

# ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** All characters presented in this story belong solely to me. Any resemblance (cough) to others is purely coincidental-don't ya look at me like that. I'd never lie to you!

**Sexual Content:** There are intimate/loving relationships between members of the same gender. If the expressing of love between females bothers you or if you're not old enough to vote, then it's probably not a wise decision for you to read this.

**Violent Content:** Yes, there is some violence in the story. A lot of which is quite graphic.

**Language Content:** Though there is some not so nice language, there aren't any true potty mouths in this story.

**Other Thoughts:** I previously posted this story a long time ago but this is the edited edition ;- ) I can't guarantee that I got every single little error out of here, but I tried my best! I also added a bit to some of the scenes, so if you've read this before then why not buckle up for the ride again? Hehehe.

**Feedback:** If you have any comments please feel free to send them to me at SumrBrezze@aol.com. It would be much appreciated!

## CHAPTER 1

Desiree Love had a hectic day, however this claim is probably a total understatement. First, she slept late, because her alarm clock decided to stop working all of the sudden. Due to this, she was caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the freeway, whereas it would usually move along smoothly, because she left early enough. Since there was a traffic jam, Desiree ended up almost being two and half-hours late, which her boss berated her for. Desiree, known for being a rather patient person most of the time, acted the complete opposite then.

"Well what did you expect me to do huh? Make like the *Jetsons* and fly over the stupid cars?" When there was bumper to bumper traffic on the freeway, Desiree could see why some people experienced road rage. Heck, she had been pretty close herself to letting it happen this morning.

The next thing Desiree knew it, she was packing her belongings in a cardboard box because her boss had thought his best option was to fire her. This was not a great loss, because she had only been a secretary, and it did not seem like she would be moving up any time soon, due to the fact that she would have been working there five years next month. Desiree had acquired the position when she turned eighteen, while concurrently attending UCLA with a major in creative writing and English. From the early age of seven, Desiree had wanted to be a fiction writer. She was on the verge of finishing her first novel. Then all she would have to do is locate a publisher, who would be willing to take a chance on her.

As Desiree pulled into her parking space when she arrived back at her apartment complex, she noticed that her live in boyfriends' car was there. "What is Alec doing home this early?" she wondered aloud. As Desiree waited in the elevator to be taken to the fourteenth floor, she thought of the reasons he could be home. "Maybe the poor thing is sick," she thoughtfully paused, "Or maybe the idiot had been fired from yet another job. Better not let it be the latter." When the elevator doors slid open, the first thing Desiree saw was two people in front of her kissing. The couple was kissing quite passionately as though their lives depended on their performance.

"Alec!" Desiree shouted in disbelief, as she hurried to get out of the elevator before the doors closed again. As she did so, the woman her boyfriend had previously been playing tongue hockey with, hurried into it with her face averted from Desiree's.

"Who was that?" asked Desiree, pointing at the now closed elevator doors.

"My girlfriend," Alec replied easily.

"Your girlfriend? *I'm* your girlfriend!" Desiree was bristling.

Alec shook his head. "Not anymore. You've been replaced," he stated calmly as though they were discussing something as trivial as the weather. In fact, he appeared very composed for a man who had just been caught cheating, which only infuriated girlfriend number one all the more. The very least he could do was to pretend like he felt bad for his infidelity! Was that so hard?

"Replaced? What am I to you Alec? Am I a freaking piece of furniture? We've been together for nearly four years and you're telling me that I have been replaced?" Desiree did not know how much longer she could refrain from physically assaulting him. The last thing she needed was to be put behind bars. She ran her hands through her strawberry-blonde hair, to keep them busy.

Alec reached out as to touch her, but Desiree deflected him, so he let his arm drop back to his side with a small sigh.

"Desi, I didn't want you to find out this way. What else can I say, but that I'm sorry. I was going to break the news to you tonight. I'm moving out today." Alec then gave her a remorseful smile, which Desiree had the urge to remove with a sharp stinging slap. Make that a sharp stinging *backslap*!

"That would be wise. Get your stuff and get out," Desiree said between clenched teeth. Alec nodded compliantly as he headed back to the apartment. Watching him go, Desiree's vision became blurry and she fought the urge to break down in tears. This day was turning into a nightmare. *Lost my job, lost my boyfriend...this day royally sucks.*

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Later that night, Desiree sat on her couch, rubbing her beloved cat Tobias, while he purred in

complete satisfaction at the attention he was receiving.

"Well at least one of us is happy, Tobias." As if he understood, the seven-year-old feline reached up and rubbed his cheek against her own, then again settled down in her lap, as his owner smiled fondly at him. Out of all the males that had been in Desiree's life, he was the only one that had never failed her.

"You're the first one today to put a smile on my face." She sighed. "What am I going to do now?" She thought about it for a few minutes as she absently twirled a lock of her straight hair around a finger. She then came to a decision.

"I'm going out for ice cream, Tobias." She put him down on the plush bright blue carpet, where he immediately began to meow in protest. He wanted more petting and he wanted it now! "Now don't cry sweetie. I'll bring you a pint of vanilla. I know it's your favorite."

If there were one cat in this world that was spoiled, that cat would be Tobias. Since Desiree did not have any children, she spoiled him endlessly. Tobias ate liver pate out of crystal goblets just like the cats on television and wore an expensive collar that cost more than all of Desiree's jewelry put together. He was to put it simply, her baby.

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Desiree instantly felt guilty as she walked back to her Lilac '96 Honda Excel, with Tobias' promised ice cream in hand. She felt like a pig after eating two banana splits with extra fudge and peanuts on each. Though she didn't feel that well, they sure were tasty. Going to her favorite ice cream parlor Sweet Sensations always gave Desiree these feelings. She mused excitedly, "Maybe I can get a job here." She thought about that for a moment and changed her mind. "Nah. I can't be trusted with all that ice cream. I'd gain 20 pounds within a week."

After Desiree put the key in the ignition, the next thing she knew it something cold was pressed against her right temple and an arm was situated around her neck rather tightly. Desiree's heart started to beat expeditiously while her blue-green eyes wide with obvious fear, were frozen on the steering wheel.

"Do what I say and you won't be meeting your maker anytime soon. Got it?" asked a low voice.

Desiree nodded, finding it impossible to speak.

"I can't hear you." More pressure was put on her temple along with a tighter grip around her neck.

"Yes," Desiree shakily whispered, her voice filled with fear.

"Good. Now this is where you go..."

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It was almost midnight as they continued to drive on the almost deserted highway in silence. Desiree was near tears, but so far, she had been able to control them. The person that had taken her hostage had not said anything, except for when she was giving directions. It was too quiet, so Desiree decided to take the initiative and say something to the person still sitting in the back seat. Desiree could tell by the voice, that the person was a female. That was the only evidence she had, because the woman had on a black ski mask, which covered her whole head except for her mouth and those electric blue eyes she had. The woman had taken away her arm and the gun, but Desiree somehow knew that she was on alert, although she was sitting back seeming to be in a relaxed state.

Desiree cleared her throat. "Do you think that's wise?" she asked quietly.

"What?" the woman snapped, her eyes boring into the back of her hostage's head. Desiree could feel them on her without looking in the rearview mirror.

"Wearing a ski mask, when somebody in another car could see you."

The woman leaned forward, her lips almost touching Desiree's ear as she spoke in that low voice, "Are you trying to tell me how to successfully kidnap you?"

Shivers that she couldn't explain ran down Desiree's spine as she replied, "N-no. I uh...I was just saying that you're apt to draw attention with a ski mask over your head." She shrugged. "That's all."

The kidnapper was quiet for a few moments, just staring at Desiree, in the process making her extremely uncomfortable. Desiree started to feel beads of sweat forming on her forehead. She thought, *I should have just kept my big mouth shut.*

"Pull over."

Desiree jumped causing the woman in the back seat to began chuckling. She frowned when she asked, "Something strike you as funny?"

"Yes, you do. Poor baby. Are you afraid of me little girl?" the woman asked mockingly, with amusement in her eyes.

Desiree frowned again, now beginning to become angry. "Don't call me a little girl. Do I look like a little girl to you?" She mentally chastised herself for getting an attitude with the kidnapper. *I must have a death wish.*

The woman made a show of examining Desiree from head to toe. Desiree did not know why exactly, but she started to blush. The woman once again leaned close to her ear. "Not at all. From this view, you look like all woman to me," she whispered. If Desiree was not blushing before, she definitely was now. *Just what is she up to?* she wondered in her mind.

"Pull over," the kidnapper repeated her demand from moment's before.

Desiree complied. As soon as she had pulled over, the woman hurried to get out of the back door with the gun pointed at her captive to let her know that she should not try to do anything tricky like drive off. Desiree would not think of doing such a thing, because for some reason she knew that the woman would be able to stop her efforts. The kidnapper got in the front seat and scooted onto the floor still pointing the gun at Desiree.

"You can drive now," she said, but the tone of her voice clearly stated that Desiree did not have a choice.

Desiree did not move. "What are you doing?" she asked. The kidnapper's tall frame looked rather cramped in the small space, but evidently she was determined to make it work.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm sitting on the floor. Now drive the car."

Desiree then checked for any other vehicles. Not seeing any coming, she pulled out.

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It was now two-thirty in the morning, and Desiree was so tired that she could barely keep her eyes open. She glanced down at her kidnapper to discover that she was staring up at her intently, as she had been for the past couple hours. The gun was still in her hand, but was not pointed at Desiree to the young woman's great relief. That deadly weapon had been making her eminently nervous.

"Why are you staring at me?" Desiree asked.

"As if I have a choice. Not much of a view from down here."

"Well nobody told you to sit down there," replied Desiree, immediately regretting what she had just said. As if her mouth had not gotten her into enough trouble today. It had cost her her job, and now it could cost Desiree her life.

The blue-eyed woman cocked her head to the side saying, "You know, you have a smart mouth for someone being held at gun point."

Desiree decided to change the subject. "I'm going to be missed by a lot of people."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not right to lie." The woman grinned.

She was rewarded with a dirty look. It was at this moment Desiree knew that her life might not be in jeopardy. Sure someone was holding her against her will with a gun, but she now felt it deep down inside that this woman would not end her life. That grin and the teasing remark gave Desiree the security that she had been seeking. The kidnapper was not a cold-blooded killer that she was dealing with. Then who was she? And what did she do? Desiree thought, *I just simply*

*have to know.*

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not right to take people against their will?" Desiree countered bravely, wondering if she had just lost her mind. This woman was still very dangerous.

The woman placed a hand on Desiree's blue-jean clad knee. "Oh baby, you'll know when you've been taken," she answered in an even lower tone of voice than the one she had been using. She took her hand away, but not without a squeeze to her captive's knee.

Her words and action caused the strawberry-blonde's cheeks to break out in another blush. Was she flirting with her? No, that could not be. Could it? Desiree shook her head to try to clear her thoughts. The woman was just playing with her mind.

All was quiet for the next twenty minutes with each woman lost in her own thoughts. Desiree tried to concentrate on what she would write in the next chapter of her novel. She tried to do this so she would not fall asleep at the wheel. The last thing she needed was to have a car accident now. Her plan was not working, so she settled on talking to her complex kidnapper again, which was exactly what the blue-eyed woman was. One minute she was teasing Desiree, and the next she was gruff, menacingly holding up her weapon.

"I have a child," Desiree stated out of the blue.

"Congratulations," the woman on the floor replied dryly.

"I have to go back, because he depends on me. I'm the only one he has." She was telling the truth. No one else would think to take care of Tobias in her abrupt absence.

The woman sarcastically replied, "You're breaking my heart."

Desiree sighed. "Please. He's only seven years old."

"You'll be going home soon enough." The woman raised a little to look out of the window. "A lake will be coming up in about ten or eleven miles. There will be a small road extending towards it, so turn on it. Got it?"

Desiree nodded. "Yes."

The woman nodded and sat back down on the floor. "Good."

Desiree took a deep breath. "He's all alone."

The kidnapper sighed. "Not this again. What is a seven-year-old doing home alone?"

"He's a latch-key kid."

"At seven?"

"We live in a safe neighborhood." Desiree thought quickly.

"Ah," the kidnapper gave a short pause. "Well it doesn't matter, 'cause I don't believe you anyway."

Desiree frowned. She actually thought the woman had been buying her story. "You don't believe me?"

The woman shrugged. "Call me crazy, but no I don't."

*Okay. You're a gigantic psycho and I think you ought to be locked up in a mental institution!* Desiree mentally said. It was on the tip of her tongue to say it aloud, but she changed her mind. "Well it's true. His name is Tobias and he's probably going out of his mind wondering where I am."

"Lady, save it for someone who'll believe it." She scratched her neck with the barrel adding, "He's probably just a cat or somethin'." She had to bite back a smile at her captive's shocked expression. "What?" she asked innocently.

"Nothing," the strawberry-blonde replied. After silently driving for about another mile, she got an idea. "I was bringing him ice cream home." She picked up the now melted pint of ice cream for the woman to see.

The kidnapped shrugged. "So? That could be your ice cream. Got a picture of him? I'll need some evidence."

"I got a new wallet yesterday, and I haven't gotten around to transporting the pictures from my old wallet to my new one." Desiree mentally congratulated herself. *I never knew I could lie so well.* Not that that was something to be proud of, but still...

The blue-eyed woman shook her head. "I've gotta hand it to ya. You're a good liar, although that's not something to be proud of." She leaned towards Desiree and whispered, "I think you need a spanking."

The young woman blushed again, and this time almost ran into a bush on the side of the road. She corrected the car and glanced down at her kidnapper to find that she was grinning broadly.

"What?" asked Desiree with a hint of irritation edging into her voice.

The woman replied innocently, "Nothing."

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Fifteen minutes later, they were pulling up to a small cabin surrounded by trees and other plants belonging to mother nature. It seemed to be the only cabin around, and Desiree had to admit that from outside appearance it was a lovely little cabin. Four steps led up to a porch that sported a

swinging bench and two rocking chairs. The scenery was beautiful with colorful flowers all around.

Desiree turned her head towards her kidnapper who was now sitting in the passenger seat instead of the floor. "Where are we?"

"In the woods."

Desiree mentally counted to ten. Aye! This woman could be aggravating! "Could you be a little more explicit?"

"Yes I could," the woman replied getting out of the car and coming around to the drivers' side. She opened the door and told Desiree to hand her the keys and get out of the car. The young woman complied on both without one word.

It was then that Desiree noticed that the other woman was much taller than she was. Desiree stood at 5'4" but this woman must have been pushing six feet. It also did not get past the strawberry-blonde that this woman had a killer figure. Although it was dark, and the woman was dressed in all black, Desiree could tell that she kept her body fit. The kidnapper noticed the shorter woman looking her over but chose not to comment on it. She might make her blush again, yet that might not be such a bad thing. The kidnapper thought that Desiree looked even prettier when she blushed or when she was ticked off.

The taller woman led Desiree into the cabin and deposited her in the kitchen in front of a black refrigerator. She took a pair of handcuffs out of her back pocket and cuffed her captive's right wrist to the handle on the refrigerator door.

"What are you doing?" asked Desiree in a surprised tone. Never in her young life had she been handcuffed. Sure, Alec had attempted to do it once, but she quickly set him straight that she wasn't into that sort of thing. She found the metal cold and slightly tight around her wrist.

"What does it look like? I'm handcuffing you to the refrigerator, 'cause I have to go do something." The woman chucked Desiree under the chin earning herself a glare in the process. She chuckled and said, "I'll be back" in an Arnold Schwarzenegger voice. She walked away briskly as Desiree looked after her, wondering after all did this woman have a screw loose.

When the kidnapper exited the front door, Desiree examined all that she could see from her position. She realized she could see everything. The kitchen was small, but seemed to have everything that it needed, from a black toaster oven to a white microwave. It had one of those modern electric stoves that were easier to clean. This was a black one, and Desiree longed to cook on it. She was an excellent cook, and she enjoyed doing it.

The countertop was white marble, and the floor was checkered with black and white squares. Desiree noticed that even the sink was painted black. The wooden cupboards and drawers were white and there was little window situated over the kitchen sink. Desiree could see the car from where she stood out of the window, and she could tell the woman was inside of it, but she could

not tell what she was doing, due to it being so dark. She turned her attention to the refrigerator and opened the door to discover with much joy and surprise, that it was loaded with food. She then opened the freezer to discover the same thing. *Old blue eyes must have been planning this.*

Desiree then scanned the living room. There was one black leather couch that was in the shape of an L. In front of it was a cherry wood coffee table, which contained glass squares on top. Behind that was a fireplace situated against the wall, with wood already inside of it to burn. Desiree noticed that the carpet was stark white, and wondered anew if this woman was nuts. People who dared to have stark white carpeting must be begging carpet cleaners to come to their homes on a regular basis. Either that or they made it a rule to check the shoes and feet of everyone who entered. Desiree would be a nervous wreck with white carpet.

A few inches to the right of the fireplace was a huge black entertainment system. In it on the top shelf on the left were ten paperback books of equal height. Desiree could not make out the titles imprinted on the binders of them, because she was too far away. The top shelf on the right had software programs for computer usage. In the middle of the entertainment center was a black 35" television with a built-in VCR. To the right of the television were two shelves packed tightly with videotapes. Desiree could not make out the titles of those either. To the left of the television were two more shelves. The top one held a state-of-the-art compact disc player, and the one below it held a few stacks of CD's. Desiree briefly wondered what kind of music the woman listened to. There were three cabinets at the bottom of the entertainment system, but Desiree did not know what was inside, since the doors were closed.

Her eyes wandered over to a cherry wood desk located by the front door, with a big window in front of it, which was covered by white venetian blinds. The desk had what must have been about a 17" black computer on top of it. Desiree could not figure out the brand from the distance, but it looked like a commendable one. Next to the computer sat a printer and a scanner. A leather-padded computer desk chair sat behind the desk.

"This chick must be loaded," Desiree stated aloud. "Probably got all of this from robbing a bank or being a drug lord."

She then spied three separate doors in the living room, and guessed that two of them were most likely bedrooms, and the other one led to a bathroom, which was what Desiree realized she needed right at that moment. She started to jump up and down slightly, finally taking notice of her full bladder. She looked out the kitchen window again for the kidnapper, but no longer saw her. She squeezed her legs together in a vain attempt to hold herself in check. The last thing Desiree needed was that woman teasing her for wetting her pants.

"Oh! I need some release," Desiree whined, starting to do the "I've got to go to the bathroom dance."

"Maybe I can help you with that," said a voice suddenly.

Desiree's head snapped to the front door to find the blue-eyed woman standing there with her mask still on.

"What?" Desiree asked in an exasperated voice.

"I said," The woman began slowly walking towards her captive, "maybe I can help you with that." She tugged on the leather belt around her waist.

Desiree rolled her eyes but she still blushed. "Must you take everything I say out of context?" she asked.

"Why whatever do you mean?" the woman asked too sweetly.

The strawberry-blonde shook her head. "Nevermind. Could you just get me out of these things?"

"Your pants?" the woman asked, grinning lasciviously.

"The handcuffs!" Desiree had not meant to shout but this woman was getting on her last nerve.

"Oh," the kidnapper said as if she had not known that. "Yes I can." The tall woman did not make a move to do this however.

Desiree stared at her, waiting for the kidnapper to release her from the cuffs. Finally, she could not wait any longer. "Well?" Desiree inquired impatiently.

"What?"

Desiree took a deep calming breath. "Could you help me out of these handcuffs?" she tried to ask pleasantly.

"I have the ability to."

*3-2-1, 1-2-3. Who the heck is bothering me?* Desiree thought. "Will you please take these handcuffs off of me?" she asked aloud.

The other woman shrugged. "Sure. Just a moment though." Taking her precious time, she strolled over to a cupboard and took out a glass. Then she went over to the kitchen faucet and turned on the water, letting it run ever so slowly. The woman looked over her shoulder to see if her plan was having the desired effect. It was. Her captive was squirming even more now, what with the water running. The kidnapper had to bite her lip so that she would not bust out laughing. She asked Desiree if she wanted some water, but the young woman declined. The kidnapper slowly raised the glass to her lips, and took a sip of water.

*You are pure evil!* "Will you please get over here!?" pleaded Desiree.

The other woman stared at her for a second. "Patience is a virtue."

"Please do something nice, and get me out of these." She indicated the handcuffs.

The kidnapper placed the glass of water down in the sink soundlessly, and then walked towards Desiree. She stood close to the shorter woman and asked, "What do I get in return?"

"How about I stick my foot in your-"

"Whoa! What a naughty girl you are." The woman tsked, and leaned close to Desiree's left ear. "Now you *really* deserve a spanking," she whispered.

Desiree cocked her head away from the woman's mouth, but not before she discovered to her astonishment that she liked the feel of the woman's warm breath caressing her ear. She had not even touched her, and Desiree managed to shiver. *Oh God, now I must be going crazy!*

Desiree narrowed her eyes. "I was gonna say mouth."

"Yeah right." The blue-eyed woman gave her incredulous look. At least Desiree thought she did. She could not tell very well since the woman still had the ski mask on.

"Could you please unlock me?" Desiree attempted to ask this as sweetly as she could.

The other woman did not utter a word as she took out a small key from a pocket in her black jeans and unlocked the handcuffs. She then took Desiree by her left arm and led her to the door closest to the fireplace. She opened the door and ushered her captive inside, warning her that she better not try anything tricky. Desiree nodded as she hurried into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

A couple minutes later after Desiree washed her hands, she took in her surroundings. The bathroom held a shower and one of those round bathtubs, instead of the basic oval shape. The sink and the surrounding area were black with gold-colored faucets and two black knobs for hot and cold. Desiree would have loved to soak in the gorgeous looking bathtub for an hour or so. Desiree opened the medicine cabinet, and discovered the basics in it. There was aspirin, cough medicine, a bottle of Tums and other medicines for one's ailments. All of the sudden a knock came at the door as she closed the medicine cabinet.

"Yeah?" Desiree called loudly.

"What are you doing in there?" asked a muffled voice.

"What do you think I'm doing? It's a bathroom."

"I heard the toilet flush. You're done, so get out," the woman demanded.

Desiree opened the door and said, "You know, you should really follow your own advice."

"What do you mean?" the woman asked on the verge of impatience.

"Patience is a virtue." Desiree tried to mimic the other woman's voice.

"Well you were taking too long," she argued.

"What did you think I was doing?" Desiree placed her hands on her hips. "Making a weapon out of the soap and toilet paper?" Talk about your paranoid kidnappers!

Desiree suddenly found herself wrapped around the waist by strong arms. She let out a yelp and placed her hands on the taller woman's shoulders, as she was twirled around. The other woman let go of her as she rushed into the bathroom, slamming it after she got in.

Desiree laughed for the second time that day. She inquired to the closed door, "Well why didn't you just say you had to potty?"

Desiree wandered over to the entertainment system to get a good look at all that was inside. Some of the books there she recognized and had read from such authors as Jackie Collins, Rita Mae Brown, and John Grisham. The CD's were mostly oldies, soft rock and rhythm and blues. The videotapes seemed to be based mostly on drama, with a few comedies. Desiree even spotted a couple of her favorites, and some that she had wanted to see, but had not gotten around to yet. It then hit her that she could very well escape. Desiree looked towards the front door longingly.

"Don't even think about it."

Desiree jumped. "Must you sneak up on me!" She glared at the woman standing in front of the fireplace, seeming to appear out of nowhere.

The woman smiled, showing a nice set of white even teeth. "I like to keep you on your toes."

Desiree nodded. "Ah." She then studied the woman. "Why did you leave me alone?"

"Nature called." The other woman shrugged. "Plus you wouldn't have gotten very far. I would have caught up with you soon enough," she replied confidently.

The strawberry-blonde rolled her blue-green eyes. "My. Don't we have a big ego."

"No. I'm just sure of my abilities," the other woman said seriously. She then walked over to the couch, taking a seat. She indicated for Desiree to come sit down too, so she did, but Desiree made sure that there was plenty of space between them.

She then studied the woman's ski mask. "Why don't you take that off?" she pointed towards the mask.

"Oh so you can identify me to the police?"

Desiree shook her head. "I just thought you'd be more comfortable with it off is all."

The other woman started to say something that would most likely make her captive blush, but she changed her mind. "Since when did you care about my comfort?"

"I don't," Desiree argued. "It's just that you look silly wearing that when I don't see any immediate need for it."

The blue-eyed woman stared at Desiree so long after that that the young woman began to squirm. Finally, the woman raised a hand and grabbed the material of the mask around her chin and pulled it off. Desiree could not help herself. She gasped and openly gazed at the face behind the mask. This had to be one of the most beautiful women that she had ever laid eyes on. The woman had dark brown hair that fell a little ways passed her shoulders. It was mussed from having been stuffed into the ski mask. She had prominent cheekbones and lips that Desiree considered looked soft as cotton. Her sky blues seemed to stand out even more without the burden of the mask. Desiree surmised that the woman could not be much older than she herself was.

"Something you find interesting about my face?" inquired the other woman with mirth in her eyes.

"N-no," Desiree stuttered. "I was just looking," she tried to say nonchalantly.

The blue-eyed woman scooted closer to her and whispered, "Is that all you want to do is look?"

Desiree abruptly hurried off the couch to stand by the fireplace. "Why do you do that?" she asked, blushing furiously.

"Do what?" the other woman asked innocently.

"Tease me. Turn what I say into something lurid with your perverted mind," she replied between clenched teeth.

The other woman shrugged. "It gets my juices flowing."

Desiree rolled her eyes. "Can't you get your juices flowing some other way?"

The kidnapper ran her eyes slowly down Desiree's body. "Oh, I can think of one or two ways." She smirked.

Desiree chose to ignore the not so hidden meaning. "Well I don't appreciate it."

"Funny." She scratched her chin. "I don't recall giving any implication that I cared about what you appreciated."

Desiree yawned for an answer. She ran a hand over her eyes wearily.

"You tired?"

"What do you think?" Desiree snapped irritability. She was so tired that her eyes were stinging.

The kidnapper held up her hands. "I was just asking." Arising from the couch, she grabbed a hold of her captive's upper arm, leading her towards the door farthest from the bathroom. She opened it and ushered Desiree inside saying, "This will be your room while you are staying here."

Desiree's eyes roamed around the small but nicely decorated room. It was done in shades of blues and white. She turned her attention to the woman still standing behind her. "How long *will* I be staying here?"

The kidnapper shrugged. "As long as it takes," she simply answered.

Desiree's face scrunched up. "As long as *what* takes?"

The woman leaned towards her captive conspiratorially. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you." She laughed at the look of shock on the young woman's face. She chuckled her under the chin saying, "I'm just kidding."

"I knew you were," Desiree announced defensively.

"Yeah right." The taller woman smirked. "Listen, everything that you find in there feel free to use. Clothes, toothbrush, towels, everything. Got it?"

Desiree nodded. "Thank you." She was not so sure that she should be thanking this woman since she was holding her hostage, but in spite of everything, the kidnapper was being cordial. How many kidnappers would give hostages their own bedroom, clothes, and bathroom needs? Desiree almost felt like she was on vacation, except for the part where she could not leave as she pleased.

"No need to thank me," the woman muttered. Really, *no need to thank me*, she thought.

Desiree fidgeted with the knob on the door. "Well goodnight." She began to close the door.

The other woman smiled slightly. "Goodnight, Love."

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Desiree stormed out of the bedroom. "What did you mean by that?" she demanded of the other woman who was now sitting in front of the computer.

The woman hurriedly switched the screen to black with a push of a button and swiveled around in her chair. She nearly choked on the soda she was drinking at the sight before her. Desiree had chosen to wear a simple white T-shirt to sleep in, but she looked absolutely gorgeous to the kidnapper. Her legs may not have been that long, but they were finely shaped. The hem of the T-shirt reached Desiree mid-thigh.

"Stop looking at me like that!" Desiree realized that she should have put that robe on she found in the closet.

"Like what?" The kidnapper inquired, forcing her blue eyes to focus on the younger woman's face.

"Like I'm a piece of meat, and you're a carnivore that hasn't eaten in weeks."

The kidnapper rolled her eyes. "Oh please. Don't flatter yourself." She mentally chastised herself for being so obvious.

Desiree shrugged, deciding it best to let the issue drop. "Whatever. Why did you call me love?"

The woman stared at her for a moment before answering. "It's your name, isn't it?"

The strawberry-blonde narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't your name Desiree Meredith Love?"

Desiree gaped at her. "How did you know that?" Then it hit her. "Did you go through my glove compartment while I was locked to the refrigerator?"

The other woman shook her head. "No, I didn't." She sighed. *Might as well give her some clue as to why she's here*, she thought.

"Then how did you know?"

The blue-eyed woman took a deep breath before beginning. "You're name is Desiree Meredith Love. You are twenty-three years old, and you were born and raised in San Francisco, California, until you moved at the age of eighteen to attend UCLA for the next four years. You used to work at an office supply company, but unfortunately, you got fired yesterday. You're currently writing a book, because becoming a well-known fiction novelist is your real passion in life." She thought for a moment. "You have one younger brother and one older sister, your parents still reside in San Francisco, and you have a cat named Tobias. You know, that latch key kid of yours." She finished smiling mischievously at the expression on her captive's face.

Desiree plopped down on the arm of the couch with her mouth hanging open. If there had been flies swarming around the cabin she would have been in big trouble. "How on earth did you know all that?" she asked astonished.

"I used to be a 'Psychic Friend'," she replied grinning.

"Don't play with me," Desiree retorted in a warning tone.

"Oooh." She pretended to shiver. "What are you gonna do to me Shorty?"

Her captive cocked her head to the side. "Shorty?" she repeated. If there was one thing she hated, it was for people to draw attention to her short stature. It was a sensitive topic for the vertically challenged strawberry-blonde.

The woman twined her fingers together in her lap. "That's what I said. Question is, what're you gonna do about it?"

Desiree balled up her hand into a fist and shook it menacingly. "How 'bout I knock you into next week?"

The kidnapper arched an eyebrow. "I'd like to see you try." She beckoned Desiree over with the fingers of each hand. "Bring it on."

Desiree marched over to her and then realized she had fell right into the Venus flytrap's plan. The sitting woman had Desiree's legs trapped between her own. She squeezed her own thighs against the shorter woman's legs, and placed her hands on Desiree's small waist. Desiree could not escape, but she was not so sure that she wanted to, as she felt the warmth radiating from the other woman's hands coming through the thin cotton material. It was far from being a cold early April morning, but they felt so good. The strawberry-blonde hesitantly placed her hands on the other woman's strong shoulders. She noticed that the woman had removed the black sweater she had been wearing along with her shoes and socks too. The woman was now only wearing her jeans and a black tank top, which showed off the muscles in her long bronzed arms. Desiree concluded that she definitely worked out.

The blue-eyed kidnapper peered up at her. "My, my, my. What a predicament you've gotten yourself into." She slid her hands down to the hem of Desiree's T-shirt. Any further down and she would be touching the young woman's bare skin. Desiree was shocked to find that she sort of anticipated that happening.

"What're you doing?" she whispered. Desiree then noticed that she was absently massaging the other woman's shoulders. She stopped her hands from doing so. *She's not the only who is crazy. I've lost my mind too!*

The woman's hands finally connected with the warm bare skin of Desiree's outer thighs. The strawberry-blonde gasped as the dark-haired woman started making circular movements with the padding of her thumbs on Desiree's skin. She then whispered, "Making you want me."

"What makes you think I want you?" Desiree had started to breathe heavily. *What in the world is wrong with me?* she wondered. *I don't even know this woman's name.*

"By the way you're reacting to my ministrations, I'd be willing to bet that you want me," the other woman explained, as she brushed a smooth jean clad thigh against her captive's leg.

"Sorry, but I don't play for that team."

A slow knowing grin made its way to the kidnapper's lips. "Oh, but I think that you could easily

be drafted." The woman ran a hand behind one of Desiree's thighs and began to caress the well-defined flesh there. "You're about as straight as a labyrinth."

"I'll have you know that I have a boy-"

"Yes. I know." The other woman interrupted looking up at Desiree, and noticing the lovely flush on her ordinarily pale cheeks. "His name is Alec and you're using the wrong tense. That's had. Not have." The woman grinned in a cocky fashion.

"That reminds me of my earlier question. How do you know who I am?" Desiree attempted to step back, but the other woman would not relinquish her hold.

"I told you. I used to be a 'Psychic Friend'," said the kidnapper smiling.

Desiree took a deep breath. "I'm serious."

The blue-eyed woman changed the subject. "How much do you want me?" She asked, gazing at her captives beautiful blue-green eyes. Desiree noticed that the sitting woman's hands were now dangerously close to her derriere.

"You mean, how much do I want you to take a flying leap into an erupting volcano?" Desiree asked sweetly. She even managed to paste on a saccharinely sweet smile.

The other woman chuckled. "You're really cute when you're angry, Desi."

Desiree's eyes narrowed in outrage. "Don't call me that. Only my friends call me that."

"And what am I?"

The strawberry-blonde put her hands at her sides. "Believe me when I say that you don't want me to answer that."

That initiated another chuckle, which only proved to infuriate Desiree even more. "You make me laugh, Desi."

"What's your name?" she ignored the usage of the nickname this time, knowing that the woman would not listen to her anyway. It would be futile to argue.

"Piper." The expression on Desiree's face was one of shock. "What? You don't like my name?" asked the kidnapper.

"No-no, it's not that. I just didn't expect you to tell me that easily. You have to admit that you haven't been very forthcoming with information."

Piper shrugged. "I figured I know all about you, the least you could know is my name."

"*How* do you know all about me?" Desiree countered.

Piper, kneading the backs of her captive's upper thighs absently replied, "I don't wanna talk about that right now." She found herself wondering if her cute hostage would be a screamer in bed. Images of Desiree screaming out her name in ecstasy caused the kidnapper to inwardly groan.

"When?" Desiree closed her eyes, and let out a soft moan, which brought a slight smile to Piper's lips that she missed.

Seemingly, within the blink of an eye, Piper raised Desiree's T-shirt to just above her flat stomach and delivered a feather-light kiss to her belly button. "Later," she whispered, as she headed in for another kiss. However, before she could deliver it the phone started to ring.

Cursing under her breath at the unwelcome interruption, she reached behind her for a small cellular phone that was lying next to the computer. She opened the flap, pressed a button, and said, "This can only be one of two people. No matter which one you are, you're dead!"

"Well that's a comforting thought," the male voice on the other end of the line replied.

Piper frowned. "What do *you* want?"

"Your butt back here."

"Sorry, but my butt is very content to stay right where it is."

"Don't be stupid, Piper. You need to get back before the authorities find out you're missing," warned the man.

"What makes you think I'm missing?"

"I went over to your apartment and you weren't there."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe I went out for a walk or something?"

"You skipped town didn't you?" asked the man hesitantly.

There was a slight pause on Piper's end of the line as she raised a hand to her head and began rubbing her temples with her thumb and middle finger. "Yes," she admitted wearily.

A loud exhalation could be heard from the other end. "Running is not the answer, Piper."

Piper shook her head, as if he could see her. "Wrong. It's the only answer." She let go of her hold on Desiree, and the young woman took a step backward, looking at Piper with obvious concern. "If I come back there, I will go straight back to prison. I refuse to go back there, and this time we both know chances are I won't ever get out." Desiree's eyes widened, but she was not too surprised to hear that the kidnapper had been previously incarcerated.

"I'll fight to get you out of it," the man argued.

"Oh please Frank. You sound like Larry Parker. You gonna get me out of this, like you got me out the first time?" she asked angrily. "I don't even know why I keep you as my lawyer. Deep down I must wanna be kept behind bars."

Frank sighed. Much of the time this woman could be very aggravating. "Why don't you come back Piper? I promise I won't tell anyone that you left. This will be kept confidential."

"No! Eight years of my life have already been wasted, and I'm not about to give up the rest. Good-bye Frank." She started to press the end button on the phone but her lawyer stated that he had something important to say. "What is it?" she asked impatiently.

For a moment, the man said nothing. "Richard Love Jr. was shot yesterday afternoon."

Piper's blue eyes darted to Desiree and then cut away quickly. "Is he dead?" she asked nervously, hearing Desiree gasp.

"No, but he almost was. The doctor gave the report on the news that if the bullet would have been half an inch to the left that he would most likely be gone."

Piper let out a relieved breath. She did not need another death on her hands, although at this point it probably would not have mattered much. "Is he gonna be okay?" she asked, noticing that Desiree looked relieved too. Piper smiled inwardly. Desiree did not have a clue as to whom she was talking about, yet she still managed to have compassion for this person who could be a stranger. *If only she knew he is her brother*, Piper thought grimly.

"Well it's early, but his prognosis appears to be more on the positive side," Frank replied.

"Good." Piper paused. "Do they have a suspect?"

Her lawyer gave another brief pause. "They know for sure who did it."

*They do?* Piper thought. "Who?" she inquired aloud.

She heard Frank take a deep breath before he replied, "You."

Piper was silent for so long that Frank began to think she had hung up the phone until he heard a sound that he had not been suspecting. His client was laughing hysterically. *She's finally gone off the deep end*, Frank thought. He wasn't too surprised by that. It was bound to happen eventually.

"Of course I did it, Frank." She stopped laughing, which soothed Desiree's nerves. At the first sound of the laughing, she had jumped back wondering what the person on the other end could have said to initiate that kind of reaction. "Why there are only six freaking billion other people on this damn earth!" Piper furiously yelled, causing her captive to flinch.

"One, not everyone knows Richard Love Jr. Two, a lot of the people on this damn earth as you put it, have alibis. Three, not everyone is being questioned for three gruesome murders already, and four, not everyone has a motive," Frank stated in a rather calm voice.

Piper scowled, "One, I don't know Ri-" She bit her lower lip. She had been about to say the man's name in front of his sister, "him," she finished. "Never met the guy. Two, I wasn't even in San Francisco when it happened." *I was in Los Angeles, planning on kidnapping Desiree Love*, she silently added to herself. "Three... whatever, and four, what in the hell is my damn motive!?"

"Easy. Judge Richard Love sent you to prison for eight years and you decided to retaliate by trying to kill his son," replied Frank.

Piper did not say anything for a minute. "You say that as if you truly believe it."

Her lawyer gave no reply.

"Well, do you? Don't tell me your taking their side against me. I thought you were my friend, and not just my lawyer," Piper stated.

She heard her lawyer sigh. "Actually to tell you the truth Piper, I don't know what to think." He exhaled loudly. "Richard said that you shot him."

Piper was speechless for a moment. "What? I never laid a hand on him! He's either lying or crazy." She ran a hand through her dark brown hair restlessly. This was an absolute nightmare!

"Well that's what he said, and now there's a warrant out for your arrest. Now their beginning to look for you, and you're nowhere around."

"So how did you expect to hide it from everyone that I left?" Piper inquired impatiently.

Frank did not answer right away. "I...uh didn't."

"You didn't?"

"Piper I think that your best option is to turn yourself in."

"You think I did it," Piper uttered incredulously. "I have an idea, Frank. Why don't you just kiss my ass!" She noticed that Desiree flinched again, so Piper turned her chair around so that her back was to the woman. "If I wanted to kill the man's son, he would be dead! I don't leave unfinished work." Piper harshly pressed the end button, turned her chair around again, and threw the minuscule phone across the room, where it safely landed on the leather couch. She then put her elbows on her knees, and covered her face with her hands.

Desiree stood looking at Piper wearing a horrified expression. The words "*I don't leave unfinished work*" kept running through her mind. *What does that mean?* Desiree thought. *I know*

*what it means. She's obviously a hitwoman, and that's why she kidnapped me. My God, someone has put a hit out on me. Who would want me to be dead? I don't have any enemies. Sure I don't get along with everyone, but who would have the nerve to get someone to terminate my life?* She briefly considered her ex-boyfriend Alec, but Desiree could not come up with a valid reason as to why he would want her dead. Alec was a jerk but he was not that cold-blooded. *Why would she go through all this trouble to kill me? She could have just shot me in the parking lot of "Sweet Sensations" and have been done with it.* Desiree shook her head to try to clear her troubling thoughts. She figured that she just watched way too much television. Surely, Piper was not intending to murder her. Indeed, the woman did have the capacity to look very dangerous, but Desiree still believed that Piper would not end her life. *"I don't leave unfinished work."* Well *she must have killed someone*, Desiree admitted.

"Is everything okay?" Desiree inquired quietly.

Piper glanced up at her as though she had forgotten that the young woman was there. She straightened up in the chair and said, "Go to bed."

Desiree took a hesitant step towards her. "If you need to talk I'm here to listen."

The blue-eyed woman glared at her. "No. You're here to do what I tell you to do. Now I said go to bed," she replied in a warning tone.

The strawberry-blonde refused to back down. Obviously, no matter what she did, Piper needed someone that she could talk to. Desiree knew that she should not care about what the kidnapper needed, but she could not help the urge she had to reach out to her. "No one has told me to go to bed since I was thirteen, so what makes you think that you can do it?"

Silently, Piper reached into the waistband of her jeans and pulled out the gun from earlier. "This makes me think I can do it." She held the gun up for Desiree to clearly see. "Now I said for you to get your stubborn little butt in that bed before I do something that you'll regret!" she yelled. "Do I make myself clear?" she asked between clenched teeth.

Desiree knew when to quit so she nodded. "Crystal clear," she replied in a small voice. She headed towards the bedroom and then turned around to face Piper who was still glaring at her. "Goodnight." Desiree waited a moment, but Piper would not say anything so she shut the door quietly behind her.

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"Did you manage to get a hold of her?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Where could she be? Did you try her at work?"

"She got fired."

Judge Richard Love looked at his wife in shock. "She got fired?" he repeated.

His wife nodded as she took her seat by her husband in the waiting room of the hospital. She took her husband's hand and squeezed it gently. "I'm sure she's fine Richard."

The man shook his head. "I get the feeling that something is wrong. It's not like Desiree to be gone without giving us any information on her whereabouts."

"She's a grown woman, darling. Probably just went out of town with some friends and that's why she didn't get our messages."

"Surely she has seen the news. Her brother was shot and we haven't heard from her yet. She should know by now, no matter where she is." Richard scratched his graying hair in thought. He was worried about his youngest daughter. His son's life had already been put in jeopardy and now his daughter was missing. She was not the only person missing. He had found out just a few hours ago that Piper Redding was now considered a fugitive. It was thought that after she had attempted to kill Richard Love Jr. that she had fled. She was considered armed and dangerous, and Judge Love was almost certain that Desiree's disappearance had something to do with her. He would never be able to forgive himself if something were to happen to his daughter. He did not want to worry his wife, so Richard was not going to say anything just yet. If Desiree did not show up or if they did not hear from her within the next couple of hours, then he was going to take some action. For now he would try to be patient.

Richard regarded his wife. "Thank God our son will be all right," he stated.

His wife nodded. "I don't know what I would have done if we had lost him." Her voice broke, and she began to cry. Richard put his robust arms around his wife and hugged her.

"If I ever get my hands on that Redding woman she will be sorry she was ever born," he stated vehemently.

"That goes double for me," said Larisa, Richard and Sandra's oldest child, as she walked into the waiting room. She looked nothing like her siblings Richie Jr. and Desiree. Both Desiree and Richie Jr. had reddish blonde hair and pale complexions. Larisa was 5'9", with shoulder-length dark brown hair, green eyes, and a tanned complexion.

Larisa took a seat on her mother's side and rubbed her eyes wearily. She had hurried to the airport to catch the next plane heading to San Francisco after she heard that her brother had been shot. "He's resting peacefully right now," she said to her parents.

"Good," both Richard and Sandra replied simultaneously, causing each to smile at the other warmly.

Suddenly the phone in Richard's jacket pocket rang. He excused himself and walked out into the hall of the hospital to answer it. The caller was Piper's lawyer Frank Webb.

"What on earth could you be calling me for?" asked the judge.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you at this time sir, but I thought it was only fair to let you know that my client has skipped town. I talked to her a few hours ago, and I don't have a clue as to where she is, but she's no longer in San Francisco."

"I already know that she left. There's a warrant out for her arrest and she's nowhere to be found."

"I thought you might know, but really that's just speculation. For all the police know she very well could be in San Francisco, but I have proof that she's not, because she told me. Ms. Redding is scared and she feels like everyone is against her," Frank explained.

"Well she should be scared, because if I have my way she will get the death penalty for all that she's done," Judge Love angrily replied.

"You have every right to be upset sir, but maybe she really didn't do all those things."

"All the evidence points to her Mr. Webb. Of course, she's guilty. My own son saw her face when she tried to kill him, so don't defend your psychopathic client to me. As far as I'm concerned yesterday when she went after my own flesh and blood, she signed her death certificate." Judge Love ended the conversation and went back to his family.

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Desiree awoke the next morning to a tongue licking her on her left cheek. "Oh, don't tell me this woman is licking my face?" she thought. *Someone please get me a straight jacket!* Desiree mused that Piper's tongue sure was rough and dry. She was happy to find that she felt not an ounce of arousal. Last night, or earlier this morning she had been worried that maybe she was attracted to Piper. She concluded that the feelings she was experiencing were due to lack of sleep and her emotional state. Whatever they were, they were gone now. Desiree opened her eyes to a very surprising sight. Lying on top of her was none other than Tobias. The light orange and white eighteen-pound tabby cat was busy licking her face, as if his young master was drenched in milk. Tobias stopped licking and started to purr when he noticed that his owner was now awake. Getting up on all four legs, he stretched and moved over to lie next to Desiree.

"Morning Sleepyhead," said a low voice coming from the direction of the window.

Desiree turned her head on the pillow to see Piper sitting in a dark blue recliner with her feet up. The light from the sun was shining on her face and sparkling blue eyes. Desiree had no choice but to admit to herself that this woman was absolutely breathtaking. Too bad she was nutty as a fruitcake.

"Morning," Desiree replied, as she sat up in the king-sized bed. She would hate to confess it aloud, but Desiree had slept wonderfully in this comfortable bed. In fact, she had not slept that well in months. She glanced at her cat, who was on his way to dreamland, still purring softly. Desiree smiled and turned her attention to Piper. "You went to go get him?" she asked the woman.

"No. I had my limo go pick him up," Piper replied grinning.

Desiree rolled her eyes. "You just can't answer a simple question. Can you?"

The blue-eyed woman shrugged. "Well it was a dumb question. Of course, I went to go pick him up. We just got back about a half hour ago."

Earlier that morning, when Piper had rudely dismissed her captive to her bedroom she had instantly began to feel like a jerk. After all, it was not Desiree's fault that she was upset. The young woman had even tried to give her comfort after hearing Piper's part of the conversation. She now knew that the kidnapper was a convict, yet she did not back off until the woman had threatened her with the gun and her words. Piper knew that she had quite a large temper, and unfortunately, the sweet young woman had to be the recipient of it. After mulling it over in her computer chair for a while, Piper came to a decision. She would go get this so-called child of Desiree's.

At three-thirty in the morning, Piper was on her way back to Los Angeles to get a cat. She shook her head, wondering if she had lost her mind. Here she was a fugitive, and she was risking her freedom to rescue a feline for her hostage. Piper broke the speed laws on her way to retrieve Tobias, but knew that would be the least of her problems if the police were to catch her. Somehow going over the speed limit by forty miles more per hour did not come close to being as important as the charges of murder, attempted murder and soon to be kidnapping once the police figured out the mysterious disappearance of Desiree Love.

Piper had reached Desiree's apartment with no trouble by 7:30am. After searching the apartment for a few minutes, she had found the scared cat hiding in Desiree's clothes closet behind a suitcase. By 7:45 Piper and Tobias were back on the road, and had reached the cabin by 12:30. The cat had cried most of the way, which was about to drive the blue-eyed woman insane. She turned on the radio in the hopes of drowning him out, but the louder the music got the louder he got. Piper momentarily thought about tossing the annoying feline out of the window, but then considered Desiree probably would not consent to that idea. Half way through the trip Piper remembered the ice cream Desiree had mentioned. She lifted the lid off of the melted lukewarm sweet stuff and held it with her right hand for Tobias to eat out of while she maneuvered the car with her left. Tobias licked it once, then turned around sticking his bushy tail up in the air as if to say, "You call that ice cream?"

"Picky little furball," Piper muttered. "I can tell she spoils you. Well you're not gonna get that from me." Then she thought to herself, *Great. Now I'm talking to a cat.*

Desiree stretched while Piper wished she were standing as she did it. She would have been able to see more skin then. "Why did you do it?" The strawberry-blonde inquired, peering at Piper through sleep filled eyes.

Piper shrugged. "Couldn't leave the kid home alone." She smiled slightly.

Desiree did not say anything for a minute, as she studied the carpet. "Thanks," she said, getting out of the bed and straightening her T-shirt.

"You're welcome. I took the liberty of getting some of his stuff from your place. He's already

been fed. Half a can all right?"

Desiree shook her head. "He eats a full can."

"At one serving?"

The young woman nodded.

"How many times a day does he eat?" Piper asked.

"Twice."

Piper laughed. "No wonder he's so fat." She scooted down in her chair as Desiree marched over and slapped her lightly on the arm.

"Tobias is not fat. He's just big boned," she argued in defense of her beloved baby. She glanced at him, hoping that he was much too deep in sleep to hear the insulting words.

Piper shook her head still laughing. "Whatever you say." She arose from the recliner and made her way over to the door. Looking back at Desiree she said, "Get dressed. Lunch will be ready soon."

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Opening the bathroom door, Desiree's senses were quickly assaulted by a delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. Instantly, her stomach growled letting her know that it was time to eat. Desiree then realized that she had not eaten anything since the two banana splits last night, and she had skipped dinner. She walked towards the kitchen and discovered a sight that shocked her. The kidnapper was in the kitchen wearing an apron that said, "Kiss the Cook." Desiree shook her head. So, the woman was a kidnapper and a cook. What wonders never cease.

Out of the corner of her eye, Piper caught sight of the strawberry-blonde approaching. She glanced towards her and stated, "Sit down. Lunch is almost ready."

Desiree took a seat at a round wooden table with four matching chairs next to the kitchen. She felt refreshed after the hot shower she had taken. Afterwards, Desiree rummaged around in the drawers in her temporary bedroom and found something to wear. She had on a pair of white shorts that reached to her knees, and a navy blue T-shirt. She marveled that they both were a perfect fit. She had not bothered to put on any shoes, so Desiree lounged in a pair of white cotton socks. Besides, it would probably be better for the carpet anyway.

Desiree looked at the television and knew that her favorite soap opera *One Life to Live* was on. She had missed almost thirty minutes of it already, but she could still catch the rest. She glanced over to Piper, and wondered if she would let her turn it on.

"Can I turn on the t.v.?" asked Desiree.

Piper stared at her for a moment. "Why? So you can watch the news? Wait till after you've eaten.

I've got something to tell you first." Piper reached into the freezer and took out some ice cubes to put in a glass.

"What is it?"

"Patience Shorty." Piper smiled at her, trying to ease the young woman's growing tension.

Desiree did not reply as Piper walked over to her with a black plate and a glass of what appeared to be pink lemonade. Piper set the plate down and watched as Desiree's eyes widened in shock. Before her was a fancily done grilled chicken sandwich and spicy smelling potato wedges. Her mouth watered at the sight.

"You cooked all of this?" she asked, looking up at Piper who wore a proud expression.

Piper nodded.

"Where did you learn how to cook?" asked Desiree, placing the paper napkin on the table in her lap daintily.

Piper walked back into the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of ketchup from the cupboard. She came back to the table, placing the condiment by Desiree's plate. The young woman thanked her and Piper replied, "You haven't even tasted it yet. It may just look good." She knew that this was not the case though. If there was one thing that Piper knew how to do, it was cook. That was one thing her mother had started teaching her at an early age.

"Well there is only one sure way to find out." Desiree picked up the heavy sandwich and took a bite. She had to open her mouth wide because it was so big. As the sandwich hit her taste buds, Desiree knew that she was in heaven.

"This is delicious," Desiree uttered, covering her mouth with a hand as she talked and chewed at the same time.

Piper smiled. "Glad you approve, Desi."

Desiree once again did not say anything about the nickname. She decided that she didn't mind at all if the blue-eyed woman used it.

"Where is yours?" she asked, after she had swallowed.

"I ate when Tobias did," Piper replied, noticing a smudge of mayonnaise on the young woman's upper lip. She started to tell Desiree to wipe her upper lip, but then she smiled mischievously after coming up with a better idea. Piper quickly bent down and licked the dollop of mayonnaise from Desiree's lip, making the woman gasp in shock.

"Mmm. That tasted good."

Desiree shot up from the chair. "What the heck are you doing?" she demanded, hoping that she was not blushing. Well unlike Tobias' licking earlier, that sure did raise her state of arousal. *So much for that theory about not being attracted to her*, Desiree thought. *I must be losing my mind. She's a woman and she kidnapped me!*

"Just tasting my creation. I made that mayonnaise you know," she said, grinning. *I am so bad*, Piper thought.

"Did you now?"

A nod from the taller woman, as she gently nudged Desiree back into her chair. "Finish your lunch, and then we can talk and watch television."

Desiree resumed eating her lunch quietly, as Piper walked over to the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of lemonade.

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About twenty-five minutes later the two women were on the couch. Piper was spread near the curve of the couch with her bare feet propped up on the cushions. She was dressed in a pair of blue jeans with a short tight gray T-shirt that stopped an inch above her navel, which Desiree found herself peeping at frequently. She then remembered earlier that morning when the blue-eyed woman had kissed her own navel. Desiree felt her cheek and knew that she was flushed. Desiree also could not contain herself from gazing at the two swells that were well defined due to the tightness of the cotton shirt. *She's a woman, she's a woman*, Desiree kept repeating to herself silently like it was her mantra. Her hormones and body on the other hand obviously did not care.

Piper cleared her throat to start. She was nervous about their conversation. How was she going to explain to this woman that she was wanted for the attempted murder of her brother and the murder of three other people? Oh, what was a kidnapper to do? Desiree seemed like the type that would keep an open mind and listen to what Piper had to say, though even her own lawyer who had become a trusted friend had turned on her.

"Well you know that I kidnapped you for a reason," Piper started.

Desiree nodded. "I figured you didn't do it just for kicks." Desiree crossed her legs under her on the couch as she faced Piper who was lying down.

"Right. I'm wanted by the police."

Desiree did not say anything as she waited patiently for the woman to continue.  
"I'm wanted for murder and attempted murder."

The strawberry-blonde's eyes widened considerably, but she still did not utter a word.

Piper did not know exactly where to take this. "Have you heard anything on the news about three

jurors being found dead?"

Desiree thought for a moment and then remembered something she had heard about three jurors in San Francisco. Apparently, all three had been found dead within a period of less than forty-eight hours. The thing that was strange about it was, they all had served on the same case about eight and a half years back. "Yes, I remember. What does that have to do with anything?" Desiree asked.

Piper swallowed hard before inquiring, "Did you hear that they had a suspect?"

Desiree shook her head.

"Well they do."

Desiree asked, "Who?" She already had a feeling what the dark-haired woman was about to say.

Piper shrugged. "Yours truly. They were three of the people who served during my trial eight years ago. The same trial that Judge Richard Love presided over."

Continued in Part 2.

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### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 2

Desiree was rendered speechless for a minute or two. "My father?" she finally whispered.

Piper nodded.

Desiree stared at Piper for a moment before saying, "It's all starting to make sense now. You kidnapped me because my father put you in prison." It was more of a statement than a question.

Piper shook her head. "No. That's not why I kidnapped you. Eight years of my life were ruined because of his sentencing, but that has nothing to do with this," she argued, sitting up on the couch.

"Then why am I here?" Desiree wore an expression of complete confusion.

The kidnapper sighed. "As I already told you, I'm wanted by the police."

A slight nod from Desiree.

"Well, last week I went to court again because three of the jurors that served at my trial eight years ago suspiciously ended up dead. I was the prime suspect because they claimed to have some evidence against me." She paused a moment to gather her thoughts. "Guess who was the judge when I walked into the court with Frank Webb my lawyer?"

"My father," Desiree answered.

Piper nodded. "Yep. The honorable Judge Richard Love," she said in a disgusted tone of voice. Just saying the man's name caused her blood to boil.

"It's not my father's fault that you decided to become a criminal," Desiree stated angrily. She was never really close to her father, but she would not let someone talk against him. "And that you are one now," she added as an afterthought.

Piper's face reddened in anger. "I didn't have a choice," she retorted in a quiet, yet angry tone. Piper smoothly arose from the couch and stormed into the bedroom that Desiree had yet to see the inside of. She came out a few moments later wearing a pair of sneakers and carrying the handcuffs.

Desiree immediately became alarmed when she caught sight of the handcuffs. Walking towards her, Piper grabbed Desiree by the arm, roughly pulling her away from the couch. She wordlessly led her captive into the kitchen and once again handcuffed the young woman to the refrigerator. Without a word, Piper hurried to the front door, opened it, and walked out, slamming it so hard behind her that the window in the living room shook. Desiree had not uttered another word, afraid that she had finally pushed the woman too far.

Desiree said out loud to the empty cabin, "Nice one, Love."

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Driving down a street of San Francisco, California, thirty-six year old Detective Victor Redding thought about the case of the three murdered jurors and of the person wanted for their senseless deaths. As far as Detective Redding was concerned, Piper Redding needed to pay for what she had done, and he was going to be the person to bring her down. Everything that had happened was her fault.

Victor was feeling triumphant after what had just occurred where the autopsies of the three jurors had been performed. He had aided by showing them that Piper Redding had left her calling card somewhat. They all had remarked on how stupid it was of her to do that, since she had adamantly claimed in court that she was innocent of the murders. Detective Redding had pointed out that all three murders had something to do with the number eight. Sally Harris, the first victim had been

shot a number of eight times in her head and chest area. Douglas Foxx, the next victim had been stabbed eight times in the head. Walter Simpson, found yesterday afternoon, was deemed the most brutally murdered. His wife had come home from grocery shopping to find her husband of twelve years tied to a chair with rope and duct tape. His fingers were lying on the floor after having been severed from his hands. It was obvious that he had bled to death, which was confirmed during the autopsy today. Detective Redding pointed out that since Piper Redding had been locked up for eight years that this number was symbolized in the deaths of her victims. This evidence furthermore convinced the police and all others involved that Piper Redding was guilty.

There was an obstacle standing in the way of arresting Piper Redding. No one had any clue where she was. Last week, after she had been arrested for the murders of Harris and Foxx, and had been arraigned by Judge Richard Love, Redding had disappeared. She had been able to return to her home after attending court since it was mostly speculation then, but Redding had obviously fled because no one could locate her. It was Detective Victor Redding's job now to help find the woman before someone else ended up dead. It was still not known exactly why Redding had killed these three jurors, but the other remaining nine jurors were being warned to be careful of where they went, and to be aware of their surroundings. Some had even spoken of going into the witness protection program, or at the very least taking long vacations.

Making a right turn Detective Redding thought about the disappearance of Desiree Love. He had a feeling that her abrupt disappearance had something to do with Piper Redding. He would bet money on it that Redding had taken Love as a hostage for bargaining. He was on his way to discuss the vanishing of Ms. Love with her father, Judge Richard Love at Baker Hospital, which was where his son Richard Love Jr. was being kept after the attempt on his life yesterday. His was the best evidence of all that Piper Redding was a murderer. Richard Love Jr. had told the police yesterday that he had seen Piper Redding's face as she prepared to kill him in his own home. He described that the woman had been wearing black jeans, a black shirt or sweater, (he could not remember for sure which) black shoes, and she had on a black ski mask at first, but then had removed it. Richie Love reported that the woman said she had wanted him to see the face of the person who was about to end his life.

Now, Desiree Love was missing and the police were beginning to become frantic. No one in his right mind wanted to deal with the wrath of Judge Richard Love. The man was both feared and respected not only in San Francisco, but in other parts of California as well. Odds were since Ms. Love was missing that Piper Redding had abducted her. If the fugitive did have her, then it would be considered as a possibility that Desiree Love would never be seen alive again.

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"Can I get you some more water, honey?"

"No, Mom. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

Richard stopped his constant pacing and faced his wife. "Sandra, stop harassing the boy! He's not thirsty all right?"

Sandra's eyes started to fill with tears again. "I know you are worried Richard, but that is no reason to yell at me." She sat down in a chair by the window in the hospital room, covering her face with her hands. Her body began to shake as she cried. Richie would have gotten out of the bed to comfort her, but he was still too weak, so he just glared at his father for the man's insensitivity. Judge Love had the ability to be harsh with anyone, including his own family. Oddly, none of his children seemed to take his most unfavorable attributes. They seemed to take mostly after their mother, especially Desiree with her sweet-natured manner and compassion for others.

Richard mentally chastised himself for his behavior as he hurried across the room to comfort his wife. He knelt by the chair, and taking her delicate hands in his big ones, he said, "I'm sorry, Sandy. I have no right to treat you that way."

Sandra smiled and extracted one of her hands from her husband's grasp to touch his cheek lovingly. Just then the hospital room door opened and one of the guards stationed in front of the room for Richie's protection poked his head in. "A detective is here to see you, sir." He directed this to Judge Love.

Richard nodded as he arose from the floor with a little help from his wife. He walked outside to the waiting room to see a young man sitting down with a small pad and a pen in hand. He had dark brown close shave hair, light brown eyes with a medium build. He stood up when he caught sight of the judge and Richard noticed that he was quite a tall man. Judge Love was six feet two himself, but this man was probably about six feet six inches.

"Good afternoon, your honor," said the young man, shaking Richard's hand with a strong firm grip.

"Good afternoon to you too..."

"Detective Redding. Victor Redding," the man supplied.

Richard looked at him with suspicion. "Redding?" he asked with a touch of anger.

"No relation sir," Victor offered him a smile, showing white even teeth.

"Quite a coincidence." Richard indicated the chairs. "Why don't we have a seat?"

Victor nodded as he headed for a chair to sit in. Judge Love sat in a chair to his left and looked at him expectantly.

"How is your son doing, sir?"

"He's fine. I've got a tough boy," he replied proudly.

Victor smiled. "I bet you do, sir." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to talk to you about your

daughter, Desiree Love." He opened his notepad while removing the top from his pen.

Judge Love started to worry more than he already was. "Did you find something? Is she okay?"

"No, I didn't find anything." He wore a grim smile. "And I'm sorry, but I don't know if she is okay. I'm sure everything is being done to find her sir."

Judge Love nodded disappointment evident on his face.

"I saw your case on television and I wanted to help. I don't know what I would do if one of my children ended up missing."

"You have children?"

The detective smiled warmly. "Yes, I have two daughters. One is nine and the other one is six."

"So you know how hard this is for my wife and I. Our son has already been shot, and now our youngest daughter has vanished."

"The police don't have any information on the whereabouts of Piper Redding?" Victor asked.

Judge Love shook his head glumly.

"Do you have a picture of your daughter?"

Richard nodded, taking out his wallet. He chose a photograph from it of Desiree at age seventeen (his most recent picture) swinging in a tire tied to a tree. He handed it to the detective, who studied it for a moment before he put it in a pocket in the inside of his jacket.

"When was the last time you saw Desiree?"

Richard thought about it for a minute. "I believe it was just after Christmas."

The detective wrote in his small notepad. "Have you argued with her in the last few months?"

"No. Not at all."

"No disagreements whatsoever?" Victor inquired, tapping the notepad with the pen lightly.

Judge Love shook his head adamantly. "I haven't even spoken to her since January," he said in self-loathing. He hated to admit it, but the judge had not bothered to keep in close contact with any of his children. Sandra had spoken to Richie, Larisa and Desiree recently, but her husband had not. The judge always seemed to be busy with a case or something else. Richard made a silent promise to himself that if all turned out well when this was over, he would make some time for his family. Maybe he would even plan a vacation.

"Do you know if she has a boyfriend?"

"Yes. She has a live-in boyfriend named Alec Drake," Richard replied disgustedly. He never had felt that Alec was good enough for his daughter.

"I get the feeling that you don't approve of this man," Victor observed.

"No I don't. He's a freeloading idiot in my opinion."

"Do they have a good relationship?"

The judge shrugged. "I honestly couldn't tell you one way or the other."

Victor nodded, writing again. "Do you think maybe he could have taken her, or maybe they went on a vacation somewhere?"

"Either is possible. I would prefer it was the latter, however I don't think he took her. Alec is a freeloader, but I don't believe he would kidnap my daughter." He paused. "If you ask me, I think Piper Redding took her. She already tried to kill my son, and now my daughter turns up missing the same day my son's life was almost ended." Judge Love clenched and unclenched his hands in rage.

Victor looked at the judge and quietly stated, "I think that Piper Redding is responsible for your daughter's disappearance also."

"I'm certain that she had something to do with this. I'm going to kill her," Richard said savagely.

Detective Redding thought, *not if I get to her first.*

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Glancing at her watch, Piper saw that it was almost four o'clock in the afternoon. She had been sitting there by the crystal blue lake, back propped up against a large oak tree for nearly two straight hours. She considered that she ought to start heading back to the cabin since her captive was still handcuffed to the refrigerator. As she thought about that, Piper felt the guilt overtake her once again. She felt bad about locking the young woman up and storming out of the cabin without so much as a word. Piper could not explain why, but if there was one thing in this world that she did not want to do, it was hurt Desiree. Piper grudgingly admitted to herself that she cared for the woman, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she would protect her to the best of her ability.

"Great Redding," Piper murmured. "Rule number one. Never fall for your hostage."

With that Piper got to her feet and checked the seat of her pants for grass stains. Pleased to not see any, she headed back to the cabin. To Desiree.

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"I wonder if she's coming back?" Desiree mused out loud. *I hope so*, she thought, kneeling on the tiled kitchen floor. *I hope so?* she thought again. Desiree realized that she really did want Piper

to come back. One reason was because she seemed to be out in the middle of nowhere, which meant that Piper might be the only one who could get her back to civilization. Not to mention the irritating handcuffs. The other reason was that Desiree wanted to see the sometimes-teasing woman again.

All of the sudden she heard a door creak open and peeked around to see Tobias walking towards her quickly. When he got to her he stretched and yawned. Tobias looked at his owner's predicament curiously while cocking his little head to the side.

"Good afternoon, Tobias." Desiree patted his head with her free hand, making the feline purr with much delight.

"Did you have a good nap?" she asked.

Tobias meowed as if to say that he had.

"I wish you could get me out of this." Desiree pointed to her handcuffed wrist. At that moment, the cat spied something much more interesting and hurried over to a green plastic bowl on the floor, which was what Piper had put his liver pate in earlier. She had got the liver pate, litter, litter box and even a couple of toys for the feline while at Desiree's apartment, but she had left the crystal goblets behind. Desiree wondered how she was able to get Tobias to eat out of the bowl. She mused that her cat must have been very hungry to eat out of the plastic instead of his usual crystal. She frowned acknowledging that she spoiled him way too much. Maybe being here would teach Tobias some discipline. It was worth a try, although it was not as if she had much of a choice.

Tobias walked back over to his owner and started his "I'm hungry" crying, after discovering that the horrid pea-colored plastic bowl was empty. He had even drunk all of the water in the other plastic bowl next to the empty food bowl.

"I'm sorry Tobias," Desiree apologized. "Mommy can't get you any food right now." Then it dawned on her that she was attached to a refrigerator. She would not be able to put the food in a container for her cat, but he could eat out of the can. Getting to her feet, the young woman opened the refrigerator door. After looking around for a minute or so, she discovered the rest of Tobias' food from earlier. Obviously, Piper had not seen it fit to give Tobias the rest of the can of cat food after Desiree told her that he ate a full can in one serving.

"Here we go, Tobias," said Desiree, taking out the can. She closed the refrigerator, knelt down again on the tile, and took the lid off the can, placing it on the floor. Tobias bowed his head to gingerly sniff the half-filled can of liver pate. He peered up at his owner as if to say, "Now you want me to eat it out of a *can*?" Bad enough that she expected him to eat the food out of a can, but it was cold too. He preferred his food to either be room temperature or heated in the microwave for twenty-five seconds. That wasn't too much to ask, now was it?

Desiree sighed in frustration. This cat definitely needed some discipline. "Tobias eat. It's still liver pate whether it is in a crystal goblet or a tin can."

Tobias stared at her for a few moments, obviously thinking that maybe she would change her mind. Finally, he gave up and began to eat his meal making Desiree smile. She briefly thought about buying him a new toy for being a trooper and "roughing" it, but then let the idea go. If she kept rewarding him, he would never learn.

Watching him eat, Desiree then noticed that Tobias' collar and nametag were missing. She became angry, guessing that the kidnapper must have taken them. *She's probably gonna try to pawn them*, she thought irately.

A few minutes later Tobias curled up by Desiree sleeping peacefully, when the young woman heard the front door opening. Piper came in and shut the door quietly behind her, but Tobias heard anyway, and his head raised up. When the blue-eyed woman headed in their direction, the feline hissed at her, trying to look as menacing as was possible. How could this silly human forget his crystal goblets? Piper glanced at the feline raising an eyebrow slightly, but other than that paid no attention to him. She unlocked Desiree from the refrigerator and helped her up from the floor, mumbling something that the strawberry-blonde could not understand.

"What did you say?" Desiree inquired as she rubbed her wrists.

Piper took a step back and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry," she said more clearly.

Desiree's eyes widened upon hearing the apology, but all she replied was, "It's okay." Brushing past Piper, she walked into the living room, choosing to have a seat on the couch and stare at the fireplace.

Piper let out a slow breath, and walked over to take a seat next to the young woman. Both women sat staring at the darkened fireplace for a few minutes. Piper decided to take the initiative. Reaching over, she gently cupped Desiree's chin and turned the young woman's face towards her. "I really am sorry."

Desiree shrugged saying, "It really is okay. It's part of your job right? You've been treating me far too well." She smiled slightly. "Like a queen," she quietly finished.

"You deserve to be treated like one," Piper murmured.

"Huh?"

The blue-eyed woman thought quickly, trying to cover her slip. "I said let's have some fun. You wanna watch some t.v.?"

Desiree peered at her quizzically, but only nodded.

Piper arose from the couch, and going over to the entertainment system, she picked up the remote control lying on top of the television. Walking back to the couch she handed the remote to her captive while stating, "Why don't you look for something to watch. Since I don't have cable there might not be anything good on but there are some videos we could watch if you

want."

Desiree replied, "That sounds good."

"Good. Pick anything you want." She indicated the videos on a shelf of the entertainment system. "I'll be right back. I'm going to the bathroom."

Desiree nodded, as Piper head to the bathroom.

Just as she switched on the television Tobias jumped up on the couch to curl up beside her. She promptly put him on the floor, not sure if Piper would appreciate the feline lying on her obviously expensive leather couch. Tobias looked up at her and then fled into the bedroom. Desiree was staying in as though he was annoyed with her. First she gave him frigid food still in its can and now refused to let him cuddle with her. What was going on here?

Desiree chuckled as she changed the channels, stopping when she found the news. She glanced at the bathroom door and turned up the volume a few notches. Apparently, she turned it on just at the right time, because Piper's mug shot came on the screen. She listened to what the newsman was saying.

"Police are still searching for Piper Redding. Please, if you have seen this woman call the number located at the bottom of your screen. Do not, I repeat do not try to apprehend this woman, due to the fact that she is considered armed and extremely dangerous. Piper Redding is under suspicion for the murders of the three jurors, Sally Harris, Douglas Foxx and Walter Simpson who served on her trial in 1990. Redding is wanted for the attempted murder of-"

The television channel suddenly switched to a talk show, and Desiree found Piper lying across her lap. She blinked wondering how Piper got there so fast, and why she was there in the first place.

"What are you doing?" asked Desiree.

"I remembered that I like this talk show," replied Piper in a semi breathless voice. Her heart was beating so severely that she half expected it to burst through her chest. In truth, she had just wanted to change the station before Desiree could hear the rest of the report. Piper could not have the young woman finding out that way. It was too soon. How can you tell someone that you have been charged with the attempted murder of his or her brother? Also, Piper could not bear to see the mistrust and hate she would surely find in those beautiful blue-green eyes. While washing her hands in the bathroom, Piper heard the person referring to her on the television, and had hurried out to change the channel quickly. Noticing that the remote control was on Desiree's right she had to jump across her and stretch her arm out to get the remote, pushing the button with an arrow facing upward.

"I just think that you didn't want me to hear what he was about to say about you."

"Oh!" Piper uttered in a surprised voice. "They were talking about me?" she asked innocently as

she pointed to herself.

Desiree smirked, not buying the innocent act for a split second. "You know they were."

Piper shrugged as she turned on her right side and propped her right cheek on her hand to watch the television. She looked back at Desiree and asked, "Would you prefer that I move?"

The strawberry-blonde shook her head, and Piper turned her attention back to the television. Surprisingly, Desiree found that she enjoyed having the tall woman lying on top of her lap. They both watched the television show for a few minutes in silence before Desiree spoke.

"I'm sorry," she apologized quietly, resisting the urge to run her hands through Piper's long dark hair. It looked so soft and inviting.

Piper maneuvered until she was on her stomach, propping both of her elbows on the couch for support. She looked up at Desiree questioningly. "For what?"

"For saying that you were still a criminal. I was just upset and I lashed out at you." She placed a hand in the middle of Piper's back. She could feel her warmth through the thin cotton.

"I am, aren't I?" asked Piper. "For all you know I killed those three jurors and attempted to kill someone else." She naughtily wished that the young woman would bring her hand down lower.

"You said you didn't do it and therefore I believe you," Desiree replied earnestly.

"When did I say that?" Piper's heart swelled at the fact that this young woman, who barely knew her, believed in her innocence. She was not used to people trusting her, and she found that it felt wonderful to have someone in her corner.

"When you were on the phone yesterday." Desiree blushed at revealing her eavesdropping, but Piper did not seem to mind.

"Oh. How do you know that I wasn't lying?" She mentally reprimanded herself, pondering why she appeared to be endeavoring to ruin a good thing. *Shut up and just accept the fact that she believes you, she thought. It could happen.*

Desiree was silent for an instant. "I don't," she finally stated with a casual shrug.

Piper stared at her in bewilderment. "Yet you believe me." It was more of a statement than an inquiry.

The strawberry-blonde nodded resolutely.

Piper felt something that she had not felt in years. Her eyes began to brim with unshed tears, so she turned her head away before the other woman could notice them. She took a deep breath.

"You don't know how much that means to me."

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Opening her eyes, Desiree saw by the clock on the wall that it was 7:56 in the evening. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and stretched to find that something heavy was lying on her lap. She looked down and saw Piper sleeping contentedly on her back with her mouth slightly open. One arm was dangling off the couch limply, and the other one was resting on her stomach. Desiree could only come up with one word to describe this woman at the moment: adorable. She had a feeling that this woman never slept this peacefully.

Desiree rubbed the kink out of her neck while looking at the television. A ten-year-old movie was about to come on the current station. She once again gazed down at the sleeping Piper and wondered, *What has happened to you?* She reached down to brush back a few pieces of hair that were on Piper's face. Immediately the woman's eyes opened and blue met blue-green, as Desiree snatched her hand back sheepishly.

"Yes?" the blue-eyed woman drew out lazily, placing both of her hands behind her head.

"Hmm?"

"You woke me up from a good dream," Piper announced, stretching, giving Desiree an even better view of her taut stomach.

"I did?" Desiree asked distractedly.

Piper nodded, noticing where the young woman's attention was. She grinned mischievously as she continued. "I dreamt I had you lying naked in a tub filled with whip cream, with luscious strawberry's strewn on top." She chuckled as she suddenly went crashing to the floor. "Ouch!" Piper looked up at a furiously blushing Desiree who was now standing up.

Piper chuckled again. "I was just kidding." She paused for emphasis. "You were wearing a thong." She got the remote control thrown at her and it struck her squarely on the forehead. "Ow!" She rubbed the injured spot, exclaiming, "That wasn't very nice, Desi."

Desiree ignored her as she stormed to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Pacing in her room, Desiree wondered how this woman was able to get under her skin so easily. The fact that she reacted to Piper's taunting and teasing only proved to infuriate her even more. Desiree did not understand how the woman could be so nice one moment and in the next annoying and arrogant. Tobias lying on the bed watched his owner curiously as she went back and forth across the room. The feline meowed. Desiree went over and picked him up.

"Hey, Toby." She said, cuddling him. "Is that woman driving you nuts too?"

Tobias meowed again as if to say that yes she was. His little head even bobbed up and down a bit.

Desiree sat on the bed for ten minutes in silence, before she heard a hesitant knock on the door.

"What is it?" she snapped.

On the other side of the door, Piper took a deep calming breath. *No need for the both of us to be snippy*, she thought. "May I come in?"

Desiree nodded, and then remembering that Piper could not see the action unless she had x-ray vision she replied, "Enter."

The door opened and Piper poked her head in. She smiled at Desiree in a friendly way. "I was wondering if you wanted steak or pork chops for dinner?"

"What makes you think that I'm not a vegetarian?" inquired Desiree stubbornly, just in the mood to be difficult.

Piper pretended to ponder that. "Gee. Could it be the fact that you polished off that chicken sandwich for lunch? Every last piece?"

Duh! "Oh, yeah." She felt very foolish at that moment. "Steak then. Well done if you will."

Piper bowed her head before replying, "It shall be done." She smiled and then left the room, closing the door soundlessly.

Staring after the closed door, Desiree murmured, "I guess cooking for me is her version of an apology." Thinking about it, the strawberry-blonde considered that she much rather have a juicy steak as an apology rather than hear the actual words. Well, at least when she was hungry. Hearing her stomach growl, the young woman chuckled. *Apology accepted Piper.*

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Some forty-five minutes later, both women were sitting at the table next to the kitchen, with steaming plates of food before them. Desiree marveled at the delicious aromas rising from the plate. Piper had cooked T-bone steak (Desiree found out that they both liked their meat well done) steamed baby carrots that were slightly sweet, baked potatoes with sour cream and bacon bits, and hot buttered rolls. She was not sure but Desiree thought she smelled an apple pie baking in the oven.

"How does it taste?" asked Piper, after Desiree had sampled every item before her. Desiree nodded, swallowing. "Everything is delicious. Where did you learn to cook so well?" She wish that she had not asked because Piper's face suddenly became pained, as if remembering a less than favorable memory. Desiree waved her fork in the air. "It's okay. You don't have to answer."

"No. It's all right." The blue-eyed woman smiled. "My mother taught me how to cook. I fixed my first breakfast all by myself when I was seven. It was quite good too," she stated proudly.

Desiree smiled warmly at her. "I bet it was."

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Desiree spoke. "This is very weird," she murmured.

"What is?"

Desiree looked up from her plate, surprised that Piper had heard her. She had not expected her to. "This." She waved her hands around her. "This has got to be the strangest hostage situation in the world."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have my own room, you cook for me, I get to watch television." She paused thoughtfully. "It's like being at home again. Only difference is you're not my mother." She speared a baby carrot.

Piper got up and leaned across the table until her face was in close proximity to Desiree's. "Good thing I'm not your mother too, because no mother should have the thoughts I'm having about her child." She sat back down in her chair, enjoying the blush she elicited from the strawberry-blonde.

Desiree took a deep breath, surprising herself with her next words. "And what thoughts are those?"

Piper raised an eyebrow. "Well Desiree. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were flirting with me."

Desiree's next response was interrupted by the arrival of a very hungry and irritable feline. Tobias made his way over to his owner and stood up on his hind legs, placing his paws on her right thigh. He started to cry. Desiree picked him, saying that it was time for his dinner. Piper showed her where she had stored the cat food, and Desiree fed the hungry cat a whole can, after Piper promised that she would make a trip to the store tomorrow. She had to pick up a few items anyway.

Coming back to the table, Desiree took her seat before picking up her fork. Carefully, she added a buttery baby carrot, a square piece of steak, and a bit of potato to the fork before placing the delicious combination in her mouth. As she happily chewed the food, Desiree heard chuckling and looked up to find that the dark-haired woman was gazing at her with an amused expression. Trying to look indignant but failing miserably, Desiree inquired as to why Piper was laughing.

"You're just so cute," Piper replied, grinning as her captive blushed. "I've watched you eat and I can tell that food is truly your passion. You love it don't you?" Her grin broadened as she watched the strawberry-blonde swallow the contents of her mouth. She felt a pleasurable jolt in the southern regions of her body when Desiree unconsciously licked her lips. Piper suddenly wished that she were a piece of steak.

Sheepishly nodding, Desiree reached for her glass and took a small sip before placing it back on the table. "I guess you could say that food is a hobby of mine," pausing, Desiree grew thoughtful before lightly chuckling. "I remember when I was child my mother would pack my lunch for school, she would have to put it all in a paper bag because what I wanted wouldn't fit in a

standard sized lunch box." Both Desiree and Piper shared a laugh before she added, "She used to worry that I would gain weight, however I managed not to."

"Lucky! How'd you do that?"

"Playing sports, exercising, and running around with my friends. Plus, I've always had a high metabolism." As she finished the last piece of her steak, the strawberry-blonde covertly watched Piper's. Thus far, she had only eaten about half of hers. "Are you done?" she asked, knowing that Piper had not touched the contents of her plate in at least three minutes.

A slow grin curved the dark-haired woman's lips. "Do you want my food Desiree?"

Stabbing her last baby carrot, Desiree answered, "Only if you don't want to eat anymore of it. I'd hate for it to go to waste."

Smirking, Piper leaned back in her chair, folding her arms over her chest. "You may have it, but it'll cost you."

Desiree arched an eyebrow. "What is it that you want?" When Piper flashed her a mischievous grin, the strawberry-blonde grew alarmed. "You can't have *that*!"

"Have what?"

It was now Desiree's turn to smirk. "You know what." *I may love food but I refuse to prostitute myself for steak!*

Managing to hold back a laugh, Piper explained, "*That's* not what I'm talking about. Why would I barter for *that* when I, being a very talented and experienced woman could get it for free from just about anyone that I...desire?" While a cocky grin appeared on her lips, Desiree rolled her eyes.

"What are you talking about then?"

"It's simple really. I just want to kiss you once on the lips."

"Ms. Stud of 1999, if you can get *that* for free then I would think it would be even easier for you to obtain a simple kiss."

Throwing her head back, Piper richly chuckled. Sobering after a few moments, she nodded. "Be that as it may, a kiss is my price."

Sighing, Desiree nodded. One little kiss couldn't hurt anything. "Okay, deal." When she puckered her lips, Piper laughed. "What?"

Pushing the plate towards Desiree, the dark-haired woman replied, "I'm not ready to accept my payment just yet but g'wan and chow down."

The strawberry-blonde became suspicious. She wanted to wait? What was the point of doing that? Shaking her head a bit, Desiree considered that she would probably never truly understand Piper. Though she rather just get the kiss over with, she acquiesced. "Okay, you just let me know when you are then," Desiree said in a distracted tone of voice as she focused in on the food now in front of her. Licking her lips again, she indeed did chow down.

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"I'll help wash the dishes."

Piper shooed her away with the dishrag. "No, I've got them."

"Are you sure? You cooked. The least I could do is wash the dishes."

"It's no problem. You like apple pie?"

*I knew it*, Desiree thought excitedly. "Why yes I do."

Piper smiled. "Good. Go sit on the couch, and I'll bring you some when I'm done in here."

Desiree smiled back. While walking away, she muttered to herself. "Okay, Mom."

"I heard that."

A few minutes later, Piper joined Desiree on the couch with a silver tray that she placed on the coffee table in front of them. Desiree's mouth watered at the sight. A big slice of hot apple pie was lying in a white saucer, topped with a perfectly rounded scoop of vanilla ice cream. Also on the tray was a carafe of ice-cold milk, two glasses, and two silver spoons.

Within minutes Desiree had devoured her dessert, and shyly asked for another piece. Piper got it for her, wondering where the small woman was able to put it all, without the added pounds. She considered the fact that the young woman must work out regularly if she always ate this much. Piper did not mind though. She liked the fact that Desiree had a healthy appetite. *If there is one thing I can't stand, it's a woman who eats like a small bird.*

Twenty minutes later the two women sat sipping cappuccinos (which Piper had also fixed) and chatting about everything and anything. Well everything except the reason they were there in the first place.

"How old were you your first time?"

"Excuse me?" asked Desiree, arching a golden eyebrow at the unexpected question.

Piper smirked. "You heard me."

"That's a little personal."

Piper did not say anything, just stared at her waiting for an answer.

Thinking that the woman was not likely to let it go, Desiree finally responded, "I was nineteen."

"Was it with Alec?" inquired Piper, grinning.

Desiree nodded, blushing. "When was your first time?"

"Guess."

"Twelve." She got punched lightly in the arm for that one and snickered when Piper stuck her tongue out at her. "I don't know." She shrugged. "Eighteen."

Piper shook her head. "I was sixteen." She took a sip from her black mug. "I remember it was in my parent's bed, and they came home to find us there." She laughed. "I was grounded for a month."

Desiree laughed too. "Why would you do it in your parent's bed?"

"Well because it was bigger than mine."

The strawberry-blonde shook her head while softly chuckling at Piper's response. "Alec made reservations for us at a five-star hotel. When we got in the room, I discovered that there were at least thirty candles lit around the room, which was the only light that we needed. I was nervous, but Alec was very patient with me," she finished softly.

Piper felt irrational jealousy. "Do you miss him?" *Tell me no. Please tell me no.*

The nostalgia quickly disappearing, Desiree laughed at the question. "Like I miss the chicken pox."

Piper smiled broadly relieved before she turned serious all of the sudden. "I'm really sorry about all this." She placed her half-empty mug on a black coaster.

"Don't be," exclaimed Desiree. "This is like an adventure sort of. You might be doing me a favor."

Piper regarded her with a surprised expression, wondering how on earth kidnapping her could be thought of as a favor. "How so?"

"This could do wonders for my writing career. It may give me some ideas for a book."

The blue-eyed woman did not reply right away. "Well. I hope you get something good out of this experience."

"I already have," Desiree replied quietly. Electric blue eyes met blue-green, staying that way for what seemed like an eternity before Desiree looked away. She tried to stifle a yawn, but did not succeed.

"I think it's time for bed," Piper announced. She got up and offered a hand to Desiree. The young woman grasped the offered hand, standing up.

"Thanks," she said.

Piper smiled warmly. It was then that Desiree decided that she loved it when the taller woman smiled at her.

"Anytime."

Desiree headed towards her bedroom but then stopped, turning back around to face the other woman. Granting her with a questioning look, Piper waited for the strawberry-blonde to speak.

"Umm...how about that kiss now?" Desiree asked in a voice so soft that Piper had to lean down in order to hear what she said. Though she wanted to get the kiss over and done with, Desiree had already admitted to herself that she wanted to feel Piper's lips pressed against hers.

Piper slowly grinned as she snaked an arm around the smaller woman's shoulders and led her to her bedroom door. After opening the door, the brunette turned to Desiree. Leaning down so that her mouth was next to a small pink ear, she whispered, "All good things come to those who wait." She grinned more as the other woman shivered a bit. Straightening, Piper silently gazed into Desiree's eyes before she kissed her. On the forehead that is.

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*"How many times have I told you to make sure that I always have a clean white shirt to wear!"*

*"I'm sorry, Alan," she apologized quietly, nearly shaking with fear.*

*"Sorry is not good enough." He hit her with such force that she went flying over the back of the couch. Getting up, Marie felt a thin trickle of blood run down her chin. Alan had busted her lip for the second time that week.*

*"Alan, you know that Piper has been sick. I got preoccupied and I forgot."*

*He advanced on her quickly. "Well maybe this will teach you not to forget again." He hit her so hard in the stomach, that the wind was knocked out of Marie as her legs gave out and she collapsed to the floor. Alan brought his leg back as if preparing to kick her, but was interrupted by a small voice.*

*"Please, Daddy. Don't hurt Momma no more," the child implored, carrying her beloved teddy bear in one hand.*

*Alan whirled around to face her. "Get your butt back in that bed, Piper!"*

*The child began to cry. "Please don't hurt my Momma."*

*"Go to bed honey," Marie pleaded. She did not want her husband to take out his wrath with her on their child.*

*Alan removed the belt looped through his pants. "I'm gonna really give you somethin' to cry about if you don't do what I say," he warned menacingly. "Now get!"*

*A few minutes later, eight-year-old Piper laid in her bed, listening to what was going on outside of the closed door. She covered her ears with her pillow, and pulled the sheet and blanket over her head, in a desperate attempt to keep the chaos out. She started sobbing, saying over and over again, "Please don't hurt Momma, Daddy. Please don't hurt Momma."*

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"Piper. Piper wake up." She shook the woman a little bit more roughly. "Piper! Piper please wake up!" she shouted nervously.

Piper abruptly sat up in the bed, pushing Desiree on her back on the bed, and pinning her arms over her head. "Please don't hurt Momma," Piper stated softly. Her eyes popped open and she stared in confusion at the terrified looking woman she was straddling. Suddenly it dawned on her that this was Desiree, and she was not eight years old anymore.

"I'm sorry," she exclaimed hoarsely.

"No problem," Desiree replied in a whisper, beginning to calm down. She again assured herself that Piper would never hurt her. She examined Piper's attire and could not help but to admit that she looked sexy in a simple way. Piper was wearing short black and red checkered boxers, and a tight black tank top, with her hair held back from her face by a rubberband, except for a few hairs that had escaped during her thrashing on the pillow.

Piper then did something that Desiree could not have expected to happen in a million years. The blue-eyed woman suddenly burst into tears and covered her face with her hands, still straddling the smaller woman.

"I'm so sorry," Piper sobbed, her whole body shaking.

"It's okay," Desiree replied softly. "It's okay, Piper." She reached up to squeeze the woman's arm, since Piper had released her hold on the young woman's arms as soon as she realized who she was.

Piper then leaned down so far that Desiree just knew that the woman was about to kiss her. *This is it*, she ruminated to herself, closing her eyes for the pleasure that she was sure would follow. Instead, she got a crying Piper stretched out on top of her, with her face pressed into Desiree's warm neck. The young woman could feel the tears dropping onto her skin. Desiree wrapped her arms around the sobbing woman who was lying completely on top of her. She had a feeling that Piper needed this cry, and she did not mind having to comfort her. This was pleasurable in its

own way.

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The next morning, Desiree awoke to find that something was chewing her hair. She knew exactly who the culprit was. "Tobias, stop," she muttered with her eyes still closed. When he did not stop, she reached up a hand to gently swat him until he got off of the bed. "I'll get your breakfast in a few minutes."

Opening her eyes, Desiree was momentarily surprised to find Piper on top of her before she remembered last night. Based on the woman's even breathing on her neck, Desiree could tell that she was still asleep. She had to go to the bathroom quite badly, so she tried to get from under the sleeping woman without disturbing her, but Piper was too heavy. "Oh, that's just great," Desiree muttered.

"Huh?" said a voice thick with sleep. Piper raised her head to see Desiree trapped beneath her. Her eyes opened wide as she scrambled out of the bed, which brought an instant frown to Desiree's face. She felt like someone had just swiped her heater. "What's the matter?" the young woman asked, sitting up.

"Did I- did we..." Unable to finish Piper pointed towards the bed.

Desiree looked at her curiously before it dawned on her what Piper was trying to get at. She briefly thought about teasing the woman as payback, but then changed her mind. She sensed that this was not a time for joking.

"Nothing happened," Desiree assured her.

"Then what was I doing on top of you?" Piper asked exasperated.

"You don't remember? You were crying and you laid down on me. You cried for what must have been about an half hour before you finally fell asleep."

An embarrassed blush appeared on Piper's face. "Oh, yeah." She put her hands on her hips. "I'm sorry about that."

"Why are you always apologizing? It was no problem. It felt quite good in fact." Desiree could have slapped herself for letting that last statement slip out. *Where's duct tape when you need it?*

Piper raised an eyebrow, but other than that to Desiree's immense relief did not comment. The tall woman walked to the door and then turned around asking, "What do you want for breakfast? French toast or pancakes?"

Desiree shook her head. If Piper kept this up, she was going to be in the Guinness Book of World Records for the hostage that gained the most weight while being held captive.

"Whatever is easiest for you," answered Desiree, getting out of the bed. With great effort she kept from doing the "potty dance."

"Pick one. Neither takes that much effort."

"Okay, pancakes."

Piper went out of the bedroom announcing over her shoulder, "One stack of flapjacks coming up!"

Desiree tried to walk in a casual manner to get to the bathroom, but Piper hurried into it, shutting the door in Desiree's face. *She did that on purpose*, the young woman thought furiously. *She knew I had to go to the bathroom*. She hit the bathroom door, only to hear a chuckle come from inside. "You are so mean!" she shouted, only to hear more chuckling.

Tobias chose that moment to start meowing, and she irritably demanded him to shut up. Not used to that tone of voice from his owner, Tobias did the wise thing and stayed out of her way. However, before he walked away, he made sure to flip his bushy tail in her direction, telling his master just what he thought of her foul mood.

Desiree made a decision. "Fine. I'm going outside. Not like I've never used a bush before." Glancing back at the bathroom door, Desiree could hear the shower running. Coming to the conclusion that Piper would probably be in there for a while, she went to the front door and opened it. She thought about leaving a note, but decided not to. Let the woman worry about her disappearance if she were to come out before Desiree could come back in. It would serve her right for behaving like such a bully at times.

Arriving outside on the porch Desiree marveled at the scenery. Beautiful green plants and flowers of all colors were strewn around the cabin. She could hear birds chirping and if her eyes weren't playing tricks on her, that was a deer that just past by a few trees about thirty feet away.

"This is paradise found," she said aloud.

Walking down the stairs and to her right, Desiree soon came to some bushes that she thought would do. Grabbing a couple of leaves that would take the place of toilet paper and then pushing her underwear down, the strawberry-blonde started to do what she came out there for.

"Well, well, well. Nice set of cheeks, and I'm not referring to ones on your face," said a jovial voice coming from behind Desiree. The accent was Jamaican.

Quickly turning around, dropping her oversized T-shirt back into place, and pulling up her panties, Desiree spied what must have been one of the most gorgeous men she had ever seen. In fact, he looked like he had just stepped out of an issue of GQ magazine. He was smiling broadly at her, and she could see that he had pearly white even teeth. His skin was the color of dark chocolate and must have topped Piper's height by at least six inches. He wore tan colored slacks, and a dark green short-sleeved shirt, which was tight enough so that Desiree could tell that he was quite muscular. He had a diamond stud in his left ear and was wearing shades with a green tint to match his shirt.

"May I help you?" she tried to ask calmly, feeling vulnerable in only a T-shirt and panties.

The man slowly nodded. "Maybe you can."

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"Let me go!" Desiree shouted. The Jamaican man was carrying her effortlessly over his left shoulder into the cabin. She figured that he thought it might have been empty and that she was all by herself. *Wrong, buddy. Piper is not gonna like this*, she thought, feeling secure in the fact that the woman was only in the bathroom and that she would be able to rescue her.

Piper opened the bathroom door wearing a black terry-cloth robe, her wet hair trailing down her back. She had heard the commotion and wondered what the young woman was up to. She figured she had the television up too loud, but the scene before her was completely unexpected. Her mouth opened wide as she ran towards the man. He put Desiree down and opened his arms for Piper's arrival, swinging her off the floor and spinning around. By this time, Desiree's mouth was now open. *She knows this guy?*

"Taj!" Piper exclaimed after the man put her down.

"It's been too long, Pippy," the Jamaican man said.

*Pippy?* Desiree thought.

Continued in Part 3.

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### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 3

"You know him?" Desiree inquired of Piper.

Piper turned to face her surprised hostage. "Of course I do." She squeezed Taj's arm affectionately. "Taj and I go way back. He's my best friend," she added jovially.

"Oh, you know that's not true," the Jamaican man interrupted. "I'm your *only* friend." He chuckled as Piper playfully hit him in the stomach.

Desiree watched this easy banter between the two old friends with growing jealousy. It was obvious that they truly were good friends, and the young woman berated herself for being upset by their relationship. *What do you care for?* She asked herself. *It's not like she belongs to you or anything.*

"So Pippy when did you two get here?"

Before Piper could answer, Desiree interrupted with, "Are you in on this?" she inquired of Taj.

He nodded. "Whose cabin do you think this is?" He raised both of his arms.

Desiree placed both hands on her hips. "Let me get this straight. You helped her to kidnap me by providing the usage of your cabin?"

Taj smiled showing a set of dimples that looked deep enough to take a dive in. "That about sums it up."

"Do you know what this is about?" Desiree asked of him. Perhaps he could provide her with the answers that Piper had neglected to.

Taj looked at Piper, who was standing next to him. "Did you tell her?" he asked in a quieter voice.

"Not everything," Piper replied in an equally quiet voice.

The man gazed at Desiree thoughtfully. "She doesn't seem to be afraid considering her situation."

Piper smirked. "She says I treat her like a queen."

"Huh. Does she know why she is here?"

Piper shrugged her shoulders. "She knows it has something to do with her father, and that he served on my case in '90."

"Is that all?"

"Pretty much."

"Excuse me." Desiree said, drawing the attention of the other two. "I guess you two forgot "she" is in the room and "she" would like to know all about what is going on," she demanded furiously. Desiree started to tap a bare foot on the carpet.

Piper peered at her smiling slightly. "You look so very lovely when you're angry, Desi." Taj laughed at this, while Desiree gave Piper a dirty look as she blushed.

"I have a right to know, Piper."

"You will soon, Desi," replied the blue-eyed woman mocking the younger woman's tone.

Desiree continued with, "When will soon be?"

"You'll know when it gets here." She flashed a cocky grin.

The strawberry-blonde threw up her hands in frustration, and huffed as she took a seat at the round table by the kitchen. Piper and Taj followed suit, with Piper sitting across from Desiree, and Taj to the right of the defeated young woman.

*Might as well change the subject, Desiree thought. They're not about to tell me anything. "So," she started glancing at both Piper and Taj, "how long have you two known each other?"*

"About thirteen years," Taj answered.

Desiree's blue-green eyes opened wide. "That long, huh?"

"Yep," Piper and Taj said in unison, causing both to start laughing. Desiree just rolled her eyes thinking that in her opinion it was not that funny.

Thirteen years ago Piper Redding had met and almost instantly liked Taj Potter on their first day as freshmen's in high school. Taj had just moved to California with his parents and two brothers from their previous home in Kingston, Jamaica a month before school started in September. He was just as nervous as Piper was about beginning high school.

*Given her locker number, and after wandering down the halls for ten minutes, Piper finally located her locker. She spent the next few minutes desperately trying to open the locker, finally giving up and pounding it with her fist in anger. Even back then Piper's patience was thin.*

*"Can I help you with that?" said a light male voice coming from behind her.*

*Piper turned around and said, "Be my guest."*

*The lanky youth went up to the locker, asked Piper for her combination and had it open within seconds. He turned his attention to her grinning.*

*"How did you do that?" The last thing she wanted was to be showed up by a boy opening her locker for her, when she could successfully tackle most of the one's in her neighborhood to the ground in a game of football. In her opinion, they were not much competition.*

*"Guess I've got that magic touch," the boy replied still grinning.*

*Piper rolled her eyes. "Thanks. What's your name?"*

*"Taj Potter." He extended his hand and they shook briefly. "I'm from Jamaica," he added.*

*"I know that," Piper uttered indignantly. "I could tell from your accent."*

*Taj shrugged. "No need to get defensive. I didn't realize you would know."*

*Piper replied, "Well I've got a brain."*

*The teenager looked her up and down slowly. "As well as a body."*

*Piper rolled her eyes again. The last thing she needed was another boy leering at her. At age fourteen, Piper was already well developed, which was part of the reason most of the freshman class girls did not like her. The other reason was that Piper did not like them either. All they cared about was their hair, make-up and gossiping about whom liked whom. Piper could not have cared less about any of those things.*

*The next thing Taj knew it, he was being slammed against a locker and Piper had a hand grasping his neck tightly, with the other in a fist shaking menacingly in his face. To his credit, even though he was in this predicament, Taj remained calm and collected. Piper noted this, and so did a few other students as they stopped to view the scene. Both Piper and Taj ignored them.*

*"You don't look like you fear me." She had to look up at him since he was taller than she was. Taj replied coolly, "That's because I don't."*

*"Because I'm a girl?" Her grip on his neck tightened.*

*"No. It's just because you don't frighten me, and even if you did I wouldn't give you the satisfaction of knowing it."*

*Piper narrowed her eyes, and then let go of him taking a step back. "You have the nerve to stand up to me," she exclaimed silently. Piper peered into his deep brown eyes. "I dig that!" She slapped him good-naturedly on the shoulder much to the other student's shock as they started to walk away. Usually her victims ended up with a black eye or worse.*

*"The name is Piper Redding."*

*"Nice to meet you, Piper." He moved his neck from right to left in order to get the crick out. The girl had a heck of a grip.*

*"I love your accent," she commented, placing her lunch in the locker and then closing it.*

*"As I love everything about you." He looked her over once more grinning again.*

*Piper sighed. If they were going to be friends, she was going to have to nip this in the bud fast. "Look, Taj you're cute and all but you're not my type."*

*Taj replied in a low voice, "The color of our skin won't matter when we are between the sheets."*

*Piper's blue eyes widened in shock. This must have been the youngest smooth talker she had ever encountered. "I'm not talking about your race, Taj. Frankly, that doesn't matter to me." She paused. "And where did you pick up that lame line?" She smiled broadly, and Taj fell in love with that smile.*

*"My older brother said it to some girl on the phone last week."*

*"Did it work?" Piper inquired.*

*Taj nodded. "Must have, because he went out that night and didn't come back home until the early morning smelling like Chanel #5 and wearing a big dopey smile."*

*Piper shook her head, chuckling. "Your brother?" She thought about something. "Is his name Dion?"*

*"Yeah. How did you know?"*

*She began to walk to her first class with Taj following next to her. "He made a pass at me a couple days ago in an arcade. I asked you if he was your brother because I had never seen him before, and he had a Jamaican accent too." She paused a moment. "Come to think of it you look like him a little."*

*"Who do you think is cuter though?"*

*"Why you of course." She linked her arm with his, both of them smiling.*

*"You're just saying that because it's true."*

That was beginning of a great friendship, and since then, they had been there for each other whenever they were needed. When Piper called Taj about needing help with her current situation he had been there. Even when she told him that she planned on kidnapping one of Judge Love's daughters, he had been on her side, instantly offering his cabin secluded in the woods for them to hide in until Piper achieved what she wanted.

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*"How do you know you can trust him?"*

*"He's the only person on this earth that I know would never betray me."*

Piper missed the look of hurt that appeared on Desiree's face at the statement. The young woman could have kicked herself for feeling put out. *Geez, she thought. You haven't even known her for a whole three days. How do you expect her to say that she trusts you?*

Piper and Desiree were currently sitting at the eating table, playing checkers. Taj went to the

store almost an hour ago after convincing Piper that she should stay at the cabin with Desiree, saying that someone might recognize her if she were to go out in public in broad daylight. She agreed that he was correct, and after he left she challenged Desiree to checkers. Now Piper wished she had never done that because the young woman was beating her to the point where it was positively embarrassing. Piper's temper was starting to take a hold on her, and she had to control herself from throwing the checkerboard on the floor and having a hissy fit.

"Are you cheating?" she asked suspiciously.

Desiree looked up at her after having just stole another one of her pieces. She had not been surprised in the least when the blue-eyed woman had chosen to play with the black pieces. She made a mental note to question Piper and Taj about their fetish with black and white. In her opinion, the colors of the living room were a bit on the depressing side and far too clinical.

"How could I be cheating?"

"I don't know, but we've played four games now, and you've won all of them. What gives, Desi?" Piper sat back in her chair, crossing her arms.

"Maybe I'm just good." Desiree smirked, and then bit her lip. She had a feeling that the other woman was about to mess with her words.

Piper stared at her with a blank expression for a few seconds silently. Desiree started to squirm, despite her efforts to stay still. Piper leaned forward and finally replied huskily, "I bet you are."

*I knew it*, Desiree thought. *She just can't help herself*. Before she knew what she was doing, the strawberry-blonde sent a red checker flying at the other woman's forehead. However, it did not make it to its destination because Piper caught it. She looked at Desiree, who was gaping and raised an eyebrow at her.

"Now it's war, little girl." Piper threw a black checker at Desiree, and then noticed that was her last one except for the one she had just caught in her hand. She had not managed to get any of Desiree's red checkers.

The shorter woman noticed her dilemma. "Tsk tsk. Now how can you have a war without ammunition Piper?" she teased.

"You wouldn't dare," Piper said confidently.

"That's obviously one thing you don't know about me."

"What is?"

Desiree stood up. "Never dare Desiree Love," she replied in a serious tone.

"Oooh. I'm scared of you shrimp." Piper grinned.

Desiree smirked. "That's it. You've done it now. Always trying to play the short card!" She picked up a couple of checkers from the table.

Piper grabbed the checkerboard for a shield just as a checker thumped her on the nose. The next thing she knew it, black and red checkers were rapidly flying at her. Piper managed to deflect most of the throws with her 'shield'. Finally, she got tired of just sitting there, so Piper arose from her chair and started to throw the checkers back. She realized that this was the most fun she had had in ages. The two were laughing as they pelted one another with the small round pieces of plastic.

This was what Taj entered in on a few minutes later, with two full grocery bags in hand. He put the bags down and just stood there slightly grinning, waiting for the giggling women to recognize that they were not alone. Finally, Desiree glanced over to see him standing with his arms crossed.

"Hey, Taj," she said, tossing the checkers in her hand on the table.

Piper glanced over. "Welcome back, Potter," she grinned at her attempt at a joke, as the other two groaned. "Hey it wasn't that bad. I thought it was kind of funny," she added defensively. She had got the joke from the title of a show from the seventies "Welcome back, Kotter" starring John Travolta.

"You have your opinion, we have our own," Taj replied, grinning.

Piper threw a checker at him, but he ducked it. Straightening up he said, "Missed me, missed me, now you gotta kiss me."

Piper raised an eyebrow and sauntered over to a smiling Taj, while Desiree still standing next to the table frowned, wondering if Piper was really going to kiss the man. She did. Piper went right up to Taj and placed a quick but sweet kiss on his lips. She then turned towards Desiree, happily noticing that the young woman looked as if she could have shot Taj at the moment if she had a gun. *Are we a wee bit jealous, Desi?* Piper thought hopefully.

"Do you want a kiss too?" she asked of Desiree.

*Is the Pope Catholic?* The young woman replied, "I rather kiss a toad."

Piper chuckled and glanced at Taj. "Well what do you think he is?" She pointed at the Jamaican man.

"Hey!" Taj wrapped his strong muscular arms around Piper and pulled her towards him until her back was pressed against his chest. "Say you are sorry."

"You are sorry," Piper chuckled again.

"You're in trouble now, Pippy." Taj began to tickle her, bringing the tall woman to her knees on the floor, protesting against the attack, yet laughing the whole time.

Desiree rolled her eyes, deciding that she could not take anymore of this bonding. She told Piper and Taj that she would be retiring to her room to take a nap with her cat. Piper told her that she would let her know when lunch was ready and the young woman nodded before quickly disappearing into her room.

Piper and Taj busied themselves with putting the groceries away. The blue-eyed woman noticed that Taj had bought twenty cans of cat food. She figured it out in her head that twenty cans meant ten days, since Tobias ate two cans a day. She hoped that this would all be over by that time, but could not help but to wonder what would happen where Desiree was concerned. Yes, she liked the young woman and if all worked out correctly she wanted to keep in contact with her. Piper smiled to herself, wondering what the young woman's reaction would be if she were to ask her out on a date. *She'd probably blush.*

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Judge Richard Love once again tried to call his daughter to no avail. The answering machine picked up again causing him to slam the phone down harshly in frustration. Something must have been wrong, because he knew that Desiree would never be that careless not to let her family or anyone else for that matter know where she was going if she were to leave on a vacation. Judge Love managed to get a hold of Alec Drake, and had found out that he and Desiree had split up on Monday, and the young man exclaimed that he had not heard or spoken to Desiree since. He promised the judge that he would call him if he found out anything. All other friends of Desiree's that her father had spoken to didn't know anything either, and stated they would call if they obtained any information on her whereabouts.

Sitting behind the large oak desk in his office at home, Judge Love decided that he would take a trip to Los Angeles. He started up his computer to make airline reservations via the Internet, when his cordless phone rang. He hurriedly pulled up the antennae and pushed the talk button saying hello. The other end remained silent so he said the greeting a little bit louder. Still no answer, so he nearly shouted the next time.

"Talk! I can hear you breathing," Judge Love said impatiently, picking up a pencil to tap on the desk nervously.

"My, Judge. Aren't we demanding," the person said almost cheerfully.

The pencil instantly snapped in two from the pressure the judge put on it. "You," he said menacingly. "Where is my daughter?"

The female voice chuckled. "What makes you think I have her?"

"You tried to kill my son, and now you've kidnapped my daughter. You will pay for this."

"No. I think that you have that backwards." The woman now sounded deadly serious.

"Your son almost died because he has an idiot for a father, and as for your daughter? Yeah I have her. Now listen to me judge." She said the title in a sneering tone. "If you ever want to see

Desiree again, you will find a way to get those ludicrous charges off of me. Do you understand?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" he asked in an exasperated voice.

"I'm sure you can find a way. You are *so* smart," she stated sarcastically.

"You're guilty," the judge argued.

"That's what *you* think," she paused. "Oh. By the way, it would be in your best interest to keep the police out of this. There is no need for them to know that your precious daughter is missing. I'll be in touch."

The phone clicked and Judge Love knew that she was gone. He put the phone down and ran a hand through his thinning hair. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind, as well as others that she was guilty, so he knew that it would be virtually impossible to get the charges against her dropped. She had called him an idiot. Thinking back, he considered she might be correct.

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"Oh, Taj that feels so good," Piper moaned, reclining on her back on the couch.

"You like that, huh?"

She replied, "You know I do."

A few minutes later, Taj said, "Give me the other one."

The blue-eyed woman obediently put her right foot on Taj's lap. He sent his strong warm hands to work their magic on it, eliciting a few more moans from Piper. A few more minutes passed by before she spoke.

"If I were straight, I'd marry you," stated Piper, with her eyes closed.

Taj replied, "That is if I said yes."

The woman sat up and waved her fist in his face threateningly. "Oh, you'd say yes." She tried to keep a grin from showing on her lips, but failed to do so.

"Tsk, tsk," sounded Taj. "Once a bully, always a bully. Huh, Pippy?" He smiled broadly at her.

She smiled back. "Always." She removed her foot from his lap and crossed her legs Indian style. "Hey! Maybe I'll marry you anyway. You're smart, you cook, clean, you're handsome, funny," she paused thinking, "give good massages and you're my best friend." She shrugged. "I could overlook what's in your pants."

The Jamaican man chuckled. "You are a naughty girl, but who knows? Once you try out what's in my pants you may become ad-dict-ed."

Piper laughed loudly. "And you're calling *me* naughty? Listen to you."

Taj chuckled again. "I've missed you, Pippy."

"Right back atcha." She squeezed his arm affectionately. "I see you have continued to hit the gym."

"Have to stay buff for the ladies." He glanced at Desiree's door. "What's up with your little hostage? Is she ever going to come out of there?"

Piper sighed. "I really don't know what's wrong with her. Maybe she's homesick." She felt instant guilt at the fact that she was keeping the young woman away from her family and friends.

Desiree had for the most part been very easy to get along with and that made Piper feel even worse. She knew that the young woman did not deserve this, but she played an important role in Piper's plan. The blue-eyed woman needed Desiree in order to survive. She was her one and only lifeline.

An hour after Desiree had gone to take her nap, Piper went to tell her that lunch was ready, but she had declined announcing that she was not hungry. Later on, Piper told her that they were about to eat dinner, but she forfeited on that too. Piper was about to sit down at the table, when Taj informed her that the "little one" had to eat in order to keep up her strength. He insisted that Desiree eat, so he brought her a tray of the food and placed it on the nightstand next to her bed. She said a quiet thank you but offered nothing more. An hour later when Taj came to pick up the tray he was happy to note that the young woman had eaten all of her dinner.

Her eyes were closed, but he got the impression that she was playing possum. The only times that Desiree had come out of her bedroom was to make a trip to the bathroom once, and to feed Tobias.

Taj sighed. "I don't think she likes me," he stated.

"Ah, Taj she just doesn't know you that well is all."

"Was she this quiet with you at first?" he asked.

"No, she was actually quite brazen. But she'll come around. You'll see."

"Hmm." Taj glanced at his Rolex watch. "I should be getting to bed."

Piper looked at the clock on the wall. "Already? It's not even 9:00 yet."

Taj stood up and stretched. "Yes, but I'm tired." He turned around and looked at Piper. "So get off my bed."

She raised her eyebrows suggestively. "What makes you think that you have to sleep on the couch?"

The Jamaican man grinned. "Don't even tease me like that, Pippy."

She laughed, rising from the couch. "Goodnight Taj."

"Nite Pippy."

She took a couple of steps towards him and they hugged tightly.

"Everything is gonna be all right. Isn't it Taj?" Piper asked, still hugging him. She desperately needed some reassurance.

He smiled warmly. "Of course it will Pippy." He released her and took a step back. "You'll be a free woman in no time."

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Desiree awoke from a deep sleep to the sound of her cat mewling. She switched on the light and looked down at Tobias who was sitting on the floor crying his little heart out. She glanced at the clock, noticing that it was past midnight.

"What is it boy?" she asked, her voice thick with sleep. Desiree shook her head. *As if he is going to answer me.*

She looked at the bedroom door, noticing that it was closed. She instantly deduced that the feline wanted to get out. At home she never slept with the door closed all of the way, but she could not stand to hear Piper and Taj laughing and talking with each other as if they were the only two in the world that mattered. She knew that she was acting foolish, but Desiree could not help herself. She admitted to herself that she was indeed jealous and the young woman did not enjoy the feeling one bit. She wondered how she could be jealous of a man who obviously held affections for a woman who had kidnapped her. Desiree figured that she must have been losing her mind, because she had never in all her twenty-three years felt these sorts of feelings for another female. She knew her parents would have a fit if they were to ever find out that while their daughter was being held against her will, she discovered that she as Desiree put it earlier played for that team.

The strawberry-blonde arose from the bed and proceeded to walk to the bedroom door, with Tobias following right on her heels. She opened the door quietly to peer outside, and found that it was pitch black in the living room. She switched on a light and noticed that there were covers on the couch as if someone had been sleeping there, but other than the covers, it was empty. Tobias raced past her to get to the kitchen, and she followed him to see that the cat had wanted a drink of water.

Desiree turned around to head back to her bedroom when she heard a noise coming from behind Piper's bedroom. Her curiosity and concern got the best of her leading Desiree to the other woman's bedroom, as she had went last night when she heard Piper repeating something, to find that the woman was having a horrible dream. The woman refused to talk about it, but Desiree knew without a doubt that it had something to do with her father. From what she heard, the young woman concluded that the man must have been abusive. Last night when she heard Piper screaming in her dream at her father, a horrendous wave of rage had overtaken Desiree at the

man for hurting this woman that she hardly knew and her mother.

Reaching the door, Desiree momentarily hesitated before opening it as quietly as she could manage. It was dark inside, but the light from the living room allowed her to see more clearly. What she saw broke her heart in two, and she recognized that she was on the verge of tears. Taj and Piper were in her bed together with the sheets pulled up high around them, but the young woman could tell that Taj's upper body was bare. She figured that if the rest of him were clothed, then it would not remain that way for much longer. Half of Taj was lying on top of Piper, and Desiree saw that the woman had her arms wound tightly around his neck. She could not see her face and only the back of Taj's head, which was a relief. The last thing she needed was to see the passion that would surely be on their faces. It would surely be her undoing.

The hurt young woman closed the door silently and went back to her room to collapse on the bed bursting into tears. About twenty minutes later, Desiree sat up on the bed, swiping at her tears angrily. *How could she play with my emotions?* She furiously wondered. She figured that Piper had been playing some twisted game with her all along, and wondered how she could not see that the woman was indeed cruel. Desiree thought that she had seen evidence of goodness in the woman, but evidently, she was wrong. All of the enticing statements, lustful looks and touches had been apart of her perverted game, and the young woman had half a mind to leave right there and then, but quickly decided against it. It was dark outside and she did not have a clue as to where she was although she had driven here. So, she was trapped here with two jerks that got their kicks messing with people's minds. *She makes Alec look like a prince.*

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The next morning Desiree was stirred from her sleep by the smell of bacon cooking. She abruptly remembered what she witnessed last night and thought she would be sick. *Damn you Piper for making me want you*, she thought on the verge of either crying again or pounding the wall with her fist.

There was a knock on the door, but Desiree chose to ignore it. Let them think that she was still asleep. The knocking grew louder and more insistent so she marched over and opened it harshly. She frowned at the person standing there.

"Morning, Sunshine," Taj said wearing a big smile.

She wanted to slug him but miraculously managed to keep her hands to herself. Instead, she replied, "Shut up!" Desiree slammed the door in his face, and then went to the closet to get something to wear. Moments later, there was another knock at the door. She let out a ragged breath and opened it again.

"Is there a problem?" she inquired testily, holding her belongings in one hand.

"I was intending to ask you the same thing," retorted Piper, wearing a questioning look.

"No. Everything is just freaking peachy," replied Desiree between clenched teeth.

Piper put her hands on her hips. "What is your problem?"

"You." The young woman brushed past her and hurried into the bathroom, leaving a confused Piper and Taj behind her.

"I told you she didn't like me," Taj stated as he placed three glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice on the kitchen table. He had demanded on cooking breakfast so Piper gave the kitchen over to him, but refused to let him use her "Kiss the Cook" apron. Her argument was that she had brought it with her, and no one wore it but her. Taj pouted but she would not give in.

Piper turned to him. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for her behavior."

Taj shrugged. "Yes there is. She doesn't like me."

"That's not reasonable," Piper argued.

The Jamaican man decided to drop the subject. "You should tell her breakfast is ready."

Piper hesitated before knocking softly on the door.

"What?" Desiree snapped from the other side.

Piper took a deep calming breath. She was started to lose her own patience. "Breakfast is ready."

"Can't you see that I'm in the bathroom?" the young woman called.

The blue-eyed woman pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling the beginning of a headache. "Well when you get done, please come eat," she said as pleasantly as she could.

"Oh, I bet you're hungry. Aren't you?"

Piper frowned, but did not even try to ask what the young woman meant by that comment. Desiree was not in a cordial mood, and soon the same was going to be for her kidnapper.

Taj and Piper decided to wait for Desiree to finish whatever it was she was doing in the bathroom to join them for breakfast before eating. Taj had tried to keep the food as warm as possible. Finally, when both were on their second cup of coffee, the bathroom door opened releasing a gush of steam and a clothed Desiree. The young woman had chosen to wear a pair of white jean shorts that were accompanied by a striped red and white cotton short-sleeved shirt. She was wearing red sandals too.

"You look cute," Piper commented, taking another sip from her coffee.

Desiree granted her with an annoyed expression and took her place at the table. Taj arose from his chair and retrieved the plates of food, telling Piper to stay seated when she tried to help him. Desiree glanced at the plate placed in front of her, and could not help but to admire the good-

smelling and delicious looking food. She had been intending to protest eating, but changed her mind. She chastised her hunger for being a traitor.

Taj folded his hands to say grace and the other two women joined, with Piper a little reluctantly until Taj kicked her lightly in the leg. She glanced at him noticing that the man was wearing a slight mischievous grin. He said grace and Desiree grudgingly acknowledged to herself that it was well spoken. Desiree picked up her fork, sliced off a piece of a buttermilk pancake on her plate, and put the piece in her mouth. This man could give the International House of Pancakes competition. *They may be jerks*, the young woman thought, *but they can both cook*.

"How is it?" asked Taj looking at Desiree.

"Fine," she retorted tersely.

A couple minutes later Piper said, "I fed your cat."

Without looking up from her plate Desiree replied, "You want a medal?"

Piper bit her tongue in an effort not to say anything. Something was definitely bothering Desiree and she had a feeling it had nothing to do with being homesick. She grudgingly admitted that it must have something to do with her friend, but could not understand what it could be.

They resumed eating and halfway through the meal Taj inquired if anyone wanted some more juice.

"Oh, I bet you were thirsty last night," exclaimed Desiree, unable to stop herself. "Weren't you Taj?" she sneered.

Piper dropped her fork on her plate with a loud clang. She glared at the other woman asking, "What the hell is your problem?" Taj quietly called her name in warning, but Piper ignored him. "No, I wanna know what is up with her."

Desiree put her own fork down. "I already told you."

"Yeah. Me. What did I do?"

The strawberry-blonde laughed humorlessly. "You know exactly what you did."

"Actually I don't, Desiree."

"Oh, come now." The young woman paused. "Wait. You did that last night didn't you?" She leaned towards a confused Piper. "Why don't you brag about how many times." She felt the tears beginning to sting her eyes and could have kicked herself for appearing so sensitive.

"What are you babbling on about?" asked Piper, her forehead creased in confusion.

Desiree sighed. *Not gonna make this easy for me, are you?* She thought bitterly. "You and Taj."

"What about me and Taj?"

The tears started to run down her cheeks. Piper reached out to her noticing the tears, but Desiree got up from the table and took a quick step back. "Don't you touch me!" she yelled. "Don't you ever put your hands on me again." She started to cry, with Taj and Piper glancing at each other wearing confused expressions.

Piper sat on the edge of her seat. "Desiree, please tell me what's wrong," she stated calmly. Seeing the small woman crying nearly broke her heart.

The disturbed young woman did not answer right away. She wiped a few tears away with the back of her hand, ignoring the napkin that Taj held out to her. "I saw you two."

"What do you mean you saw us?"

Desiree shook her head. "You know what? I don't know why I'm tripping because it's none of my business anyway what you do and who you decide to do it with. It's not like I own you."

"Just spit it out."

"Last night I saw you two in bed together. I thought you might be having another bad dream and I opened the door to see you and Taj in a very intimate position."

Desiree could have slapped Piper for what the woman did next. Piper started laughing so hard that she fell to her knees on the floor. Desiree glanced at Taj to notice that the man was chuckling. Her attention went back to Piper and she saw tears streaming down the woman's face.

"I don't see what's so funny about it," Desiree said indignantly, causing the other woman to laugh even louder.

After a few more moments, Piper finally got herself together and took a seat back in her chair. She motioned for Desiree to sit down too, but the young woman chose to remain standing. "Desi," Piper chuckled. "No offense to you or Taj," she glanced at the man, "but I wouldn't sleep with him if he were the last person on earth. You want to know why?"

"Why?" Desiree asked still angry.

"Because he's a man. Males aren't my forte, and I thought I had made this abundantly clear to you already."

"I thought you had too, but when I saw you with Taj, I figured you were just messing with my mind." *Could it be that I was wrong?* Desiree silently hoped so.

Piper shook her head. "No, I wasn't. Let's get this straight." She paused. "No pun intended. I'm

gay." She pointed to herself. "Always was, always will be. I don't play on both teams and I can assure you that I'll never get the urge to. I strictly like the ladies."

"But he was practically on top of you."

"I was trying to hold her down," Taj interjected. "I was on the couch asleep when I heard her in her room. I hurried in to find her thrashing around on the bed, so I held her down so I could wake her up. I didn't want her to hit me in the process or hurt herself. Finally, she woke up, put her arms around my neck, and started..." He looked at Piper apologetically. "Sorry but I should tell her." He turned back to Desiree. "She started to cry, and I held her until she fell asleep again."

"You didn't have a shirt on."

"A lot of men don't sleep with a shirt on. I haven't since I was twelve."

Desiree thought for a second and then closed her eyes momentarily. "Well I feel like an idiot," she said.

"It happens to the best of us," retorted Piper. She wanted to jump up and down and shout it from the rooftops. Obviously, the young woman liked her more than in a friendly way, and the blue-eyed woman could not remember ever being as happy as she was at that moment.

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The rest of the day pretty much past in a getting-to-know-you sort of way. Desiree learned that Taj had two brothers, one older and one younger who also still resided in California. His parents were retired and now lived in Bakersfield, California. His oldest brother, Dion was married to a wonderful woman and they had two young daughters who Taj claimed said that they adored their Uncle Taj. His youngest brother was currently attending a college in San Francisco into his second year and on the dean's list. Taj spoke of his family in a proud manner, and Desiree could tell that they were all very close.

She thought about the way she had been treating the man since his arrival, and felt guilty. Desiree discovered that after talking with him awhile that she enjoyed the man's company, although to be honest she could not wait to have Piper all to herself again. She was both anxious and nervous to be with the woman alone, and gathered that Piper felt the same way.

When she asked him if he was seeing anyone, Taj said that he wasn't but he would be heading back tomorrow morning because he had a hot date on Saturday night. He asked them both to wish him luck, because this would be his third date with this woman and he felt it could be going somewhere soon.

Early in the evening Taj challenged Desiree to checkers, after hearing from Piper that the woman was indeed a master of the game. He proved her right when after four games, Desiree had won the majority of them. Piper laughed at Taj and he retorted that at least he was able to win one game. She wisely chose not to comment again on the subject.

Taj exclaimed that he would make dinner since it would be his last night with the lovely ladies.

They reclined on the couch watching a video that Taj claimed he had already seen, while he cooked soon filling the cabin with mouth-watering aromas.

When the trio took their seat the table, Desiree smiled at her plate in happiness. Taj had prepared fried chicken, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, and a loaf of freshly baked bread. For dessert, there was chocolate cheesecake. This was one of Desiree's favorite desserts of all time.

"You guys are going to make me fat," she exclaimed joyfully.

"Only more of you to love, darlin'," replied Piper in a mock southern accent, causing the young woman to blush.

The rest of dinner past in friendly conversation between the three. The two women relentlessly told Taj how delicious the food was and he smiled, basking in their praise of his cooking. Desiree asked him where he learned to cook, and he stated that his parents had taught him how. If there was one thing in this world that Taj Potter got along with it would be the stove. He loved to cook and he loved to see people eating his cooking.

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"It was good to see you Taj." She hugged him tightly.

"It was good to see you too Pippy. You take care okay?"

She nodded. "You make sure to do the same."

He turned his attention to Desiree. "I will miss you, little one. You watch out for her okay?" He pointed at Piper. "She's my best buddy."

Desiree nodded, smiling. "I will. You take care Taj." She put her hand out in front of her. He looked at her hand. "What is that? I don't do handshakes when a hug is more appropriate." Before Desiree knew what was happening, she was being lifted off of her feet and was wrapped in a big bear hug. She hugged Taj back, laughing as he swung her around. He put Desiree down on her feet and chuckled her under the chin.

He smiled at them both as he grabbed his suitcase and went around to the back of the cabin, which is where he had parked his Jaguar.

"I'm actually going to miss him," Desiree said.

"Yeah. Me too," Piper replied as she casually wrapped around the smaller woman's shoulder.

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"So what do you wanna do today?" Piper asked sitting on the front porch with Desiree. They both had their own chair to sit in.

"I don't know. What do *you* wanna do?"

Piper thought for a moment. It was a beautiful Friday morning. Why not? "You wanna go

fishing?" she asked admiring Desiree dressed in tan shorts and a white tank top that showed off the well-defined muscles in her arms. She herself had opted to wear short blue jean cutoffs and a red T-shirt. She had her hair in a ponytail, while the younger woman chose to wear hers in a french braid.

"I've never been fishing before. I always wanted to though."

"Then let's do it." Piper got up from the chair and started to go down the stairs.

"Do it?" Desiree said. *Give her a taste of her own medicine. Although she'll probably like it.* "I thought we were gonna fish?" she asked, smiling a little.

Piper turned around to face her wearing a surprised expression. She started to chuckle and said, "I see you've picked up a bad habit of mine. This chick once told me that I turned something she said into something lurid with my perverted mind." She paused. "Now you're doing it."

Desiree slowly walked up to her, stood on her tiptoes, and whispered in Piper's ear, "You'll know when I'm doing it." She then started to walk in front of the other woman, then not knowing where she was going turned around and asked, "You coming?"

Piper chuckled and said under her breath, "I hope so later."

"What?" asked Desiree, not hearing what the woman had said, but quite sure it would have been blush worthy.

"Oh nothing," Piper replied innocently.

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An hour later they were standing by the lake after having gathered all the equipment they would need for fishing. Desiree had made sandwiches for them while Piper made sure everything else was ready for the eight-minute walk to the crystal blue lake. Both applied suntan lotion to themselves so that they would not be in danger of sun burning. Piper had put on a red baseball cap that Desiree considered she looked cute in. She didn't tell the woman that, but she thought it.

After they got to the lake Piper exclaimed that she would be back soon, and disappeared for a few minutes. When she returned she was holding an old coffee can.

"What's that for?" Desiree inquired.

Piper smiled, her perfect teeth gleaming in the light. "Bait."

"Bait?" Desiree repeated. "Are there worms in there?" She took a step back although the other woman was about fifteen feet away from her.

"Yep," Piper replied cheerfully.

She set the can down on the ground and motioned Desiree to come over. The young woman

hesitated before realizing that she was being foolish. They were worms, not tarantulas for goodness sake. After closing the distance between she and Piper, the woman handed her a fishing pole. Gazing at the slim rod, she didn't know the first thing to do with it. Piper picked up one for herself.

"Today you're gonna learn how to fish," she said.

Desiree nodded. "Is this what's for dinner?"

Piper shrugged. "Maybe. We'll see." She turned her attention to the pole in her hand. "Now these fishing poles are identical. Do you know what they're called?"

Desiree silently shook her head.

"They are spinning reels." She continued to tell Desiree all about spinning reels and how you fish with them, eventually making the strawberry-blonde wonder if there was going to be a test on this later. She had the feeling that she was back in school and Piper looked as if she was in full teacher mode.

Finally, Piper seemed to be done with her lecture. She bent down to pick up the coffee can with Desiree standing next to her trying to resist the urge to slap or pinch her on the behind. Piper straightened up, put the pole on the ground, and took the lid off of the can.

"We are going to use these little fellas as bait." She turned the can in Desiree's direction so that the woman could see that there were seven or eight live worms in it. She resisted the urge to start squirming around. Desiree hated creepy crawlers.

"Get one."

"What?"

"I said get one. I'll show you how to put it on."

Desiree suddenly laughed thinking back to health class and when they showed videos on how to put on a condom. Piper sounded just like the people on the television.

The blue-eyed woman stared at Desiree strangely. "What's so funny?"

The young woman blushed. "Nothing." She cleared her throat. "Proceed."

Piper continued to stare at her for a moment and then continued, "Pick a worm. Any worm at all." She held the can out to Desiree.

"I don't want to."

The tall woman sighed. "I thought you wanted to fish."

"I do. But can't I use one of those pretty artificial baits?" Desiree inquired while pointing to the tackle box sitting on the ground.

"The proper name is lures."

Desiree rolled her blue-green eyes, which Piper noticed seem to sparkle when the sun hit them.

"Thank you for correcting me Professor Redding," Desiree remarked in a sarcastically sweet tone of voice.

Piper smirked. "Try to teach somebody something and they don't wanna listen," she said to herself more than to the other woman.

"Okay. I'll cooperate."

"You will?"

Desiree nodded. "I promise."

"Then get a worm. It won't bite you."

After a couple of hesitant starts, Desiree finally reached into the can and picked up a worm between her thumb and middle finger. Piper proceeded to show her how to put the bait on the hook of the fishing pole.

After a few more minutes of lecturing on how to cast the fishing pole into the lake they were ready to begin. Although it took her a few tries, but Desiree finally got it right and gave her "teacher" a huge smile. Piper smiled back.

"How about we make a bet?" Piper asked while tugging down the hood of her cap in order to keep the sun from shining on her eyes.

Desiree looked over at her. "I'm game if you are."

Piper nodded. "How about this. If I catch the biggest fish then you owe me a full-body massage. If you catch the biggest fish then I owe you a full-body massage. How 'bout it?" The tall woman was quite sure that she could win this bet. *You can beat me at checkers shrimp, but I've gotcha here!*

"Sounds good to me." *Oh. Geez, I'm gonna lose.*

After a few more minutes past, Piper broke the silence again. "I've got a proposition for ya."

"What would that be?" Desiree asked as she kept her eyes riveted to the still lake. *Come to me fishy, fishy*, she thought.

"How about you no longer be my hostage?"

"You mean, you're going to take me back?"

"No. Not that."

"Oh," Desiree said in a way that made it sound as if she was relieved, which she was. She realized that was not ready to go back. She wanted to stay a little while longer in this secluded little paradise with the blue-eyed beauty standing beside her.

"I need you here to accomplish what I want to accomplish."

"And what is that?"

Piper sighed. "Let's not get into that just yet. How about this? We'll be in this as equals. You stay here with me a few more days until I get this mess all straightened out. Just think of it as a little vacation. If everything works out according to plan then I'll be your do-whatever for six months."

"My do-whatever?" Desiree frowned. What the heck was that?

"Yeah. I'll do whatever you want me to do for six months. Pick up your dry cleaning, cook for you, wash your car...whatever." She shrugged. "All for free, because I'll owe you. I'll owe you big time."

Desiree thought about it. Her do-whatever. That could have some interesting benefits. "You have a deal." She reached over and they shook hands on it.

\*\*\*

"I still say you cheated."

"I did not. Why are you always accusing me of cheating? Tell me how I can cheat at fishing?" Desiree placed the empty lunch pail on the kitchen sink and turned towards Piper, who was standing a couple feet behind her.

"I don't know how, but you did. Either that or you lied. You have fished before. Therefore you hustled me!"

Talk about a sore loser. "Piper, it was just beginner's luck."

"Yeah right," replied Piper incredulously.

"I'm not going to stand here and argue with you." She brushed past Piper, only to have the woman grab a hold of her arm and pull her back to face her.

"What do you want for dinner?" she asked, between clenched teeth. She realized to herself that she was definitely a sore loser. Desiree caught the bigger fish, and that's all there was to it, yet here she was making a big deal out of something so trivial. It just wasn't fair though! Piper was used to coming out as the winner.

"What makes you think I'm hungry for food," Desiree retorted brazenly, before trying to walk away again, this time succeeding.

Piper watched her walk away in shock. "She's been hanging around me way too much," she said out loud.

\*\*\*

Later that night after eating their dinner in separate rooms, Piper figured it was time for them to kiss and make up. Well she wasn't sure about the kissing part, but definitely time to make up, because this fight was ridiculous and childish. She knocked on Desiree's door with a towel and a bottle of baby oil in one hand. She heard a muffled 'come in' and walked into the room, seeing Desiree sitting on the edge of the bed.

"May I help you?" the young woman asked coolly.

"I'm sorry," Piper mumbled.

"Excuse me? I didn't hear that."

The blue-eyed woman took a deep breath. "I said I'm sorry," she repeated more clearly.

Cocking her head to the side, Desiree stared at Piper for a silent moment. "I forgive you," she simply said.

Piper shrugged. "Is that it?"

"Yep. It's not healthy to hold grudges. What's that stuff for?" She pointed at the towel and baby oil in Piper's hand.

"For you. They are for your full-body massage, since you won the fishing bet fair and square." She paused while trying to keep a grin from showing. "So get nekkid."

Desiree's eyes widened considerably.

Piper chuckled, "And put this on." She threw the towel to her and Desiree caught it before leaving the room, announcing that she would be back shortly.

Piper sat on the bed, wondering how she had gotten herself into this predicament. *Oh yeah. The bet was your idea, stupid.* She was nervous, not knowing how she was going to be able to perform this massage without keeping herself from doing something unprofessional. In just a few minutes, she was about to have her hands all over Desiree's enticing body and the idea both excited and terrified her. Piper did not totally trust herself to behave appropriately.

When Desiree walked back into the bedroom wearing nothing but the towel, Piper could have sworn that that towel had been shorter when given to her. *I should have picked the blue one.*

Getting up from the bed, she instructed the young woman to lay on her stomach across the center of it. Desiree silently did what she was told, folding her arms and laying her head on them. Taking a deep calming breath, Piper then straddled the young woman's strong smooth legs. She pushed the towel up her thighs a little before flipping the cap back on the bottle of baby oil. She then went to work, sending a silent prayer that she would not do something stupid.

She poured some oil into the palm of one hand and rubbed it with the other. Piper then applied gentle pressure to Desiree's thighs, when she heard the young woman gasp. She swiftly glanced up to see that Desiree's eyes were closed.

Before long, Piper was working her way down to Desiree's legs and then she began to massage her delicate little feet. She had started to tickle the arch of the young woman's foot but did not want to ruin the mood. Soon she was on her way up again and almost at Desiree's derriere, which brought back fond memories of that first night at the cabin. When she was dangerously close to those firm yet soft cheeks she heard Desiree say something.

"Repeat that please."

"I said don't go there," the young woman mumbled, with her eyes still closed. Her heart was pounding so hard that she was a little shocked Piper could not hear it. Desiree was afraid that if those skilled hands were to touch her behind, no matter how much she craved it, she would lose all control. She was not quite ready to take the next step. *Chicken*.

"But Taj said they were so purty," she said with a southern drawl while broadly smiling.

Desiree opened her eyes and raised her head. "He told you?"

Piper chuckled. "Yep. He saw you squatting in the bush."

The young woman lowered her head in embarrassment and closed her eyes once more. "Remind me to kill him if we ever cross paths again."

Piper chuckled again. "Will do."

She decided to skip the derriere then, and lowered the towel until the edge was just at the beginning of Desiree's buttocks. Piper applied some more oil to her hands and massaged the young woman's smooth warm back, eliciting a few moans from the woman beneath her. Piper smiled beginning to thoroughly enjoy herself. She happily worked for a few more minutes in silence before deciding to speak.

"You know what, Desi?" she said quietly. "You are the sexiest woman I have ever seen in my life. You're absolutely gorgeous. I think you might really be a goddess and I would joyously spend an eternity worshipping every beautiful inch of you." She waited for the young woman to reply, but after a few minutes of silently massaging her again Piper stopped and bent down to discover that Desiree was actually sleeping. She sat back on her heels while trying to decide if it was a good or a bad thing that the woman had not heard her small speech.

"Well what do you know. I put her to sleep." Piper smiled to herself. "I'm good." Arising from the bed, she left the room soon to return with a blanket that she found in her closet. She placed it over Desiree, assuming that the young woman would not care for it if Piper were to dress her in her nightclothes. If she did not want Piper to see her nude, then the blue-eyed woman would respect that. Before leaving the young woman's room Piper looked back at her and said although the woman was fast asleep, "I still owe you the front."

She then headed to the bathroom and proceeded to take a long shower. A long, long cold shower.

Continued in Part 4.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 4

Before even opening her eyes, she could tell that she was not alone. There was someone or something in the bed with her that was not there the last time she had been conscious. She deduced that the object lying behind her was alive, based on the warmth that was radiating from it, and she could feel warm breath on the back of her neck. She knew who it was and smiled, wondering what they were doing there. She opened her eyes, and sure enough, there was an arm thrown across her waist. She could barely make out the soft light blonde hairs on the petite arm, and she noticed for the first time that the fingernails bore clear nail polish.

Turning onto her back, she peered at the sleeping face to her left and smiled warmly. The woman had light blonde eyebrows, a petite mouth that just begged to be kissed, long graceful eyelashes and a little nose that the woman found extremely adorable when the strawberry-blonde smiled broadly causing it to crinkle. She found herself foolishly wanting to tweak the cute nose. Heck, she mused to herself that she wanted to tweak every part of this young woman that she could get her hands on. Her eyes returned to the generous mouth and she wondered if those lips felt as soft as they looked. She started to find that out, but changed her mind. She did not want her first kiss to be with this young woman when she was dead to the world.

She gently rubbed the young woman's pale cheek and thought back to the one time that she had given her heart to someone. A few months before she got in trouble with the law, she had met

someone while she was vacationing in Jamaica for a month during the summer. The affair had lasted only a little over three weeks, but those had been the best weeks of her life, until her lover had dumped her, claiming that their relationship would never work out. She had been heart-broken and had vowed that she would never give her heart to another for as long as she lived. She glanced at the young woman sleeping beside her and cursed under her breath. Her heart was a traitor and she was breaking her vows.

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Detective Victor Redding removed his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, placing them quietly on the desk. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Piper Redding and Desiree Love were still missing, and he had no idea, no clue where they could be. He desperately needed to locate the whereabouts of the fugitive. Opening his light brown eyes, he glanced at the phone thinking that perhaps the judge would have some information for him. The detective took the phone off of the receiver and flipped through his Rolodex until he found the judge's cell phone number. Quickly dialing it, the phone began to ring and he sat back in his leather chair, waiting for Judge Love to answer. Three rings later a voice came on the phone. "Hello?" said a tense male voice.

"Is this Judge Richard Love?" inquired the detective.

"Yes it is. Who am I talking to?"

"You may not remember me, sir. I'm Detective Victor Redding. I came to see you earlier this week at Baker Hospital."

The judge breathed a sigh of relief. "Of course I remember you, Detective. Have you found something?"

"No, unfortunately I haven't. I know it's a long shot, but have you?"

Judge Love started to tell the detective about the phone call he had received on Wednesday, but quickly changed his mind. Desiree's life could very well depend on what he said next. For now, he would play the game Piper's way.

The judge took a deep breath. "I have."

The detective's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You have?"

"Yes."

"What?" the detective asked on the brink of impatience.

Judge Love cleared his throat. "I found my daughter."

"Is she okay? Where is she?" He had been hoping that the young woman's abrupt disappearance would lead him to Piper. Now it may not be true if Desiree turned out not to be missing after all.

"She is fine." *I hope*, he thought grimly. "She called yesterday, apologizing for not telling us that she went on a ski trip with her friends up in the mountains somewhere. This memory of mind won't let me remember where she said they were." He paused. "So as you can see we won't be needing your help anymore." He hoped he sounded convincing.

Detective Redding frowned. His instincts told him that the judge was not telling him the truth, and he began to wonder why. Something was not right with this story, and he was determined to find out what it was.

"When did she leave on her trip?" he asked. He would catch this man in a lie if it were the last thing he did.

"Monday."

"I see. So, she went on a ski trip after being fired. Most people wouldn't be in the frame of mind to take a vacation after losing their job."

"What can I say? My daughter is different." The judge began to perspire. He had the impression that the detective was not buying his story.

"Hmm. You didn't get the number of the place she's at?"

"No, I didn't. I was just so happy that she was all right, I forgot to ask."

The detective shook his head. *You're lying to me judge*, he thought. "Do you know when she will be back?"

"No, I don't."

"Do you know who she went with?"

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you that either," Judge Love replied, anxious to end the conversation.

"I only have few more questions for you sir. Do you know how she traveled?"

Judge Love recalled that the police could not find Desiree's car, so he replied, "She took her car."

"I see. So she didn't tell you where she was, who she was with, nor how long she would be gone, but she told you that she took her car?" Detective Redding tried to keep his voice from sounding annoyed.

Judge Love started to get angry. Where did this man get off questioning him like he was some type of criminal? "That's right. She said she picked up a couple of her friends and they went skiing."

"All right then. Have you heard anything from her boyfriend?"

"He told me that they broke up. What does that matter anyway, detective?" Judge Love closed his eyes as a dull ache started in his head.

"I was just wondering if he knew anything concerning her whereabouts. They broke up huh?"

"Yes they did."

"Okay. Well thank you for your time, sir. I'm still searching for Piper Redding, so I'll keep you informed on what happens," said the detective.

"Thank you, Detective. I appreciate your help." He sighed in relief that the conversation was almost over.

"Not a problem. This is my job."

The detective hung up the phone and reflected on what the judge told him. The man sounded nervous, and Victor knew something was up. He blew out a frustrated breath and searched through his Rolodex again, until he found the name and number that he wanted. Picking up the phone again, the detective dialed the number and waited for the person to pick up.

"Yeah?" a male voice said.

"Good morning. Is Alec Drake there?" asked the detective.

"You're talking to him. Who's speaking?"

"Detective Victor Redding. I'm working on the case of Piper Redding and Desiree Love's disappearance," he replied.

"I already told her dad that I don't know anything."

"Mr. Drake, I'm certain that you could help me. When did you tell Judge Love that you didn't know anything? He called you?"

The detective heard a female voice in the background and he heard Alec tell her to shut up. *No wonder they broke up*, the detective thought.

"Yeah. He called me Wednesday."

Detective Redding wrote something down on his now open notepad. So far, the judge's story made sense. He called the boyfriend on Wednesday still worried, and his daughter called him on Friday.

"Have you heard anything about Desiree since then? Has she tried to get in contact with you?"

"Like I told the judge, I haven't spoken to or seen Desiree since Monday. I have no idea where she is."

"Did she say anything to you about going on a ski trip?"

"No. I've never known her to ski."

The detective smiled. Something was definitely amiss and he would find it indeed. "Where did you last see Ms. Love?"

"In our apartment." He paused. "Or I should say her apartment now. We broke up," he added.

"Yes, I know. So she didn't say anything about going out again?"

"Nope."

"Did she have any bags or suitcases packed?" asked Detective Redding.

"No, she didn't. At least not to my knowledge," replied Alec.

"Did she ever seem like the type to be impulsive?"

"No." Alec laughed. "Not Desiree."

"Have you been to the apartment since Monday?"

"Nope. Just packed my bags that day and left."

"I see." *I'm not getting anywhere*, the detective thought. "Well thank you for your time Mr. Drake. I'll call you in the future if I need your help again."

"Sure. You do that, detective."

Alec hung up the phone, and Detective Redding was left listening to the dial tone. The man did not seem in the least bit concerned about Desiree's disappearance. Sure they had broken up, but she was still his ex-girlfriend from a relationship that lasted four years. The detective hit the desk impatiently. The judge could not be telling the truth. *Piper, I'm going to find out the truth and track you down. And when I do, you are going to pay.*

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Desiree awoke in bed to find to her disappointment that she was alone. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was close to ten o'clock. Putting a hand on the empty space beside her where Piper had been sleeping she noticed that it was cold. This indicated that the dark-haired woman must have got up a while ago. Desiree sat up and stretched, noticing Tobias curled up at the foot of the bed.

"Hey, Toby. What's shakin'?" she reached down and patted him on the head, which activated his purr button. "Is Piper in the living room?" she asked him. He got up, jumped down from the bed, and walked out of the room for an answer.

Desiree got up and followed her cat into the front of the cabin to see a yellow post-it note attached to the bathroom door. She took it off and began to read while noting that Piper had a lovely penmanship.

**Hey Sleepyhead,**

**Went out for a drive. Needed to think. I'll take good care of your car (smiley face)**

**-P**

**P.S. I fed the furball.**

Sighing, Desiree folded up the small note as the sadness began to seep in. Here it was probably going to be a perfect beautiful Saturday to do something, and the woman decided to go out on her own. The strawberry-blonde wondered where she could have gone. She hoped that Piper would be careful not to get herself caught, then reprimanded herself. If anyone could take care of him or herself, it would be Piper Redding.

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"You be good, all right?"

"Yes daddy," the seven-year old twin boys said in unison.

"Okay." He ruffled both of his children's hair. "Where's my hug?" he asked.

The boys ran into their father's arms and squeezed him as tightly as he squeezed them. They then went to their mother and hugged her too, before they piled into the waiting station wagon with the neighbors' and their children. The William's had offered to take the Lowell's children to the park for the day. The boys had been ecstatic when their parents said that they could go.

The William's had known that the Lowell's would want some time alone since it was their ten-year anniversary today. They claimed that it was only part of the gift that they were giving them. Michael and his wife Annie appreciated the William's for giving them this quality time.

"Why don't we go inside," Michael said. "I don't know about you, but I'd like to work on creating a little girl," he said in as sexy a voice as he could muster.

Annie turned to her husband and smiled joyously. "Do you mean it, Mike? You want to start trying today?" They had been discussing the idea of having another baby for the past six months or so.

He shrugged. "Why not? I'm not getting any younger so we better hurry," he joked. Michael was

thirty-eight years old, but he acted like a big kid at times. Especially when he got on the floor and wrestled with his boys.

"Oh you." She playfully socked him in his side. "Well then. I guess we better get started." She lightly kissed him on the lips.

He put an arm around her shoulders and headed back to the house, thanking God that he had this wonderful woman in his life, and that she loved him as much as he loved her. Was there anyone as lucky as he?

\*\*\*

The lilac Honda pulled up in front of the suburban house and shut off the ignition. The person seated inside thought over what they were about to do, and they did not relish the job, but they had to do it. It was all part of the plan. Parked a few houses from this one a few minutes ago, they had witnessed the twin children leaving so that meant it should only be Michael Lowell and his wife at home. The person mused that it was better that the children not be there. They didn't need to see this.

Taking a deep breath, the person got out of the compact car and walked up the driveway to the front door. Glancing around to make sure no one was looking, they took out the black ski mask and gloves they had brought with them. Next, they rang the bell and proceeded to wait for either Michael or his wife to answer. The person hoped that it would be the husband. Otherwise, the wife might have to go as well.

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Michael stopped kissing his wife and cocked his head towards the bedroom door. He looked back at his wife and asked, "Did you hear something?"

Annie replied, "I think the doorbell rang."

Her husband sighed, getting up from the bed. "Just my luck. We're trying to make a baby and we get interrupted." He leaned down to tenderly kiss Annie one more time before leaving the room. "I'll be right back," he called over his shoulder.

Michael went down the stairs as fast as he could. Reaching the door, he squinted through the peephole to see a nice looking dark-haired woman standing there. He opened the door and gave her a welcoming smile.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"No, I highly doubt it," the woman retorted pushing Michael so hard that he landed on his back on the floor.

Peering up Michael could see that this woman was tall, as she hurriedly closed the front door soundlessly, and put on a black ski mask and gloves. She then reached behind her and took out a

claw hammer that appeared to be brand new.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked nervously.

"I'm going to kill you," the woman replied matter-of-factly in a low voice. She then raised the hammer above her head to strike him, but Michael got up from the carpet and charged her, taking the woman to the ground. She kned him in the groin, causing the man to groan and roll off of her.

She got up and asked, "You just have to make this difficult, don't you?" She raised the hammer once again, and this time was able to make contact with Michael's arm, causing the man to yelp in pain. She raised the hammer again and hit him on the left side of his head. She broke his nose with the force of her next blow, causing the man to start bleeding.

Hearing her husband's screams, Annie hurriedly got out of the bed and headed towards the door, wearing nothing but a short nightgown. She looked over the railing at the top of the stairs and her eyes widened at what she saw. A tall person dressed in all black was striking Michael again and again, with what looked to be a hammer. Annie ran down the stairs and screamed, running towards the attacker furiously.

Hearing the wife's scream, the woman's head snapped around to see Annie coming towards her. She readied herself for the imminent attack. Annie reached her and balled up a fist to hit the attacker, but the woman easily caught the fist before it could strike her. She proceeded to squeeze Annie's hand until the older woman went down to her knees in pain. The attacker turned her attention back towards Michael, who by now was unconscious and bloody in his facial area. His blood started to soak into the carpet. She figured a few more blows ought to finish off the job. Just before she was able to hit him again, the wife pulled her right arm back and bit down, but it did not do much good, since the sweater the attacker was wearing was thick.

The tall woman turned around to face Annie, and the shorter woman put her hands around the attacker's throat and attempted to take the thick ski mask off. She did not get very far before the woman pushed her to the carpet and leaned over her to hit Annie in the face. Annie reached up again and managed to at least scratch the woman on the neck, which was the only part of her exposed at the moment, except for her lips and those electric blue eyes.

"Lights out," the attacker stated causing Annie to realize that this was a woman as she heard the low voice. That was her last thought before the woman hit her so hard with a fist that everything instantly went black.

The woman turned back to the unconscious Michael and sighed. She really did not want to do this, but it must be done. There was no other choice. She raised the blood splattered hammer and delivered a few more blows to Michael's head, before she hurried back to the car, not even bothering to remove the ski mask and gloves in her haste.

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Three-thirty that afternoon found Detective Victor Redding heading towards 1240 Evergreen

Lane in Pasadena, California. The police had arrived earlier that day at the house, due to a panicked call from one Annie Lowell. Apparently, someone had come into their home that morning and attacked her husband with a hammer. The body had already been taken to the coroner's office, since when the ambulance arrived Michael Lowell was already dead.

Reaching the house, the detective parked on the curb and glanced around at a few police cars that were already there. Getting out of the car, Victor glanced around to see a few neighbors looking over, trying to determine what was going on. Victor walked up the driveway and entered the house, since it was already open. He saw Annie Lowell sitting on a couch, rocking back and forth and seemingly staring at the floor blankly. A policewoman had her arm around the distraught woman, trying to comfort her. The policewoman glanced up as the detective came towards them. He nodded to her, letting her know that he would take over now, and she nodded back, getting up from the couch and patting Annie a final time on the back gently before taking her leave.

Detective Redding sat down in the space the policewoman had previously been occupying, and took out his notepad and a pen. He peered at Annie, smiling slightly at her, although she did not see it because she was not looking at him. He put two fingers under her chin and lifted her face until she was looking at him instead of the carpet. He saw the tears in her eyes and offered her a tissue from his pocket.

She shook her head, holding up a handkerchief for him to see. He nodded and squeezed her shoulder gently, before putting the tissue back in his pocket.

"I know this is a dumb question, but how are you doing?" he asked quietly.

Annie sniffed and wiped her runny nose. "My husband is dead, and now I have to tell our children when they come home," her voice broke and she bowed her head crying softly. Detective Redding rubbed her back for comfort.

"I realize this is a hard time for you, but I have to ask you some questions," he said.

She looked up at him. "Now?"

The detective nodded while looking at her apologetically. "No telling how many other lives might be in jeopardy if we don't find the person that...killed your husband."

Annie nodded. "I guess your right. She needs to be caught." She blew her nose.

"She?" Detective Redding wrote something down in his notepad.

Annie glanced at him. "Yes. I was surprised to find that it was a woman."

"Did you see her face?"

She shook her head negatively. "I heard her voice though. It was low and she spoke with an

American accent."

"You don't even know what ethnicity she was?"

"I think she was Caucasian, because I saw a little of her neck." She paused thoughtfully. "By the way she may have a scar, because I managed to scratch her on the neck."

The detective smiled. "Good for you, Annie. May I call you Annie?"

She nodded.

"Okay. You say you heard her voice. What did she say?"

"She told me light's out, just before she punched me so hard I lost consciousness."

"Did you see how tall she was?" the detective inquired.

Annie replied, "She must have been at least five-feet ten."

The detective wrote something else down. "Hair color or eye color?"

"I don't know what color hair she had, but I'll never forget her eyes for as long as I live. They were blue. A cold, ice blue." She shivered involuntarily.

Detective Redding wrote in his notepad once more. "What would you guess her weight to be?"

Annie thought for a moment. "Probably about one-forty. It was hard to tell with the clothes she was wearing."

"What was she wearing?"

"All black. She had on a black ski mask, black jeans, black sweater, gloves, and black shoes. I don't know what kind."

Detective Redding smiled warmly at her. "That's fine all right, Annie." He took a deep breath. "Now for the harder part. What did she use to kill your husband?"

Annie took in a deep breath, trying not to cry again. "A hammer," she whispered.

The detective looked around the room. "Did she take it with her?"

Annie shrugged. "I don't know. I don't even know when she left."

"Do you know what type of vehicle she was driving?" he asked.

"I don't even know if she was driving. You're the first person I have spoken to about all this."

The detective nodded. "Yes. They were waiting for me to get here to question you." He closed the notepad and looked at Annie, who had tears running down her face again. He took her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for all your help, Annie. I promise you that we will find the woman who did this to your husband. She won't get away with it."

"Please do." She wiped at her now bleary eyes.

Detective Redding nodded. "If you remember anything else, just call me." He took out a business card and handed it to her. "Anytime. Day or night, 'kay?"

Annie nodded and smiled as best she could at him. The detective got up to go interview the neighbors outside, to see if they knew anything. Before he could make it out of the front door, a uniformed policeman stopped him. He remembered the man's name was Raymond Banks.

"Hello, Ray," he said shaking the man's hand.

"Hello Detective." Ray sighed. "Quite a mess, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. A shame what happened."

"You get anything from his wife?"

"Yes I did." He paused. "I have a suspect. In fact I'm sure this person did it."

"Who?" the policeman inquired.

Detective Redding slapped his thigh with the notepad before answering, "Guess. I happen to remember that Michael Lowell was one of the jurors along with Harris and the other two that were killed."

Ray inhaled sharply. "Our beautiful blue-eyed fugitive."

The detective rewarded him with a disgusted expression. "Anyone, who can do things like that," he pointed over to where the carpet was bloody, "is the farthest thing from beautiful." Victor then walked out of the house not saying anything more.

The detective walked across the street and studied the neighbors. He saw an elderly woman dressed in a pink jogging outfit and a white headband. Detective Redding decided to question her to see if she knew anything. Making his way up to her, he tapped the woman on the shoulder to get her attention. She turned to him wearing a worried expression.

"This is horrible, isn't it?" she asked the detective. "That Michael was such a nice young man. He used to come over and mow my lawn for free when my arthritis would act up."

Victor nodded. "Yes, it is. I presume that you live on this street?"

The white-haired woman nodded adamantly. "I've lived here for over twenty years now," she replied proudly.

The detective graced her with a smile. "That's quite a long time." He opened his notepad and uncapped his pen. "May I ask you a few questions Mrs...?"

"Mrs. Ida Emmett. That's two m's and two t's," she offered, looking at the detective's notepad to make sure he spelled her name correctly.

"Did you see anything, Mrs. Emmett?" he inquired.

"Yes. I saw a woman dressed all in black go up to the Lowell's house and ring the door bell."

"How do you know it was a woman?"

"I saw her..." Mrs. Emmett put her hands out in front of her chest to indicate exactly what she was referring to. "No man should be that big there."

Detective Redding chuckled. "Can you describe her for me?"

"She had long dark hair, she was tall and I believe she was white."

"How old did she look?" asked the detective.

Mrs. Emmett thought for a moment. "I would have to say about thirty."

"Do you know how she got here?"

Mrs. Emmett nodded, smiling cleverly. "She was driving a purplish colored car. It was a Honda Civic."

Detective Redding jotted down something in his notepad. "Would you say it was lilac?"

Ida nodded.

"How do you know all of this?" the detective inquired.

Mrs. Emmett looked sheepish. "I was peeping out of my window. I was curious because I've never seen that car in this neighborhood, nor that woman." She paused while thinking. "Also, she looked sort of suspicious," she whispered conspiratorially.

"Hmmm. Can you remember anything else for me?"

Mrs. Emmett thought. "No, nothing else, but that she hurried out a few minutes after entering with a blood stained hammer in her hand. She hurried into her car and sped off down the street."

"Did you happen to catch any of the license plate number?" the detective asked.

"There wasn't a license plate. In the front or the back," she replied confidently.

"Well thank you for your-

"Detective! Detective wait."

Detective Redding turned around to see Annie Lowell running towards him. She made it to him and stopped, bending over slightly trying to catch her breath. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder and squeezed it.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He then noticed in the sunlight the purplish bruise forming on the woman's cheek from the punch the attacker had given her.

Annie managed to catch her breath, and stood up properly again. "Yes, I am." She glanced at Ida. "I have to speak with you privately," she stated low enough for only the detective to hear.

"Of course." He took a hold of her elbow and walked with the woman to his car. He placed her in the passenger side and then jogged around to get in the driver's seat. He then turned his attention to her, waiting for Annie to speak.

Annie cleared her throat. "I think I know who did this, and I have proof that this person is the one who," she stopped, taking a deep breath, "who killed my husband." A tear rolled down her cheek.

Victor reached on the dashboard and took a tissue out of a box handing it to her. Annie took it, exclaiming a quiet thank you. She wiped her eyes and sniffed.

"You have proof?"

Annie quickly nodded.

"Who do you think did this, Annie?" he asked, his heart starting to race.

She whispered, "Piper Redding."

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Sitting on the couch, Desiree picked up the remote control and shut off the television. She rubbed her eyes, after having just watched three movies in a row, since she could not find anything good to watch on regular television. Earlier that morning she had been subjected to cartoons, and found (although she would never tell this to another living soul) that she still liked watching the animated characters. They had some new ones on that she had never seen or heard of before, and she found them quite enjoyable. After the cartoons went off, Desiree explored the videos in the entertainment system, and ended up viewing three of them. One of them she had been dying to

see, and after finally watching it, she concluded that it was well worth the wait. It was by far one of the best movies she had ever seen.

The news had been on earlier, but Desiree had been determined not to watch it, no matter how curious she was to hear what they had to say. She figured that it would all be lies against Piper, and she knew that it would only make her mad, because they were talking against a woman she had grown to care for deeply. Desiree could not calmly sit and listen to the filth that would surely come out their mouths. No matter what anyone said, she believed in the blue-eyed woman's innocence completely. If no one else on this earth had faith in Piper's innocence, then Desiree knew that at least she and Taj did. Forget everyone else if they were too blind to see through the falsifications.

She glanced at the clock and noticed that it was going on three-thirty. Piper still was not back yet, and she had not heard a word from the woman. Desiree began to worry as she paced back and forth across the floor. She tried to tell herself that there was a reasonable explanation for Piper not being back yet. Desiree then took notice of the computer and figured she could put some of this nervous energy to good use. Walking over to the personal computer, she took a seat in the comfortable revolving chair in front of it. She remembered that the first night they had been here, she had come into the front and Piper had quickly shut off the computer as if she were involved in something that she did not want the young woman to see. Desiree bit her lower lip, wondering if she should mess with Piper's computer, and then she recalled that mostly everything in this cabin belonged to Taj not Piper, including this Compaq Presario. She mulled it over and concluded that the Jamaican man would not mind if she were to work with it.

Desiree turned on the computer and thought about what she would do next. She figured she could work on either her novel or her journal. She decided that she would work on her journal since she could now. When the young woman had been getting dressed that morning, she had discovered her purse lying on the dressing table in her room. She deduced that Piper must have put it there for her before she left. Desiree had opened the purse to discover that all of her belongings were still there, and did not even look as if they had been tampered with. An instant wave of guilt washed over her for thinking that the older woman would go through her things without asking. One of the things that the young woman kept in her purse were her floppy disks that had her journal entries on them. Some people carried around a pound of makeup but Desiree carried around her journal on disks.

Desiree inserted the latest used disk into the A drive and started the Microsoft Word program. She then opened her journal and paged down until she found where she had left off. Desiree did not write in her journal very often anymore so the last entry was dated back in early January of this year. She skipped a couple of spaces, typed in today's date, and sat back to ponder what she would write. A few minutes later the young woman started typing.

**April 10, 1999**

**Dear Journal,**

**I know it has been along time since I have written to you. Things have been hectic lately,**

and you wouldn't believe the latest adventure of my life. Who am I kidding? I don't have a lot of adventures in my life, but this certainly is one. Guess what? This gorgeous woman kidnapped me earlier this week. Yes, I called the woman gorgeous. She is beautiful! We have been secluded in a quaint cozy cabin in the woods since this past Monday, and call me crazy but I'm not ready to go back to Los Angeles yet. Well at least not without her. I don't have all the details about what is going on and why she kidnapped me exactly, but it has something to do with my father. Oh well. I guess she will tell me soon. At least that's what she says. Anyway, J, I think I...well I have feelings for this woman. Can you believe it? I have fallen for a WOMAN! All of these years I guess I have been fooling myself and now I know why I really couldn't make it work with Alec. Poor guy (poor jerk more like it) it wasn't his fault that he was the wrong gender. Oh geez! If my parents find out, they will have a conniption fit. What am I gonna do? I can just picture the reunion scene with my folks:

"Desiree, are you all right?" my parents ask me as they envelope me in smothering hugs.

"Yes, yes I'm fine," I answer calmly. "But guess what?"

"What?" they say.

"Well," I start, "I got kidnapped and I didn't get hurt, but I became a ..."  
AH! J, I can't even say the word. I can't believe this has happened, and I keep trying to blame it on the fact that all of this excitement has made me think that I am...well you know, but I know deep down inside that this is not true. (I'm taking a deep breath). Okay. Here goes.

"Hello. My name is Desiree Love and I am a lesbian!!"

Whoo hoo! I typed it. I typed the word, J. What do you think of that? Well I should be going now. I will be sure to get back to you soon. Of this I promise.

P.S. Now all I have to do is get up the courage to say it aloud.

Love 4ever,

Desi

Desiree clicked the save button and then took out the now warm disk, placing it back with the rest of the disks into her purse. She ended Microsoft Word and arose from the chair speculating on what she should do next. As a yawn escaped her, she decided to take a nap. Desiree was hoping that when she woke up Piper would have returned. It was worth a try.

Strolling towards her bedroom, Desiree walked inside and closed the door behind her before she slipped out of her shoes and climbed into the bed. Wrapping her arms around the pillow, she closed her eyes soon drifting off with thoughts of the mysterious blue-eyed woman roaming through her mind.

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Victor Redding parked in a spot at the Los Angeles Police Station and wandered inside to talk with Captain Irving Pruett about the murder of Michael Lowell and how it was possibly connected to Piper Redding. He knocked on the man's office and heard a gruff voice tell him to come in. The detective walked into the office, said his greetings and took a seat across from Captain Pruett, who was reclining in a chair behind his desk.

"Something you want, Redding?" the older, white-haired man asked roughly.

Detective Redding cleared his throat. "I have some news on the Piper Redding case sir, and how it might be connected to this latest juror death."

The man stared at him. "What?" he asked in a tired sounding voice.

"I have proof from Annie Lowell herself, the victim's wife that Piper Redding caused the death of Michael Lowell."

"What is it?" the captain asked impatiently. He hated it when these young think they know it all idiots beat around the bush.

The detective cleared his throat again, causing Captain Pruett to glare at him. "I was told by Annie Lowell, and she is willing to testify that in 1990 her husband was given money to argue that Piper Redding was innocent, while he served on her trial."

The captain began to look slightly interested. "Go on."

"She, Annie Lowell I mean claimed that her husband was given five-thousand dollars in cash to say that Piper Redding was innocent. Ms. Redding actually initiated the whole thing. Therefore, with this evidence I am certain that Piper went to the man's house today and killed him with a hammer, because she was sent to jail, even though she gave him money to keep her from going. Her devious plan didn't work so she retaliated on him today." The detective took a deep breath while waiting for the captain's response.

"What makes you think that these aren't just the ramblings of a distraught widow?"

The detective reached into his pocket and withdrew a bank receipt. He handed it to the captain who snatched it and squinted at the both light and minuscule writing. He refused to put on his glasses in front of this young guy who probably had twenty-twenty vision. He examined the slip and discovered that a deposit for five thousand dollars had been made into the joint bank account of Michael and Annie Lowell a week before the verdict was read for Piper Redding.

Captain Pruett looked impressed, which did not happen often with him. "Why did she kill three other jurors?" he asked. "Do you have an explanation for that?"

"Yes, I most certainly do sir. She also paid Sally Harris, Douglas Foxx and Walter Simpson.

Each five-thousand dollars in cold hard cash." He looked pleased with himself. Score another point for Redding.

The captain narrowed his eyes, making his bushy white eyebrows come closer together. "How do you know this?"

"I got access to their bank accounts, and I was able to talk with Walter Simpson's wife today. She met with me and admitted that her husband had also been paid five-thousand dollars." Detective Redding wore a smug smile.

Captain Pruett nodded. "Do you know if any other jurors were paid?"

The detective nodded. "I checked, and none of them were. She only paid those four."

"And all of them are dead," the captain stated as if to only himself. He shook his head. "I heard that Desiree Love had been found. I talked to her father on the phone."

"Yes," the detective sounded like he was hesitating going any further, "but I don't believe it, sir," he finished.

The captain regarded him with an agitated expression. "What do you mean you don't believe it? The man said that his daughter called him from a ski trip she went on with some friends, so evidently Piper Redding didn't abduct her."

Victor wondered if he should push any further. He decided he would give it a try. "Yes, I know sir, but I have possible proof that Desiree Love is still missing."

"Why would Judge Love be lying?"

The detective readily replied, "Because he wants to protect his daughter. I think that he talked to Ms. Redding, and is now worried that if he lets the police know that his daughter has been kidnapped, that the woman will do something to her."

The captain was silent for a moment. "What's your proof, detective?"

"Witnesses say that the murderer drove away in a lilac Honda Civic."

"And?"

"And that is the kind of car that Desiree Love drives. And get this. The license plates were missing, so obviously Piper Redding removed them so people wouldn't know that it was Love's car."

"I don't know. Honda is a very popular automobile."

"Yes, I agree with you, sir, but what are the odds? We know the murderer is Piper Redding, and

we know that she shot Richard Love Jr. and now the judge's daughter is missing. He is lying, and I don't care what he says, Piper Redding has that young girl, and he knows she does. He thinks he's protecting her, but he's only making matters worse by keeping silent."

The captain looked contemplative. "I'll put out a missing report on her. I want you to look more into this. I admit it does sound a little fishy."

Detective Redding stood up to take his leave. "Thank you, sir."

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Piper shut off the ignition and sat in the car thinking. How exactly was this problem going to be fixed? She hoped it would be soon, because she hated the waiting.

"Judge, you better come through," she stated out loud, as she grabbed the key out of the ignition and opened the car door, getting out. It was starting to get chilly as the sun began to set and she hurried to get inside. Looking up she could see clouds starting to form.

Opening the front door, Piper walked in to an empty room. Instantly she became alarmed that Desiree had decided to leave. Hurriedly, she made her way over to the young woman's bedroom and put an ear to the door to listen. She could not hear anything, so Piper silently opened the door to see to her immense relief Desiree lying on top of the covers sleeping. She smiled as she went into her own room and retrieved a blanket from the closet. She carried it back to Desiree's room and covered the young woman with it. Piper gazed down at her, thinking once again that the young woman did not deserve to be entrapped in all this.

She took a deep breath as she exited the room, closing the door softly in her wake. Piper looked over at the computer and noticed Desiree's purse lying next to it. Obviously, the young woman had located it on her dressing table during sometime that day. Piper went to the car that morning right before she left, got the purse and placed it in Desiree's room so that she would have it in case there was anything she wanted from inside.

Piper sat down in the computer chair and glanced at the light brown medium-sized purse. It was unzipped and she could see some floppy disks inside. She wondered if the young woman had been using the computer. She hoped that she had not somehow managed to tap into her personal files. That would not do at all, and Piper would not have the slightest idea how to explain it. She figured that Desiree would not be able to get past her password.

Piper curiously looked at the floppy disks in the purse again and wondered what they could contain. Who toted around computer disks in their purse? Evidently, the strawberry-blonde did. Piper bit her lower lip and contemplated on what she should do. She knew she should mind her own business, but the bright green disks seemed to be calling her to check them out. Piper glanced back at Desiree's closed door and decided to sneak a peek. What would it hurt?

She extracted the disks from the purse, feeling like a thief and chose one, putting it in the correct drive. She turned on the computer and entered Microsoft Word. She opened the only file, which was named "journal," and saw that she was indeed looking at a journal entry. She was not surprised to find that the young woman kept her diary on disks instead of having them the old-

fashioned way. Desiree seemed like the type that would be that orderly. Piper paged down until she found something that caught her eye.

**April 15, 1994**

**Dear Journal,**

**I have a major dilemma. The prom is coming up and I have to choose between Bobby and Andrew to go with. I don't know which to choose though. I don't want to hurt either of them, and I like them both. Bobby is very intelligent and we like the same sort of things like music and movies. We get along with each other very well. Andrew is the captain of the football team, muscular and your all around American teenage hunk. How am I to choose?** "Oh, what is a girl to do when she finds herself in such dire circumstances," Piper stated out loud in a bored tone. "Maybe she is straight after all."

**Oh, who am I trying to kid? Now I am lying to you, as I have been to myself and those I have relationships with. Frankly, I don't want to go to the prom with either Bobby or Andrew. Sure, they are nice enough guys, but my heart belongs to another. There is someone else that I would like to go with, but that can never happen.**

"Hmmm. This is getting interesting." Piper glanced at the still closed door, satisfied before returning her attention to the screen. This was almost like reading a juicy soap opera instead of watching one.

**I don't even know if this person likes me the way that I like them, and do I actually like this person this way? I can't. It can't be possible. Not me. There has got to be some reasonable ex-**

"What are you doing?"

Jumping slightly, Piper turned around guiltily to find that Desiree was standing behind her. She offered the perturbed young woman a smile, but Desiree would not return the kind gesture. Instead, she stood with her arms crossed, glaring down at Piper.

"I asked you a question."

Piper cleared her throat. "It's not what it looks like." *Yeah, she's gonna buy that one!* Piper sarcastically thought.

Desiree gave her a wary look. "I think it is exactly what it looks like. You were reading my journal. How could you? How could you go into my private things?" She did not wait for answer as she marched back to her room, slamming the door behind her, managing to make the blue-eyed woman flinch.

"Now you've done it Piper," she said to herself, feeling like a numero uno rogue.

Piper called herself giving the young woman time to calm down, by waiting a few minutes before she knocked on her door softly. She didn't know what she would say but she had to say something. Piper did not know why exactly, but it bothered her extremely when Desiree was upset with her over some matter.

"What?" an angry voice said on the other side of the door.

"May I come in?" Piper asked quietly.

"What?"

A little louder she asked, "May I come in?!"

"Whatever," was the young woman's only reply.

Piper opened the door and smiled at Desiree, who was sitting on the end of her bed. Piper came in a few steps and said, "I'm sorry." Was it just her imagination, or did she seem to be saying that a lot lately?

"Yes you are," Desiree retorted furiously. "Very sorry."

Piper gave her an annoyed look. "How long are you going to be angry with me?"

"I don't know. I guess until this sick feeling I have that you intruded on something that I consider to be very private goes away. Until then you are at the very top of my you know what list!"

The blue-eyed woman sighed. "I don't know what else to say."

Desiree glanced up at her. "How much did you read?" she asked nervously.

"I only read some of one entry. You stopped me before I could finish. That's the truth."

Desiree did not say anything right away. She shot up from the bed and got in Piper's face. "You can't handle the truth!" she yelled in an imitation Jack Nicholson voice.

Piper stared at her for a moment before she burst out laughing. Mere seconds later Desiree joined her, and soon both of the women were sprawled on the floor laughing joyously. The strawberry-blonde turned on her side and regarded Piper, who had tears in her eyes from laughing so hard.

"I'm sorry, Piper. I took that all out of proportion. There was no reason for me to get that upset."

Piper sat up. "No. You had every right to be upset with me. I really do apologize for opening your journal, but I couldn't resist." She shrugged. "Temptation got the best of me."

Desiree nodded. "I understand. It happens to the best of us." She smiled at Piper, and the woman smiled back. The younger woman then noticed the scratches on Piper's neck. Two red parallel

lines ran down the left side of her neck for about an inch and a half. "What happened to your neck?" Desiree inquired as she pointed towards the scratches.

Piper touched the scratches and smiled sheepishly. "Stupid how it happened. I fell asleep in the car and when I woke up nature was calling, so I hurried out of the car towards the bushes where some rather long branches sticking out scratched my neck. I'm okay though. Doesn't even hurt that much," she finished.

"Did you put something on it?"

Piper shook her head. "No, I didn't bother to."

"I'll be right back." Desiree got off the floor and walked out of the room to go to the bathroom for what she needed. When she came back out, she heard Piper calling her from her own room. She went into the other woman's bedroom with cotton and alcohol in hand. She walked up to her and stood between her legs, like she had the first night near the computer. Except this time, it was of her own volition.

"I'm sorry but this is gonna sting," she warned Piper.

The blue-eyed woman bravely replied, "I can take it."

At the first touch of the alcohol soaked cotton ball, she raised slightly from the bed, hissing loudly. Piper looked at Desiree to see if she had noticed, and caught the young woman smirking. She looked away embarrassed. *Who's a wussy? I'm a wussy!*

Continuing to lightly run the alcohol soaked cotton ball along Piper's neck for a bit longer, Desiree then leaned down and blew on the area, trying to hurry along the process of the alcohol drying. Little did she know the effect her warm breath on Piper's neck was having on the brunette. Holding in a moan of pleasure, Piper silently wished that Desiree would lean a bit closer so that she could feel those lips on her neck.

"Okay. All done," Desiree said as she stood back up, tossing the cotton ball into a nearby wastebasket.

Piper smiled at her, hoping that she didn't look as flushed as she felt. "Thank you doc."

The strawberry-blonde winked. "No prob, Bob."

Piper put her hands on Desiree's small waist and peered up at the woman. "Why do you always end up like this?" she asked.

"Like what?" Desiree inquired, pleasantly feeling the warmth of the other woman's hands on her waist. She blushed, thinking to herself that she wanted those hands on other places.

"Between my legs," Piper whispered seductively. "Are you hungry?" she asked in her normal voice, remembering that she had not eaten dinner, and the other woman probably had not either.

Desiree shook her head almost in a daze. "Not for food," she retorted wantonly, surprising herself with the admission.

The blue-eyed woman softly growled as she stood up and put her face so close to Desiree's that there must have been only a centimeter of space between them. "Neither am I," she stated. She walked slowly past Desiree, and asked the young woman to sit on her bed. Desiree did as she asked, watching as Piper extracted something from one of her drawers' and left the room. The young woman sat there nervously, waiting for Piper to come back. She wondered what the older woman was up to.

She did not have to wait much longer. Soon the music to a song began to play. Desiree instantly recognized that it was "Let's Get It On" by Marvin Gaye. A slight grin lifted the corners of her lips.

*I've been really trying baby  
Trying to hold back this feeling for so long  
And if you feel like I feel baby them come on  
Oh come on  
Let's get it on*

Out of the corner of her eye, Desiree suddenly noticed a long, smooth, bare tanned leg curving around the entrance to the room. All of the sudden Piper came in, and the younger woman's jaw dropped to the floor. Piper was clad in a pair of french lace black panties with a matching brassiere. She was wearing a see through silk black long-sleeved shirt over it, which was completely unbuttoned.

The tall magnificent woman started to dance erotically in time to the music as Desiree stared in amazement at her. Piper turned around and glanced back over her shoulder looking at Desiree as she slowly removed the black shirt from her body. The light fabric cascaded down her arms to the floor and she winked at the astonished woman sitting on her bed.

*We're all sensitive people  
With so much to give  
Understand me sugar*

Piper turned back around to face Desiree and sauntered towards her. She bent down and mouthed the next two lines of the song.

*Since we've got to be here, let's live  
I love you*

Not being able to stop herself, Desiree reached out to touch her, but Piper lightly slapped her hands away, and wagged a finger at the aroused young woman. She backed up, swayed to the music gracefully, and blew a kiss to the strawberry-blonde.

*There's nothing wrong with me loving you*

*Baby no no no  
And giving yourself to me can never be wrong  
If the love is true*

Falling to her hands and knees on the carpeted floor, Piper crawled towards Desiree, who's already wide blue-green eyes managed to open further. Never in her wildest dreams would she have guessed that she would have someone crawling on the floor to her. The young woman swallowed hard. Piper crawled towards her, reminding Desiree of a wild jungle cat with her ease and smoothness. The older woman reached Desiree and stuck out her tongue, running it across her upper lip seductively. Desiree had to control herself from jumping her. It proved very difficult to do.

*I ain't gonna worry  
I ain't gonna push  
I won't push you baby  
Come on, come on, come on, come on baby  
Stop beating around the bush  
Hey, let's get it on  
Oooh, let's get it on*

Piper got to her knees in front of a panting Desiree and reached behind her to undo the clasp of her bra. She stood up and let the bra slide down her long bronzed arms to fall onto the floor. Desiree gazed at the twin mounds in front of her and started to say something, but Piper placed two fingers against her lips to quiet her. Desiree picked up the bra and put it to her nose, inhaling the wonderful scent of this woman.

Piper stepped back dancing again, and hooked both of her thumbs into either side of her panties and began to slide them down at a painfully unhurried pace. Desiree bit her lower lip and grabbed a handful of the blanket she was sitting on.

*Oooh, come on, come on, come on, come on, come on darlin'  
Stop beating 'round the bush  
Oh gonna get it on  
Begging you baby  
I wanna get it on*

The panties finally made it to Piper's ankles and she kicked them off, only to have Desiree catch them in mid-air. Perhaps she would keep them for a souvenir. *Please*, Desiree thought, *if I'm dreaming don't let me wake up anytime soon*. Piper danced, rocking her hips from side to side.

*You don't have to worry that it's wrong  
If the spirit moves ya,  
Let me groove ya  
Good, let your love come down*

Piper walked up to Desiree and gently pulled the woman up from the bed, only to vacate the spot that she had been sitting in. She placed her hands in the waistband of the young woman's gray

sweat pants and pulled them down and off of her completely. She then helped the flustered young woman remove her socks. Piper crooked a finger at Desiree and the young woman straddled her thighs, her face inches from the older woman's.

"You ready to get it on Desiree?" Piper whispered hotly.

Instead of using words, the young woman answered by crushing her lips to Piper's, forcing her way into the older woman's mouth. Piper loudly moaned as she held on to Desiree's waist. She thrust her tongue into the strawberry-blondes mouth, causing Desiree to moan loudly as she started grinding her center against Piper's abdomen. Keeping one arm around the smaller woman's waist, Piper slid her hand along the outside of Desiree thigh, lightly stroking up and down. Ending the kiss, Desiree started placing feather-light kisses along Piper's jaw, making her way towards the woman's neck where she twirled her tongue around her pulse point.

"That feels terrific," Piper announced in a faint whisper as she slid her hand to the inside of Desiree's thigh, steadily moving up it. As the strawberry-blonde's sweet mouth sucked and nibbled on her neck, Piper slowly slipped a finger beneath the edge of her panties, moaning as she felt Desiree's immense heat. "You're so hot," Piper whispered as she found the smaller woman's center and slipped one digit inside, causing Desiree to cry out in pleasure. "And so wet," the dark-haired woman added as she began to move her finger in and out of Desiree's moist cavern at a slow pace.

"Oh, God," Desiree drew out the word, slowly moving her body up and down her new lover's long digit as she held onto her shoulders for support. Never had she felt anything so wonderful in her life.

Removing her finger, Piper heard a small mewl of disappointment from Desiree. She kissed her tenderly on the lips before telling her to stand up. On shaky legs, the strawberry-blonde did as she was told, already missing the warmth of the other woman's body. She watched intently as Piper reached out and started to pull her panties down. As they reached her ankles, Desiree barely had time to kick them off before she was pulled back onto Piper's lap. She grinned at the woman as she wrapped her arms around her shoulders and captured her lips for a heated kiss, their tongues playfully dueling.

Reaching between them, Piper buried her finger in her lover's center, her digit thrusting back and forth in perfect rhythm with her tongue. Her lips still on Piper's, Desiree whispered for her to add another finger before she started sucking on her lower lip, lightly nipping with the edge of her teeth. More than happy to comply, Piper slipped in another digit, letting out a moan as it was enveloped by Desiree's moist heat.

Breaking the kiss, Desiree threw her head back in rapture as she continued to ride her lover. She moaned more as Piper's mouth descended upon her exposed neck, lightly sucking at the flesh. Her fingers slick with Desiree's sweet nectar, Piper continued stroking her inner walls at an unhurried pace while she watched her. Desiree had to be the sexiest woman she had ever seen.

"Take your shirt and bra off for me baby," Piper stated in a voice thick with desire.

Folding her arms across her upper body, Desiree pulled her T-shirt over her head and threw it over her shoulder. She blushed just a little as intense blue eyes watched as more of her body was revealed. Reaching behind her, she undid the clasp on her bra with minimal difficulty before sliding the straps down her arms. Momentarily halting her thrusting, Piper licked her lips as she waited for the offending bra to disappear so that she could behold the twin treasures beneath. Knowing the effect she was having on Piper, Desiree took her time removing her bra, as a grin spread across her lips.

"Desiree," Piper said in a low voice, drawing out the last syllable of the woman's name. Slightly amused blue eyes flickered to the strawberry-blonde's face. "Show me the goodies."

Chuckling just a bit, Desiree took mercy on her lover and finally removed the bra, dropping it to the carpet. As blue eyes focused in on the gorgeous mounds displayed before them, Piper let out a moan of approval. Perfect. They were absolutely perfect. Though she had a feeling that every part of this endearing young woman was perfect. Raising her free hand, Piper brushed her fingertips across the swell of Desiree's breasts, eliciting a moan from her.

When Desiree moved her hips slightly, Piper began to thrust in and out of her again, watching for a moment as the younger woman's full firm breasts gently bounced with her movements. Feeling greedy, Piper leaned forward, taking one of the bouncing breasts into her mouth, her tongue leisurely twirling around a sensitive pink nipple.

"Mm, yes Piper yes..." Desiree bit down hard on her lower lip as she placed a hand to the back of Piper's head, holding the woman to her breast. She cried out in pleasure as teeth lightly pulled at her enlarged tip. Her hips began to move faster against the skilled fingers plunging within her center.

Not wanting the other breast to feel left out, Piper moved to it, flicking her tongue across Desiree's nipple before drawing it into her mouth, lightly suckling. Feeling her lover's vaginal muscles tightening around her fingers, Piper added her thumb, lightly flicking it back and forth across Desiree's clitoris, successfully driving her wild.

Wrapping an arm around Desiree's waist, Piper held on tight as the woman rode her faster and harder. Instinctively knowing that she was close to climaxing, the dark-haired woman increased the pace of fingers, driving them in and out of Desiree almost furiously fast. "Ooh, I'm gonna come," Desiree stated in a breathless voice, bouncing up and down on top of Piper like a kangaroo.

Releasing the smaller woman's nipple, Piper kissed her parted lips. "Come for me baby," she whispered, following it with a longer kiss. "My sweet sweet baby." She continued playing with the woman's hardened little nub, pressing the padding of her thumb against it.

Not being able to hold on any longer, Desiree yelled out her lover's name as she started to come, waves of pleasure running through her body like volts of electricity. Burying her fingers deep within Desiree, Piper watched in fascination as the small woman writhed on top of her. She had never witnessed such a beautiful sight.

"Ooh, Piper yes! You feel so good," the strawberry-blonde purred, still riding the fingers inside of her, albeit at a slower rate. Pressing her face into the crook of Piper's neck, Desiree concentrated on trying to get her breathing and heart rate back to normal as tiny orgasms quaked through her body.

Moments later, Piper slowly removed her fingers before bringing them to her lips and drawing each one into her mouth as Desiree silently watched. The dark-haired woman grinned at her. "Mm, you taste better than I had originally imagined." As the fair woman blushed, Piper's grin widened. Wrapping her other arm around Desiree, she hugged her tightly, smiling as she felt the hug being returned.

The tall woman stood up, and Desiree wound her legs tightly around her waist as Piper carried her to the top of the bed. She turned back the covers and sheets and gently placed Desiree there. Piper then took the time to admire her body and contemplated on how lucky she was to have this gorgeous young woman in her life.

"You are truly beautiful," she whispered in awe, causing Desiree to blush again.

"You're the one who's beautiful," Desiree shyly replied.

Smiling, Piper got into the bed, lying close to the younger woman. She kissed her forehead, then her eyelids, making her way down to the young woman's sweet soft and tender lips. She could never have dreamed that something could be so perfect. Loosely wrapping her arms around her lover's neck, Desiree teasingly ran her tongue across Piper's lips before slipping between them, provoking a low moan of approval.

Ending the kiss, Desiree gazed deeply into darkened blue eyes as she started to caress Piper's cheek, idly brushing her thumb back and forth. "You've just made me feel so wonderful," Desiree started in a faint whisper. "Made me feel things that I've never felt in my life. I didn't know anything could feel so good...so right." Leaning forward she brushed her lips across the other woman's before whispering close to her ear, "Allow me to return the favor."

Smiling tenderly at her, Piper quietly replied, "You needn't ask."

Her lips curving upward in a smile, Desiree gently pushed the dark-haired woman onto her back before she straddled her thighs. Leaning down, she passionately kissed Piper as she felt the woman's soft palms come to rest on her waist, her fingertips lightly stroking in small circular motions. While successfully keeping her lips joined with Piper's, the smaller woman stretched out so that she was lying on top of her.

Feeling the need to move on, moments later, she broke the sweet contact of their lips, and started trailing butterfly kisses down Piper's chin, her neck, chest, until her face came to nestle between the woman's bountiful breasts. Piper moaned as she felt a warm wet tongue lazily stroking up and down the valley of her bosom. Placing a hand on top of Desiree's head, she started to gently sift her fingers through the woman's long soft tresses.

"So you like to be on top, hm?" Piper asked with a small grin on her lips.

Blue-green eyes glanced up at her, seeming to twinkle. "Top...bottom...really doesn't matter," she said while starting to kiss all over Piper's breasts, ignoring their aching tips for the time being. "I'm pretty flexible." Desiree grinned before her mouth suddenly enveloped a nipple. She lavished it with her tongue, while holding it captive to the roof of her mouth.

"Ooh, I'm starting to recognize that," Piper breathlessly replied as she arched her back, letting out a guttural moan. She then shut her mouth, finding it virtually impossible to form coherent speech.

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After their passionate lovemaking, Piper laid on her back with Desiree curled up next to her, resting her strawberry-blonde head on Piper's shoulder. Enjoying the afterglow, neither of them had said a word in the last few minutes as they lightly caressed each other.

"Piper?" Desiree whispered.

"Yes, baby," the older woman said, running lazy circles on the younger woman's arm with her fingertips, causing goosebumps to arise.

"How did you wind up in prison for eight years?" She held her breath, hoping that the sudden mention of this topic did not upset Piper.

Piper wondered how much she should reveal. She figured that she might as well start telling Desiree everything. After the beautiful experience they had just shared, Piper deemed there should be no more secrets between them. She owed the young woman the complete truth. The rate of her heartbeat starting to rapidly increase, Piper thought of how she should start. There really was no easy way to say it.

"I took someone's life."

Closing her eyes, Desiree softly sighed. Well she knew that it couldn't have been petty theft. She figured that Piper's incarceration was due to murder or at least attempted murder, yet she had hoped she was wrong.

"Who did you kill?"

Piper was silent for so long, that Desiree started to think that she wasn't going to answer the question. Finally, she heard the woman sigh before she gravely replied, "My father."

Continued in Part 5.

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# ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBreeze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

## **CHAPTER 5**

Desiree sat up on the bed and stared down at Piper in utter disbelief. Of all the people in the world, she had not expected the blue-eyed woman to say that she killed her own father. Desiree crossed her legs while trying to locate her voice.

"You killed your own father?" she asked.

Piper nodded, wondering what the other woman was thinking.

"Did you do it on purpose?" Desiree inquired hesitantly. She wasn't sure that she wanted to hear the answer. For some reason, she had a feeling that the murder was deliberate.

"Yes, I did."

The younger woman frowned. "What gives you the right to choose who should live and who should die?"

Piper scowled at her. She sat up in the bed glaring at Desiree. "Don't you presume to judge me for what I did. You don't know the whole story. He had to die."

Desiree shook her head. "It shouldn't be up to you."

"Look," Piper took a deep breath, desperately trying to contain her anger. Desiree was the last person she wanted to lash out at, "you don't even know me, so why don't you just see your way out of my personal business," Piper stated evenly.

Falling silent for a few moments, Desiree bowed her head, thinking that perhaps she had gone too far. Piper was correct. She didn't know the whole story, so who was she to reprimand? Desiree glanced up at her, looking apologetic. "Why did you do it?" she whispered.

Releasing a loud sigh, Piper reached over laying a warm hand on the other woman's exposed thigh. Peering at Desiree, she warned her that this wasn't a pretty story.

"I didn't expect it would be," the strawberry-blonde replied.

"He used to beat my mother a lot."

The expression on Desiree's face was pained. "Is that why you dream about him? I remember you telling him not to hurt your mother when you had that nightmare."

Piper nodded. "I dream about him doing that most of the time. Although the last couple of nights they haven't come because you were with me." She gave the young woman an appreciative smile and took one of her hands in her own. "It's like you're my protector, my shield. I never did thank you for holding me last night."

Desiree smiled, shrugging. "You would have done the same for me. Plus I was being partly selfish. I just wanted to touch you," she announced slightly embarrassed, causing the blue-eyed woman to grin. "What are you grinning at? You look like the Cheshire cat."

"And you look like you need to be kissed." Promptly leaning forward, she touched Desiree's lips lightly before she opened her mouth running her tongue over the younger woman's lips, silently asking for entry. Desiree acquiesced and their tongues dueled for space in each other's mouths. As good as this felt, a few moments later, the younger woman placed both hands on Piper's shoulders and pushed her back.

"I'm not that easy to manipulate, Piper." She wagged a finger at the flushed woman. "Tell me what happened. Please."

The dark-haired woman sighed. "Well I guess I should tell you. It all started in November of 1989. I arrived home from work one evening to walk into what looked like the aftermath of a battlefield..."

*Entering the one-story house, Piper saw what a mess it was, which was unusual because her mother usually kept it orderly and clean. The cushions on the couch were strewn around on the floor, the coffee table was turned over, and the books on the shelf were scattered around the small living room. Eighteen-year-old Piper became worried that either they had been robbed or her father had gone on another rampage.*

*She hurried towards the kitchen, because she heard a muffled sound coming from that direction. Entering the kitchen, the teenager saw her mother bloody and crying in anguish. She was lying on the cold linoleum floor with her husband stooping over her with his big hands wound around her slender neck. It was obvious that the man was trying to choke her, and Piper got the impression that this time he meant to kill her mother. This was no ordinary beating. The teenager hollered for him to stop, but her father paid her no attention.*

*Making up her mind, Piper went to a kitchen drawer and extracted a hammer. She came towards her father and glanced at her mother who was gasping for breath with her eyes bulging out. She raised the hammer high above her head and brought it down so fast that the air could be heard and slammed it against the back of Alan's head. He immediately tumbled over and ended up lying next to his wife, whose eyes were wide with shock, as she looked at him and then her daughter. Alan looked at his daughter with blue eyes filled with agony, anger, and even hatred.*

*With some difficulty, Marie sat up as Piper took a couple of steps towards her father, and began to strike him relentlessly with the hammer all over his body.*

*"Piper, stop it!" her mother shouted hoarsely, desperately trying to pull her daughter away from her husband, who was writhing in pain.*

*The teenager just shrugged her off, as she continued to strike her father with her hammer, mainly focusing on his head. She meant to kill him and no one was going to stop her. All the years of abuse that this man had put her mother through, finally came down on her. All the rage she had felt came out in those few life-changing minutes.*

*"Die! Die you bastard!" Piper yelled, hitting her father again on the side of his head. She could faintly hear her mother begging her to stop, but she would not cease until his vacuous heart was no longer beating. Breaking out in a cold sweat, Piper then noticed the pool of blood that was forming under her father. An icy grin formed on her lips just before she felt something hard strike her in the back of the head. Instantly, her surroundings turned black.*

Piper fell silent as she looked at her hands, as if she had found something interesting with them.

"What happened?" Desiree asked quietly.

The blue-eyed woman glanced at her. "I found out when I came to that my mother hit me with a frying pan." She smiled humorlessly. "I woke up just after the police arrived."

"Did your mother press any charges against you?"

Piper shook her head. "In fact she apologized for hitting me with the frying pan. She said I was scaring her and she had to do something to stop me. She and Frank, the man I was speaking to the first night we were here, tried to get me out of it, but they found me guilty anyway." She paused. "However, I wasn't much help because I refused to plead innocent. I was guilty and that's all there was to it. Frank after much talking finally got me to plead innocent by claiming temporary insanity. I felt like a jerk doing that, because I really don't know if I lost it when I killed him. I remember that I felt stable. I was just angry. Very angry."

Desiree studied her silently for a moment. "You said my father presided over your case?"

Piper nodded. "That he did."

"So you kidnapped me because he sent you to jail for the murder of your father," she stated. Piper cocked her head to the side. "Not really. I mean that was part of it, but not the whole reason why I did that."

Desiree sighed. "Then why?" It was like pulling teeth trying to get information out of this woman.

"Because he sentenced me to prison for eight years, and frankly I think that something is going on, but I just can't put my finger on it. Your father is part of a conspiracy that I have to solve," Piper replied mysteriously. Her blue eyes took on a far away look.

Desiree was shocked. "My father part of a conspiracy? He didn't do anything he wasn't supposed to." She tried to soften her next words. "You broke the law, you pay for it."

Her lover glared at her. "Why don't you just shut your mouth, Desiree?" Getting out of the bed, Piper walked toward the closet and retrieved a short black silk robe, which she proceeded to put on. She then turned back toward Desiree who was speechlessly staring at her. "You may think you know everything, but here's a news flash for you. You don't. I know something is wrong I just don't know what it is yet, and I know that your father is apart of it. A *big* part of it." After securing the straps on the robe, Piper folded her arms across her chest as she leaned against the wall.

Desiree turned around in the bed to face her. "I'm sorry, Piper. It just seems so clean cut. You killed your father. Now maybe he deserved to die but it's not your responsibility to decide when." She held up her hand for silence when the tall woman looked like she was about to say something. "And then my father presided over your trial. You were found guilty by the jury and then sentenced to eight years in prison by him. Now where's the conspiracy?"

Piper stared at her for a minute in silence. "I know you're not dumb, Desiree."

"I know I'm not dumb either, Piper."

"Then why don't you examine what's happened thus far."

Desiree frowned. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Piper sighed. "Three dead jurors mean anything to you?"

The strawberry-blonde put a hand to her mouth. "That's right," she whispered. She looked up at Piper. "Do you think somebody's trying to frame you?"

"Either that or I'm really the killer."

"But you're not."

Piper's eyes narrowed in the younger woman's direction. "Is that a question or a statement?" she asked quietly.

Desiree replied a little too enthusiastically, "A statement of course."

The dark-haired woman nodded, but gave her a skeptical look. "Well there is something else that you should know too."

"What would that be?"

"You remember when I spoke to my lawyer Frank Webb, and I asked him if the person he was talking about was dead?"

Desiree thought. "You mean the one who had an attempt on his life?"

"Yeah, that's it." She paused. She had no idea how Desiree was going to take this, and this may be the end of a great relationship. "The person we were talking about was your brother."

The young woman's eyes grew wide as she jumped out of the bed and marched right up to Piper naked as the day she was born. She placed both hands on either side of the taller woman's head and leaned her face in close. For a moment, Piper inanely thought the woman was about to kiss her, but she would not be lucky enough to get that kind of reaction.

"What do you mean you were talking about my brother? Somebody tried to kill my brother and you didn't tell me?" Desiree asked between clenched teeth.

"I did tell you," Piper replied almost meekly.

"When?" Desiree almost yelled.

"Just now." Piper tried smiling, but the shorter woman continued to shoot daggers at her. *If looks could kill, I'd have collapsed to the floor right about now*, Piper thought. *She still looks cute though.*

"Don't be smart, Piper. What happened?"

"I don't have all the details, but apparently last Monday someone tried to kill your brother by shooting him and he blames me for it." She swallowed. "He says I did it. That I tried to kill him."

Desiree stared at her in confusion. "Why would he say that if it weren't true?"

Piper shrugged. "That's what I'm trying to find out. Maybe he's afraid of the real murderer, or maybe he's in on it too. I don't know." She took a deep breath, half wishing that she had just skipped the country.

"So you think Richie meant to get himself shot?" Desiree stared at the tall woman dubiously.

Piper sighed. "I don't know. Could be."

"Why would he do that to you?"

"A good question, but I don't have an answer, Desi." She was starting to have a difficult time concentrating on the conversation, what with the young woman standing in front of her not even wearing one stitch of clothing. Sure this was a serious conversation they were having, but she

was only human. And horny. Again.

"Well is he gonna be all right?" She had never been as close with Richie as she had been with Larisa, but she did care and love him deeply. They were family, and it terrified Desiree that he had almost lost his life.

"He'll be fine," Piper swiftly assured her.

The strawberry-blonde sighed as she stepped back from Piper. "Okay." She glanced up at the tall woman. "We'll figure this out. There has to be a-

"Wait a minute," Piper interrupted. "We?" she inquired.

Desiree looked at her. "Yeah, we. As in you and I. You have a problem with that?"

The dark-haired woman offered her a smile. "Not a one."

Desiree nodded. "Good." She leaned forward and gave her lover a peck on the cheek. Piper would have preferred the lips, but that would do for now. Desiree took Piper's hand and began to lead her out of the bedroom.

"Where are we going?" Piper asked.

"We're gonna try out that bathtub together. A good soak always helps me think."

Fifteen minutes later, the two ladies were reclining in a tub full of peach scented bubble bath water. Piper had her back against the wall of the tub with Desiree sitting between her legs with her back pressed against Piper's chest. Steam was rising from the water due to it being so hot.

Piper ran a hand through the younger woman's now soaked hair and smiled to herself. She deemed that she was indeed the luckiest woman in the world at that moment.

"Piper?"

"Yes," the dark-haired woman said distractedly.

"We need to figure out who is doing this to you."

"I agree," Piper retorted, turning her attention to the conversation at hand.

Desiree glanced over her shoulder at Piper. "Did you tell me the whole story?"

Piper nodded. "Yeah, you know about everything I know at this point."

"So in a nutshell you kidnapped me because you figure that my father is apart of some conspiracy that you want to solve."

"And I want all of the charges that have been brought against me to be dropped," Piper added, picking up the peach scented soap to run it across the younger woman's slippery back.

"Right now you're wanted for the murder of three jurors and for the attempted murder of my brother."

"And for you're kidnapping unless your daddy handled his business."

Desiree scooted around in the bathtub until she was facing her lover. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I talked to him. I told him to get the charges dropped against me and you would be fine. Also I told him that if he ever wanted to see you again, that he better not mention that we had that little conversation to the police," remarked Piper.

"He's probably worried sick about me, Piper! Did you tell him that I'm all right?"

"He knows that you're alive."

Desiree threw her hands up in the air. "Damn it, Piper. Just because you have problems doesn't give you the right to mess with other people's emotions," she stated angrily, wondering if she had moved too fast with this woman. Right now, she found herself wishing that she had never met Piper Redding. The woman was too unpredictable.

"Your father was the creator of my problems," Piper retorted in a voice that was much too calm.

"No. *You* created your problems when you decided to knock off your daddy!" Right after the words left her mouth, Desiree desperately wanted to take them back. If only it was possible to rewind time. *That was a low blow, Love*, she thought miserably.

Piper raised her hand as if she were about to strike the younger woman, but just as quickly lowered it. Tossing the bar of soap she had been holding in the water, she quickly jumped out of the tub and left the bathroom, leaving a more than sorry Desiree behind.

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Desiree entered the living room and looked at the blue-eyed woman sitting on the floor in front of the roaring fireplace. Piper was dressed in a pair of blue cotton sweatpants and a black T-shirt. She had her legs bent, with her arms wrapped around them and her chin resting on one of her knees. She stared blankly into the fire.

Desiree, now dressed in a nightshirt with a picture of Tweety bird on the front, cleared her throat to get the other woman's attention. Piper glanced up at her but did not say anything. The strawberry-blonde walked towards her and took a seat Indian style next to the older woman. She stared into the fire for a few minutes before saying anything.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Desiree softly inquired.

"About what?" Piper asked, still staring into the fire.

"About your father. About growing up with a man who beat your mother."

The blue-eyed woman shook her head. "The last thing I wanna do is talk about that man," she stated with a bitter tone.

Desiree fell momentarily silent. "Then how about we talk about your mother? Where is she? Does she still live in San Francisco?"

Piper's eyes instantly began to fill with tears. "She died," she whispered.

Blue-green eyes gazed at Piper sympathetically. "What happened?" she asked.

"She killed herself two years into my sentence." Piper took a deep breath. "She put a noose around her neck, jumped off the kitchen table and hung herself. She left a note saying that she couldn't live with herself anymore, and that it was her fault that I was put in prison because she didn't have the guts to leave my father early on in their marriage."

"That's horrible. I'm so sorry." Desiree hesitantly put a hand on Piper's back and began to rub in a circular motion. "Do you have any other family?"

Piper shook her head. "My mother has a couple of sisters but I don't know them well. Haven't seen them since I was eight years old."

A few minutes passed before Desiree said, "I'm sorry about what I said in the bathroom. That was cruel and inconsiderate."

Piper offered her a small smile. "That's okay. I don't blame you." She stared at Desiree for a moment, before she leaned in and kissed the young woman lightly on the lips. She took one of Desiree's hands in her own and squeezed it saying, "I don't know how you feel, but it's good to have you here. I'm glad to say that I have met you and I'm sorry for this mess."

Desiree shrugged. "Same goes for me." She paused. "Piper I know deep down in my heart that you didn't do those things. Although my own brother said that you tried to kill him, there must be some explanation. You could never do such a thing."

A tear escaped Piper's left eye. She swiped at it quickly, hoping that the other woman hadn't noticed. "You are simply amazing, Desi."

"I just believe in you. I know I'm right. You're innocent and that's all there is to it." She gave a slight pause before quietly asking, "May I have a hug?" She knew that Piper needed one as badly if not more so than she did.

Without any words, Piper scooted closer to Desiree, wrapping her arms around the smaller woman. Grateful for the contact, Desiree wound her arms around the dark-haired woman's neck,

clinging to her tightly. As she nuzzled her face into the crook of Piper's neck, she started to cry tears of both sadness and joy. Sadness because of everything Piper had been through in her life and was still enduring. Joy because despite everything that was happening, Desiree was so happy that Piper had found her and that they were together. She didn't quite know how, but somehow they would make it through this together.

They silently held each other for nearly an hour before Piper heard soft snoring coming from the young woman in her arms. The blue-eyed woman carefully laid Desiree on the floor before rising to her feet. She gazed down at the petite young woman as she continued to sleep. She smiled, thankful that Desiree still had faith in her innocence. She needed all the people she could get on her side. Reaching down, she picked up the lightweight causing Desiree to automatically wrap her arms around her neck, though still deep in sleep. Piper carried Desiree to the young woman's room, and then exited the bedroom with her precious cargo after discovering a sleeping Tobias in the middle of Desiree's bed. She made her way to her own bedroom and deposited Desiree on her bed. Pulling the covers around her, she then kissed her on the tip of her nose.

She whispered, "Goodnight, Desi."

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The next morning after feeding Tobias, Piper headed back to the bedroom with a tray laden with a bowl of strawberries, a bowl of whipped cream and a basket of warm freshly baked croissants. There were also a couple mugs of hot chocolate with minuscule white marshmallows floating on top. She smiled as she opened the door, discovering that the strawberry-blonde was still sleeping soundly. Piper sat on the bed and placed the tray next to her. Looking at the young woman, she wondered if a kiss on the lips would cause her to wake up. She thought it was worth a try. Besides, nothing would give her greater pleasure than to kiss this gorgeous sweetheart.

"Worked with Sleeping Beauty," Piper stated aloud. Leaning down, she kissed the young woman with little pressure at all. She looked at Desiree not noticing any sort of a response. She kissed her again with more pressure, but no dice. Piper decided to try another tactic. Reaching into the glass bowl of strawberries, she selected one. She then dipped it into the whipped cream and placed it against Desiree's lips. Nothing happened so she smeared the young woman's lips with the whipped cream and was rewarded when the tip of a pink tongue reached out and rubbed against Desiree's upper lip. Piper groaned, remembering what that little tongue could do. The young woman's tongue came out again and soon licked all of the whipped cream from her mouth. Blue-green eyes opened and squinted at a grinning Piper. Desiree grinned back while sitting up in the bed. She ran a hand through her hair, which was very messy, but Piper thought that the young woman still looked sexy. In fact, the mused look somehow only proved to enhance her sexiness. *I've got it bad*, Piper jubilantly thought to herself.

"Were you trying to wake me up?" Desiree asked in a voice thick with sleep. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and then peered at Piper quizzically.

The blue-eyed woman grinned. "Guilty as charged." She dipped the strawberry once again in the whipped cream and offered it Desiree. The young woman opened her mouth and bit down on the

juicy strawberry that Piper still held in her hand. A thin stream of red juice dribbled down her chin to which Piper quickly leaned forward to lick clean with one swipe of her tongue. She leaned back and offered the sweet fruit again. Desiree swallowed, and then took another bite leaving only the green stem in Piper's hand. Dropping the stem on the tray, Piper started to reach for another strawberry when Desiree suddenly wrapped a hand around her wrist and dipped all five of Piper's fingers into the bowl of whipped cream. She brought the creamy digits up to her mouth and opened it to take in Piper's thumb. Desiree kept eye contact with her lover while she sucked Piper's thumb clean. She moved on to the next finger giving it the same attention. Piper could only offer little moans of complete pleasure while she gazed into the younger woman's blue-green eyes. Desiree soon made her way to Piper's pinkie finger and sucked it clean. During the whole process the two women kept eye contact without either breaking away, although Piper had come close more than a couple of times. She just wanted to close her eyes with the ecstasy, but there was no way she was going to be the first to look away. Desiree then turned Piper's hand until the older woman's palm was facing her. She leaned forward and ran her tongue around the center of Piper's palm in a circular motion a few times, causing the blue-eyed woman to moan even louder. It tickled but it felt so good. Desiree dropped her lover's hand, got up on her knees on the bed, and leaned towards Piper. She reached one of her own fingers into a bowl and it came out with the tip covered with a dollop of the sugary cream. She then plastered Piper's lips with the whipped cream while the older woman gazed at her. Piper had no idea whatsoever that breakfast would be this fun. Desiree brought her mouth close to Piper's and poked out her tongue to run it lightly across the woman's now completely white lips. Piper attempted to stick her own tongue out, but every time she tried Desiree would pull away until she obediently placed it back in her mouth. The strawberry-blond finally licked Piper's lips clean and then sat back on her heels, licking her own lips much like Tobias did after a good meal.

"I wonder if the rest of you tastes so good," Desiree said in a low silky voice. "Guess there's only one way to find out," she whispered. Leaning forward again she captured Piper's lips in an earth shattering kiss. She pushed the woman back on the bed and moved the tray out of the way. She then pulled Piper's blue sweatpants off and flung them across the room. Straddling Piper's hips, she smiled seductively while removing her Tweety nightshirt, leaving her only in a pair of cotton underwear, which were bikini cut. Piper reached her hands up to rub Desiree's firm stomach, only to have them swatted away by a frowning strawberry-blond. Desiree picked up her nightshirt and proceeded to tie Piper's wrist together with it. She then placed her captive's hands above her head. Next, Desiree did not bother to remove Piper's T-shirt the correct way. Showing an amazing amount of strength, she managed to rip it off with her bare hands, surprising, and exciting the older woman in the process.

"I hope you weren't too attached to that shirt," Desiree said, a sexy little grin curving her lips.

"No, no," Piper replied, her breathing already becoming uneven in anticipation of the events to come. "There are plenty of shirts in the sea."

"Good, good. I'm glad."

Both of them only wearing panties now, Desiree began to move on top of Piper, closing her eyes as she massaged the other woman's delectable mounds, stimulating their rosy tips. Piper groaned

loudly, beginning to grind her hips right along with the strawberry-blonde. She tested the piece of clothing binding her wrists together, only to discover that she could not get free. She admitted to herself that part of her did not want to get free. Desiree leaned down and the pair shared a passionate kiss before she abruptly broke away causing Piper to growl in frustration. She reached over, chose a strawberry from the bowl, and bit into it while Piper closely watched her wondering what the young woman would do next. Desiree rubbed the remaining part of the strawberry on Piper's abdomen, smearing the sweet juice all over her stomach. She bent down to blow on the now wet stomach, causing the muscles underneath to contract. Desiree looked up at her lover, her expression showing her arousal.

"Do you want me, Piper?" she asked alluringly.

Piper amorously answered, "You know I do baby."

"How much do you want me lover?"

"I want you so much that I feel like I'm gonna die if you don't take me soon." Desiree smirked. "Well we can't have that." She crawled up, buried her face in the crook of Piper's neck, and began to suck gently on her overheated skin. "I mean if it did, who would be my playmate then?" Desiree heatedly whispered before continuing her assault on the other woman's neck. Piper moaned, closing her eyes. Never in her life had she felt something so incredible. Piper was sure that she would have a hickey after Desiree was done, and she would proudly wear the telltale mark.

The strawberry-blonde placed her nose close to Piper's. "Piper?" she asked.

"Yeah, baby," the dark-haired woman answered dreamily, her eyes still closed.

"Where are those handcuffs?"

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Taj walked into the small bare room and took a seat waiting for Detective Redding to come in. He was thoroughly annoyed because a couple of policemen had shown up at his church that morning, claiming that they had to bring him in for questioning. At least they had waited until the service was over, but Taj had better things to do and it was quite embarrassing to have the police coming after him.

Now dressed in a midnight blue two-piece suit by Calvin Klein, Taj sat ramrod straight in a cold metal chair. Impatiently, he tapped his fingertips on the old scarred wooden table as brown eyes nearly bored a hole through the closed door, willing the detective to open it. Finally, Detective Redding entered the room with a portfolio tucked underneath his arm. Offering Taj an obviously insincere smile, he leaned against the edge of the table. Taj frowned, noticing that something about the detective seemed vaguely familiar, as if he had seen him before. Taj shrugged the thought off, considering the fact that he would remember this man if he had ever met him before, because he was excellent with names and faces.

Taj figured he knew what this was about, and his suspicions were confirmed when the detective opened the portfolio and he caught a glimpse of a picture of Piper. He made up his mind right there, that no way were the cops going to get information out of him. Piper was his best friend and he would do all he could to protect her.

Detective Redding glanced down at Taj and asked, "Can I get you something to drink, Taj?"

Taj shook his head negatively. "And the name is Mr. Potter."

The detective smiled coldly at him. "Whatever you say, Mr. Potter." The detective studied Taj's suit. "Nice suit," he said.

Straightening his tie, Taj replied, "I was at church when you sent your men after me." "Sorry about that," Detective Redding retorted, not sounding in the least bit sorry. "Nice car you got parked outside too."

The Jamaican man sighed. "Listen," he started. "I am a very busy man so let's just get down to business. I know you want to ask me some questions about my involvement with Piper Redding so stop beating around the bush, because if there is one thing I don't have to offer you, it's my time." Taj sat back in the chair and crossed his legs. "Now get on with it."

The detective frowned. "You have quite a bad attitude, Mr. Potter," he exclaimed. "You haven't been here five minutes and you're treating me like I'm your worst enemy."

Slowly rising from the chair, Taj leaned toward the other man. "That's because I don't like you. My impressions about people when I first meet them are usually right. It didn't take me fifteen seconds from the first instance of laying eyes on you to tell that there was something crooked about you. I don't exactly know what it is, but I'm receiving bad vibes. So excuse me if I seem a little wary of your intentions." Taj took his seat again.

Detective Redding glared at him but chose not to comment. "Well let's get on with it then. Do you mind if I tape this?" The detective indicated a tape recorder resting on the table. Taj shook his head so the detective pressed the record button. He then took the picture of Piper out of the portfolio, and held it up for the younger man to see. "Do you recognize this woman?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"I believe that's my best friend Piper Redding," Taj replied.

"Your best friend huh? Do you know that she is a fugitive?"

"It's all over the news. How could I miss it?"

"Do you know where she is?" the detective inquired, putting the picture down.

"No, I don't have a clue," Taj smoothly lied.

Detective Redding nodded. "I see. So when was the last time you saw her?"

Taj pretended to think about that, his brow furrowing in thought. "I saw her once after she was released from prison. It was a couple weeks afterwards. We had lunch at a park."

"And that's the last time you saw her?"

The Jamaican man mutely nodded.

Victor clasped his hands together and looked at the other man intently. "Piper Redding is a very dangerous woman, Mr. Potter. If you have any information on her whereabouts, you need to level with me. We have reason to believe that she may have kidnapped a judge's daughter, and there is no telling what she will do to her if we don't find her."

Taj remained silent as he studied his perfectly manicured nails. He did not seem to be interested in what the detective had to tell him.

"Mr. Potter." Taj peered up at him. "Tell me. Honestly, do you think that Piper Redding is innocent of these crimes?"

Taj did not answer right away. "No. I don't." The detective wore a triumphant smile. "I *know* she is innocent," the Jamaican man added after a pause, causing the detective to frown.

"Was she innocent when she killed her father?" Victor asked angrily.

"She did what she felt she had to do." Taj arched a curious eyebrow. The detective sure was heated about this case. *I smell the stench of a vendetta*, the man thought. He just had to figure out what that vendetta was.

"Just like in this case. She did what she had to do, which is kill four people, try to kill another and kidnap a judge's daughter. Great argument, Mr. Potter."

Taj sighed. "Are we almost done?" He checked his watch.

"Almost. What makes you think that she's innocent?"

"I know her. I've known her for over ten years and she would never kill someone in cold blood," Taj replied vehemently.

The detective studied him. "You honestly believe that." He shook his head and shrugged. "Okay. I guess we have nothing more to discuss then. You're free to go. Thank you for your time, Mr. Potter."

Arising from the uncomfortable chair, Taj straightened his double-pleated trousers before heading for the door. The detective calling his name stopped him. Taj turned around and waited for him to speak.

"If I find out that you lied to me I'll bring charges against you so fast you won't know what happened. I bet that if I was to pay enough attention to you, that I would find something to charge you with. I bet you're all ready doing something illegal. Aren't you boy?" The detective once again smiled coldly.

Taj wanted to deck him but he managed to keep a cool façade. "I'm not your boy, and if I were you-Thank God I'm not-- I wouldn't threaten me." Taj gave him a warning look as he opened the door. "You don't know who you're messing with." Walking out, he shut the door as the detective glared.

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The sound of her cell phone ringing brought Piper out of her deep sleep. She gently removed a sleeping strawberry-blond from on top of her and hurried out into the front of the cabin, the cool air hitting her naked body. Reaching the computer desk, she found the phone and answered it sleepily.

"Piper?"

"Yeah. Who else would it be?" She rubbed her half-closed eyes.

"This is Frank."

"I know that. What do you want Frank?" she asked in an annoyed tone of voice. "I have nothing to say to you, and if this is about trying to get me to come back it's not gonna work."

"No. That's not what I want. You need to turn on your television to channel two," Frank stated.

"What for?" she asked while feeling warm arms encircling her naked waist and soft lips touch the side of her neck. With her free hand, Piper rubbed one of the arms around her.

"Just do it. Now."

The phone then went dead in Piper's ear. She pushed the end button, frowning at the electronic device.

"Was that your lawyer?" Desiree asked softly.

"Yep." Piper walked out of Desiree's arms and took a hold of the young woman's right hand. She began walking towards the couch saying, "Let's watch some t.v." Piper sat down on the couch buck naked, putting Desiree on her lap.

Desiree looked over her shoulder at Piper and said, "Piper I know it's just you and I here, but I

feel a little self-conscious sitting here with no clothes on."

Piper laughed while removing her lover from her lap and walked into her bedroom. She emerged a few minutes later wearing a pair of blue jeans and the black tank top she had on the first night. She handed Desiree her Tweety nightshirt.

The young woman took it and smirked. "You get to wear day clothes and I get to wear this skimpy gown?"

Piper nuzzled her neck, causing Desiree to giggle. "You don't have to, but I think you look pretty damn hot in it," she whispered.

Desiree giggled again. "Well in that case I guess I will." She put the nightshirt on and sat cross-legged on the couch. Piper took a seat next to her after retrieving the remote control. She clicked on the television and turned to channel two to find that the news was on. She figured that was what Frank had wanted her to tune in on. Turning up the volume the two women began to listen.

"And now we'll go to Chad Adams live in Pasadena with the latest update of the Piper Redding Mystery."

Piper saw Desiree glance over at her wearing a worried expression. She took one of the young woman's small hands in her own and gave it a reassuring squeeze. The strawberry-blonde smiled slightly as she turned her attention back to the screen.

"Hello. I'm Chad Adams live in Pasadena with some sad news. Another juror from the 1990 murder trial of Piper Redding has been killed. Thirty-eight year old Michael Lowell was killed in his own home yesterday by a masked female who police suspect may have been none other than the fugitive Piper Redding. Annie Lowell, the victim's wife witnessed the gruesome murder. Apparently, the female used a hammer that ultimately caused the death of Michael Lowell. Police have uncovered that a hammer was also used in the killing of Alan Redding, Piper Redding's father. She killed him about nine years ago with that same tool.

"Here is the current description of the murderer of Lowell. The woman has been described as being a little less than six feet with blue eyes and long dark hair. She may have a scratch on her neck, and was wearing black pants, a black sweater, and a black ski mask. She was driving a lilac Honda Civic without a license plate. This is all of the news that we have now, but we will be sure to get back to you if anything else comes up. If you feel that you have seen this woman please call 1-800 555-7897. That number once again is 1-800 555-7897. Thank you. This has been Chad Adams. Back to the news room."

Piper clicked off the television and stared at the now dark screen. All that she could hear in the room was her own ragged breathing, of which she was desperately trying to control. She glanced over at Desiree noticing that the young woman was staring at her with something in her eyes that made Piper flinch slightly. Those blue-green eyes were wide with evident fear and mistrust. Desiree snatched her hand away from Piper's and jumped off of the couch walking away backwards. Piper got up causing the younger woman to back up until she could not go any

further due to a wall being behind her.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Desiree you have to listen to me," Piper stated in a voice that she fought to keep calm.

"There's nothing you could tell me to make me feel better. You lied to me. It's true. You are the killer. I believed in you and you lied to me."

"I didn't," the dark-haired woman said louder than she meant to.

"You did!"

"I did not," Piper remarked between clenched teeth. She was trying too hard to control her own temper. All the stress and accusations were starting to wear her out, and she did not want to take out her anger on Desiree. It was amazing that the young woman had trusted her this far.

"Where were you yesterday, Piper?" Desiree asked nervously. She could feel her palms becoming damp with perspiration.

"Huh?"

"Oh now you're hard of hearing. I asked you where you were. You were gone all day."

"I told you where I was," Piper wearily explained.

"Tell me the truth."

Piper balled her hands into fists. "That was the truth."

"Okay." Desiree placed her hands on her hips. "So you were gone all day because you fell asleep in your car?" Suddenly, that explanation sounded quite ludicrous. Desiree shook her head while feeling like the biggest moron on earth. How could she have believed this woman?

Piper nodded.

"And you got those two scratches from a branch."

Piper confirmed this with another nod, though she had a feeling that Desiree wasn't going to believe the story anyway.

Desiree gave her an incredulous look. "You must think I'm pretty stupid. I hope you're not one of those people who think that blondes are dumb, because you're the one who is behaving that way. You can't even cover up your tracks well. Why don't you just tell me the truth, Piper?"

The blue-eyed woman took a deep breath, feeling the beginning of a headache. "Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"What?"

"That it was so easy for them to say it was me. I wouldn't go out in broad daylight dressed in black to kill someone. That would be stupid. Somebody's trying to frame me, don't you see?" She asked, her blue eyes pleading.

Desiree shook her head. "All I see is someone who killed four innocent people who were just doing their job, and someone who tried to kill my brother." Angry tears formed in the young woman's eyes. She had really believed in this woman's innocence, and the truth was tearing her apart inside. "Damn you!" Desiree shouted. "You tried to kill my own brother! How could you make love to me knowing what kind of a monster you were? How could you be so gentle and yet so cruel?" Desiree wiped away the tears running down her flushed cheeks.

Piper ran a hand through her hair. This was turning into a nightmare. "Baby, listen to-"

"Don't call me your baby!" Desiree shouted. "I am not your baby. I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you. I'd like to kill you myself."

"I didn't try to kill your brother!" Piper yelled, her heart breaking in two.

Desiree laughed humorlessly. "Then why did he say you did? My God, I believed your word against my own brother's! I must have lost my mind."

"He's lying."

"No he's not. You're the one who's a liar. You are a liar, a kidnapper, and a cold-blooded killer! But I guess I shouldn't be surprised, huh? Your father was an abuser and a would-be murderer. His child is successfully one. It fits, don't you think?"

The next thing Desiree knew it she was collapsing to the floor. Piper had walked towards her so fast that the young woman had not had sufficient time to duck the blow that the older woman gave her. Coming out of her daze, Desiree touched her lip and when she pulled her fingers away, she noticed the bright red blood on them. She also noticed that one of her teeth had come loose. She spit it out and looked up at Piper who seemed to be as shocked as she was. Piper knelt down next to her.

"Baby, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do that," the dark-haired woman apologized, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

Desiree scrambled to her feet and went over to the computer desk. She searched it until she found the cellular phone. She then ran to the kitchen and came out a few seconds later with a butcher knife. Piper looked at her frowning.

"What are you doing?" the blue-eyed woman asked.

Desiree shook the butcher knife at her menacingly with blood still dribbling down her chin. She wiped it away and said, "Don't you come near me or I'll kill you. So help me God I will kill you!" She thought back to the news and remembered the number the newsman had given. Desiree began to dial the number after figuring out how to use the phone. She was on the third five when she heard Piper's voice.

"Put the phone down, Desiree," Piper's voice was devoid of any emotion. Desiree looked up and saw that Piper was holding the gun she had managed to kidnap the young woman with.

"You're going to shoot me now?" Desiree asked trying not to sound as terrified as she felt.

"If I have to," Piper said coolly. "If I have to shoot you in order to protect myself then so be it. I may have taken you to bed, and we may have had some real fun together but you're not worth going back to prison for." She pointed the gun at the other woman's head while hoping that her bluff would work. "If you don't think I'll do it, try me."

Desiree noticed that the woman had a dangerous glint in her eyes, and for the first time, the strawberry-blonde got the impression that Piper might actually do her harm. She pushed the end button and threw the phone over to the couch.

"Throw the knife on the couch too."

Desiree did as she was told, her heart beating loudly.

"Good girl. Now sit in the chair and stay there."

Desiree did that too, as she cautiously watched the other woman go into her bedroom. Piper came out a few minutes later carrying a duffel bag and the handcuffs. She put the duffel bag on the kitchen table and placed one cuff around Desiree's wrist. She then pulled the young woman up roughly and led her into the kitchen where she once again locked her to the refrigerator. Piper went back to the kitchen table and retrieved her bag. She headed to the front door and then turned around. "In case you're thinking differently, I will be back. This isn't over yet. I'm just gonna go take a dip in the lake." With that, she left the cabin. Desiree shook her head while starting to softly cry.

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Detective Redding picked up the phone and dialed Judge Richard Love's number. On the second ring, the man picked up.

"Good afternoon Judge Love," said Victor.

"Detective. Did you hear about the killing of Michael Lowell?"

"That's precisely why I'm calling. We suspect that Piper Redding did that job too. What do you think?"

The judge did not give a reply right away. "I've been thinking about it, and maybe she didn't do it. Maybe she's being framed," he lied. It was killing him not to tell the truth, but he had Desiree to think about. No matter what he had to protect his daughter. After all, it was partly his fault she was in this current predicament.

"Framed?" the detective repeated with surprise in his voice. Now he *knew* that the judge was hiding something. Piper Redding must have his daughter as her hostage. The detective smiled with victory. Now all he had to do was find out where the fugitive had stashed the young woman and herself as well. Not being able to find Piper was making the man extremely tense and agitated. "What do you mean?" the detective continued. "She tried to kill your son, sir. He even admitted that it was her."

*I know*, the judge thought grimly. "Maybe he was just confused."

"Confused, sir?" The detective frowned. *What are you hiding, Judge?* he wondered. "Did you hear the description of the female who murdered Michael Lowell?" he asked the judge.

"Yes I did, but Piper Redding is not the only woman who is tall, has dark hair and blue eyes. There are probably plenty of women who fit that description."

"Uh huh. Well this information hasn't been released yet, but I happen to know for a fact that Redding paid off the four jurors who died to argue in her defense. They were given five thousand dollars each. Obviously they didn't fulfill what they were supposed to, so when she got out she killed them." Victor sat back in his chair. "What do you think about that, sir?"

All the detective could hear coming from the other line for the next few seconds was the judge's harsh breathing. "I told you that someone is framing her."

"Why all the sudden are you defending her?" he paused for emphasis. "You hiding something, sir? If you are, you need to tell me what it is. This woman is very dangerous and needs to be apprehended as soon as possible. What if she goes after your daughter while she's on that ski trip? What if she goes after Larisa? Too many lives have already been lost, don't make it more by becoming silent. I need your help if you can give it to me."

"I'm sorry. I can't help you."

Detective Redding cursed under his breath. "Well that's too bad. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to have a man like you in our judicial system. Have a nice day, sir." The detective hung up the phone in anger. He hadn't got anywhere with that call.

Victor looked at the computer screen in front of him and thought. This Tommy Jung that he located may have some answers for him. According to what he found, Jung, Potter and Redding had been like the three Musketeers in high school. He figured that Potter and Redding had been the closest, since Jung had not met them until he started at their high school as a junior. The detective mused that perhaps Tommy Jung was embroiled in this somehow. Well there was only one sure way to find out. The detective arose from the chair, obtained his car keys, and left the

office.

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He turned down the rock music playing on the stereo because he thought he heard a knock on his front door. Tommy left his bedroom and walked to the front door to squint in the peephole. He saw a man that didn't look at all familiar to him. He asked who it was, and the man stated his name while holding a badge up to the peephole.

"I don't speak to police. I've got nothing to say," Tommy stated.

"Open the door Mr. Jung. This is very important. I need to ask you some questions."

"Go away man." Tommy ran a hand nervously through his jet-black hair.

The detective clenched his teeth together tightly while resisting the urge to kick the door in. "If you don't open this door right now, I will open it myself. I have my own methods. You want to see?"

Two seconds later the door was opened and the detective saw Tommy Jung. The man was Asian, standing at about five feet five inches. He had dark brown almond shaped eyes and black hair. Most women would probably describe him as being cute in a teddy bear sort of way.

Detective Redding smiled at him as he walked inside. Tommy nervously smiled back, and the detective got the impression that if pressed enough unlike Potter, this man would talk.

The detective closed the door behind him and asked, "Do you know Piper Redding?"

Victor then saw a touch of fear in the man's eyes. "No-no man. I don't know her. She used to go to my high school, but that's it." Tommy tugged on an ear that had a gold plated earring in it. The detective noticing this reckoned that it was probably a nervous habit.

"The two of you weren't friends?" the detective asked.

"No. Not really."

Detective Redding frowned. "What do you mean not really?"

"I mean I knew her, but I didn't *know* her. You know?" Tommy took another tug on his ear. "We were more like acquaintances."

The detective raised both eyebrows. "Ah. So you don't know where she is?"

Tommy shook his head. "I don't have any idea man." The detective stared at him, so he continued with, "If I did I'd tell you."

"Oh you will," the detective replied menacingly. He advanced on the younger man and snatched

the earring out of his ear, causing the Asian man to cry out in pain. By ripping the earring out so forcibly, the detective had caused the man's earlobe to split. Victor grabbed Tommy around the neck and slammed the man's head up against a wall. Tommy soon found out that his feet weren't touching the ground any longer. Fury showed in the detective's brown eyes as he glared at the scared younger man. "You better tell me what you know right now, before I make you regret the day your sorry ass was born. Do you understand me?" He tightened his grip on Tommy's neck.

Struggling for breath Tommy nodded profusely. The detective nodded putting the man back down on his own two feet. Tommy rubbed his neck looking at the detective. "What do you wanna know?" He hoarsely inquired.

"Did she take anybody hostage?"

Tommy nodded.

"Who?" The detective inquired impatiently.

Tommy swallowed and said a silent apology to Piper and Taj before answering, "Desiree Love, that judge's daughter."

The detective could not help it. He smiled brightly. *Gotcha Piper*, he thought. "Do you know where they are?"

Tommy nodded again as he began to tell the detective where the two women could be located. He also told him his and Taj's involvement in the plan, and how he had made it possible for Piper to capture Desiree.

"Thank you," Detective Redding said, patting Tommy on the back. "You've been a great help."

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About an hour later, there was another knock on Tommy's door. His expression wary, he apprehensively moved toward the door and looked through the peephole before breathing a sigh of relief. Fumbling with the lock, Tommy opened the door and grabbed the person standing on the other side of it, pulling them into his apartment. Practically slamming the door closed, he locked it. His visitor put strong hands on his shoulders while asking if he was all right.

Tommy nodded. "I'm fine. We have a problem though, Taj."

Taj squeezed his shoulders and let go of the man. "What problem is that?" He frowned noticing that his friend had a Band-Aid on his ear. He pointed towards it and asked, "What happened?"

"Some cop or something came here earlier harassing me. He tore my earring out man, but that's not important right now." He hesitated on going further. He knew how much Taj cared for Piper, and he had a feeling that the man was about to get very angry at what he had to say.

"What is important?" the Jamaican man asked.

"He made me tell him about Piper and Desiree."

"What did he make you tell him?" Taj managed to ask in a calm tone of voice. That was the only thing about him that was calm at the moment.

"Where they were," Tommy murmured.

Taj exploded. "How could you?!" With great control, he managed not to smack the smaller man.

"He was gonna kill me man! I had to tell him," Tommy said in his defense, backing up just in case the other man had the urge to hit him.

"You don't know how to protect yourself? Where's all that black belt crap you've been bragging about for years?"

"Man, I know how to fight but he was big!" Tommy winced, wondering if the excuse sounded as sorry to his friend's ears as it did to his own.

Taj glared at Tommy as if he could have killed him right then and there. Thinking it wise to leave before he did something he might (or might not) regret later, he turned toward the door and left without uttering another word.

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Picking up the bottle, Judge Richard Love poured himself another shot of brandy. He drained it and sat back in his chair, wondering about what he would do. He could tell from the conversation on the phone earlier with Detective Redding, that the younger man had not believed what he said. He had a feeling that the man would go on investigating the disappearance of his youngest daughter. The judge poured himself another brandy and downed it in one gulp. He felt the warm liquid slide down his throat, but drinking half a bottle had yet to calm his nerves any. He ran his hand over his face noticing the telltale signs of a forming beard. He had not even bothered to shave. The judge was half-afraid that he might try to take the razor and cut his own throat so deep was his despair and guilt over the current events. It was partly his fault that those jurors were dead. It was partly his fault that Desiree had been taken hostage and it was also his fault that his only son had nearly lost his life.

Pouring himself another drink, Judge Love thought back to the night that the greed had overtaken him.

*The judge walked to his Cadillac and got in the car. Before he could start the engine, he saw out of the corner of his eye a figure standing next to his window. The man was trying to get his attention by making motions for the judge to roll down the window. Judge Love did so and asked the young man what he wanted.*

*The man spoke with an English accent. "I have an offer that you can't possibly refuse. Why don't you meet at the coffee shop across the street in let's say," the English man looked at his watch, "five minutes." He straightened up from leaning in the window. "I'll see you there." The man walked off, leaving the judge wondering what this was all about. He glanced at his own watch, remembering that he and Sandra were supposed to have dinner with the Carlton's tonight. He did not want to be late again arriving at the restaurant. He decided that he would make this short, so the judge started the car and headed across the street.*

*On entering the establishment, Judge Love instantly recognized the English man from outside sitting in a booth near the back. He made his way over and took a seat in the opposite booth. He looked at the man expectantly, wondering what it was that he wanted. The man had curly dark brown hair that went down to his neck and was wearing dark shades, so the judge could not tell the color of his eyes. He also had a dark brown mustache. Before anything could be said a waitress came by the table and sat a cup of coffee in front of the judge and the English man. Both thanked her as she moved away.*

*"I ordered you a cup of coffee. Do you like coffee?" the English man asked as he took a sip from his own cup.*

*The judge picked up the coffee cup. "Yes I do. Thank you for the kind gesture."*

*The English man smiled slightly. He extended a hand and the judge shook it, noticing the man had a strong grip. "I have a proposition for you."*

*"What would that be?" Richard asked. "And might I ask what your name is?"*

*The English man replied, "You can call me Joe."*

*"Okay. Joe." The judge knew that this probably was not the man's real name, but he didn't pursue it.*

*Joe leaned further across the table. "How would you like to be twenty thousand dollars richer?" he asked quietly.*

*The judge frowned. This was beginning to sound like a bribe. It would not be the first time someone had tried to give him one. "What would I have to do?"*

*Joe shrugged leaning back in the booth. "You're presiding over the Piper Redding case. Aren't you?"*

*"Yes I am."*

*"When she is found guilty sentence her for at least ten years. You do that and the money is yours. Cash, and in any sort of denominations you desire."*

*"How do you know that she'll be found guilty?"*

*"Oh, she will," Joe said confidently. "Just look at the lawyer she has. What's his name? Franklin Webb. My dog could do a better job defending someone."*

*The judge found himself to be tempted but shook his head nonetheless. "I can't. I'm not interested." He started to rise from the booth, but the other man put a restraining hand on his arm.*

*"Wait," Joe said. Judge Love sat back down in the seat. The English man opened his jacket and pulled out a stack of twenty's that must have been at least an inch thick. He handed the stack to the judge under the table. Richard looked around and took the money, placing it in his own jacket. Joe smiled at him and took another sip of his coffee. The young man tossed a five-dollar bill on the table and got up. "That's your incentive. Remember the twenty thousand that can be yours too." With that said Joe walked out of the coffee shop.*

Judge Love downed another drink of brandy and put the top on the bottle. Sure enough, the jury had found Piper Redding guilty of murder two weeks later. Judge Love sentenced the nineteen-year-old with ten to fifteen years in prison. If he had never met the English man, he might have given Piper only three years. That was what he had planned on if she were to be found guilty. Two days later he received a phone call from Joe. The man asked him how he would like his twenty thousand. Richard replied that he would prefer all hundreds. The money arrived by airmail three days later.

Yes, the judge felt guilty for his actions, and now others were suffering because of his mistakes. True he had not made Piper go on a killing rampage, but if he had just said no to that man all those years ago, this mess might not have started. When Piper Redding had got out two years before she would have completed a full decade, the judge had been worried that the mysterious Englishman would come back. So far, he had not heard a single word from him. He hoped that it stayed that way.

"What have I done?" the judge asked himself aloud. He opened the bottle of brandy again and took a swig straight from it while feeling lower than dirt.

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For what must have been the twentieth-something time, Piper's cellular phone rang. Desiree gritted her teeth in agitation, because she could not reach the phone, due to it still being on the couch and she being handcuffed to the refrigerator. Piper had yet to come back and that was fine with her. Well at least partly fine. If the woman did not come back then that meant eventually Desiree would die because no one knew where she was, and she had a feeling that no one ever came up here. The only positive thing she could think of to happen would be for Taj to come back to the cabin, but then she thought that maybe he was in this whole scheme the entire time. He and Piper might be in cahoots with each other. Desiree hoped not, because if Taj could not help her then all she had was Tobias. She glanced down at the cat that was lying beside her, and began to cry again. *I'll probably never get out of here alive*, she thought miserably as the phone stopped ringing again. She touched her free hand to her aching jaw and touched the empty space with her tongue where her tooth used to be. Obviously, she had been wrong about Piper ever hurting her.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door that made the already nervous young woman jump. She stared at the door wondering who it could be. Whoever it was he or she could very well be her ticket out of here. Luckily, Piper had left the door unlocked. She yelled for the person to come in. The door opened and a man who was probably somewhere in his early thirties walked into the cabin. He looked at Desiree wearing a shocked expression. She noticed that the man had curly blonde hair, green eyes, and was rather tall. The man closed the door and locked it. He came towards her and knelt down on the kitchen floor.

"What happened to you?" he asked studying her predicament.

Desiree replied, "I was handcuffed to the refrigerator by a murderer. Have you heard of Piper Redding?"

"Of course I have," the man replied. "I'm her lawyer." He stuck his hand out and she shook it. "My name is-

"Frank Webb," Desiree finished for him. "She told me."

"Ah. Where is Piper?" He glanced around the room as if she would suddenly appear.

"She's not here. She went out for a swim hours ago, but hasn't returned yet. I don't know what you think but she's guilty. She probably did everything the police are accusing her of." Frank turned his attention back to her and smiled warmly. "Don't worry." He stood up. "I'll get you out of here." He looked at the handcuffs. "Do you know where the keys are?"

Desiree shook her head. "I don't have any idea. Piper might very well have them with her."

"Hmm." Frank reached behind him and took a gun out of his steel gray trousers. "Now you have to remain very still." He pointed the gun at the handcuffs as Desiree's blue-green eyes widened.

"What are you gonna do?" she asked nervously, though she already knew.

Frank took a deep breath. "I'm going to have to shoot them off. It's the best I can do for now, and we have to hurry." He took the safety off, aimed and pulled the trigger. After the bullet went through the metal of the handcuffs, a sharp ringing started in Desiree's ears.

"Sorry about that," Frank said, helping the young woman to her feet. He put the gun back in his waistband.

"That's okay," she replied, touching her ears. She still had the cuff around her wrist, but at least she was free.

"Come sit over here." Frank took a chair from the kitchen table and placed it over by Desiree's bedroom door. She walked towards it and sat down. He squeezed her shoulder and asked, "Are you okay now?"

She looked up at him and gave the man a small smile. "I'm fine. I think we should be going now." She started to get up but he gently pushed her back down in the chair.

"Not yet. Let's wait for Piper to get back."

"Why?" Desiree asked with fear creeping into her voice.

"Because I'm taking her with us. She's going to get herself killed if she stays out in the streets, and no matter what she's done I want her to remain safe," he replied, leaning against the wall by Desiree.

"Why? She's a murderer."

Frank glanced down at her. "So you say."

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Taj drove down the highway as fast as his car would go. If a police car were to take notice of him at the speed he was going then they would just have to chase him, because there was no way that Taj was going to willingly stop. He had to get to the cabin as soon as possible to warn Piper and Desiree that someone knew where they were. He wiped the sweat from his brow wondering what they would do next.

The Jamaican man looked over to phone lying next to him. He picked it up and dialed Piper's cell phone number again. He had been trying for the past few hours to get in touch with her, but every time he dialed the number the phone would just ring and ring. It was starting to worry him that Piper would not answer her phone. Maybe he was too late. Taj shook his head trying to remain positive. Piper was an intelligent woman and she would know how to defend herself. Everything would be fine.

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The phone began to ring again. Desiree started to get up to answer it but Frank ushered for her to stay seated. He made no move to pick it up himself as he crossed his arms over his chest. The phone stopped ringing after a couple of minutes.

"Whoever it was they were persistent," the lawyer stated.

Desiree agreed with him. "Frank?"

He looked down at her. "How did you know where we were? How did you find out?" It had suddenly come to her attention that the only person who should have known they were there was Taj. Not another soul was supposed to have a clue.

Frank smiled down at her before glancing toward his watch. "Well I don't have any other

explanation for you other than the truth. Would you like to hear it?"

Desiree frowned slightly. Something did not seem right. "The truth is always good," she replied.

"Well," he pushed himself away from the wall, "first let's start off with how Piper and I met." He started to walk back and forth in front of Desiree. "We met in San Francisco almost nine years ago when she needed a lawyer because she killed her father. Did she tell you about that?"

"Yes. She told me everything."

Frank nodded. "Very well. Well I went to the jail she was being held in and volunteered my services after learning what had happened. This brave young woman had killed her own father in order to protect her mother from the abuse he gave her regularly. My heart went out to young Piper, so I wanted to take the case. Much to my relief, she and her mother decided to choose me, and that's where it all began. Unfortunately, I lost the case and Piper went to prison for eight years." He glanced at Desiree. "You don't know how I felt when the jury read the verdict. I still remember it like it was only yesterday. And then for Judge Richard Love to give her ten to fifteen, that was brutal. I remember looking over at her and she looked calm and cool." He smiled slightly. "I admired her for that. I've seen some people who have totally broken down and started screaming and crying, but not her. After that, I didn't see her again until she got out a few months ago. I held her in my arms and she cried because she was so happy to be free. I had never seen her cry before that day." He paused gathering his thoughts. "Now all this has happened." Frank shook his head. "I don't believe she did any of it. In fact I know she didn't."

"How can you be so sure?" Desiree interjected.

Frank stopped pacing and looked at her. "Because I know who did it," he stated quietly.

"Who?" The young woman almost whispered. Maybe Piper really was innocent.

The lawyer then took off the genuine appearing blond wig and put it in his pocket. Removing the green contacts from his eyes, he put those in his pocket as well. As he smiled at Desiree, she noted his dark hair and brown eyes, confusion plainly written on her face.

"I did," he stated simply. He smiled again while announcing, "I'm Victor. Piper's big brother."

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Piper stopped running through the woods and leaned up against a tree, trying to catch her breath. She had been running for nearly an hour and she was drenched in sweat. She thought about taking another dip in the lake, but changed her mind. What she needed to do was get back to the cabin, and figure out what she was going to do with Desiree. While running, Piper had concluded that this was all over. She would go back to the cabin and set the young woman free, by giving Desiree her keys and telling her she was free to leave. After that was done Piper would try to get out of the state as fast as she could. After she was settled somewhere she would write Desiree a letter and send it stating how sorry she was about what had happened.

Piper held up her hand, which was beginning to bruise from the blow she had given the strawberry-blonde earlier. Piper could have kicked herself after she did that. She had never wanted to hurt Desiree and now she had done it. Now the young woman thought that she was a murderer and after Piper thought about it, she could not blame her. If she were in Desiree's position, she would have most likely thought the same thing. Piper flinched every time she thought back to when the young woman claimed that she hated her. A tear rolled down Piper's cheek and she wiped it away harshly. She wished that she were dead.

Looking around the now dark woods the dark-haired woman took a deep breath. It was time to go back to the cabin and send Desiree on her way. She pushed away from the tree and headed back to the cabin.

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Desiree felt instant fear again. "I thought Piper was an only child."

"That's what she thought too, but as you can see it's not true."

The young woman licked her lips. "Then you're not Frank. You were only pretending to be him."

"Oh, you don't get it do you?" he asked giving her a pitying look.

"Get what?" she asked wondering how she could get out of here. Desiree did not think it would be wise to just get up and try to go since the man had a gun, and he looked quite strong.

"I *am* Frank." At her puzzled look he continued. "I was pretending to be a lawyer all those years ago. I made Franklin Webb up. I still can't believe how easy it was to get away with it." He laughed. "I've also been an English fellow named Joe, and I'll tell you about him shortly."

"Wait a minute. Her own brother was her lawyer and she didn't know about it?"

"That's right cutie. I used to hug her during the trial, like I told you she never cried but sometimes she needed comfort. Well sometimes I would hug her and I would have to restrain myself from snapping her neck."

Desiree felt like she was going to be sick. "Why?"

He stared at her as if she were the stupidest person he had ever met. "You still don't get it?"

"Get what?" she asked with a touch of irritation in her voice. *Calm down girl. He has a gun*, she mused to herself.

Victor sighed. "She killed my father. It took every ounce of control I had not to kill her a long time ago. It had to be perfect. Everything had to be just right." He started to pace again. "You see I wanted her to suffer. Giving her death simply was not enough, so I made it that she would spend years in jail only to come out and have the threat of going back again. But this time I wasn't going to let her go. No, my little sister would die before she went back in and everyone would know that I did it, because I would simply claim that she came after me because she found

out that I was Alan Redding's son. She was so angry and insane that she tried to kill me, but I got to her first. Of course, as you should know that plan flew out the window when I found out that she was missing, and so were you." Victor shook his head. "Boy was I upset, because I was just about to go after her, and she pulls this stunt." He took a deep breath. "So ever since last Monday I've been looking for you two. Searching and searching and finally I find out where you are from this guy Piper used to know in high school. Did she tell you about Tommy Jung?"

Her voice having deserted her, Desiree merely shook her head in the negative.

"Well he along with another guy Taj Potter were her friends during high school. Do you know Taj?"

Desiree nodded.

"Yes, I know him too. That asshole wouldn't tell me a damn thing. But that's okay because Tommy told me." He fell silent for a moment still pacing. "So let's talk about Joe." He laughed. "I gave myself an English accent when I spoke as him. I have to admit I sounded very much like a true Brit. Anyway, I went to Judge Love, your daddy one night and gave him a proposition. I told him if he sentenced Piper to at least ten years in prison than I would give him twenty thousand dollars. He did and I mailed him the money, but she got out early so I suppose I'll have to pay your daddy another visit. I know. After he finds out that you are dead as well as Piper then he'll kill himself. He'll be so distraught over your death and his own guilt that he'll take a gun to his head and blow his brains out." He laughed merrily. "Perfect." He looked over at Desiree who was staring at him like a deer trapped in the sights of a hunter. "Don't you think?" She didn't answer so he asked again. When she still didn't answer he came over and backslapped her. Feeling the painful sting in her cheek, Desiree's eyes blurred with tears.

"I asked you a question. When you're asked a question, you answer it. Don't be rude Desiree."

She nodded, and he went back to pacing. "I agree. Anyway, I knew that wasn't enough. So, this is what I did. You know there are four jurors who died right?"

Desiree nodded again.

"Well I killed them of course. At least three of them anyway. I didn't do the last job. Anyway, during the trial I offered all four of them five thousand dollars to convince the other jurors that Piper was innocent. I let them all think that Piper had orchestrated it, so years later the police could find out that she had paid them off. Therefore, when they ended up dead then her motive for killing them would be that they didn't do what they were supposed to do. Now, you may ask how I could be so sure that they wouldn't be able to convince the other jurors to vote in Piper's favor. Well I pretty much knew that the verdict would be guilty, because as her lawyer I purposely messed up so badly that I made the prosecutors look even better than they were. I also made sure to tick off the judge, the jury, Piper, and her mama. I'd say stuff that would make the jury glare at me, and Piper would ask me on more than what occasion what I was doing and was I trying to get her put in jail. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. She kept me anyway though, because sometimes I would do well and we became friends. Besides, it was too late for

she and her mother to get another lawyer. Speaking of her mother you heard she passed away a couple years after Piper was put in prison, didn't you?"

Desiree nodded.

"It was said that she committed suicide by hanging herself, but that's not true." He faced the young woman. "Guess who did it?"

"Oh, God," Desiree groaned.

Victor laughed. "No, not Him. Yes, as you probably have already guessed I was the culprit. I made her write the suicide note and then I made her hang herself. I told her that I would sneak into the prison and kill her daughter if she didn't do it, so she did."

"Why would you kill her mother?"

Victor shrugged. "I was upset. Here my mother was a great woman, but he leaves us and marries Marie. She wasn't good enough for him, and she deserved all the beatings he gave her. I'll have you know that my father never had to lay a hand on my mother. She knew how to take care of him and she was a good wife. I loved every moment of Marie's fear when she knew she was about to die. The look in her eyes was priceless." A maniacal laugh fell from his lips. "I should have videotaped it."

"You are truly a sick bastard," Desiree said in a voice riddled with disgust.

Victor glanced at her and shrugged a bit. "Maybe I am, but I'm not the one who is about to die." He took the gun out again and showed it to her. "Do you know what this is?"

Desiree looked up at him, briefly wondering if that were a trick question. "It's a gun."

He slapped her again on the other cheek. "Don't be smart. I know it's a gun, I mean do you know what type of a gun?"

She shook her head while touching the newly painful spot.

Victor sighed. "Women aren't good for much more than cooking, doing what a man tells them to do and popping out babies." He paused. "And the occasional beating when they need it. In fact, the only woman on this earth who I thought was worthy of being here was my mother. She died of a stroke last year, leaving only my sister and I. This," he held the gun out again, "is a glock 17 9mm. Nice isn't it?"

Not wanting to make him angry again, Desiree nodded. "It is," she stated quietly.

"Do you know where I got the money to pay the judge and the jurors? A detective's salary isn't *that* much."

"No, I don't." *But I'm sure you'd be more than happy to tell me.*

"Robbed a couple of banks in some small towns." He laughed. "They never knew it was me, and it was so easy. I even saved a little bit for myself. Well for my family at least. I have a couple of children you know. I guess that makes Piper an aunt."

"Do you think they would be proud of what you did?" Desiree asked. "Your children."

"No they wouldn't. But they don't need to know. What they don't know won't hurt them. Right?"

"Absolutely."

Victor nodded. "I'm glad that you see it my way. I'll be right back." Detective Redding went to the front door opened and grabbed a bag from outside. Closing the door, he came towards Desiree with a blue sports bag in his hand. He put it on the floor and unzipped it taking out a rope. He instructed Desiree to put her hands behind the back of the chair, and when she did, he tied her wrists together tightly. He then came around to the front and tied her legs to the front legs on the chair. Standing up he exclaimed, "That ought to do it." Moving back to the bag, he reached inside and took out a can of kerosene. He showed it to Desiree. "Do you know what I'm going to use this for?"

"Are you going to burn me up?" Desiree felt a knot forming in her throat and swallowed. This man put the "p" in psychopath.

Victor laughed as though her reply was extremely funny. "Why I do believe you are getting smarter! Yes I am. Both you and Piper when she gets back. When will she be back anyway?" He glanced at his watch. "I'm anxious to get this over and done with." He took the top off the kerosene and started splashing the liquid around the room. He put the liquid on the carpet, the walls, the computer, the kitchen table, and other places. Finally emptying the can, he put it back in the sports bag.

"Won't that look odd?" Desiree asked.

"What?"

"Well, when the police find this place they may find out that the fire started due to kerosene. How are you going to explain that?"

"I won't. I was never here. Nobody knows I'm up here now and nobody will ever know. So when they-- *if* they ever find this place I had nothing to do with it," he replied confidently. "My hands are clean," he paused. "Well not really, but it'll look that way." Victor chuckled.

"So how will my father kill himself over my death when he doesn't know that I'm dead?" Detective Redding thought about that. "Good point. I'm going so fast I forgot about that." He paused. "Okay. No problem. I'll say this. I was here, but when I got here Piper was dousing the cabin with kerosene because Taj called her and warned her I was hot on her trail. Not wanting to

leave any evidence behind that she was here, she puts it on fire in her haste to get away. So I get here, rush into the cabin, which is now on fire and she tries to kill me but I kill her first. It was self-defense. Unfortunately, due to the rising flames and smoke I can't see you tied up over here, so I rush out of the cabin and it blows up, killing you in the process. How about that?"

*Damn.* "Do you honestly expect the police to believe that?"

"Yes I do. A lot of people respect me and they would never doubt me."

"What about the fact that you're her brother?"

"Nobody alive on this planet knows that except you, my sister and I. She's not talking and neither are you because you'll be dead."

"Did you try to kill my brother?"

"No, I didn't. I forgot to tell you about that. This is what happened. I shot him, wearing a mask and everything, but I made sure that it wasn't fatal. Before I shot him, I instructed him how to tell the police what happened. I told Richie to tell the police that Piper Redding tried to kill him. If he didn't do all that I told him to do, then I would come after his whole family. Obviously, the guy listened to me."

*Oh, Piper. I'm so sorry,* Desiree thought to herself while on the verge of tears.

Just then, they heard a key working in the door and the detective rushed over to it. He shot twice before he even saw who it was. The person in the doorway fell face down to the ground. Victor put the gun in his waistband and dragged the body into the cabin. Desiree gasped when she saw the person.

The detective smiled triumphantly. "Well look who we have here. Piper has arrived."

"Y-y-you killed her! You bastard!" Desiree shouted, noticing the blood that was starting to pool around the woman's head. Victor must have shot her in the head with the two bullets he fired.

The detective looked at her in surprise. "What's the matter? She takes you hostage, and by that bruise on your jaw she abused you too, and you're upset by her death?"

"I loved her!" Desiree blurted starting to cry.

Victor rolled his eyes. "Oh, great. You're not only stupid but you're a dyke. I knew she was but you too?" He tsked. "And you're so cute. What a waste." He shrugged. "Oh well. It doesn't matter because you're about to die anyway." He went to his duffel bag again and took out a matchbook. Next, he went around the room lighting matches and tossed them in various places. Mini fires started that would soon turn into huge ones. He went to his bag and picked it up. "Well I have to be going now." He smiled at her. "Oh, don't cry cutie. You and my sister will be together again soon. You're about to join her in Hell."

When Victor turned around his nose connected with a fist, which caused him to stumble backwards, almost falling on Desiree in the process. Before he could straighten up again, he took another blow to his right cheek, which made him fall to the floor. Victor hurried to his feet and took out his gun shooting the person who was attacking him. The attacker did not seem to notice as the gun was kicked out of Victor's hand and the other person caught it in the air. As the person pointed it at Victor's head, the detective finally got a good look. Meanwhile, the fire was starting to quickly burn out of control.

"Well well well. If it isn't the boy." He smiled brightly. "How are you Taj...oops I mean Mr. Potter?"

"Better than you're about to be," Taj replied as he pulled the trigger three times. Victor fell to the floor instantly dead from two bullet wounds in his head and one in his chest. Taj knew the cabin was about to blow, so he did not bother untying Desiree. Instead he picked her up and carried her outside along with the chair. He then went back inside, trying to dodge the flames as he moved to the body lying by the front door. Taj knelt down and put two fingers on her neck feeling for a pulse although he did not expect to find one. He was right. It was too late to save her.

Taj put a hand to his mouth and swallowed trying to hold back the tears. He kissed her on the back of the head and said, "Farewell my friend." Taj rushed back outside and hurriedly untied the ropes, releasing Desiree from the chair. He then grabbed her and started running away from the house just as it started to collapse. Desiree fought him, trying to go back to the cabin.

"No!" she shouted. "Piper is in there. I have to go get her!"

"She's dead, Desi." He was able to pull her back since he was stronger than she was.

"No! Let me go. Let me go, damn you!" she cried.

Just then the cabin exploded and flames flew high through the sky. Desiree screamed and collapsed to the ground. Taj put his arms around her as tears fell from his own eyes.

"NO! NO! PIPER!" Desiree screamed over and over again as Taj held her, trying to offer her some comfort. They watched the flames licking at the cabin, destroying it as well as someone very dear to them.

Continued in Part 6.

**The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive**

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~ Hostage of the Heart ~  
by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

## **CHAPTER 6**

Sandra Love was waxing the kitchen floor when she heard a knock on the door. Briskly walking towards the front door, she opened to find her oldest child standing there with a rather large lavender duffel bag in hand. Larisa smiled and gave her mother a quick peck on the cheek before strolling passed her into the apartment. She put the bag down and regarded her mother after Sandra closed the door.

"So how is she?" the younger woman asked, wearing a worried expression.

Sandra let out a loud breath. "Not too good." She paused. "I honestly don't know what's going on with her. She won't eat or do anything else but lay in that bed all the time."

"Her friend just died five days ago Mother, and she nearly lost her own life," Larisa replied. "That can take a lot out of a person."

"Her friend? That woman almost got my child killed," Sandra retorted with a tinge of anger in her voice.

Her daughter took a deep calming breath. "Then in that case, your husband almost got your child killed too." Larisa was beginning to become angry herself. A lot of the time her mother had the ability to not observe a situation from all sides.

Sandra's blue-green eyes opened wide. "Don't you dare say a thing like that to me," she demanded.

"I'll mind my tongue, if you mind yours," Larisa said in the most pleasant voice she could muster at the moment. It seemed like she and her mother were always fighting over one plight or another. It had always been that way between them. Out of Richard and Sandra's three children, Larisa had been the most rebellious and outspoken, which caused her to get grounded on a regular basis.

"You watch your mouth young lady."

Her daughter sighed. "Mother I am twenty-nine years old. All I'm trying to say is I wish that you wouldn't talk about Piper. The woman is dead, and yes she took Desiree hostage, but if you really think about it can you blame her? Maybe it wasn't the smartest decision, and she ended up losing her life, but it's obvious that Desiree cared about her, and she's hurting right now. So, I think that we should focus on making her feel better, and stop all the blaming. It's over so let's try to move on. My sister's and your daughter's health is the most important thing now. Don't forget that."

With that said Larisa began to walk towards Desiree's bedroom, without waiting for a reply from her mother. She knocked on the door softly, but did not receive an invitation to enter, so she opened the door and walked on in, closing the door behind her. What she saw broke her heart. Desiree was lying in her queen-sized bed curled up in a tight ball. She had the sheets and blanket up to her neck while staring at the stark white wall. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were puffy and red from crying and had dark circles around them, as if she had not been sleeping well or at all.

Larisa slowly walked towards the bed and touched her younger sister on the shoulder. Desiree did not respond to the touch so she bent down and gave her a kiss on the nose, like she used to do when Desiree didn't feel well. It used to bring a smile out of the younger woman, but this time not even a ghost of a smile appeared. Larisa straightened up and sat on the edge of the bed. It was then that she saw one tear escape Desiree's eye. Looking on the nightstand, she spied a box of tissues. Larisa snatched one from the box and gently wiped her little sister's cheek.

"Desi?" she whispered.

After a moment, Desiree moved her eyes to Larisa. She looked at her and tried to smile, but she could not. She sat up in the bed, putting her back against the headboard. Taking one of Larisa's hands in her own, she gave it a light squeeze. Desiree then stared at her older sister for a moment.

"I feel so empty inside," the strawberry-blonde stated hoarsely.

Larisa reached over and gave her a quick hug. She sat back and replied, "I know. But as time goes on you'll start to heal." Larisa paused, trying to find the right words. Helping people in their time of need was more of Desiree's domain. "You really liked her, didn't you?"

The strawberry-blonde smiled sadly. "I liked her a lot. It's bizarre because she did kidnap me, but...we could have been...friends."

"It'll be okay little sis. You'll see."

Both women fell silent for a moment. "Is mom still here?" Desiree asked.

"Of course she is. I think I interrupted her waxing the floor."

Desiree let out a short bark of laughter. "I think she must have been a maid in a past life. That's all she's been doing for the past four days. Vacuuming, polishing, mopping, washing..." She paused. "As if that's going to make everything better, but I know she's just trying to help. But between you and me," Desiree leaned towards Larisa conspiratorially, "she's driving me nuts."

As soon as Desiree had got re-settled into her home, Sandra had been there every single moment. For the first few days, Richard had been there, but he had to fly back to San Francisco yesterday, because the hospital was releasing Richie Jr. He promised his wife that he would be back

tomorrow along with his son.

Larisa laughed heartily. "Well you know how she used to fuss over us when we got sick."

"Oh, I remember all too well."

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Sandra was just putting away the mop when she heard the doorbell rang. She walked towards the front door hastily and opened it. Her temper rose when she saw whom it was.

"What are you doing here?" Sandra asked tersely.

Taj took a deep breath, removing his round black-rimmed sunglasses that had a blue tint. "I came to see Desiree."

"Well she has another visitor."

"Would it be possible for me to wait then?" Taj asked patiently. From the first moment he had laid eyes on this woman, he knew they were going to have problems. He half could not blame the woman for acting the way she did towards him. The Jamaican man mused to himself that if the situation were reversed he would most likely be acting like Sandra was.

"Well I'm very busy, and I don't want anyone in my way," Sandra replied.

"Then I'll wait outside."

"No you won't," Larisa said having come into the room after hearing two different voices. She came towards the door standing next to her mother. "Taj please come in. You are very and *always* welcome here." As Larisa said the last sentence, she looked at her mother. She grabbed Taj's arm and led him into the apartment, shutting the door behind him.

Sandra took her daughter by the arm and walked a few feet away from where Taj was standing somewhat uncomfortably. "You have no right to invite just anybody into your sister's home," Sandra whispered.

"Taj is just not anybody," Larisa replied with a tinge of anger. "In case it has slipped your mind, he saved Desiree's life. She would have been dead if he hadn't come along when he did."

"If it wasn't for that man and that other woman my daughter's life would not have been put in jeopardy. As far as I'm concerned that man didn't do anything he shouldn't have done."

Larisa sighed, putting a hand to her forehead. She could feel a headache approaching. This happened most of the time when she was around her mother. It was the reason why she always kept a bottle of aspirin in her purse, when she knew she was going to see the woman. Instead of offering a reply, Larisa left her mother standing there and walked back over to Taj. She smiled

up at the tall man. Unlike her mother, from the first moment Larisa had seen Taj she knew that he was someone she could be good friends with.

"Taj, she's in her bedroom." She led him over to Desiree's closed bedroom door. "She's awake."

"How is she doing?" he asked, concern plainly written on his face.

Larisa sighed. "One moment she's melancholy and the next she makes me laugh." She squeezed Taj's arm. "She needs help. Maybe you can give it to her."

Taj smiled warmly. "I'll do my best." He knocked on the door to hear Desiree say come in. Opening the door Taj walked in and smiled back at Larisa who was walking away. He closed the door behind him and turned around to face Desiree, who was sitting up in the bed.

"Hey Desi," he said.

"Taj," she replied in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

He walked to the bed and sat down. "I came to see you."

Desiree's blue-green eyes began to glisten with tears. "I didn't think I would ever see you again."

"Why wouldn't you?" Taj inquired.

"Because you were Piper's friend." She shrugged not knowing what else to say.

"Desi." Taj shook his head. "If you were not already so upset I would put you over my knees and spank you. How could you think that? True I've known Piper for years, but you have become my friend too." He smiled brightly. "Besides she'd come back and haunt me if I didn't come to see you." He wiped away a few tears that were running down her cheeks, with the padding of his thumbs. "I care about you, Desi," he said seriously. "And if you don't mind I'd like it if we could hang out. Go places together. You know, the things that friends do."

"I'd like that very much," Desiree replied, trying not to cry again.

"Good. 'Cause so would I." Taj put a bag on Desiree's lap that she had seen him come in with. It had the name of a toy store on the front.

"What is this?" Desiree inquired in wonder.

"It's for you. Open it."

Desiree shook her head, smiling slightly. She considered that Taj most likely was the sweetest man that she had ever met. She opened the bag and what she saw made her eyes tear up again. She wiped them away in frustration, tired of crying so much. She took out the stuffed animal that was a cat. It even had a collar that looked like Taj must have bought it separately.

Desiree looked up at Taj and said, "Thank you, Taj. This is so sweet of you."

"You like it?"

She nodded. "I do. I really do."

"Good, because I didn't know how you would react to it. I intentionally didn't get a stuffed animal that had the colors of Tobias, because I figured that might be too overwhelming for you."

"It's perfect." She squeezed the fluffy white-haired stuffed animal to her while noting its bright blue eyes. Swallowing with difficulty, she held back the tears that threatened to come again. Those eyes reminded her so much of Piper.

"I'm glad you like it." He paused wondering how to pose what he wanted to ask. "How long have you been in this bed?"

Desiree answered sheepishly, "Pretty much ever since I got home."

Taj shook his head, suddenly looking like a worried parental figure. "That's not good, Desi. How do you expect to heal right if you don't try to help yourself? You can't just stay in this bed all the time. That's not going to make you feel better."

The young woman looked down at her cat and rubbed its head as though it was real. "I know," she quietly agreed. Desiree had tried to get out of bed, but it took too much effort.

"I have to do something today," Taj started.

Desiree looked up at him, silently waiting for the Jamaican man to continue.

"I have Piper's remains," he said softly. "I'm going to spread her ashes in the water at Cabrillo Beach."

"And?" Desiree inquired while getting the feeling that Taj was beating around the bush.

"And I would really appreciate it if you would go with me."

Desiree shook her head negatively. "I can't Taj. I'm sorry, but that's something that I'm not prepared to handle. Maybe Larisa will go with you. Why don't you ask her?"

Taj peered at her and asked quietly, "Please? I want you to go. Maybe this will help you to heal easier."

"Dumping her in the ocean is supposed to help me?"

"Lying here in bed and feeling sorry for yourself is helping you?" Taj countered.

Desiree thought about it for a few moments. Finally, she threw back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed next to Taj. She took one of his hands in her own and squeezed it. Peering into his brown eyes she said, "I'll go. Give me half an hour, okay?"

Taj smiled and pecked her on the cheek. "Okay. I'll be in the living room unless your mother puts me out." Chuckling, he stood up and walked towards the door, leaving the room.

After he was gone, Desiree reached under the bed and took out the half full bottle of gin she had been nursing. Twisting the cap off she took a few long swigs before putting the bottle back under the bed. Getting up, Desiree straightened out the sheets and cover on her bed, putting her cat on the pillow, before heading towards the private bathroom she had in her room. She turned on the light and looking at her reflection in the mirror caused the young woman to grimace. Too put it bluntly, she looked like she had been on a ten day drinking binge.

Turning away from the telltale mirror, Desiree peeled off her pajamas before entering the shower. Twisting the knob, she turned on the water as hot as she could bear it. Picking up her pink sponge, she generously put the liquid soap on it and squeezed with her small hands until the sponge was soapy. Proceeding to scrub her body vigorously, Desiree then rinsed off, closing her eyes as the hot water relaxed sore and tense muscles. Opening her eyes a couple minutes later, Desiree reached for the bottle of shampoo and started to wash her hair, repeating twice after rinsing. Turning the water off, Desiree wrung some of the water from her hair before getting out of the tub and grabbing a towel from underneath the bathroom cabinet, quickly drying off.

Wiping the condensation off the mirror with the towel, Desiree stared at the image before her. Tears began to form in her eyes as she wondered for the five-hundredth time how life could be so cruel. You found a person that made your heart fill with joy, only to have them snatched away from you abruptly. She had found happiness with someone, albeit someone with quite a few problems, but Piper had been very special to her. All she had been doing for the past few days was think about Piper and the few precious days that they had been lucky enough to share with one another. Fishing, teasing, playing games, making love. The strawberry-blonde shook her wet head. This was all so unreal. She wished that it was all just a horrible nightmare and soon she would awaken in Piper's arms.

Taking a blow dryer out from underneath the cabinet, Desiree plugged it into the socket. She closed her eyes tightly while wondering how people could find the strength to go on after losing someone that they loved. Opening her eyes, Desiree looked up towards the ceiling.

"Well," she began, "you said you would be my do-whatever after all this was over Piper, so here is your first thing to do. Come back to me."

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Taj was reclining on the blue couch in Desiree's living room when the young woman came out of her bedroom. He stood up and smiled in delight at what he saw. Desiree had managed to considerably fix herself up from the way she had looked only about thirty minutes ago. She was

wearing a pair of khaki pants and a short-sleeved white blouse under a white cardigan. A headband that perfectly matched her pants held her hair back. On her feet were white tennis shoes that she wore without socks. Desiree had even put on a little lipstick. Her eyes still looked puffy, red, and the dark circles could still be detected, but it was a great improvement overall.

"You ready to go?" Taj asked.

Desiree smiled slightly. "Sure." She looked past Taj to see her mother peeking out from the kitchen with a dishcloth in her hands. "I'm gone, Mom. See you in a little while." She beckoned Taj to follow her to the door and opened it to go out when she heard Sandra calling her name. Turning around, Desiree looked at her mother wondering what she wanted.

"Do you think it's wise for you to go out with someone you hardly know?" Sandra asked, twisting the cloth in her hands.

Desiree sighed. She was hardly feeling in the mood to argue with her. "Mom, I-

"Taj isn't a stranger. She knows him just fine," Larisa interjected before her younger sister could say anything more. She was standing behind her mother with a plate in her hand. "Mother we have dishes to finish so stop holding Desiree here against her will." She waved the plate at Sandra who was glaring at her for interrupting. Larisa only offered her a saccharinely sweet smile before she turned her attention to Taj and Desiree, who were still standing by the opened front door. "Please go you two." Sandra stormed past her oldest daughter into the kitchen without another word.

Taj motioned Desiree to exit the door first before he made to leave the apartment. Before she did so, she gave her sister a grateful look for stepping in. Larisa smiled and winked at her in return. Hearing Larisa call his name softly just as he began to close the door, Taj looked over at her questioningly.

"Thank you," she mouthed. She was glad that someone had managed to get her little sister out of the house. Larisa had complete faith that Taj would take care of Desiree, and she knew that the depressed young woman was in good hands.

Taj smiled at her warmly. "My pleasure," he mouthed back before closing the door behind him. As Taj walked out into the sun, he removed his shades from the collar of his shirt and put them back on. He located Desiree patiently standing on the passenger side of his 1998 black Jaguar XK8 convertible. This car was his most prized possession. There was not a day that went by when he would not polish it with a special cloth he kept in the glove compartment. He made sure to check the car for scratches everyday. When his older brother, Dion and his family had come to visit a couple of months ago, Dion had claimed that he was insane when he saw his little brother fussing over his Jaguar. Taj had only replied that the man was jealous because his wife had forced him to give up his Porsche in order to get a more family oriented vehicle.

"Nice sports car, Taj," Desiree remarked admiring the shiny automobile. She had ridden in it back to Los Angeles but had been in too much shock at the time to notice the Jaguar. It could

have been a neon pink Cadillac for all she knew.

The Jamaican man grinned as he released the lock on the doors with the electronic car door opener on his keys. After the car beeped, Desiree opened it to get in. Taj opened the door on the opposite side and got in the driver's seat. The inside of the car was white. White seats, white floor, white floor mats... Desiree shook her head. This was as daring as the white carpet Taj had at his cabin.

Taj put the key in the ignition and soon they were speeding off down the street. The top was down and the Jamaican man wondered if it was too much for his passenger, although it was a beautiful southern California day with not a single cloud in the sky and a calm breeze blowing. "Do you want me to put the top up, Desi?" Taj asked, glancing at her.

Desiree turned to him and shook her head. The warm wind blowing in her face felt wonderful. "It's nice. I've never been in a convertible before."

"Really?" he asked.

Desiree shook her head again. "Nope." She looked up towards the clear blue sky watching a Goodyear blimp for a couple minutes before turning her attention back to Taj. "Could we make a stop before heading to the beach?" she asked him.

"Of course. Where do you want to go?"

"A jewelry store."

Taj thought for a moment. "I know where one is on the way. We can stop there."

Fifteen minutes later they were pulling into the parking lot of the jewelry store Taj had been referring to. Desiree jumped out the car, telling Taj that she would not be long. He nodded turning off the ignition. The strawberry-blonde went into the store and exited a few minutes later with a small plastic bag in her hand. She got in the car after Taj took off the alarm. He looked at her curiously while wondering what was in the bag.

"You hurried out of there pretty fast, little one. What did you do? Rob the place?" He chuckled. "You're not carrying a purse."

Desiree looked at him a faint smile on her lips. "Lost my purse at the cabin. I found a handy piece of plastic in my drawer and it's in my pocket."

"Yeah, right." Taj started the car, put the gear in reverse, and backed out. "But that's okay, Desi. I won't tell anyone what you did," he teased, a grin on his lips.

Desiree laughed softly, thinking that Taj reminded her a lot of Piper. They both had pretty much the same sense of humor, and the young woman was glad that Taj had decided to remain in her life, even though Piper was no longer living. He made her laugh and she found that very

comforting. Impulsively, Desiree reached over and gave Taj a hug when the car came to a halt. The startled man wound his arms around her and wordlessly hugged her back tightly. Afterwards, Desiree sat back down in her seat and buckled her seat belt.

A few minutes later the pair was on the freeway headed towards San Pedro, the home of Cabrillo Beach. Desiree happened to look in the back seat and spotted a brown supermarket paper bag behind Taj's seat. Her breath caught for a moment as she thought of what or rather who was in it. She turned her eyes to Taj and swallowed, her blue-green eyes shining with fresh tears that threatened to spill.

"Taj?" she whispered.

He looked over at her noticing her distressed expression. "What's the matter Desi?" he asked in concern.

Not giving a ready reply, she pointed to behind his seat. "What's in there? That bag I mean." Taj let out a ragged breath turning his attention back to the freeway. "An urn with Piper's remains," he replied quietly.

The strawberry-blonde nodded mutely turning to stare out to her right. A tear cascaded down her cheek to that she quickly wiped away with the back of her hand. She felt a warm hand squeeze her shoulder before it pulled away. They drove a few more minutes in silence, before Taj could not take it anymore. Not really wanting to listen to the radio, he reached behind Desiree's seat and brought out a compact disc case. He handed the leather case to Desiree and asked her to choose a CD from it to play.

The strawberry-blonde rifled through the case looking through the clear plastic at the different titles. She finally chose a CD and extracted it to insert in Taj's CD player. She then pressed a button on the CD player in order to change tracks before putting the case back behind her seat and sitting back to listen, closing her eyes. Taj was interested to know what Desiree had selected, but he did not have to ponder for long.

*Sorry I never told you  
All I wanted to say  
And now it's too late to hold you  
'Cause you've flown away*

*Not this song*, Taj thought, as he glanced over at his passenger. Desiree still had her eyes closed tightly. He tampered with the idea of stopping the song from playing, but changed his mind. If this was what Desiree needed to listen to, then she wouldn't get any objections from him. People had different ways of dealing with their grief.

*Never had I imagined  
Living without your smile  
Feeling and knowing you hear me  
It keeps me alive, alive*

After switching lanes, Taj took notice of the lone tear rolling down Desiree's cheek, although her eyes were still closed. She had her hands balled up into fists as if she was trying to hold the pain and agony inside. Taj shook his head. She would never heal correctly if she didn't just let it out. If she were to continue on this path, then the young woman would eventually explode such as a ticking time bomb does. Taj reached over and encased one of Desiree's fists in his own. He was pleased that she did not pull away from the contact.

*Darling I never showed you  
Assumed you'd always be there  
I, I took you for granted  
But I always cared*

Hearing a soft gasp come from the young woman, Taj quickly turned his eyes to her. She had her eyes open now looking to her right. He could see the wet tracks on the left side of her face that had been left from the tears. He reached into his black leather jacket and extracted a white handkerchief. Taj held it out to Desiree. She took it and gave him a slight smile before returning her attention back to her right.

*Although the sun will never shine the same  
I'll always look to a brighter day*

Desiree removed her hand from under Taj's and clasped his own tightly. The Jamaican man noticed that the palm of the young woman's hand was cold and clammy. He hoped that his much warmer one would heat it up a bit.

*And I know you're shining down on me from heaven  
Like so many friends we've lost along the way  
And I know eventually we'll be together  
One sweet day*

Desiree sniffed and dabbed her face with the soft handkerchief Taj had given to her. She wondered not for the first time if Piper knew that she was awfully sorry for what had happened between them on their last meeting. It was killing her that their last time together had been spent yelling and threatening one another. *Piper, if by some chance you can hear my thoughts please know that I'm so sorry for ever doubting you. I love you.*

*Sorry I never told you  
All I wanted to say*

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Arriving at Cabrillo Beach, Taj found a parking space and informed Desiree that he would not be long before leaving her alone in the car. About ten minutes later Taj returned, and raised the hood on his Jaguar and grabbed the brown bag from the back seat before he led Desiree, who was carrying her own small bag from the jewelry store to the water's edge. Taj had rented a boat

for them to take out into the water. He asked her if she had ever been on a boat before, and the young woman exclaimed that she had once or twice a few years back on her uncle's forty-five foot Bayliner.

The Jamaican man helped Desiree into the boat and then got in himself, setting the bag down beside him. Handing the young woman a life jacket, he put one on himself after removing his leather jacket. The boat wasn't motorized so Taj had to paddle. Desiree tried to help but he was dead set against it, telling her to just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Taj paddled them out until they were about a half-mile from shore. Both of them noticed that the water was calm today. Desiree reached a hand down and ran it through the water finding it quite warm. She wished that Piper were here because she would have loved to go swimming with the blue-eyed woman. She bet the woman would have looked great in a swimsuit. Thinking of Piper caused Desiree's eyes to tear up so she tried to turn her attention to the birds soaring up above. Hearing the crinkle of the bag being opened, Desiree glanced at it with her heart starting to beat faster. She didn't know how she would react to seeing an urn and knowing that what was left of the woman she had come to love so quickly was inside of it. Instead of taking out the urn, Taj took out two clear plastic cups and something wrapped in a wad of newspaper. He removed the newspaper and held up a bottle of champagne for his companion to see. It was a bottle of 1978 Dom Perignon that Taj explained he had put in the freezer before leaving to come to Desiree's apartment. Briefly touching the bottle, she removed her now chilled fingers.

Taj opened the champagne and poured some into each plastic cup until they were both half full. He explained that was all he would be consuming, since he considered himself the designated driver. He handed a cup to Desiree and told the young woman that she could make a toast if she wanted to. Desiree started to decline, but changed her mind. If there were anyone in the world that she would feel comfortable talking about Piper in front of, it would be the person sitting in front of her. She started to speak, but then asked Taj if he would mind going first. He didn't have a problem with it so he went first, but not before warning Desiree that he was never any good with putting into words what he felt.

"Piper," he started gazing down at the cup in his hands, "I've known you ever since we were in high school, and I thank God that you came into my life. I'm proud to say that I knew you, because you were a very special person. You brought joy into my life, and I'm happy that I can call you my best friend. I will love you forever," he paused and Desiree noticed his brown eyes starting to glisten with moisture. She reached over and squeezed his hand for encouragement. "Be obedient up there in heaven instead of a donkey's rear-end. I don't want you to get kicked out."

Desiree laughed and Taj followed suit. He wiped his eyes gesturing for Desiree to begin. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat, choosing to look at the water. "I...um I don't know exactly what to say. Piper, I want to apologize for the way I acted. If I'd had more faith in you, maybe you would be alive today." Taj started to say something but Desiree motioned for him not to. He settled for shaking his head. "I want you to know that I truly did love you, although it didn't seem like I did at the end. I didn't show it and I'll never be able to forgive myself for being so blind and stubborn. When you love someone you are supposed to believe in them," her voice

broke and she gulped, "and...and I couldn't do that. I wish that we could have had more time together, but like they say, life is short. I hope you forgive me. I love you so much, and I will continue to love you until the day that I die. I know that you are not truly gone, because you will always be alive in my heart. You hold a special place there that no one else could ever touch. I know I'll see you again someday."

Her head dropping forward, she began to softly cry. Immediately putting his cup down, Taj pulled her into his embrace. She wrapped her own arms around his neck and cried on his shoulder. The Jamaican man began a rocking motion while he rubbed Desiree's back, telling her that everything would be all right. After a few minutes the young woman had her emotions under control again and sat back, wiping her face with Taj's handkerchief. Picking up his cup, Taj waited for Desiree to do the same. She did and they touched their cups together before taking a sip. Well at least for Taj it was a sip. He noticed with a raised eyebrow that the strawberry-blonde drained all contents of the cup in one long swallow. She asked him if she could have some more and he nodded mutely. Desiree picked up the bottle and poured the amber liquid into the cup until it threatened to spill over the brim. She soon finished that cupful, but drank slower this time. She wanted to get another cupful, but did not want to risk being reprimanded or questioned by Taj, so Desiree placed her empty cup on the boat floor while glancing at the champagne bottle longingly.

Reaching into the paper sack, Taj carefully removed the urn. He set the silver urn in front of him and glanced at Desiree. After her eyes caught a glimpse of the urn, the young woman quickly turned away. The strawberry-blonde had no desire to see what her lover had been reduced to. Looking at the urn had caused Desiree's eyes to tear up again, and she mentally chastised herself for acting like a big baby.

The Jamaican man cleared his throat to speak. "Desi, do you want...or should I..."

She knew what the man was trying to get at. Desiree glanced at Taj replying, "If you don't mind, would you...do the honors."

He nodded, removing the lid from the urn. The Jamaican man then grasped the urn between his hands and made to toss the contents of it into the water, when he felt a hand on his shirt trying to stall him. Taj looked over at Desiree who was taking something out of her bag from the jewelry store. She took out a small black velvet case. Inside the case was a fourteen carat gold-filled heart-shaped locket, embellished with a ten carat pink gold rose with two twelve carat green gold leaves on either side of it. The piece of jewelry was hooked on to a twenty-inch gold-filled rope chain. Desiree held up the delicate jewelry in her hands and opened the heart locket. She then reached over to Taj, who still had the urn in his hands, and she hesitantly put a hand inside of the urn. Taj watched, understanding what she was about to do. Desiree's hand came out with a pinch of ash between her thumb and first finger. She placed the bit of ash in the locket, closed it, and put the chain around her neck. Desiree motioned Taj to continue, afraid to look at his face in case the man was staring at her strangely for what she just did. Instead, she missed the look of compassion plainly written on the Jamaican man's face. Turning to his left, Taj tipped the urn over the side of the boat and the pair watched, as Piper's remains spread into the water. Hearing a soft gasp from his companion, Taj put a comforting arm around Desiree's shoulders. They stayed

there in the water watching for a little while longer before they headed back to the water's edge.

Ten minutes later, the two were back on the freeway heading to Taj's house in Gardena, after he managed to cajole Desiree to come over so he could fix her dinner. It didn't take them long to arrive at Taj's house, since he was closer to Cabrillo Beach than Desiree was. When the Jamaican made to turn into his driveway, he spied someone sitting at his doorstep. After he got out of the car and came around to the passenger side to help Desiree out, he walked over to see who it was. On closer inspection, he noticed that the person was his younger brother.

"Leroy? What are you doing here?" Taj walked over to his young sibling and caught the man in a bear hug. Leroy hugged him back just as voraciously.

Twenty-year-old Leroy Potter had nothing in common with his older brother, except for the fact that they both had the same skin tone. They looked nothing alike, but Leroy was just as handsome, except that he had a baby face, which made him look a couple years younger than he was. Leroy was five feet nine, which he hated. He had often exclaimed when he was younger that it was not fair that all the men in his immediate family reached six feet or above except for him. Also, out of everyone in the family, Leroy was the only one not to have a Jamaican accent. For some reason, he had lost the accent after he and his family moved to California when he was seven years old. Taj saw that his little brother had braided his hair. He silently shook his head and planned to speak with Leroy about the braids later.

"Can't a guy just come to see his favorite brother?" retorted Leroy.

Taj narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He had the feeling that something was going on and he intended to find out just what it was. "Not before school is out, he can't. Don't you have classes today?"

Leroy shrugged, taking notice of Desiree standing a couple of feet behind Taj. "Hey, who is this pretty lady?" Leroy put on his most charming smile. The pretty lady in question found herself smiling back.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Taj turned to Desiree and brought her forth. "This is my friend, Desiree Love. Desiree I would like to introduce you to my little brother, Leroy." Leroy stuck out his hand and he and Desiree shook hands. Taj noticed that he held hers a little longer than necessary. He cleared his throat causing Leroy to let go.

"Are you and Taj dating?" Leroy inquired, sticking his hands in the pockets of his blue jeans.

Before the young woman could answer, Taj said, "No. We're just friends. Now stop stalling. I asked you a question."

Leroy cocked his head to the side. "And what question would that be?" he inquired in an innocent tone of voice.

Taj took in a deep breath. "I asked you weren't you supposed to be in school? Why aren't you

there?" He crossed his arms across his chest, waiting for the younger man's explanation.

Leroy seemed to ponder this for a moment. Finally, he mumbled, "I got kicked out." His brother narrowed his eyes. "What?"

A little clearer Leroy repeated, "I got kicked out."

Taj took a deep breath, trying to maintain a hold on his usually non-existent temper. There had to be a reasonable explanation. "How did you get kicked out?"

"Could we go inside?" Leroy asked wearing a nervous expression. If there were one person in this world that he did not want to ever disappoint, it would be the man standing in front of him now. He had always wanted to be like his older brother, and Leroy felt quite ashamed of himself that this situation had occurred. He mentally castigated himself for what must have been the hundredth time for his stupidity.

Taj nodded as he put an arm around Desiree's shoulder and led her to the front door with Leroy right behind them. Taj opened the door and the trio entered, with Leroy closing the door. They walked into Taj's spacious living room to sit on his black leather couch, which reminded Desiree of the one at his cabin, except for the fact that this one was larger. She admired the room in approval, except for the white carpet, just like at the cabin. She had to hand it to Taj though, because the carpet looked like it was brand new. To the right of the living room were huge glass doors that led out to an extensive backyard. Next to the vast winding couch was an oval glass coffee table, with black legs. Next to the couch also was a black recliner that possessed a massage device. Under the coffee table was a hand-crafted silk and wool area rug, with a convoluted design.

Taj sat on the couch with Desiree choosing to sit next to him. Leroy took space in the recliner, lifting the lever in order to put his feet up. Once again, Taj crossed his arms over his chest, acting more like a stern father than a brother, and waited for Leroy to start explaining. A few minutes ticked by with everyone present remaining silent. Taj stared at his brother, while Desiree fidgeted with a button on her cardigan. Starting to run out of patience Taj said, "Well?"

Leroy figured he had pushed his brother far enough, so he began his story, "I got kicked out because I plagiarized on a couple of essay's for a couple of my classes."

Taj's brown eyes opened wide. "Let me get this straight. Plagiarizing for one class is bad enough, but you did it for two?"

His brother nodded mutely.

"Why?" Taj asked in quite a deceptively calm voice.

"Because I was overwhelmed with everything. I had tests, quizzes, essays, and deadlines..." He trailed off, shrugging. "Plus you know I was involved in sports and a couple of clubs. All the pressure just got to me, and I thought I could do it without anyone being the wiser."

"Well evidently you couldn't," Taj exploded. Desiree put a restraining hand on his arm. Not looking at her, he nodded, understanding what she was trying to do.

Leroy shrugged again. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize to me. You're the one who just messed up your future. What did Mom and Dad say?"

"That's why I'm here. Dad and I had an argument so I got on the first bus I could catch out of there going to LA. I then took a taxi over here, and I've been waiting for a few hours for you to show up."

"Do they know where you are?"

Leroy nodded. "I called them when I got to the bus station here," he paused. "Can I live with you?" he asked quietly. "Just for a while at least? Until I get my own place."

"How are you supposed to get your own place when you don't have employment?"

Leroy argued, "I'll get a job."

Taj put his arms on his thighs, sitting forward. "Where?"

Leroy shrugged. "I don't know. I'll buy myself a newspaper and start looking."

"He can work for me," Desiree said abruptly. It just sort of slipped out before she even fully registered what she was saying, however thinking about it, it might not have been such a bad idea. She could be helping him out as well as herself.

The younger man smiled at her. "I can?"

Desiree nodded. "What was your major? What do you want to be?"

"Desi, you don't have to do this," Taj said. She ignored him, focusing her attention on Leroy whose face had seemed to brighten considerably after her offer.

Leroy looked sheepish. "I didn't really have one established yet, but most of my classes revolved around English and history. I would like to write screenplays," Leroy exclaimed.

Desiree's blue-green eyes shined. "Really? Well we have something in common then. I'm working on a book. And that's what I need you for. How good are you with research?" she asked.

"Well...I've done it for my classes, but I don't know if I could call myself a professional." The young woman smiled. "Honesty. I like that, Leroy."

Though he almost commented that it wasn't honest for the ex-student to plagiarize on his

schoolwork, Taj managed to keep his thoughts to himself. As he observed his beaming little brother, he could have sworn that he saw him blush. He rolled his eyes, thinking that Desiree did not need Leroy falling all over her. Taj made a note to have a talk with the young man about the short little braids in his hair and that.

"There is one catch," Desiree continued. "I can't pay you much, since I don't have a job myself at the moment, so it may behoove you to still look for other employment."

Leroy looked at his brother. "What do you think?" he asked him.

Taj shrugged. "It's your life. Are you not planning on going to any school again?"

"Maybe this has worked out for the best. Maybe it was meant to be this way, for me to come to Los Angeles. This is one of the best places to start with my screenplay writing. I could probably pick up a few pointers working with Desiree."

"So in other words, you're done with school."

"Some people never go to college and they do just fine. At least I had almost two years experience," he paused, noticing his older brother's disapproving look. "On second thought I could take a couple classes at a local community college this fall."

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While chatting about their arrangement, Desiree and Leroy began to smell the delicious aromas coming from the kitchen, where Taj was fixing dinner. Desiree thought to herself that this would be good. Getting into her book again would help Desiree to heal and not think about Piper so much. She needed something to occupy her mind, and with Leroy's help, she hopefully could succeed. As for the money, the young woman had a small nest egg saved up in her bank account from getting a few stories printed in magazines over the years and from her last job. It was then that Desiree decided that she needed a job herself. Sure her parents would be more than happy to help, in which they already were but the young woman wanted to have her independence.

"So, Desiree," Leroy started, squinting at her. He was now sitting next to her on the couch. "You know what? You look familiar."

Desiree took a deep breath. So, he had figured it out who she was. "Do you watch the news?" she asked.

Leroy's breath came out sharply. "I remember now." He put a hand to his head, thinking to himself that he was the stupidest person on the earth. So involved in his own problems, he had forgotten to mention anything about Piper Redding to his brother. When he found out a few days ago that the woman had been killed, he had immediately called his brother to give his condolences, but the woman had not once entered his mind since he arrived on his older brother's doorstep. "You're the Desiree Love that was kidnapped by my brother's best friend."

The strawberry-blonde nodded. "Yep. That would be me."

Leroy patted her shoulder. "I'm sorry about what happened to you. Also, I'm sorry about what happened to Piper. I knew her since she and Taj were like this." He crossed two of his fingers to show just how close Taj and Piper had been. "My brother told me that you and she had become friends. I didn't think it was odd, because Piper can be easy to get along with if you're lucky enough to get her to let her guard down. I'll miss her, although I haven't seen her in years. Actually, don't think I've seen her since I was about fourteen. That was when Taj took me with him to visit her in prison. I remember I had to beg him to take me." He chuckled softly.

Before Desiree could offer any sort of a reply, Taj came out of the kitchen informing the two that dinner was ready to be served, and that they should take their seats at the table in the dining room. Leroy arose first from the couch and escorted Desiree over to the table by placing a hand in the middle of her back, acting like a true gentleman. When they reached the glass table, Leroy pulled out a chair for the young woman, and she thanked him as she took her seat. Taj witnessed this whole event and only rolled his eyes. Leroy was becoming as bad as Dion used to be before he settled down and got married.

Leroy took a seat next to Desiree, as Taj came out of the kitchen again with a bowl of salad he made. It consisted of everything from croutons to tomatoes. Taj also placed on the table two different kinds of salad dressing, that he informed his brother and friend was homemade. Leroy called him a showoff, causing Taj to playfully sock him on the arm. Desiree fondly watched them, remembering how she and Piper used to play with one another. She could feel herself becoming emotional again, so she excused herself from the table, asking Taj where his bathroom was. Wearing a concerned expression, he told her and Desiree hurried off.

On entering the bathroom, Desiree closed it silently behind her and sat on the toilet after she lowered the top. She bent over covering her face with her hands and began to weep softly. Shaking from the wracking sobs, Desiree wondered if the pain would ever go away, or if she would forever feel this enormous loss. After crying for a few minutes, the distraught young woman reached over and tore off a few squares of toilet paper. She dabbed at her eyes and cheeks and then threw the now wet paper in the small green trash can she saw on the floor. Desiree then stood up long enough to remove a small silver flask from the back of her pants. She opened it and took a few swallows of the gin that she had put in it earlier. After putting the now half-empty flask back in her pants pocket, Desiree headed over to the sink and gargled with Taj's mint flavored mouthwash so that neither he nor his brother would smell the alcohol on her breath. The young woman composed herself in the mirror and then went back out to the dining room.

Both Taj and Leroy asked Desiree if she was all right and nodded while attempting to smile. Neither brother felt it was the truth, but they decided by exchanging a look with each other that they would not pursue it for the moment. They did not want to push the young woman since she seemed so fragile already.

Desiree looked at her plate, knowing that if everything was all right that she would attack this food with a vengeance. As it was, the young woman found that she was not hungry in the least. Taj had made spaghetti and meatballs with melted mozzarella cheese on top. In a basket on the

table was homemade freshly baked garlic bread. Desiree figured that she should try to eat, so she reached over to take a piece of the bread. She missed the smile of approval that Taj gave her. He had figured that she probably wouldn't have much an appetite, but was glad to notice that she was at least making an effort to eat. Desiree twirled a few strands of spaghetti around her fork only to be swatted on the back of her hand. She peered up at Taj who was sitting on her right. He was smiling teasingly, so instead of frowning she smiled too.

"We didn't say grace yet, Desi. We were waiting for you," Taj informed her. "Would you like to do the honors?"

Desiree shook her head. She still did not trust herself with speaking yet. Taj motioned the two to bow their heads and he said prayer instead. Leroy kicked him under the table, because the young man thought that he was taking too long and he was famished. Taj ignored him, and when he finished saying grace, scowled at his little brother as he kicked him back. Desiree picked that moment to glance over at Leroy, noticing his pained expression. When she asked him what was wrong he told her she he was fine, but then gave his older brother a dirty look. Taj only smiled sweetly in return.

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It was beginning to become dark, when Taj asked Desiree if she wanted to spend the night or did she want him to take her home. She chose to go home so before they headed out to the car, Desiree hugged Leroy informing him that she would be calling about the research work he would be doing for her. He nodded, exclaiming that he could not wait to get started.

Back on the freeway, Taj turned on the radio and discovered that an upbeat song was playing on the current station. He breathed a small sigh of relief, turning up the volume. Desiree said that she loved that song and he smiled. Maybe the young woman would be okay after all.

Taj pulled up in Desiree's driveway and she thanked him for getting her out of the house. He retorted that he could not have done it without her. Before she got out of the car, the strawberry-blond reached over and gave Taj a kiss on the cheek. He grinned saying that he would never wash his cheek again, causing Desiree to chuckle as she closed the car door. She had asked him if he wanted to come in, but Taj declined saying that he had to get home to have a chat with Leroy about a couple of things.

On coming into her apartment, the first thing that Desiree noticed was that her mother was sitting on the couch knitting a blanket. Seeing her daughter come in, Sandra arose from the couch, walking towards her to ask if she was all right. The younger woman simply replied that she was before she started to head for her bedroom. At any other time she would not have a problem with having a conversation with her mother, since they saw each other so infrequently, but tonight Desiree did not want to be bombarded with endless questions most likely concerning Taj and what they did. Desiree hurried into her bedroom, missing the shocked look that Sandra was wearing.

Desiree removed her cardigan and kicked off her shoes before kneeling down in front of her bed, and took out the bottle of gin that she had drank from earlier. She opened it and took a long swig

from the bottle. It was then that she remembered the half-empty flask in her back pocket. Desiree took out the flask and after finishing the contents of it, put the flask in the nightstand next to her bed. Picking up the bottle again, Desiree headed into her bathroom to take a long hot bubble bath. She figured that this would relieve some of the tension in her muscles and help her to think about what she was going to do now. She realized that was going to have to make some decisions, and stop moping around feeling sorry for herself. Yes, it was definitely time to ease pain.

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Walking into the apartment, Larisa noticed that Sandra was pacing back and forth across the carpet. She was wearing a worried expression. Sandra glanced up at her oldest child, but continued to pace.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Larisa asked softly though she knew that it might not be that bad. Sandra had the ability to over-dramatize a situation.

Sandra stopped pacing to face her daughter. "Something is wrong with your sister."

Larisa had to control herself from rolling her eyes. "Yes, Mother there is. I thought that we already had this conversation. Her friend was killed and she nearly lost her life as well. She's been through a horrifying ordeal. If there weren't anything wrong with her, then I would be worried. As it is what she is going through is expected."

Sandra waved her hand impatiently in the air. "I'm not talking about that. She came home about fifteen minutes ago, and she barely said a word to me. She just went into her room and shut the door," she paused dramatically. "Do you think that man did something to her?"

Larisa took a deep breath, which was quickly followed by another one. "Mother, his name is Taj, and no I don't think that he did anything to her." *She probably just doesn't want to be bothered with having to listen to your mouth,* the younger woman thought.

"Why don't you try to talk to her?"

After assuring her mother that she would try, she headed towards Desiree's bedroom. The woman knocked a few times on the door not receiving an answer, so she gave up and just walked in. Scanning the room, Larisa saw that Desiree was not in it. Hearing a sound coming from the bathroom, Larisa headed towards that door. She knocked and heard her sister telling her to enter. She walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Desiree was reclining in the bathtub covered with a thick layer of bubbles nearing reaching her shoulders. Some were even airborne. Larisa chose to sit on the floor next to the bathtub.

"I'm glad that it was you," Desiree announced, chuckling slightly. "I really don't wanna deal with Mom right now."

The older woman smiled, glad to hear a happy sound coming from her younger sibling. "Well, I

figured that you wouldn't and I don't blame you. She's in drama queen mode right now."

Larisa grabbed Desiree's sponge and put a small amount of liquid soap on it. She told her sister to sit forward. When Desiree did so, Larisa began to wash her back with the sponge, just like she used to do when her sister was younger. Except then Desiree used to get the floor all wet and Larisa as well. The dark-haired woman smiled at the memory. A couple minutes later after washing the soap off her back, Larisa informed Desiree that she was done. The strawberry-blonde thanked her for it.

"So where did you and Taj go?"

Desiree rested the back of her neck against a folded up towel on the rim of the porcelain white tub. She closed her eyes before answering, "We went to go spread Piper's ashes at Cabrillo Beach, and then we went back to Taj's place where I met his delightful little brother and had dinner."

"Who cooked?" Larisa decided not to ask for any details about Cabrillo Beach.

"Taj did. He's an excellent cook too." She opened her eyes to look at her sister thoughtfully. "I've been thinking unless you have a problem with dating outside of your ethnicity, I could fix you up with him. He's two years younger than you, but he's awfully handsome and sweet."

The dark-haired woman had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. "I'll have you know blondie that I have dated outside of my ethnicity before. I have no problem with that."

Desiree shrugged and closed her eyes again. "Well how was I supposed to know that? I hardly see you anymore."

"Hey! I don't see you making an effort to come see me. I know it has nothing to do with the distance, because I don't live that far from you."

"Would you be willing to go out with Taj?" Desiree asked, changing the subject to what it was before.

Larisa inhaled deeply. "No. He's a nice guy but I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

The older woman laughed loudly. "Who are you now? Aphrodite? I rather talk about you then have you trying to fix me up. I'll handle my love life."

"What about me?" She would give up for now, but Desiree found that she would not mind having Taj as a brother-in-law. She could work more on her sister later.

Larisa did not know quite how to start what she wanted to ask. "Let's talk about what happened at the cabin," she began.

"What about the cabin?" Desiree still had her eyes closed, enjoying the heat radiating from the water.

Larisa hesitated. "How close did you and Piper Redding become?" she asked gently hoping that it didn't sound like she was trying to pry.

Lifting one eyelid, Desiree glanced at her sister before closing it again. "What do you mean?" she asked procrastinating.

Her sister let out an impatient breath. Little sisters could really get on a sibling's nerves. "I just asked how close you guys got."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Larisa chastised herself for her suddenly sharp tone.

"Why are you asking?" Desiree inquired.

Larisa shrugged. "Call it curiosity. Just tell me."

Desiree wondered if she should do just that. How would her sister react if she were to tell her how close she and Piper really did get? It was then that Desiree noticed that she had to tell someone. She wanted someone to know what had happened at the cabin, and she mused maybe her sister was the person. If there was anyone she could confide in, it would be Larisa. Desiree opened her eyes and sat up in the tub. Looking at her sister nervously, she considered how to tell her. Larisa helped by giving her an encouraging smile.

"She was my lover," Desiree spoke clearly. She felt a heavy weight drop from her shoulders at the declaration. She had already decided that her parents did not need to know. What would be the point?

To Desiree's shock, Larisa did little more than raise an eyebrow and glance at her lap. The other woman did not look surprised at the statement. For a moment, neither of the women said anything. Finally, Larisa took a deep breath and folded her arms on the rim of the tub, resting her chin on top of them.

"Were you in love with her?" the dark-haired woman asked in a whisper.

Desiree nodded as she swallowed, trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to come. "Yes, I was. Very much."

Larisa nodded. "Did she love you?"

The strawberry-blonde shrugged. "I never knew. She died before I could tell her that I loved her, so she never even knew how I felt."

"I'm sure she did," Larisa nearly whispered.

"How?"

Her sister smiled slightly. "Knowing you Desiree, you probably showed her in your actions. She knew. Believe me she knew. And I'm sure she felt the same way."

Desiree shook her head. "One of the last things that I told her was I hated her. How could she know that I loved her? More than I thought I could love anyone."

Larisa thought for a minute. "She probably knew you were only hurt. Don't dwell on the bad. Remember the good times that the two of you shared."

"I just miss her so much."

A tear fell down Desiree's cheek. She tried to stop it, but she started to cry. Larisa moved until she was on her knees and gathered her younger sister in her arms. At first Desiree tried to stop her mumbling that she did not want to get her wet, but Larisa would not let her back away. The younger woman gave up and hugged her sister back, sobbing on her shoulder. Desiree did not see them, but tears were running down Larisa's face too.

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The next morning found Desiree and Larisa working the crossword puzzle that had come in the newspaper that morning. They had convinced their mother to go shopping, since she noticed a couple of dresses that she liked in a sales paper from the day before. They relished the peace and quiet with their mother away for a few hours. Desiree was looking up a word in her dictionary when she and her sister heard a knock on the door. Getting up to answer it, Desiree opened the door to see a blonde woman standing there who she guessed to be in her early thirties. Desiree offered her a welcoming smile, saying hello. As the woman returned the smile, she extended her hand and Desiree shook it briefly while not being able to hide the curious look upon her face.

Resting her hand back at her side, the visitor said, "You don't know who I am, but Victor Redding was my ex-husband. My name is Andrea."

Desiree wore a surprised yet confused expression. She had known that Victor had an ex-wife and children, but she could not figure out why the woman was on her doorstep. Stepping aside, she motioned Andrea to come in and she did so with a grateful look. The woman noticed Larisa sitting at the dining room table and offered her a smile as well. Larisa returned it as she folded the newspaper and pushed it aside. Desiree asked Andrea to take a seat at the dining room table while she offered her a beverage. The woman shook her head, declining the offer. Desiree took a seat in the chair that she had been occupying previously to Andrea coming.

"Um...Mrs. Redding...do you go by that name anymore?" Desiree inquired, wondering how anyone could have stood to be married to a horrible man like Victor. Well at least Andrea had had the good sense to divorce him.

Andrea nodded. "Yes, I do though please just call me Andrea."

Desiree smiled slightly. "Okay. Andrea...is there something I can do for you?"

"Maybe there is something I can do for you." The woman reached into her large cream colored purse and extracted a white standard business envelope. "I didn't know where else to take this, so I thought I'd might as well give it to you." She handed the envelope to Desiree, who took it, seeing that the front had the name Emily Redding printed on it.

"How did you find out where I lived?" Desiree asked the woman.

"I was rifling through Victor's things at his house and I found your address in a little book that he had."

The strawberry-blonde shuddered while an image of the horrible man entered her mind. On a regular basis, she had been enduring nightmares with him in them after the ordeal at the cabin. She would wake up in a cold sweat thinking about all the fire, the smoke, and Piper abruptly losing her life.

"Who is Emily Redding?" Larisa asked, getting into the conversation.

Andrea replied, "That's Victor's younger sister. She sent me that envelope in another envelope with a note in it informing me to give one of the letters to Victor and the other to Piper. Well I never got a chance to, since both of them ended up passing away. I read the letters after finding out the news and then I knew that I had to give them to someone." She turned her full attention to Desiree. "I thought I'd give them to you. See if you could make sense of what she said. Would you read them please? I think it crucial that you read them right away."

Desiree glanced at her sister and then proceeded to take the letters out of the already open envelope. The first one she read was addressed to Piper. She read it out loud so that Larisa could know what it said.

**Dear Piper,**

**We have never met and I feel that this is sad. I want to apologize for all that my brother and I have done to you. I wish that we could have had a relationship with one another, but things don't always turn out the way you want them to. Please, I have no right to ask for your forgiveness but don't hate me. Yes, I have wronged you and I will feel the guilt of that for the rest of my life.**

**Victor seemed to be obsessed by you, and I didn't make the situation any better because I chose to help him carry out his malicious plan. I don't know why I went along with all that he did. I guess because he tried to tell me that you were responsible for the death of our father. At first I tried to tell him that you did not have a choice because the man had tried to kill your mother, but soon Victor wore me down anyway. So, I helped him. I know that it**

was stupid, but I went along with him anyway. I guess that you could call me one of those people who jump off a cliff just because somebody else is doing it.

Victor was the one to kill the first three jurors, but I have a confession to make. I took Michael Lowell's life while pretending to be you. I had reservations about doing it right from the start, but I did it anyway. Before that I had never harmed another human being in my life and I have to say that it was horrible. It was not as horrible for me as it was for Michael and his family though. I've come to realize that I took an innocent man away from his family forever. I wish that I could turn back the hands of time, but unfortunately, that can't be done. Victor and I had a plan to make it seem like you did it. We even went so far as to get a lilac Honda Civic, because we knew that's what Desiree Love drove. Of course, we didn't know for sure if you had taken her hostage but Victor thought it probable that you had. At the time, he didn't know for sure but it wasn't long before he had it confirmed.

As you read this letter, I'm most likely locked up in a jail cell, which is where I know that I belong. I'm not going to try to plead innocent, because I am the farthest thing from it. I hope that you will be able to live your life now without having to run. I am sorry for disrupting your life, and I promise never to bother you again. You take good care of yourself.

Sincerely,

**Emily Redding**

Desiree put the letter down on the table now having the question answered of whom really murdered Michael Lowell answered. She remembered that Victor had confessed to her that he had killed all of the jurors except for Michael Lowell, but he had never divulged who the person was. She had forgotten all about his sister. Desiree looked up at Andrea who was the looking back at her.

"Where is Emily now?" the strawberry-blonde asked. For some reason, she did not feel a lot of anger towards the woman. In fact, she managed to feel some sympathy for Emily.

Andrea replied, "Just read the next letter."

Desiree gave her a peculiar look, but did as the woman told her to. Unfolding the next letter, she started to read aloud.

**Dear Victor,**

I know you probably hate me right now, but I did what I had to do. There was no reason for our baby sister to go back to prison for our heinous crimes. We did them and we should be persecuted for them. Not Piper. I know I turned on you, but I don't feel in the least bit sorry for it. Sure we may spend the rest of our lives in prison now or they may seek to give us the death penalty, but it is no less than we deserve. Somebody should beat *us* with a hammer or chop off our fingers. Victor what we did was immoral and I couldn't apologize

enough for it. I have already written Piper to tell her my main part in it, and how sorry I am.

I had been following you and I found out that you knew where the cabin was and that Piper had indeed taken Desiree Love as her hostage. Since you were going there, I knew that you would kill our sister and maybe that innocent young girl, so I thought about it and I came to the decision that I couldn't let you do it. So, I devised a plan. I would sneak over to your house and get in the back of your car, hiding so that you wouldn't know that I was there. When you got to the cabin, I would stop you before you could take anymore lives.

As you read this, we're both probably behind bars and now you probably want to kill me as well. Well Victor we went too far. Let's face it. Alan Redding was a horrible man who beat his wife and tormented his youngest child for years. Sure he was pretty good to us when he was around, but obviously deep inside he was a twisted person and if you ask me, we've seem to have inherited that trait based on all that we've done. Why should we defend a man who tried to kill his wife? Victor despite all of this you are still my flesh and blood brother and I love you. I hope you remember that when you're cursing my name.

Love,

Emily

Desiree put the letter down and stared off into space for a few moments as she tried to gather her thoughts. One statement from Emily's second letter kept running through her mind. *When you got to the cabin, I would stop you before you could take anymore lives.* So, where was this Emily Redding during that time? Desiree peered across at Andrea who had tears in her eyes.

"What do you have to say?" Andrea inquired of Desiree.

The strawberry-blonde shook her head. "I don't know exactly what to say. Where is Emily? You wouldn't answer me before."

"That's the weird thing about it. I don't know where she is," she paused wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Hurrying into the kitchen, Larisa came back with a napkin that she handed to the emotional woman. Andrea thanked her as she dabbed her eyes. "Although I have a hunch. What I want to know is if you have the same hunch."

Desiree frowned in thought and then her face brightened considerably. "What if it wasn't her?" she said more to herself than anyone else.

"What if what wasn't her?" Larisa asked, forming her own hunches.

Desiree turned to her sister. "The body," she exclaimed excitedly. "What if the body in the cabin wasn't Piper's?"

**Continued in Part 7.**

## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 7

Larisa stared at her sister as though she had just lost her mind. She then glanced to Andrea to see that she was wearing a slight smile that appeared to be tinged with despondency. The dark-haired woman took a deep breath before she opened her mouth to speak.

"What do you mean by maybe the body in the cabin wasn't Piper's?" Larisa addressed this to her sister who was smiling like she had just won the California Lottery for a hundred million dollars. She was overjoyed to see Desiree smiling, but conceived she was wasting her happiness on something that could not possibly be true.

"I mean," Desiree turned to her sister, "Piper could be alive. That body may have been Emily's."

"How do you figure? You and Taj saw the body, right?"

"Yes, but I never saw her face! I just assumed it was Piper. The woman had long dark hair and she was tall. As for Taj I don't think he saw her face either." Desiree could scarcely keep herself from bouncing up and down in her chair. If she was right then this was the happiest day of her life.

Larisa thought about this information. Well if Emily did go through with the plan she told Victor about in her letter to him, then that meant she was up at the cabin that night. Whether the body was that of Piper's or Emily's then someone was missing in action. Larisa asked both Andrea and Desiree if Piper was alive then where was she. Wouldn't she have gotten in touch with them by now?

"I don't know," Desiree replied brightly, refusing to give up her newly found hope. She was clinging to it as though for dear life. She knew she should be thinking more rationally, but now she felt like Piper could not possibly be dead. Her love was out there somewhere, and Desiree was going to make it her personal goal to find out just where she was. She would not rest until she found her soulmate.

"Maybe she's gone into hiding," Andrea offered. "Could be that she's afraid of what will happen

if she reveals that she is still alive."

Desiree excused herself from the table, announcing that she would be right back. Hurriedly making her way into the kitchen, she picked up the phone mounted to the wall. Only pressing a couple of buttons because she had him on speed dial, Desiree called Taj. The phone rang a couple of times before Leroy answered it. He began playfully flirting with her, until another voice came on the phone. It was Taj.

"Sorry about that," the Jamaican apologized. "You'll have to excuse my little brother because he doesn't know any better. How are feeling this morning?" he inquired with concern.

"I'm better than ever!" Desiree exclaimed. "I have some wonderful news!"

Taj held the phone to his ear, amazed at the excited tone coming from this young woman, who only yesterday was crying her heart out. He briefly wondered if she had resorted to using illegal drugs and this shook his head. Desiree would never do that. She was too intelligent to get caught up in that kind of thing.

"What wonderful news is that?"

Desiree replied, "I'll tell you when you come over. Please come to my place as soon as you can."

"I'm on my way."

After hanging up the phone, Desiree returned the dining room and explained to Andrea and her sister that Taj was on his way over. She hoped that he would be able to tell her that he had not seen the woman's face in the cabin otherwise her theory might prove wrong. Desiree began to get nervous. Whatever happened next solely depended on what Taj saw. She prayed that he did not get a look at her face.

"If Taj didn't see her face, then maybe it's true," Desiree announced.

"Now who is Taj?" Andrea asked.

Desiree explained that Taj Potter was Piper's best friend and that they had known one another since their freshman year in high school. She also explained how he had saved her life at the risk of losing his own and how attentive and helpful he had been to her since that awful night at the cabin.

"Sounds like a pretty terrific guy," Andrea commented.

The strawberry-blonde smiled. "Yes he is. And if anyone will be able to help find Piper that person would be Taj."

"If Piper is indeed alive, then where is she?" Larisa asked. "Doesn't make sense to me that she hasn't gotten in touch with you or at least Taj by now. Even if she is in hiding, doesn't seem like

she would allow you two to needlessly worry."

"Why are you being so negative?" Desiree inquired of her sister.

"I'm just being realistic," Larisa retorted. "Desi, you have to face the fact that Piper might be gone forever," she continued in a soft voice.

The younger woman shook her head. "You don't know what you are talking about. The woman who died was Emily Redding and I'll prove it to you."

"How are you gonna pull that off?"

"By finding Piper," Desiree stated confidently.

"So I presume that you and Piper became close?" Andrea inquired.

Desiree smiled warmly. "Yes we did. I have never met anyone like her." In case Andrea would not approve of the true nature of their relationship, the younger woman decided it was best not to divulge into details.

"So Andrea where do you live?" Larisa inquired, attempting to change the subject until Taj arrived. Maybe she could find an ally in him. She wasn't trying to be cynical. This just seemed too good to be true.

"I drove here from San Bernardino."

Larisa's green eyes widened. "You mean you came all the way from San Bernardino to deliver those letters?"

Andrea nodded. "I felt it was important that I give them to Desiree. Also I wanted to see if she would agree with my theory."

"Which is?" Desiree inquired.

"Which is that the woman who died in the cabin was my ex-sister-in-law, Emily."

"Exactly." Desiree gave her a pleased smile while reaching over to squeeze the woman's shoulder affectionately. Glancing at her sister, she offered her an irritated look, which Larisa ignored.

"Where are your children?" the strawberry-blonde asked. "Victor told me that he had children."

"Oh," Andrea began to proudly smile. "My little loves, Stacey and Samantha. They are at a hotel I'm staying at nearby, with my brother, Keith."

"How old are they?" Larisa inquired in interest. The last few years her maternal urges had been

kicking in, but Larisa knew that the chances were slim that she would ever have children. She had been giving a lot of serious thought about adoption, and had wanted to talk to Desiree about it, but around the time she wanted to do so, all of this started to happen.

Andrea replied, "Nine and six," she paused. "It's a shame that they'll never get to have a relationship with their father. Although I suppose, it's for the best, since I wouldn't have wanted him around them anyway. The man was crazy."

"That's an understatement," Desiree muttered.

"Is that why you two divorced? Because you knew he needed the kind of help that you couldn't possibly deliver?" Larisa asked.

"Actually we divorced because we had started to fight all the time. We fought about everything and anything. That was two years ago. I didn't know there was something psychologically wrong with him until Piper was released. It was then that I wouldn't let him take Stacey and Samantha anywhere without my supervision. I didn't want them out of my sight because frankly I didn't have a lot of trust in him."

Larisa stated, "I don't blame you. Was he a good father though? I mean basically?"

Andrea thought for a moment. "At the end of our marriage he started to snap at the children, but for the most part, yes he did seem to be a good father. I just didn't trust him to alone with them."

"Did you trust Emily?" the dark-haired woman inquired.

"Yes, I did," Andrea started. "She was a great auntie to my daughters. Stacey and Samantha adored her." She wiped her left eye, which was where a tear had formed. "I had no idea that she was embroiled in all this, until I read those letters. I thought Victor was working alone on whatever he was trying to accomplish. I just wanted to stay out of it myself." She wiped her eyes again. "Now I wish I had done something. Tried to find out what Victor was really up to. I never dreamed he would resort so far as to try to kill her, and that Emily would try to help him."

Desiree reached over and squeezed Andrea's hand. "It's not your fault, Andrea. You can't blame yourself for what your ex-husband did because you're not responsible for his actions. He was sick and he needed help, but unfortunately he never got it."

Andrea nodded. "Emily seemed like such a sweet girl. She was the type of person that you would say would never hurt a fly. Obviously I misjudged her."

All three of them started thinking about the brutal murder of the juror Michael Lowell, and how he had been beaten with a hammer. Desiree winced, remembering how she had accused Piper of that. She had so many things to apologize for. She wouldn't blame Piper if she never spoke to her again.

"I'm sorry, Andrea," Larisa said. "Even though she did take a life and was gullible enough to be

sucked into her brother's schemes, it's obvious that you cared for her a great deal." Larisa then noticed that she was speaking in the past tense. She sighed, wondering if Desiree and Andrea were right all along. Maybe it was Emily in that fire, and Piper was still alive. That would be wonderful. True that someone would still be dead, but at least that person wouldn't be her.

"I did care for her," Andrea said while looking at Larisa. "But I would rather it be her than Piper in that cabin. I didn't know Piper, but I would like to get to know her. Now that I know she wasn't doing all of those things. I knew Victor was involved with her somehow, but I never knew that he was the one actually killing those people. I just figured that the both of them were insane." She shook her head. "Sometimes it's hard to figure someone out."

"You can't always judge a book by its cover," Larisa added.

The three women talked some more. Larisa and Desiree mainly asked Andrea about her daughters and they found themselves chuckling at the stories that the blonde-haired woman told about Stacey and Samantha. Andrea promised that she would bring the children by before they all headed back to San Bernardino. Desiree found herself excited at the prospect of meeting Piper's nieces. If they found Piper in time, maybe she would get to meet them too.

Hearing the doorbell ring, Desiree hurriedly arose from her chair to jog over and answer it. She opened the door to see Taj standing there and started smiling as she greeted the man and told him to come in. He gave her a questioning look, choosing to remain silent for the moment. Studying her, Taj still did not know what the strawberry-blonde was up to. She seemed so excited that he half expected her to explode. Evidently whatever she had to tell him, was huge news.

He glanced over to the dining room table to see Larisa and another woman he did not recognize sitting there. He waved at Larisa and smiled politely towards Andrea. The Jamaican man turned his attention back to Desiree who asked him to sit at the dining room table. He took a seat noticing that the petite woman was choosing to stand. She was acting like a child on Christmas morning.

"Taj I have some excellent news to tell you," Desiree started. Taj remained silent, waiting for her to continue. He crossed his arms over his muscular chest giving the woman his full attention. "First, I want you to read these." Desiree picked up the two letters on the dining room table and held them out to Taj. He took them and chose the one that was addressed to Victor to read first. Desiree took that one away and asked him to read the other one first. Taj cocked an eyebrow, wondering why it mattered but he acquiesced without inquiring. He read that letter without comment, and then reached for the other one that Desiree was grasping tightly in her hand. Various expressions flitted across Taj's face as he read the second letter. After he finished reading it, Taj put the letter on top of the other on the table. He glanced around noticing that all three women were studying him closely. He felt like a lab animal that they were about to run a series of tests on. Taj cleared his throat looking up at Desiree, who was still standing.

"So what do you think?" she asked as calmly as she could.

"Well I remember you telling me that Victor said he had a sister. So this Emily is the sister he was referring to?"

Desiree nodded. "She's the person that actually killed Michael Lowell. Whereas I thought it was Piper until Victor started rambling on about what all he had done. I didn't know who actually killed that last juror until I read those letters. I had thought about the sister, but I wasn't positive."

Taj nodded. "So where is she?" he asked.

"Emily?" Desiree asked.

Taj nodded again. "Did she actually go up to the cabin or did she chicken out?"

"We don't know," Larisa cut in. "We don't know if she ever went there and we don't know where she is now."

"Larisa," Desiree said sharper than she had meant to. "Of course Emily went up there. She had to have been there, otherwise..." She could not and would not finish that sentence. She could not afford to. Thinking positive was the key here.

Taj frowned. "Otherwise what?" he inquired, looking at Desiree.

"Otherwise we have no proof that Piper is alive," Larisa answered.

The Jamaican man turned to her. He considered all that had been said after he read the letters. He considered how excited and happy Desiree was acting. Then it all clicked together. He turned his attention back to the strawberry-blonde. "You think that that wasn't Piper's body in the cabin, don't you?"

Desiree nodded profusely.

"That it was Emily's?" he went on.

She confirmed this as well. "What do you think?"

Taj was silent for a few moments, as he tried to gather his thoughts. "It could have been Emily Redding," he said. He turned to Larisa, after hearing her call his name. The dark-haired woman asked him if he had seen the face of the body in the cabin. Thinking back, Taj remembered that he had not been able to look at the face of his friend. He did not know if he would be able to see her lifeless blue eyes, so he avoided looking at her much as he kissed her on the back of the head. He shook his head to answer Larisa's question. The next thing he knew it, there was a loud holler coming from Desiree as she launched herself into his arms. She burst into joyful tears as she kissed him full on the mouth. Taj as well as Andrea and Larisa became wide eyed with the excited display. Her sister knew that Desiree was usually an affectionate person, but her little sister never took it that far as to plop a kiss on somebody's lips.

Desiree arose from Taj's lap and regarded her sister triumphantly. "See? There is our proof that Piper is alive. She's out there somewhere." Desiree did a little happy dance. She and Andrea exchanged high five's, since the both of them were true believers in thinking that Piper was still on this earth.

Larisa sighed, getting the feeling that she was quickly losing this battle. She shrugged. Well maybe they were on to something after all. Larisa just did not want to see her sister get hurt if it turned out that Piper was actually dead. Desiree might sink into a severe deep depression if she found out that Emily was still alive. Therefore, Larisa decided to go with the motto that if you couldn't beat 'em then join 'em.

"Okay. So where do we start looking for her?" Larisa asked, glancing around at everyone.

Desiree smiled, glad that her older sister was going to listen to them. "I don't know," Desiree announced. She looked down at Taj. "What do you think?" she asked him.

Taj scrunched up his face in thought. If Piper were indeed alive then where could she be? The question that was bothering him was why was she hiding. Why didn't Piper just come to his or Desiree's place?

"Maybe we should start searching the area around the cabin," the Jamaican man stated. He proceeded to tell them that if Piper were alive then it was possible that she was in that area, because there was no other way other than hitch hiking that she could have gotten back to where there were a lot of people.

"She could have hitch hiked," Larisa said.

Taj turned to her, "Yes, she could have, but if she would have done that, then we would have heard from her by now. She's not the type to let someone worry. Therefore she has to be somewhere, where she can't reach a phone."

Desiree asked, "So you think that she's stranded in the woods?"

Taj considered this, and then nodded. "It's a possibility."

"Then we have to go out there," the strawberry-blonde announced. "We have to go out there right away. Let's go."

Desiree grabbed the keys to her Honda off the key ring hanging by the front door and made to open the door, when Taj suddenly placed his body in front of it, successfully blocking her. She gave him a slightly irritated look as she tried to push him out of her way, but he would not give. Finally, she asked him to move while tapping one foot impatiently on the carpet.

"No, Desi. What are we supposed to do, huh? Just go out there with no plan? Just the four of us walking around calling out her name?"

Desiree shrugged. "That about sums it up. Let's go now Taj." She pleaded him with her eyes.

Out of the corner of her eye, Desiree noticed Larisa jumping out of her seat, as if she had just been bitten. She turned around to study her sister, as everyone else did the same. The woman, who had everyone's attention, had a bright look in her green eyes. She told them that she had an idea. Her sister asked her what it was.

"Let's form a search party!"

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After all three of them working together got Desiree to settle down, Larisa announced that she had to go to the airport to pick up her father and brother, who were arriving from San Francisco today. Desiree got up from the couch and started pacing, telling Taj and Andrea that they should have been on their way out to the cabin searching for Piper instead of just sitting there. Taj explained to her that they needed to get people together so that their chances of finding her would be more successful.

Removing his cell phone from his jacket pocket, Taj thought of people he knew that would be willing to help. He decided to call his brother Dion first in San Francisco. Since Dion had an automobile that could carry up to six or seven passengers, Taj figured that they could use that. He was sure that Dion would be more than willing to help with the search, since he had met Piper when Taj introduced her to him back during their high school years.

The Jamaican was not disappointed after he got off the phone with Dion. After explaining the situation to him, Taj's older brother was more than happy to help. He was overjoyed to hear that there was a chance that Piper was still alive. Dion informed Taj that he would be leaving as soon as he could pack a bag and arrange to have a few days off from work. When Taj asked him if there would be a problem with his job, his brother told him that it would all right, and that he needed a vacation away from it anyway. Just before they were about to hang up, Taj inquired if Dion would be bringing his wife and daughters. Dion said that he had not planned on it but changed his mind, when his younger brother asked him. Taj had just come up with a plan if all of this worked out in their favor.

The next people that Taj got in contact with, were his parents who resided in Bakersfield. After giving them the same explanation that he had given Dion, his father Nathaniel said they would be arriving as soon as he could make reservations for the next available flight heading to Los Angeles. Taj said he would call him back in about fifteen minutes to see what time he should pick them up, but Nathaniel insisted that they could take a taxi to Taj's house.

Next, Taj called his friend Tommy Jung, who had helped with carrying out Piper's plan to take Desiree hostage. Tommy informed him that he would be glad to help, since he felt responsible for what had happened at the cabin, because he was the one to leak where Piper was to Victor Redding. Taj told him that he would be in touch after he found out what the definite plan was for this search party.

Taj decided that he would tell Leroy the news about the search and see if he would help, when he got back to his house. He was sure that his younger brother would help, but if he didn't then the Jamaican man mused that he could always threaten him with the prospect of not having a place to live. Also when he got home, he would call his almost girlfriend Valerie (he hadn't really asked her to be his girlfriend yet because that word commitment made him nervous every time he thought about it) and see if she would be willing to help although she had never met Piper.

It was then that Andrea announced that she had to be getting back to the hotel. She gave Desiree and Taj the number of the nearby hotel she was staying at. She informed them that she intended to help, so they were expected to call the number. They promised that they would and Desiree hugged and thanked Andrea for brightening up her day. The blonde woman blushed from the gratitude while telling Desiree that she did not have to thank her.

After Andrea left, Taj informed Desiree of all the people he had called and she thanked him. He noticed that the young woman was so fidgety that he went to her kitchen to fix her a cup of hopefully soothing tea. He didn't know if it would have the desired affect, but it couldn't hurt to try. When he gave the steaming mug to the strawberry-blonde she smiled her gratitude and took a sip, informing him that it was delicious.

Desiree sat on the couch and grasped the mug of tea between her hands. She glanced over at Taj who was sitting at the dining room table, apparently deep in thought. Desiree had to call his name a couple of times in order to gain the man's attention.

"Answer me honestly," she began. "Do you think we will be able to locate Piper's whereabouts?"

Taj replied quickly, "If she's still with us, then we will indeed find her. I know we will," he assured her, believing what he said with all his heart.

"What do you think she's doing right at this moment?"

"I don't know," Taj replied. "Probably trying to figure out a way to get back to civilization."

"But if she *is* out there in the woods, don't you think she would have been able to find her way back by now? I mean I know I don't know her as well and as long as you have, but she just seems like the type who would be able to achieve what she wanted to achieve quickly. Today is the sixth day she's been missing. It's not like she doesn't know where you or I live."

The Jamaican man thought for a moment. "Maybe she's been injured."

Desiree looked at him worriedly. "Please, Taj don't say that. I can't bear the thought of her somewhere hurt."

Taj apologized just as they both heard a key in the lock at the front door. It opened and in came Desiree's mother. The strawberry-blonde sighed, wondering how her mother was going to take this latest news. Sandra smiled at her daughter, but when she caught sight of Taj, she glared at

him before turning her eyes away from him. She closed the door with her foot, since she was carrying three big shopping bags. Taj arose from his chair to help her with the bags, but she told him curtly that she could handle them on her own. Trying to maintain his own patience, Taj once again took his seat without another word. He was trying to make peace with this woman, but she was making that difficult to achieve.

Heading into the guestroom that she was using while staying at her daughter's apartment, Sandra deposited her bags near the bed. Coming out and closing the door behind her, she made her way over to her daughter and took a seat by the young woman on the couch. Taking a hold of one of Desiree's hands, she sandwiched it between her own while asking the young woman how she was feeling. Not sparing him another glance, Sandra had decided she would ignore Taj all together. Evidently, Desiree insisted that this man was welcome in her home, but as far as Sandra was concerned, he did not exist to her.

"I'm fine Mom." Desiree looked at her mother as if she wanted to tell her something, but found it difficult to start. Sandra looked back at her expectantly, waiting for her to speak. "I have some news Mom."

"Which is?" Sandra inquired.

Desiree took a deep breath. "Mom, Piper Redding may be alive."

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Larisa arose from her seat and went to the gate, after hearing over the intercom that the plane from San Francisco was preparing to land. While she had been waiting for her family to arrive, Larisa wondered if she should tell her father that the woman who had taken his daughter hostage, may not have died. A part of her wanted to wait to return to the apartment, but the man was sure to ask how Desiree was doing, so Larisa would feel inclined to tell him that his youngest daughter was in high spirits due to this recent revelation. The only thing that he did not need to know was that Piper and Desiree were lovers. He would have a fit and so would Desiree. Her sister may not ever speak to again if she were to let the cat out of the bag. Larisa shook her head. No, what Desiree chose to do with that information was her own business. Besides, Larisa thought grimly as she shook her head. She had her secrets as well.

Ten minutes or so later, Larisa stood at the window watching the passengers descend the stairs of the plane. It wasn't long before she spotted her father and brother getting off the plane. She hurried over to intercept them when they came through the door leading inside the airport. When Richie saw her, his face broke into a wide grin and he ran to her. He managed to pick her up although the activity caused a twinge of pain. Larisa rapped him on the shoulder lightly, to get the young man to put her down.

"Richie, you shouldn't be doing that," Larisa warned, yet she was smiling. She ruffled his hair only to receive a mock glare from him that made her laugh.

"Yeah, well I just wanted to show you how strong I still am." Richie puffed out his chest. "No

bullet can stop me." He grinned. He then felt a sharp pain of guilt at what that reminded him of. Richie partially put the blame on himself for what had happened to Piper Redding. He admitted that he had lied to the police about who had shot him. It had felt like an extensive weight had been lifted from his shoulders after revealing the truth. When Richie had apologized to Desiree over the phone, she had told him that there was no apology needed, but the young man knew that the guilt he was going through would always be there, no matter what the circumstances had been. Although the real shooter had threatened he and his family, Richie still felt the guilt.

Richard clapped his son on the back. "That's my boy," he said proudly. The older man looked at his daughter and squeezed her shoulder. Richard had never been the type of father who showed a lot of affection.

"How are you, Larisa?" Richard asked his daughter.

The dark-haired woman nodded. "I'm fine. How was the flight?"

"Smooth," Richie said while reaching into a pocket of his pants. He took out two small bags of honey roasted peanuts and handed them to his sister. She laughed thanking him for the little treats.

The trio chatted, mostly Larisa and her brother as they walked to the baggage claim to get the two men's suitcases. Richard found the bags and carried them both back to Larisa's blue Nissan. She opened the trunk so he could deposit them in there. Richard insisted on driving so his daughter handed over the keys to him without any argument. Larisa moved into the back seat of the car despite her brother's protest that he could sit back there. She wanted him to sit in the front in the hopes that he would be more comfortable. Besides, she didn't particularly want to sit that close to her father just in case he was in a mood to interrogate. After he settled into the driver's seat, they sped off into traffic.

"How is Desi doing?" Richie asked, stretching his legs out in front of him in the front seat. He could not wait to get his younger sister's apartment to see her. He wanted nothing more than to envelop the petite woman in his arms and assure her that everything would be all right. Richie also wanted to tell Desiree how much he really loved her, since he had taken after his father in not showing much affection. It was times like these that made one realize how precious family really was. Richie winced, thinking that a tragedy had to occur in order for him to want to be close with his little sister. Right now Desiree probably needed all the love and affection she could handle, and he silently vowed that he would be the best brother he could be. Richie mused that it was all a part of the big brother's imaginary handbook to look out for the little ones.

Larisa sighed softly as she wondered just how she should answer that particular question. Should she just tell them now or wait until they got to the apartment? She concluded that she might as well tell them now and get it over with. Besides maybe telling them now, especially her father might take some of the heat off of Desiree. The dark-haired woman had the impression that her little sister was hanging on by a very thin rope. A piece of thread maybe. Desiree would not be able to take much more stress before something drastic happened. Larisa did not have a clue what that would be, but Desiree was in a fragile state right now and she would not allow their

father to push her any farther.

"Well," Larisa began, "actually, she's doing better."

She saw her father nod in approval, for like her mother he did not understand why his youngest child was in such deep despair over someone who robbed her of her freedom for nearly a week. Larisa had also tried to explain to her father that somehow Desiree and Piper had become friends, but the stubborn man would not listen to her plea. It was times like these that Larisa figured that he and her mother were perfect for one another.

Richie looked over his shoulder at his sister, who was sitting directly behind his seat. He had yet to see his sister, but just from hearing her voice on the phone, he could tell that she was taking this hard. The young man had a surprised look on his face when he replied, "She is? Well that's good. Has she started writing again?"

Richard snorted as he stopped at a red light. That was another matter. Richard was the only one in the family who did not care for Desiree's chosen line of work. When she had announced that she wanted to be a free-lance writer, her father had told her that she would never be successful in the business since there was so much competition. Desiree would not listen to him and ended up building her major in college around her writing. Now, since she had lost her job Richard figured that she still considered herself to be employed as a free-lance writer. Being a free-lance writer in his opinion equated to simply being out of work. He had hoped that by now she would have grown out of it, but Desiree was still obsessed about her hobby, which was what he referred to it as.

"No, she hasn't Richie, but I believe she probably will soon enough."

"She needs to get a real job," Richard stated as he kept his eyes riveted to the traffic.

Larisa took a deep calming breath. Arguing with her father was not an event that she wanted to get into at the moment. Matters, which were much more important needed to be discussed now. However, if the man brought up the subject of Desiree's chosen employment in the future, than Larisa would defend her sister against him. She knew Desiree would not do it, and the odds that Richie would were slim. Larisa informed her brother and father that she had some important news to tell them. They both asked her what it was.

Larisa began to talk but then she got a disturbing image. What if when she told them, Richard lost control of the car resulting in an accident? Maybe she should ask them to pull over at the next café they passed. Larisa asked her father to do this, but the man replied that he was not making any stops so she should start talking where she was. The woman figured that it was a chance that she would just take.

"Desiree, Taj and I found out something today. Not long before I left to pick you guys up from the airport."

"Taj?" Richard said with a frown. "You mean Taj Potter that no good friend of Piper Redding is

at my daughter's home?" he asked in an angry tone of voice.

Larisa rolled her eyes. If she did not know any better she would think that her parents were prejudice, but she knew that their animosity towards Taj was solely focused on him and not his race.

"Yes Father, Taj is at Desiree's. And he will remain there because he is her friend, and there isn't a thing that you can do about that. Why don't you and Mother try to forgive instead of hating him and Piper?" Larisa could not help herself. She had to go further. "You claim to be strong Christians but right now you don't resemble them in the least bit. You and Mother are filled with hate and bitterness and it truly disgusts me! You are such a damn hypocrite. Who's the one who put Piper in the slammer for eight years for some filthy money, huh? How does it feel to learn that you took money from a Redding? You know, you're lucky that it was Desiree to learn all this about you, because if it was me instead of her at that cabin that night with the police, I would have turned your antagonistic ass in!"

All of the sudden Richard made an abrupt right causing the tires to screech as he came to a halt that sent all three of them forward a little. Leaving the ignition running, he turned to regard his daughter, the expression on his face one of anger. He was flushed with the amount of anger that he felt at that moment towards his oldest daughter. Not backing down, the woman gave him a look of utter defiance. In all her twenty-nine years, Larisa had never spoken to either of her parents like that. She admitted to herself that it felt good to get that off her chest and she did not feel the slightest bit guilty about it.

Richard told his daughter in a low tone to get out of the car. He told her that she could walk to Desiree's home for all he cared. Remaining quite, Richie watched the scene unfolding before him with dread. He had never seen someone stand up to his father like his older sister had just done and he didn't know whether to decide that she was brave or just plain stupid. During her tirade, he had desperately wanted to slap a hand over her mouth but he got the feeling that it would not have done any good. Larisa would have been able to get out what she wanted to say despite his efforts.

"Excuse me?" Larisa said coolly towards her father.

Richie started to say something, but his father gave him a warning look before turning his attention back to his daughter. "I said get out of this car now!"

Larisa laughed which caused her brother to wince. He half figured that his sister had lost her mine, and now was in desperate need of a straight jacket. "I think you forget Father that this is my vehicle and therefore you cannot tell me to get out of it."

"Oh, I remember," Richard replied. "Now get out of the car," he said between clenched teeth.

The dark-haired woman looked at her brother and smiled at him warmly, although part of her wanted to call him a coward for being so spineless at times like this. Leaning forward Larisa gave Richie a quick kiss on his cheek before getting out of the car without another look at her

father. A second later, the blue Nissan eased back into traffic and continued on its way. Larisa watched as it took off just now remembering that she had left her purse in the back seat. Well she wouldn't be able to take a taxi or a bus since she did not have a penny on her. She estimated that it would be about a nine-mile walk to her sister's apartment. The woman began walking along the sidewalk, cheerfully whistling, and swinging her arms at her sides as she did so. No matter if people looked at her strangely. There was a possibility that Piper was alive, Desiree was feeling better, and she had got the opportunity to tell her father off. Larisa was in a good mood.

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Richard Love and his son walked into the apartment after letting themselves in with a key Richard had made. The man found his wife pacing back and forth while giving their youngest daughter worried looks. Desiree glanced towards them and smiled when she caught sight of her brother. He smiled back as he began to walk towards her. Desiree met him half way and the man wrapped her in a big bear hug as he lifted her off the floor. She laughed slightly as he put her down and took a step back to look at her.

"You look good sis," Richie said. "I've missed you." He leaned forward and gave her a peck on the cheek as Desiree gave him an odd look. She had never known Richie to be this affectionate and especially with an audience. What he said next surprised her even more. He told Desiree that he loved her and that he would be there for her whenever she needed him. Tears welled in her eyes as Desiree gave her big brother another hug. When she pulled away, she noticed that he was wiping an eye. He claimed that something had flown in it, but his sister knew better. She considered that that bullet in his chest must have done something good to his heart.

Richard cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. He asked his wife what was wrong and she turned towards him standing still finally. Desiree and Richie took their seats at the dining room table, which was where Taj was. Reaching the other man Richie stuck out his hand and they shook hands. The younger man thanked Taj for saving his sister's life but the Jamaican man waved it off.

Sandra put her hands on her hips. "I think our daughter has something to tell you." She looked at Desiree as Richard did the same.

Desiree glanced around the room. Someone was missing. She addressed her father when she asked, "Where is Larisa? She did pick you guys up, didn't she?"

"She had to take a walk," Richard replied. "Now what is it you have to tell me?"

"Piper may be alive." Her father's eyes widened as she heard her brother gasp loudly.

"What do you mean she may be alive?" Richard asked. "She burned to a crisp, remember?"

Desiree winced at the tone of his voice and his poor choice of words. The man sounded as if he were merely discussing the weather, instead of someone's death.

"Must you be so callous about it?" the strawberry-blonde questioned softly.

Her father glared at her briefly. "I'm just stating a fact."

Desiree shook her head. "It's not necessarily a fact any longer." She reached on the table and picked up the two letters. Arising from her chair, she walked over to her father holding the letters out to him. "Read these."

He took the letters and sat down on the couch. Reaching into his shirt pocket, Richard took out his reading glasses and put them on before starting. The other four people in the room watched Richard intently as he read first one letter and then the second. After finishing both, the man deposited the letters on the coffee table before he turned to his daughter and stared at her for a moment without speaking. "Let me guess. You think that the woman in the cabin was actually this Emily Redding?"

Desiree nodded. "Yes, I do. What do you think?"

"Who is Emily Redding?" Richie asked his sister. Desiree got up, grabbed the letters, and then handed them to her brother. As Richie read them, Desiree turned back to her father to hear his reply.

"I think you should move on with your life, Desiree," Richard replied. "That woman is dead. Whether she is dead because she was killed or dead because she is missing, either way she is out of your life. She should be dead to you because of what she did to you. Piper Redding was or is a liar, kidnapper and cold-blooded killer and for the life of me I can't figure out why you would want to associate with such a person."

"She did what she had to do, Daddy," Desiree said. "You know how her father was. He was abusive and he tried to kill her mother. Piper was only defending her. He probably would have tried to kill her too if she hadn't done something about him."

Richard sighed. "She beat her father to death with a hammer. According to that letter, her sister beat another man to death with a hammer and her brother killed a few people. If you ask me, that whole family is crazy. Where did you get those letters anyway?"

Desiree explained how Andrea Redding, Victor's ex-wife had brought them all the way from San Bernardino to give them to Desiree, because she thought that the body that burned in the cabin was Emily's and not Piper's. Desiree also told her father that they planned to form a search party to go look for Piper in the woods by the cabin. She told him how Taj had been able to get a few people already to help them and that they were on their way to Los Angeles.

Before Richard and Richie had arrived, Desiree had told the whole story to her mother about how Piper might be alive. The woman had not wanted to listen to a word she said, but Desiree managed to tell her all of it. When she finished she asked her mother if she would participate in the search and Sandra had adamantly declined, announcing that she was not about to go looking for a woman who almost caused her daughter's death. Desiree sighed trying to get the woman to

realize that it was not Piper's fault, but Victor's, yet Sandra remained stubborn. The strawberry-blonde had not given up hope, considering that maybe once he got there that her father would be able to change his wife's mind, but now Desiree was not so sure.

"Daddy would you help in the search party?" Desiree asked. She had debated using her puppy dog eyes but figured that it would not work. She hadn't used them since she was fourteen years old because that's when they ceased to help.

"No I won't. And neither will you. There will be no search party because I'm calling it off."

The front door suddenly slammed and everyone in the room jumped at the unexpected noise. All of their eyes widened as they noticed Larisa standing in front of it while breathing hard with a look of pure vexation on her face. There was no easy way to put it. She was an absolute mess. Her shirt was dirty and ripped. One of the sleeves from her jacket was missing and the seat of her pants was ripped so badly, that if she were to turn around, everyone would be able to plainly see that she was wearing silk black and silver designed boxers. Her hair was in a disorder, and if Richie wasn't mistaken, he thought he saw bits of tomato and some sort of green sauce in it. Everybody scrunched up their noses as they began to detect a rancid odor emanating from Larisa. She warned them that the first person that said anything about how bad she smelled would get to smell her really well, because she would jump then.

Taj decided to have a bit of fun with that statement. "You don't smell so fresh. Now jump me." He gave her a suggestive look while attempting not to laugh. Richie chuckled, nudging Taj on the shoulder as Desiree grinned widely. Richard and Sandra just glared at Taj, but he missed them.

Larisa looked at him and smirked. "Funny, Taj. I'm laughing hard on the inside." Removing what was left of her jacket, she opened the front door and tossed it outside into the hall. Closing the door and locking it behind her she turned back to regard her shocked audience.

"Rule number one people. Always lock the door when you enter your home, 'cause there are a lot of wackos in Los Angeles!" Larisa shouted while pointing an accusing finger at the door behind her that had been unlocked when she had turned the knob. "Rule number two is I'm running the show from now on." She glanced at her father. "I heard what you said about there being no search party because you're calling it off." Larisa shook her filthy head. "I don't think so. The search party will proceed as planned." There was a note of command in Larisa's voice as she continued. "Rule number three. Everyone," she looked at everyone in the room when she said the last word, "will do as *I* say." The dark-haired woman put her hands on her hips. "Any questions?" she asked lightly.

Everyone in the room looked at everyone else, wondering who was going to take the initiative to speak to the seemingly now crazy dirty brunette. They were all a little wary of Larisa except for her father. Richard presented her with a glare.

"Have you lost your mind?" he asked her angrily, causing his wife to wince at the tone of his voice. "Who do you think we are? Your personal army to boss around? You better keep a firm

hold on your temper, because you've already ticked me off enough today, Larisa."

Larisa smiled at him much too sweetly. "Oh, I've ticked *you* off, Father?" she asked calmly. "Who is the one who kicked me out of my own damn car, huh?" She heard her mother gasp at this information, which made the younger woman conclude that her father had not bothered to share with everyone why she failed to arrive with him and her brother.

"You were being disrespectful to me. I'm your father and I demand to be treated with more respect."

"You gotta give it to get it Pops," Larisa replied. "Maybe if you weren't so narrow-minded you'd be a lot happier and *respected*."

It was then that Sandra asked her husband why he put their daughter out of her own car. He told her the story of how Larisa had spoken so rudely to him, that it got to the point where he could not take it anymore, so he put her out on the street and told her to walk home. Sandra was upset with him for it, but Richard adamantly defended himself claiming that he was in the right. Desiree cleared her throat to get her quietly feuding parents attention, as well as everyone else's. She then turned her gaze on Larisa, finding that she had to bite her lower lip in order to keep from laughing because her sister looked so ridiculous. Obviously something had gone wrong on her walk here, but it couldn't have been that bad. Desiree asked her sister what happened to make her look so disheveled. Larisa glanced down at herself, as if she had forgotten what state she was in. She looked up to find that everyone had his or her eyes on her waiting for an explanation.

"I wondered how long it would take someone to ask. Well the walk started out nice enough. On the way here I came up with a plan as to how to perform this search party. I will inform you of that plan later. Anyway, after oh say about three miles all of the sudden I'm grabbed from behind and lifted off my feet..."

*Larisa saw a big hairy hand clamp down over her mouth to prevent her from screaming. She was then dragged into an empty alley and deposited roughly on the ground. The dark-haired woman looked up to see two men grinning maniacally as they stood over her. One was tall and resembled a toothpick in width, with long stringy blond hair and a nose that was so disfigured that Larisa got the impression that it had been broken at least once before. By the man sat a big black dog that could easily be mistaken for a wolf. The other man was not as tall as the skinny man was, but both of them still towered over Larisa. The slightly shorter man must have weighed at least two hundred and eighty pounds. His hair was coal black, but there were more bald spots visible than hair. Both of them appeared to be in their mid to late thirties.*

*The bigger man leaned over Larisa and informed her that they were about to have a little fun with her and that there was nothing she would be able to do about it. The woman turned her head away not being able to stand smelling the stench of his breath. The man started to unbuckle the belt holding up his trousers when Larisa suddenly kicked him in the crotch, while informing him that he was not her type. He doubled over in pain, giving Larisa enough time to arise from her vulnerable position on the ground. It was then that the skinnier man charged her and managed to knock Larisa back to the ground. He managed to send a hard blow to her right eye*

*momentarily dazing the brunette as he began to litter her neck with wet sloppy kisses. Thoroughly disgusted, she could feel the stubble on his cheek rubbing against her smooth one. Reaching up, she managed to grab a handful of his hair and gave it a sharp yank. Instantly letting her go he howled in pain as he grabbed his head. Hurriedly scooting away, Larisa drew her right leg back before she quickly brought it forth, kicking him square in the face, causing the skinny man to fall to the ground on his back.*

*Getting up again, the brunette noticed the heavy man was coming towards her, his face twisted into a snarl. Larisa sighed, wondering if this was happening because of the way she had treated her father in the car. By the time the big man got to her, she was ready for him. Making a tight fist, Larisa aimed for his nose, managing to make perfect contact. It began to bleed as he cursed her while holding both hands to his nose. Wordlessly, Larisa walked up to him and kned him in the crotch again, which sent the man to his knees. She thought that she noticed tears in his eyes before she returned her attention to the other man. He was getting up again and was currently on all fours. Quickly taking advantage of the situation, Larisa kicked him in the stomach, which caused his whole body to flip over as easily as a pancake would with the help of a spatula. The skinny man landed flat on his back due to the severe blow. Larisa was abruptly pulled back from the writhing man by a rough tug on her jacket sleeve, which ended with the sleeve being ripped off. She turned around to see the big man sending his fist towards her. She managed to duck the hit and butted the man in the stomach with her head. She doubted it did much good, since he was so heavily padded there. Larisa straightened up only to be pulled the other way by her shirt. It ripped too as she came face to face with the skinny man. She was not so much afraid as she was angry by this point. Gritting her teeth, she maneuvered herself in a position where she could put her hands on the back of both of the men's heads. She then proceeded to bring their heads forward making the two attacker's foreheads bang together with a loud thud. The skinny man fell to the ground, but the big man managed to stay on his feet as he blinked rapidly to clear his now fuzzy vision. Taking a couple of steps back, Larisa brought her leg up and kicked him in the face. She then delivered another kick to his groin, causing the man to groan in pain.*

*Before she could do anymore damage to his partner in crime, the skinny man swiftly yet quietly walked behind her and picked up her up. As the feisty brunette struggled in his arms, he carried her over to a nearby Dumpster and threw her inside. Larisa found herself smothered in garbage. When she got to her feet, she noticed that she was nearly up to her knees in trash. By then the skinny man was standing on a crate by the trash can putting them at about eye level. It was then that Larisa noticed that he was holding a pocketknife in his hand, which was aimed at her. She hurriedly looked in the Dumpster for something to defend herself with, since there was no way that she could quickly get out of all the trash. Her eyes landed on an empty beer bottle peeking out from beneath a newspaper. Picking it up by the neck, she turned around to the skinny man who was wearing a triumphant smirk, because he thought he had her now. Before he knew it, he was being hit over the head with a hard object. Falling off of the crate, he landed on the ground, completely unconscious. The big man then came towards her wearing a menacing glare. The brunette threw the bottle down and pretended to look around for something else. When he came near enough, Larisa grabbed the broken bottle that now had jagged edges from being broken on the skinny attacker's head and ran it across the man's face. Thin lines with blood leaking from them formed on his face, as he howled in pain. He took a few steps back as Larisa managed to hop out of the Dumpster and came towards him. Drawing her leg back, she kicked him in the*

*stomach making him double over, while he held one hand to his face. Larisa then hit him in the face with all her might. Feeling pain coursing through her hand, she knew she would probably have bruises on her knuckles, but it was worth it because the big man finally fell to the ground into oblivion.*

*Larisa breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived. The next sound the woman heard was the dog growling. She had forgotten all about him. Reluctantly turning to face the canine, Larisa saw that he was baring his sharp fangs at her. She did not make a move, barely breathing until he suddenly lunged after her. Larisa cursed loudly as she began running down the alley with an incensed dog not far behind her. Running around a corner, she waved her hands in the air, yelling for someone to help her. She saw people in their cars curiously looking at her but they kept going. Glancing over her shoulder, she unfortunately noticed that the ferocious dog was catching up on her, strings of saliva flying from his wide mouth. The dark-haired woman kept on running with her breath starting to quicken more than it already had been from the attack. The unusual run was starting to pull in her calves, and Larisa made a silent vow that she would start going to the gym regularly once again if she could only get out of this predicament unscathed.*

*The next thing the woman knew the dog was right on her heels, trying to get a nip at her. She ran as fast as she could, but soon felt the teeth tugging at her pants. Screaming, Larisa desperately tried to get away, but the beast would not let go. He moved his head from side to side, yet Larisa noticed that he had yet to get her meat, which was good because the dog looked like he could have had rabies or anything. The dog managed to rip a big piece off the seat of the woman's pants, and it was then that Larisa was able to take off again. Her legs pumping fast and hard, she heard the dog barking behind her. She heard his large paws as they slapped on the pavement as he once again began his pursuit of her. Larisa figured she had to give the dog some credit for being tenacious in his goal.*

*Rounding another corner, the brunette almost cried out in joy as she saw a liquor store up ahead. She glanced behind her to see that the dog was still coming after her rather quickly. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and upper lip as the woman ran with all her might towards the store. At that moment it looked like the most beautiful thing she had ever laid eyes on. Finally reaching the store, Larisa ran inside and managed to push the glass door closed before the dog could enter. He stood on the outside looking at her as he barked loudly. Getting to his hind feet, he banged against the glass, as if he intended to break it. Larisa would have wagered that given enough time he probably would have been able to do just that.*

*The tired woman bent over, placing the palms of her hands on her knees as she quickly gulped air into her burning lungs. Two concerned looking men approached her. One was an older man and the other looked like he was in his early twenties. Larisa considered that they might be father and son, for the younger man looked just like a younger version of the other man. The older man introduced himself as Cliff and the other man as being his son, Gary. Cliff patted Larisa on the back, asking her if she was all right. She nodded as she gave a quick explanation of what had just happened. Gary asked her if she wanted him to call the police, but the woman declined saying that she just wanted to get where she was going. Cliff asked her where that was, claiming that they would give her a lift. Larisa started to decline this too, but then changed her mind, deciding that she did not want to walk home after all. She was tired, sweaty, messy and her*

*emotions were all out of whack. By the slight pressure evident in her temples, she was also starting to get a headache.*

*Glancing at the barking dog outside, Gary went to the counter where the cashier was watching the trio as well as the irate canine intently. Fishing his wallet out of his pocket, Gary purchased a long stick of beef jerky before walking over to the entrance. He motioned for his father and Larisa to stand back as he started to open the door. Blocking the dog's entry to the store, Gary allowed it to smell the edible stick before he hurled the beef jerky far down the street. As he had hoped, the dog turned around and chased after it in hot pursuit of the tasty treat, forgetting Larisa for the time being. After the dog got about twenty feet away, Gary told his father to hurry and get Larisa in the truck while he attained their purchases from the store.*

*Cliff led Larisa to the huge red truck parked next to the sidewalk. Wearing a look of apology, he asked her if she could get in the back because it was hard for him to do so, since he had arthritis. Not having a problem with riding in the back, the brunette told him so while wearing a grateful smile. Hopping in the truck bed, she rested the back of her head against the window with her legs stretched out in front of her. She watched the dog warily, wondering if she should scoot down in the truck just in case he was to glance over and see her in it. Before she did it, Gary came out of the store carrying two cases of root beer, which he put in the back of the truck with Larisa. He offered her a broad smile before he got in the passenger side of the vehicle, and they took off.*

"And so Cliff and Gary dropped me off here," Larisa said winding down her story. She had described everything and everyone else in the room looked as exhausted as she felt. "Therefore I am not in a good mood, and I would appreciate it if you guys would work with me here on this search party." She turned to her parents. Before she could say anything more, her mother interrupted her.

"Where are the men now?" Sandra asked. "Don't you think you should file a report?"

Larisa shook her head impatiently. "I guess they're either still in the alley out cold or looking for their dog. I don't care where they are and I don't care about filing a report. Forget it. The important thing is that I'm okay."

"Larisa, you just can't let this go," her father told her. His tone did not hold any anger in it now.

"Watch me," the dark-haired woman replied, as Taj thrust a plastic bag of ice in her hand. She smiled at him gratefully and held the cold bag to her bruising eye. She winced at the pain the contact caused, but held the bag to the eye as best she could. "My main concern now is getting Piper back. Now, Mother, Father you will be in the search party. We need all the people we can get."

"And if Taj's parent's can come all the way from Bakersfield to help, than you two should be able to do it. You and Mom are right here," Desiree added, receiving a quick smile of approval from her sister.

Richard turned his gaze on his younger daughter. "I don't care what Mr. Potter's parents are

doing. If you all insist on wasting your time on that woman, then do it. Your mother and I want no part of it. Besides, Redding doesn't act like she wants to be found if she is alive. She probably just wants you all to leave her alone."

"You don't know what she wants," Larisa stated with a slight tinge of anger in her voice. "You don't even know her. Besides we think that she's lost and possibly injured in the woods and that's why she hasn't contacted us."

Her father swiftly retorted, "And you don't know her either. This is a very dangerous woman."

"She didn't kill those people, Daddy," Desiree supplied. "You know that now. It turns out that she was innocent after all."

"I know that, but the woman is still a convicted killer and I don't want her anywhere near this family or you. Why do you care so much about her anyway? What do you hope to achieve?"

Before Desiree could reply anything Larisa interrupted. "For the umpteenth time, Piper is Desiree's friend. She just wants to help the woman. And Piper must not be that dangerous, because otherwise she could have killed Desiree. All she wanted was for you to get the police off her back. She didn't do anything wrong and she was scared." Larisa paused. "Try putting yourself in her shoes. Wouldn't you have been frightened of being locked up again for something that you didn't even do? She already lost eight years of her life due to your greediness." Her father started to say something, but the woman held up a sticky hand. "No, it's true and you know it. I think the only reason you don't want to help is because you're scared that Piper will tell what you did if Desiree or one of us was to tell her the whole story of what Victor Redding said that night. As of now we are the only ones who know what you did and you want to keep it that way," she stated quite calmly. "You're scared and you're a coward."

"Now wait a minute young lady," Sandra said standing up. "I will not allow you to talk that way to your father. Either you show him some respect or you get out of this apartment."

"This is my home Mom and Larisa doesn't have to leave if I don't want her to. So please don't presume to think that you have rule over a place that doesn't even belong to you," Desiree interjected politely. She glanced away when her mother regarded her with a shocked expression. Larisa did the same but she smiled approvingly again. If her little sister kept this up, she would have to take her out somewhere special to celebrate sometime. It felt good to not be the only one standing up to their parents.

Richard glared at Larisa. "Look what you've done. Now you've got your sister talking disrespectfully."

The dark-haired woman shook her head. "Blame it on me all you want. I don't care. All I know is you're helping out in the search," she stated confidently.

"No I'm not," her father argued, his eyebrows knitting together as he frowned at her.

Larisa smiled sweetly, which proved to raise everyone's suspicions. Although Taj had not known her long, he had the feeling that she was about to do or say something out of the ordinary.

"You wanna know why you'll help, Father?" Larisa asked. "Because if you and Mother don't help in locating Piper's whereabouts, I'm afraid," she didn't look like she was afraid at all, "that I may not be able to keep my mouth shut." Looking at him innocently, she waited for a reply.

Her father continued to frown at her. What did she mean by that comment? "About what?" he asked hesitantly, while considering that his oldest child might be on drugs or something. Larisa had always been rather outspoken, but today she had reached a new level of speaking her mind.

"I'm so glad that you asked," the brunette replied with a smile on her lips. "I'm afraid that I'll have to tell the proper authorities about your little problem with incarcerating people for a certain amount of time for financial reasons. Are we on the same page here, Father?"

"You wouldn't dare," he argued thinking that based on the way she was behaving, she most likely would. Then his career would probably be over and he would be shamed in front of all that knew him. Not to mention this could possibly land him right behind bars.

Larisa clasped her hands together in front of her, a sober expression on her face. "You care to bet?"

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About three hours later, Desiree and Larisa arrived back at Desiree's apartment with a motor home they had rented for the drive up to the cabin. Larisa had come up with the idea that if they did find Piper somewhere wandering in the woods, that she would be most likely be tired and hungry. If they had a motor home, then she could use that to relax in on the trip back to Los Angeles, and possibly a hospital if she ended up needing one. After being assured by her sister that she could manage driving the big vehicle, Desiree agreed to the idea.

They had rented a thirty-five foot class "A" motor home for the next three days. The one that they had rented had roof air conditioning, a fresh water sink, hot water shower, a toilet that flushed, a waste water tank, a refrigerator, stove, oven and a furnace. It was also equipped with a queen-sized bed, which was located in a tiny bedroom towards the back, a table with chairs to sit at near the front and a padded bench. The people they had rented it from, assured Larisa and Desiree that the motor home was built to hold six to eight adult-sized passengers comfortably.

Before leaving to go shopping for a motor home, Larisa and Desiree had informed Taj what to tell the people he had arranged to go on the search party. The plan was for all the people involved to meet at Desiree's house at seven o'clock Sunday morning, which was tomorrow. It would be then that Larisa would inform them of what else would be going on and what they were supposed to do. After that, they would head out on the road. Some would ride in the motor home while the rest would ride in Dion's automobile. Both Larisa and Desiree had told Taj that they could not wait to meet his family. Larisa had already called Andrea to let her know to be at Desiree's apartment in the morning at the specified time. The blonde-haired woman stated that she would be there.

Larisa and Desiree exited the motor home after finding a place to park it. Larisa declined Desiree's offer to come inside, saying that she had some other things to take care of before the trip. Telling Desiree that she would make a trip to the supermarket to get the items and food that they needed for the motor home, Larisa headed towards her car. Having forgotten about stocking up the motor home for the trip, Desiree offered to come along but Larisa insisted that she stay home, pack and rest before they left. Just before getting in her car, Larisa hugged her little sister, promising that they would do everything they could to find Piper. Desiree hugged her back fiercely, fear creeping its way into her heart that they would never find her beloved before she managed to push it away.

Entering her apartment minutes later, Desiree went to the kitchen to get a snack. Finding her brother there, she took a seat at the kitchen table and began talking with him after grabbing an orange from a fruit basket on the counter. She had not seen him in a while so the two had a lot of catching up to do. When they started talking about the search party, Richie once again brought up how sorry he was for his part in what happened. His sister assured him that nothing that happened was his fault, and that he did not have a choice. She also told him that if she were put in his position that she would most likely have done the same thing. He was only protecting those that he loved so there was no reason to apologize for that.

Giving his sister a smile, Richie arose from his chair and wrapped his arms around her. He planted a kiss on the top of her head before leaving the kitchen saying that since he was in Los Angeles, there were some friends he would like to visit. Tossing the peelings of her orange in the trash, his sister followed him out of the kitchen.

Desiree gave him the keys to her Honda when she saw him searching in the Yellow Pages for a taxicab service. Gratefully accepting the keys, Richie offered his sister another hug before leaving the apartment. Desiree watched him walk down the hall to the elevator wearing an expression of complete bewilderment. That was the third time today that her brother had given her a hug. She couldn't even recall receiving three hugs from him in the past within a six month span, yet alone a day. Desiree closed the door and locked it remembering Larisa's warning earlier as she popped a piece of the juicy sweet orange into her mouth. Thinking about her sister, the young woman began to laugh so much that tears rolled down her cheeks. Thankfully, her parents were not there at the moment so she was free to laugh all she wanted to without interruption. Larisa had looked comical standing there covered in garbage stains.

After outlining the plan of the trip, Larisa had asked to use Desiree's bathroom so that she could take a shower. When the strawberry-blonde commented that she would wash her sister's clothing, she had been told to just put everything in the trash. Desiree argued saying that she might be able to salvage the shirt and pants with some thread and a needle, but Larisa insisted she toss them. After taking her shower, Larisa put on the clothes that her sister had laid out for her. The clothes were a tad bit small, but at least they were presentable.

Strolling into her bedroom, Desiree plopped down on the bed. After polishing off the rest of her orange, the strawberry-blonde licked the sweet juice from her digits before removing her shoes and placing them next to the nightstand. With any luck by this time tomorrow Piper would be

with her. She smiled dreamily, knowing how good it would feel to hold the blue-eyed woman in her arms and profess her love to her. Getting up from the bed she went to her closet to take out her overnight bag. She put the necessary items and clothes into it, before setting the bag by her door.

Going back into the kitchen, Desiree pre-heated the stove, and opened the refrigerator, taking out a package of ground beef she had put in it this morning from the freezer. She quickly prepared the ground beef into a meatloaf, adding spices, and all else that was needed to it. After putting the meatloaf in the oven, Desiree went to the cabinet underneath the sink and reached into the back for what she wanted. Closing her fingers around its neck, Desiree pulled out a bottle of vodka.

Closing the cabinet, she went back to her room and sat at the desk in front of her computer. Putting the vodka on her desk, she powered up her computer. Desiree reached into a case sitting on the desk, took out a red floppy disk, and inserted it. She had chosen to start her journal all over again since the other disks had been destroyed in the fire at the cabin. This would be her first entry. The young woman started up her Microsoft Word program and then twisted the cap off the bottle of alcohol. She took a few sips while wondering how to start. Setting the bottle down Desiree flexed her fingers before she started to type.

**April 17, 1999**

**Dear Journal,**

**Man! After the last time I wrote you things just started to get out of hand! Things have been going haywire, but it seems like my life is about to get back on track. I almost died last week at the cabin. This man Victor Redding (I will never forget him) is the reason that Piper kidnapped me. He had been committing murders and blaming them on her. I have a confession to make. I came to the conclusion that she was committing the murders, but evidently I was wrong. Tomorrow we are going to go on a search party and look for her, since Piper is now missing. I thought she had died in the fire, but I was wrong about that too. She is out there somewhere and I'm going to find her, J. I won't rest until I do. I'm in love with this woman and I didn't know that a person could feel such a depth of love for someone. Now it hurts that I can't hold and kiss her whenever I want to, because I don't know where she is. She means the world to me and I plan to tell her so. I just hope she'll listen to me after the way I treated her on our last meeting. I was brutal. Let's put it this way. I was all in the Kool-Aid and didn't know the flavor. Well I'm going to go now. I'll let you know what happens.**

**4ever,**

**Desi**

Desiree saved her entry and shut down the program. Picking up the bottle, she took another sip feeling the alcohol slide down her throat. This would help to calm her nerves. After securing the top on the vodka bottle, Desiree went to her bed and laid down trying to put together what she would say to Piper when she saw her. She had so many things to tell the woman but did not

know exactly where to start. Pulling over her gift from Taj, Desiree held the stuffed kitty close as she allowed her thoughts to wander.

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The next morning, Desiree woke up to the smell of something good. It smelled like someone was cooking. Leaning on an elbow, she squinted at the alarm clock on her nightstand to notice that it was a few minutes before six thirty. Her eyes widened as Desiree considered that she should have been up by now. Hurrying out of the bed the young woman went to her closet and rummaged around until she found a light robe to put on. Quickly putting on the robe, she opened her bedroom door, heading in the direction of the kitchen. Her stomach grumbled letting her know that it was aware of the food too. Entering the kitchen Desiree was shocked with what she saw. Taj was over by the stove mixing something in a bowl with a whisk while whistling softly. He was wearing a forest green apron. The Jamaican man caught movement out of the corner of his eye and glanced up to see Desiree standing in the entryway looking at him with curious sleepy blue-green eyes, her blonde hair mused. He grinned while thinking that she looked adorable.

"Morning, little one," Taj greeted her cheerily.

Desiree smiled starting to come forward to hug him, but then changed her mind when she figured she must look a fright. She had not brushed her teeth, washed her face or anything. Excusing herself, she turned around and headed out to go fulfill those tasks. The young woman also brushed her hair while she was in the bathroom. Coming out on her way back to the kitchen, Desiree smiled in amusement when she spotted her brother sprawled out on the couch sleep with his mouth opened so wide that she could see his molars. Though hating to wake him, she tapped the man lightly on his shoulder. When Richie opened his eyes and focused them on her, she told him to start getting ready. He nodded getting right up. Desiree continued on her way to the kitchen and this time she saw Taj flipping pancakes high in the air and watched as they landed safely back in the pan. Desiree's mouth gaped open in amazement. She had only seen that done on television by professional chefs. The Jamaican man made it look so simple to do, but the young woman knew she would have been wasting them all over the floor.

"How did you do that?" Desiree asked with admiration in her voice.

Taj grinned at her. "Just takes practice, little one."

"It smells wonderful in here. How did you get in?"

Taj replied, "Easy. I jimmied the lock." At Desiree's startled expression he laughed, covering his mouth with a hand to prevent himself from being too loud. "I'm just kidding. I knocked and your brother let me in. He offered to help, but I told him to go back to sleep. I went to the store last night to get what I needed to fix everyone breakfast. I've been here since about six o'clock."

Desiree spied a basket of biscuits and swiped one like a child taking a cookie out of the jar, knowing good and well that dinner was almost ready. The young woman bit into the warm honey soaked biscuit and let out a soft moan. She told Taj that it was the most delicious biscuit she had

ever tasted.

The Jamaican man chuckled. "Be careful, Desi. Anymore sounds like that and they'll think I'm doing much more than cooking in here." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. Desiree smirked as she playfully slapped him on the arm.

The young woman took another big bite out of the biscuit before saying, "You have made enough food to feed an entire army."

"Well we have about thirteen or fourteen people among us. I hope everybody's hungry."

Desiree replied, "If they're not, after they see this they will be."

Just then, her father walked into the kitchen. Taj gave him a polite good morning and asked the older man if he had slept well. In response, the judge only narrowed his eyes at him before turning to greet his daughter. Desiree started to say something about his behavior, but a pleading look from Taj changed her mind. Her father asked her if she would start the coffeepot since he did not know how to work "the stupid thing" as he called it. Before his daughter could say anything a steaming mug of delicious smelling coffee was thrust into his hand by Taj. He started not to take it but changed his mind. He needed a cup of coffee first thing every morning. After taking a sip of the coffee, the judge had to admit that it was quite delicious. In fact, it was by far the best cup of coffee that he had ever had the pleasure of tasting. Looking at Taj, he gave him a nod of approval before glancing around the kitchen, paying extra special attention to the food cooking on the stove. He then turned back to Taj noticing the man's apron.

"You cooked all this?" Richard inquired of the other man.

The Jamaican man nodded, suddenly feeling like a rookie in boot camp. "Yes I did, sir."

The judge nodded again. "Are you a chef?" He took another sip of the coffee already knowing that he would have a second cup. Maybe a third too.

Taj shook his head. "I'm working on it though. I'd like to own my own restaurant, so I intend to take the necessary classes first."

Richard nodded. "You'd probably prosper at your business." Desiree beamed at the grudging compliment her father gave. While holding up the cup of coffee, the judge informed Taj of how good it was.

"I didn't use Desiree's coffeepot. I made it myself." Desiree stuck her tongue out at him jokingly and Taj chuckled in return. "It's called vanilla hazelnut. Added a little extra something that's been in the family for a long time."

"Like I said. You'd prosper." Richard headed out of the kitchen after refilling his cup, saying that he was going to get dressed. He turned around at the entrance, grumbling something about letting him know when breakfast was ready, because he intended to taste everything.

Desiree watched her father leave before bursting into laughter. She turned her sparkling blue-green eyes on Taj who was wearing a broad grin. "Well they say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." She looked back at the empty entrance of the kitchen. "Guess it's true."

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Fifteen minutes later the doorbell rang as Desiree ran to answer it with her hair still a bit damp from the shower. She was fully dressed except for her shoes. The young woman had chosen to wear something that she could easily move in since she would be strolling through the woods. She had on a pair of gray leggings along with a white T-shirt. After finishing the process of drying it, she would put her hair in a ponytail.

Opening the door, she saw her sister standing there in a pair of khaki shorts and a black short-sleeved *Guess?* Tee. Her dark hair was done in a french braid and was covered by a black baseball cap that she had chosen to wear backwards. Walking into the apartment, Larisa kissed her little sister on the cheek, before asking what was for breakfast after smelling the aroma coming from the kitchen. Desiree told her that Taj was cooking breakfast for all of them. As if on cue, Taj strolled out of the kitchen greeting Larisa with a cup of coffee and a warm smile. Thanking him profusely, she took a sip of the hot liquid. Telling him that it was delicious, Larisa quickly took another sip.

"So is everybody ready?" Larisa inquired of her sister. Taj was already on his way back to the kitchen.

Desiree glanced at her watch. "Well you're early, but we're almost done." She motioned her older sister to follow her as she headed towards her bedroom. A few moments later they ended up in Desiree's bathroom. Plugging in the blow dryer, she proceeded to use it on her hair as she and Larisa tried to hold a conversation over the noise. Finally they just gave up, opting to wait until the strawberry-blonde was done.

A few minutes later, Desiree wrapped up the blow dryer and placed it back under the sink, before grabbing her brush out of a drawer and running it through her hair, making it shine. She then extracted a rubberband from a bag full of them and pulled her hair back into a neat ponytail. Rummaging through her drawer for a comb, Desiree ran it through her short bangs until she was satisfied with the way they looked. As she finished, she detected the ring of the doorbell.

Desiree went back to the living room with her sister not far behind her. Before she could get to the door, her father answered it. Looking out through the peek-hole first, both Desiree and Larisa could see the older man grimacing at the visitor standing on the other side. Opening the door, he waved for the person to come in, though he didn't look the least bit happy about it.

"Alec?" Desiree said as the visitor was revealed. Looking at his ex-girlfriend, he gave her a dazzling smile.

"Hey, Desi. How are you?" He started to come towards her but she held up her hand, causing the man to stop in his tracks.

"What are you doing here?"

Alec frowned, having not expected this kind of greeting. "What do you mean, what am I doing here? I came to help with the search party."

"How did you know about that?"

Alec pointed at Larisa. "Your sister told me. You didn't know I was coming?"

"Evidently I didn't," Desiree snapped before she turned to regard her sister. She gestured for Larisa to follow her back into the bedroom. Closing the door behind them, the younger woman put her back against the door, preventing Larisa from making an escape because she looked as if she wanted to bolt. Crossing her arms over her chest, Desiree greeted her sister with a glare.

"Do you have something to tell me, Larisa?" she asked as calmly as she could manage.

Larisa defensively replied, "I did it for you."

Her sister scoffed. "You did it for me? You invited my old boyfriend who cheated on me by the way and seemed to have no shame whatsoever, to help us search for my girlfriend? Let me tell you something. The next time you have an urge to do something for me, don't."

The dark-haired woman scowled. "We need as many people as we can get. I'm not a fan of Alec Drake either, but he was willing to help when I called him last night. Excuse me for trying to help. He's a jerk, but he has a pair of eyes. And those are what we need right now. Eyes that are capable of seeing. Alec is willing to look for Piper, so I suggest that you just shut your mouth and go with the flow." Both women stared at each other as though they were having a contest before Larisa asked, "Are you going to get out of my way?"

Desiree cast her eyes down to the floor. When she looked back up at her sister, she had tears in them. "I'm sorry Larisa. My emotions are just a tangled mess right now. You only did that to help. I should be thanking you, not getting angry. Please forgive me for lashing out at you." She shrugged. "I'm sorry."

Larisa smiled warmly. "It's okay, Desi," she paused. "But I'm not gonna ask him to leave. We need him for the search. Plus he makes it an even number."

The strawberry-blonde gave a short laugh. "Yeah." She wiped her eyes. "You know we can't have an odd number of people. That would just be wrong! How many are there anyway?"

"Fourteen."

Desiree nodded, pleased. "Sounds like a fine number."

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Not much more time passed before everyone had arrived. All search party participants greeted one another and learned who everyone was, before they were hustled into the kitchen by Taj and Larisa to eat breakfast. The dark-haired woman exclaimed that she wanted to be on the road in no more than thirty minutes. Everyone hurriedly made their plates as if they were at a smorgasbord and sat where they could find a seat. The elders of the group, Richard, Sandra, Nathaniel, and Vivian sat at the dining room table. Surprisingly, Richard Love and Nathaniel Potter had a pleasant conversation mostly concerning what the younger crowd referred to as 'boring' subject matter. Sandra and Vivian seemed to be getting along rather well too. Watching them, Taj and Desiree smiled at one another, relieved that their parents were not being hostile.

After finishing their meals, everyone congratulated Taj on his excellent cooking skills, and true to his word, the judge made sure to sample every food that the young man had cooked. Feeling embarrassed from their words, Taj just smiled and quietly thanked them. Although Taj had made breakfast, there was hardly anything to wash, since he had brought paper plates, paper cups, and plastic utensils for everyone to use. After they ate, they were instructed to put their plates and everything into a big trash bag.

Just as they were about to leave Larisa stopped them all. She gave the group a pep talk that made some of them feel as though they were about to go play in the Super Bowl. After the rather long talk they all clapped because they were relieved it was over. Larisa smirked at them before she opened the door and went out with the rest following behind. Desiree was the last to leave the apartment, silently vowing that when she returned, Piper would be with her.

A few minutes later next to the motor home, the group stood in a line that Larisa had put them in. Larisa now carried a clipboard in her hand and sported a black leather fanny pack around her waist. She had put on a pair of black oval framed, smoke-tinted sunglasses and wore a shiny silver whistle on a thin black rope around her neck. Now everyone felt as if they were in the army. Richie even found himself checking to make sure his tucked in shirt was evenly lined with his pants. Taj informed the dark-haired woman to remember to take role call. She only smirked at him while wagging a finger in his direction.

"Okay folks," Larisa started in a loud voice. "This is how we are gonna do this. In my hand, I have a clipboard with all of your names listed on it in alphabetical order. It goes from Alec Drake all the way to Andrea Redding. After thinking it over, I know how we will choose who gets to ride in the motor home and those that will ride in Dion's vehicle. Here I have a coin." Larisa fished a quarter out of her pocket. "I'm going to flip the coin. If heads shows up, then starting with Alec and choosing every other name those people will ride in the motor home. The other seven will ride in the Isuzu. If the coin toss results in tails then we will start with," Larisa glanced at her clipboard, "Valerie Hall and then every other person. Do I make myself clear? Do you guys find that fair?" Everyone nodded and some murmured yes. The leader nodded, pleased with her group. "Okay then. I'll flip the coin." Larisa threw the coin up in the air and caught it in her right hand, flipping it over to the back of her left hand. She announced, "It's heads. That means the following people will be riding in the motor home." She read off her clipboard, Alec Drake, Tommy Jung, Larisa Love, Richie Love Jr., Dion Potter, Nathaniel Potter, and Vivian Potter.

"Why am I not surprised that you get to ride in the motor home?" said Desiree. She was irritated because she had to ride in a car with her parents on a four-hour trip. It was bad enough having them in her home, but she could not make an escape in a vehicle. She sighed. Well at least she had Taj with her, but he had his now girlfriend, (she had found out this morning) Valerie with him so he was paired off. Well there was still Andrea and Leroy. "How do we know that isn't a two-headed coin?" Desiree squinted her eyes due to the sun as she looked at her sister.

Larisa sighed, coming towards her sister. She handed the young woman the quarter, claiming that she could keep it. Next, Larisa informed everyone to get their bags and to get into the vehicle they were supposed to be riding in. Larisa was going to drive the motor home and Taj said that he would drive his brother's dark blue 1999 Isuzu Oasis. Dion handed his little brother the keys, warning that he would be checking for even the tiniest scratch on it later.

Finally, the whole group was ready to head out for the road. Both the motor home and the Isuzu had a full tank of gas so they were ready to go. Larisa said that they would stop at every rest stop on the way to the cabin to stretch and use the restroom if needed. She wanted to be at the rest stops for no more than fifteen minutes each unless there were some kind of an emergency. Larisa figured that they should make the cabin by noon if they kept a steady pace.

The group was able to make the cabin a few minutes before twelve o'clock struck. They got out of their respective vehicles and stretched, while looking at the ruin that used to be Taj's cabin. He looked at it too, shaking his head at what had happened inside of it. It was all so senseless. The Jamaican man glanced over to Desiree to see that she was hugging herself, as she stared at the ruins. He was also able to notice that she was slightly trembling yet it wasn't at all cold. He swiftly walked over to her and wrapped the young woman in his arms. She wound her arms around his neck, crying softly. Taj tried to comfort her by saying that it would be all right. She nodded, listening to his words.

"I was so scared," Desiree mumbled into the warmth of his neck.

"I know," Taj replied. "I know, little one." He saw over the crying young woman's head, his mother coming towards them. She placed a hand on Desiree's back rubbing it gently in a circular motion. Taj smiled tenderly at his mother. Crying for a couple of more minutes, Desiree finally let go of Taj and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"That's it," Taj started. "Wipe your eyes. You don't want Piper to see that you've been crying, do you?" He lifted Desiree's chin up gently, so that she was looking at him. She gave him a small smile as she shook her head. Everyone then heard Larisa asking them to form a straight line. Some of them rolled their eyes but they did as their leader asked, and waited for the dark-haired woman to give her next instructions. They prayed that she wouldn't take too long. Larisa placed herself in front of the group, still wearing her shades and backward cap, with her clipboard still in hand.

"Okay folks. I've constructed a list of pairs. I have divided you all off so that there will be a total of seven couples out searching in these woods. Now when I call off your name and that of your partner, I don't want anyone to gripe about whom they are with. I put you in the pairs I am getting ready to tell you about for a reason." She shrugged. "I don't know if it'll work, but it's

worth a try. Anyway," Larisa looked at her clipboard as she cleared her throat, "group one is Desiree Love and Andrea Redding." Both Desiree and Andrea seemed pleased with the match, and beamed at one another. Larisa had not expected any trouble from them. "Group two is Richard Love and Nathaniel Potter." Larisa glanced up at her father and Taj's father to see that both of their expressions were nonchalant. She shrugged again. At least they didn't seem to be upset. She hadn't expected them to hug each other and jump up and down in sheer excitement. "Group three is Sandra Love and Vivian Potter." The dark-haired woman glanced up to see that the two women smiled politely at one another. Maybe the Potter's and Love's were starting to get along. Larisa hoped so. Although, she mused it was really the Redding's that her parents had to get along with, unless Desiree chose not to tell them of her relationship with Piper. Larisa shook her head. She did not want to be there if her sister ever did tell them. They would have to find out eventually it seemed. "Group four is Richie Love Jr. and Leroy Potter." Like their fathers, there was no reaction from either of the young men's faces. "Group five is Taj Potter and Alec Drake." Larisa heard Taj groan loudly at this. She didn't blame him one iota. "Group six is Tommy Jung and Dion Potter." Tommy had known Dion because of being close friends with his younger brother, so they both accepted the match. "And group seven is Valerie Hall and I." Larisa noticed Valerie smiling at her and she smiled back. Everyone seemed to take their partners better than she thought they would. So far so good.

Larisa then opened the fanny pack situated around her waist and took out a plastic sandwich bag. Everyone in the group looked closely at it to notice that it was filled with orange colored whistles. The dark-haired woman opened the bag, explaining that she was going to give each of them a whistle and then she would explain what they were for. She went down the line handing everyone a whistle. When she got to her brother Richie, he asked her jokingly why she got a silver whistle and they got plastic orange one's. He only got a glare in return that succeeded in wiping the smile off of his face. He thought that if Larisa ever decided to retire from the catering business, she would make one heck of a drill sergeant. The woman continued down the line until she had distributed all of the whistles. She put the empty bag back in her leather fanny pack, and picked up her clipboard that she had laid on the ground.

"Now I will tell you what the whistles are for. Here are the calls." She looked at her clipboard. "Please remember the following. Number one. Blow the whistle once if you and your partner have found Piper. Only blow the whistle once. Now when the rest of you hear that one blow from the whistle I want you to come directly back here and wait for the duo that found Piper to arrive with her. Got it?" She saw everyone nod at this. "Good. Number two. Blow the whistle two times if you have found Piper, but you need help with her." Larisa looked up from her clipboard at the group. "Like if she's injured or something. I have an emergency kit in the camper in case we need it." The woman turned her attention back to the clipboard. She was silent for a moment before continuing with the next one. "Number three. Blow the whistle three times if you find Piper and she is...um...if she is no longer with us," she finished quietly, unable to make eye contact with anyone. She heard Nathaniel, Taj's father say in a strong voice that that would not happen. Larisa saw her sister smile at the older man gratefully. He gave her an encouraging one of his own.

"Well let's all think positive then," Larisa stated. She put her clipboard on the ground again and placed her hands on her hips. "Well let's get going. Get with your partner and pick any direction

you please. We will meet back here in," Larisa glanced at her watch, "two hours. We'll take a break then and have some lunch. Although, hopefully we won't have to meet back here for a break, because we've already found her." She clapped her hands together twice. "I wish you luck and remember to look for signs of where she may be. The search party is on!"

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Desiree and Andrea walked through the woods, making sure to look at the ground for signs of footsteps or anything that might lead them to Piper. They had been searching for the past fifteen minutes, but had yet to locate any clues of the woman's whereabouts. Desiree's heart was beating so hard in her chest that she was sure that her partner must hear it. She was nervous, anxious, and excited all at the same time. She needed a distraction. The strawberry-blonde turned to Andrea.

"So tell me about your daughters." That was one good thing that had developed from all of this. Piper did have living family after all. She had two young nieces that she could dote over. Desiree had a feeling that Andrea and her girls would remain in Piper's life. She hoped her feeling proved correct. The young woman briefly wondered how Andrea would react if she were to tell her that her ex-sister in law and she were more than friends. Desiree prayed that learning this information would not push the woman away.

Andrea smiled proudly. "Those two are like night and day. Samantha, my youngest is very outgoing. Never meets a stranger and seems to make friends with everyone that she meets. Stacey is very quiet though I don't think she's really all that shy. She just doesn't talk that much, unless she really gets the chance to become close with you. They are both very sweet and they mean the world to me."

Andrea extracted a photograph from a wallet she had in her pants and handed it to Desiree. The young woman studied the picture of the two girls and smiled. Samantha was fair-haired like her mother and had gray eyes like Andrea too. Stacey on the other hand had dark hair and the same blue eyes as Piper. Examining Stacey further, Desiree noticed that this might have been the way Piper looked when she was a child. The oldest girl reminded the strawberry-blonde of the blue-eyed woman.

Desiree sighed inwardly, handing the picture back to Andrea. *Oh, Piper where are you?* she thought. *I have so much to tell you my love.*

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Alec snapped a stick off a tree and started breaking it into small pieces. He glanced at the man walking beside him, and wondered not for the first time if there was something going on between he and Desiree. On studying them together, he noticed that the two seemed to be close to one another. He shook his head, silently asking himself why he cared. He had someone new now, although, Alec was contemplating about ending that relationship. He had found out after only three days that the woman he left Desiree for was not worth losing the blue-green eyed woman. His new girl was great in the sack, but not too bright in the brain. He simply had not known how good he really had it until he tossed it away. He glanced at Taj again, who was intently watching

his surroundings. It was time for Alec to get some answers.

"So, Taj you and Desi are pretty close, huh?" Alec threw the rest of the stick on the ground and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Taj glanced his way, wearing a slightly irritated expression now. Of all the people, why did Larisa have to stick him with this man? What was the point? Going over it again and again, Taj could not for the life of him figure out what it was.

"I guess we are," Taj replied slowly, wondering where the man was taking this particular conversation.

"Do you like her?" Alec inquired.

The Jamaican man looked over at him. Taj smiled inwardly. That was what it was. This man was jealous of him. Not that there was anything to be jealous about, but Taj could still have some fun with him. Alec did not know that. Taj licked his lips, wondering how far he should and could take this. The other man was still looking at him intently, waiting for an answer.

Taj finally said, "Define 'like'."

Alec sighed. "I mean do you like her as more than a friend."

Taj clasped his hands behind his back, dodging a branch in his way. "And why is that any of your business?"

The other man shrugged. "I guess it's not. I was just wondering is all."

"Why?"

"I just want to make sure that you treat her right."

Taj countered, "Oh, like you didn't you mean?"

Alec scowled over at him. "Look, I may have made mistakes, but I'm sorry for them. I will never forgive myself for what I did to Desiree. I'm a jerk and I admit that. But I'm trying to change. I want to change." He moved in front of Taj, blocking the other man's path. The Jamaican man thought about pushing him out of his way, but changed his mind. He may not have been able to stop at that. "I want Desiree back. She's mine."

Taj glared at him. So far, this man did not impress him. "No, I don't think she belongs to you Alec. She's a person not a cockerspaniel and therefore belongs to no one but herself." Taj used his height to his advantage by towering over Alec. "Do I make myself clear?"

Alec gulped. He told himself this other guy did not intimidate him. It didn't do much good. "Sorry, if I sounded possessive. I just want her back so bad. Try to understand that Desi and I

belong together."

Taj motioned the other man to get out of his way, and Alec did. They resumed walking. "You can't have her," Taj said simply.

"Why? Because you do? I know about that girl Valerie. You already have a girlfriend, so I don't think it's right for you to judge me, when you're doing the same thing I did. So don't assume that you deserve her."

Taj peered at him. "True, Valerie is my girlfriend, but I never said that Desiree was." Well that was a short game.

Alec frowned. "Desiree is not your girlfriend?"

The Jamaican man shook his head.

"The why can't I have her?"

Taj did not know for sure what was going on between Piper and Desiree, but he had drawn his own conclusions. However, he was not about to tell this man of them.

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe Desiree does not want you back?" Taj asked, making a right, with Alec keeping pace next to him.

"Did she tell you that?"

"Not in so many words. Although, I'd bet my life on it that she doesn't want you. Frankly, I think she'd rather have a relationship with a cactus than to welcome you back into her life. You had someone very special, but you ruined it. You clearly decided to think with what was in your pants then with what was in your head," Taj finished.

Alec was growing angry. Where did this man get off giving him a lecture? He didn't know him. Alec clenched his fist at his sides.

"Who do you think you are?" Alec sneered. "A relationship counselor? Tell you what. Why don't you just stay out of my business and mind your own. No matter what you or anyone else may think, I still love Desiree. I have always loved her. Yes, I treated her badly, but I'm not the first man to cheat on his girlfriend and then dump her for another one." Taj decided not to tell Alec about the log a few feet in front of him. Let the man figure it out for himself. "All I know is that I want Desiree back and I intend to have her. We belong together. I can't really explain it but that's the way it's going to be. And neither you nor anyone else is going to ruin what we can have again. So why don't use just take a...whoa!"

The next thing Alec knew it, he was lying face down on the ground, his face pressed into a small bushel of leaves. He raised his head up to look back and noticed that he had tripped over a log. He had been so intent on giving his speech that he had forgotten to watch where he was going. He glared up at Taj after hearing a light chuckle coming from the man. Alec growled low in his

throat. He should have never agreed to go on this search party. There were other ways to get close to Desiree than to do this. Who cared about this Piper Redding anyway?

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For the past few minutes, Dion and Tommy had been walking in companionable silence. The both of them were desperately searching around for clues as to Piper's whereabouts. Dion was a little worried because about thirty feet back he had located a few spots of blood on the ground, no bigger than the size of a quarter. However, he and Tommy had both agreed that that was not much a clue, and may have had nothing to do with Piper. They hoped so, unless it proved not to be serious.

Tommy suddenly stopped, grabbing Dion by the upper arm. He pointed down to where almost completely hidden in a bush was a duffel bag. He pulled it out and the two men knelt down next to it. They looked at each other and then down back at the bag.

"Do you think it's hers?" Tommy asked, his heart hammering in his chest. What if she had been killed and her body was somewhere around here? The Asian man shook his head. He'd been watching far too many movies.

"It could be," Dion replied. Then he thought about it. What were the odds that someone else was in these woods? His brother had chosen a secluded place to build his cabin at. Therefore, the duffel bag had to belong to Piper. "It must be hers. Now we have to figure out why it was stashed in the bushes as if someone were trying to hide it from view."

"Maybe Piper did it," Tommy offered.

Dion shrugged. "What would be the point? Why would she want to hide it? Maybe Emily Redding had something to do with it."

Tommy stared at him. "You think she might have done something to Piper?" he asked in a quiet tone.

"I have no idea. She must not have done anything. She came up here to stop it. Let's open the bag."

Dion unzipped the duffel bag, and the two men noticed an extra set of clothes and a gun. Dion took out the gun and examined it, noticing that the weapon was fully loaded. He handed the gun to Tommy who studied it briefly before he put it back in the bag and zipped it up again.

Dion took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. "Well do those give you any clues?"

Tommy nodded. "I gave that gun to Piper. She was supposed to use it in order to kidnap Desiree."

Dion decided not to say anything about how Tommy had been involved in the kidnapping. He

had yet to say much to Taj about it. "So if the gun is Piper's, then that means the clothes probably are too."

Tommy nodded. "Probably." He looked over at Dion. "We should start searching again. She must be around here somewhere."

Dion agreed, so the two men rose from the ground with Tommy holding the bag as they continued on their way. A few minutes later, about fifteen feet away Dion saw someone sitting in front of a tree with his or her back against it. Neither he or Tommy could make out the face but the person had dark hair. The person's head was down with their chin touching their chest as if they were sleeping. Both Dion and Tommy raced over to the tree. Reaching it they saw that the person was tied to the tree mostly by their arms being pulled backwards around the trunk of the tree with the wrists tied with rope and wrapped in black electrical tape. The figures ankles were also tied with rope and then with the tape. They also had a rope tied around their waist to the tree. The men noticed that the person did not move as they approached, as if they were either in a deep sleep or deceased.

Dion hesitantly reached out and moved the long hair out of the way, because it was obstructing them from seeing the face. He already had a feeling that it was Piper, but now it was time to confirm. With the hair out of the person's face, he and Tommy both noticed that it was indeed Piper. Her eyes were closed and there was caked dried blood on her left temple. She was as still as a statue. Dion tapped her on the shoulder, receiving no response. He then put two fingers to her neck to locate her pulse, and was relieved to find one. Albeit one that was extremely fast, but an accelerated pulse was much better than no pulse at all.

"Is she alive?" Tommy inquired. He hoped they were not too late.

Dion nodded. "Yes she is, but we need help." He took the orange whistle out of his pants pocket and blew on it twice, like Larisa had instructed. All of the sudden Piper's eyes snapped open as she gazed at the Jamaican man kneeling in front of her. His eyes widened when he noticed her looking at him. Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, her eyes trailed over to Tommy. Piper then turned her attention back to Dion. None of the three had yet to speak.

"Dion is that you?" Piper asked in a slightly weak voice. She glanced at Tommy who had moved better into her line of vision. "And Tommy?" She offered them a crooked little grin. "Am I in Hell then?"

Dion and Tommy laughed relieved that she seemed to be all right considering. Taking out his whistle, Tommy blew on it once. Shooting up from the ground, Dion grabbed the other man's whistle from him. He glared at Tommy who was busy wondering what he had done to deserve the expression. All he did was blow on the whistle once like he was supposed to.

"Are you nuts?!" Dion exploded, throwing the whistle onto the ground.

"What are you talking about man?" Tommy asked with a confused expression.

"Why did you blow the whistle again?"

Tommy replied, "Because she's okay. We don't need the others now. I think she can walk on her own." The Asian man looked down at Piper who looked quite confused herself. What was with the whistle business? "Can't you?" Tommy asked.

Piper shrugged. "I've been tied here for days and I don't feel like I have much energy left, but maybe I can walk. I'll sure try."

Tommy turned back to Dion. "Well see. I just saved everybody a needless trip to find us."

"No you didn't. Do you know arithmetic?"

Tommy gave him a look. Did the man think he was a complete moron? "Yeah, I do. Learned back in elementary school thank you very much. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well two plus one makes three. Which whistle call does that remind you of?"

Then it dawned on Tommy what the others might be thinking. "Oops. My bad."

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Desiree suddenly halted her frantic running towards where she and Andrea presumed the whistle sound had come from. Andrea ran right into her from the back. The older woman asked her why she stopped. Desiree turned to her with blue-green eyes filled with evident fear.

"She can't be dead!" the younger woman shouted. At Andrea's confused expression she continued. "We heard two whistle blow's right?" The blonde woman nodded. "I just heard another one, and that's three whistle blows. Three means dead." Andrea's mouth opened wide.

"Maybe they just made a mistake."

Desiree replied in a shaky voice, "Only one way to find out." She turned back around and started running again, with Andrea right behind her.

Minutes later, both Desiree and Andrea arrived at the place where they saw Dion, Tommy and Piper standing. She was leaning against a tree, wearing a pair of short navy blue cotton shorts, and a dirty white tank top. On seeing Desiree, Piper's tired face broke into a smile. The strawberry-blonde started crying when she noticed that the blue-eyed beauty was truly alive. Desiree let out a whoop as she ran towards the other woman. Piper watched her coming, suddenly thinking about the cartoon The Flintstones, when Fred would come home only to be bulldozed to the ground by his lovable pet Dino who was happy to have him home. Desiree was reminding her of Dino.

Reaching Piper, Desiree wrapped her arms around the woman's neck hugging her tight. The dark-haired woman managed to stay standing on her feet, though she did take a few steps back as

if she were going to fall. Piper soon felt hot tears dropping on her neck as Desiree broke down crying. She hugged the smaller woman tightly to her with one hand, as she rubbed her head gently with the other, making comforting noises and saying that she was all right. Desiree soon let go of her tight hold, though she still had her arms loosely wound around Piper's neck. She gazed into the other woman's eyes, barely able to believe that she was seeing them again. Desiree then shocked the heck out of Piper. She leaned forward on her tiptoes and kissed the woman passionately, pushing her tongue through the other woman's lips. At first Piper was too shocked to react, and saw with her eyes still open Tommy, Dion and another woman she didn't know staring at them wide-eyed. She then shrugged and closed her eyes, melting into the delicious kiss. If Desiree did not mind other people staring at them then neither did she. Both of them were breathless by the time Desiree pulled away. The younger woman glanced around with her face beginning to redden. So ecstatic over seeing Piper she had forgotten they had an audience. Well, now four people knew of their involvement. Maybe five if Taj had figured it out without Desiree telling him. Desiree gazed at Piper with her eyes still wet.

"It's so good to see you again," Desiree said in a voice thick with emotion.

Piper smiled warmly at her, caressing the smaller woman's cheek with the back of her right hand.

"Good to see you too. I never thought I would again."

"I could say the same. I thought you were dead."

Piper leaned forward and kissed Desiree sweetly on the lips. "I don't think dead people kiss." She grinned.

Desiree had missed that smile. Those eyes...heck she had missed everything about this woman.

"I've missed you, Piper."

The taller woman hugged her again. "I've missed you too, Desi."

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The five of them made their way back to the place where the motor home and Dion's car was located. Desiree had one of Piper's arms around her shoulders while Dion had the other. On the way back they had given Piper a brief explanation of who Andrea was, about how she used to be Victor Redding's wife, the man who had tried to kill both Piper and Desiree. Piper had yet to find out that Victor was her brother and that he had been her lawyer as well. The blue-eyed woman was impatient to find out the whole story, but none of them would volunteer to tell it to her yet. She did know that Victor and she had the same last name, which had her wondering.

On seeing the condition of the burned down cabin, Piper asked the other's what had happened. Desiree explained to her that Victor had burned it down intentionally. Piper also learned that Taj had saved Desiree's life the night that all of this happened. The small group suddenly laid eyes on Richard, Nathaniel, Sandra, and Vivian. Desiree felt the tension rise in Piper as the woman saw her father. She also saw her lover's jaw clench and her blue eyes grow cold as ice. Richard and the others came over to them. Reaching them, Richard stood in front of Piper. Desiree wished that he would step back, because she wasn't sure if Piper would be able to keep her hands

to herself. The blue-eyed woman stared at the man, but neither had yet to speak.

Richard cleared his throat and said, "I only did this for my daughter." Which was false. The only reason he had agreed to participate in this search party was because his oldest daughter had blackmailed him. "So don't think I've forgiven you for what you've done." He walked away without waiting for a reply.

Piper looked at his wife Sandra and smiled politely, thanking the woman for helping out with her search. Sandra opened her mouth as if she were going to say something but quickly closed it, opting to just nod before walking away to catch up to her husband. Piper turned her attention to Nathaniel and Vivian, smiling widely at them. She greeted them and found herself in a three-way hug. She warned them that she did not look and smell her best but they let her know that it didn't matter. When they let go, Vivian put her hands on Piper's cheeks inspecting her eyes and face. Before she retired three years ago, Vivian had been a nurse.

"Are you okay, child?" Vivian inquired of Piper. Piper smiled again, remembering that this endearing woman had always called her child no matter how old she got. She didn't mind it a bit.

"I'm fine, Aunt Viv," Piper replied. At Vivian's skeptical look she continued. "Other than feeling a little dizzy, hungry, tired and thirsty I'm all right." She winked at the older woman earning a smile in return.

"Nothing some food and rest won't fix," Nathaniel stated.

"I am quite hungry," Piper commented as she suddenly got the feeling that something was missing. "Oh, shoot!" She turned her attention to Desiree. "I forgot something."

"What?" Desiree inquired.

"The cat."

Desiree frowned in puzzlement. "The cat?" Was Piper referring to... "Tobias!" Desiree screamed, peering around Piper and the others. The other people turned around and all saw Alec and Taj coming towards them. Taj held in his hands a squirming furry bundle. The cat kept clawing at him so he let it go, having an idea where it was going. He found he was right, as the cat headed straight for Desiree. Before seeing the woman, Tobias had been completely still, but after noticing his master, the cat all but went wild in Taj's arms to be set free.

Tobias ran to Desiree and she picked him up, cradling the feline in her arms as she rubbed her cheek against his head. He started purring in delight. He then saw Piper standing next to his master and turned away quickly as if he had nothing to say to the woman.

"Oh, now you're gonna shun me, huh furball? I thought we might have bonded over these past few days. I should have known you were only using me because I was the only human around." Piper said. The cat paid her no attention.

"Tobias it feels so good to hold you again," Desiree stated while looking down at her cat

adoringly. She figured he must have run out the cabin before it exploded. Life was good. She not only had Piper back but Tobias as well.

"I think you missed that cat more than me," Piper muttered, but she was smiling at the same time. Desiree gave her a winning smile back.

Just then the rest of the group came in together. After spotting her, Leroy ran over to Piper and gave her a big hug. He tried to lift the woman off her feet, causing Piper to laugh, but he failed to do it. Leroy shrugged, trying to maintain an air of coolness.

"Piper you're alive," Leroy stated, looking almost bewildered.

"Yep." The dark-haired woman put an arm around his shoulders. "That I am." Piper then saw Richie smile at her somewhat shyly and she smiled back at him. He came over closer to her.

"I'm sorry about what happened," Richie stated. "I was only trying to protect-

Piper would not let him finish. "No need to apologize. We all did what we thought had to be done. I don't blame you at and you don't owe me any apology." Richie stared at her for a moment and then nodded, walking away. The next thing Piper knew it she was being entrapped in a bear hug. This time she was lifted off the ground, only it was by Taj. She heard Leroy a few feet away calling his brother a show-off. Taj grinned at her.

"What's the matter with you? You had us all worried sick. I-

Piper cut him off. "Let me guess. You thought I was dead." She smiled and then gave him a hug as she placed a tender kiss on his cheek. "As you can see I'm as alive as the rest of you."

Taj nodded. "Good." He stared at Piper so long that she noticed his eyes were red as if he had been crying. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I won't," Piper replied in a quiet voice.

Taj nodded again. "Do you want a sandwich?" he asked her.

Blue eyes brightened considerably. At this point, anything sounded good. As long as it was edible, she would gladly gobble it up. She told Taj that she would enjoy having a sandwich. He went to go get it, wearing a wide smile. On his way, he turned back around and took Valerie by the hand. He brought her over to his best friend.

"Piper," Taj started. "Remember at the cabin I told you I had that hot date?"

The dark-haired woman nodded.

"Well this was her. Piper I'd like you to meet Valerie Hall. My girlfriend," he stated proudly. It had only been a few days that he had been in this relationship, but so far, it was progressing rather well. He considered that he might be falling in love with Valerie already. Piper and Valerie shook hands and said a few words in greeting. Instantly, Piper felt that she could get

along with this woman, and that she would be the perfect companion for Taj. She was very happy for them and thought they made a fine couple as she watched them walk toward motor home.

Standing on slightly shaky legs, Piper turned back around and informed Desiree that she needed to sit down. The younger woman wrapped an arm around Piper's waist while still holding Tobias in the other one, and guided the taller woman to the motor home. On entering the large vehicle, Desiree helped Piper to sit at one of the chairs around the table. She informed Piper that she would be back shortly after hearing her name being called from someone outside. Taj then came up to Piper and handed her the sandwich along with a tall glass of lemonade. She thanked him as he too went outside with Valerie behind him.

Picking up the thick sandwich, she took a huge bite out of it. At that moment, it was the most delicious piece of food that she had ever tasted. Needing something to wash it down, she then took a long swig of the lemonade. Hearing someone coming up the steps of the motor home, Piper looked up to see Larisa. The older woman smiled at her as she came forward and asked Piper if she could take a seat. Silently, Piper gestured for her to do so. Larisa sat down across from Piper, watching the woman take another bite of her sandwich before putting it down on her plate. Piper then picked up a napkin and wiped her mouth free of any crumbs that may have been there. She looked over at Larisa expectantly.

Larisa found that her heart was beating fast. "I'm glad that you are okay."

Piper nodded mutely, having not spoken a word to the other woman yet. She noticed Larisa's swollen eye and wondered what had happened to her.

Larisa cleared her throat. "There's something I have to tell you."

"So tell me," Piper replied tersely.

"I know about your relationship with my sister."

Piper stared at her waiting for the woman to continue.

"I just have this to say. If you hurt her then I will spend the rest of my life making sure that you are miserable. She doesn't deserve to be treated like crap, so don't treat her that way. Desiree got enough of that from her old boyfriend Alec. Okay?" Larisa finished.

The blue-eyed woman did not say anything for a moment. All the sudden she laughed hollowly. Piper glared at the other woman briefly, before regarding her coolly. "Well isn't that the pot calling the kettle black. Shouldn't someone be telling you that, Larisa?" Larisa did not get a chance to reply as Desiree re-entered the motor home. Instantly, she could feel the tension in the air. The young woman looked at her sister and then her lover quizzically.

"What's going on guys?" she asked them.

"Nothing," Larisa replied getting up from her seat. She had to get out of there. She all but felt Piper's eyes throwing daggers at her. "We were just getting to know each other." Larisa glanced down at Piper, not really making eye contact. "Nice to meet you Piper," she said. Piper managed to smile politely at her though it proved quite difficult. Larisa then left the two of them alone. Desiree turned her attention to Piper, getting the feeling that there was more to it, but she decided not to pursue it. Grabbing the chair that her sister had been occupying, Desiree placed it next to Piper. She then sat down and took one of the dark-haired woman's hands in her own, squeezing it. Glancing towards the entrance to the motor home, Desiree then turned back to Piper and kissed her deeply. The blue-eyed woman moaned as Desiree pulled away.

"Did I tell you that I missed you?"

Piper pretended to think it over. "You told me, but I don't think you showed me enough." She wiggled her eyebrows.

Desiree chuckled as she leaned forward and captured Piper's lips with her own again. She wound her arms around Piper's neck as the other woman wound her own arms around the smaller woman's waist. They both knew they were playing with fire, because someone could enter the motor home at any moment, but they could not help it. They were together again and it felt oh so good.

Continued in Part 8.

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### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 8

Piper forced herself to break away from the delightful kissing. She needed some answers, and she was determined that Desiree would be the one to give them to her. Piper reached a hand up and lightly brushed the younger woman's cheek, as she smiled at her tenderly. So much had happened and she could hardly believe that she was seeing this woman again. Sometime over the last few days, Piper had considered the fact that she would most likely die tied to that tree. She had not known what had happened to Desiree and she did not want to think about it. A part of her thought that the young woman was dead, because all she had to go on was being attacked by someone in the dark and then waking up tied to a tree with the stench of something burning in

the air. Piper then had the feeling that the cabin was on fire, and all she could think of was that she had handcuffed Desiree to the refrigerator. What gave her hope that the young woman was alive, was that perhaps the person who had attacked her was good and had come to rescue Desiree and had managed to get her out of the cabin before the explosion. This was not true. A man named Victor Redding had put the cabin on fire and Desiree had been saved by Taj. So, who was the person who had attacked Piper?

Piper looked at Desiree wearing a slight frown. The young woman looked back at her gingerly. The blue-eyed woman took one of her hands in her own and squeezed it.

"What happened, Desi?" Piper inquired.

The smaller woman took a deep breath. Oh where to begin? "What do you want to know?"

Piper shrugged. "Everything."

Desiree laughed humorlessly. "Could you be a little more specific for me?"

The dark-haired woman thought about it. "Okay. Let's start with you telling me who Victor Redding is."

"He was a detective who took a monumental interest in you, and the murders you were accused of committing."

"Any reason why he and I have the last name? Or just coincidence?" Piper asked.

Desiree nodded. She looked towards the door hoping that anyone would come through it. Even Alec of all people would be welcome. Desiree did not want to do this alone. How can you tell someone that a brother they did not even know that they had wanted to end their life? This was not an easy task.

Piper waited for the young woman to speak, but Desiree remained silent. The blue-eyed woman took a deep breath. This was as hard as getting blood out of a turnip.

"What is the reason, Desiree?" Piper asked calmly.

The smaller woman clasped her hands tightly together. "He's your brother," she murmured. She suddenly remembered that she had brought the letters from Emily on the trip. She would have to go get them out of Dion's car so that Piper could read them. Thinking of the other woman, Desiree peered at her seeing the shocked expression on her face.

"I don't have a brother," Piper stated quietly. What was going on here?

Desiree ran a hand through her hair, once again looking back towards the entrance to the RV. "Yes you do. You also have a sister." She heard the other woman gasp but continued, while studying the top of the table. "Your father had another family before he even met your mother

years ago. He just never told you two about them. Your brother's name as you know is Victor and your sister's name is Emily. Andrea the woman you met earlier is Victor's ex-wife and she has two daughters by him that are of course your nieces." Desiree stopped, waiting for Piper to speak. After a silent moment or so passed, the strawberry-blonde looked up to see her staring at her incredulously.

"Piper?"

The dark-haired woman shook her head as though she had been in a daze. "I have siblings. A brother and a sister." She fell silent for a moment. "My brother tried to kill me." Piper peered over at Desiree. "Why?"

"Because you killed his father. He blamed you for that, although he knew why you did it. He wanted you to pay for it."

"With my life," Piper replied more to herself than the other woman. "How did you find out about all this?"

Desiree replied, "He told me. He told me all of it before he set the cabin on fire. He was insane, Piper."

The dark-haired woman nodded. "I'll say," she paused. "I just noticed that you're speaking in the past tense. Is he dead?"

Desiree nodded. "Taj came in just in time and they scuffled until Victor was shot and killed. Taj then picked me up, because I was tied to a chair that Victor had put me in, and carried me outside before the cabin blew up. The flames were already going haywire," she explained.

"Where is my sister?"

The smaller woman looked down at her hands as if she suddenly found something fascinating about them. "She's dead as well. She came to cabin in the back of her brother's car unbeknownst to him. Emily had been intending to stop him, before he could attempt to kill you, but her plan obviously failed. That's why we thought you were dead. While Victor was talking to me someone came through the door and he shot them. The person fell to the floor and I didn't get to see their face nor did he, but I thought it was you. It had to be, because who else would be in those secluded woods? I saw the long dark hair and I freaked out. I just knew it was you. Problem is I never looked at your...the profile because it was faced down, and I wouldn't have wanted to anyway. It would have hurt too much," she finished quietly. Desiree then felt a hand brush across her cheek and glanced up to see Piper looking at her tenderly.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," the tall woman stated. "Emily must have been the person who attacked me, when I was coming back to the cabin. I was almost there when someone tackled me to the ground from behind. It was so unexpected I couldn't defend myself properly. I managed to see long dark hair but I didn't get to see the person's face clearly. The next thing I knew it a rock or something came flying at my head and struck me so hard that I lost

consciousness." Piper gave a short laugh. "For a moment there I thought it was you, but then I noticed that the person was too big. It wouldn't have surprised me if it was you."

"Piper-

"No." The taller woman put a finger to Desiree's lips. "I would have deserved it," she halted. "Why don't you continue."

"Well that's the basic story. I guess I should fill it in now."

Piper nodded. "By all means please do."

Desiree thought for a moment. "You know your lawyer?" she asked.

"Frank? He has something to do with this?"

The smaller woman nodded. "He was Victor. He was Victor pretending to be your lawyer Franklin Webb."

The other woman's blue eyes widened considerably. That was totally unexpected. Although, just about everything Desiree had told her thus far had been unexpected. All of this was so unreal. "You're telling me that Franklin Webb was Victor Redding?"

"Yes he was."

"And the point of him being my lawyer was...?"

"He meant to make mistakes as your lawyer in the hopes that the jury would find you guilty."

Piper took a deep breath. Unbelievable. "So let me get this straight. My brother wanted to send me to prison and then when I got out he wanted to kill me. I assume that he was the one to commit all those murders."

Desiree replied, "All of the jurors died at his hand except for Michael Lowell, the last one."

"The one that was killed with the hammer?"

"Yeah. Your brother got Emily to do that one."

Both Desiree and Piper turned toward the entrance of the motor home to see that Andrea had answered Piper's last question. The blonde woman smiled asking if she could join them. Both of the other women nodded, gesturing for her to come over. Andrea sat at the table and studied the two women in front of her. When Desiree had kissed Piper back where the blue-eyed woman had been found, Andrea had been shocked to say the least. But looking at them now she could tell that the two cared for each other deeply. Although they were women, it didn't matter to her. As long as they were happy that was all that mattered. Andrea had to admit that Piper and Desiree

did make a cute couple. She briefly wondered if Desiree's parents knew about them. The blonde woman considered that they probably didn't. *That father of hers would probably have a fit!*

Andrea took two folded sheets of paper that she had in her hand and gave them to Piper to read. The woman took them, thanking Andrea. After she opened one of the sheets of paper, Desiree leaned over to see that it was one of Emily's letters. Andrea had evidently gone to Dion's car and retrieved them. Piper read the first letter without comment and then moved on to the next one. She read this one silently as well and then folded up both of the letters and handed them back to Andrea. The blonde woman shook her head, claiming that they were now Piper's letters since one of them were originally meant for her anyway. Piper folded up the letters and put them in a pocket located on her shorts.

Piper turned her attention to Andrea. "Emily gave you these before she left for the cabin?"

Andrea nodded. "She sent them to me. I read them after I found out what had happened and then I knew that I had to give them to Desiree. Reading the letters I concluded that you could very well be alive, since I had yet to hear word about Emily's whereabouts."

"Thank you," Piper said, looking at her ex sister-in-law intently. "If it wasn't for you I might have died out there." She reached over and squeezed the other woman's hand before pulling away. The blue-eyed woman then turned to Desiree and gave her a peck on the cheek. Desiree smiled at her warmly.

"I just did what I felt had to be done," Andrea replied while noticing the affection between the other two women. She then took out a wallet and extracted a picture from it. She handed the picture to Piper, explaining that it was picture of Emily from last Christmas. Both Piper and Desiree examined the picture, right away seeing the definite similarities between Piper and her sister. They both had the same blue eyes, dark brown hair and Andrea informed them that Emily had been tall as well, almost reaching a height of six feet. Piper gave the picture back to the Andrea and watched the woman put it away in her wallet.

Looking down at her lap, Piper clasped her hands together. "I had two siblings and I knew nothing about them." She laughed humorlessly, feeling Desiree put a comforting hand on her back. "One of them tried to kill me and the other tried to sabotage me. Dad sure did make some fine children," she stated sarcastically. "We're all messed up."

Desiree put a hand under Piper's chin and lifted the woman's face to her own. She didn't speak until the blue-eyed woman made eye contact with her. "Now you listen to me, Piper. You listen good. You are not messed up. Victor and Emily had problems, but you don't. I love the way you are. I wouldn't have you any other way, and I don't appreciate you talking about my favorite girl."

The dark-haired woman gave her a crooked smile, suddenly feeling better. "I'm your favorite girl?" Desiree nodded adamantly. "Then we have something in common," Piper continued. "'Cause your mine as well."

Just then, Larisa entered the motor home. She had her shades on again in the hopes that no one would see the pain and nervousness in her eyes. She asked for Desiree and Andrea to come outside so that she could tell everyone which automobile they were supposed to be in, in order for them to start the trip back to Los Angeles. Both Desiree and Andrea nodded as they got up to leave the motor home. Piper started to get up as well, but Desiree gestured for her to stay put, and told her to finish her lunch.

On arriving outside, Desiree and Andrea noticed that everyone was positioned once again in a straight line. Larisa asked them to join that line, and the two complied. Larisa had her clipboard in hand, as she began to tell the group that they would be switching vehicles. Therefore, those that had ridden in the motor home on the way here were to switch with those that had arrived in Dion's car. Larisa asked if there were any problems with this new arrangement and everyone informed her that there wasn't one. It was fair.

Ten minutes later, everyone was in the right vehicle and they were ready to head back to Los Angeles. Larisa for one was glad that she would not have to ride in the same vehicle with Piper. That would have been too tense and Desiree surely would have suspected that something was wrong between the two of them. Larisa had silently promised herself that she would not ruin anything for her younger sister. This would only cause Desiree pain if she were to find out.

The bad thing about riding in Dion's car was that Larisa's father was there. He was supposed to be riding in the motor home, but had swapped places with Alec, claiming that he would not ride all the way back to Los Angeles with that woman. Of all the people in the world, she did not want to deal with him right now. The first thing he did upon taking a seat was start talking rudely against Piper, calling her a "kidnapping female dog". Poor Richie had to be subjected to listening to the insults. The dark-haired woman merely rolled her eyes and tried to ignore his ranting. She sincerely hoped this wouldn't keep going until they reached Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, in the motor home, Desiree, Piper, and Andrea were sitting at the small table they had been sitting in before the group left the cabin. Out of everyone, Desiree was the happiest to leave. She did not care if she ever went there again. The young woman had enough nightmares concerning that night as it was.

Desiree looked down as something suddenly brushed against her leg. The strawberry-blonde smiled when she saw that it was Tobias. She picked up the cat and began to stroke him, instantly turning on his purr button. The cat rubbed his head softly against Desiree's chin while enjoying the kitty massage.

Piper took a sip from her fourth glass of lemonade while watching Desiree fondly. She could not believe that they were together again. She thought back to their last moments spent together in that cabin and inwardly shuddered. What had come over her? Piper would never forget how she had so brutally hit Desiree with her fist, managing to knock the young woman's tooth out with the force of her blow. The next image in her head was that of her father beating on her mother all those years ago. It took something like this for the dark-haired woman to realize that she was truly his child. Piper shook her head to rid it of the undesired thoughts. This was her chance to make it better. She wanted to make Desiree happy and she intended to do so.

"Looks like furball is trying to make me jealous," Piper stated with a grin.

Desiree looked over at her, smiling. "Is it working?"

The blue-eyed woman snorted. "Yeah. I'm really jealous of your precious Tobias." She leaned towards Desiree and whispered in her ear. "He may get your strokes but I get that and much more." Smirking, Piper sat back watching as Desiree's face went considerably red. Andrea frowned, wondering what it was that her ex sister-in-law had told the younger woman.

Leaning towards Piper, Desiree whispered back, "Watch it, Piper. In case it slipped your mind my mother is in this vehicle."

Piper shrugged. "She's taking a nap. She can't hear me."

"Yeah, but still." Desiree looked slightly uncomfortable. No matter how proud she was of this woman, the last thing Desiree wanted was for her parents to find out about their relationship. If her father didn't like Piper now, the young woman would not be surprised if he came over with a shotgun after being notified that she was his daughter's girlfriend. Desiree admitted that it would sort of be funny to see the expression on his face, but it wasn't worth it. Eventually they would have to know but that didn't mean it had to be any time soon.

"So your parents don't know about you, huh?" Andrea inquired of Desiree.

The younger woman shook her head. "And I don't know when I'll have the guts to tell them." Desiree glanced at Piper. "I thought I liked boys until she came along." She slapped her lover playfully in the stomach.

Piper chuckled. "Hey! What can I say? I'm good." She kissed the strawberry-blonde on the cheek, much to the young woman's dismay and delight. "Hello, Alec," stated Piper conversationally while looking straight ahead of her. Desiree turned around and saw that her ex-boyfriend was standing behind the dark-haired woman, wearing a curious expression. Andrea glanced at the man wondering what was going to happen now.

Alec scowled at the back of Piper's head. "How did you know I was behind you?"

Piper clasped her hands together on her lap and without looking at him remarked, "Because I can see Leroy is in the drivers seat and Taj right by him, which leaves you to be the only," she snickered, "*man* in the motor home. Plus, when they hugged me I could tell that they weren't wearing that cheap crap that's supposed to be cologne." She turned around to regard him. The man was glaring at her now but Piper merely smiled sweetly. "Of course it had to be you, and let's face it. The only thing I think you have good taste in is women." She glanced at Desiree quickly, but managed to see the younger woman blush. "Your problem is you don't know how to treat them properly."

"Who died and made you a relationship expert?" Alec inquired snidely. "Desi and I may have had our share of problems but we belong together," he paused. "I don't think I like you hanging

around her. Why don't you just leave Desiree alone?"

Before Piper could offer a reply, Desiree jumped in with, "Why don't you just leave *us* alone, Alec? Thank you for helping out in the search. Don't mess it up by acting like a jerk again," she managed to say in a rather pleasant tone.

Alec narrowed his eyes at her briefly. "You are so naïve, Desi." He shook his head sadly. "This woman is abnormal and you don't want anything to do with her."

The strawberry-blonde frowned up at him. "What do you mean she's abnormal?"

The man glanced at Piper who was staring at him with an unreadable expression. He leaned down towards Desiree and answered. "She's a dyke. I'm sure of it by the way she was looking at..." He didn't get to finish because Andrea suddenly arose from her seat and pushed him so hard that he fell to the floor. Alec looked up at her in shock.

"Don't you ever call my sister a dyke!" Andrea said between clenched teeth. "You may be a dick but she's not a dyke. As soon as you start having respect for other people, just maybe you'll get some back," the blonde woman finished before heading back to her seat. Now she knew why from the first moment she had laid eyes on this man that there was something she did not like about him. It was him plain and simple.

Alec arose from the floor first glaring at Andrea and then at Desiree because she was chuckling. Tobias, still in the young woman's lap even had something to say about it with a hiss at the enraged man. Growling, Alec picked the cat up by the back of his neck. He started to fling Tobias across the motor home but a severe blow to his stomach prevented him. He liberated the feline onto the floor as he doubled over in pain. Taking advantage of the situation, the cat reached up only on his hind legs and took a swipe at the man's cheek while he was bent over. Alec let out a little shriek as four thin lines trailed on his left cheek from the cat's sharp nails. A hand enclosed around his throat and lifted him up until he was face to face with Piper. Her cool blue eyes had fire in them as they bored into his. Meanwhile, her hand on his throat tightened almost to the point where he could not breathe at all. Alec's face started to turn a slight reddish color.

"You listen to me," the woman started, "don't you ever put your filthy hands on that cat again." The hand tightened a little. "Don't you even look like you want to put your hands on him. On second thought don't you even look at Tobias," she paused. "And you know what else?" He shook his head as he was lifted onto his tiptoes. "Do not ever again try to get in contact with Desiree. Get it through your thick skull that she wants nothing to do with you. She doesn't want you and she doesn't love you. Just accept that fact okay? It's over. Got it?" After Alec nodded, she let him go.

While taking in gulps of air, Alec touched his cheek with a finger. It came away with blood on it. Everyone in the motor home was looking at him, except for Sandra who had somehow managed to still be sleeping in the small compartment in the back. Leroy's attention alternated between Alec and the road, until finally Taj told him to keep his eyes forward.

Alec looked from Desiree to Piper. He pointed at the dark-haired woman. "Is this what you want?" he asked loudly, causing Desiree to look nervously at the door her mother was napping behind. "Is that it, Desiree? No wonder you were sometimes hard to please in bed," he goaded, finally giving up all hope that he would ever have Desiree for his own again. He touched his crotch. "You didn't want my equipment. You wanted-"

Alec never even got to finish before he was hit so hard in the face, that he fell to the floor once more. He looked up expecting to see the blue-eyed woman again, but this time Taj was the source of his latest injury. A small mewling sound came out of Alec's mouth as he wondered what this man who looked as if his second home was a gym would do to him. Taj grabbed Alec by the shirt and hauled him roughly to his feet, glaring at him all the while.

"You are the sorriest excuse for a human being that I have ever seen in my life. And I want you out of here now!" the Jamaican man demanded angrily. He continued to drag Alec towards the entrance of the motor home and opened it, pushing the man in front of him.

Leroy from the drivers' seat looked over at his older brother inquiringly. "Taj, what are you planning on doing?" he asked nervously.

Taj glanced over his shoulder and stated, "I'm going to throw this bastard out of this vehicle. You have a problem with that?" At that moment, Alec twisted and turned in the hopes of getting free, but strong hands gripping his shoulders, squeezed tightly causing the man to yelp in pain as his knee's bent slightly.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Leroy said, easing off of the gas just in case his brother decided not to listen. The slower the vehicle went the better off Alec would be injury wise. Not that Leroy liked the man. In fact, he could not stand him from the little amount of time he had spent in his presence, but it would not do for them to have him thrown out of a fast moving motor home and then to possibly lose his life.

"Well I happen to think that it's a grand one," Taj replied, noticing from the pavement through the open door that Leroy had decreased the speed. He hadn't decided whether to be relieved or annoyed by that fact. The Jamaican man glanced back at the other passengers. Andrea was looking at them curiously, silently questioning if Piper's friend would actually go through with this. Desiree was peering over with a troubled look in her eye, but she had yet to say anything to stop Taj's intentions. Taj had to chuckle when he looked at Piper. The dark-haired woman had a big grin plastered on her face and winked at him. She glanced at Desiree noticing that the younger woman's attention was not on her, so Piper looked back to Taj and motioned with her hands for him to push Alec onto the highway. Valerie, Taj's girlfriend had yet to hear or see anything. She was lying on the floor facing the other way with earphones blasting in her ears while she read a magazine. Well she was previously reading a magazine. Now she had her head down on her folded arms fast asleep.

Taj turned his attention back to Alec, who was no longer struggling to get loose. The bigger man patted him on the shoulder. "Well Alec, I guess it is time for you to go," he paused. "Unfortunately, I can't say that it's been nice knowing you." Taj began to push Alec out of the

motor home, but was stopped when the man braced his hands against either side of the opening.

"Wait," Alec started in a panicked voice. "You can't do this to me. I could get killed."

"Yes, I can and I will. And your possible death is a chance I'm willing to take." Taj leaned towards him. "Remember to tuck and roll." He then shoved Alec so hard in the back that the man fell out of the moving vehicle onto the road. The good thing was that they were in the lane closest to the side of the road and even if they had not been there were not a lot of cars.

As Alec yelled rolling on the pavement before he managed to stop the erratic movement, Piper appeared by Taj at the door looking back at him. She waved and flashed him a cheery smile. While getting up, Alec noticed both actions and gave her one of his own.

Piper chuckled and hollered to Alec as loud as she could, "Didn't your mother ever teach you not to use that particular finger that way?"

Leroy sped up thinking that both his brother and Piper had lost their minds. What was left of them anyway. It had always been dangerous for those two to be together. They were like a pack of matches and a can of gasoline. When they were younger, they had gotten into all kinds of trouble with their impishness.

As Taj closed and locked the door with a faint smile on his face, Piper turned to see that Andrea and Desiree had a window open looking back at Alec. The dark-haired woman went over to them and put a hand on Desiree's back while she was leaning out of the wide window. Feeling a hand on her, the strawberry-blonde straightened up to turn around and see Piper standing there, doing her best not to smile. Desiree shook her head, wondering what she was going to do with this woman. It was then that their deal popped into her head. She gave a magnificent grin. What would she do? Anything that she wanted for the next six months.

Piper noticed the grin and grew wary. What was this woman thinking of now? Out of the corner of her eye, Piper saw Andrea close the window and walk back towards the small table, shaking her head in bewilderment. The dark-haired woman put her hands on her hips, regarding Desiree. "Care to tell me what's rolling around in that pretty head of yours?"

Desiree smirked. "I will. Later."

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A little after three hours later, both the RV and Dion's car pulled into parking spaces at Desiree's apartment building. Sandra came out of the small bedroom after looking out of the window to see that they were back. She had been awake for over two hours but hadn't told any of the others. The last person she wanted to face was Piper. On entering the main part of the RV, Sandra saw her youngest daughter and Taj with their arms around Piper's waist, helping her out of the vehicle while ignoring the slightly weak woman's protest that she could walk on her own.

Sandra bypassed them and headed down the stairs to locate her husband. She found him

stretching by the other vehicle. Walking up to him, she kissed him on the cheek. He asked her how it was to ride with that "dreadful" woman. Before they had left from the cabin, Richard had informed his wife that she should switch vehicles with him, but Sandra told him that she could handle being in the same vehicle as Piper. She hadn't wanted to give up the luxury of the RV.

"It was fine," Sandra replied. "I was in the bedroom for most of the time."

They both turned their attention to Piper, Desiree, and Taj as the trio headed towards the entrance of the apartment building. The judge had a scowl on his face as he watched the woman who had taken his daughter hostage. If he had it his way, Piper would never see his daughter again. He wondered not for the first time how his daughter could make friends with this woman. Like the rest of her family, Piper Redding was filth. No child of his should be associating with that.

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On arriving at the apartment, Taj's parents had informed him that they were going to head straight back to his house with Dion. Taj insisted that they come up to the apartment for a few minutes because he had an announcement. After they said that they would, the couple watched as Taj took Valerie's hand and led her through the double doors. By the time Nathaniel and Vivian had reached Desiree's floor, they were sure they knew what their middle son was going to announce. Desiree's door was wide open, so they walked in talking in low voices.

"Do you honestly think that's what it is?" Nathaniel asked his wife. "They haven't been dating long. I courted you for two years."

Vivian linked arms with her husband. "I'm sure." She smiled up at the big tall man. "Our baby's getting married." They took a seat on the couch that Desiree had reserved for them. Sandra and Richard were sitting by them.

Vivian looked at her husband. "I like Valerie. When she came over to the house last night, we talked some. Lovely girl."

Nathaniel put an arm around her as he smiled revealing the deep dimples that Taj had inherited from him. Still speaking in a low voice he replied, "Well it's about time he's settled down," he paused while thinking. "I think that boy has dated over two-hundred girls over the years." He chuckled. "I lost track along time ago."

"You think it was that many?"

"Remember his senior year? He must have brought home at least two girls a week for dinner." He chuckled again, shaking his head at the fond memories. "He was probably trying to figure out who he would take to the prom."

A few minutes later, everyone was settled waiting for Taj's announcement. He was the only one standing up with Valerie choosing to sit on the floor Indian style by him. She was looking up at him curiously, wondering what this was about, just like everyone else except for his parents.

They both had knowing smiles plastered on. Taj didn't seem to notice this. Before the Jamaican man could get started, Sandra made a query.

"Where is Alec?"

At the dining room table, Piper put her hands over her face, desperately trying to smother the instant laughter. Sitting next to her, Desiree slapped the woman lightly on the arm, though she was smiling too. Across from them, Andrea just shook her head, though she found it necessary to bite her lower lip every time that she thought about the man being pushed out of the RV.

Valerie glanced up to her boyfriend. "That's a good question. I don't remember seeing him when you woke me up on our arrival. Did he leave already?"

With a straight face Taj said, "While we were still on the road back to L.A., he stepped out." He heard Piper break out into a fit of giggles and almost lost it. "No. Seriously, he was acting like a jerk so I put him out. I'm sure that he'll be able to find his way home. Alec will be fine," he paused, looking around to see that everyone seemed to accept this. Taj rubbed his hands together. "Now for my announcement."

Not being able to contain herself a moment longer, Vivian stated, "I can't tell you how happy your dad and I are for you and Valerie, Taj." The older woman had tears in her eyes, and after a quick trip to her room while everyone sat in silence, Desiree came back with a tissue for Vivian. The woman took it saying, "Thank you, sweetie." Desiree smiled, thinking that her own mother had never called her sweetie, and went back to her seat beside Piper.

Taj stared at his mother curiously as Valerie peered up at him. "Mommy, what are you-"

He never did get to finish, because Valerie let out a loud shriek as she jumped up from the floor and threw herself at him, sobbing. Taj put his arms around her, wondering what was going on. He glanced over at his parents who were smiling again. Next he heard clapping, and looked over to where Dion was. The man had come out of the chair he had retrieved from the kitchen and was clapping while wearing a bewildered expression.

"I never thought you would actually do it, Taj," Dion said. "I'm proud of you little brother."

Vivian and Nathaniel joined in on the clapping, and soon everyone, including Sandra and Richard were clapping as well. Taj's look of confusion turned to one of apprehension. No. They could not have thought that. Could they? Before he could set anyone straight, Valerie let go of her hold on him and looked at him with wet cheeks.

"This is so sudden," she started. "We just began dating but if you're ready then so am I." She kissed him softly on the lips. "I would love nothing more." She chuckled softly. "In case you didn't know already, the answer is yes." As the applause died down Valerie stared at him lovingly. "You have made me the happiest woman on earth, Taj Maurice Potter." She hugged him again.

Taj thought about it, and then shrugged. Oh, well. This could work out. He was starting to love Valerie. In fact, he had never felt the way he felt about her with anyone else, and they had not known each other that long. Besides, he didn't have the heart to tell her that wasn't what he was about to say. He didn't have the heart to tell his mother either. Resigned, Taj got down on one knee, fully aware that he didn't have a ring to give her. That would look odd, but he didn't have to have an engagement ring.

Looking up at Valerie, Taj smiled. She was quite a beautiful girl, and at only twenty-four she was successful with only her own clothing boutique here in Los Angeles that received notable business. Valerie was a petite woman standing at five feet five inches. She had smooth creamy skin a shade darker than cocoa butter. Valerie had thick jet-black hair that fell to just below her shoulders and big light brown eyes that Taj found that he could drown in. Yes. He could marry this sweet young woman. It was amazing how things could change so quickly.

Taj took both of Valerie's shaking hands in his own, as he felt a breeze behind him. He turned around just in time to see Desiree hurrying into her room again so fast that one would think that she was being chased. Not saying anything, Taj just waited for her to come back. A moment later, the strawberry-blonde was heading in his direction with a small black velvet jewelry box in her hand. She handed it to the man.

"This is yours, Taj," Desiree said smoothly. "You left it here this morning when you were showing it to me. I put it up in my room." She winked at him while Valerie's attention was riveted on the box. Desiree then went to go take her seat and gave Taj an encouraging wave.

Over her shoulder, Piper whispered to the blue-green eyed woman, "Where did you get the ring?"

"It was my engagement ring," Desiree replied.

Piper then turned her whole body around towards the younger woman. "Alec proposed to you?"

Desiree replied simply, "No." She patted Piper on the arm. "Let's watch Taj and Valerie." Really, she just mainly wanted to get the dark-haired woman's attention off of her. Piper watched Desiree for a moment but then decided to let the subject drop for now. She turned back to the couple.

After clearing his throat, Taj looked up into Valerie's warm light brown eyes and said, "I know you already said yes, but I'd like to make it official," he paused. "Will you marry me?" He opened the box and Valerie let out a little yelp. Taj looked at the ring and his eyes grew wider. It was a fourteen-carat gold ring with a half-carat Marquise diamond. He figured that it must have cost close to two thousand dollars. The Jamaican man glanced over to Desiree to see that the young woman was smiling at him widely. Clearing his throat again, Taj took out the ring and put it on Valerie's left ring finger. She brought it up to her face to get a closer look. Tears sprang to the young woman's eyes again as she knelt down on the floor and put her arms around her fiancée's neck.

"I'm so happy, Taj," she cried.

He smiled as he wrapped his arms around her. "So am I." He held her for a minute and then thought about his real announcement. Taj let go of Valerie and stood up, offering her a hand. She took it and he helped her up as well, ending up with putting an arm around her waist. He told everyone that he had another announcement to make. "You all are invited to a celebration at my house tomorrow. We will celebrate Valerie's and mine engagement, and Piper's reappearance. I hope that you all can make it." He continued to tell them what time the party started and gave everyone a business card with his address on it.

Everyone except Sandra and Richard was excited about that. Richard rolled his eyes, whispering to this wife that they weren't going. On cue Larisa came over and kneeled in front of her parents wearing an encouraging smile. She asked them if they were coming and they told her that they wouldn't, giving the excuse that they needed to rest up the day before their flight left back to San Francisco. Their daughter gave them an incredulous look and softly stated that they were indeed coming.

The judge frowned at his eldest. There was no way that she was going to make him go to this party for that Redding woman. "What makes you think that we're going?" Richard inquired.

Larisa gave her father a smile that unnerved him. "Because if you don't," she began only loud enough for he and her mother to hear, "I'm afraid that Piper might somehow find out about that twenty-grand you miraculously got eight years ago," she paused, cocking her head to the side. "You don't want that to happen, do you?"

The judge swallowed nervously. He could never hate any of his children, but his daughter was making it really hard for him to like her. Richard nodded, almost imperceptibly. He shook his head at his wife, knowing that she was about to say something. Having taken care of that, Larisa excused herself politely and walked away.

It wasn't long after that, that everyone had taken his or her leave except for the Love clan. Larisa was about to be on her way, when she suddenly considered that her parents and Richie were staying here in Desiree's apartment. Since Piper was here, maybe she should...Larisa shrugged. What the heck? This could be her good deed for the day. She deduced that her sister and Piper most likely yearned to be alone. The woman walked over to where her parents were sitting on the couch after having just turned on the television. Larisa punched the off button on the thirty-five inch Magnavox and regarded her parents. Her father frowned at her, which seemed to have become a habit.

"I think you two and Richie," she looked towards the kitchen where her brother was just coming out with a Popsicle he had located in the freezer, "should spend your last two nights at my place, since you were here with Desiree last night." She glanced at Piper who was still sitting at the dining room table. She offered the woman a smile, but was not surprised when it wasn't returned. "And Mother," she looked at Sandra, "you've been with Desiree for days now, so come spend some time with me. You guys will see Desiree at the party tomorrow. How 'bout it?"

"I think it's a great idea," Richie said, while licking his strawberry Popsicle. He didn't have a clue

that Larisa was trying to make it so that Desiree and Piper could be alone. The young man was thinking about the fact that his older sister had a swimming pool in her backyard. Plus, sleeping on Desiree's couch wasn't something that he cared to repeat. "I'll go get my stuff, okay?" Even if they weren't going, he would. When Larisa nodded his way, Richie made his way into the guestroom that his parents had been using. In there, he gathered his sparse belongings.

Larisa put her hands on her hips, looking at Sandra and Richard. They were still sitting on the couch. Richard frowned again. "Can you honestly say that you want us at your house?"

The dark-haired woman smiled at him. If nothing else, her father was perceptive. She considered that was what helped to make him good at his job. "Yes, I can," she lied easily. Actually, Larisa didn't mind her mother so much. It was her father who she had a problem with now. The way he treated Piper was not called for. He had exhibited traits the last couple of days that had been less than desirable. "Please come with me." She glanced over to Desiree who was standing by the dining room table gripping her hands together tightly. Larisa could tell that she wanted them to leave.

Richard looked at his wife after she tapped him on the shoulder. She whispered something in his ear, causing him to scowl. The judge looked at his eldest daughter. "We'll get our stuff together." They both got up and headed towards the guestroom, passing Richie as he came out with the Popsicle stick hanging out of his mouth and a small suitcase in his hand.

Desiree walked up to her sister and gave the taller woman a hug. She thanked her for what Larisa had just managed to do. The oldest disengaged herself from the embrace and smiled at her youngest sibling. "What are sisters for?"

A few minutes later, Richard and Sandra Love were ready to go. They each hugged Desiree, telling her that they would see her tomorrow. After considering it, Sandra smiled politely at Piper before following her husband to the front door. Richard had chosen to ignore Piper, like he had done the whole day. She could not have cared less. Richie hugged his sister and then walked over to Piper, who had started to get up from the chair, but he gestured for her to stay seated. He knelt down and kissed her on the cheek before following his parents and older sister to the elevator. Desiree waved at them and then closed the door, making sure to lock it. She stayed there for a few moments not turning around. She had wanted to be alone with Piper, but now it had finally happened. Butterflies began in her stomach as she realized that they were truly alone. Desiree silently admitted to herself that she was nervous. She had Piper alone, and her heart was beating so fast, that the young woman was sure that her lover could hear it.

Noticing that something seemed to be bothering Desiree, Piper arose from her chair and slowly walked over to the woman. Reaching her she put her hands on Desiree's shoulders from behind, and leaned in to take in the fragrance of her hair. The dark-haired woman closed her eyes at the wonderful scent coming from that strawberry-blonde hair. Over the days tied to the tree, a lot of her thoughts had focused on Desiree and how she longed to run her hands through the young woman's hair and stare into those blue-green eyes. Piper had missed the woman more than she thought she could ever miss anyone.

Piper began to massage Desiree's shoulders, causing the younger woman to moan faintly as she leaned her head back to rest on the dark-haired woman's ample bosom. Piper smiled as she increased the pressure of her long fingers.

"I should be doing that to you," Desiree murmured, indicating the massage.

She could feel the vibration coming from Piper's chuckle. The taller woman put her soft lips against Desiree's ear, causing the butterflies in her stomach to flutter more. Piper ran her slightly parted lips against the ridge of her lover's ear a few times before replying in a low voice, "There are a lot of things you could be doing to me."

Piper chuckled as Desiree turned around and slapped her playfully on the arm, before placing both arms around her waist and drawing Piper in as she leaned her back against the door. Piper put her arms around Desiree's waist as well. The blue-eyed woman wore a triumphant smile as she noticed the blush that had formed on Desiree's face. She briefly wondered if she should keep a record of how many times she was able to make the younger woman blush. Piper chuckled to herself. One thousand blushes a year easy.

"You are naughty, Piper Redding," Desiree stated. "You gonna keep teasing me?"

Piper gave her a peck on the nose. "It's what I do best."

Desiree gave a low growl and kissed Piper with a passion that surprised the older woman. The strawberry-blonde forced her way into Piper's mouth and their tongues began a furious duel. The kiss ended way too soon for Piper, leaving both women breathless. Desiree arose onto her tiptoes and whispered into the taller woman's ear, "That's not what you do best." She quickly leaned back to see if the older woman had blushed, and was discontented to see that Piper's face was just as tanned as always. She had an eyebrow raised, but that was it.

Piper smirked and nodded. "I see that you're learning."

"Well you are the Queen of Teasing. I learn from the best."

Piper smiled her white teeth sparkling although they had not seen a toothbrush in almost a week. "The Queen of Teasing? I like it."

"I like *you*." Desiree put a hand on the back of Piper's head and brought the woman's head down to kiss her again. This kiss was softer but just as insistent as the last one. The blue-eyed woman was overjoyed that it lasted longer. Desiree finally ended it and placed her hand around Piper's waist again. She noticed that the taller woman's blue eyes had darkened considerably with her rising desire.

"You better stop doing that," Piper warned. "Or I might just decide to take you right here on the living room floor."

"I don't think so Miss Stinky." Desiree scrunched up her little nose, which Piper found endearing.

She figured that everything about this woman was probably endearing. She loved the way Desiree's nose scrunched up. It looked so cute. It looked so cute that she kissed it, causing her lover to grin up at her.

Piper then raised an eyebrow. "Miss Stinky?" She pretended to be offended. "Well you wouldn't smell so good either, after being tied to a tree for days with the absence of soap and water." She smelled her shirt, her eyes widening as she let go of her lover. "Whew! How could you stand to hug me? I *do* smell bad."

Desiree smiled. "That's an understatement."

Before Piper could think of a comeback, there was a knock on the door. The strawberry-blonde squinted her eye to look through the peephole and saw that it was her sister. She opened the door and noticed that Larisa was holding a very disgruntled Tobias. Desiree's mouth formed into an O as she remembered that she had forgotten all about her cat. The feline meowed when he caught sight of her, and Larisa handed the cat over. She knew that Piper was standing behind her sister, but she refused to make eye contact.

Desiree made Tobias little round face level with hers. "I'm sorry, Toby. Mama is so sorry that she forgot you in the RV." She hugged his warm furry body to her and rubbed her cheek against his head. "How about some din din? Want something to eat?" Tobias meowed again as Desiree looked up at her sister. "Thank you for bringing him back."

Larisa waved her hand. "No problem. Mother and Father were following Richie and I in the motor home to take it back when I heard a soft meowing. Richie went to investigate and found Tobias under the bed so we came back to deliver him to you. I imagine he is hungry after all these days." She rubbed him with a finger under the chin, causing the cat to lean his head back for more. Larisa chuckled and informed her sister that she would see her tomorrow. She said bye to Piper without looking at the woman. Piper didn't say anything back to her. Desiree glanced at her lover before giving Larisa a quick hug before they parted. She closed the door and headed into the kitchen with Tobias still in her arms. Piper followed her in there and sat at the kitchen table.

She watched as Desiree opened a cabinet and took out a can of cat food and rolled her eyes when the young woman reached into another cabinet and took out a crystal goblet. Tobias was one lucky cat. The feline busied himself with rubbing his body against his owner's legs and crying nonstop. Desiree made cooing noises for him the whole time that she prepared his dinner. Finished she put the goblet down on Tobias' own little forest green rug and watched a moment as he began to eat. She then filled a bowl that had the cat's name on it with fresh water and put that down as well, before going over to sit at the kitchen table with Piper.

Desiree folded her arms and regarded Piper. "What is your problem with my sister?" she asked in a gentle tone of voice.

The dark-haired woman shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have a problem with your sister." She looked at Tobias as she said this, trying to avert Desiree's blue-

green eyes.

Desiree put a small hand under Piper's chin and made her face her. "You don't treat Richie that way. What's the problem?"

Piper leaned back. "There is no problem. How did I treat your sister?" she asked as if she didn't know.

"Like crap," Desiree replied bluntly. "She said bye to you and you didn't say anything. I know that there's something going on. You care to tell me what it is?" She raised an eyebrow trying to mimic the other woman, and Piper started to laugh. She was infectious and soon both women were laughing so hard that tears rolled down their cheeks.

Piper gestured for Desiree to come over, still giggling. When the younger woman did so, she pulled her down until she was sitting on her lap. The dark-haired woman kissed her lover on the cheek and looked at her fondly. "You are so adorable," she stated.

Desiree had a feeling that she was trying to avoid answering her question about Larisa, but she decided to let it drop for now. Maybe she was just imagining it. *I'm probably making a mountain out of a molehill.*

Desiree squeezed Piper's shoulder and peered at her. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

Piper emitted a low growl and nuzzled the younger woman's neck, causing her to laugh. "I most certainly am," the dark-haired woman whispered in her lover's ear.

Desiree shook her head. "You know that's not what I meant." She arose from the taller woman's lap and faced her, putting her hands on her hips. "Do you want something to eat?" Noticing her choice of words, the young woman went on before Piper could offer a reply. "Food, I mean."

Twiddling her thumbs, the older woman said, "As a matter of fact I do." She grinned mischievously at Desiree. "I'm famished." Leaning back in her chair she asked, "What do you feel like having?"

The younger woman could see naughtiness dancing in Piper's blue eyes. They were now light with playfulness. The dark-haired was most likely wondering if she would take the bait and respond to her question with a flirty reply. Well Desiree was determined not to do that. She smiled innocently. "How about pizza?"

Piper stuck her tongue out at her. She murmured, "Sucker." Louder she replied, "That sounds good." Piper chuckled to herself. "I don't even know what kind of pizza you like. What's your favorite?"

The strawberry-blonde crossed her arms over her chest. "Funny. You know everything else about me. And I heard you call me a sucker. Excuse me for not acting like a horny teenager like some people I could mention, but I will refrain from naming names."

The blue-eyed woman smiled broadly. Damn it! She loved this woman's cattiness. "First of all, I don't know everything about you. Most of what I do know I told you at the cabin. Second, am I supposed to be this horny teenager you're referring to? 'Cause if I am," she was having a hard time keeping a straight face like Desiree seemed to be accomplishing. Piper wondered briefly if she was really upset, "excuse me, but I haven't had sex in a week. Hell yeah I'm horny. And you know I always act like that. Playing off of your words." She finally let her smile show. She couldn't contain it any longer. "I like to see you blush."

Desiree smirked. "Yeah. I've come to realize you like to see me blush. A week? Please, as if that's so very long. Before that you hadn't had sex in at least eight years so I really don't see how that is an excuse."

Immediately, it occurred to Piper that they were headed into dangerous territory so she deemed it time for a subject change. "I like Canadian bacon and pineapple on my pizza," Piper stated as she arose from the chair heading out towards the living room with a frowning and suspicious Desiree following behind her. The younger woman called out her name.

"Hmm?" Piper stopped walking when she reached the couch. She looked at the two doors. One of which was by the kitchen. She pointed at that one. "That's the room your parents were in so I assume that's a guest room." She pointed to the other door. "I know that's your bedroom. Your bathroom is in there too, right? I need to take a shower."

Desiree nodded as the older woman headed in the direction of her bedroom. Desiree continued to follow her. On entering the younger woman's bedroom, Piper removed her shirt and made her way into the bathroom, where she placed the shirt on the cabinet. Her lover stopped at the entrance to the bathroom and watched, mesmerized. The blue-eyed woman reached behind her, undid the clasp on her bra, and let it fall to the floor, leaving Desiree with the difficult task of trying not to stare at her breasts. With strength that she did not know she possessed, the younger woman managed to keep her blue-green eyes on Piper's blue ones. Leaning against the cabinet, Piper removed her shoes before straightening up to look Desiree in the eyes. The older woman grinned lasciviously as she hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her shorts and pulled them and her panties down simultaneously. There this almost six-foot Amazon of a woman stood naked as the day she was born. Desiree swallowed, desperately trying not to look. She knew if she did that, then it would all probably be over and she would never get her answers. At least not on this evening, she would.

Piper placed her clothing and shoes together on the cabinet and then turned to the shower to get it started. A few moments later the warm spray was coming from the showerhead. When Piper turned around Desiree had a blue towel and washcloth in her hands. She handed the washcloth to Piper silently and placed the towel on the cabinet. The woman took it and then regarded her young lover with a sensual smile.

"I believe there's enough room for two. Care to join me?" the blue-eyed woman asked in a tone of voice that made Desiree ache with need. Oh, how she wanted this woman.

Desiree shook her head, although she would have loved to do the opposite. "Piper, can you answer a question for me?"

The dark-haired woman nodded. "I most certainly can try. What's up?" She already had an idea of what the young woman wanted to ask her.

"I noticed you left the kitchen in quite a hurry." Desiree cocked her head to the side in a way that Piper deemed was enchanting. "Care to tell me the last time you had relations with someone before me?"

Piper pretended to think it over. "Nope," she replied as she got in the bathtub and closed the flowered shower curtain. One thing she had noticed about the young woman's apartment. It was nicely done, just too colorful for her taste. Well at least her bedroom and bathroom were. The next thing Piper knew the shower curtain was being pulled aside.

"Let me rephrase the question," Desiree said pleasantly, although the other woman could tell that she was irritated. "When was the last time you had sex before having it with me?" It had just dawned on her that Piper had been out of prison for a few months before they met. It was possible that she could have been with people during that time. The rational part of Desiree was saying that she had no right to be upset, but she could not help her feelings. She couldn't stand the thought of someone else putting their hands all over Piper's body. The strawberry-blonde shook her head. She didn't even want to think about it.

The blue-eyed woman picked up a bar of soap and began to lather her washcloth. "Shouldn't you be ordering the pizza? I'm really hungry and I can just taste that mouth-watering gooey cheese."

Desiree sighed. This woman really knew how to evade something she didn't want to talk about. "Don't try to change the subject. Did you have sex with anyone after you got out of prison? Besides me that is."

The blue-green eyed woman was aware of the fact that her lover was now soaping the darkened area of her right breast ever so teasingly with the washcloth. She also noticed the tip enlarging. Desiree blew out a breath trying to maintain control of herself. "Are you trying to insinuate that I'm some sort of a harlot?" Piper asked though she was wearing a smile that made Desiree just want to give up and join her in the shower.

"No," the strawberry-blonde quickly informed her. "That's not what I meant. I just wanted to know if you've been with anyone. Call it curiosity," she paused seeing that Piper was now moving on to her left breast. She sighed again. This was more difficult than she previously thought it would be. She should have known. "So have you?"

Piper smirked. "N.O.Y.B." Her movements were closely watched as the dark-haired woman moved the washcloth to her flat stomach and began scrubbing it using a circular motion.

Desiree shook her head in an effort to clear it. Piper was really working to distract her. She got a confused expression. What in the world was the woman talking about now? "Noyb? Was does

that mean? Not on your butt?"

Piper chuckled. "None," The rag circled its way around her bellybutton, "of," it moved to her abdomen as the dark-haired woman watched her lover watching the washcloth, "your," the washcloth was now right above her dark curly thatch, "business." Piper propped her right foot up on the ledge of the bathtub and moved the rag further down. She then began to move it up and down. Growling, Desiree snatched the washcloth from her and glared at her lover.

"Stop that!" the strawberry-blonde all but shouted.

Piper regarded her with a look of innocence. "What did I do?"

"You were washing yourself."

The blue-eyed woman raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that what you wanted me to do? I thought you wanted me to be clean?" She asked knowing why Desiree was upset. The petite woman looked so cute all hot and bothered. Piper planned on fixing that later.

"I did," Desiree said between clenched teeth. "But you're doing it all...sexy like."

Piper chuckled again. "Sexy like?" She removed her foot from the ledge. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she lied, trying to hide a grin.

Desiree glared at her more. "Whatever," she said in an irritated tone. "Are you gonna answer the question?"

"Tell me about the engagement ring." As far as she knew, Desiree had never been married before. Piper hated to admit it, but the business with the expensive looking engagement ring was bothering her. She had got a good look at it on Valerie's finger and had started to really wonder who have given it to the young woman if it hadn't been Alec.

The blue-green eyed woman stared at her. "Is that the only way you'll tell me?"

Piper nodded as she picked up a bottle of shampoo. She opened it and squirted some into the palm of her hand before rubbing both hands together and applying it to her hair. She massaged the scalp while looking at Desiree.

The strawberry-blonde thought about it. Two could play this game. "Fine. You tell me yours and then I'll tell you mine."

Her lover shook her head. "I don't think so, Desi. You go first. After all, I did ask you that question before you asked me yours. Why should I tell when you didn't?" She stopped washing her hair momentarily. "Now does that seem at all fair to you?" She resumed washing her hair.

Desiree shook her head. She never knew what emotion Piper was going to bring out in her from one moment to the next. She was used to being in control of her own emotions and here was her

new lover throwing them all out of whack. It was driving her insane, but she wouldn't change Piper for anything in the world. For some reason unbeknownst to her, Desiree liked the older woman just the way that she was. It was a shame that she might have to kill her within a week.

Desiree admitted, "I guess it doesn't." She stood there silently for a second. "I'll go order the pizza." She turned around to leave the bathroom, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Desiree turned around and regarded Piper with a questioning look.

"I take it that you're not going to tell me about the ring, are you?"

The smaller woman shook her head. She was determined that Piper would break before she would. Desiree could tell that the business with the engagement ring was upsetting the other woman. She smiled inwardly. Good. Now her lover knew how it felt not to be told something that one really was anxious to know. No, Desiree was not going to be the first of the both of them to break down.

Piper nodded. "Okay. That's just fine with me. I can be just as cryptic as you." She smiled. "Do you really want me to take a shower and get clean?"

Desiree nodded. "I would appreciate that unless you plan to sleep on the floor." She grinned at Piper.

"Nah. I don't plan on sleeping on the floor. On *you*, but not the floor." She got a slap on the arm for that one. It only caused her to chuckle. "Well can I have my rag then?" Piper held her hand out for it, and Desiree realizing that she still had it gave it to her. The older woman thanked her and closed the shower curtain. The strawberry-blonde picked up Piper's shoes and clothes and started to leave when Piper thought of something and called her back.

"Yes, Piper?"

The dark-haired woman poked her head around the shower curtain. "Do you have a spare toothbrush by any chance?"

Desiree bit her lower lip. She had not thought about that. In fact, she had not thought about getting any essentials for Piper. "No, I don't." The strawberry-blonde glanced at her own toothbrush sitting in a cup on the sink. She turned her attention back to Piper. "I guess you can use mine. I know it's not very hygienic, but it's better than nothing." She grinned. "If you're thinking otherwise, your breath won't keep you out of my bed. Besides I have some *Tic Tacs*."

The blue-eyed woman raised both eyebrows and gave a little grin of her own. "Well that's good to know. I'll just use my finger and toothpaste for the time being."

"Okay. We can get you one tomorrow morning."

"Great. See you in a few," Piper replied before she disappeared behind the shower curtain once again.

Walking out of the bathroom, Desiree heard her lover beginning to sing *More than a Woman* by the Bee Gees in quite a lovely voice. So Piper could cook *and* sing. Desiree grinned wondering if the woman knew anything modern.

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Piper walked into Desiree's bedroom from the bathroom dressed in nothing but the towel that the younger woman had given to her. Desiree was sitting at her computer writing something. Watching her, Piper could tell that she had a look of intense concentration on her face. The dark-haired woman smiled. She looked so adorable. Piper shook her head, wondering when she had become this mushy. It was when Desiree had managed to break through her defenses most likely. The younger woman made her feel alive and playful. Piper hadn't felt that way...well since Jamaica. That was probably her last happy memory before Desiree came into her life.

Piper walked around so that she could look at the computer screen. As soon as she did so, Desiree minimized it. She scowled at the younger woman asking why she had done that. All that Piper had been able to make out was the date. It was today's date. The strawberry-blonde turned around in her chair to face the other woman, placing her arms on the arms of the chair. "Because it's not for you to read. It's my private journal." She sighed. "Unfortunately, I now have to start over."

Piper walked a few feet back and sat on the bed. "I'm sorry, Desi." The dark-haired woman shook her head. This was all her fault. She never should have brought Desiree to the cabin in the first place. When she thought of that though, Piper realized that they might have never met if she hadn't taken her hostage. What would her life have been like if she hadn't met this wonderful young woman? Would she still be running now? That made Piper think of the fact that she had to get her life back. She almost laughed at that. Before Desiree came into her life, she didn't have much of one. Now she had a reason to want to live.

Desiree arose from the chair and went over to sit on the bed next to the older woman. She put a small hand on Piper's bare knee. The towel didn't reach down that far. "Don't apologize," the petite woman stated softly. "I shouldn't have carried my journal entries in my purse." She smiled. "None of this is your fault."

Piper looked at her. "How can you say that? I nearly got you killed." She abruptly left the bed and started pacing. "I took you hostage for purely selfish reasons."

"You were being framed for crimes that you didn't commit. I might have run too in your situation. Don't blame yourself for your brother's problems," she paused thoughtfully. "I'm the one who should be apologizing to you."

The blue-eyed woman stopped pacing and faced her. Desiree gestured for her sit down again, and Piper did so. Piper started to utter something, but her lover gave her a pleading look for her to remain quiet. Desiree took both of her hands between her smaller ones and looked the woman in the eyes. "I lost faith in you." Piper began to speak again, but the strawberry-blonde put an index finger against her lips. "And I don't know how I can ever forgive myself for that. When

Victor told me that he was the murderer, I felt like I could just die." She tried not to cry, but the tears began to fall anyway. Piper moved her hands so that she was now holding Desiree's in between her own. "Part of me wanted him to kill me because I felt so horrible because of the way that I had treated you." Her voice broke and she couldn't go on. Gently pulling the younger woman into her arms, Piper made soft cooing noises in her ear while she rubbed her hair softly.

"Don't cry," the dark-haired woman spoke quietly. "Please don't cry, baby. It's okay. Everything is gonna be okay now." Piper placed a kiss in her hair. "You don't have any reason to apologize. I don't blame you at all." Piper shuddered, thinking about her actions that day. "I'm sorry I hit you. I don't know what got into me. My father and I are two of a kind," she said disgustedly.

"No!" Desiree shouted as she pulled out of the comforting embrace. She wiped away her tears and sniffed. "You are not like that man, Piper. You were under a lot of pressure and stress and let's face it. I wasn't making it any better for you." She placed her hands on either side of Piper's face. "Piper, I'm so happy that you're in my life. I don't know how I ever did without you. I..."

Blue eyes closely studied her. "What?" Piper prompted. Her heart started to beat faster wondering if Desiree was going to say those three special little words.

"I...think you are...beautiful." Turning away from Piper, Desiree rolled her eyes. Well that was lame. *I am a sucker*. She had started to tell Piper that she loved her, but changed her mind at the last moment. She was afraid that Piper might not feel the same way. After all, they hadn't known one another for very long. *I'll just wait a bit longer*.

Piper put her hand on the younger woman's chin and brought her face back around so that she could see her. She was wearing an adorable crooked little smile. "You're the one who is beautiful." Leaning towards Desiree she added, "I bet if you were to look up beautiful in the dictionary there would be a picture of you displayed along with the definition." Piper chuckled as Desiree rolled her eyes again, but she had managed to make the young woman smile. What Desiree had just told her wasn't what she had been hoping to hear but it was alright. They had plenty of time.

Desiree gave her two thumbs up. "Awesome pick-up line you got there." She giggled.

Piper feigned hurt. "Hey! I'll have you know that I've never used that particular line before. Besides the important thing is that I meant it." She grinned and kissed the younger woman on the nose. It was quickly becoming a habit.

Desiree sighed in contentment. "That must be the third or fourth time you've done that."

"I like doing that."

The strawberry-blonde whispered, "I like doing this." She then leaned towards Piper and trapped the woman's lips in a passionate kiss. Piper wrapped her arms around the smaller woman's waist and laid her down on the bed. Deciding to put her hands to good use, Desiree entwined them in her lover's still wet hair. They ended up on the nape of her neck and Piper moved her mouth

away from Desiree's and openly kissed the woman's neck causing her to moan. She bit the side of her young lover's neck gently while her hands began to slide Desiree's shirt up.

"Okay. We can finish this later," the flushed younger woman stated as she gently pushed Piper away. Sitting up on the bed, Desiree looked at the dark-haired woman who was breathing as heavily as she was. Her blue eyes had grown darker again and she wore a slightly irritated expression. Desiree grinned as she kissed her on the nose. That initially earned her a scowl that quickly changed into a smile.

Rising from the bed, Piper said, "That was cruel woman. Very very cruel. You're lucky I'm a gentlewoman." She grinned as she walked over to Desiree's closet and opened it. "As much as I love wearing this towel do you have anything big enough for me to wear?" Piper turned to look at Desiree who was still sitting on the bed. "I mean I know you and Barbie wear the same clothes, but-

She never got to finish her statement because she was attacked. She ended up on her back on the carpet with Desiree straddling her. Piper raised an eyebrow. Oh, yeah this was her kind of position! The smaller woman put her hands on her lover's broad shoulders and lowered herself until they were nearly nose to nose. Desiree was trying to pretend that she was angry but she wasn't in the least bit convincing. A smile kept playing on her lips.

"I hate it when people bring attention to my short stature." Desiree playfully growled only arousing Piper all the more.

"I didn't say anything about your short stature, Dino. What I was stating in a way was that you were small. That's all." Piper grinned as she put her hands on the woman's hips. "Did you order the pizza?"

Desiree nodded. "Should be here soon." She put on a mock frown. "What do you mean by calling me Dino?"

"Simply that you act like him. However, this is the first time that you've been successful in knocking me down like he does Fred. I like it. It's a cute nickname for you because you also have this cute little growl like Dino." She grinned again and said in a lower voice, "Growl for me, baby." She started to raise the shirt again but Desiree slapped her hands away. Piper stuck out her lower lip.

"Don't try the boo-boo lip routine on me. It doesn't work. And do I look like a pet to you? I'll growl when I want to."

The dark-haired woman looked her up and down. "Well I don't know. You are cute and small." She swiftly moved so that Desiree now had her back on the carpet. Leaning over the younger woman, Piper smiled like a hunter in the wild that had finally caught his prey. "And it feels nice to cuddle with you too." Piper leaned down and captured Desiree's lips in a searing kiss. It took all of the younger woman's self control not to rip Piper's towel off of her. It didn't take long for Piper's lips to find their way to her neck again. Except that this time they were on the opposite

side. Desiree began to moan and finally got the willpower to push her lover away again. "Okay, okay," Piper started as she sat back on her heels. "We'll wait until later. But I don't know why we can't do it now."

Desiree got to her knees in front of Piper. "Anticipation is part of the excitement. Waiting can make it even better." The truth was that she was scared. They had made love more than once before, but now everything was different. The circumstances were different. They were no longer hiding out in the woods, but were free. It felt good but at the same time nervousness kicked in. This was reality and Desiree did not know if she could handle it. She hardly knew Piper and was already making plans in her head to have the woman live with her. She sincerely hoped that the dark-haired woman did not intend on going back to San Francisco. Obviously, she did not have to continue on her probation since not even Desiree's father had said anything about it. It appeared as though Piper was actually a free woman. The question was if she was with Desiree long enough would there eventually come a point that she wanted to be free of her as well? The younger woman did not know if she would be able to stand it.

"I guess that could be true," Piper said grudgingly. "If the waiting doesn't kill me first."

Desiree smiled at her warmly before she kissed her chastely on the lips. "I'm sure you can wait a couple more hours." *Maybe more.*

Piper rolled her eyes. "Do I have a choice?" she grinned at the smaller woman as she again noticed the chain with the charm on it around Desiree's neck. From the first time she had noticed it back at the cabin grounds, the blue-eyed woman had been curious about it. "What's this?" Piper asked as she reached out to open the charm. "Is there a picture in here?" Before Desiree could stop her, she had opened the charm. A thimble full worth of ashes fell to the floor as the younger woman's mouth opened but no sound was forthcoming. Piper frowned. Of all things why had Desiree been carrying around ashes in a charm? Hair she could understand, but ashes? And wasn't it supposed to be a picture?

Piper chuckled slightly. "Are those from a memorable bar-b-que or something? Had some tasty ribs did you?" she asked, noticing that the strawberry-blonde seemed to be speechless. This was highly unusual. "Is something wrong, Desi?"

Desiree nodded mutely.

The other woman was now very concerned. Removing the chain and charm from around her neck, Desiree closed the charm before laying both on the carpet. She looked at Piper after the woman called her name in a worried voice.

Opening her mouth Desiree whispered, "You just wasted your sister."

Piper looked at the younger woman as if she had just stated that she was from another planet. The blue-eyed woman glanced down at the ashes on the floor and then brought her attention back to Desiree.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Remember when I told you while we were still in the RV that Taj and I had spread ashes out in the ocean thinking that they were yours?"

Piper nodded and then it dawned on her where this was heading. She pointed at the ashes. "Do those...is that...um...Emily?"

"Yes. That's her." Desiree shrugged. "A little bit of her anyway."

The dark-haired woman peered at the ashes a moment in silence, before glancing at the other woman. "I wonder what part. A bit of an ear maybe." She chuckled. "A nose."

Desiree's mouth formed into a wide O. Before Piper could even think to stop her, the younger woman had reached out a hand and slapped her none too gently on the side of the head. Ignoring her lover's shocked expression, Desiree grabbed the chain and charm as she arose from the floor. She walked over to her dresser and placed both items in her floral designed jewelry box, almost lovingly. Desiree heard Piper asking her why she hit her, but did not offer a quick response. Instead, she kept her vision focused on the jewelry box, willing her temper to cool down some. Finally, sensing that she could control any outbursts, Desiree turned around to regard the other woman. Piper was now leaning against the wall close to the bathroom entrance with her arms crossed over her chest. It was clear from the expression on her face that she was waiting for an explanation.

"How can you be so callous?" Desiree asked in a quiet voice. "This is another human being we are talking about. Your own sister, Piper."

A scowl appeared on Piper's face. "Let me get this straight. You are defending a woman who tried to frame me for a murder that *she* committed? I don't have any sisterly feelings for that woman." She shrugged. "If that makes me seem cold-blooded then so be it."

Desiree mentally counted to ten. This was starting to become one difficult relationship, but the young woman was determined to make it work. *Who am I kidding? This has been difficult from the start.* She knew there was a heart of gold in this woman. "She's dead," Desiree simply stated.

The dark-haired woman studied her for a few seconds in silence. "Not my problem." Her blue eyes had turned ice cold, and the strawberry-blonde got the distinct impression that she was pushing her luck. Piper was speaking in a normal tone of voice, but Desiree knew that the woman was most likely seething underneath it all. Not exactly at Desiree herself, but at the whole situation with her siblings. *That's something else that I'll have to work on. She is way too hot tempered.*

Desiree sighed. Should she just drop the subject for now? That might be in both of their best interests. "So you want something to wear?" She tried to ask brightly.

Piper nodded, glad for the change in subject.

The younger woman turned towards her dresser again and opened the top drawer. After rummaging in there for a few moments and not finding anything suitable, she moved on to the next drawer. As Desiree moved the clothes around in that drawer, she felt warm hands on her shoulders. Next, she felt a pair of soft warm lips lightly touch the skin just beneath her left ear. "I'm sorry," Piper whispered. Desiree looked in the mirror in front of her and spied both her own and Piper's reflection. The dark-haired woman gazed at her through the mirror. "You make me want to be a better woman."

Desiree's face screwed up in thought. That sounded so familiar. Where had she heard it before? As it dawned on her where, the younger woman began to chuckle softly. Her lover raised a dark eyebrow, still looking at her reflection in the mirror. "Is there something that you find particularly humorous?" Piper removed her hands from the shorter woman's shoulders and repositioned them on her small waist.

Desiree nodded as she finally managed to stop chuckling. "You stole that line from the movie *As Good As it Gets* and you know it."

Piper barely managed to keep from grinning. She had figured that she would be able to get away with it. "I don't recall Jack Nicholson saying that Helen made him want to be a better woman," she retorted.

The strawberry-blonde chuckled again. "You stole the majority of the line though. Just edited it a bit." She turned around in Piper's arms to face the taller woman, smirking. "Don't try to pull one over on this Love girl. I live and breathe movies and that flick happens to be one of my favorites."

Piper tightened her hold as Desiree put her own arms around her neck. "So you're a movie buff, huh?"

Desiree nodded.

The blue-eyed woman said, "Well, I meant it. Every single word, even though...as you put it, I stole it." She leaned down and kissed her lover on the nose, receiving a low growl from the younger woman. Piper smiled. "That's my Dino."

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Ten minutes later, Piper was dressed in a tight fitting navy blue T-shirt that showed off her upper body quite well in Desiree's opinion. For the lower half she had on baggy white cotton workout pants that had belonged to Alec until the blue-green eyed woman had swiped them the last time she had washed the clothes. When the dark-haired woman asked her why she did that, Desiree had replied that the pants looked comfortable and warm since some nights she found to be chilly. Unfortunately, she had never got the chance to wear them because the next night she was abducted.

At first, Piper was adamant against wearing the pants, stating that she did not want to wear

anything that had belonged to the other woman's ex-boyfriend. Desiree shook her head, wondering why this woman had to be so stubborn. Since Desiree did not have any underwear that would fit Piper, and the ones she had on before taking her shower had just been tossed in the garbage it was either the pants or nothing. The strawberry blonde told her that if she refused to wear the pants then she would have to walk around either with the towel wrapped around her waist or with her naked rear end sticking out. Not being in the least bit modest, Piper was all for the latter. Desiree shook her head. There was no way on this earth that she was going to allow this woman to walk around in nothing but a T-shirt that barely covered her abdomen. The strawberry-blonde decided to deliver an ultimatum. Piper was told that she either put on the pants or sleep on the couch tonight. Alone. After mulling it over for all of a second, the dark-haired woman put on the pants in what must have been a record time. Desiree shook her head, chuckling as she showed her lover the blow dryer.

While Piper busied herself combing out the tangles and drying her hair, the other woman took a quick shower. Standing right next to the shower Piper was sorely tempted to cease fixing her hair and join Desiree no matter how much she protested. If the dark-haired woman had her way, Desiree's resolve would break soon. Just as Piper finished with her hair, the other woman cut off the shower and asked her politely for the towel that was lying on top of the lid of the toilet. The blue-eyed woman got a mischievous glint in her eye. No way was she going to let this golden opportunity pass. Turning towards the closed shower curtain, Piper put her hands on her hips.

"Gee, I don't know if I can," she stated in a sing song voice.

"What do you mean you don't know if you can?" Desiree inquired behind the shower curtain.

Piper could not see the younger woman but she could imagine what Desiree must look like. All wet and slippery... The blue-eyed woman shook her head. Thinking like that was not a good idea, since her lover obviously wanted to wait. Piper could not fathom why she wanted that, but she was determined to respect the younger woman's wishes. Even though, the tortuous waiting was starting to drive her completely insane.

Piper shrugged though Desiree could not see the action. "I just don't know if I can."

The strawberry-blonde mumbled something under her breath and the dark-haired woman asked her to repeat what she had said. "Nothing. I said nothing. Forget it. Listen. Piper, just hand me the towel okay? Please? I'm getting cold." Which was true. Desiree wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to retain some warmth. She shook her wet head. That woman was going to get what she had coming to her very soon.

"Then turn the hot water back on," Piper offered, grinning.

Desiree argued, "But I wanna get out." She was nearly whining now.

"Sounds like a personal problem to me." The blue-eyed woman could hear her partner growling in frustration or anger. She couldn't tell which. Either way she was happy. Desiree was so cute when she was miffed.

"What do you want, Piper?" the strawberry-blonde asked in an irritated tone. Yes, her lover was definitely going to get it. She didn't know what "it" was yet, but Piper would most definitely be getting it.

Piper sauntered towards the closed shower curtain until she was close enough to open it if she wanted to. Which she really wanted to. "Oh, you know what I want," Piper replied in a deeper voice that sent warm tingles through the other woman's body. *It's amazing how she can just turn me on with her voice.*

Desiree pulled the curtain back just far enough for the taller woman to see her face. Piper had a good view since she was standing right outside the tub. If the woman managed to get any closer she would probably trip over the edge and fall in. Desiree raised a golden eyebrow. Suddenly her nervousness had disappeared. She wanted Piper and she wanted her now. "What is it that you desire, lover?" she asked in her smokiest voice, pushing the shower curtain back so that the other woman could see her entire body. She immediately saw Piper's blue eyes darken with her passion and the goofy grin she was wearing evaporate.

"You," the dark-haired woman answered in a whisper that Desiree could barely hear. However, Piper did not make another move. In fact, she was as still as a statue, waiting for the strawberry-blonde to make the next move. It was completely up to Desiree what occurred next. Piper did not have to wait long for the younger woman to act.

Wrapping her wet arms around Piper's neck, Desiree brought her lips to those of her partners in a light touch. The blue-eyed woman placed her arms around Desiree's waist as the kiss deepened. Piper's tongue asked for entrance into the other woman's mouth and was immediately let in. Their tongues danced together as Piper began to move her hands up and down her lover's smooth back. Desiree moaned softly as she broke the kiss and quickly moved her lips to the older woman's neck and bit the skin gently causing Piper to let out her own moan.

"Oh, baby, I want you so bad," the dark-haired woman whispered hoarsely. She moved her hands down to Desiree's firm yet soft buttocks and began to massage her cheeks. Desiree moved her mouth to Piper's ear and started to suck the lobe gently. The taller woman felt Desiree's hot breath on her skin and involuntarily shivered in delight.

Unfortunately, someone picked that precise moment to ring the doorbell. Piper growled in frustration as she took a step back, releasing the other woman from her embrace. Running a hand threw her hair, Piper told her lover that she would die if she didn't have her soon.

Desiree chuckled. "I don't believe deprivation of sex can kill someone."

The dark-haired woman gave her a mock scowl in return. "You just remember this conversation when you're weeping over my tombstone that reads, 'Here lies Piper Redding. Died because she couldn't get any'. You'll be sorry then."

Laughing now, Desiree playfully slapped her on the arm, informing the woman that she should get the door. Piper headed towards the bathroom door, but then stopped and came back around to

face the strawberry-blonde. The blue-eyed woman wrapped her arms around Desiree's waist and kissed her quickly before stating huskily, "I'm gonna rock your world tonight, Desi." She let go with a wink and hurried out of the bathroom to answer the door as she heard the doorbell ring again. Piper heard Desiree telling her that the money was on her dresser if that was the pizza deliverer. The dark-haired woman quickly grabbed a twenty-dollar bill lying on the dresser before all but running for the front door. She hadn't had pizza in months. Not since she first got out and treated herself to one. After that one time, Piper had not allowed herself to splurge very often.

After peeping through the peephole, Piper opened the door and greeted the deliverer with a bright smile. She could smell the delicious aroma coming from the rectangular box already. The young pizza delivery boy took one look at Piper and took a step back as he gasped. For some reason, the action caused the dark-haired woman to quickly look over her shoulder. Not seeing anything, she turned back to him with a raised eyebrow. Piper asked him if something was wrong.

The teenage boy nodded then shook his head. It was obvious that he was confused or frightened about something. Piper wondered briefly if he was high on some illegal substance by the way that he was acting. The dark-haired woman shook her head sadly. Some of these kids today... He pointed at her. "I...I kn...know you. I know you," he stated in a shaky voice as he jumped a little.

Piper raised an eyebrow again. "You do?" he nodded emphatically. "Funny. Because I don't think I know you. To be honest you don't look familiar at all."

The boy pushed a few strands of shoulder-length blonde hair out of his face. "Dude, I wouldn't. You don't know me but I know you." He moved towards her a step. "I thought you were dead."

It then dawned on Piper why he was acting the way that he was. She took a deep breath. Maybe answering the door wasn't such a good idea. "You're not the first person to tell me that today. So you've obviously heard of me."

"Yeah." He chuckled and bounced some. "I can't believe that I'm staring you in the face." The next thing Piper knew it, the teenager had a hold of her hand and was shaking it. After forcing himself to let go he looked at his hand as though he would never wash it again. He glanced at her and said, "I am a big fan of yours, Ms. Redding. May I call you Piper?" Before she could answer his question, he went on talking excitedly. "I've been keeping up with you since all this shit happened and I hafta tell you that I thought you were innocent of those crimes from the start. Sure it looked shady but I never gave up hope." He put the pizza on the ground and pointed at himself. "By the way, I'm Ice Cream." He shrugged. "That's not my real name but they call me that because I'm smooth, cool, and sweet."

He gave her a look that caused the dark-haired woman to roll her eyes. Poor thing, little did he know he didn't have a snowball's chance in Hell of wooing her. "Look, Ice Cream...thank you for believing in me. I really appreciate." She glanced down at the pizza box. "May I have my pizza now?"

"Just a minute." Ice Cream removed his work shirt and showed Piper his T-shirt underneath. "Check this out. I had a friend of mine do it. Cool, huh?" The white cotton shirt sported a picture of Piper that was taken during her trial nearly nine years ago. She was sitting in a chair in the courtroom wearing a gray charcoal suit. She remembered that day. It was the day the jury had read the verdict. Underneath the picture in all capitals and bold writing was printed the word **"INNOCENT"**. Ice Cream turned around and Piper read on the back of the shirt, **"UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY"**. The dark-haired woman thought it odd that the boy would choose the picture that was taken the day she was indeed proven guilty. Ice Cream turned back around to face Piper with a huge grin plastered on his face. "Do you like it, Piper?"

She nodded although all she really cared about was getting her pizza. "May I now-"

Ice Cream cut her off. "Ooh! Dude, can I have your autograph?"

Both of the dark-haired woman's eyebrows shot up. "You want my autograph?" So, the boy saw it fit to give her the status of a celebrity. Well far be it of Piper to let him down. Besides, the quicker she got rid of him, the quicker she could sink her teeth into that mouthwatering pizza.

The delivery boy nodded. "Please?" He took out her receipt and turned it over on the back, which was blank. "Do you want this?" Ice Cream waved the small slip at her, and Piper shook her head. "Okay. You can put it on the back of here then." He felt on his pockets and then informed her that he did not have a pen.

Out of the corner of her eye, the blue-eyed woman saw Desiree coming out of the bedroom wearing green plaid pajama bottoms and a green tank top to match. The top showed off the smooth feminine muscles in her arms and Piper grinned in appreciation. The strawberry-blonde was drying her hair with a fluffy towel as she came over to the door wearing a curious expression.

"What's going on Piper?" the young woman asked as she looked at the pizza boy who appeared to be a little bit too excited about delivering pizza.

The dark-haired woman turned to her. "Ice Cream here, knows me." At Desiree's blank expression she continued, "He knows who I am and he wants my autograph." She shrugged and finished, "He's a fan." Piper tried hard not to, but she could not manage to keep a grin off of her face. Thinking it over it felt good to know that she had someone else in her corner that didn't even know her personally. The dark-haired woman asked Desiree if she would get her a pen. The young woman left to retrieve the requested item and shortly came back. She handed it to Piper who asked Ice Cream for the receipt. Piper then asked him what he wanted her to write on it.

"Put to my greatest fan, Ice Cream. Yours always, Piper Redding. Oh! And that's Ice Cream with a "K" not a "C"."

The blue-eyed woman nodded as she began writing the message on Desiree's back. Finished, Piper handed the autograph to the delivery boy. Thanking her, he folded the autograph and put it

in his wallet. Picking up the pizza, Ice Kream handed it to Piper while announcing that it was on the house. She tried to pay him but he refused to take her money, so she and Desiree ended up getting a free pizza. The delivery boy shook Piper's hand and then made to leave when the strawberry-blonde called him back. Ice Kream looked at her expectantly.

"Now this is our little secret, right?" Desiree inquired. "You won't tell anyone that you saw Piper here, will you? She really doesn't need the press hounding her right now. She's been through enough as it is."

The delivery boy nodded. "Of course I won't tell anyone. I completely understand what you mean, Miss...?"

Standing beside her, Desiree heard Piper chuckle. She resisted the urge to glare at the older woman, and instead turned a sweet smile on Ice Kream. So, he did not know who she was, eh? The strawberry-blonde did not know whether to be insulted or relieved by that fact. So what if the teenager did not ask for her autograph. It did not matter one bit to Desiree. *What am I? Chopped liver?*

"It doesn't matter, Ice Kream," Desiree replied. "I'm just a friend of Ms. Redding's and she just came here for some peace and quiet before she resurfaces. So mums the word. Okay?"

Ice Kream nodded again. "Of course. You have my word that I will not tell anyone." He laughed. "Dude, I won't even tell my own shadow."

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Desiree eyed the last piece of pizza in the box. It was not hot anymore, but she still wanted it. If there was one thing that the young woman excelled at, it was eating. From an early age, she had done it well. Piper, sitting next to her on the couch, smiled inwardly. At first, the strawberry-blonde had been turned off at the idea of eating pineapple on pizza, but she ate more of Piper's half than she did. She also ate her own which only consisted of pepperoni.

The dark-haired woman stretched her legs out on the coffee table. "You looking at my last slice of pizza?" she asked with a trace of amusement in her voice.

Desiree spared her a quick glance. "No." She turned her attention back to the old movie playing on television. She was full, but it tasted so delicious.

"Come now, Desi." Piper leaned towards her and whispered in the younger woman's ear, "You know you want it." Desiree gulped. "You can just taste it, can't you?" Piper quickly ran her tongue on the ridge of the other woman's ear, causing her to shudder. Leaning back into the comfortable couch she said in her regular voice, "G'wan and take the pizza." When Desiree did not make a move she added, "Take it before I change my mind. You can have it." Giving in to temptation, the strawberry-blonde reached over and swiped the last slice from the box. She practically inhaled it while Piper looked on in amazement. How could such a little thing consume so much? Piper guessed it was probably one of those many mysteries in life.

Impulsively, Desiree reached over and kissed the dark-haired woman on the cheek and said, "I'm so happy to have you back, Piper."

The other woman smiled at her warmly. "Ditto."

Desiree grinned back and then maneuvered herself until she was stretched out on the couch with her head in the other woman's lap. Piper immediately placed a hand in the strawberry-blonde's hair and began to stroke it gently as she turned her complete attention to the movie.

A while later, as Desiree watched the credits of the movie roll, she wondered if Piper had fallen asleep since she had been quiet for the last fifteen minutes or so. The strawberry-blonde had learned something interesting about the other woman. Piper, to Desiree's great surprise enjoyed talking while watching a movie. Now probably with anyone else she would have been irritated, but not with the woman whose lap she was lying in quite comfortably at the moment. Piper liked to make comments, most of which were positive, though some of what she said caused Desiree to start laughing.

Enjoying where she was immensely, Desiree did not want to move, but it was time to wake Piper up and get her to the bedroom so that she could lie down and get some much-needed rest. Desiree sighed. The last thing she had on her mind was rest, but she considered that the other woman needed it, and as bad as she herself had been sleeping, Desiree had to admit that she should head to bed as well.

The strawberry-blonde reached for the remote and clicked off the television as she felt a drop of something wet fall on her cheek. It was followed quickly by another drop leaving the young woman to wonder if there was a leak in her ceiling coming from the apartment above hers. Another drop fell and Desiree turned so that she was lying on her back, with the back of her head on the other woman's lap. With widened blue-green eyes, Desiree noticed that Piper was crying. The dark-haired woman swiped the tears away and turned her head to the side.

Biting her lower lip to keep from laughing, the strawberry-blonde lifted a hand to turn Piper's full profile back to her. However, Piper refused to make eye contact.

"Piper, that is so adorable," the younger woman stated as she left her hand on the other woman's cheek and began to caress it softly.

The dark-haired woman glanced down at her. "What is?"

"That you're crying over the movie. At least I assume that's why you're crying."

Piper sniffed and quickly wiped at her right eye. "I don't know what you're talking about, Desi. I wasn't crying," she retorted stubbornly.

Her lover smiled. "Yeah, right. So those things falling from your eyes aren't tears?"

The dark-haired woman lied, "I just got something in my eye is all. I don't cry over movies. Not like it's real or anything..."

*Yeah, sure*, Desiree thought to herself. Did Piper actually think that she was fooling someone? Well Desiree was not about to press the issue.

Piper leaned over and kissed the strawberry-blonde on the nose. "Ready to hit the sheets?" she asked waggling her eyebrows.

The younger woman chuckled. Well rest could wait. "Yes, but you go on ahead." Desiree got up and stretched before starting to gather their mess from dinner. Piper offered to help her, but the younger woman refused, advising her to go wait in the bed. After thinking it over quickly, the dark-haired woman decided to take her up on her offer and all but skipped to the bedroom. Desiree could never be sure, but she thought that she even heard Piper whistling a little happy tune.

Gathering the empty pizza box and everything else, Desiree took them to the kitchen. She washed the few dishes and glasses while Tobias rubbed against her legs while purring. After finishing and drying her hands on a dishtowel, Desiree picked up the cat and scratched him for a few minutes as her thoughts traveled back to the sensual woman waiting for her in her bedroom.

Piper Redding was her girlfriend, and Desiree supposed live-in lover. That is if the dark-haired woman decided to stay. Desiree certainly hoped that she would. What if she wanted to go back to San Francisco? The young woman shook her head. No, that wasn't going to happen. She was sure of it. After all, there was nothing for Piper there. Her friends were here and Desiree considered that she didn't have anything to go back to. No commitments or family. The strawberry-blonde knew for a fact that she herself would not want to go back.

Desiree sighed. She would have to get working on her book again and get a job if she didn't want to get herself, Piper and Tobias evicted. She was sure that her parents would help out, but that was what she was trying to avoid. Desiree wanted to be on her own without their help. She was an adult and she was fully capable of taking care of herself. So, that was what she would do. If she had to get a job at a burger joint for the time being in order to pay the bills then so be it. Sometimes you had to work your way up the ladder of success.

That settled Desiree deposited Tobias down on the floor despite his meows of protests. The young woman began to walk out of the kitchen, but then turned back around and went to one of her cabinets rummaging around until she found a bottle of whiskey in the back behind a big can of coffee. Untwisting the cap and taking it off, Desiree tipped the bottle and took a few swigs of the alcohol. The nervousness had returned some but she needed Piper. She wanted her so much that she could taste it. Taking another long swig, Desiree put the cap back on and replaced the bottle in the back.

Taking a deep breath, the young woman made her way through the living room and then quietly opened her bedroom door. The light was on and she could plainly see Piper in the bed, stretched out under the sheets and blanket with an arm across her face, covering her eyes some from view.

First sighing, and then chuckling to herself, Desiree turned out the lamp next to the side of the bed Piper was sleeping on and then crawled in next to her. In her sleep, the dark-haired woman immediately rolled over and threw an arm around Desiree. Feeling her lover's warm deep even breathing on her neck, the strawberry-blonde succumbed to sleep.

She was dreaming and my, was it vivid! Someone was kissing her on the neck and she discovered that it was quite a delightful feeling that sent wonderful sensations through her body. She moaned as she felt a soft warm hand enter the waistband of her pants and roam down until it was covering her mound. The woman moaned again as a pair of soft lips covered her own. The tip of a tongue touched her bottom lip and the woman opened her eyes to find that this actually was not a dream at all.

Desiree blinked her eyes and then reached over to turn on the light. With her eyes narrowing because of the brightness, she squinted at Piper, who was lying besides her with their bodies in close contact. Desiree could all but feel the heat emanating from her lover. She could also feel Piper's index finger consistently rubbing at the entrance of her center, and she involuntarily let out a soft moan of pleasure.

"Pi...Piper, what are you doing?" *What kind of idiotic question is that? What does it look like she's doing?*

The dark-haired woman chuckled low in her throat. "You know what I'm doing, Desi," she whispered. "I like to keep my promises." Piper covered a patch of skin on the younger woman's neck with her lips again. "If you notice the time," she went on between kisses, "it's not yet midnight, therefore it's still Sunday and I distinctly remember saying that I was going to rock your world tonight." She stopped to gaze into Desiree's eyes. "That is a promise that I won't break." Finished with her short speech, Piper leaned down to capture the other woman's lips with her own. Desiree moaned as she kissed her lover back passionately. Far be it from her to prohibit Piper from fulfilling her promise.

Moments later, Piper ended the kiss and got to her knees. She reached down and began to pull Desiree's shirt off of her. Wanting very much to help, the younger woman sat up and shucked her T-shirt, throwing it across the room. Piper growled low in her throat as she leaned down to take one of Desiree's rosy nipples into her mouth. The blue-green eyed woman gasped at the stimulating contact. Piper increased her sucking as she gently nudged the other woman to lie down. Desiree did so willingly due to the sudden weakness that she was feeling.

The dark-haired woman crawled down to kneel besides the other woman's legs. She pulled Desiree's pants and panties off of her at the same time. Piper threw them onto the floor, as her darkened blue eyes raked over her lover's body. The strawberry-blonde began to fidget from the silent exploration. She wanted this woman to make love to her. Not examine her like a rare piece of art.

Desiree cleared her throat. "Are you going to just look or...touch?" she asked in a lowered voice.

Dark blue eyes glanced at her, before Piper hurriedly removed her own T-shirt and caused the

bed to bounce some, as she pulled off the baggy pants and threw them in the general direction of the shirt. Now it was Desiree's turn to admire her body. Was it the younger woman's imagination or had Piper managed to look even better with her clothes off, then she had a week ago?

Piper covered the smaller woman's body with her own and started kissing her soft lips. Desiree wrapped her arms around Piper's back and began running her hands over it as she melted into the kissing. The older woman began to grind her middle into that of the other woman's as she broke the contact of their lips and began to kiss along Desiree's jaw line.

"I want you so bad, Desi," Piper stated in a lowered voice. She began to kiss the younger woman's neck. The dark-haired woman could feel Desiree's heart beating as rapidly as her own was at that instant.

Before Piper knew what had happened, she was lying on her back on the bed with the strawberry-blonde straddling her hips. The older woman grinned, wondering what Desiree was intending to do. One thing was for sure. Piper was not about to let herself be handcuffed tonight. Though she had thoroughly enjoyed it up at the cabin, she wanted full usage of her hands tonight. For some reason, she didn't believe that Desiree had any handcuffs lying around anyway.

Desiree leaned down and kissed her lover on her eyelids softly. She then kissed the woman on the nose, and then made a detour for one cheek and then the other. The strawberry-blonde passed those wonderfully full lips, and went for Piper's neck instead. She placed her lips over the spot where she could feel the dark-haired woman's racing pulse. Desiree's lips traveled to a collarbone that she gladly kissed along, as she felt Piper's long fingers run through her hair. She then felt the woman's hands on her shoulders, putting a slight pressure there, silently urging the strawberry-blonde to go lower.

Desiree smiled mischievously up at her impatient lover. "Did you want something, Piper?"

The blue-eyed woman growled low in her throat. "You know what I want, Desi. Please don't tease me tonight," she replied sounding earnestly desperate. There was pleading in Piper's eyes, and Desiree being a soft-hearted person, did not have it in her to tease when the other woman was being so sincere. She thought back to events from earlier that evening. Though it wasn't like Piper didn't deserve to be teased. The younger woman considered that she had every right to pay the woman back, but not now. Besides, Desiree was getting impatient herself.

One more ribbing wouldn't hurt anything. She could not resist. "You know," Desiree began in a conversational tone, fully aware that Piper looked like she might be getting ready to take charge of the situation, "this chick once told me that patience is a virtue." The strawberry-blonde smirked.

"Really?" Piper lifted an eyebrow. *Rule #1 of dating Desiree Love. One must watch what they say around her. For it could come back to haunt them.* "Well whoever she is, she's crazy."

Desiree kissed her lover on the lips and grinned. "I couldn't agree with you more."

The dark-haired woman smirked. "Cute. Very cute." She gently but quickly pushed Desiree off of her and the younger woman landed on her back, with a gorgeous naked Amazon of a woman kneeling over her.

*I can't believe she's mine.* "Hey! What did you do that for?" inquired Desiree in a playful tone.

"I've decided," the blue-eyed woman started as she slowly lowered herself onto her younger lover. Piper closed her eyes at the exquisite contact of their bodies. Sure she was much bigger than this woman, but they were a match made in Heaven. Blue eyes opened as a hand began to travel down Desiree's body, starting at the side of her breast. The strawberry-blonde's breath began to quicken, wondering where that hand would end up. Piper went on, "to take," the dark-haired woman began to kiss her small lover, starting with her chin and slowly going down her throat as her hand stroked the woman's thigh. Piper moved down the other woman's body until her mouth was level with her full breasts. Her tongue darted out and lightly flicked across an extended rosy nipple, as Desiree arched her back, beginning to moan softly, "matters," Piper whispered before she closed her mouth over the other woman's nipple, taking as much of the breast into her mouth as was possible. She heard the younger woman call out her name as her mouth moved to give equal attention to the other breast. After a few moments, Piper ended the sweet torment and slid off of Desiree, making sure that their bodies were still touching. Her hand traveled up the inside of the other woman's thigh having a destination in mind, "into," Piper went on in a voice thick with desire as one finger slid into the strawberry-blonde's hot and moist center, "my own hands." Desiree cried out at the pleasure. The dark-haired woman began to move her finger in and out slowly as she reached up to place a feverish kiss on her lover's mouth. This was true bliss.

Their tongues thrashing about, Desiree's hips moved against the digit plunging within her, deeply caressing her. Wanting her lover to feel what she herself was experiencing, Desiree slipped a hand between them and stroked Piper's womanhood, her outer lips coated with her thickened nectar. Moaning in delight into her mouth, the brunette practically begged Desiree to come inside of her while as she added another finger, her pace quickening. Not wanting her lover to have to wait another moment, the strawberry-blonde slipped a couple of digits between her swollen lips causing Piper's hips to began almost furiously gyrating.

They eagerly matched each other's strokes and soon worked up to a feverish pace, sweat dampened foreheads touching, heated puffs of air flowing between them as slick thrusting fingers brought them to the precipice where they swiftly catapulted into a pool of rapture.

Breathing heavily, Piper kissed the length of her lover's neck as soft palms languidly rubbed up and down her back. Softly moaning, she raised her head and tenderly touched her lips to those, which she deemed sweeter than honey. Gazing into Desiree's eyes, a smile curved her lips.

"That was...damn," she reverently whispered.

Desiree lightly chuckled while giving a slight nod. "My sentiments exactly."

With the lights now off, Piper gently rubbed Desiree's back in a circular motion, while the

woman's head rested on her broad shoulder in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Their breathing had returned to normal and the two women were quiet. Neither had said much in the last few minutes, and Piper felt the need to break the silence.

She began to speak in a quiet voice. "Desi, I don't feel like I deserve you. In fact, I know that I don't. You deserve to have someone that can give you so much more than I have to offer. Just look at the way we met. I kidnapped you." She bent her head and gently kissed the object of her affection on the forehead before lying back on the pillow. "I'm so sorry, baby," she whispered as a tear escaped her eye. Piper didn't bother to wipe it away. "But I'm way too selfish to just leave you. I can't do that. I don't wanna leave you. I need you. It frightens me that I need and want you so much," she paused. "I guess you could say that I desire you Desiree." Piper chuckled. "I've been waiting to use your name and that word in the same sentence," she paused once again. "If you were ever to decide that you didn't want me, and I wouldn't blame you one bit...I might just die. Not actually, but I know that I might just die inside. I'm hooked on you now, and I have a feeling that that will never go away. That it's forever. I'll always want you. Need you." Another tear fell as Piper whispered, "I guess what I'm trying to say is, I love you, Desiree Meredith Love."

Minutes passed without Desiree offering any comment. Piper's heart to began to beat faster. *Oh, God. I've probably scared the poor girl. Good going, stupid. Should have just kept my mouth shut.* "Desi, I'm sorry I said all that. Are you upset?" When the younger woman still did not answer, Piper's brow furrowed as she turned her head to look down at the woman. Since it was dark, she reached over and clicked on the light. Getting a good look at Desiree's face, the dark-haired woman felt instant relief and a small amount of disappointment at the say time. The strawberry-blonde was fast asleep.

"I'll be damned," Piper said good-naturedly. Oh well. Maybe Desiree was not meant to hear her declaration just yet. Extinguishing the light before slipping her arms around her young lover, she closed her eyes. As she lay there, it suddenly dawned on Piper that she had not been this happy in a long time. The feeling was incredible. A slight smile evident on her lips, Piper drifted off to sleep.

Continued in Part 9.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

## **CHAPTER 9**

Yawning, Piper opened her eyes. She smiled when her eyes landed on the other woman lying next to her. By listening to her breathing, she could tell that Desiree was still in a deep sleep. *Must have worn her out*, Piper thought to herself as she grinned. Well after last night, it did not surprise her one bit. Speaking of sleep, Piper raised up to take a look at the clock. The woman was shocked to find that it was nearly eleven o'clock. She never slept that late.

Piper frowned. There was something warm and heavy on her back. Glancing over her shoulder, the woman noticed that the culprit was Tobias. She shook her head. This cat had some nerve deciding to rest on her, when usually he would not give her the time of day.

Still looking back at him and seeing that he was asleep as well, Piper said, "I don't understand you, furball." Cocking open one eye, Tobias peered at her in apparent boredom. "I know you don't like me, but you obviously don't find any problem with using me as your personal pillow." The feline opened the other eye and yawned. "Get off of me." Stubborn as a mule, Tobias didn't move an inch. Piper shook her body a little thinking that that might make him leave, but of course, it did not do the trick. "I want you to get off of my back right now, furball. That's an order." Tobias stretched out his front legs and extended his claws, as if threatening his human pillow. Since Piper's bare back was exposed, those sharp claws could really do some damage if the cat chose to use them in a negative way. Piper raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't dare." Tobias' right paw was now close to the dark-haired woman's smooth bronzed skin. "In case you forgot, I defended you yesterday, furball. Remember? Against Alec?" Piper shook her head again. She was trying to hold a one-sided conversation with a cat. Not only that. She was trying to reason with him too. What truly frightened her was that she believed he was actually listening and understanding every word that she said.

Both of Tobias' front claws were all but touching Piper's skin now. "If you fancy keeping your tail, Tobias, get off now," Piper stated in a low voice. The cat then tried to stare her down, but after a couple of minutes gave up and jumped off the bed. Piper chuckled to herself as she lay back down on her pillow to gaze at Desiree.

She did not get to do that for long, because Tobias, now sitting on the floor right next to the bed, began to cry. Rolling her eyes, the dark-haired woman turned her head to the left and rested on her elbows. "What is it, furball?" Tobias continued to cry while looking up at her. "I suppose that you want to eat now?" It seemed as if his crying became louder after she asked the question. The blue-eyed woman could not understand how Desiree could continue to sleep through that noise. She glanced back at her lover noticing that the woman was either playing possum, or she was still very much asleep. Quietly getting out of bed, Piper retrieved the pants she had been wearing last night. After putting them on, she located her shirt, which was lying in Desiree's computer chair. Slipping on the shirt, she told Tobias to be quiet. Of course, the cat would not listen as he rubbed against her leg and purred loudly, doing a fairly good impression of a lawn mower.

"Oh, now I'm your best friend, huh?" The dark-haired woman said, walking towards the bedroom door. The feline beat her out of the room and all but raced to the kitchen as if his life depended on this very meal. Piper took her time walking to the kitchen. She was not about to hurry to feed

that little ungrateful brat.

On entering the kitchen, Piper went to the cabinet the cat's food was in. She took out a can of liver pate and opened it. Taking Tobias' crystal goblet out of the dish drainer, Piper emptied the cat food into it before placing it on the cat's rug. Instantly stopping his crying, the feline walked up to the goblet and began eating.

The blue-eyed woman ran a hand through her mused hair as her stomach grumbled. Well it was time to feed the human. Piper went to the refrigerator and noticed a box of cornflakes on top. Taking it down she found a couple of bowls in another cabinet and poured cereal into each. She then poured some sugar into each bowl from a sugar bowl that was in the shape of a kitten. Starting to whistle, the dark-haired woman took out a banana that she was delighted to find in the refrigerator and sliced it. She put an equal amount of slices into each bowl. After putting two pieces of bread in the toaster, Piper poured milk onto the cereal, and then added a spoon to each bowl. The toast popped up and the woman put margarine and strawberry jelly on them, before putting both on a saucer. Pouring orange juice into two glasses, Piper set them on the cabinet, before putting the saucer on top of one of the bowls and carrying the bowls of cereal to the bedroom.

Entering the bedroom, the dark-haired woman put what she was carrying on the nightstand, before hurrying back to get the glasses of juice. When she came back, Piper halted at the entrance to the door, watching in amusement as Desiree took a gigantic bite out of one of the toasts. The strawberry-blonde licked away a spot of jelly on her upper lip before eating a spoonful of cereal with two slices of banana on it. Desiree had another spoonful ready when she heard someone clearing their throat. She glanced up in embarrassment. The young woman hurried to swallow the food in her mouth and rested her spoon in the bowl.

"Sorry," Desiree apologized sheepishly. "I woke up and saw the food. Being extremely famished, I couldn't wait for you."

Piper chuckled as she came towards the bed and handed her lover one of the glasses of juice, before putting her own on the nightstand. The dark-haired woman sat on the bed and picked up her bowl. She plucked the remaining piece of toast from the saucer now lying on the bed between them. Piper bit a piece of the toast and then kissed Desiree on the cheek. "No need to apologize, Desi. I know after last night you must be starving." The dark-haired woman grinned as the other woman blushed. *First one of the day*, Piper thought in amusement.

The two women ate in silence for a few minutes with the only sound being the clink of their spoons against the bowls. Desiree glanced at the time and informed the other woman that they should get ready soon for Taj's party.

Piper finished the rest of her toast. "I don't have anything to wear."

"That's not a problem," Desiree replied. "We can go shopping and you can change in the dressing room. We have to get you a toothbrush anyway. After that, we can head to Taj's house."

"Shopping?" The dark-haired woman was wearing a look of part distaste and fear. "You plan for us to go shopping?"

"Yeah," the other woman replied cheerily. "It'll be fun." Desiree then studied Piper's face. "What's the matter?" The strawberry-blonde looked at her companion's cereal.

"I don't really care for shopping," Piper replied, noticing where the other woman's eyes were. "There are more cornflakes in the kitchen, Desi. Go get you some."

"I don't want your cereal," Desiree lied. She then drank the remaining milk in her bowl, emptying it. "Thank you for breakfast."

"You're welcome."

"Why don't you like to shop?" the younger woman asked after a few seconds of silence. She had always found shopping to be quite pleasurable. Desiree would enjoy spending a whole day strolling through the stores of a mall. "It's so fun to do."

The dark-haired woman snorted. "Maybe for you. Not for me, though. I never liked it."

Piper thought back to the last few weeks of past summers. She had always dreaded them while growing up. It was not because she had to return to school, but that her mother would make a whole day out of shopping for her school clothes. On that dreaded day, Piper would have to try on at least a dozen outfits in a dressing room. What eight-year-old wants to spend a summer day trying on clothes?

Though, her mother always meant well. Not all parents took that time with their children. Marie had always tried to make their shopping day lively, but her daughter had never enjoyed them. Although, at the end of the hectic day, Piper always ended up with a smile plastered on her face. After piling the bags of clothes into the trunk of the car, mother and daughter would take in a movie and then go out to dinner. Though sometimes that would be reversed, depending on when the movie started. Piper considered that getting to spend a wonderful evening with her mother was worth enduring the shopping experience.

"How about this?" Desiree started. "We can just go right in, pick something quickly, buy it and you can change. Shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

The dark-haired woman pondered this for a moment. Why did she get the feeling that Desiree most likely loved shopping as much as she loved food? Marie would have enjoyed having her as a daughter. Piper sighed. Well she did need clothes. She informed Desiree, albeit stubbornly, that they could go shopping. She made the young woman promise that they would not be in the department store any more than fifteen minutes unless the line was long. The strawberry-blonde agreed to the deal, though it was evident she was not overjoyed with it.

Desiree made to take the dishes in the kitchen, but Piper stopped her, telling the younger woman that she could just get ready. The strawberry-blonde kissed her on the lips and began to get out

the bed when her lover pulled her back around and kissed her deeply. Wrapping her arms around the other woman's neck, Desiree got to her knees on the bed in between Piper's spread legs. Hugging Desiree to her, Piper broke the heated kiss and began to deliver light kisses to her collarbone.

"Piper," the blue-green eyed woman said in a faint whisper. When Piper kept kissing her without replying, Desiree called her name again, a little louder.

Piper reluctantly stopped her pleasurable assault and looked the other woman in the eye. "Yeah?"

"It's passed eleven o'clock."

"So?"

"So we have to get ready, go shopping for something for you to wear and buy a toothbrush, before heading over to the party. You know it starts at one."

"And?" Piper leaned forward and began to suck on Desiree's earlobe, almost achieving in distracting the younger woman completely.

"And...and we have to be there...can't be late."

"And why can't we?" The dark-haired woman began to suck stronger causing Desiree to moan.

"Because it's Taj's wedding party and your welcome...welcome back party, Piper."

Piper kissed her on the lips. "I'm sure that Taj won't mind if we're a little late."

Desiree hurried out of the bed before Piper could grab her. The strawberry-blonde stood by the bed with her hands on her hips. "Piper, we are going to get ready right now, because I do not want to be late for that party." She was wearing a look of determination, and the dark-haired woman knew she should give up.

Piper sighed. "All right." She waved towards the bathroom. "Then go on and get ready."

In all her naked glory, Desiree began her short trek to the bathroom with a victorious smile on her lips. She could practically feel Piper's eyes on her and could not resist shaking her hips a little, as she walked. The strawberry-blonde chuckled when she heard a faint groan coming from behind her. Just before Desiree closed the door, she heard the other woman ask if she could join her in the shower in a few minutes. Now that was not such a bad idea.

"I'll be waiting." Desiree winked before shutting the door quietly.

Grinning from ear to ear, Piper arose from the bed and gathered the dishes and glasses. She glanced at the bathroom door longingly, as she left the bedroom. Walking into the kitchen, the dark-haired woman dumped the dishes into the sink and turned on the hot water. She was

waiting for it to heat up when she heard the doorbell ring. Piper sighed, hoping that it was not Desiree's parents. The blue-eyed woman hurried to the door and opened it without asking who it was or looking through the peephole. She quickly found out that she should have done one of those or both.

On opening the door, Piper was greeted to five or six reporters with microphones, tape recorders and camera's that they snapped in her face, causing the dark-haired woman to close her eyes briefly from the bright lights. All of the reports were attempting to speak at the same time.

"Miss Redding, how did you survive the fire?" one woman with frizzy bright red hair asked.

"What exactly is going on between you and Desiree Love?" a tall heavily bearded man asked as he thrust a mini tape recorder at Piper. She wanted to break the tape recorder as well as the hand holding it. How did they find out that she was at Desiree's house? More importantly, how did they find out that she was alive? The dark-haired woman's eyes narrowed. Ice Kream. Why that big-mouthed pizza boy...

"What are your plans now, Miss Redding?"

"I know what *my* plans are," a voice yelled angrily from behind the reporters. They along with Piper turned towards the voice. Larisa Love was standing there with both a shopping bag and a white plastic bag in hand. With her shades pushed to the top of her head, green eyes glared at the reporters. "Who the hell do you think you people are? Put yourselves in her shoes," she said pointing at Piper, who was staring at her with a blank look on her face. "This woman has endured enough crap already and she doesn't need you vultures bothering her. I know that this is what you do for a living, but why don't you look up the word "decency" in the dictionary and then try to have some. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," she paused. "Now get on the elevator and get out of here now! The show is over."

For some reason, the reporters decided to take this woman's advice without any argument. A couple of them even murmured apologies to Piper as they made their way down the hall. Larisa moved out of the way to let them pass easily. After the reporters quietly shuffled into the elevator and the doors closed, Larisa looked at Piper not having a clue what she would read if anything on the younger woman's face. The blue-eyed woman was still looking at her blankly, but her jaw was clenching and unclenching.

"For the record, I don't need you to defend me, Larisa," Piper said as she walked back into the apartment, leaving the door open. Larisa took that as a good sign. At least the woman had not closed the door in her face. Following the other woman into the apartment, Larisa closed the door, making sure to lock it behind her. She noticed that Piper was briskly walking towards the kitchen, and followed her in there. Larisa saw the younger woman making dishwater. She took a seat at the kitchen table, sitting the bags on the floor.

"I know that, Piper," the older woman stated quietly. "I was only trying to help."

"Don't need or want your help," the other woman muttered as she picked up a sponge and a bowl.

Larisa sighed. This could not go on much longer. "Tell me how long do you think you can keep your thinly veiled animosity toward me hidden from my sister? You two are building a life together I presume."

Piper scrubbed the bowl with more force than it needed. "You got a problem with that?" She kept her eyes towards the sink.

The older woman shook her head, then realized that Piper would not be able to see the action. "No," she whispered. "It's none of my business what you and my sister do," she halted, trying to gather her words. "I'm happy for you both."

The blue-eyed woman rinsed the bowl off and put it in the strainer, before reaching for the other one. Was that pain she heard in Larisa's voice? Did she care? "Are you really?" she glanced over her shoulder at the woman.

"Yes. I really am." Knowing that she should change the subject, Larisa had to inquire one more thing. She could not help herself. "Do you love her?" she asked in such a low tone of voice that Piper could barely make out the words.

In silence, the younger woman quickly finished up the dishes before turning around, leaning against the sink as she regarded Larisa with another blank look. "What's it to you?"

Larisa nodded. That answered her question. "Just curious is all. I hope you treat her right. She deserves to be happy. My sister has been through more than you probably know."

Piper replied, "I've come to the conclusion that we both do." *More than I know?* "Is there something that I should know about?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

"That is wholly up to Desiree to decide."

The younger woman glared at her. "Then why the hell did you bring it up in the first place?"

Larisa sighed. Piper's temper strikes again. "Would you try to lower your voice and maintain a semblance of control, Piper?" she asked calmly. "I just thought that you should know that you aren't the only person that has had problems."

The blue-eyed woman crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you saying that I'm self-absorbed? I know I'm not the only one who has problems. I'm aware of that fact thank you very much." Piper leaned over to pick up Tobias' empty goblet and tossed it in the still hot dishwater, before picking up the sponge to wash it.

Larisa bounded out of the chair and came over to stand next to Piper. The other woman refused to make eye contact with her and when Larisa put a hand on her arm, Piper shrugged it off. She inwardly sighed. If this kind of behavior kept up, it would not be too long before Desiree found out.

"Piper, we have to talk. We really *need* to talk." Larisa glanced towards the entrance to the kitchen to make sure that her sister was not coming. The coast was clear.

The taller woman glanced at her. "I don't have anything more to say to you." She tried to get passed Larisa, but the woman stopped her by putting her hands flat on Piper's stomach. She felt the muscles contract under her touch. "Get your hands off of me," the younger woman demanded in a dangerously low voice. Larisa hurriedly did what she was told.

"You act like I have cooties or something, Piper."

"I just don't want you touching me," the other woman retorted. "Never put your hands on me again."

Larisa shook her head. This was not going well at all. "Okay. I'll keep them to myself, but will you please try to talk to me? Please."

Piper let out a slow breath and mutely nodded her head as she leaned a hip against the sink, crossing her arms over her chest again.

"My main concern at this point is my sister," Larisa started. "Do you want her to find out?"

The younger woman silently shook her head. What would be the point? Nothing beneficial could come out of it.

"Well we agree, because neither do I. So this is what *you're* going to have to do."

Piper narrowed her eyes. "What do I have to do?"

Larisa moistened her upper lip with the tip of her tongue. "Forgive me," she whispered.

The younger woman regarded her with an unbelieving look. "I can't comprehend why you would ask me to do such a thing," she paused momentarily. "That's not an option."

Larisa ran a hand through her hair. She could feel her heart breaking all over again. "Well can you at least pretend like you don't hate me?"

Piper looked as if she was considering this. "Not sure if I can pull that off to tell you the truth."

Feeling her temper starting to rise, Larisa was silent for a minute. She was even angrier to discover that her vision was growing bleary. *Don't cry you big baby. Don't allow her the satisfaction of seeing you cry.* Larisa bit her lower lip. "Well can you try? Just try for her sake?" The woman wiped at her eyes, noticing that Piper's expression had not changed from one of boredom. "Let's get something straight. Desiree is my sister and I plan on coming around quite often. I will not allow you to keep me away from her, so you'll just have to learn to get along

with me somehow, Piper."

"I would never attempt to keep Desiree away from her family."

Larisa nodded. "Well I refuse to stop calling and coming to visit just because of you."

Pushing away from the sink, Piper stood to her full height in front of the other woman. She looked Larisa in her eyes, her blue ones cool. "I already told you that I will not try to keep you away. You can come around whenever you like," she paused. "I get the feeling that you'll be coming around a lot more often now."

The shorter woman stared at her. "What is that supposed to me?"

Piper shrugged. "Just an observation of mine."

Larisa chuckled humorlessly. "Well someone is full of themselves. Piper, I will be coming here because of my sister. It has nothing, and I mean absolutely *nothing* to do with you, you presumptuous bitch."

Piper raised an eyebrow. "My, my. Such language, Risa. Now, shouldn't *I* be calling *you* that? No." She scratched her chin thoughtfully. "I suppose we can leave the presumptuous part off."

Larisa came as close to Piper as she could before their bodies would be touching. "Believe it or not, I have an excuse. You're just too stubborn to hear me out."

The taller woman bent her head down. "There is no excuse for what you did to me."

"Get over it, Piper. Go on with your life." Their faces were so close now, that they could feel each other's breaths.

"I have gone on with my life. I just don't particularly like that you are in it."

"Well get used to it if you plan on being with my sister," Larisa replied, staring into the other woman's hypnotizing blue eyes.

"Oh, I plan on it all right." Piper wanted to take a step back, but it was as if she was frozen to that spot.

"Go on and kiss already."

Both women quickly turned their attention to the entrance of the kitchen. Desiree was standing there in a blue robe and a towel expertly wrapped around her head. She was wearing a playful smirk as she came towards the startled pair.

"You gals look like you just got caught with your hands in the cookie jar." Desiree studied the two women. "Okay. What's going on here?" She thrust her hands into the large pockets of the

robe.

"Nothing," Larisa replied, not sounding in the least bit convincing.

Her sister gave her an incredulous look before the young woman turned her attention to Piper. "So this is why you didn't make it for our shower date," she said, lowering her voice to a near whisper.

The dark-haired woman graced her with a lopsided grin. "Sorry 'bout that." *You have no idea how much.* She glanced at Larisa, who stood there awkwardly. "Would have much rather been with you." Piper then put her hands on Desiree's waist and drew the younger woman towards her. She kissed her full on the lips as Larisa looked on. The kiss finally ended, with Desiree being a tad weak in the knees.

"That's not gonna make me forget my question," the strawberry-blonde breathlessly uttered, though it had almost succeeded. "What's going on here?"

"I answered your question, Desi," Larisa stated. "Nothing is going on."

"Looked like something was going on to me. You were up in each other's faces. Now what is it? I noticed something in the trailer between you two. There is some tension and I know I'm not imagining it." Desiree carefully looked at each of them. "What I want to know is why? What were you talking about just before I came in?"

"Nothing, Desi," Larisa repeated. "Just silly stuff."

"Like what?"

Her sister sighed. Desiree could be persistent when she wanted to be. "Politics."

The strawberry-blonde raised an eyebrow. "Politics?" Blue-green eyes settled on Piper. "So you're into politics?"

Her lover merely smiled at her. Desiree did not know what to make of that. She looked back to her sister growing more confused and anxious by the minute. "I think you're lying to me and I really don't appreciate that. Please tell me what this is about. I have a right to know." It was true. Her heart rate was starting to rapidly increase. What in the world was going on?

Larisa looked over to Piper. The woman did not seem as if she would offer any sort of help. Fine. If Desiree wanted an answer, then she would give her one. "All right, Desi," Larisa started. "I'll tell you the truth." Out of the corner of her eye, Larisa could see one of Piper's eyebrows going up, yet she continued to keep her mouth shut.

"What is it?" Desiree asked in a hushed tone, almost afraid to know but needing to.

"Piper used to be a stripper before her last bout with the law."

"She used to WHAT?!?" Desiree all but shouted. The strawberry-blonde glanced at her companion. Piper's mouth was slightly open now, but she was still silent.

Larisa nodded solemnly. "It's true. We didn't think that you would ever have to know, but since you're unrelenting there it is out on the table."

For a moment, Desiree had a difficult time finding her voice. "What was does that have to do with the tension between you?" she asked her sister.

"Easy. I went to San Francisco a few months back and my car stopped. Found out that the battery was dead later. Anyway, I noticed that I had stopped next to this gay strip joint. So-

"Wait a minute." Desiree put her hand up momentarily. "A gay strip joint? There's such a thing?"

Larisa rolled her eyes. "Well of course, Desi. Where have you been? Anyway, so since I didn't have my phone with me, I decided to go in and use the phone so that I could call AAA. So when I went in, I asked to use the phone and they let me. Were very nice people by the way. So I made the call and while I was waiting for someone to pick up, I detected movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned slightly and saw Piper walking out to the stage," she paused, glancing at the mute brunette. "Piper, care to take it from here?"

The other woman shook her head. "You seem to be doing just fine on your own."

Larisa gave her a sweet smile. "Okay then. Anyway, her stage name was Leggy Lola and she was dressed in a candy striper's uniform. You know, the ones at hospitals?"  
Desiree nodded hurriedly, wanting her to continue.

"Yes, well that's what she had on that night at least. So the phone was finally picked up and I talked to a guy for a few minutes. They would be there soon I was told. I hung up the phone and went to take a seat since I had a little time on my hands. Now don't get me wrong, sis. That's not my type of place. Especially a *gay* strip joint."

"Well you're not gay. That would make perfect sense," her sister casually stated.

Larisa nodded while the other dark-haired woman rolled her eyes, though only the storyteller caught it. "Right. But since it was so cold outside, I decided to have a seat. So I sat down and my eyes became riveted on Leggy Lola. I wasn't attracted to her at all," Piper briefly glared at this point, causing Larisa to almost burst out laughing, "but she had the most gorgeous eyes." The woman shook her head. "They draw you in, you know?"

Desiree nodded, smiling slightly. She could happily gaze into those blue eyes for the rest of her life. "Yes, they do." She glanced at Piper, who to her surprise blushed. "So then what happened?"

"Well that's about it. She danced and then left. Someone else came on and then I was not

interested anymore. I spent the rest of the time doodling on a cocktail napkin until the AAA service came."

"That's it?" Larisa nodded. The strawberry-blonde frowned slightly. "So why the tension?"

Larisa shrugged. "Piper was just worried that I would use the information of her being a stripper against her. She didn't want you to find out about what she used to do. What Piper didn't realize was that I would never try to bribe or threaten her," she explained.

Desiree was silent for a few seconds as her gaze moved from her sister to her lover. "So that's why you haven't been getting along? Larisa is right, Piper. She would never do such a thing." The dark-haired woman offered her a tight smile. "So now you don't have anything to worry about. I know what you did and I'm not upset. Sure I was shocked at first, but sometimes we have to do things that we would rather not do. It saddens me, but I understand, Piper. It's okay." The woman then gave her a genuine smile and an arm squeeze. "So, everything is okay now, right?"

Larisa nodded and started to move towards her bags when Piper told her to wait. The older woman looked at her expectantly. "Yes, Piper?"

"You told some of the story, but you conveniently 'forgot' to mention the rest," Piper coolly replied.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Larisa slowly stated.

The blue-eyed woman smiled coldly at her. "You didn't mention the part where you called me a tramp. Sure I left the stage, but you know that I came back out for an encore. It was then that you called me that. I heard you loud and clear."

Larisa stared at her silently before shaking her head. "I didn't call you that."

"Sure you did. I know what I heard, Larisa. In fact, you were loud enough for everyone in that joint to hear you."

"I did not call you a tramp," the older woman enunciated each word. "I called you a self-depreciating low-down *dirty* tramp."

Piper seemed to be taken aback for a moment. Desiree's blue-green eyes were wide with shock as she stared at her sister. The strawberry-blonde asked Larisa how she could pass judgment on someone she didn't even know.

"She was all over this customer," Larisa went on, trying to explain her case. "Dancing and shaking her half naked body on this chick's lap."

"It was a lap dance," Piper argued, glancing at Desiree, who appeared to be slightly peeved by hearing the information. *Oh, that's just great.* "I was only doing my job," she added in an almost

whining voice.

"You had your knockers so far in her face that I'm surprised the woman didn't suffocate!"

Piper angrily replied, "I was only trying to give her, her money's worth."

The older woman shook her head. "What did you do that for, Piper? A few measly dollars? Enough to buy yourself a cheeseburger after work? And just maybe you'd have enough left over to get some fries?"

The blue-eyed woman balled her hands into fists at her sides, trying to control her temper. It would not look good for her to deck Desiree's sister right there in the kitchen. No, it would not look good at all. "She paid me fifty dollars for that thank you very much," she ground out between clenched teeth.

Larisa gave a short chuckle. "Oh, wow! That's a lot," she said sarcastically.

"To me it was. It meant food in my stomach and a roof over my head. It isn't like I was sleeping with the woman. I only gave her a harmless dance. Not everyone can be a successful caterer, Larisa."

"Okay, gals," Desiree interjected. Enough was enough. "Why don't we just forget whatever happened in the past, huh? Look to the future, because that is what matters." She looked at Piper. "Piper, Larisa is very sorry for what she called you." Her gaze traveled to her sister. "Aren't you, Larisa?" She gave Larisa a warning look to behave.

The woman nodded. "Of course I am." She looked at Piper. "You have got to believe me, Piper. I really am sorry for what happened between us in the past. I never meant to hurt you," she finished quietly.

Piper studied her bare feet as if she suddenly found something very interesting about them. When she felt a nudge in her side given by Desiree, she glanced over at Larisa and shrugged.

"Does that mean that you forgive me?" Larisa asked hopefully. Her heartbeat started to increase.

The taller woman pursed her lips and was silent for a few moments before replying, "I suppose I do." She received another nudge from her companion. "I mean I do," she paused. "I forgive you, Larisa."

Tears welled up in Larisa's eyes as she put a hand to her mouth. The woman smiled at Piper as she resisted the urge to embrace her. The blue-eyed woman most likely would not appreciate that. As tears rolled down Larisa's cheeks, her sister studied her curiously. For her part, Piper kept glancing at the entrance to the kitchen as if she wanted to escape.

Desiree reached out to put a hand on her sister's shoulder and squeezed. "Hey, it's okay," the strawberry blonde said softly. "This really had you upset, didn't it?" Desiree could not for the life

of her figure out why her sister would be so disturbed by a few undesirable words.

Larisa nodded as she retrieved a paper towel from the kitchen cabinet. She blew her nose before replying, "You have no idea."

Noticing that Piper appeared to be extremely uncomfortable, Larisa turned around and went to get the bags that she had brought with her. She picked up the bags and brought them to Piper. The blue-eyed woman took them, asking what they were. When Larisa told her that she had bought some clothes for her Piper tried to give them back, but the other woman put her hands in her pockets.

"I don't want them, Larisa." It was difficult to say the next part, however she did it anyway, so as not to make Desiree anymore suspicious then she probably already was. "Thank you, but I can't accept these. Desiree and I were going shopping before we went to Taj's party."

"Well now you don't have to. Please take them." Larisa gave Piper a pleading look. "In the white bag you'll find a toothbrush, comb, hairbrush and a razor."

"That's so sweet of you, Larisa," Desiree said, as she excitedly grabbed the *Robinson's May* bag from her lover. Looking inside of the bag, she smiled in delight.

Piper inwardly sighed. She did not want anything from this woman. She looked over to Desiree, who had on a smile that would put a hundred-watt bulb to shame. *Dang!* "Thank you, Larisa. I appreciate it, and as soon as I get a job and make my first paycheck, I'll pay you back."

The older woman waved a hand in the air. "Not necessary. I owe you."

Piper had to bite her lower lip to keep from saying anything snippy. Well it was time to get out of there. "I'm gonna go take a shower," Piper stated as she took her bag back from Desiree and kissed her on the cheek. "Why don't you and your sister talk?" She smiled tightly at Larisa as she walked out of the kitchen. She could feel both pair of eyes on her. Just as Piper reached the bedroom, she murmured to herself, "Man, I'm a good liar." *Then again, so is she.*

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"Come on, Piper. Open up for me, sweetheart."

"No way," came the stubborn reply.

"Yes way. I'm sure it'll look good. I bet you're looking pretty sexy."

She heard the woman give a brief snort. "I highly doubt that. I cannot believe I let you talk me into this."

"Piper, open up right now!" Desiree pounded on the door.

"No, I can't do that," there was a slight pause. "I'm changing. She has some pants in here." The voice began to drift away from the door.

"No! Please, Piper. For me?" There was only silence from the other side. "Just one day. If you don't like it, then you will never have to dress like that again."

"You promise?" Piper asked, sounding much like a ten-year-old.

"Now would I lie to you?"

The dark-haired woman winced at the mention of the "L" word. She tried to block it out. She had her reasons for being dishonest. After unlocking it, Piper slowly opened the door to see Desiree standing on the other side of it fully dressed and ready to go in a pair of blue jean overall long pants and a turquoise T-shirt that was a close match to her eyes. The strawberry-blonde had her hair done in a french braid and looked quite adorable.

"I don't understand why you get to dress similar to a farmer like you're about to go tend to the chickens and I have to wear a skirt," the dark-haired woman managed to state in a serious voice. She was rewarded with a slap on her arm as Desiree gave her a mock glare.

"Very funny, Piper."

The taller woman chuckled. "I'm only kidding. You look precious." Precious? Never in her life had Piper told anyone that they looked precious. The woman shook her head. Desiree was having quite an effect on her. She inwardly smiled, not minding one bit.

Desiree blushed. "Thank you. You look absolutely gorgeous."

Piper was wearing a sky blue skirt that went about mid-calf. It had medium-sized white flowers printed on it. She also had on a short-sleeved sky blue blouse. Her hair was held back with a white headband. On her feet were...

"Sneakers?! Piper, Larisa also had a pair of dress shoes in that bag. I saw them."

"I don't like wearing dress shoes." Instead of wearing the dressy shoes, she had on a pair of white Nikes along with white socks.

"But they are flats," Desiree argued.

"It's not the hills. I just don't like dress shoes. Sandals and sneakers are all I like. Now I'm wearing the skirt so try to meet me halfway, Desi."

Both women stared at each other, neither wanting to give in. The strawberry-blonde then came up with something and had to fight to keep the smile off of her face. She informed Piper that she would be wearing the dress shoes whether she liked it or not. The dark-haired woman looked at Desiree as if she had lost her mind. The woman leaned against the doorjamb.

"What do you mean I'm going to wear them?" Piper asked.

Smirking, Desiree leaned forward and whispered in the taller woman's ear. "I own you."

The blue-eyed woman raised both eyebrows at her, even as shudders of desire swept through her due to the young woman's breath on her ear and Piper had to admit that the words spoken stirred her arousal as well. She inwardly kind of liked the idea of this woman saying that she owned her. "And what makes you think something so ridiculous as that?"

Desiree rocked on her heels. "You're my do-whatever," she cheerily answered.

The other woman stared at her blankly for a long moment before Piper realized what she was referring to. She thought back to that day at the cabin when she had made the deal while they were fishing.

*Piper sighed. "Let's not get into that just yet. How about this? We'll be in this as equals. You stay here with me a few more days, until I get this mess all straightened out. Just think of it as a little vacation. If everything works out according to plan then I'll be your do-whatever for six months."*

Piper sighed to herself. *Me and my big mouth.* Maybe there was a way that she could get out of it. "That didn't happen."

Desiree frowned slightly. "What didn't happen?"

"I said I would be your do-whatever if everything worked out according to plan," she paused for effect. "It didn't. Everything went haywire."

The strawberry-blonde put her hands on her hips. There was no way that she was going to let this go. It was too perfect a deal. "Now, Piper that's not fair. My life was still in danger. Whatever happened doesn't change the fact that I was your hostage and I feel that you should go through with it. It's not right that you're trying to renege now."

The dark-haired woman sighed louder. "Okay. I'll be your do-whatever," she mumbled. "But I don't want to wear the shoes. Please don't make me do that." *I already look silly enough in this stupid skirt with the big flowers on it. It's so...girly!* She attempted to look sad, hoping that her lover would take pity on her.

Desiree didn't intend to give in to that look. "That means your butt belongs to me for the next six months. Until October 19th," Desiree stated happily. This was going to be barrels of fun! "And you're wearing the shoes, Piper. So go change. Larisa and I are waiting."

Without another comment, Piper turned around to go change her shoes. October 19th. It seemed so long away. For the next six months, Desiree could tell her to do anything. What if she wanted to go shopping a lot? Piper shuddered at the mere thought of it. Unlacing her shoes, Piper shook her head. *Me and my big mouth.*

Minutes later the three women were getting ready to go out the door when the phone rang. Piper

advised Desiree to let the answering machine get it since it might be reporters. While Piper had been taking her shower, Larisa filled her sister in on what had happened when she came over earlier. Desiree found out about the reporters in front of her door.

The young woman had taken the news well, knowing that that was bound to happen at some point, when people found out that Piper was still alive. The only part that she was worried about was if the media discovered that she and Piper were lovers. If they knew then it would not be long before her parents found out and then all hell would break loose.

The phone rang four times before Desiree's cheery voice on the answering machine began. "Hello. I can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name, a short message and the time you called after the beep, I will be sure to get right back to you as soon as possible. Have a wonderful day!" **Beep!**

"Hello Desi, this is Alec. It's a little passed twelve." The man's voice sounded tired. "Not that you care, but I'm home now. I just got here not too long ago and thought I'd let you know. I had to hitchhike. If you want me to leave you alone then I will. If you rather be with someone with the wrong equipment then that's your problem. Just don't come crying to me when you realize that this woman liking business of yours is just a phase," he paused, dramatically sighing. "Who am I kidding? I still love you and I want you back. You have my cell phone number if you ever need me. Bye." The recorder beeped again signaling the end of the message.

All three women had different reactions to the message. Larisa rolled her eyes as she opened the door, wearing an expression of disgust. Desiree felt guilty that her ex-boyfriend had to hitchhike after he was pushed out of the RV. He might have been a jerk but that was taking it too far. Plus, he ended the message sweetly, which only added to her guilt. Piper had to bite her lip to keep from chuckling that the preppy boy had to hitchhike. Served him right for the way he had treated Desiree.

"Should we go, ladies?" Larisa asked as she walked into the hall.

"Let's," Desiree said as she followed her sister out with Piper right behind her. The three women walked towards the elevators with Desiree in the middle. She could still feel the tension between the other two and wondered if there was more to the story than what they had divulged to her.

Larisa pushed the down button and then waited for the elevator to arrive. Putting an arm around Desiree's shoulders, Piper pulled the young woman closer to her.

"There is something wrong with your message," she stated in the quiet hallway.

The strawberry-blonde glanced up at her. "There is?"

The dark-haired woman nodded. "Yep. You told the caller to have a wonderful day."

Desiree's brow furrowed. "Is there something wrong with that? I want my callers to have a nice day."

Piper smiled down at her as the elevator doors opened and the three women walked in. "The point I was trying to make was what if someone calls you at night? You just told them to have a wonderful day."

Desiree put an arm around Piper's waist. "So what should I say? Have a wonderful day or night?"

"No." The blue-eyed woman thought about it. "Instead of saying have a wonderful day, say Piper is a wonderful lay." She chuckled as Desiree took her arm from around her waist and gave the woman a little push.

Desiree grinned despite her best efforts not to. "You're truly perverted, you know that?"

The dark-haired woman gave her a crooked grin. "Yeah, I know. You like me anyway though."

The strawberry-blonde stood in front of her, putting her arms around Piper's neck. "You know it." She then leaned up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on her lover's lips as Larisa averted her eyes from them, trying to hold her tears in check.

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"I remember the last time I was in this car with you," Piper said as she stretched her legs out as much as she could in the small Honda.

"So do I. You scared the crap out of me," Desiree replied as she made a right turn with Larisa following behind in her own car.

Piper chuckled earning a glare from the other woman. "You knew I wasn't going to shoot you." She sobered up. "But I'm still sorry baby." She took a hold of the hand that Desiree had resting on the brake and brought it up to her lips to kiss the back. "I'm sorry that I put you through all of that."

The strawberry-blonde brushed her hand lightly against Piper's cheek before she placed it back on the wheel. "Forget about all of that Piper." She glanced over at the woman who was looking intently at her. "I'm glad you did that. Otherwise, we probably wouldn't be together. That only proves that good things can be born from bad ones." She gave the dark-haired woman a smile and Piper smiled back as she turned to look out of the window.

"Thank you," Piper whispered still looking out the window a few minutes later.

Desiree turned her head towards the woman thinking that she had imagined that. "Did you say something?" she asked.

The other woman glanced her way. "I said thank you."

Braking at a red light, Desiree inquired, "What for?"

"For being here. For caring even though I act like a jerk at times. And I'll confess that I'll probably act like a jerk in the future." She shrugged. "But I'm working on changing. I want to make you proud of me. I achieve that and I know I've done something worthwhile in my life."

Desiree leaned over and kissed her lover softly on the lips. "You've already made me proud."

"Now how did I do that?"

"You've been through so much and yet look at you. You still have your sense of humor and you have kindness and warmth. Most people would be cold and standoffish. But that's not you." She continued on the street after the light changed.

Piper raised an eyebrow. "You must be thinking of someone else. The words kindness and warmth shouldn't be associated with me. I think the only people on this earth that I really like and care for are you and Taj." She was silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts. "I cared for, *loved* my mother but she left me. She left me of her own accord." Her voice caught as unbidden tears came to her eyes. Piper turned back towards the window in an attempt to hide them.

Desiree's knuckles turned white as she gripped the steering wheel tightly. *No, that's not true Piper. Your mother didn't kill herself. I just haven't gathered up the nerve to tell you yet.*

*"It was said that she committed suicide by hanging herself, but that's not true." He faced the young woman. "Guess who did it?"*

*"Oh, God," Desiree groaned.*

*Victor laughed. "No, not Him. Yes, as you probably have already guessed I was the culprit. I made her write the suicide note and then I made her hang herself. I told her that I would sneak into the prison and kill her daughter if she didn't do it, so she did."*

Desiree could feel the anger seeping into her as she thought back to how cruel and nonchalant Victor had been about killing Marie. She shook her head in an attempt to get the unwanted thoughts out of her head. She glanced over to Piper, who was wiping a tear away, that fell down her cheek and Desiree's heart went out to the woman. She had been through so much. Convicted of a crime that in Desiree's opinion she should not have been. And then sent to prison for eight years because the judge was paid off. Her own father had put the woman she loved with all her heart behind bars for Victor's dirty money. Piper did not even know that. *I don't know if I can ever tell her how my father was involved.*

Trying to lighten the mood, Desiree said, "I left something out that I'm also proud of you about."

Without turning her way, Piper asked, "And what's that?"

"You have some guts lady! I'm proud of you for taking me on." The dark-haired woman looked at her. "That takes a lot of courage."

Piper raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really now? Seems safe enough to me."

Desiree gave a mysterious grin. "Well all I'll say is since you've gotten in the car, buckle up for the ride."

Stretching out an arm, Piper began to fiddle with the radio controls. "I'm sure it'll be a fun one."

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Desiree parked her Honda in front of Taj's house and shut off the ignition. She was about to get out when she noticed that Piper was not moving. The strawberry-blonde glanced over to her, wondering what the problem was. She asked Piper if she was feeling all right. The dark-haired woman gave her a reassuring smile and unbuckled her seat belt before opening the door.

"Yes, I'm fine, baby. I'm just nervous about this."

"Because of my parents being here?" The young woman glanced around for her father's car. So far, it did not look as if her parents had arrived yet. She hoped that they never would in order to avoid conflict. Desiree then watched as Larisa parked her car and exited, heading straight for the house without even so much as a glance in their direction.

Piper nodded. "Yeah, that and I'm embarrassed. That's the main reason."

"What reason do you have to be embarrassed?" Desiree inquired.

"Because a week ago people thought I was a cold-blooded murderer. Now a party is being held because they found out that I was innocent." She peered at the younger woman. "I'm an ex-con. I remember that when I was younger, I used to go over Taj's house for dinner. His house was more of a home to me than my own and I loved going over there. I feel embarrassed because his parents are in there and before yesterday they had not laid eyes on me since I was a teen," she paused thoughtfully. "I haven't done anything with my life. I just got out of prison a few months ago because I killed my father. That's the biggest thing I've ever done and they know that. Vivian and Nathaniel were like my surrogate parents. There were times when I would lay awake at night, hearing my parents fighting and I would pray that I could be Taj's parents daughter." She bowed her head looking at her lap as a tear fell onto her thigh. Desiree put an arm around Piper's shoulders. Both were quiet for long moments.

"First, this party isn't being held because you are innocent. It's because you're alive. Thank God for that." She kissed Piper on her left temple. "Second, I don't know them, but I doubt Vivian and Nathaniel will be disappointed of you if that's what you're thinking. If anything, they should be proud. Proud that you were able to overcome all of that and keep living. You are a beautiful person, Piper. Inside and out. You have nothing, absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about."

The dark-haired woman stared at her for a silent moment. "I don't deserve you," she said in a near whisper.

"Kiss me."

Piper glanced out the window before capturing the other woman's lips with her own. Desiree wrapped her arms around her lover's neck as she increased the pressure of her lips. A moment later she stuck out the tip of her tongue and ran it lightly across Piper's lips. The older woman opened her mouth and Desiree entered as both women let out a small moan. Piper wrapped her arms around the smaller woman's waist and lifted her until Desiree was straddling her lap. The strawberry-blonde kissed Piper passionately as her small warm hands began to massage the woman's neck. Finally, Desiree ended the kiss. Both women's breaths were labored.

"Ever...ever say that again," the blue-green eyed woman started, "and you'll be missing those kisses because I'll refuse to give them to you. Got it?"

"You'll never hear the words I don't deserve you come from these lips again." Piper leaned forward to kiss her again, but Desiree took that moment to quickly exit the car on the dark-haired woman's side. Piper growled in frustration as her companion looked at her from the sidewalk.

"What? Did you honestly think I was about to make out with you in broad daylight when my parents or anyone else could pop up at any second?"

"Desi, you can't give me that kind of a kiss and then jump out of the car. It's cruel. Lucky I'm a girl, otherwise I'd have a difficult time concealing my sudden arousal."

The strawberry-blonde chuckled. "Are you gonna stay in that car all day?"

"I'm seriously considering it." Piper crossed her arms deciding to pout.

"I don't think so."

The blue-eyed woman glanced up at her. "Huh?"

"I said I don't think so. You're not going to sit in this car for the remainder of the day. You're going to get out and put on a happy face." Desiree grinned. "Now do as I say, Piper. You don't have a choice in the matter."

Muttering something as she reluctantly exited the vehicle, Piper closed the door with more force than she needed to.

"And don't try to break my car door just because you're ticked." Desiree smirked even as the other woman glared at her. "My Honda didn't make you mad. I did."

Piper wagged a finger at her. "You know what? I think you're taking this do-whatever business a little too far. In fact I think you're power hungry."

"Power hungry? I've told you to change your shoes and get out of my car. And now you're labeling me as power hungry?"

The dark-haired woman nodded. "If it looks like a duck and walks like a duck then it must be a duck."

Desiree narrowed her eyes. "You know what I feel like doing?"

Piper grinned lecherously at her. "I know what *I* feel like doing," she said in a lowered voice as she took a couple of steps towards the smaller woman.

The strawberry-blonde shook her head, chuckling. "Is that all you ever think about?"

The dark-haired woman put her arms around her companion. "That and you. That *with* you." She grinned as she nuzzled Desiree on the neck.

The smaller woman had to admit that she liked what her lover was doing, but this was neither the time nor place for it. She felt like getting in the car and going home to finish this now, but that would not be right. Plus she had been looking forward to this. Seeing Andrea again and meeting Piper's nieces. She also wanted to talk with Leroy about his doing some research for her. She felt as if they could make a good team.

Hesitantly pulling away from the delightful contact, she informed Piper that they should be going in. Piper reluctantly agreed and they began the walk up to Taj's front door. Desiree rang the doorbell, already hearing the music from inside. The door was opened a moment later by Dion. He smiled at them warmly and ushered the pair inside.

On entering, both Desiree and Piper spied the large "Welcome Back Piper" banner extending from one wall to another. Everyone was in the backyard except for a small child that was sleeping on her stomach peacefully on the couch. Dion gestured for Piper and Desiree to follow him to the couch. He caressed the baby's small chubby cheek with the back of his hand as he smiled adoringly down at her.

"This is my littlest one, Nina," Dion supplied proudly in his thick Jamaican accent.

Kneeling on the floor next to the couch, Desiree gazed at the child. "She's so precious. How old is she?" The strawberry-blonde caressed the baby's smooth coffee-colored arm. Desiree had always been fond of children and she just wanted to wrap this tiny bundle of joy up in her arms.

"Thirteen months," Dion replied.

Piper patted him on the back. "Congratulations," she said. "No one could ever tell me that you would be married with children, playboy that you were." She grinned at him and he grinned back.

"What can I say? I saw her and I was hooked. I even burned my little black book."

The dark-haired woman dramatically winced. "Was that difficult?"

"Honestly? Yes." Dion laughed merrily. "I had collected a lot of numbers. It was like a hobby." Growing serious, he pulled Piper to him, wrapping her in his arms. "I'm so happy that you're all right and that this mess has been resolved."

Piper hugged him back. "Me too." She stepped back and smiled up at him. "Now that I've arrived, let's get this party started!"

Dion, Piper, and Desiree ventured to the backyard to see Larisa sitting in a lawn chair talking with Dion's wife who was sitting in an identical chair next to hers. Both were sipping tall glasses of lemonade. Vivian and Nathaniel were sitting on a blanket in the grass playing a board game with a little girl. Over by a grill, Taj was demonstrating to Leroy, who still had his short braids, how to form the perfect hamburger patty. The younger man made one and then put it on the grill. Taj happened to glance up and saw the trio standing by the sliding glass door. He grinned as he all but ran towards them.

"Pippy!" he exclaimed, lifting the woman up off of her feet and twirling her around. Piper chuckled as he put her down. The Jamaican man studied her. "You're wearing a skirt. Never thought I'd ever see you in a skirt, Pippy. You look very pretty."

"Thank you, Taj," she replied.

Taj turned his attention to Desiree and gave her a charming smile. "Hello there, little one." He put his hands on either side of her face and kissed the young woman on the forehead. "How are you doing?"

The strawberry-blonde glanced at Piper. "Very well, Taj. And you? Did you and Valerie set a date yet?"

The Jamaican man barely kept himself from sighing as his longtime friend gave him a knowing look. "I'm fine, little one. And no, Val and I have yet to set a date." Taj then asked the two women if they would care for something to drink. Piper declined going over to help Leroy with the hamburgers. She claimed that she had a special recipe that would make them out of this world. Taj informed her that the grill was hers. When Desiree asked the Jamaican man if he had any beer, he hid his look of concern, remembering when she had drank so much that day at the beach. Instead the man ventured over to a cooler, took out a slim ice-cold bottle, and handed it to a grateful Desiree.

The young woman twisted off the cap and took a long swig before she walked over to where her sister and Dion's wife, Rochelle were sitting. The big man escorted her over. The other two smiled as they came near and made room for Dion and Desiree to sit on the long chairs. Dion did the introductions for his wife and the strawberry-blonde. The two women shook hands and exchanged smiles.

"You have beautiful children," Desiree exclaimed as she glanced over to who she presumed to be their other child playing on the blanket with Nathaniel and Vivian.

"Thank you," Rochelle stated, lightly nudging her husband. "I'm trying to get him to work on number three. I would love to have a son."

Desiree smiled warmly as Dion interjected, "And what if we get another girl?"

"Then we'll keep trying," Rochelle replied happily patting her husband on the thigh as he grumbled. The other two women laughed.

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Nearly half an hour later, everyone who was invited to the party had arrived. Richard and Sandra had been the last to arrive with their son. They outright ignored Piper, but both gave Desiree hugs and asked her how she was doing. The dark-haired woman did not let it get to her as she continued cooking with Leroy's help. Ten minutes into cooking with him, she had decided that the youngest Potter child did not have the 'gift' of knowing how to prepare food. Left alone, she knew he would cook the patties until they were extremely well done.

Grabbing a second beer from the cooler, Desiree went over to Taj who was putting paper plates and cups on a picnic table. The man smiled as he saw her. He declined her offer when she asked if there was anything she could do to help him.

"Taj?" Desiree started.

The Jamaican man looked at her as he straddled the bench. The strawberry-blonde did the same, sitting her bottle in front of her. "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"What do you do for a living? I notice that you have a nice car and a nice house." She shrugged. "Just curious and maybe wondering if you could get me a job where you work." Desiree laughed good-naturedly.

Taj scratched his neck while wondering how he should reply. "I'm a problem solver," he finally stated.

The woman waited for him to say more. When he declined to offer anything, she asked him to elaborate. However, the man would not give anymore information.

"Oh, come on, Taj." Desiree was near begging. He was going to make his choice of employment a mystery? It would nag at her to no end if she did not find out. "I won't tell anyone. Girl Scouts Honor."

"You were a Girl Scout?"

"Well no," Desiree offered begrudgingly. "But Larisa was and I've learned a lot from her."

Taj raised an eyebrow. "Your sister was a Girl Scout?"

The strawberry-blonde nodded. "I think it was a phase. Please don't tell her I told you."

The Jamaican man shrugged. "Your secret is safe with me, little one."

"Great. Yours can be safe with me too, you know?"

Taj chuckled as he arose from the bench. "Nice try." He squeezed her shoulder as he walked away, leaving the young woman wondering.

Whistling, Piper flipped a patty as Taj walked over to her. She offered him a smile after asking Leroy to get the cheese slices from the kitchen. Piper shook her head, chuckling as she returned her attention to her longtime friend.

"So, Taj tying the ol' knot, eh?"

The man nodded.

Lowering her voice so that she wouldn't be overheard, Piper asked, "You weren't really gonna propose yesterday, were you?"

Taj shook his head. "Having a party for you was supposed to be the only announcement. But then I saw Val's face and I couldn't correct her."

Piper nodded. "But you do love her, right? Don't do this if you don't want to get married. Just tell Valerie the truth."

The Jamaican man was silent for a few moments. In that time, Leroy came back with the package of sliced cheese and put it on a small table for Piper to use. She thanked him, saying that he was free to go. Leroy was more than happy to let her finish the cooking as he left.

"I do love her, Pippy. And after careful consideration, after thinking it over last night, I want to marry her. I'm nervous about it, but I do."

Giving him a bright smile, she put her spatula down before drawing Taj into a hug. "Well congratulations then. I wish you both much happiness."

Within ten more minutes it was time to chow down. They were having hamburgers, hot dogs with and without chili, along with an assortment of chips, cookies and fruit salad. Everything was delicious, and Piper received much praise for her cooking abilities. That is from everyone except Richard. His wife however, managed to be borderline polite.

Afterwards, everyone separated and talked with others. Seeing some of the fruit salad left, Piper popped a watermelon ball into her mouth as she scanned the yard, studying everyone. Her

inquisitive eyes came to rest on her oldest niece, Stacey. The little girl was sitting in the grass, plucking rich green blades up from the ground. The dark-haired woman made her way over to the nine-year-old and asked if she could take a seat next to her. Stacey looked up at her and nodded mutely.

Sitting down in the grass with her legs stretched out in front of her, Piper looked at the young girl. Stacey did remind her of herself when she was a child. The same blue eyes and dark hair. They were tended to be quiet as well. Piper had earlier observed that Samantha was definitely the more outgoing of the two, and was now sitting at a small table playing a game with Alexis. The two seemed to hit it off perfectly only being a year apart in age.

Having woke up now, Nina was pestering her older sister and Alexis' new friend by trying to steal the pieces they were using for the game. After a few more useless tries, the baby gave up and toddled away to get into other mischief. She went towards him as fast her little plump legs would carry her, when Nina noticed her Uncle Leroy holding out a chocolate chip cookie to her. Reaching him, the baby put one small hand on his knee as she took the cookie with the other.

Both Leroy and Desiree, who was sitting conversing with the man watched as Nina munched contentedly on the cookie. The strawberry-blonde stretched out her arms and the baby threw up her own arms as she walked to her on the other side of the table. Smiling, Desiree picked up the small child and put her in her lap. Double happy now with the attention and the cookie, Nina felt generous enough to offer her human seat some of the now soggy treat. Chuckling now, Desiree shook her head and said something to her that Piper could not make out from the distance. Whatever it was, caused the baby to laugh.

Wearing a tender smile, the dark-haired woman reflected on how good a mother Desiree could be. She herself had never really given much thought to having a family of her own. Turning her attention back to Stacey, Piper instinctively knew that something was bothering her. She asked her niece if she was okay. The nine-year-old nodded her head unconvincingly.

"Hey you," Piper called softly. After a moment, Stacey looked up at her, meeting her eyes. "I know something is wrong. What is it? You can talk to me." Having virtually no experience whatsoever with children, the dark-haired woman vied to do her best to help her niece.

Stacey plucked another blade of grass from the lawn and studied it in rapt interest. When Piper began to believe that she was not going to answer, Stacey spoke up, saying, "There's something that I shouldn't feel sad about, but I do," she said in hushed tones.

"What is it, sweetie?"

Stacey looked down at the grass. "I know my daddy hurt you and Desiree, but I can't help but to feel sad over his death." A tear rolled down her cheek. "I feel bad for missing him."

Piper's heart broke for this child. She had never given any thought to the despair that Victor's children could be feeling over his death. Samantha seemed to be taking it rather well. Though, she was only six. It seemed like the younger you were, the more resilient.

"Stacey it's okay to be sad over what happened. What all did your mother tell you?"

"She said that my daddy hurt a lot of people, including you and Desiree. She said that it ended up costing him his life. Mommy also told Sam and I that daddy loved us but he was sick in his mind with hate for certain people."

The child began to cry more so Piper picked her up and held Stacey to her. The little girl wrapped her arms around the woman's neck and buried her face in her neck as well. The dark-haired woman told her it was all right to cry and made soft comforting noises as she rubbed the child's back. Moments later, Piper looked up after feeling a hand on her shoulder. Andrea was standing there, concern for her child evident in her eyes. The dark-haired woman mouthed that it was okay and after being reassured a few more times, Andrea gave them privacy.

Piper wondered if Andrea's children knew about their aunt as she began rocking back and forth, feeling the hot wet tears staining her neck. She had the feeling that this was the first time this child had allowed herself to really cry for her father's passing. After a little while, Stacey's crying subsided as she continued to cling tightly to her aunt. Piper knew that she had fallen in love with her eldest niece.

She proudly smiled to herself. This children helping stuff was not so difficult. The dark-haired woman asked Stacey if she were to ask Andrea if she could keep her, did Stacey think that she would say yes. The little girl laughed before she gave her aunt a peck on the cheek. Piper's smile brightened even more. Being an aunt was turning out to be very cool.

Reaching up, she wiped away the remaining tears left on her niece's cheeks. A song began to play over the speakers. The blue-eyed woman recognized it immediately, thinking that she had not heard that song in years. It was *Into the Mystic* by Van Morrison and happened to be one of her favorites. Getting up from the grass and wiping at the back of her skirt, the dark-haired woman asked Stacey if she would like to dance. The child shook her head negatively while admitting that she didn't know how to dance.

"That's not a problem," Piper said extending her hand down to the little girl. "With me you can't look bad."

Stacey grasped the much larger hand. "Does that mean you dance real good?"

Piper shook her head. "Never said I was good at it. No matter how bad you are, I can guarantee that I'll make you look great, 'cause I'm horrible."

Stacey laughed and Piper joined in. "Girls can dance together?"

"Girls can do a lot-" *Shut up, Piper.* The woman cleared her throat. "Yes, they can, sweetie. Shall we?"

Her niece nodded in excitement. "We shall."

The dark-haired woman led Stacey by the hand further towards everyone else. She then picked the little girl up and began to dance with her. Stacey wrapped her legs around her aunt's waist as she grinned, revealing a missing tooth in the front. While they danced, Stacey mentioned that Piper was strong.

"Thank you, sweetie. I used to work out a lot. Have to start doing it again. I'm a little rusty."

"I take vitamins," Stacey offered proudly.

"You do? Why dontcha flex your arm for me?" Piper asked.

Stacey did just that, and the blue-eyed woman gently felt the arm. She then gave the girl a smile of approval. "I can tell you take vitamins. You're very buff." This caused the nine-year-old to grin. "I'd like to have muscles like yours. How 'bout you hook me up with some of those vitamins?" Piper managed to inquire in a serious voice as she dipped Stacey, earning a laugh from the child.

"You can't take my vitamins, Auntie Piper. They are only for kids." She sounded much like those animated children in the *Trix's* commercials. The only thing was Stacey did not call her aunt a silly rabbit.

Piper deadpanned, "I'm big for my age."

Stacey let out a big belly laugh. "You're funny."

Three songs later the pair was still dancing. Andrea looked over to see that Stacey had fallen asleep with her head on her dance partner's shoulder. The poor thing had not slept well in the past few days after hearing the news of her father's death. Perhaps today she would begin to heal. Her mother sincerely hoped so. Like any loving mother, she hated seeing either of her children in pain. That was precisely why she dreaded telling them the news of their Aunt Emily. First their father and then their aunt. Andrea had wanted to be certain that it was Emily's body in the cabin and not Piper's before she told Stacey and Samantha. Now she knew for sure and they would have to be told soon. The blonde woman figured it could wait until they got back to San Bernardino.

Andrea smiled warmly towards Piper and Stacey. She was partly surprised and wholly overjoyed that the two had bonded so quickly. It would probably be tough trying to get Stacey ready for the trip back home. Once she attached herself to someone, the child was apt to not want to let go.

Andrea walked over to Piper and Stacey. The dark-haired woman smiled at her as she stated in a quiet voice that Andrea was raising a terrific daughter. Delighted by the compliment, the blonde woman thanked her, asking if she could take the child to lay her down, since she had fallen asleep.

"Yes, I know," Piper replied. "I'm good at putting girls to sleep." She winked as Andrea shook

her head, grinning. "I'll put her down."

Andrea shook her head. "No, it's no problem."

"I know that. Let me do it."

The blonde woman shrugged, smiling again. "Okay. She's all yours."

Piper smiled triumphantly as she began to walk towards the house with Stacey in her arms. She turned around when Andrea called her name. The blonde woman informed her that she liked her skirt.

Not very good with receiving compliments, Piper replied, "Thanks." She began walking again, thinking that she still did not want to wear a skirt ever again.

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"So I'll bring over what I have of the story so far tomorrow for you, okay?" Desiree said as she bounced Nina on her knee. The baby was making happy gurgling noises as she raised her little arms in the air ever so often.

Leroy nodded. "I cannot wait to read what you've written. There's just one little thing..."

"What's that?"

The young man asked, "What's it about?" That caused Desiree to sigh. "What's wrong? You don't want to answer the question?"

"Does any writer?"

Nina picked that precise moment to start crying. The strawberry-blonde considered that the child had wonderful timing and could not have been happier with the interruption. Nina's hands balled into tiny fists as she wailed. "Fwed," the baby cried. "Fwed."

Desiree's face scrunched up in thought. "Fwed?" she said looking across at Leroy. "Do you know what a fwed is?"

The young man nodded. "She wants her teddy bear. His name is Fred." Leroy got up from his seat. "I'll go get him."

"No, I'll do it," Desiree replied as she got up as well. "I need to make a trip to the little girl's room anyway. Where can Fred be found?"

Leroy replied, "He's in her baby bag. I think her mother put it by the couch."

The strawberry-blonde handed the crying baby to her uncle and then began to walk towards the entrance to the house.

After she put the sleeping Stacey down on the couch and rubbed her cheek for a few moments, Piper got to her feet. Just as she was about to turn to go back outside Larisa walked into the living room from the hall. The other woman stopped walking when she laid eyes on Piper. Larisa offered her a smile that was not returned. Hurt but determined not to show it, the older woman started to go outside when her movements were blocked by Piper.

"We need to talk," Piper announced. "In private right now."

Desiree walked into the living room, empty except for Stacey sleeping on the couch. The blue-green eyed woman knew she had seen Piper come into the house not too long ago with Stacey in her arms. She wondered where her companion had ventured off to, because she had yet to return to the backyard.

Desiree found Nina's bag and unzipped it. Lying right on top was a teddy bear wearing a red sweater with a red, white, and blue plaid bow tie. She took the small brown bear out and looked at him. "So you must be Fred," she said to the stuffed toy, knowing that she was a little tipsy. She shook the bear's paw. "It's very nice to meet you, my furry inanimate friend. Your owner requires your attention, sir. But first I need to make a pit stop." Standing back up, Desiree walked towards the hall, which she knew was the way to the bathroom. Nearing the hall, the young woman stopped as she heard voices speaking quietly. One of them she was positive was Piper. Deciding to hide next to the entrance to the hallway, Desiree did so, listening intently.

"What did you expect me to do, huh?" the other voice asked. Desiree identified this person as her sister. The young woman felt butterflies fluttering in her stomach nervously. She knew there must have been more to it than what they were telling her. "Tell her the truth?"

"It would have been better than that horrendous lie," Piper replied angrily.

"Well I didn't see you stepping in to tell her the truth."

The dark-haired woman did not give a quick reply to that. "We never should have done that."

"Well we did." Larisa shrugged. "I feel bad about it, but it's done now. There is no reason that she has to find out."

Piper shook her head. "I can't continue to look her in the eye knowing that we stood in her kitchen this morning and told her something that was completely untrue."

"What are you saying, Piper?" Larisa's heartbeat began to speed up. She did not want her sister to find out. It would most likely only cause her pain. What was the point?

The dark-haired woman took a deep breath as she leaned against the wall. "I think that we should tell her the truth."

The older woman shook her head. "Big mistake. We already lied about it. So then if we tell her

than she'll know we lied to her. Piper, please let's just keep this to ourselves. It was a long time ago."

*What was a long time ago?* Desiree thought to herself. And what had they lied about? It hurt that Piper and her own sister could not be truthful with her in the first place.

"Regardless, she has a right to know," Piper said. "I can't continue to keep this from her. And if I'm to be honest there is no way on this earth that I can be civil to you when I can barely stand the sight of you."

There it was. The pain struck her like a large truck traveling down a highway at over one hundred miles per hour. Tears stung Larisa's eyes at the other woman's words. The truth really did hurt. "So that part was a lie too?"

"What part?"

"When you said that you forgave me. You were lying about that?" Larisa inquired, already in her heart knowing what the answer would be.

The younger woman nodded. "Of course. It was all for show. I didn't want Desiree to be suspicious. Oh and please stop with the tears. Don't do that again."

"What are you talking about? You're hurting me and you expect me to keep a stiff upper lip?"

Piper narrowed her eyes. "I'm hurting *you*?" She snorted. "What about what you did to me, huh? I guess you've somehow forgotten about what happened in Jamaica. *I'm* the one that deserves to cry, not you. But I'm over it now. I grieved over it for a long time. The way you treated me was cruel and brutal. How dare you stand here and tell me I'm hurting you."

"I never got the chance to explain," Larisa said quietly. "I'm sorry I did that to you."

Piper shook her head. "Too little too late, Larisa. You made me feel special and then you just dumped me for no good reason."

*Dumped her?* Desiree clutched at the teddy bear in her nervousness. She wished that the two would just get to the point.

"Will you let me explain, please?"

"I don't care to hear whatever you have to say. I just wanted to let you know that I'm telling Desiree the truth."

"So you're planning on telling her that we were lovers? Do you think that bit of information will help your relationship any?"

Desiree did not hear any more of the conversation because she ran out of the house as quietly as

was possible. Closing the front door behind her, the young woman took a deep breath as the tears began to come, blurring her vision. Fred still in her hand, the strawberry-blonde walked towards her car and got in the drivers seat. She took her keys out of her pocket and started the ignition. The young woman laid her head against the steering wheel and closed her eyes as a few tears fell down her cheeks.

Her own sister and Piper had been lovers. They had lied to her and she had stood there like a naïve idiot believing every single word that they were telling her. Desiree put the teddy bear in the passenger's seat before pulling away from the curb. She drove down the street not knowing where she was going, but knowing that she had to get away.

The young woman was remembering when Larisa had went to Jamaica during the summer almost a decade ago. When she had come back, she had been abnormally quiet and reserved. When the teenage Desiree had asked what was bothering her, her older sister had told her that everything was fine. Evidently, based on the way Piper was treating her, Larisa must have been the one to end the relationship.

And in all these years, her sister had never confided in her. Had she not trusted Desiree? That was causing her pain as well, that Larisa did not tell her that she was gay. Desiree considered that she had known for at least nine years that she was gay, yet she herself was not made aware of that fact. And of all the women in the world, Larisa had ended up being involved with Piper. Now what were the odds of that happening?

While making a right turn, she shook her head in bewilderment. This all had to be a nightmare. She wished that she would just wake up and everything would be fine. Ten minutes ago, she was in good spirits only to have her mood suddenly take a nose-dive. Ignorance could be bliss.

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With Nina saddled on his hip, Leroy went inside of the house, passing Larisa who was on her way out to the backyard. The woman did not seem to notice him as she walked pass. Piper was about to pass him as well, when the young man stopped her, asking if she had seen Desiree in the past few minutes. The dark-haired woman shook her head negatively.

Leroy frowned. "But I saw her come in here. She was supposed to be getting Nina's teddy bear out of her bag and going to the bathroom. I saw that you just came from the hall. You didn't see her?"

Piper became alarmed. "She just came in here?" she asked the man.

He nodded. "Just a few minutes ago." He went over to Nina's bag and looked inside. "And the bear is missing."

The blue-eyed woman checked the kitchen. She was disappointed to find that it was empty. The dining room was empty as well, which meant the only way that Desiree could have gone without being noticed would be the front door. Using long strides, Piper walked towards the door and

opened it. Going outside she saw that the Honda was gone. *Oh, crap.*

Leroy came outside still holding Nina, who was quiet now, but every so often, she would softly utter Fred's name. He noticed that Piper's face was etched with worry and asked what was wrong.

"She's gone," the dark-haired woman said barely above a whisper. She looked up and down the street as though the lilac car would appear at any moment.

"Maybe she had to go run an errand," Leroy offered helpfully.

"Maybe," Piper said. *Or maybe she heard my conversation with her sister and took off.*

Leroy shifted the baby to the other side. "Well wherever she went, I think she took Fred with her. Whatever called her away must have been important."

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Desiree pulled into the parking lot of a bar not too many miles from Taj's house. She sat there for a few minutes after turning off the ignition. Piper and Larisa used to be lovers. It was so unreal. And the worst part about it was that they had lied to her. The young woman's shoulders began to move up and down as she sobbed out her anger and pain. Desiree's hands tightened on the steering wheel as she lay her forehead on it.

Finally able to pull herself together some, the young woman got out of the car and headed into the bar. She needed a drink desperately. On opening the door to the building, Desiree's eyes had to adjust to the darkness within. Walking inside, her nostrils were assaulted by the stale and smoky odor of the place. Desiree sat at the practically empty bar and pulled a basket of peanuts in front of her. She did not have much of an appetite though.

The barkeep ventured over and asked Desiree for her license as he wiped an area of the counter with a towel.

"What for?" the young woman asked.

He eyed her curiously. "I'm not sure that you're old enough to be in here."

Both were surprised when Desiree suddenly reached out her left hand and grabbed the barkeep's collar, pulling him towards her across the bar. Anger in her green-blue eyes, she balled up her right fist and drew it back as if to strike the man. The barkeep stared in fear, wishing that he had just called in sick today.

"And I'm not sure," Desiree began softly, "that I could knock your front teeth out if I were to hit you in the mouth." She brought her face closer to his. "Care to find out?"

The man shook his head and the strawberry-blonde let him go, wondering what had come over her. She looked at the man and quickly apologized. The barkeep appeared to be shocked but

nodded, accepting the apology. Instead of asking for her license, he asked what she would like to drink.

"Anything with alcohol," she replied. "I'll take a shot of whiskey."

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Walking out to the backyard, Piper scanned it until she found Taj. He was sitting on the bench, holding hands with Valerie. His parents were sitting on the other side as all four conversed. The dark-haired woman went up to Taj and asked if she could talk with him for a moment. Knowing that something must be wrong, the Jamaican man excused himself, leading Piper inside the house. They went to the dining room to sit at the table.

"What's wrong, Pippy?" Taj asked in a worried voice.

She did not answer right away, as she looked down at her hands on the table. "Desiree's gone and I don't know if she is coming back."

"Where did she go?"

Piper blew out a ragged breath. "Good question. I just don't have an answer for you."

"What happened? Did you have a fight?"

The dark-haired woman shook her head no. She glanced around to make sure no one was there and then asked the man if he remembered when she had that affair in Jamaica.

Taj shook his head. "With Larisa. Yes, I remember that like it was yesterday." He also remembered Piper crying on his shoulder on and off all night after she informed him that the woman had broken it off with her that afternoon.

Nodding, Piper continued on to tell him that she and Larisa had discussed how they had lied to Desiree this morning about why they did not get along. "And I think she might have overheard us."

Taj sat back in his chair. "Why did you lie, Piper?"

"I didn't want her to know that I had an affair with her sister."

"It isn't like you had it concurrently while seeing Desi."

The blue-eyed woman nodded. "I know. I just couldn't tell her. So I took the easy way out and lied about it."

"Lied about what?" Larisa asked as she came into the house.

Piper narrowed her eyes. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

Larisa bit her lower lip to keep from saying anything surly. *Just keep walking.* Larisa continued towards the front door silently. She stopped when Taj asked where she was going.

Turning around, Larisa replied, "Sorry, Taj. That was rude to try slipping out without saying goodbye." She walked over and shook hands with him. "That was a very nice party and I wish you joy in your marriage. Congratulations." She leaned down and gave Taj a peck on his cheek. "I have to be going now." She did not have to go. Larisa just wanted to. Nothing had changed with Piper and she no longer wanted to be here. The woman glanced at Piper. "I'll be seeing you, Piper. And can you tell Desiree when you see her that I said bye?"

"Desiree's gone, Larisa," Piper stated.

Larisa frowned. "Gone? Where did she go?"

"That seems to be the million dollar question," Taj offered as he looked up at Larisa. "We have no idea."

"Is her car gone?"

Piper nodded. "I think she overheard our conversation and hightailed it out of here."

Sitting down at the table, Larisa muttered an expletive. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"I found out from Leroy that she was in here at the time we were. She was supposed to be getting Nina's teddy bear and never came back outside with it. She and the bear are gone."

Taj chuckled, not being able to help himself he added, "You think maybe this is payback? Desi took Fred hostage." The Jamaican man doubled over in his chair from laughing so hard. The laughter was infectious. Larisa found herself chuckling as well. Piper merely glared at the other two.

"Very cute, Taj," Piper said dryly. "I love it that you're cracking jokes at my expense."

Getting himself under control, Taj replied, "I'm sorry, Pippy." He reached over to squeeze her shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll straighten this whole mess out and everything will be fine. You'll see."

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"Another please."

The barkeep came over and refreshed Desiree's drink for the he did not know what time. The young woman picked up the shot glass and drank all of the burning liquid in one gulp.

A woman sitting at a booth watched Desiree asking for another drink. She shook her head as she finished her Pepsi. The woman sat there thinking for a few moments. Coming to a decision she

got up and walked over to the bar. She asked Desiree if she could take a seat on the stool next to her. The young woman turned to see the one of the most beautiful women she had ever had laid eyes on.

This gorgeous Latina stood at about five feet seven and had a slim athletic build. She had deep brown eyes and straight dark brown hair that went a couple inches past her shoulders. She sported a pair of soft lips that practically said, "Kiss me". The woman had on a tight dark brown tank top that showed off the delicate muscles in her bronzed arms and the gentle curve of her ample breasts. She had on a pair of tight blue jeans that had the ability to make one notice her round well-defined derriere. Just ask Desiree. She did.

Unable to speak at the moment, the strawberry-blonde nodded for the Latin woman to sit down. With a small smile, the woman took a seat on a stool on Desiree's right. It was then that the barkeep came back with his now completely inebriated customer's next shot of whiskey. The dark-haired woman shook her head though, telling the man in a rich low voice that the woman sitting next to her was done. Desiree glared at her and mumbled that she should mind her own business.

The woman chuckled. "You are my business."

The strawberry-blonde stared at her without speaking for a minute. "You think so? Wuz make you think that?"

The woman looked her in the eye, wearing an expression of complete seriousness. "Because you just saved my life."

Continued in Part 10.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much. Once again I apologize for the delay.

### CHAPTER 10

Everyone gathered into the living room at Taj's home. Taj, Larisa, and Piper had decided that it might be wise to let them all know that Desiree had left. Yes, she was grown, but with all that she had been through lately and with what she had just heard not too long ago, it might be

dangerous for the young woman to be alone.

Taj, Larisa, and Piper had also decided to leave out the reason why Desiree had left in an upset state. If they were to give the reason why she was not there, than Desiree's parents would find out the true nature of their daughter's relationship with Piper. They would also know what their oldest daughter had been up to in Jamaica nearly a decade ago. Now was not the time for Richard and Sandra to find out that both of their daughters were lesbians.

Richard, Sandra, Nathaniel, and Vivian were all sitting on the couch. Having woke up when the grown-ups started piling in, Stacey was sitting in her mother's lap on the floor with her sister sitting next to them. Samantha once again began playing with Alexis. The two were trying to work out a small jigsaw puzzle. Andrea's brother Keith had chosen to stand, leaning against a wall. Leroy had a nodding Nina in his arms as he sat in a recliner. Rochelle, Valerie, Taj, and Dion were all sitting in chairs that they had brought in the living room from the dining room. Tommy had already left, taking Richie Jr. with him after the young man had exclaimed that he was tired. Tommy had offered to give him a ride back to Larisa's house after lunch.

Like Keith, Larisa was also leaning against a wall. She had her arms crossed over her chest as she watched Piper pace in front of her. She felt like grabbing the woman and yelling at her to stop. Instead, Larisa called the other woman's name softly in order to get her attention. Piper looked at her with a look bordering on annoyance.

"Calm down," Larisa stated quietly. "Please."

Piper did not get a chance to reply. For the judge chose that moment to look around the room before inquiring loudly to no one in particular where Desiree was.

"That's why you all have been called to the living room," Larisa answered. She took a deep breath and raised her eyes to meet her father's. "She left."

"Maybe she had something important to attend to," Valerie offered, trying to be helpful.

Larisa shook her head. "We have reason to believe that she was upset, and that's why she left in such a hurry."

The judge leveled a glare at Piper. Whatever had happened, it most likely had something to do with this woman. He had to find some way to get Desiree away from her. There was no way that a child of his was going to have a friendship with the likes of Piper Redding. "And why was Desiree upset?" Judge Love asked still staring at Piper. She merely rolled her eyes and tried her best to ignore the man.

Larisa sighed before answering, "She-"

"I made a pass at her," Taj interjected.

Both Larisa and Piper stared at the man as if he had suddenly grown wings. That was not what

they had decided to say. Larisa quickly looked at Valerie to gauge her reaction. As she had expected, the young woman looked as if she were about to explode. Richard sat on the edge of his seat, now glaring at Taj. And to think he had been willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

Tears starting to form in her eyes, Valerie arose from her seat, picking up her purse in the process. When Taj began to say something to her, the young woman put her hand in his face to silence him. Without a word, Valerie marched towards the front door, opened it, and left, closing the door soundlessly behind her.

Shaking his head, Taj turned to meet the blazing eyes of Judge Love. The Jamaican man silently thanked God that Desiree's father did not have a shotgun handy.

"You did what?!" Judge Love nearly shouted. His wife put a hand on his arm in the attempt to calm him down some. Richard did not seem to notice the action.

"I said I made a pass at her," Taj repeated slower. *I'm already in the doghouse. Might as well keep this going.* "Today wasn't the first time I did." He looked at Larisa. "You remember that day I came over to get Desi out of her apartment?"

Larisa nodded mutely, wondering where he was going with this. She also wondered *why* he was doing this.

Taj continued, "Well we went back to my place after we supposedly dumped Piper's remains in the ocean. That was when I first made a pass at her." He looked at his younger brother who to Taj's chagrin appeared to be disgusted. "You weren't in the room when it happened." Leroy merely shook his head and put Nina down on the floor before going out to the backyard. Concerned about her youngest son, Vivian followed him. Her mother's instinct told her that Taj was lying, though she could not figure out why.

Before Taj could get another word out, Judge Love was out of his seat and heading towards him quickly. "Why you dirty punk!" Richard screamed as he grabbed the collar of Taj's shirt and lifted the startled man to his feet. "I should kill you with my bare hands!" However, the judge did not get to do anything further, because both Dion and Keith managed to pull him away.

"Father, will you please calm down?" Larisa asked wearily. "That's not really what happened."

Judge Love regarded his daughter with a furious look. "What do you mean? This hoodlum," he pointed at Taj, "took advantage of my daughter! He admitted it." Sandra called her husband's name but he ignored her. "And I'm tired of you always butting in Larisa."

Larisa took a deep calming breath. "If you'll just listen to me Father, you will find out the truth."

"That *was* the truth," Taj stated as he gave Larisa a look, shaking his head.

Larisa noticed that he wanted her to keep quiet. She tried to silently argue with him, but it was no

use. *You have a death wish Taj?* Larisa thought. The woman shrugged, sticking her hands in her pockets.

Judge Love stood toe to toe with Taj. "I want you to stay away from my daughter." As an afterthought, he then turned to glare at Piper. "The same goes for you. Don't try to call her, live with her...anything! Do you understand me?"

Piper nodded. "Though it is up to Desiree whether I stick around or not. I don't know if you realized it, but she is quite capable of making her own decisions without her daddy." She gave him a cold smile. "Now why don't you leave since you can't seem to keep your hands off of people."

Sandra stood up from the couch and came over to take a hold of her husband's arm. Judge Love stared at Piper for a few silent moments. "You mean like you couldn't keep your hands off of your father?" The expression on his face grew pensive. "Or would that be your hammer?"

The dark-haired woman clenched her hands into fists at her sides but said nothing in reply. She would not give him the satisfaction. The judge looked at Piper as though he expected her to say something. After a second, Richard turned his attention on his daughter. "Let's go, Larisa," the man stated.

The young woman shook her head. "I'm not going anywhere yet. Why don't you and Mother go back to my house and I'll let you know when we locate Desiree? I'm sure we'll find her soon," she stated in a reassuring tone.

Larisa was surprised when her father did not argue. Instead he put an arm around Sandra's waist and headed for the front door. They left neither saying another word.

Sighing in relief because they were gone, Larisa glanced at Piper who was staring toward the floor. With some uncertainty, Larisa reached out to put a hand on Piper's arm and squeezed gently. The other woman glanced at her in some confusion before moving away so that Larisa was no longer touching her.

The blue-eyed woman cleared her throat. "We need to start looking," she said to no one in particular.

"Maybe she just went home," Andrea said, still sitting on the floor. "She could be there by now. Couldn't she?"

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Desiree stared at the woman sitting next to her. "How did I save your life?" she reached into a small basket and took out a beer nut to put in her mouth. Chewing, she waited for the woman to answer.

The gorgeous Latina grabbed a cocktail napkin and began to fold it. She kept her gaze on her

task as she replied, "I was going to do something very foolish, but then I kept looking at you and ended up changing my mind." She lifted her head to study the strawberry-blonde. "To put it bluntly, your looking like crap over here, drinking so much and appearing like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders made me want to live. And I thank you for that."

Desiree ate another beer nut, trying to process the information she had just been given. Since her brain was currently working in the lowest gear possible, she found processing extremely difficult. Finally, she replied, "No biggie." Desiree ran a finger across the scarred wood.

"What happened?"

The strawberry-blonde glanced at her. "Long story."

"I've got time. I should introduce myself." The woman put her hand out towards Desiree. After grabbing at the air twice, she successfully grasped the hand offered to her. "My name is Micaela Chavez."

"I'm Desimee." She chuckled to herself, finding her inability to speak properly hilarious. "I mean I'm Desiree," she paused as if in deep thought. "Love." She asked Micaela had she heard of her. The woman shook her head.

"Should I have?"

Desiree shrugged. " 'Pose not. Not evewybody has."

"Are you famous?"

She shook her head for longer than was needed. "Not weally, but my girlfriend is." Desiree slapped a hand over her mouth, noticing that she had let it slip that she was a lesbian. To her credit, Micaela did not so much as blink.

"And do you feel neglected because of that?"

Desiree shook her head. "That's not it. Let's not talk 'bout it. I'd like another drink." She looked at the bartender who was a few feet away from them, polishing glasses.

Micaela put a hand on her arm. "No more alcohol. I'm taking you home."

The strawberry-blonde looked at her suspiciously. " 'Cuse me?"

Micaela got to her feet and walked back to where she was sitting in order to get her jacket. Coming back to the bar she replied, "That's right. Don't worry, Desiree. I'm not a psychopath or anything. Get up so we can move on out." She slipped her jacket on and insisted on paying the other woman's tab. Without another word, the young woman tried to get up from the barstool. Noticing that she was having trouble, Micaela put an arm around Desiree's waist and instructed the young woman to put an arm around her neck. After the smaller woman did so, the two left

the bar.

The Latin woman headed towards the Honda Civic, after Desiree pointed out that car as being hers. Grabbing the keys in her pocket, the strawberry-blonde handed them to Micaela. After the Latin woman secured Desiree in the passenger seat, she jogged around to the drivers' side and got in. After buckling herself in, Micaela asked the other woman for her driver's license. Desiree handed it over, warning her designated driver that the picture was hideous. Chuckling, Micaela studied the address on the card before driving out of the parking lot.

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They had been driving around Los Angeles for the past twenty-five minutes or so. Before everyone had split up at Taj's house, the Jamaican man had informed them, (although some of them were not exactly on speaking terms with him) that he had considered the fact that Desiree might have been in a bar somewhere. He explained that the day he had went to the beach with the young woman that she had consumed a considerable amount of champagne within a short time.

Silently sighing to herself, Piper hoped that Desiree was all right, wherever she was. *Please don't let me have driven her to drink*, she thought to herself as she stared out of the passenger window of the car.

Larisa came to a halt at a stoplight and glanced at her passenger. Sighing softly, Larisa noticed that the woman was even more beautiful than she had been when they first met in Jamaica all those years ago. Piper did not have the appearance of a woman that had been locked up in a prison for the past eight years.

Feeling eyes upon her, Piper turned her head towards the other woman and quietly asked if there was a problem. Shaking her head, Larisa turned her eyes to the red light, willing it to turn green. Seconds later it did and the two were off once again.

Piper took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Looking out of the passenger side window again, she said, "Maybe we should check out some bars." She fell silent for a moment before continuing, "I hope she's not drinking."

Larisa instantly replied, "Not Desiree. My sister is too smart for that."

Cool blue eyes turned to regard her. "And that's why she almost polished off a whole bottle of champagne by herself, isn't it?"

Larisa bit down on her lower lip to refrain from retorting something nasty. She had had just about enough of Piper's attitude towards her. "Piper, how long are you going to keep this up?"

"Keep what up?"

"Acting like you hate me."

Piper turned towards the window again, replying, "It isn't an act," she paused shortly, "You see, I really do hate you."

Chuckling humorlessly, Larisa pulled into a gas station and shut off the ignition after stopping by a pump. Both women sat in silence for a few moments before the older woman said, "I have a tip for you, Piper. You really should grow up."

Still looking out of the window, Piper replied, "And you can take your tip and shove it up your ass. I *have* grown up."

Larisa opened her door and leaned down to pull the latch up in order for the gas tank to pop open. "You could have fooled me," she retorted before getting out of the car, shutting it loudly behind her.

Piper leaned her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. Her thoughts quickly drifted to the woman pumping gas into the car. While in prison, Piper had often thought about that time in Jamaica with Larisa. She never knew why she did it. The memories only seemed to cause her pain. She still remembered that dreadful day as though it had happened just yesterday.

*Nearly twenty minutes late because she lost the key to the hotel room and had to find Taj in order to use his, Piper walked into the crowded restaurant. She stood at the entrance for a few moments, trying to get her breathing under control after the short run here from the hotel. The dark-haired young woman had just learned a very valuable lesson that could be useful to all women around the world. Running in high heels and a short dress is not the best idea. Speaking of the dress, Piper did not feel comfortable enough in it, but she wanted to look great for Larisa.*

*The older woman had asked her out on a date a couple of days before and stated that they would be going to this restaurant, which happened to be the hottest dining place on the beach. The two had been on several dates before, however Piper always felt the same nervousness and excitement when she knew that she was about to be reunited with the love of her life. She was in love and it was the most wonderful feeling in the world. She was in love with the most beautiful, intelligent, witty, and kind woman in the world. Piper did not see how life could possibly get any better.*

*Thank goodness, she and Taj had decided to vacation in Jamaica at this time of year. Otherwise, she might not have ever met Larisa and known that this special woman who made her feel so wanted and loved, existed. It was a frightening thought, and Piper inwardly shuddered every time that she thought about it.*

*The young woman scanned the restaurant, and soon blue eyes connected with green. Piper smiled brightly, hoping that she did not have a goofy look on her face, as she moved through the tables and nearly collided with a waiter on her way to Larisa's table. As she drew nearer, Larisa stood up and walked around to pull her date's chair out for her.*

*Reaching the table, Piper leaned over to give Larisa a kiss on the lips. The older woman quickly*

*ended it with a faint smile at Piper. Thanking Larisa, Piper sat down in the chair and placed her small purse, (of which she detested carrying around because she deemed it too much trouble) on the small round table set for two.*

*"Hey," Piper said in a breathless voice. "I've missed you." This was quite an understatement. She had not seen or heard from her lover since that day she was asked on a date to here. Larisa had claimed that she had something extremely important to take care of, and would not be able to see Piper for a couple days. The younger woman had felt instant heartache at the news, but looked on the bright side. At least Larisa had given her something to look forward to.*

Pumping gas into the car, Larisa took the opportunity to study Piper unnoticed through the back window. The other woman had her eyes closed, her lips slightly parted. Shaking her head, to clear her thoughts that were traveling to places that they were better off not going to, Larisa suddenly began to think about the day that she had broken up with Piper in Jamaica. She often regretted what she had done, but at the time she had felt there was no other way. All of those years ago, Larisa had convinced herself that what she was going to do was the right thing for them both.

"Yeah, right," the woman muttered to herself, remembering.

*"Hello," Larisa replied, having a difficult time keeping her eyes off of her date. Piper was simply the most gorgeous creature that she had ever laid eyes on. The blue-eyed woman had on a light coating of make-up that only proved to accentuate her beauty, but she could easily do without any. "I've-" Automatically, Larisa began to state that she had missed Piper as well, which was the truth, but it would only make what she had to announce all the more confusing. "I've been waiting for you." Larisa picked up the menu so she could focus her eyes on something else other than the beautiful person sitting across from her. "Almost half an hour. Started to think that you weren't going to show up."*

*Piper picked up her own menu and opened it, her eyes still on Larisa. "I'm sorry. I had some trouble getting into the hotel room." She had on a sheepish look now. "Lost my key." With much difficulty, Piper turned her attention to the menu.*

*"It's just that we had reservations for 6:30." Larisa reached over picking up her glass and taking a sip of her water, hating the way that she sounded, but it was all for a reason. There was no alternative. "I would have appreciated it if you would have been considerate enough to pick up a phone and call."*

*The younger woman's brow furrowed. Something was not right here. Larisa was being unusually cold to her. Was she that upset that Piper was late? The woman quietly put the menu down, having decided what she wanted and folded her hands together in her lap. "I already said that I was sorry," she replied in a calm quiet voice. "I should have called you, but I didn't think about it."*

*Neither woman said another word until after their waiter came to take their orders. After the man came back with their beverages and left once again, Piper busied herself with rearranging*

*the silverware on her cloth napkin, while wondering what the sudden tenseness between them was all about. Not being able to stand it another moment, Piper broke the silence, asking Larisa if there was anything wrong.*

*Taking a sip from her glass of wine, the green-eyed woman put the flute down on the table slowly with a thoughtful expression on her face. Looking up, she studied Piper's face. For the first time, she was having doubts about what she was about to do. Perhaps this was not the way to go about this after all. She wanted to be with this woman for the rest of her life and it caused Larisa a lot of pain to know that it could never be. She had to do this. The woman inwardly told herself that she should just get this over with.*

*"Piper," she started, "I don't think we should see each other anymore. That's why I invited you here. To break up with you."*

*The other woman's blue eyes begin to tear instantly. "What do you mean you don't think we should see each other anymore? What happened?"*

*Sighing, Larisa sat back in her chair and regarded her companion. "Did you honestly believe that I really loved you?" The look that Piper gave her obviously said yes. Larisa chuckled coldly. "Oh, please little girl...you could never win my love." She almost winced and could have kicked herself as she saw the tears rolling down Piper's strong cheekbones. She was causing the other woman pain and hated herself for it.*

*Piper shook her head. "You're lying. You do love me. As much as I love you." She realized that she was behaving desperately but could not help herself. There was no way that Piper intended to live without her beloved.*

*Larisa chuckled all the more, going on with the show. "You're deluded, Piper. Remember when I told you that I had something important to take care of the last two days?" Piper nodded mutely. Leaning forward in her chair, Larisa continued in a near whisper, "Well during that time I was screwing someone else." She grinned. "She knows how to please me in ways that you never could and I plan to take her back home with me to California. You were just my little toy. Thanks," Larisa finished casually.*

*The blue-eyed woman shook her head, not wanting to hear another word of this, as her shoulders began to shake with the force of her sobs. Customers started looking her way curiously, but Piper was blind to them. She kept her eyes on Larisa and realized that this was not the woman who she had made sweet love with not five days ago. Larisa had transformed into this cold-hearted person sitting before her smugly.*

*"You used me?" Piper said in a small voice.*

*"Yes," replied Larisa. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know what? You're really pathetic. Sitting there crying like the baby that you are. Frankly, I don't now what I ever saw in you. You may have the body of a twenty-five year old but you've got the mentality of a child. A little itty bitty chi-"*

*"Shut...up," Piper said between clenched teeth as she glared at the other woman. Larisa held her breath momentarily, thinking that she might have gone too far. Piper looked as if she could do just about anything at this moment. "Just shut the hell up," Piper continued in a low voice. "You have messed with the wrong person." With that said, the blue-eyed woman arose from the table and stormed out of the restaurant never to be seen again by Larisa until years later.*

Noticing that the gas was about to overflow, Larisa quickly stopped pumping and removed the pump from her tank. She was soon back in the car, where she sat without touching the keys placed in the ignition. For a couple of minutes Piper did not say a word, but soon grew curious as to why they were just sitting there. Looking over at Larisa, she asked the woman why she had not started the car yet.

Larisa did not so much as spare Piper a glance as she continued to gaze out of the windshield at nothing. Piper followed her eyes and only saw the wall of the electronic car wash that the gas station had.

"Are we going to sit here all evening or are we going to go try to find Desiree?" Piper asked.

"We need to talk," Larisa said quietly, still staring out of the window, her hands resting on her thighs.

Piper shook her head. "I have nothing to say to you, Larisa."

"Fine. Then just sit there and listen to me."

The blue-eyed woman inhaled deeply before allowing the air to escape from her lungs slowly. "We can talk later, 'cause right now Desiree is my main concern."

Larisa turned her gaze on her ex-lover. "You promise?"

Piper nodded curtly as she reached over to start the engine herself. "Promise."

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On opening the door, Micaela led the strawberry-blonde into the dark apartment, making sure to keep an arm around the younger woman's waist securely. She shut the door softly behind her before feeling along the wall until she found a light switch that she turned on. Both women squinted as the bright light overhead assaulted them. Micaela asked Desiree where her bedroom was and the young woman pointed to a door towards the left. The duo headed that way slowly. Desiree had an arm around the Latin woman's shoulders and was leaning heavily on her.

Soon Micaela had the blue-green eyed woman in an oversized sweatshirt that had the letters UCLA emblazoned on the front of it. Pulling back the covers, she helped the woman to get into the bed before tucking the covers around Desiree. Not being able to stop herself, Micaela leaned down and tenderly kissed the younger woman on her forehead before straightening back up and walking out to the living room searching for a chair.

By the time that she got back with a chair from the dining room table, Micaela noticed that Desiree was fast asleep and had curled up on her left side, her right arm tucked beneath her head like a second pillow. The Latina smiled tenderly as she placed the chair next to the bed and sat in it quietly. Glancing at the lamp, she decided to leave it on.

Micaela observed the sleeping strawberry-blonde and silently thanked the Lord for this angel (for she looked like one if you paid no attention to the drunkenness) that had saved her. Though Desiree had not been attempting to and had no way of knowing that Micaela was in trouble, she was responsible for the thirty-two year old being alive. *If it hadn't been for her, I would have taken that gun out of my glove compartment and used it by now.* Micaela shuddered and wondered how she could have been so selfish and stupid. *That was by far the dumbest thing that I have ever thought of doing.* She thought for a moment. Well maybe it was among the top five dumbest things.

Micaela Chavez was born and raised in Mexico. She came to the United States after she graduated from high school. She went to Texas and enrolled at an art school, studying there for the next two years while she stayed with her mother's sister during the first year and half before she got her own apartment. It was not long after Micaela moved into the very first place that she could call her own before she met Clint Reynolds, a mobster. The gorgeous Southern man basically swept the young woman off of her feet. It did not take long before Micaela was moving into Clint's mansion, which meant that she could save money by not having to pay rent and she could quit her job as a waitress to focus on school. Micaela had agreed to be Clint's lover in return for all that he gave her. Though she knew that the man participated in illegal acts, Micaela felt that Clint was one of the sweetest men that she had ever known. He treated her well and she could have just about anything that she wanted.

At first, the arrangement was all right, until a few months after living there, Clint started to "lend" Micaela to his friends. The first time that she got up the nerve to confront the man about it was the first time that he raised his hand to her and slapped Micaela so hard that she fell over the couch that she had been standing in front of. After that, the young woman decided not to bring up the issue again out of fear. Two months later, not being able to take it anymore, Micaela attempted to escape but did not get far before one of Clint's cronies located her and brought the frightened young woman back to the mansion. For her trouble, Micaela was beaten with a belt that left welts and bruises all over her back, rear end, and thighs. Clint also warned her that if she ever tried to leave him again that he would make sure that she would have no family to go home to back in Mexico. He would also do away with the aunt that lived there in Texas. Shakily, Micaela had promised that she would never leave again.

Soon, the young woman started to find solace in alcohol and began drinking on a daily basis. By the end of the day, Micaela was usually wasted. There were quite a few evenings when she passed out right on the floor and someone had to carry her to bed. Clint hated it when Micaela was inebriated, especially in front of his colleagues, so he used that as an excuse to beat her on occasion. There were a couple of times that he beat her so bad that the young woman had to be taken to the hospital. Of course, she always came up with a lie as to how her arm, ribs, or something else became broken or bruised. It took five very long years, but Micaela got help for

her drinking problem and learned that alcohol would not make her feel better. Leaving Clint was the solution, but the Latin woman still could not bring herself to do that. There was just too much of a risk where her family was concerned. She had no doubts that Clint would have her family murdered if she tried to flee.

One Christmas set the next course of events. At the age of twenty-nine, Micaela was allowed to go home to Mexico to visit her family for two weeks during Christmas. Her family knew of Clint but had no idea how horrible the man was and Micaela had no desire to tell them. It would be dangerous to.

One evening, after being at home for a few days, Micaela was sitting down in the living room reading a book. Everyone else had left to pick up the tree, but the young woman had decided to stay there. The front door opened and in walked her brother-in-law Luis, who always had given her creeps from the first moment that she set eyes on him.

*Luis smiled at Micaela as he shut the door behind him, asking the young woman what she was reading. Wearing a slightly suspicious look, she told him, noticing that he was steadily making his way towards her. Luis had his hands at his sides and was clenching and unclenching them. The man towered over Micaela by a good seven inches as his dark eyes penetrated into hers.*

*The young woman set the book down and swallowed with some difficulty. "Is something wrong, Luis? I thought you were with the others."*

*"I decided not to go," he said in Spanish, deciding to speak with his native language. "Why don't you and I have some fun." He grinned at her maniacally.*

*"No thank you, Luis. I'm reading right now."*

*Luis picked up the book that Micaela had set down and threw it across the room. "No you're not."*

*"Please leave me alone," the young woman pleaded softly, her eyes darting around as if trying to find an escape.*

*Not saying anything, Luis suddenly pulled Micaela roughly to her feet and tossed her over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing more than a bundle of hay. Squirming, the woman tried to get away as she yelled at her brother-in-law to let her go, but Luis would not listen. Entering a bedroom, the man tossed Micaela on the bed. When she tried to flee from the bed, Luis punched her hard in the jaw, causing the young woman to become a little dazed. It was then that he proceeded to rape her. Tearing her clothes off and ignoring her pleas, Luis roughly assaulted his sister-in-law as she attempted to get the huge man off of her though it was no use. It took no more than five minutes, but to Micaela, it seemed like a lifetime.*

Not twenty-four hours later, Micaela was on a flight back to Texas. She had informed her family what Luis had done, but none of them had believed her. They chose to believe that Micaela had slept with her brother-in-law and now wanted to make trouble. Crying and shocked, the young

woman gathered her belongings and ran out of the house. Even her own mother and father had turned on her and Micaela now felt that she had no one.

A week after being back at the mansion, the young woman found out that she was carrying Luis's baby. She knew that it was his since she had not been with anyone in nearly a month prior to going to Mexico, and there had been no one since she had been back in Texas. She would not lose this baby. If Clint were to find out that she was pregnant, he would surely make Micaela terminate the child. In the past nine years, the young woman had become pregnant three different times, all of which were the babies of Clint's friends (the one's that she had been on loan to) and had been forced to get an abortion for all of them. Well not this time. Micaela silently vowed that she would keep this baby. Although it was Luis's it was an innocent child and she did not want to lose yet another baby. There was only one way to assure the safety of her unborn child.

*Curled up on the couch, Micaela held a book in her hands, but her eyes were on Clint, who was sitting across from her on the other couch. He was reading the newspaper and looked up when he felt eyes upon him. The Southern man caught Micaela observing him and offered her a charming smile, showing white even teeth as he laid the newspaper aside and sat forward.*

*"Is there somethin' the matter, Mickey?" Clint asked with a hint of a Southern accent that Micaela used to find adorable.*

*The woman tried to smile at him. "No. Nothing is wrong Clint."*

*Getting up, Clint walked over to Micaela and took a seat next to her on the couch. He put a hand on her knee and the woman resisted the urge to pull away. Bright blue eyes raked over Micaela's body. "You know...for bein' almost thirty, you sure do look good, darlin'," Clint said as he traced a finger over the woman's knee. "You know it's been a while. Since we've been together," he paused. "Why don't you get sexy for me tonight and come into my room? I'll get some champagne." He grinned at her. "And those chocolates you like."*

*Perfect, Micaela thought. "Sure. That sounds splendid Clint. I'll be there," she smiled sexily at the man, "wearing little."*

*Later that night, Micaela entered Clint's lavish bedroom and headed towards the adjoining bathroom after detecting that the shower was running. She was wearing a short silky black chemise with a matching silk robe over it that she left hanging open. Opening the door, Micaela was assaulted with the hot steam coming from the shower. Barefooted, the woman made her way to the shower and slid the door back. Clint jumped a little in surprise having not heard her.*

*"Hey darlin'! You scared me." The man chuckled as he turned towards her with his short blond hair slicked back. His eyes twinkled, as he looked Micaela up and down, taking his time.*

*Micaela did the same to him, thinking that Clint did not deserve the gorgeous body that he had been given. Nine years later he looked even better at the age of forty-five. There were a few wisps of gray in his hair, but they only proved to make Clint more handsome. Weren't the bad guys supposed to look worse as the years went on? Lucky bastard, Micaela thought to herself.*

*"You gettin' in?" Clint asked. "God, you are one beautiful lady, Mickey." His blue eyes fell on her brown ones. "I did a lot of thinkin' while you were in Mexico and...uh...I wanna let you know that I'm gonna change and do right by you."*

*Blinking several times, Micaela focused on Clint closely not being able to believe what she was hearing. "What?"*

*The Southern man sighed softly. "I know that I've done you wrong in the past. A lot. I had no right to treat you like I have been. I want you to know that I'm getting help. Now I realize that I need it. I'll never raise my hand to you again and I'll never make you do anything that you don't wanna do. I can't lose you, Mickey." Leaning forward, still in the shower, he kissed her softly on the lips, which was unusual. Clint usually kissed Micaela roughly as though stating that he owned her.*

*What was going on here? Why this? Why now? Clint was behaving like he was when they first met. She could not trust that it would last. He had gone back on his promises in the past. There was no real proof that this time he would really change for the better. If he found out about this baby, he might go ballistic. If her own family did not believe that she was raped, who was to say that Clint would?*

*"I love you, Mickey," Clint whispered.*

*Taking a couple of steps back, Micaela reached into a pocket on the right side of her robe. She looked at Clint who was smiling at her. "Clint?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Her heart began to beat faster as her breathing increased.*

*Clint cocked his head to the side in an adorable fashion. "For what, darlin'?"*

*Wordlessly, Micaela took her hand out of her pocket. She was holding a gun that she pointed at her lover's chest. The man had no time to react as she pulled the trigger twice. The force from the bullets was so hard that Clint stumbled backwards and slammed his back against the wall of the shower with a shocked look on his face. Slowly, he slid down to the floor of the shower as blood seeped out of his chest from two holes. Unable to turn her eyes away, Micaela watched as his blue eyes began to close as he looked at her, astonished.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

Larisa pulled into the parking lot of the third bar that she and Piper would be checking tonight. At the first two, they had not discovered anything. None of the people at the bar had seen the woman on the picture that Larisa and Piper showed them. The women silently made their way into the smoky bar and immediately headed over to the bartender who was serving another customer. On seeing the lovely women, he raised a hand to his hair and patted it down as though

he thought that he had a chance with them.

*Dream on*, Larisa thought to herself as she took out the picture. "Excuse me, sir. Have you seen this woman?" She handed the picture to the bartender. Piper stood beside her quietly.

The bartender looked at the woman on the picture and then at the two women before him, before finally settling his gaze on the woman doing the talking. "Maybe...I have. Maybe...I haven't." *I can probably make some money on this.*

Larisa barely stopped herself from giving the man a dirty look. "Look. She's my sister and I just want to know if she's been here tonight. I'm worried about her." She glanced at Piper whose eyes were riveted to the bartender. "We both are."

The man started to wipe the already highly glossed bar top. "Like I said...maybe I have and maybe I haven't. A little cash might help my memory."

Quickly, Piper clenched parts of the man's shirt in her hands and proceeded to pull him over the bar top onto the floor. He landed on his stomach on the floor between the perturbed woman and a startled Larisa. Piper then kicked the man in his side, causing him to howl in pain as he moved onto his back, placing a hand over the injured area.

Dryly, Larisa asked, "Piper, haven't you ever heard of the phrase never kick a man when he's down?"

Ignoring her, the blue-eyed woman placed her right foot on the bartender's crotch only touching the area with the sole of her shoe. "Now," Piper pressed down on the sensitive area, adding a little of her weight, "I think having full function of your balls will help with your ability to father children. Don't you agree?" She pushed down harder, causing the bartender to break out in a sweat as other patrons in the bar looked their way curiously.

"Mmhmm." The bartender nodded. "I couldn't agree with you more. I saw her, I saw her." He mewled softly at the pressure. "She was here earlier."

Raising her foot, Piper indicated for the man to get up, which he did hurriedly. Walking slowly over to a barstool, he sat down in it, facing Piper and Larisa while he placed a protective hand over his crotch.

"Are you sure it was her?" Piper asked.

The bartender nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. You're not the only chi-person to attack me tonight."

The blue-eyed woman raised an eyebrow. "She attacked you?"

"Yeah, well sort of." The bartender looked flushed. "I asked for some ID to make sure she was over twenty-one 'cause she didn't look like it and she didn't wanna give it to me, so she threatened me. She really didn't do anything to me though," he paused. "She wasn't old enough, was she?"

Ignoring his question, Piper asked another one. "When she left was she drunk?"

The bartender nodded. "But I don't think she was driving. Some lady she met took her home."

"Lady? What lady?" Larisa inquired of the man.

He looked to her. "I dunno. Never seen her before. She was gorgeous though. Came right over and started talking to the blonde and ended up paying her tab. Not long after that, they hightailed it outta here. Probably a little over an hour ago."

Piper's hands balled into fists as she tried to remain calm. So this is what Desiree was going to do after overhearing hers and Larisa's conversation back at Taj's house. Just pick up some woman, or be picked up by one in a bar and take her home. And who was to say that this woman wasn't some sort of psycho who preyed on vulnerable young women? *I have to get to Desi. She could be in trouble.*

The blue-eyed woman turned to Larisa. "Let's go. We have to get to Desiree's right now."

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Running a hand through her hair, Micaela got up from the now uncomfortable chair and stretched. Deciding to get a glass of water, the woman headed for the bedroom door quietly so as not to disturb Desiree while she was sleeping. Opening the door, the woman walked out into the darkened living room. Hearing a key turning in the lock, she paused by the front door as it was opened and two silhouette's came in.

Before Micaela got a chance to say anything, she was attacked by the shorter of the silhouettes. The figure rushed her with such a great impact, that they both fell to the carpeted floor. The Latin woman managed to shove the figure off of her and they stumbled to her right. Bringing her foot up, Micaela hit the person in the nose with the bottom of her shoe. She heard the person cry out in pain as the room suddenly was illuminated.

Piper stood by a light switch, staring down at the pair before her blue eyes focused on Micaela, glaring at her. Larisa sat up on the floor and held a hand to her bleeding nose. Not paying much attention to Piper's glare, Micaela looked between the both of them before she swiftly arose to her feet and offered Larisa a hand up. Quietly, the woman allowed herself to be brought to her feet by the stranger.

The dark-haired woman shook her head at Larisa. "Way to go Xena." Larisa smirked at her. Turning to the Latin woman, Piper asked in a low voice, "Who are you?"

"Micaela. I assume you both know Desiree. I brought her home. She wasn't in any shape to drive so I volunteered to bring her home." She pointed towards Desiree's bedroom. "She's in there getting some shuteye. Please relax, I don't mean any harm. I was only try to help." Micaela looked at Larisa, who still had her hand cupped around her nose. "I'm sorry about that. You jumped me and it was a reflex."

Larisa shrugged. "No big deal. You were only trying to defend yourself. That was a dumb thing for me to do."

"You got that right," Piper muttered, earning another smirk from Larisa. "I'm gonna go check on her." The blue-eyed woman proceeded to walk towards Desiree's bedroom.

Micaela turned to Larisa and said, "Why don't you come with me? I'll get you fixed up." She began walking towards the kitchen and the other woman followed her silently. Her eyes 'of their own volition', settled on the other woman's rear. *Oh, now that is quite lovely. What I wouldn't give to be those jeans!* Larisa shook her head. What was she thinking? This was definitely not the time. However, her eyes stayed on Micaela's behind and she almost walked into a wall, not watching where she was going. Smiling sheepishly, Larisa entered the kitchen and sat down at the table. She tipped her head back, watching Micaela as she retrieved the dish-drying towel and then brought it over to her.

"You should lean your head forward slightly. A lot of people think that it's best to tip the head back with a nosebleed but that's not true." Placing her hand on the back of Larisa's head, Micaela gently pushed her head forward some. "If you lean back, then you run the risk of the blood going down your throat." She then took the towel and gently blotted at the blood on Larisa's face and the surrounding area. Larisa attempted to do it herself, but Micaela would not let her.

The green-eyed woman obediently sat with her hands in her lap as this virtual stranger doted over her like a mother hen. Larisa had to admit that she was thoroughly enjoying the treatment. Micaela was so gentle. "Are you a doctor or a nurse?"

The Latina smiled down at Larisa, her brown eyes full of warmth. "No. I'm an artist." Done, she informed the woman to pinch her nose between her thumb and forefinger for ten minutes without letting go. Larisa followed the advice, as she informed Micaela to sit down. However, she declined saying that it was time for her to go.

"Will Desiree be in good hands with you both?"

Larisa nodded. "Yes. Thank you for looking out for her. You didn't have to stay and baby-sit." *But I'm glad that you did. Otherwise, I might never have met you.*

"Well I didn't want her here alone," Micaela replied, tossing the stained towel in a nearby trash can. "Haven't you heard stories of people that drink too much choking on their...well not to be gross but vomit and dying of asphyxiation? I didn't want to take any chances with that happening with her."

Larisa stared at her in bewilderment. "Are you sure that you're not a doctor?"

Micaela laughed and Larisa decided that she very much enjoyed the gleeful sound coming from this woman. "Unless I apprehended my Ph.D. during unconsciousness or a period of amnesia, I'm pretty sure." She winked at Larisa.

The other woman grinned in return. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Micaela."

Larisa raised an eyebrow. "Are you like Cher and Madonna?"

The brown-eyed woman chuckled. "I'm sorry. My last name is Chavez. And what's your name?"

"Larisa Love." She put out her free hand and shook hands with the other woman, noticing how soft and warm Micaela's palm was. After a moment, Larisa reluctantly let go, resting her hand on her thigh. "So...can I give you a lift?" she asked, hoping that the answer would be yes.

Micaela was about to decline the offer when she suddenly thought that it might not be such a bad idea. Getting a ride from Larisa back to the bar to pick up her car would save Micaela all the money taking a taxicab would cost.

"If you don't mind," the Latina started, "I would really appreciate it if you could do that."

The other woman smiled, quite pleased with Micaela's answer. "I don't mind at all."

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Piper saw the women to the elevator before coming back into the apartment, making sure to lock the door behind her. Sighing softly, she walked into Desiree's bedroom noticing that the young woman had changed positions in the bed, now lying on her stomach with Tobias curled up on her pillow, sharing it. Silently moving to the bed, Piper pulled the covers up around her lover as she wondered how she would explain what Desiree overheard earlier that evening at Taj's house.

Shaking her head, Piper headed in the direction of the bathroom. *Fine mess you've gotten yourself into this time, Piper. You may have just screwed up the best thing that has ever happened to you,* she thought.

Twenty minutes later, Piper walked out of the bathroom feeling refreshed from a hot shower. Giving her hair a final squeeze with the towel, she tossed it on the back of the computer chair before moving to her side of the bed and getting in, careful to be quiet so as not to awaken Desiree. She wanted to postpone the imminent conversation that they would have to have for as long as possible.

Lying back on the pillow, Piper glanced over to Desiree's side of the bed to notice Tobias looking at her with what seemed to her an annoyed expression on his face. "What?," she said softly. "Did I disturb you your majesty?" Tobias chose that moment to stick out his tongue, (though he might have only been licking his mouth), however Piper stuck hers out as well. "Spoiled brat," she muttered, thinking that the furball would find himself on the floor if he even laid one paw on her pillow. Piper doubted that he would though. It was clear to her that Tobias disliked her.

Turning on her side with her back to the cat, Piper shook her head. *I think I've finally lost it*, she thought to herself. She was actually allowing the thought that Tobias did not like her, bother her. What did she care if the furball liked her or not? It was Desiree's opinion that she should be concerned with. Piper suddenly smiled. Tomorrow she would get him one of those squeaky cat toys. Surely, she could score points with Tobias for bestowing upon him a gift. Who says you can't buy love?

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At hearing the loud knocking on the door, Taj quickly arose from the bed and ran to the front door to answer it, hoping against hope that he would find Valerie standing on his threshold. Quickly wiping the sleep from his eyes, the man opened the door wearing a hopeful smile. It faded as he noticed that the person was not his fiancée.

"Geez...don't look *too* happy to see me Taj." Piper chuckled as she asked if she could come in.

With a sheepish look, Taj moved to the side to allow his friend entrance into his home. Closing the door behind her, he said, "Sorry Pippy. I thought you might have been Val." He offered the woman a bright smile as he walked over to her, lightly kissing her cheek. "Good morning. I take it that Desi is still in bed since she's not with you."

Both walked over to the couch to have a seat as Piper replied, "Oh good. Larisa got in contact with you." She took a seat next to Taj. "I asked her to call everyone to let them know that Desiree was all right. Would have done it myself but all I wanted to do last night was go to bed."

Taj nodded. "That's understandable. You should be tired after all that has happened lately." He paused thoughtfully. "So...something tells me that this isn't a social visit. What's up?" After years of knowing her, Taj could tell when there was something on Piper's mind.

Piper leaned back on the couch as she looked at the Jamaican man. "I need the package."

Taj gazed at her blankly for a few moments before it dawned on him what she was referring to. He inwardly sighed, having hoped that Piper would have forgotten all about the package by now. He should have known better. "What are you intending to do with it?"

"Ruin him."

Taj shook his head. "I don't think that's such a good idea Pippy."

"Well I don't recall asking you what you thought Taj," the dark-haired woman replied with a hint of irritation in her voice.

Taking a deep breath, Taj managed to keep his cool. He had learned long ago that sometimes it took much patience to deal with this woman. "Pippy," the man started, looking at his dearest friend pleadingly, "don't do this."

Piper sighed. She wanted that package and the only way she would get it was if Taj cooperated, which he did not seem to be inclined to do anytime soon. What was his problem? The whole point of gathering the information in that package in the first place was to destroy Richard Love's career. Piper thought back to the day she asked Taj to help her.

*A smile lit up her face as the twenty-year-old spied her best friend making his way towards the table she was currently sitting at. Standing up, she ran over to him, quickly closing the distance between them. Laughing, the man swung her around as he heard her squeal delighted to see him as much as he was delighted to see her.*

*"Hey!" Taj said brightly, taking a step back to look Piper up and down. "How's my buddy doing?"*

*Piper nodded, still smiling. "I'm good." She shrugged a little. "Well as good as one can be locked up behind bars." Her smile began to fade a bit though she fought to keep it in place. Taj only hugged her to him tightly, his tender embrace expressing more than words could.*

*"Why don't we sit down?" Piper inquired moments later, already walking back to the table. Sitting down on a chair on one side of the table, she watched as Taj sat in a chair directly across from her own. Reaching over, she placed her hand over his, immensely glad to her best friend. Visiting day was a day that she looked forward to the most and Piper intended to enjoy this time with Taj. Right after she took care of some important business first.*

*"Hey Taj...I have a huge favor to ask of you."*

*Placing his other hand on top of the one she had on his other, Taj said, "Anything. You can ask me anything."*

*"You know that judge who sentenced me here?"*

*Taj nodded, waiting for her to get to the point of this.*

*"I want him to pay," she said, regarding her friend with a deadly serious look. "I don't know what it is but something about my trial seems fishy. I feel it in my gut that that bastard had something to do with it and I want him to pay dearly."*

*"What do you want me to do exactly?"*

*Piper lowered her voice so that only Taj could hear her, "Find something on him. Something dirty. Everyone has a secret and I fully intend to expose whatever he's hiding when I get out of here. Just get me something and keep it for me. I'll take care of the rest later." She looked closely at Taj. "Think you can do that for me?"*

*The Jamaican man nodded. "I know I can."*

"He's going down Taj and I need that package to do it. Please give it to me."

Taj sighed as he replied, "Pippy I know that you're upset about the money, but I feel that by doing this you're--"

"Money?" Piper quickly interjected. "What money?"

Taj's eyes opened a fraction wider as he suddenly realized that perhaps Piper did not know about the money Richard Love was paid to give her a long prison sentence. Since Piper did not know about the bribe, then that meant that all hell would break loose where she and Desiree were concerned. *Oh...little one...I am so sorry.*

"Taj...what money?" Piper repeated growing anxious. What could he be talking about? Whatever it was, Piper could tell that her friend would rather not have to explain his comment.

Maybe he could find a way not to answer her question. "Nevermind Pippy." Taj stood up, thinking that he could dismiss the issue. "How about some breakfast?" he asked casually.

Piper arched an eyebrow. Taj was trying to change the subject. Reaching up, she wrapped her hand around her friend's arm and gently tugged him back down on the couch. "How about you tell me what's going on?"

Taj sighed. Maybe not. "Pippy," he started, looking at the young woman closely, "during your trial Judge Love excepted twenty thousand dollars in turn for giving you a long prison sentence." He paused shortly, gathering his thoughts. "He got the money from Victor, though he didn't know it was him during that time. Victor pretended to be some English man." The Jamaican man waited for the explosion, but Piper just sat quietly. He found himself almost wishing that she would scream instead of having to endure this silence.

Finally, Taj could not take it anymore. "Pippy?" he said softly.

The blue-eyed woman turned her gaze on him. Her eyes appeared to be devoid of any emotion whatsoever. "Give me the package, Taj," Piper said in a quiet tone of voice. To his chagrin, Taj had no idea what his friend was thinking. All he knew was that she was acting too calmly and that could only mean one thing. She was pissed as hell. "Piper I don't think that you have thought this through. Have you thought about the consequen--"

"Taj please," Piper said a little more forcefully, "spare me your advice or any lectures, because I am not going to change my mind. I just want my package and I want you to hand it over right *now.*"

Looking down, Taj noticed that the woman's hands were clenching and unclenching. She was trying not to lose it completely. Sighing softly, the man arose from the couch and silently walked out of the room leaving a quietly fuming Piper behind. Moments later, Taj walked into his bedroom and headed towards a painting on the wall. Removing the painting from the wall and gently placing it on the floor, Taj looking at the safe that was behind it. Perhaps he could just

flush the evidence down the toilet and inform Piper that if she wanted to ruin Richard Love, then she would have to find some other way to do it. Taj shook his head. No, if she wanted to do this then so be it. After all, she was a grown woman and could make her own decisions, no matter how wrong those decisions might be. Besides, Taj was still clinging to the hope that Piper would not go through with this anyway. Perhaps the woman would come to her senses. He could only hope that she would.

Seconds later, Taj had the safe open and was reaching into to pull out the rectangular shaped manila envelope. Closing the safe, the man put his painting back on the wall, making sure that it was straight. He then headed for the door to see his little brother standing there. He appeared as though he had just awakened.

"Hey Leroy," Taj said, putting on a smile. Last night the younger man had been so upset with him that he had begun to pack his clothes thinking to go back home with his parents. Taj managed to explain to Leroy that he really had not made any passes at Desiree and why he said to her father that he did. At first, the young man did not seem inclined to believe him, but Taj finally got through. Now all he had to do was to explain to Valerie. He sure did miss her.

"Hey Taj," Leroy returned, his eyes on the envelope. "What's that?"

"What's what?" Taj asked, pretending not to know what his brother was referring to.

"What's that in your hand?" He pointed at the envelope. "Something to do with Piper?"

"How'd you know that?"

Leroy replied, "'cause I saw her pacing in the living room just now. She didn't notice me though." He paused before asking, "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing that I won't fix," Piper said, now standing behind Leroy. Her sudden appearance made the young man nearly jump out of his skin as he quickly moved, standing beside his brother. Piper glanced at the envelope in Taj's hand and reached out, plucking it from his grasp. "Thanks Taj," she said before vanishing from their sight, leaving both speechless.

Muttering an expletive, Taj raced out to the living room with his brother following closely behind, wondering what this was all about. His worried eyes catching sight of the wide-open front door, Taj knew that he was too late. She had already left and with a damning package that was sure to ruin a certain judge's career and perhaps his life as well. Releasing a sigh, Taj walked over toward the front door and glanced around for any sign of his friend before shutting it.

Sidling up to his older sibling, Leroy asked him what the problem was. Slipping an arm around the younger man's shoulders, Taj shook his head. "According to Pippy, nothing that she won't fix."

Leroy glanced towards the couch to see a stuffed animal lying on it. "Hey look." He pointed towards the toy, as Taj turned to look at it.

"Is that who I think it is?"

Leroy nodded, smiling. "Yep. She brought Fred back."

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Parking the lilac Honda in the parking lot, Piper got out of the car, shutting the door behind her. She stormed inside the apartment complex, heading towards the elevators. Punching the arrow pointing upward, she waited impatiently for the elevator to arrive as she paced, the now opened manila envelope in her tight grasp. She had let her guard down and had been betrayed. That was exactly what it felt like. A betrayal by someone she had allowed into her heart and trusted.

The elevator doors finally opened and Piper walked inside, pressing the number of the floor that Desiree lived on. Taking deep breaths, Piper once more went over her plan. Richard Love was definitely going to pay for what he had done. All this time Piper had known something was wrong concerning her trial, she just did not know it was this heinous. She simply could not wait. The judge was going to pay dearly for what he had done to her.

The elevator doors opened and Piper walked out. Making her way to Desiree's door, the woman inserted the correct key into the slot and opened it, walking inside. Closing the door behind her, she tossed Desiree's keys on a nearby table before heading towards the bedroom. Opening the door wide, she noticed that the strawberry-blond was still fast asleep in bed. She was going to have one hell of a hangover when she finally awoke. Good.

Eyes moving towards the computer, Piper went over to it and took a seat in the computer chair as she looked for the correct button to turn it on. Finding it, she pressed it and waited as she slid a hand into the envelope and removed the contents, putting them on the desk. Piper had had an idea of what was in the package but this was almost too juicy. Taj really had done a superb job. This information would definitely ruin Judge Love.

Placing her hand over the mouse, Piper pointed the arrow to the AOL symbol and clicked on it, waiting for the log in screen to appear. Moments later it did. The dark-haired woman soon found out that she would need a password in order to sign on. Glancing towards Desiree, she arose from the chair and walked over to the bed. Reaching out a hand, she tapped the young woman on the shoulder getting no response. She did it again, more forcefully this time, but still no response. Piper then slapped Desiree on the back of the head, causing the woman to quickly sit up in the bed, her sleepy eyes opened wide. The young woman focused her vision on Piper, who was standing next to her bed.

"What did you do that for?" she asked in irritation, her voice thick with sleep. Clearing her throat lightly, Desiree reached up to run a hand through her messy hair.

"I wanted you to wake up," Piper replied casually. "I need your password."

Wearing a confused expression, Desiree's brow crinkled. "What password?"

"To the Internet. I can't get on without it." She folded her arms over her chest. "What is it?"

Though she wondered what Piper would want it for, Desiree told her anyway. "It's bard123."

"As in B-A-R-D?"

The strawberry-blonde looked annoyed. "You know any other bard?"

"Don't get smart Desiree."

"Can't get what I already am," Desiree cattily replied. Where did Piper get off having an attitude? She was the one who had the right to be upset after finding out what Piper and Larisa had been hiding. They had lied to her face yesterday and now Piper was behaving as though she had done something wrong. What nerve.

Icy blue eyes narrowed. "Yeah...yeah you are quite a smart cookie Desiree. What with getting drunk enough last night that you needed someone to escort you home and keeping things from me that I have every damn right to know..." She trailed off as she went back to the computer, typing in Desiree's password and then tapping the enter key. Piper sat back down in the chair as she saw the other woman out of the corner of her eye, moving so that she was sitting on the side of the bed, facing the dark-haired woman. The movement caused Desiree a bit of nausea and she wrapped her arms around her middle.

"What are you talking about?" Desiree asked.

Not answering, Piper kept her eyes riveted to the computer screen. AOL welcomed her as she put a hand on the mouse and moved the arrow towards the symbol to write mail and clicked on it, an email form appearing. Glancing at the desk, Piper picked up the black floppy disk that had been in the envelope and searched for where to put it. She found the correct drive and inserted the disk. She then picked up a piece of paper that Taj had written instructions on how to attach and send files. Piper thought that this was much easier and quicker than sending the information by regular mail. She could get used to this Internet thing.

"Piper...what are you doing?" Desiree asked as she remained on the side of the bed while attempting to see what the other woman was doing, but she could not see the computer screen. What in the world was she up to?

"Just a moment," Piper mumbled as she followed the instructions. Soon she had the correct files attached into the email. The pictures Taj had and the report he had written to explain them all, including what Richard Love had done a few years back. Piper smiled to herself. Revenge was truly sweet. Looking at the paper again, the woman began to type in the email addresses Taj had provided her with. After doing that, she sat back in her chair, admiring her handy work.

Desiree started to get up, but another wave of nausea swept through her so she remained seated. She was about to ask Piper again what she was doing when the woman suddenly swiveled

around in the chair, facing her.

"You want to know what I'm doing Desiree?"

The strawberry-blonde nodded slightly, her head starting to pound. She felt like swallowing an entire bottle of Excedrin.

"Simple. I'm going to make your dear old daddy's life a living hell."

Desiree's eyes opened wide. Had she slept through some major event? "What? Why?"

"Why?" Piper cocked her head to the side. "I think you know why Desiree. The question is why didn't you tell me?"

The younger woman grew alarmed. "Tell you what?" she asked softly.

Piper crossed her legs as she folded her hands together on her knee, regarding the other woman. "That your father was paid twenty grand to grant me a nice long free trip to prison of course," she replied all too casually. "Did it slip your mind or were you trying to protect him?"

She knew. Dear God she knew. Desiree suddenly wished that she were anywhere but there. Was it her imagination or was her head beginning to pound even more? "I..." Desiree began to speak but did not know what she wanted to say. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

Piper arched an eyebrow. "Oh, you're sorry? Is that it? That's quite lame of you Desiree."

"What do you want me say, huh? I'm not the one who put you in prison. I had nothing to do with it. What my father did was despicable but it's not my fault."

The dark-haired woman nodded. "You're absolutely right. It's not your fault, but you should have told me. Instead, you kept it a secret because you wanted to protect him from me. You didn't want me to find out." She paused. "Tell the truth. You did not intend to ever tell me about the bribe. I'm correct right? You would have been content with my never discovering your father was paid to strip me of my freedom."

Desiree wanted to refute the accusation, but found that she could not do so. Most likely, it was true. She never really intended to inform her lover of what her father had done all of those years ago. In her opinion, nothing good could come out of telling Piper about the bribe. Not answering, Desiree merely turned her gaze to the floor, not being able to meet Piper's angry blue eyes.

"It's okay," Piper started. "You don't have to answer. Your silence is confirmation enough. You never intended to tell me," she finished quietly.

Silence fell between them, as each woman became lost in her own thoughts. Tobias broke the silence as he got to all fours in the bed after having just woke up from his latest nap. Stretching,

he walked over to Desiree and curled up next to the young woman. Putting a hand on his head, the woman absently rubbed Tobias' head, causing the feline to purr.

"What are you going to do?" Desiree suddenly inquired, half-afraid to hear the reply. She had a feeling that Piper could get dirty if she really wanted to.

"Did you know that your father had an affair five years ago?"

The strawberry-blonde's head snapped up as she focused her eyes on the other woman who sat almost smugly in her chair. "Wh...what?" Desiree shook her head. "No...you have to be mistaken. My father would never do anything like that."

"Oh, but he would send a woman to prison for eight years because someone gave him twenty grand to do so?" Piper slowly nodded. "I see. He's not an adulterer, just a crooked judge. Makes perfect sense."

Desiree closed her mouth, realizing that Piper had a valid point.

The dark-haired woman went on. "And did you know that the woman he had an affair with-an affair that went on four months I might add-ended up pregnant with his child and he paid her off so she wouldn't tell anyone about it?"

At Desiree's disbelieving look, Piper swiveled around in the chair and grabbed the pictures she had put on the desk. Getting up, she walked over to the bed and deposited the photographs on the other woman's lap before retaking her seat in the chair. Piper watched as the younger woman cautiously picked up the photographs and started to examine each one. One was of her father and a woman who looked to be around Desiree's age. Richard had his arm around the young woman's shoulders as they walked down the street smiling at one another, neither having any indication that their picture was being taken. Another was of the two of them sitting at a small table outside next to a café. Desiree's father held the woman's hands in his as he kissed her on the lips. The next photograph made Desiree sick to her stomach as she saw her father in bed with the younger woman. It was obvious what they were doing. Throwing the incriminating pictures down on the bed, the strawberry-blonde ran towards the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Piper remained seated in the chair as she heard Desiree in the bathroom retching loudly. The dark-haired woman felt a twinge of guilt but quickly shrugged it off. Desiree had betrayed her. She felt as though she had willingly given away her heart and then had it thrown back in her face. This is what happened when you trusted someone too much. They in turn hurt you.

Minutes later, the bathroom door opened and Desiree walked out, not even glancing at Piper as she made her way back to the bed. Sitting down, her eyes strayed to two remaining pictures. One was of the young woman walking towards a car clearly pregnant by at least seven or eight months. The other was of the same woman pushing a stroller with a newborn baby in it.

Shaking her head in bewilderment, Desiree took deep breaths, not sure whether she wanted to

cry or shout. Perhaps she wanted to do both. Looking up, Desiree noticed Piper observing her. "Are you proud of yourself?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Piper looked as though she was pondering that. "I guess you could say that I'm pleased with the results. As you can see, your daddy ain't perfect."

"No one is."

Piper nodded in agreement. "True. But people are about to find out just how imperfect he is."

"What's done is done Piper. Why now?"

"Why not now?"

Desiree momentarily closed her eyes as she softly sighed. "I know it's easy for me to say because this had nothing to do with me, but let it go." She looked at the other woman imploringly.

"Please. Just let it go."

Piper pretended to think about that before she answered. "No. I can't do that. You don't know what it's like to be locked behind bars for nearly a decade. And you don't know what it's like to have your freedom snatched away from you. You're father, the judge," she sneered, "put me away and was paid for it. He got twenty thousand dollars in exchange for my freedom and I'll be damned if I let it go. I refuse to do that. Do you understand?"

Not waiting for an answer, she swiveled around in the chair to face the computer screen. Putting her hand over the mouse, Piper directed the tiny arrow on the screen to the "Send" button. With the arrow hovering over the button, the dark-haired woman noticed Desiree's reflection on the screen as she came towards the computer, choosing to stand behind Piper as she examined what was on the screen.

"Who are you sending this information to?"

"Just a couple of newspapers. One located here in Los Angeles, and the other in San Francisco. And three judges who know your father well. At least they thought they did," Piper replied casually as she poised her index finger to click. She actually found that her hand was beginning to shake slightly. *You can do this Piper. Just click the button and let the chips fall where they may.*

Desiree crossed her arms over her chest. "If you do this then we are through. If you send that email, I never want to see you again. I never want to hear from you again. I want you to go away...forever. So if you go through with this vindictive scheme, you lose me." Her heart beginning to beat faster, Desiree barely breathed as she waited for Piper to make the next move whatever that may be.

Click. It was done with the click of a button. Both Piper and Desiree watched as the email vanished before their eyes and a tiny box appeared on the screen letting them know that the

email had been sent. Now that the bomb had been planted, all to be done was to sit back and wait for it to explode. There was no turning back now.

Desiree swallowed hard, feeling a lump in her throat as she attempted to keep the tears from falling. "Thank you for just letting me know how very little I mean to you," she said quietly, not moving. "Now get out of my home."

Without so much as one word, Piper arose from the chair, and obtained everything that went inside of the package she came back from Taj's with. She then walked towards the bedroom door not even glancing at Desiree. The younger woman remained standing where she was as she watched her now ex-lover heading towards the front door. The dark-haired woman opened the door and exited. As she closed the door behind her, Desiree shakily walked over to the bed and sat down as hot tears started to run down her cheeks. Moving so that her whole body was in the bed, Desiree curled up into a tight ball as her body began to shake while she sobbed, mourning the loss of her lover and the father she now realized that she didn't know.

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"Val...please honey just listen to me. I can explain what happened last night. I just need you to pick up the phone." Taj listened, hoping that Valerie would talk to him. There was only silence on the other end of the line so he ended the conversation with the answering machine by saying, "I need to see you Val. Please don't shut me out." Taj paused thoughtfully. "I love you." Pressing the end button on the cordless phone, the man began to pace back and forth in the living room. Soon the doorbell rang and Taj all but raced to the door to answer it. It must have been Valerie. Opening the door wide, Taj sighed as he noticed the caller.

"No applause is necessary Taj." Larisa grinned. "Were you expecting someone else? Valerie perhaps?"

"That's very perceptive of you," Taj replied sarcastically as he moved out of the way so that she could enter. "Get your butt in here."

Chuckling, Larisa walked inside, shutting the door behind her. "In a bad mood Taj?"

"Well let's see..." the Jamaican man started as he tossed the phone on the couch before sitting on the arm of it. "My fiancée won't talk to me, your father is probably trying to hire a hitman as we speak to get rid of me because he thinks I put the moves on his daughter, and speaking of Desi she probably doesn't like me too much right now either." He shook his head before looking at Larisa, who was now standing in front of him. "So to answer your question, yes I'm in a bad mood."

"Taj don't be worried about Desi being upset with you. She won't blame you because you didn't tell her about Piper and I in Jamaica. That was our job to do, not yours."

Taj shook his head. "That's not why I don't think she'll like me."

Larisa's brow crinkled. "Something I should know about?"

The man took a deep breath. "Pippy knows. She knows about the bribe."

The dark-haired woman winced. "Oh, shit. You told her?"

He nodded. "The way she was talking, I thought she already knew about it. Now she certainly does know and...to put it mildly she's pissed off. You know how she can get."

Larisa nodded. "Yes. I definitely know." She thought for a moment. "I need to get in touch with Desiree." She spied Taj's phone laying on the couch and asked if she could use it. Reaching behind him, the man picked up the phone and handed it to Larisa. Thanking him, she quickly punched in her sister's phone number before putting the phone to her ear, listening as it began to ring. On the fourth ring, Desiree picked up. Instantly, Larisa could tell that she had been crying. If Piper had done anything to her baby sister, she would kill the woman.

"Sweetie this is Larisa," she stated softly. "Are you okay?"

"Leave me alone," Desiree enunciated each word before she hung up the phone, leaving a stunned Larisa listening to the dial tone.

Watching her, Taj's expression grew concerned. "What's wrong?"

Shaking her head, Larisa took the phone away from her ear and ended the call. "She told me to leave her alone and hung up on me." She sighed. "I guess I don't blame her. I did lie to her."

Reaching out a hand, Taj gave Larisa's shoulder a light squeeze. She in turn offered him a faint smile. "How am I ever going to get my sister back?"

"You will," Taj replied. "Just give her some time to cool off. A lot has been happening lately and Desi needs time to process it all."

Larisa nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I know I'm right." Taj grinned at the woman as she playfully rolled her eyes.

Larisa was about to say something when the phone rang. Pressing the talk button, she put the phone to her ear before saying, "Hello. Potter residence." Glancing at Taj, Larisa noticed the look of hope plainly written on his face.

"I have a collect call from," a computer voice stated.

"Piper," said a human voice.

The computer went on to tell Larisa that if she wanted to accept the charges for the call to push five. If not, push one. Larisa pushed number five and listened to what else the computer had to

say before the call was connected.

There was silence on the other end for a second before a female voice said, "Put Taj on the phone Larisa." The dark-haired woman shook her head sadly as she mouthed an apology to Taj, letting him know that the caller was not Valerie.

"Is the word please in your vocabulary?" Larisa retorted.

"Are the words I'm going to kick the sh-"

Larisa quickly interjected, "Now now Piper. Let's not resort to threats."

"Just put him on the phone."

"Taj is not accessible at the moment, so you'll have to deal with me. What can I do you for, hmm? Do you need a lift?"

Piper wanted to say no just to disagree but that was her main reason for calling. "What makes you think that?"

"Because one, you called collect so that leads me to believe that you aren't calling from Desiree's phone and that you don't even have thirty-five cents to call directly. Two, I can hear cars passing in the background and from that I can deduce that you are using a public phone. And three, since you don't have even thirty-five cents that means you can't even make it over here on a bus and that would be much too far to walk. Now am I right or am I right?"

"Pompous ass," Piper muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"I said you're a smart lass," the blue-eyed woman said clearly.

Larisa smirked into the phone. "Yeah, sure you did. Where are you? I'll come pick you up."

Deciding not to argue, Piper informed Larisa exactly where she was before the woman told her that she would be right there. When they ended the call, Piper walked over to the curb to have a seat and wait while Larisa explained to Taj that she was going to go pick up the homeless penniless person-her exact words.

"You want me to come with you?" he asked.

"No hon." Larisa handed Taj his phone. "I've got it all under control. I'll be right back." She started towards the door when she suddenly remembered her reason for coming there in the first place. Turning around, Larisa walked back over to Taj, who was still sitting on the arm of his couch. "Could you do something for me while I'm gone Taj?"

"Sure. What is it?"

Fishing a small piece of paper out of her pocket, Larisa handed it to Taj. On looking at it, the man saw written on the slip of paper seven letters and numbers grouped together with the name Micaela Chavez printed underneath them. Turning his eyes to Larisa, Taj asked what it was for.

"That's a license plate number," Larisa explained, "and that is the name of the owner of it. I was wondering if you could possibly find out where she lives."

Taj arched both of his eyebrows. "You want me to find out this woman's address based on the number of her license plate?"

She nodded.

Taj shrugged. "Sure. No problem. But who is this?"

"Oh, just someone I met last night," Larisa tried to casually reply. She had been thinking about Micaela all through the night and knew that she simply had to see her again. If anyone could help her to locate Micaela, that person would be Taj.

The Jamaican man grinned knowingly. "Oh, just someone you met last night, hmm?"

Larisa nodded again. "Yep." She paused. "Well I'll be on my way now." She headed towards the front door. "I'll be right back with our ex-kidnapper."

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Putting almost half of the donut into his mouth, George grabbed a napkin as some of the thick sweet red jelly inside squirted on his lips and dropped onto his tie. He muttered something about this being a present from his wife as he dabbed at the spot of noticeable jelly on the tie before tossing the napkin in a nearby trash can.

Things had just not been going well for the journalist the last few weeks. His job was on the line, the bills were piling up, he and his wife were arguing with one another constantly, and his oldest son was beginning to be a royal pain. Just yesterday George had been called into his boss's office and informed that if he did not write a good story within a week's time then he would be out of a job at this particular newspaper.

On finishing the rest of his donut, George reached into a pink box for another when he noticed an email in his box from a DesLove@aol.com. The journalist found that name vaguely familiar as he clicked on the email to see what it contained. Reaching over, George grabbed his glasses off of his desk and put them on before beginning to read.

*Download to get a killer story.*

A killer story. That was the only sentence written in the email but George saw where he could download an attached file. Moving the arrow over the correct button, the journalist clicked and

waited for the file to be transferred to his computer while he waited, completely intrigued to know what this was about. Could this story, whatever it may be, possibly save his career? He most certainly hoped so.

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As she pulled up to the curb, she noticed Piper sitting on the sidewalk with her arms folded across her knees and a manila envelope lying next to her. She appeared to have a lot on her mind as she stared down at the ground, having no idea that Larisa had pulled up. On honking the horn, Larisa was able to obtain Piper's attention as her head shot up, eyes moving to the car. The blue-eyed woman watched as Larisa pulled down the driver's side window, a hint of a grin on her face.

"So tell me," Larisa started as she made a big display out of moving her eyes up and down Piper's body, "do you charge by the hour?"

Piper gave the woman a dirty look, not being in the least bit amused.

Larisa chuckled. "Oh, you know I'm just playing with you." The other woman just stared at her. "Are you going to get in or not?"

Taking her time, Piper arose from her seat on the sidewalk, grabbing her package in the process and walked around Larisa's car to the passenger side. Opening the door, she got in, still not uttering a word. Shifting gears, Larisa pulled back into traffic, heading towards Taj's house. There was silence in the car for a while, until the driver of the vehicle just could not take it anymore.

"What happened between you and my sister?" Larisa inquired.

Looking out the passenger side window, Piper coolly replied, "Ask your sister."

Larisa bit her lower lip. This attitude of Piper's had to go. "I would, but Desi isn't talking to me right now. I called her just before you called Taj and she hung up. Told me to leave her alone," she finished quietly. When there was no reply from her passenger, Larisa asked what happened again.

Piper rolled down the window and placed her arm on the ledge of it. "She did something that she shouldn't have done and I did something that she didn't want me to do."

"That summary is far too succinct. Will you go into detail a little more?"

The blue-eyed woman inhaled sharply. "She kept something from me that I was entitled to know."

"You mean the bribe?"

Piper glanced over at Larisa. "You knew too." She shook her head. "That's great. That's just freaking wonderful!"

Larisa kept her eyes on the road. "Okay. I'll take that outburst as a yes." Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Piper glaring at her. Larisa decided to ignore it. "And what did you do?"

"Something that needed to be done."

Rolling her eyes, Larisa checked the traffic before carefully pulling into the parking lot of a grocery store. Finding a space, she pulled in and stopped the car, cutting off the ignition. Removing her seat belt, she turned so that she was facing the other woman, who was now looking at her.

"Why did you stop?" Piper asked.

"Because I want to give you my full attention. Now...what did you do Piper?"

Not saying anything, the blue-eyed woman reached into the manila envelope and took out a few pictures. She handed the photographs to Larisa and watched as the woman observed each one. Larisa's expression did not change, as she looked through the pictures of her father with another woman and of the woman alone with a baby. Done, she handed the photographs back to Piper.

"So Father had an affair," she quietly stated.

Piper merely nodded.

"And...you found that out and had some photos of them together taken, unless you took them yourself."

"These were taken five years ago so I couldn't have taken them since I was locked up behind bars. So yeah, I had someone else do it."

Larisa nodded. "I see." She looked up into Piper's eyes. "Does my father have another child?"

Piper nodded again.

"He doesn't see his child though, does he?"

"No. He paid his mistress to keep quiet about their affair and the baby. I have no idea where she and the child are now."

Nodding again, Larisa stared out of the window not saying anything. Minutes later, she started the car and drove out of the parking lot, heading in a direction other than the one leading to Taj's house. Noticing, Piper asked the woman where she was going.

"Home," Larisa replied.

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This was going to push him to the top again. This email was simply brilliant. Imagine the honorable Judge Richard Love having an affair with a woman and then paying her off to keep the conception of his child a secret. This story had fallen into George's hands and he was quite thankful, though he wondered if anyone else had received the email. Glancing around, he noticed that no one seemed to be acting out of the ordinary. Perhaps he was the only one. Though even if he was not, George was going to do everything in his power to get this story printed as soon as possible. Hopefully by tomorrow morning, everyone who read this newspaper was going to know the scandal of the judge.

Looking at his computer screen, the journalist observed the email address. DesLove. If life were an animated cartoon, a flashing light bulb would have appeared over his head. It suddenly dawned on George who this could be. Acting quickly, George pulled up a newspaper article on the disappearance of Desiree Love. Scanning the article, the journalist recalled how ex-convict Piper Redding, who coincidentally had been sentenced to prison by the young woman's father, had taken her hostage.

For some reason unbeknownst to George, Desiree Love put together an email that could shatter her father's career and reputation. The big question was why?

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Opening the door, Larisa walked into her home with Piper coming behind her. Hearing someone talking in the kitchen, Larisa headed in that direction. Entering the kitchen, she noticed her parents sitting at the kitchen table, Piper appearing at her side seconds later.

"What is she doing here?" Richard asked his daughter, sparing the woman standing beside her a glance.

"Her name is Piper and she's here because I want her to be," Larisa testily replied, while Piper crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned her shoulder against the wall, wondering what Larisa was going to say.

Sandra sighed as she looked up at her daughter, quietly saying, "Larisa, please don't speak to your father in that tone of voice. It isn't at all respectful."

"Respectful?" The dark-haired woman gave an empty laugh. "You want to talk of respect mother? Well what about the respect your own husband has given you, which is none."

"What are you talking about now?" Sandra asked in an exasperated tone.

"I'm talking of how Father has disrespected you by not being honest about his past indiscretions."

Sandra closed her eyes, softly replying, "You know."

Both Piper and Larisa raised an eyebrow at that as the older of the two said, "You already knew about it."

Opening her eyes, Sandra looked up at her daughter again, as her husband sat across from her, his stomach tying into knots inside. How could Larisa have found out about his affair? He had not informed anyone of it except for his wife. Richard's eyes suddenly settled on Piper as she watched Larisa and Sandra. His eyes narrowed. Somehow, this was her fault. It had to be.

Sandra nodded. "Yes. Your father told me five years ago. How did you find out?"

Larisa shook her head in bewilderment. "You mean you stayed with him even though he had an affair? Mother he laid down with another woman."

"I forgave him." Reaching out, she put her hand over her husband's. "Your father is sorry for what he did."

"So you condone him for abandoning his child too?"

Sandra appeared to be confused now. "What do you mean? What child?"

*Oh, dear God.* They had found that out too. Richard looked at his wife, but she had her eyes on their daughter. He felt his heart beginning to pound harshly in his chest and briefly wondered if he was experiencing a heart attack. With all of this stress, it would not have surprised Richard if he had been.

By the expression on her face, Larisa instantly knew that her mother did not know of the baby. She looked at her father then. "Why don't you tell her Father? Tell your wife the rest of the story. I suppose you conveniently forgot."

Sandra removed her hand from her husband's and placed it on her lap as she looked at him. "Richard?" she said as calmly as she could, though her voice was shaking.

The judge felt as though his world was suddenly crashing before his very eyes. "It's true, Sandy. When I had an affair with Theresa, she ended up pregnant. I didn't want her to tell anyone so I offered her money and had her sign a contract stating that she would never let anyone know that I was the father. I haven't seen her or the baby since."

"How could you?" Everyone turned to see Richie standing in the entrance to the kitchen. He stared at his father with a hurt look on his face. "How could you do that to my mother?" He shook his head. "And to think I respected you. I looked up to you." Tears formed in his eyes as Larisa came towards him, attempting to hug her brother, but he shrugged her off. "No, you're just as bad, telling her like this."

"Rich-" Larisa started.

"No. Don't say a word to me." He walked over to his mother and helped her up from the chair. "I think we should go home now Mom."

Sandra nodded in agreement. "Yes. Why don't you get our things and then we'll head to the airport." Complying with his mother, Richie walked out of the kitchen. Sandra turned to her daughter. "Larisa, could you possibly give us a ride? Please don't worry about Richie. He didn't mean what he said. He's just upset right now."

Larisa nodded. "I know Mother. I don't blame him." Putting a hand in her pocket, she took out a ring of keys. "I'll take you and Richie to the airport whenever you're ready to go."

"Don't leave," Richard spoke up in a near whisper, as he remained seated at the table. "Please don't leave me," he added, his usually booming voice sounding almost childlike.

Sparing him a glance, Sandra replied, "I don't even know you anymore." She walked out of the kitchen without another word, Piper, Larisa, and Richard watching her go. Larisa then looked at her father, asking him to leave her home. Not bothering to plead with her, the man arose from his seat and walked out of the kitchen, heading for the front door. Moments later, both Piper and Larisa heard the door slam as he left.

Running a hand through her hair, Larisa let out a ragged breath. "Will you stay here while I take Mother and Richie to the airport? That is unless you want to come with us."

Piper shook her head. "No. I'll just stay here until you get back."

Nodding, Larisa said, "Okay. I'll be back soon." She started to walk out of the kitchen when Piper reached out, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"You all right?"

Surprised by the concern she heard, Larisa gazed up at the taller woman for a moment before replying in a soft voice, "I will be." She then continued on her way, still feeling Piper's touch.

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As Piper sat on the couch she heard footsteps behind her and glanced back to see Richard walking towards her. She was about to say something when she suddenly noticed the gun the man toted in his right hand. It was pointed down at the floor, but Piper found herself becoming uneasy all the same. The judge must have finally flipped his lid.

"Hello Redding," Richard said in a conversational tone, as though the two of them were old friends. Walking in front of her, he chose to stand there. Piper remained seated on the couch, not moving a muscle. "I'm pleased that you decided to stay here while Larisa took my son and wife to the airport. I think we need to have a little chat. What do you think?"

The blue-eyed woman chose not to say anything, just staring up at him, waiting for the man to

make a mistake so that she could wrestle the weapon away from him.

The judge laughed, though there was not a hint of humor in it. "Well you've now screwed me over just like I did you, Redding. First you took my daughter as your hostage and then somehow managed to make a friend out of her. And then you make my wife leave me and my son now hates me too. I'm sure you told Desiree about my indiscretion as Larisa called it, so she most likely hates me as well. And you know what?" he stared down at her with a thoughtful look on his face. "I bet you let a lot of other people know too. Am I right?"

Piper nodded slightly.

The judge nodded. "I thought so. There goes my career down the drain. So in a nutshell I have no family and no job," he paused, "because of you. Did you tell anyone about the bribe? I know you must know about that too."

Piper shook her head negatively. "True, I know about it but I haven't told anyone."

"Why not? That'll be even more perfect. Then you could probably send *me* to prison. Wouldn't that be ironic?" Richard humorlessly laughed again.

There was no response from Piper as her eyes glanced from Richard to the gun. "So the way I figure it Redding," the judge raised the gun and pointed it at the young woman. Piper's breath caught as she stared at the barrel of the gun, "you should finish the job. I know you want your revenge on me...so take it. Here," coming towards her, Richard pushed the gun into Piper's hands, startling the woman. Taking a step back, the judge stood with his hands at his sides, "finish me off Redding."

The blue-eyed woman looked down at the heavy gun in her hands before she raised her head to look at the judge, who stood waiting. "I'm not going to shoot you."

"Why not? You've taken away all that I had to live for."

"It's not as though you didn't help to make that happen," Piper replied matter-of-factly.

Richard blinked away a couple of tears. "Aim the gun at me and then put your finger on the trigger and pull it. It's as simple as that."

The dark-haired woman shook her head. "I won't."

"What's the matter with you? Don't you want me dead? I ruined your life. Sent you to prison for what? Eight...nine years? You did time while I used that money to paint my house and purchase a new car. Surely, you want to kill me. There has to be some part of you that is screaming for you to pull that trigger. Come on Redding...kill me like you did your daddy." Although he was saying all of this, the judge knew that she would not kill him in cold blood. There was no way that she was going to pull that trigger.

Piper's hand tightened around the handle of the gun until her knuckles turned white. "I refuse to take your life."

Richard heavily sighed as he outstretched his hand towards Piper. "Then give me the gun back."

Piper raised an eyebrow. Did he think that she had stupid written all over her forehead? There was no way that she was about to give him that gun. "No, I don't think so."

"No, you don't think so?"

The dark-haired woman nodded. "That's what I said."

"Give me my gun now."

Piper shook her head. She was about to get up when the judge suddenly jumped at her, causing them both to fly back in the couch as the back of it landed on the floor, making them both tumble onto the floor. The blue-eyed woman let out a yelp of pain as she felt her wrist snap when she attempted to break her fall with her left hand. Pain radiating up and down her arm, Piper still held the gun in her right as a much bigger Richard held her down, clamping a big hand over Piper's own hand holding the gun.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Piper yelled, trying to squirm from underneath the man.

Not answering, the judge placed a finger over the one that Piper held in front of the trigger and forced the barrel of the gun to aim at his head. She attempted to move the gun away from Richard, but he used his free hand to get a grip on her wrist keeping the weapon in place.

"Don't...do...this," Piper said, sweat forming on her brow, trying to resist the finger pushing down on her own. She tried to push the judge away with her free hand, but it hurt too much to do so.

The judge looked her in the eyes as a tear fell down his cheek. "I'm sorry," he whispered as he pushed down on Piper's finger enough to get her to pull the trigger. There was a loud bang as Richard landed on top of Piper, completely still, his grip on her wrist and hand relaxed.

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As Larisa pulled up to her house, she noticed an ambulance and a few police cars parked outside of her house. Some of the neighbors stood around watching, interested to see what was going on. Larisa came to a stop as she saw two men carrying out a stretcher with a filled body bag lying on top of it.

"Oh, God...Piper," Larisa whispered as she got out of the car and ran towards the two men. A police officer caught her.

"Whoa...Miss I can't allow you to be here."

"This is my home! I live here," Larisa struggled to get past the man.

"Miss calm down." The officer placed his hands on her shoulders. "You say you live here?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm Larisa Love. Wh...who is in that body bag?"

The officer sighed. He absolutely detested this part of his job. "Miss, I'm sorry but I have some bad news. Your father Richard Love has been shot. By the time the ambulance arrived here he was already dead."

Larisa shook her head not wanting to believe him. "No, that can't be right. You see my father isn't even here. He left."

"We have a positive ID on him Miss. I'm terribly sorry."

"Wh...who shot him?"

"Well Piper Redding is being questioned right now."

Larisa exhaled loudly. "She wouldn't kill my father. Where is she?"

"She's inside, though I can't let you in there."

The woman looked at him pleadingly.

The officer sighed. He was always a sucker for a woman with eyes as pretty as hers. "I'll escort you in Miss."

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"So you're telling us that Richard Love came in here, tried to get you to shoot him and then when you wouldn't he attacked you, forcing you to point the gun at him and made you push the trigger by manipulating your finger?" Officer Penn inquired.

Piper nodded for what must have been the fiftieth time during the questioning. "Yes. I tried to wrestle the gun away from him but I couldn't. He was lying on top of me, weighing me down and he had the upper hand." The young woman cradled her left arm against her body, with her right hand wrapped around her aching wrist. She had a feeling that it was broken.

"Piper..." Larisa said a few feet away from the woman. The blue-eyed woman looked over to her with tired eyes. Decreasing the distance between him, Larisa quickly walked up to Piper and attempted to hug her when the woman took a step back, indicating her shirt, which had blood all over it.

Larisa saw the blood and shook her head as if in a daze. "God...what happened here?"

"Who are you Ma'am?" Officer Penn asked.

The young woman glanced at him. "My name is Larisa. Richard Love was my father and I want to know what happened." She looked back at Piper.

"He killed himself," Piper stated in a quiet, apologetic voice. "I tried to stop him but I couldn't. Of course, it looks like I did it because I have his blood all over me, I know my fingerprints are on the gun, and I probably have gunpowder residue on my hands. But I didn't do it. I didn't kill your father Larisa."

The older woman nodded. "I know you didn't." She turned towards Officer Penn and his partner. "This is a waste of time."

"Miss Love, we found a man shot here and we're going to investigate before ruling that it was indeed a suicide. Until then, Miss Redding is our only suspect."

"Well did she call 911 to let them know what happened?"

"Yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Your father had already passed away by the time she called."

"Where did she get the gun from?"

"She says your father had it when he came back after having left earlier because you asked him to."

"So why don't you do a trace on where it came from?" She had been paying attention to some of those many cop shows on television.

"Can't do that," Officer Penn replied. "The number was scraped off. Though we will ask around to see if anyone knows anything."

Larisa nodded. "And what about my neighbors? Are you going to ask them questions?"

The other officer spoke up. "We're right on top of that Miss Love. If Piper Redding is indeed innocent then we will find that out."

"Until then?"

"Until then I'm afraid we'll have to take Miss Redding into custody," Officer Penn stated.

Larisa cursed softly under her breath. "This is such bull. I know this woman and I know that she would never do anything that heinous. She and my father did not have the best relationship, but there is no way on God's green earth that she would kill him."

"As I said before, if that is true we will find out," Officer Romero said.

"Excuse me, Officer Penn and Romero?" All four people in the living room turned to see the young officer who had let Larisa in a few minutes ago.

"Yes?"

"I have a witness out here who says that she saw Richard Love get out of a taxi and walk up to this house. She says that he took a gun out of his pocket as he entered the house."

"Have her come in please," Officer Penn replied.

Nodding, the young officer left the house, returning a few moments later with a short-haired blonde woman who appeared to be in her early forties. Officer Penn asked the woman her name, and she informed him that it was Bridgett Martin.

"Okay Ms. Martin...tell us your story please."

"Well I was out watering my yard when a taxi pulled up to the curb in front of Larisa's house. Being nosy, I waited to see who got out. I recognized her father the judge immediately. He looked a little worse for wear too. Anyway, he walked up to the house, but before he opened the door, he took a gun out of the pocket of his jacket. He then disappeared inside and I never saw him again."

Officer Penn nodded. "What time was this about?"

"Oh, I really couldn't tell you. I started watering my lawn sometime around 12:00, but it wasn't long after that that he arrived." Bridgett shrugged. "Maybe ten...fifteen minutes later."

Officer Penn took down a note. "Did you happen to catch the license plate on that taxi by any chance?"

Bridgett shook her head. "No, I'm sorry I didn't." She thought for a moment. "But the driver was a man if that helps any. He had on a red baseball cap."

Officer Penn smiled at her. "Thank you for your assistance Ms. Martin. If you remember anything else please let us know." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small card, handing it to the woman. "We'd really appreciate it."

"You're welcome Officer." She turned to Larisa and wrapped her arms around the woman, hugging her tight. "I'm so sorry sweetheart. If there is anything that I can do don't you hesitate to let me know. I'm right across the street." Patting the young woman's back she let go, giving Larisa an encouraging smile to which the woman returned a faint smile of her own.

"Thank you Bridgie. I will."

Winking, Bridgett headed towards the exit with the young officer who had escorted her in. Officer Penn turned to Piper who stood quietly.

"Miss Redding, I'm afraid that we are going to have to take you in now."

"Wait a minute," Larisa interjected. "You're arresting her? You just learned that my father came here with that gun. You honestly think that Piper took it away from him and shot him with it?"

Officer Penn replied, "Miss Love, I would like to prove Miss Redding innocent just as much as you would, but with the evidence that we have now, it's enough to take her into custody. Now we are going to be investigating and I assure you that the truth will come out."

"It already has. She's innocent."

"I want you to let me prove that. I'm on your side here. Both Officer Romero and I are." Officer Romero nodded in agreement with his partner. "Try to trust me here." He smiled at her, showing a set of deep dimples. "We're good at our job."

Softly sighing, Larisa nodded. "Okay. But can you give me a moment with her alone?"

Officer Penn nodded. "Yeah, sure. We'll be right outside." With that, both he and his partner left the house to wait just outside the door where they could see but still give the women their privacy.

Larisa looked up at Piper. "How are you holding up?"

The blue-eyed woman nodded. "I'm okay considering," she paused. "What about you?"

Larisa shook her head. "I don't know. I'm...I'm just in sort of a stupor. I can't believe all of this is happening. Last time I saw my father I kicked him out of my house and now he's dead." She swallowed with some difficulty. She was not about to break into tears now.

"I'm sorry," Piper started. "I really tried to stop him."

Giving her a faint smile, Larisa replied, "I know." She glanced towards the front door, where the policemen were waiting. "I guess I better let you go now. You'll be out of there soon okay? You've spent enough unfair time behind bars."

Reaching out, Piper squeezed the other woman's shoulder briefly before she started to walk towards the door. Suddenly she stopped and turned back towards Larisa. "Desiree. You need to go tell her before anyone else gets the chance."

Larisa nodded. "I know. I'm headed over there now." Piper started to walk away when the other woman suddenly thought of something and called her name. Piper turned around again.

"Hmm?"

"Did you see a suicide note? Did he say anything about one?"

Piper shook her head. "No. He probably didn't have one."

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Desiree retrieved the mail out of her box before walking over to the elevator and pressing the button to go up. As she waited for the elevator to arrive, she rifled through the mail, finding a couple of sales papers, coupons for a new pizza place and a letter from a friend who had recently moved to Texas. There was also an unmarked envelope, which had been stuck into the crack of her mailbox. Desiree wondered what that was as the elevator doors opened.

A little unsteady due to the amount of alcohol she had consumed earlier, the strawberry-blonde walked into the elevator and pressed the correct button for her floor as she leaned against a wall. Closing her eyes, she tried not to think about Piper who she had to admit she already missed. Her eyes, that smile, the way she made Desiree feel safe and protected, even when she had her hostage at the cabin. But the woman had chosen revenge over her and it was all over. It had to be. Piper obviously was not the right person for her after the stunt she had pulled just that morning.

The elevator arrived at Desiree's floor and she walked out, trying to keep one foot in front of the other. Making it to her apartment, she opened the door and walked in, putting the mail on a desk located near the front door. Going into the kitchen, Desiree grabbed a small glass and the half-full bottle of whiskey she had been drinking from. Pouring some of the liquid into the glass, she took a small sip before moving back into the living room and to the desk. She was about to pick up the unmarked envelope when there was a knock on the door.

For a split second, she hoped that it was Piper as she opened the door. The caller was a woman, but not that one. "Larisa, what do you want?"

The other woman saw the glass. Walking into the apartment, she closed the door behind her before gently taking the glass of whiskey from Desiree. The strawberry-blonde started to protest when Larisa held up a hand, stopping her. "I have something to tell you." She put the glass on the desk before asking her sister to join her on the couch. Obediently, Desiree followed Larisa to the couch and the women took their seats, sitting next to each other.

"If this is about you and Piper..."

"No," Larisa shook her head, "this has nothing to do with that."

Desiree started to feel that something was terribly wrong. "What happened?"

There was simply no easy way to put this. She just had to come out and say it as gently as she could. "Desiree...this afternoon Father...he committed suicide."

The strawberry-blonde's eyes widened as she shook her head in disbelief. "No," she whispered. "You're wrong...he wouldn't do that."

Larisa attempted to take Desiree's hand in her own, but the other woman pulled away before she could get the chance to. Softly sighing, Larisa quietly said, "It's true..." She noticed that her younger sibling's eyes began to brim with tears and ached to hold her. "He killed himself in my house not too long ago. He and Mother had a disagreement so she decided to leave with Richie. I took them to the airport and by the time I arrived home there was an ambulance and policemen parked in front of my house."

"Why would he kill himself?" Desiree asked in a shaky voice. "So what if they had a disagreement..."

"I confronted him about his affair. Piper told me today," she explained before her sister could ask. "It turns out that Mother knew about the affair all this time, however she didn't know about the child. So she became upset and decided to return right then without Father." Looking down at hands resting in her lap, Larisa softly concluded, "I suppose that is why he did it. He felt as though he had lost his family."

Both women fell silent for several moments before Desiree asked, "How?"

Though it was a one-word question, Larisa instantly knew what her sister was inquiring. "He shot himself."

Desiree closed her eyes tightly as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her shoulders began to shake as she cried. Not being able to stand it another minute, Larisa scooted closer to the younger woman and wrapped her arms around her. She was relieved when Desiree did not pull back, opting instead to put her own arms around her sister. Stroking up and down her back, Larisa gently rocked the strawberry-blonde back and forth, as she cried hard for the loss of their father.

A while later, Larisa noticed that her sister had grown quiet and completely still. Looking down at the younger woman, she saw that Desiree had cried herself to sleep. Knowing that she did not have the strength it took to carry her sister to the bedroom, Larisa gently arose and laid Desiree out on the couch, careful not to disturb her sleep. Walking into her sister's bedroom, she soon returned with the other woman's bedspread. Laying the cover over her sister, Larisa leaned down and placed a tender kiss to her forehead before she took a seat on the floor with her back to the couch. She let out a soft sigh as she wondered just how everything had managed to get out of hand within such a short amount of time.

Desiree had taken up the hobby of drinking now. Larisa could smell the whiskey on her breath when they were talking.

Desiree and Piper were no longer on speaking terms.

There was another sibling out there somewhere that they knew nothing about.

Her mother no longer had a husband and she, Desiree, and Richie no longer had a father because he got the idea in his head to shoot himself.

Piper was probably sitting in a jail cell right now for being charged with his death.

What else could possibly go wrong?

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He finally added the last period of the story before starting to go over it, correcting any mistakes that he might have made. George Stanley smiled to himself. This was brilliant. Truly brilliant. The journalist simply could not wait for people to read his article in tomorrow's newspaper. For what must have been the thousandth time today, the man silently thanked Desiree Love for the email she sent him, though he still could not fathom why she did such a thing. Why she would want to expose her father's less than perfect past was beyond him.

Having left it for the last thing to add to the article, George was about to write a title when Daniel Morris, a friend and co-worker of his perched himself on the edge of the journalists' desk. Earlier today, George had called Daniel over, letting him know about the email from Richard Love's daughter. Not being able to keep the information merely to himself, the journalist had to tell someone, so he chose his most trusted friend.

"Hey Dan, what's up?" Looking up at his friend, George instantly noticed the melancholy expression on his face. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

"You haven't heard what happened this afternoon?"

George shook his head. "No, I've been working on the Love story. What happened?"

Dan blew out a ragged breath as he ran a hand through his short red hair. "Richard Love...he's dead."

A shocked look appeared on George's face. "Dead?" Dan nodded. "How? When?" What was this going to mean for his article? "Did his daughter kill him? Desiree that is."

Dan shook his head. "Nah, she didn't do it. Check this out. Apparently, the cops think Piper Redding knocked him off. She's been taken into custody."

His eyes opening wide, George sat back in his chair. "Piper Redding," he started in a low voice, as though he were talking merely to himself, "arrested for the murder of the man who put her behind bars for eight years. Desiree Love, the woman who was taken hostage by Piper Redding, sends me a hot story this morning that could jeopardize her own father's career. And this afternoon...he's dead." The journalist was thoughtful for a few moments before he looked up at his friend asking, "How was he killed?"

"He was shot."

"You said the police think she did it. Does that mean Redding has pleaded innocence?"

Dan shook his head. "I don't know George. They didn't give a lot of information thus far in the news. All I know is that she was arrested for killing him. It happened at his other daughter's home. No one else was there at the time."

George absently nodded, as he grew thoughtful once more. Finally, looking at his friend, he said, "I know what happened."

"What?"

The journalist glanced around to make sure that no one else was listening in on their conversation before he scooted closer to Dan in his chair. In hushed tones, he replied, "It's simple really. Love had Redding kill her father." Not being able to keep a serious expression on his face, Dan broke into laughter. George smirked at the man while he waited for him to calm down before going on. "It makes perfect sense."

Dan shook his head, still chuckling every so often. "No it doesn't. George, as good an article as that would make, it's not true."

"Why not?"

"I don't know her personally, but I honestly don't believe that Desiree Love would put a hit on her father."

"She sent me that email this morning. She was able to do that," George refuted.

"There is a huge difference between sending out an email that can destroy another human being's career and getting someone to put a bullet in that person's head."

George chewed on his bottom lip as he thought quietly. "Well like you said you don't know her. Desiree Love could be capable of anything for all we know. Even murder. She found out about her father's shady past and something snapped inside of her. She wanted revenge, so not only did she want me to put in print what her father did all those years ago, but she also wanted him dead. So she had her lover kill him and Redding had zero qualms about doing that since she blamed the judge for putting her away." George sat with a pleased look on his face. It all made sense to him. Everything seemed to click. What a story he had!

"Whoa...how did you establish that Love and Redding are lovers?"

"You know how we heard that Piper Redding was found at her former hostage's apartment. It's obvious that she's staying with her. That right there lets you know that Desiree Love isn't dealing with a full deck. What person is going to welcome the one that held them hostage into their home Dan?"

Dan shrugged. "That doesn't mean they're lovers."

"Fine...whether they be lovers or just friends, Love put a hit on her father. And Redding executed it. And *I'm* going to let our readers know *all* about it."

Continued in Part 11.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 11

Larisa paced back and forth in her sister's kitchen as she talked on the phone with Taj. She made sure to speak in a low voice just in case Desiree happened to awaken from her nap on the couch. By the time that Larisa called Taj, he had already known about Piper's arrest from watching the news and was on his way out of the door, heading to the police station. She filled him in on Piper's version of what happened at her home and they both agreed that the woman was innocent. Though she obviously detested Richard Love, she did not have it in her to murder him in cold blood. Now all they had to do was prove that to the police.

"So I'll meet you at the police station in a little while," Larisa said to Taj, getting ready to end the call. She nodded as he said something. "You bet we are. I don't want Piper to spend anymore time in jail for this then she has to. Enough of her life has already been wasted." As Larisa made a U-turn to pace back towards the entrance to the kitchen, she suddenly came to an abrupt stop as she noticed her sister standing there with a confused expression. "Hey Taj...I have to go. Desiree just woke up...Okay, see you then." Pressing a button to end the call, Larisa looked at Desiree. She was getting ready to say something when the younger woman cut her off.

"Why is Piper in jail?"

Larisa placed the phone down on the kitchen table before she motioned her sister to take a seat. Walking over, Desiree pulled out one of the chairs and sat down as she watched her sibling closely, wondering what was going on. Larisa took a seat next to Desiree, taking a deep breath before letting it out slowly. She had no idea how the other woman would react to what she was about to divulge.

"The police think that she is responsible for Father's death, but she's not and Taj and I plan on proving that," Larisa explained quickly.

Desiree's confused expression changed into one of anger. "What do you mean by responsible?" she inquired slowly.

Larisa suddenly desired to be anywhere but here. "She was arrested because it's suspected that she might have killed him."

The strawberry-blonde stared at her sister silently for a few moments. Larisa resisted the urge to fidget in her chair as Desiree unexpectedly picked up the phone. Standing up, she threw the object and watched as it flew towards the wall, making impact with it before hitting the floor. "That bitch!" She stormed out of the kitchen leaving a shocked Larisa behind. Never had she heard her sister speaking with such venom in her voice. Never had she witnessed Desiree give such an outburst.

Getting up from the chair, Larisa walked out of the kitchen to find her sister standing at a window looking out. Hearing her footsteps, Desiree looked towards Larisa, shaking her head. "You said that he committed suicide," she said, her voice shaking with anger.

"He did," the dark-haired woman replied quietly. "I know he did."

"Then why has Piper been arrested? Explain that to me Larisa."

"Because she was there when it happened and it appears that she did, but both Taj and I know she didn't. Piper would never go that far."

Desiree shook her head. "You should have seen her this morning. She found out some information concerning Dad and was intending to use it against him. I asked her not to, but she wouldn't listen. She was so cold and callous about it all. I now know that I never really knew her. She played me and now she's doing the same thing to you and Taj."

"That's not true Desiree," Larisa replied in a quiet voice. "She's innocent. I know she is. And I intend on making everyone realize that."

Desiree said something but her sister could not make out what it was so she asked her to repeat it. "I said," the strawberry-blonde started in a louder tone of voice, "get out of my home. You're not welcome here any longer," her voice shook as her eyes filled with tears again. "If you and Taj want to play detective's then fine. But you're wasting your time because that... woman killed my father. Just as sure as you are that she's innocent, I'm sure that's guilty." Desiree took a deep breath as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Now you have to go."

"Desi...you shouldn't be alone-"

"I said leave. I *want* to be alone."

She turned back towards the window as though to dismiss her sister. Sighing softly, Larisa headed towards the front door. Opening it, she glanced back towards Desiree, saying, "I can't go home...I don't want to be there. So if you need...want to get in touch with me I'll be staying at the Ashton Inn." She waited for some type of response but there wasn't one. Shaking her head sadly, Larisa walked out, softly closing the door behind her.

Hearing the door close, Desiree collapsed to the floor as the tears came. Her body shook as she wrapped her arms around her bent legs, burying her face against her knees. More than anything she wished that this was all a horrible nightmare that she would soon awaken from.

"Why?" she cried as she rocked back and forth. "Oh, God why?"

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Pulling into the parking space, Larisa got out of her car and looked around for Taj's vehicle. She found it with him leaning against it. The Jamaican man did not see her, since he was facing the other way. Walking over she called out his name and Taj looked towards where the voice had come from. Not saying anything, he walked towards Larisa, wrapping his arms around her. She wrapped her own arms around the man as she swallowed, a lump forming in her throat. She fought the tears that were threatening to come. This was not the time to break down.

The two stood embraced for a moment or two before Larisa pulled back, attempting to give Taj a smile. "Thanks. I needed that."

Taj tenderly smiled at the woman as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She in turn put one around his waist. "How is Desi doing?" he asked as they begin to walk towards the police station.

"Not good as to be expected. She's been through a lot lately," Larisa gave a momentary pause. "I told her that Piper was arrested. Desiree thinks that she's guilty. And since you and I don't, that puts us on her you know what list. I was asked to leave...well told really."

Taj squeezed her gently. "I'm sorry Risa. Like you said, she's been through a lot lately. It has to be getting to her. It'll be all right."

Reaching the police station, Taj opened the door and waited for his companion to enter before going in himself. They asked to speak with Piper and were escorted by a police officer towards a door, which had to be unlocked. Following the man, down a short hall they soon reached Piper's cell. She was lying on a small cot looking up at the ceiling. Seeing them, she quickly arose from the cot and walked over to the bars, wrapping her hands around them.

"Hey...it's good to see some familiar faces." She smiled faintly, as did Taj and Larisa. The police officer left, but an on duty guard was in the background, reclined in a chair.

"It's good to see you too hon," Larisa said as she noticed the cast on Piper's forearm, covering all

of her hand except for her fingers and thumb. "Is your wrist broken?"

Piper glanced at the cast on her left arm. "Yeah, I fractured it when I tried to break my fall. They ran me by a hospital before we came here." She was afraid to ask but she had to know. "Did you speak with Desiree?"

Larisa nodded mutely.

"What did she say?"

When Larisa did not say anything, Piper turned to Taj with a questioning look. Clearing his throat, Taj uttered, "At this point Pippy, she has it in her head that you killed him. She doesn't believe that it was a suicide. But try not to worry, because we're going to make her see differently."

Piper gave a slight nod. "I don't blame her," she said softly. "If I were her, I'd probably think I was guilty too."

Slipping a hand through the bars, Larisa squeezed Piper's shoulder quickly before letting go. "Well we're going to prove that you're not."

"How are you gonna do that? All of the evidence points to me." She counted the evidence on her fingers. "My fingerprints are on the gun. I have gunpowder on my hands. I have a motive for wanting him dead. I was the only one there when it happened. There isn't a suicide note, and even if there was a suicide note that still doesn't mean that I didn't kill him. He could have come back to your house planning on committing suicide but I turned it into a homicide." Piper glanced at them both. "Guys, I don't mean to be cynical but it appears that I'm pretty much screwed," she paused. "So I ask you again. How are you gonna prove that I'm innocent?"

Larisa and Taj shared a look before turning back to Piper. "You want the truth?" Larisa asked.

The blue-eyed woman nodded. "That's what I prefer."

"We don't have a damn clue." If the situation had not been so dire, Piper could have laughed at the admission. "But I assure you, you won't be in here much longer. We'll think of something."

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Tapping his fingers on the Walkman, seventeen-year-old Dennis Farrow listened to the music blasting from his earphones. His head moved back and forth, as he looked around. He had never been in a morgue before. His father had worked here for nearly five years now, but Dennis never visited until today. Well he did not have much of a choice. His mother wasn't home and his father had to work, therefore not having the time to take Dennis home.

For the past two hours, the teenager had been sitting in the lobby watching as people went in and out. He could identify those that had come to view a body by the expression on their faces. They all wore the same exact one. Fear. In all of his years, Dennis had never seen a real body except

for on television and some part of him was curious. He kept glancing towards the door where people disappeared through.

While he sat, Dennis wondered how long his father was going to ground him this time. The reason he was at the morgue and not at school, which was where he was supposed to be now, was because the teenager had been caught selling drugs on campus during break that morning. He had been expelled from school and had to go to court. Dennis did not understand why everyone was getting so bent out of shape. All he had was some marijuana. The teenager did not really care about getting expelled. It was like being on vacation.

As side A of the tape in his Walkman finished playing, Dennis was about to turn it over when he changed his mind. Removing his earphones, the teenager placed the Walkman on the chair next to him. Not seeing anyone, he got up and walked towards the door he had been eyeing for the last couple of hours. Opening it, he strolled inside, looking from side to side, not spying anyone. Dennis saw three doors and chose one of them. Opening the door, he found himself in a brightly-lit room that had rows of square silver colored doors on one of the walls. From watching television, the young man knew those were the freezers for the bodies.

What really caught his attention though was the body bag lying on an examination table. It was the only one out. Looking around again, Dennis saw no one and hurried fully into the room, making sure to shut the door behind him. Slowly he walked towards the bag as though the person inside would wake up if he or she heard the teenager. On reaching the bag, Dennis spied the zipper. With a shaky hand, he pulled the zipper half way down before he looked at the face of the person inside.

Dennis' brow crinkled as he studied the man. For some reason, he looked familiar, but Dennis knew that he did not know him personally. The teenager wracked his brain until a name finally popped in his head. This was Richard Love. He was the judge who had been on the news lately because his daughter was taken hostage. Dennis stared at the hole in his head, wondering who shot him. Looking around again, the teenager still did not see anyone before he looked back at the corpse. If they had not removed his clothing yet, then he must still have his wallet. That is unless his death was due to a robbery. Not feeling so much as an ounce of guilt, Dennis snaked a hand into the man's jacket pocket, grasping something. It wasn't a wallet though. Pulling the object out, the teenager studied what was a small tape recorder. As a door on the far right was pushed open, Dennis hurriedly slipped the tape recorder into a pocket of his baggy jeans.

His father glared at him. "What are you doing back here Dennis?"

*Crap.* "Sorry Dad. I was looking for the bathroom and I got lost."

His father looked at him with a disbelieving expression. "Go sit down Dennis. You're not supposed to be in here. My shift is almost done."

The teenager nodded. "All right." He started to walk towards the door but then turned back towards his father. "Hey Dad, who killed Richard Love?" He got a surprised look. "Hey, I watch

the news. I keep up with what happens. So, who killed him? I bet it was Piper Redding. I think if anyone would wanna kill him it would be her."

"As a matter of fact she was arrested. It's possible that she did. Now go back to the front. And don't move again. I mean it Dennis."

The teenager put his hands up. "All right, all right. I'm going." Turning around he walked out of the room and headed towards his chair. Sitting down, he took the tape recorder out of his pocket and pressed a button to rewind it.

"I wonder what we have here," he said out loud. Minutes later the tape reached the beginning and Dennis inserted his earphones into the tiny hole located on the tape recorder before putting them on. Pressing play, he listened intently. There was silence so far except for faint footsteps. He then heard a male voice.

*"Hello Redding."* Dennis noticed the voice as that of the judge.

*"I'm pleased that you decided to stay here while Larisa took my son and wife to the airport. I think we need to have a little chat. What do you think?"*

The teenager listened up to the point of a loud gunshot. Pressing the stop button, the young man took off his earphones as he thought over what he had just heard. Piper Redding was innocent. The judge must have recorded the whole conversation so people would know the truth about what happened. Dennis saw two options. He could take this tape to the police and become a true hero or he could use it to his advantage and make some money. The teenager grinned. Talk about a no-brainer.

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Desiree drained another glass of whiskey just as the phone began to ring. She started not to answer it but then figured the call might be important. Getting up, she searched around the living room for the phone before remembering where she had left it. Drunkenly, she moved into the kitchen and picked up the phone from the floor, amazed that it still worked. Pressing the talk button, she said hello.

"Hello, Desiree is that you?"

The strawberry-blonde nodded, but then remembered that the person on the other end of the line could not see it. "Yes...it is. If this is a reporter, I'm not in...intewested in talking," the young woman slurred.

Micaela closed her eyes shortly as she listened to Desiree speak. It was clear that she was inebriated. "No, Desiree I'm not a reporter. Perhaps you'll remember me from last night at the bar. I took you home. My name is Micaela Chavez."

Desiree nodded again as she shuffled towards the kitchen table, having a seat in one of the chairs. "I remember you. Did you leave somethin' here?"

"No, I called to offer my condolences about your father," Micaela softly stated. "I'm so sorry to hear what happened. I know that this must be a difficult time for you and your loved ones. I know you don't know me from Adam, but if there is anything that I can do please don't hesitate to let me know. Why don't I give you my phone number?"

"Thank you Micaela, but I'm gonna be just fine. I need to go now."

"Wait. Please don't hang up yet. May I have your sister's phone number or is she there with you now?" Micaela had a feeling that Desiree was all alone since she was drinking so heavily.

"She's not here. We had a disagreement earlier and she had to leave. You can reach her at the," Desiree had to think for a moment, "Ashton Inn."

"Thank you Desiree. So does that mean you're there by yourself?"

"Yep. I like it like that." The young woman rested her forehead on the cool table as she began to feel sick to her stomach. "Listen, I really need to go now. Thanks for calling Micaela."

"Okay. I'll let you go. Take care of yourself now. Goodbye." The Latina ended the call as she sat in thought for a few minutes. She came to a couple of decisions as she dialed information to get the number for the Ashton Inn. Dialing the number for the hotel, Micaela waited for someone to pick it up. On the second ring someone did. "Hello. May I have Larisa Love's room?" Moments later she was connected to Larisa's room as she listened to the phone ring.

"Hello?"

"Larisa, hello. I'm glad I was able to track you down. This is Micaela Chavez. We met last night. I uh...kicked you in the nose."

*Like I could ever forget you*, Larisa thought extremely surprised that her caller was Micaela. She sat down on the queen-sized bed, her knees suddenly feeling a tad weak. *She must have called Desiree*. "Yes, my nose and I remember. A mighty fine kick it was." Larisa emitted a short chuckle. "How are you?"

"I'm doing good. How are you? I'm sorry to hear about your father."

"Oh, I'm hanging in there." She smiled, though Micaela could not see it. "Desiree must have informed you of my whereabouts."

"Yes, she did. She also said that the two of you had a disagreement. I know that it's none of my business, but what could have happened? You and she should be together during this time."

"I agree, but my sister is upset with me. In a nutshell, I believe that Piper is innocent whereas she doesn't. So since I don't agree with her, she doesn't want anything to do with me right now. I had

planned on staying at her apartment so she won't be alone and neither will I, but that's not about to happen. How did she sound to you?"

*Drunk.* "She said that she wanted to be alone. That she liked it like that, but I didn't believe her."

Larisa sighed into the phone. "I'd go over there, but I know Desiree wouldn't let me in."

It was time to execute one of her decisions. "Well why don't you come over here? My apartment isn't that grand, but I have room for you."

*Yes, yes, yes!* "Micaela, I couldn't impose on you like that. Thank you anyway though."

"It's not an imposition. I want you to come."

*Yes, I'd like you to do that too,* Larisa thought, an image forming in her mind. She then shook her head. *Wait, what am I thinking? This is not the time. And I don't even know this woman. She could be some kind of psycho.* Larisa shook her head again. *Nah, what psycho would escort a tipsy woman home and then wait until other's arrived there before she left?*

"Larisa?" Micaela wondered if she had hung up.

"Oh, sorry! Spaced out for a moment." She paused. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. There is no reason for you to be paying to stay in a hotel when you could just bunk with me. I could really use the company myself. Now do you have a piece of paper and a pen? I'll give you my address."

"Just a second." Opening the drawer of the nightstand next to her bed, Larisa removed a thin tablet and a pen, both with the hotel's logo on them. She began to write down Micaela's address as the woman dictated it to her. "Okay, I've got it. What time should I come over?"

"Anytime that you want sweetie. If you can be here in ten minutes then that's great."

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"Not really. I just ate a bagel," Micaela replied.

"Well that's not a proper meal. I'll bring something. What's your favorite type of food?"

"Chinese."

"That sounds yummy," Larisa said as her stomach growled. She had not eaten a thing all day.

"What dishes do you like?"

"Anything but pot stickers."

Larisa laughed. "I don't much care for those either." She glanced at her watch. It was nearly six-thirty. "Okay, I'll be there in a little bit. Thank you for having me."

Micaela warmly smiled into the phone. "It is my pleasure. I'll see you in a bit."

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As she lay curled up in her bed, Desiree groaned as she heard the doorbell ring. She attempted to ignore the caller, but they were persistent, ringing the bell a few more times. Giving in, the young woman threw back the covers and on shaky legs made her way to the door.

"Hi there," Micaela said in a cheery voice as Desiree opened the door. She held two small white bags in her hand and the strawberry-blonde could smell the rich aroma emanating from them.

"Hello." Desiree cocked her head to the side. "Are you an angel?"

The Latin woman chuckled. "No, sweetie. I'm far from it. May I come in?"

Though she wanted to say no because she was not in the mood for visitors, Desiree had a feeling that Micaela would not take no for an answer, so she merely stepped out of the way. The other woman walked in and headed straight for the couch. Taking a seat, she put her bags on the coffee table as Desiree closed and locked the door. She then walked over to the couch as well, and took a seat next to Micaela.

Smiling at Desiree, Micaela opened the bags. Out of one of the bags came two sixteen ounce styrofoam cups with coffee in them. She asked Desiree what she liked in her coffee if anything, as she reached into the other bag and took out packets of raw sugar, Sweet n' Low, a pint of milk, cream, and a couple of stirrers.

"I like a little milk and sugar." Desiree sat back on the couch and closed her eyes, her head spinning.

Removing the top from one of the cups, Micaela poured in some milk along with a packet of sugar. Picking up one of the red skinny little straws, she mixed the contents of the cup together before replacing the top and pulling back the tab where you sip. Looking back at Desiree, she raised the cup until it was just under the younger woman's nose. Micaela began to move it back and forth as the aroma wafted up. Desiree opened her eyes and took the cup.

"Thank you," she said as she held the cup between her hands, the warmth from it seeping into her palms.

"You're welcome," Micaela replied as she picked up her own cup and pulled back the tab, taking a sip. "Drink up."

Doing as she was told, Desiree lifted the cup to her lips and took a few small sips. "That's good coffee," she said. The other woman nodded in agreement.

Curling one leg underneath her, Micaela sat back on the couch facing Desiree. "So what do you think drinking is going to solve?"

The strawberry-blonde looked at her. She was not in the mood to be lectured. Especially by someone she didn't even know. "Pardon me?"

"I asked what you thought drinking would solve?"

"What business is it of yours?"

Micaela shrugged. "None, but since you helped me I intend on returning the favor. You stopped me from making a very stupid mistake last night and I want to stop you before you become what I once was."

"What were you?"

"An alcoholic," Micaela quietly replied. "Well I *am* an alcoholic...I always will be, but at least now I have it under control."

Desiree shook her head. "I don't have a drinking problem. You saw me drunk last night and I assume you know that I've been drinking this evening but that doesn't make me a candidate for being an alcoholic."

The Latina nodded. "Maybe you're right. All I know is picking up that bottle won't solve your problems. It won't make them go away. All you're doing is masking them for a while." Raising her cup, she took another sip before going on, "I drank because I was abused. Mentally and physically by a man that I thought loved me."

"I'm so sorry," Desiree said sincerely.

"It took me five years, but I finally got help for my problem and I've been sober ever since."

"What happened last night?"

Micaela did not say anything right away. "I was planning on killing myself. The gun was in my car waiting for me as I sat there reviewing my life and feeling sorry for myself. I don't know what got into me. That was not only stupid but also selfish. I have responsibilities." She looked at Desiree who was listening intently. "You made me realize that I had to keep living, that I *wanted* to live."

There was silence between the two women before Micaela finally spoke up saying, "Desiree, now is the time that you and your sister should be there for each other. Please don't push her away."

"Did she send you here to speak with me?"

Micaela shook her head. "No, she doesn't know I'm here. I invited her to stay with me so she wouldn't have to be alone in that hotel room. Why don't come home with me and talk to her?"

Desiree shook her head before she took a sip from her cup of coffee before leaning over and setting it on the table. "No, I can't do that. I don't have anything to say to her. If she wants to believe that Piper didn't murder our father then it is her choice to do so, but I haven't a thing to say."

Micaela cocked her head to the side. "What makes you so sure that you're right and she's wrong?"

Letting out a ragged breath, the strawberry-blonde stood up and walked over to the front door. On opening it, she turned back to Micaela who was still reclined on the couch. "Thank you for coming by to check on me and for bringing the coffee, but I think that it's time you leave."

The older woman smiled, but there was no humor in it. Getting up, she walked towards the front door with her coffee in hand. She stopped next to Desiree. "You're awfully good at putting people out, aren't you?" Not waiting for an answer she took a slip of paper out of her pocket and pressed it into Desiree's hand. "That's my address and phone number in case you want to contact your sister. Take care sweetie." With that, Micaela walked out of the apartment, closing the door as she went.

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Arriving at apartment 2C, Larisa knocked on the door before she reached up to run a hand through her hair, smoothing it out. In her other hand, she held two heavy brown paper bags filled with various Chinese cuisine. Moments later she heard a tiny voice asking who it was and wondered if she had the wrong apartment. Deciding to take a chance, she gave her name and then heard the locks being turned before the door opened. Larisa had to look down to see who had let her in. She noticed a toddler dressed in pajamas that had Disney characters printed all over it. *Oh, my. Micaela has a child.*

The little boy smiled up at her, showing an adorable set of deep dimples in his cheeks. "Hi Ma'am. Mommy said you were gonna come stay with us." He stepped out of the way. "Please come in."

Smiling at his politeness, Larisa walked into the apartment before the toddler closed and locked the door. As he did so, a woman who Larisa guessed to be around twenty-five walked down the hallway towards them. She smiled at Larisa as she reached her, shaking the woman's hand. "Hello. You must be Larisa. I'm Carly the baby-sitter. Sorry I didn't hear you arrive. I was in the bathroom."

Larisa turned to the little boy and reached out a hand, gently ruffling his pile of dark brown ringlets. "That's all right. This fine gentleman did a terrific job." The toddler beamed up at her. Larisa winked at him before turning back to the baby-sitter. "So Micaela isn't here?"

Carly shook her head. "No, she said to tell you that she had to go see someone, but for you to make yourself at home and that she would be back shortly."

Larisa nodded. "Okay. May I put these in the kitchen?" She held up the bags for Carly to see. The other woman nodded as she motioned Larisa to follow her to the kitchen. The toddler followed along behind the women. Putting the bags on the kitchen cabinet, Larisa smiled down at the boy again. "What's your name?"

"It's Dante," he said, smiling. "Nice to meet you."

Larisa chuckled. "It's nice to meet you too Dante. That's a very nice name you have."

The little boy blushed. "Thank you Ma'am."

He was so adorable. "You can call me Larisa, 'kay?"

Dante nodded, smiling. "Okay Larisa. I like your name too."

Carly smiled at them both before she walked towards the toddler, picking him up in her arms. "Okay Danny Boy, it's time for bed now. Did you pick out the story you want me to read?"

Dante nodded, the curls on his head bouncing. "Yes Carly. I want *Jack and the Beanstalk*." *Jack and the Beanstalk* was the toddler's favorite story, and most of the time he chose to be read that one at bedtime.

"That was one of my favorite stories when I was a child Dante," Larisa said. "I loved it."

He smiled at her. "Would you like to read it now?"

The woman smiled back. "I'd enjoy that." She looked at the baby-sitter. "Carly, would it be all right with you if I put Dante to bed and read him the story?"

Carly nodded as she handed the small child over to Larisa. "No problem." She smiled. "He's all yours." She brushed the back of her hand against Dante's cheek. "Danny Boy, why don't you show your guest where your room is?"

Squiggling out of her arms, Dante placed his tiny hand around two of Larisa's fingers before leading her towards his room as he merrily talked all of the way. Soon, the little boy was tucked into his bed with Larisa sitting on the edge of it with a copy of *Jack and the Beanstalk* in her hand. Reaching out, she gently pushed a couple of errant curls off of the boy's forehead before she opened the book and began to read.

"Once upon a time there was a poor widow who lived with her son Jack in a little house. Their wealth consisted solely of a milking cow. When the cow had grown too old, the mother sent Jack to sell it. On his way to the market..."

Not too long later, Micaela entered the apartment. Seeing Carly on the couch in the living room, she smiled at the woman as she walked over to her. "Hey Carly. Did Larisa arrive yet?"

The baby-sitter nodded. "Yes. She's in Dante's room reading him a bedtime story." Carly grinned as she stood up, putting the strap of her purse on her shoulder. In a near whisper she said, "She's gorgeous."

"Who?" Micaela asked, knowing exactly whom Carly was referring to.

The other woman rolled her eyes. "That sweet thing in your son's room. If I were into women..." she trailed off still grinning.

Micaela playfully slapped her on the arm. "You're bad."

The baby-sitter chuckled as she headed for the front door, Micaela walking along with her. "Well you're too good. You've been abstinent at least since the day I met you and that was three years ago."

Micaela chuckled. "So?"

"So?" Carly opened the door. "I don't see how you've done it. I've watched you Mickey. All you do is go to work and then come home to spend time with your son and maybe work on your painting every few months. This is not what I would call a fulfilled life my friend. What you need to do is get out and meet people."

"Is that so?" Micaela said with an amused look upon her face. Carly was always trying to motivate her to get out and 'meet people.' "It's not like I'm a complete homebody. I've been out on a few dates."

"Five," the baby-sitter replied. "In three years you've been out on five dates and none of them ended in the sack."

Micaela laughed as she gently pushed Carly out of the door. "Okay Car, it's time for you to go home now."

Carly grinned. "Larisa...see if she's interested. I have a feeling she is. You see Mickey, I know people."

The other woman nodded, wearing that same amused expression. "Is that so? Goodnight Car."

The baby-sitter chuckled as she began to walk down the stairs. "Goodnight Mickey. See you manana. Same place, same time."

Chuckling, Micaela closed the door before walking down the hall to her son's room. Looking in, she leaned against the doorjamb as she watched Larisa finishing up *Jack and the Beanstalk*. A tender smile crossed her lips as she saw her child nice and cozy underneath the covers fast asleep

with his teddy bear in his arms.

"The magical sound of the harp cured his mother's sadness and she was once again happy and cheerful. The hen kept on laying golden eggs. Jack's life had gone through a lot of changes since he had accepted the magic beans. But without his courage and his wit, he and his mother could never have found happiness." Larisa closed the book and put it on the nightstand before she leaned over and pressed her lips to Dante's forehead. "The end," she whispered before quietly arising from the bed and turning to head for the door. She stopped as she saw Micaela standing there watching her. She had a smile on her face so Larisa returned one. "Hello," she said quietly.

"Hello," Micaela mouthed back. She motioned Larisa to finish walking out of the room. After she did so, the Latina closed the door softly before she wrapped an arm around the other woman's waist, leading her towards the living room. "That was really sweet."

"What was?" Larisa was momentarily disoriented due to the arm that was suddenly around her waist. She found that she enjoyed it being there.

As the two women sat on the couch, Micaela kept her arm around Larisa replying, "You reading Dante his bedtime story," she smiled, "and for the kiss." She looked at the other woman. "*You're* really sweet."

Larisa swallowed with a bit of difficulty. It was not her imagination. There were actually butterflies in her stomach and her heartbeat had suddenly increased. Did Micaela have any idea what kind of effect she was having on her? Larisa suspected that the answer was no. Wrapping an arm around the Latina, she quietly thanked her.

Micaela winked at her. "Can I get you anything to drink?" She started to get up from the couch, stretching as she did so.

Larisa ran a hand through her hair as she asked, "You don't by any chance have scotch, do you? After today, I could really use one."

The other woman walked into the kitchen replying, "Sorry sweetie, but there isn't any alcohol in this house except for the kind you put on your body. I'm a recovering alcoholic."

Larisa arose from the couch, following Micaela into the kitchen, watching her removing two plates from one of the cabinets. "How long have you been sober?"

"Five years." Micaela took the plates along with silverware to the dining room table before entering the kitchen again and picking up the bags of Chinese food, taking them there as well.

The younger woman smiled as she took a seat at the oblong shaped glass table with Micaela sitting on her right. "That's wonderful."

"It was difficult, but something I had to do." Opening the bags, the Latina began removing the white cartons. "Mmm...these smell terrific. I haven't had Chinese in weeks."

As she was about to take another carton out of the bag, Larisa stopped her, by placing a hand over hers. When Micaela's warm, brown eyes made contact with her green, Larisa simply said in a silent tone of voice, "Thank you."

Smiling, Micaela arose from her chair before gently tugging the other woman out of hers. Not uttering a word, she embraced the younger woman as Larisa put her arms around her waist. Unbidden, tears sprang to Larisa's eyes. Soon her shoulder's shook as she began to cry, finally letting out the emotions that she had been holding in during the entire day. Micaela held her tighter, beginning to gently stroke up and down her back as her own eyes glistened. As Larisa's knees buckled, Micaela guided them to the floor, managing to keep the grieving woman in her embrace.

Burying her face against Micaela's shoulder, Larisa softly whispered as the tears continued to come, "I'm sorry Daddy. I'm so sorry."

Beginning to rock her, Micaela started rubbing the woman's back again as she whispered next to her. "It's gonna be all right sweetie. Everything is gonna be just fine." She tenderly kissed Larisa's cheek as she held her tighter.

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Sitting up, she sighed. It was no use. No matter how hard she tried, she just could not sleep. Piper looked around the darkened cell figuring that it must have been around ten or eleven o'clock at night. She glanced at the guard who was currently reading a magazine before she sat back on the bed with her back up against the wall. Her wrist was throbbing, she was tired though she could not sleep, and she missed Desiree terribly.

Looking across at the guard again, Piper wondered if she could make a phone call. Since she had been placed in here, Piper had not attempted to contact anyone, but weren't you entitled to one phone call? Arising from the cot, the dark-haired woman walked over to the bars, wrapping her hands around them as she studied the guard. What was his name again? Henry...Harold...oh, yes. She knew what it was now.

"Hank?"

Taking his eyes away from the magazine, the guard looked at Piper. "Yes Miss?" he said in a deep voice.

"Please let's not be so formal. Call me Piper." She tried a smile out on him, somewhat surprised when Hank smiled back, his dark mustache twitching as he did so.

"Yes Piper?"

"I know it must be late, but I was wondering if I could make a call? There is someone that I must speak with. It's very important Hank," she finished wearing a pleading expression.

Mulling it over for a moment, the guard closed his magazine before placing it on the floor as he arose from the chair standing at his full height of nearly six and a half feet. Walking over to Piper's cell, the man took a small cellular phone out of his pocket before slipping it through the bars. "You can use my phone," he said. "Take your time. Let me know when you're done." Winking at her, or at least Piper thought he did, Hank returned to his chair. Picking up his magazine, the guard resumed his reading. Thanking him, Piper walked back to her cot. Having a seat, she stared at the tiny electronic device in her hand for a few minutes, trying to get up the courage to call. She knew the number by heart. Now all she had to do was press the correct buttons and then talk. That sounded simple enough.

Her palms beginning to sweat, Piper pushed the numbers, all the while wondering if this was an absurd idea. She concluded that it was, but this was something that she had to do. Putting the phone to her ear, Piper listened as it began to ring. Resisting the urge to pace, the woman sat back on the cot as she crossed one leg over the other. Just as she was about to hang up, she heard a soft voice answer.

Having to find her suddenly lost voice first, Piper said, "Hi Desiree. Please don't hang up. It's me."

There was silence on the other end but Piper was glad not to hear the click that signified that the phone call had been disconnected.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to, but please listen to me okay?" There still was no answer so she went on, "I'm sorry about what happened today. I know that sounds pretty lame but I am. If I hadn't been so vindictive in the first place, none of this would have happened," stopping for a moment, Piper took a deep breath, her heart harshly pounding beneath her chest. "Your sister informed me that you think I'm guilty, and frankly I don't blame you. If I were you, I would think I was too," she paused, quickly running her tongue along suddenly dry lips, "but I swear to you, I *swear* Desiree that I didn't murder your father. He wanted me to kill him but I didn't. Not technically anyhow...my finger pressed the trigger but only because he manipulated it." Piper let out a loud breath. "I know that sounds totally stupid, which is why I'm probably going to prison for the rest of my life, but it's the truth. Sweetheart, I'll admit that I wanted your father to pay for what he did, but not like that. I would never go that far," she stopped as she listened to Desiree's soft breathing. Good. She was still there. "You don't have to believe me, but I sincerely wish that you would." Piper sighed. "I suppose that I never should have entered your life in the first place because ever since that first night, one terrible thing after another has happened to you and I can't apologize enough for that. But despite all of it I'm glad to have met you because you have brought so much joy to my life in the short time that we have been together," Piper halted, wondering if there would be any type of response. She was greeted with mere silence. "I guess I'll let you go now. I'm sorry to have called this late but I needed to speak to you. I...I love you Desiree."

She heard a click as the caller hung up. Tears rolling down her cheeks, Desiree turned off her phone before placing it on the nightstand. Curling up on her side in the bed, she began to cry again. At that moment, Tobias strutted into the bedroom. Jumping up on the bed next to his

master, he nuzzled her neck as though to offer comfort. Wrapping an arm around his warm furry body, Desiree brought the cat closer, placing a kiss on the top of his head as the tears fell. It was starting to seem as though the tears would never cease to exist. She thought back over what Piper had just said. Though her story of what happened was not concrete, Desiree began to question whether she really did kill her father. She suddenly wanted to believe that Piper was not capable of cold-blooded murder. *I love you Desiree*. The strawberry-blonde closed her eyes as those words ran through her mind again and again. Did she really?

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After putting the dishes from breakfast in the dishwasher, Micaela leaned against the kitchen cabinet watching her son and Larisa as she sipped her second cup of coffee this morning. She smiled at the two of them as they conversed on how to build the house they were trying to make out of Dante's *Legos*. So far, they had a pool, a gate, and a blue front door. Micaela was amazed at how close they had become in such short a time. She could tell that her son absolutely adored Larisa and that the feeling was highly mutual.

Taking another sip from the cup of coffee, Micaela placed it on the cabinet before walking into the living room. Going past Larisa and Dante on the way to the front door, she reached down, gently ruffling her son's curly hair. The little boy smiled up at her before returning his attention to Larisa and the *Legos*.

Opening the front door, Micaela picked up the newspaper that she received on a daily basis. Closing the door, she read the headline. She was glad that she hadn't brought her coffee along with her when obtaining the newspaper, because she surely would have dropped it on the floor. Right there on the front page in bold letters was the words "***Love's Lover Kills Judge at Her Request.***"

Brown eyes grew wide as saucers. "Oh, shi-" She glanced at her son who along with Larisa was now looking at her, "Shish kabob." That was a close one. Last thing Micaela wanted was for her son to hear her swearing. "Umm...Dante, why don't you go color Larisa a picture in your room okay? I need to speak with her for a bit."

Doing as his mother asked, Dante put down the lego he had in his hand and arose from the floor. He headed towards his room to color. After she heard the door close, Micaela walked over to the dining room table and took a seat with Larisa soon joining her. The other woman asked her what was wrong. Not answering, the Latina merely handed the newspaper to Larisa. Taking it, the younger woman spied the headline, her green eyes narrowing in anger.

"What the hell is this?" She did not wait for a reply as she started to read the article, her blood beginning to boil. Finishing, Larisa slapped the newspaper down on the dining room table. She sat there quietly for a moment before glancing back at the newspaper searching for the author of the article. Her eyes narrowed again as she found it. George Stanley. He was going to pay for this. Standing up, Larisa stormed towards the front door.

"Wait a sec!" Micaela hurried over to the door. "Where are you going?"

"To have a little chit chat with George Stanley," Larisa replied between clenched teeth.

"Who?"

Opening the door, Larisa explained, "The son of a bitch who wrote that piece of garbage. I'm going down to that newspaper and I'm going to give him a piece of my mind. And while I'm there I just might give the crack of his ass a piece of my foot!"

Placing her hand on the door, Micaela pushed it closed before the other woman could walk out. "Wait. If you must do this, then I'll go with you. Carly will be here soon to baby-sit. Can you just wait a few more minutes?"

"Don't you have to go to work?"

Micaela shrugged. "I'll call in sick. I never do, so I have plenty of sick leave. Besides, I could use a day off."

Larisa shook her head. "I don't want you to do that. I'll take care of this on my own." She attempted to open the door again, but the other woman pressed her hand against it again.

"The hell you will. The last thing we need is for you to end up being Piper's cellmate. I'm going with you whether you want my company or not. Got it?" Micaela gave Larisa the same look she sometimes had to give Dante when he got out of line. It worked like a charm.

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Desiree was just finishing getting dressed after having taken a long hot shower when she heard the doorbell ring. Buttoning up her shirt, she jaunted into the living room towards the front door. Opening it, she saw a young man around the age of seventeen or eighteen standing there dressed in a pair of baggy black jeans and an oversized blue sweatshirt. He smiled at her charmingly as he removed his sunshades, dropping them into his pants pocket.

"Hello," he said in a jovial tone of voice. "My name is Brian Walker. You must be Desiree Love."

Desiree nodded, wondering who he was. She had never heard of a Brian Walker. She would have thought that he was a journalist or in some profession like that but he seemed too young. Plus he did not dress the part. "Yes, I am. May I help you?"

"I think the real question is if I can help you?" He continued to smile. "And I do believe that I can."

The strawberry-blonde grew alarmed. Something in this teenager's smile seemed sinister. "I beg to differ with you Brian." Desiree started to close the door. "I'm sorry that I have to cut this so short but I must be going now."

Placing his foot in the door, the teenager stopped her from fully closing it. "Don't you want to know what I came here for?" He kept that same smile in place.

"Not really."

"Not really means some part of you does want to know." Brian nodded. "Good." Giving the door a small kick, he opened the door wide enough to walk into the apartment before he closed it, putting his back against it as Desiree took a couple of steps back, prepared to fight if need be. "Relax, I didn't come here to make any trouble. I just wanted to give you something that I think you might be interested in having."

"What's that?"

"A tape."

Desiree's brow crinkled in confusion. Who was he and what was he talking about? "What tape?"

Brian replied, "The tape that is going to set your friend free. Piper Redding is...or was your friend, right?"

Desiree shook her head. "I don't understand what you're talking about. How can this tape set her free?"

"Easy. If the police got a hold of the tape that I have in my possession, it would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Piper Redding is innocent. It would prove that she did not murder Judge Richard Love after all."

None of this made any sense. "How did such a tape get into your possession?"

"I found it."

"Where?"

"You see," Brian started, "my father works at the morgue and I happened to be there yesterday when Richard Love's body arrived. I wasn't supposed to be back there, but I sneaked in anyway because I was curious as to what a real body looks like. Well imagine my surprise when I see your father lying there. By the way, I'm deeply sorry for your loss," Brian added, not sounding the least bit sincere. "I happened to see something in his pocket and I took it out. It was a small tape recorder," the teenager paused for effect. "To get to the point, your father recorded the entire exchange between he and Piper Redding. I listened to it and she's innocent. He really did commit suicide. I think without this tape, she's going to get the death penalty or at least spend the rest of her life behind bars." The teenager looked at Desiree closely. She had gone pale. "Now is that what you want to happen?"

"How...how do I know that you're not lying?"

Brian shrugged. "You don't. But ask yourself. Why would I fabricate such a story as that?"

"Where is the tape? I'd like to listen to it."

The teenager shook his head. "No way. You scratch my back and then I'll scratch yours."

Desiree stared at him. A long list of unfavorable names to call him ran through her mind at that moment. "My father just died and you have the audacity to try to blackmail me?"

Brian nodded. "You hit the nail right on the head."

The strawberry-blonde added a few more names to her list. "What do you want?"

"I think ten-thousand dollars should cover it. If you don't have the money right now, I can wait a week or two. Piper can just sit in her cell for the time being." He smiled again and Desiree had the urge to smack it off. Hard. Extremely hard.

"No, I have the money in the bank now. Will you take a check?"

"Sure," the teenager began. "Of course you won't get the tape until I take your check to the bank. I wouldn't want to have to come back here if it bounces." He winked at her.

Desiree bit her bottom lip hard to keep from saying anything negative. She started to walk towards the direction of her bedroom. "Please have a seat on the couch Brian. I'll be right back with my checkbook."

Nodding, the teenager strolled over to the couch taking a seat. He started to pick up a magazine laying on the coffeetable when his eyes zeroed in on a slip of paper. Micaela Chavez. Could it be her after all of this time? Glancing behind him, Brian grabbed the piece of paper and slipped it into the back pocket of his jeans. This was his lucky day in more ways than one.

Desiree watched Brian as he sat on the couch with his back to her. She inched towards the couch holding an empty whiskey bottle in her hand. Gripping the neck of the bottle tightly, she made her way closer to him. Finally standing behind him, unbeknownst to the teenager, Desiree raised the bottle before striking down on the back of his head, successfully knocking him out and breaking the bottle in the process. She winced, hoping that she did not hit him hard enough to cause permanent damage.

Ten minutes later, the unconscious Brian was tied to a chair with a wide piece of duct tape over his mouth. Grabbing the phone, Desiree quickly dialed a number before pressing the phone to her ear. She started to pace back and forth as she listened to the phone ring. *Come on. Pick up please.*

"Hello?" a female voice answered.

"Valerie?"

"Desiree?"

"Well now we know who each other is," Desiree said, nervously chuckling. "Is Taj home? It's very important that I speak with him."

"Sure, he's here. I'll get him. Hold on hon."

Desiree heard as the phone was put down. Moments later, Taj picked it up. "Desi! It's so good to hear your voice. How are you doing?"

"I...uh...well that's a little difficult to say. Um...I need to see you as soon as possible."

"What's the matter?" Taj's voice had grown worried.

"I think I might have evidence that Piper is innocent..." She began to tell him what Brian had said and what she had done to him.

"I'll be right there." That was the only thing he said before hanging up the phone.

Desiree resisted the urge to have a drink as she took a seat on the couch after cleaning up the glass, to wait for Taj's arrival. She occasionally glanced at Brian, who didn't move, his chin resting against his chest. A thought suddenly occurred to Desiree as she looked over at the small desk next to the front door. She remembered that she had deposited her mail there yesterday but had yet to open any of it. One of the envelopes was unmarked. Walking over to the desk, Desiree found the envelope, picking it up. It was thin except for a small bulge in the middle. It must have been another tape. Quickly opening the sealed envelope, Desiree had her thought confirmed. Inside lay a tiny tape designed for recording messages.

It was true. It had to be true. Piper was innocent. A wave of relief rolled over Desiree at the thought. Thank God, she was innocent after all. Taking the tape out of the envelope, the strawberry-blonde walked into her bedroom and searched for her tape recorder. Minutes later, she found it and slipped the tape into it before pressing the play button as she moved back into the living room to keep an eye on her captive. She heard her father's voice as he began to speak. Taking a seat on the couch, Desiree began to listen intently.

*"Desiree, I know that you probably think of me as a coward. Believe me, I feel the same way about myself. I took the easy way out and I only hope that someday you, Larisa, Richie, and Sandra will find it in your hearts to forgive me. What I did was wrong. All of it. The affair, taking that money in exchange for giving Piper Redding a long sentence...all of it. I have done some things that I am truly ashamed of and I don't have it in me to face up to them. To show my face to the world and have those that once respected me to look down upon me. My job is to be fair, just, and honest and what it comes down to is that I'm nothing but a hypocritical coward. I'm sorry that I couldn't be more. You all deserve better than me. I love you Desiree, and I love Larisa though she can be sassy, my son, and wife. You all mean more to me than you'll ever know. I really am sorry for what I did.*

*Right now, I'm sitting in a coffee shop not far from your apartment complex. After I finish this tape, I'm going back to your sister's house where I know Piper Redding is. I have a few things I want to say to her and you'll all get to hear it because I'm going to be taping the whole thing so please make sure to get the tape recorder out of my pocket. I have a feeling that Redding will get blamed for this so that's why I'm recording it. Despite what she did to you, that woman has been through enough and putting my personal feelings aside, I don't want her to get in trouble for something that wasn't her fault. I took my life, not her.*

*I can't believe that I'm going to say this, but Desiree I want you to be happy. And though she isn't one of my favorite people, it seems to me that Piper Redding makes you happy. I may be old but I'm not blind. I know there is more to your relationship with her than meets the eye. You have a connection with her that reminds me of the one that I shared with your mother. So, if she is what you want, then please don't let her get away. You could do worse. I mean look at Alec (the judge chuckled). And tell your sister for me, that if she didn't have such a big mouth, perhaps she'd find a lady friend as well. Anyone would be lucky to have her. Either of you. Though it might have seemed as though I was trying to run your lives...and I suppose that I was, I'm very proud of you girls. Well I'll be going now. Again, I love all of you dearly. Please take care of yourself precious."*

After she picked her jaw up from the floor, Desiree shook her head at what she had just heard. She desperately wished that her father had been there at this very moment, because she would have hugged him so very tightly. Raising a hand, she wiped at the tears falling down her cheeks as she felt a deep ache for her father. *Oh, Dad I love you too. You're forgiven.*

Rewinding the tape to the beginning, Desiree placed the recorder on the coffeetable before getting up. She started to pace again and continued to do so until she heard the doorbell ring. Almost running over, Desiree opened the door, delighted to see that it was Taj. She gently pulled him into the apartment before closing and locking the door behind him. She indicated the teenager tied to her kitchen chair.

"Nice work little one," Taj said, smiling like a proud father.

"Thank you," Desiree replied. "I know he's telling the truth now. The tape really does exist."

The Jamaican man looked at her. "Did you find it?"

She shook her head negatively. "No, but I found another tape that my dad left stuck in my mailbox yesterday just before he went back to Larisa's house. It was in an unmarked envelope, so I had no idea it was from him, otherwise I would have opened it yesterday. Anyway, on the tape he explains that he's going to record the whole conversation between he and Piper. He made the tape to prove that she wasn't guilty and that he committed suicide."

Without a word, Taj wrapped his arms around Desiree, bringing her close to him. She hugged him back as she fought the tears that were threatening to come again. "I'm sorry about what happened little one."

"Thank you Taj," she replied in a quiet voice. Giving the man a squeeze, Desiree disengaged herself from his embrace, asking what they were going to do now.

Taj glanced back at Brian. "When Sleeping Beauty wakes up, we'll ask him where he stashed the tape."

"And you think he'll just tell us?"

"No. That's why I brought an incentive."

Desiree did not get to inquire what that incentive was, because Brian chose that moment to start waking up. The pair looked at him as his head began to move slowly from side to side while he groaned. Taj took a few steps towards him as the teenager's eyes opened. Focusing them, he stared up at Taj. The Jamaican man waved as he gave a mock friendly smile. There was no response to either.

"Would you like for me to take that off?" Taj asked, pointing towards the duct tape covering the teenager's mouth. Brian nodded. "If I do, will you promise not to scream?" Taj was greeted with another nod. "Good." Getting a grip on an edge of the duct tape, Taj forcefully ripped the tape off, leaving the area around the boy's lips a bright pink. Not being able to help it, Brian yelped at the pain. "I'm sorry. Did that hurt?" Taj asked, trying to hide a grin. The teenager gave him a dirty look. "What's your name?" The Jamaican man crossed his arms over his muscular chest.

"Brian. Brian Walker."

Taj nodded. "Okay Brian, Brian Walker...what's your *real* name?"

"That *is* my real name."

Taj looked behind him at Desiree. "Little one, maybe you should go in the kitchen while I speak with your visitor."

Desiree shook her head. "No thank you Taj. I'll just stay right here."

The Jamaican man nodded. "Okay. Suit yourself." Turning back to the teenager, he abruptly backslapped him across the face. Brian's head snapped to the side as another dirty look appeared on his face. "Care to tell me your name now?" The teenager muttered something. "I'm sorry. I didn't catch that."

The teen looked up at him. "I...said...my...name...is...Dennis...Farrow."

Taj nodded. "Okay Dennis...where is the tape?"

"Where is my money?" He glanced at Desiree before returning his attention to Taj.

Not saying anything right away, Taj reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. He pulled out a

revolver. Starting to whistle, the man slipped a hand into his pocket and removed a single bullet. Dennis watched, his eyes widening a bit. Opening the chamber, Taj slipped the bullet in before spinning the chamber and putting it back into place. He asked Dennis if he knew what Russian Roulette was. The teenager nodded, for the first time beginning to get nervous. He glanced at Desiree, who was looking on with a blank look on her face.

"I have a new version of Russian Roulette," Taj exclaimed in a calm tone of voice as he pressed the barrel of the gun against Dennis' crotch. The teenager swallowed with difficulty. "If you don't tell me where the tape is right now, I'm going to pull the trigger. For every time that you don't tell me, I'll pull the trigger. Now if you don't speak up, you might be asking me where your penis is instead of where your money is." The barrel pressed against the teenager's crotch more. "So where is it?" When Dennis did not say anything, Taj pulled the trigger and a clicking sound was heard. The teenager let out a relieved breath. "One down, five to go Dennis. You might as well tell me where it is, because penis or no penis you're not getting so much as a penny." When Dennis still declined to talk, Taj pulled the trigger again resulting in another clicking sound.

The teenager's heart was beating wildly after that. "Okay, okay! I'll tell you where it is. Just please get that thing off of me man!" He yelled, referring to the gun.

"I'll take it away after you tell me. And it better be the truth. You're not going anywhere until I hear that tape."

"It's right outside her door. Underneath the mat."

Hearing him, Desiree walked over to her door. Opening it, she leaned down and pulled up her welcome mat. Sure enough, there was a tiny tape cassette lying there. Picking it up, the young woman closed the door. Taj and Dennis watched as Desiree took the other tape out of her tape recorder before placing that one in. Walking over to them, she pressed the play button. All three listened to the tape.

*"Hello Redding." There were the faint sounds of footsteps. "I'm pleased that you decided to stay here while Larisa took my son and wife to the airport. I think we need to have a little chat. What do you think?"*

*The judge laughed. "Well you've now screwed me over just like I did you, Redding. First you took my daughter as your hostage and then somehow managed to make a friend out of her. And then you make my wife leave me and my son now hates me too. I'm sure you told Desiree about my indiscretion as Larisa called it, so she most likely hates me as well. And you know what? I bet you let a lot of other people know too. Am I right?"*

Though her voice was not on the tape, Piper must have nodded or something akin to that based on Richard's next words.

*"I thought so. There goes my career down the drain. So, in a nutshell I have no family and no job...because of you. Did you tell anyone about the bribe? I know you must know about that too."*

For the first time, Piper spoke up, *"True, I know about it but I haven't told anyone."*

*"Why not? That'll be even more perfect. Then you could probably send me to prison. Wouldn't that be ironic?"* Here Richard laughed again though it was void of any humor.

*"So the way I figure it Redding...you should finish the job. I know you want your revenge on me...so take it."* Richard must have given her the gun at this point. *Here...finish me off Redding."*

*"I'm not going to shoot you."*

*"Why not? You've taken away all that I had to live for."*

*"It's not as though you didn't help to make that happen."*

*"Aim the gun at me and then put your finger on the trigger and pull it. It's as simple as that."*

*"I won't."* Piper sounded resolute.

*"What's the matter with you? Don't you want me dead? I ruined your life. Sent you to prison for what? Eight...nine years? You did time while I used that money to paint my house and purchase a new car. Surely, you want to kill me. There has to be some part of you that is screaming for you to pull that trigger. Come on Redding...kill me like you did your daddy."*

*"I refuse to take your life."*

*"Then give me the gun back."*

*"No, I don't think so."*

*"No, you don't think so?"*

*"That's what I said."*

*"Give me my gun now."* At this point, there was a loud crashing sound as the two on the tape sounded as though they were scuffling. There was a short scream from Piper not long before she yelled at the judge.

*"What the hell are you doing?!"* There were more sounds of scuffling and low groaning.

*"Don't...do...this."*

*"I'm sorry."* The judge whispered this just before a gun was fired.

There was complete silence on the tape for a few seconds before Piper's voice was heard again in a near whisper. *"Oh, God. Oh, dear God..."* She groaned as it sounded as though she were struggling to do something. There were footsteps after this, so she must have been getting up.

Soon Piper could be heard talking to someone, though her voice was very faint. *"I don't have to check..."* Her voice grew clearer as she said, *"Why don't I? Because his eyes are open! He's dead! This is a nightmare."*

*"Okay...No, I'll be waiting. I'm not going anywhere."* There was a small beep which must have been the phone being turned off.

More silence before Piper sighed. *"Why did you do that? Why did you have to do that?"* It sounded like she had started to cry. *"This is all my fault...all my fault."*

There was silence after this until a knock sounded at the door. Desiree and Taj discerned that it was the ambulance. The rest of the tape was hard to hear and soon the tape ran out. Desiree pressed the stop button as she resisted the urge to burst into tears. Never again did she want to listen to that tape. Reaching over, Taj gave her shoulder a light squeeze and she smiled at him gratefully.

"So can I go now?" Dennis asked impatiently, breaking the silence. There went the down payment for that car he wanted.

Taj looked at him shaking his head. "Nope. You're going to the police station with us so you can explain to them how you obtained this tape and then brought it over to Desiree. You're free to go after you do that. I never want to see your face again, you got it?" Taj gave the teenager a look that let Dennis know he was deadly serious. The youth merely nodded.

Taj turned his attention to Desiree. "Little one, we're ready to go when you are."

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The elevator doors opened and Larisa and Micaela stepped out of them. They looked around the busy office, both wondering which one of these people was the journalist they were searching for. As one young man walked passed them, Larisa stopped him, asking if he was George Stanley. By the look on her face, the man was thrilled to announce that he was not. Turning around, he pointed to the journalist's desk where George could be seen eating a donut as he worked. Thanking the young man, Larisa and Micaela headed towards the desk.

Arriving, Larisa leaned against the journalist's desk with the newspaper folded in her hand. She watched as George took another donut out of an almost empty pink box, having yet to see her, his eyes riveted to the computer screen. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that too many of those things can kill you?" Startled, the journalist's head snapped up as he looked at her. "Then again, so can people," she said in a dangerous tone of voice.

George closed his open mouth. "Um...aren't you Larisa Love?"

"The one and only. I have a bone to pick with you big boy." Opening the newspaper, she slammed it down on his desk, the title staring him in the face. "Tell me...do you always write this kind of filth? Mr. Stanley, you have the appropriate skills that are needed to work at a

tabloid. What are you doing wasting your time here at a respectable newspaper?"

George put his donut back in the box, his appetite suddenly gone. "Ms. Love, my article is not filth. I have never written filth. I tell it like it is." He glanced at the gorgeous woman standing next to Larisa. She was glaring at him so he quickly looked elsewhere.

"You mean you tell it like you want it to be," Larisa retorted. "I cannot begin to tell you how very furious I was to read this." She stabbed a finger at the newspaper. "It's not true. You have it completely wrong and you *will* fix it in tomorrow's edition because you really don't want to tangle with me. At the risk of sounding clichéd, I can be your worse nightmare."

George cleared his throat. This woman sounded like she meant business. Okay, perhaps he went a little far with deeming them as lovers, but wasn't everything else correct? "Everything is wrong?"

"Yes!" Well except for the lovers' part, but that was none of the public's business. "For one thing my sister did not send you that email about our father having an affair. She also didn't have Piper kill our father. She would never do a thing like that. My sister is one of the most moralistic people that I know. And Piper did not kill our father. Yes, she was pissed with him and she had a right to be, but she would never go that far. She's innocent. He committed suicide."

"Then if he committed suicide why has she been arrested?"

*I want to slap you so bad.* "Because we don't have any evidence to exonerate her yet, but we'll get it." At that instant, her cell phone rang. Reaching into her pocket, Larisa took out the small phone, answering it. Her voice sounded irritated at the intrusion. "What?!" She heard who it was. "Oh, sorry Taj...No, I'm okay. What's up?" Her eyes widened as she listened to the man. "No way!" A triumphant smile appeared on her face, as Micaela and George looked at her, wondering what she had just been told. "That's terrific! I'll be right there...Okay see you soon." Ending the call, she dropped the phone back into her pocket before turning around and throwing her arms around Micaela as she squealed in glee. Laughing, the Latina hugged her, thrilled to see Larisa so obviously happy.

"What was that all about?" Micaela asked as Larisa took a step back.

"That was my friend Taj. They have a tape that should set Piper free. Apparently, a kid found it at the morgue yesterday...his dad works there and he brought it to Desiree this morning. On the tape is the whole exchange between my father and Piper."

Micaela appeared to be slightly confused. "You mean he recorded it?"

Larisa nodded. "Exactly! She didn't do it! I knew she didn't." The woman smiled and Micaela did as well.

"That's wonderful. So where are you going now?"

"The police station." Larisa turned back to George who had been listening to their conversation. He had yet to decide whether to be happy or not. On the one hand, he had another story, on the other, the article he wrote yesterday turned out to be mere fabrication. That was not good for a journalist.

"Well Mr. Stanley, I'm sure that you just heard me. Piper Redding is innocent. I want you to make sure that your reader's find that out pronto. If they don't, and you better make it good, you'll be slapped with a little thing I like to call a lawsuit. Are we clear?"

George nodded quickly. "I'm sorry for this." He pointed at his article. The journalist was truly ashamed of himself. Maybe he would just resign after writing this latest article. "You and your family have my condolences Ms. Love," the journalist stated earnestly.

Larisa nodded, knowing that he was truly sorry. "Thank you. Just get that taken care of."

"I will."

Larisa turned to Micaela. "You ready to roll?"

The Latina smiled. This fiery young woman was growing on her, and very quickly too. "Lead the way."

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As they drove up to the police station, Larisa and Micaela spied Taj, Desiree, and Piper coming out. Taj was between the two women with an arm wrapped around both of their shoulders. Piper smiled at him as he said something. Parking the car, Larisa cut the ignition before jumping out. She waved at the trio with a smile on her face. Walking towards them, she grinned at Piper. "Hey jailbird. How's it going?"

The blue-eyed woman stuck her tongue out at Larisa in response to the nickname. "It's going all right. I'm very happy to have my freedom back. You and Taj said it would happen and you were both right." She smiled.

"I'm always right," Larisa replied, grinning.

"And modest too," Taj added, chuckling.

Larisa winked at him. "That's me." She looked at her sister wondering if everything was all right between them now. "Hi Desi."

Desiree smiled as she walked over to her sister, wrapping her arms around the woman, assuring her that everything was fine. Larisa hugged her back tightly. "I love you sis." Desiree's eyebrows raised high. It wasn't very often that she heard those words out of her sister's mouth.

"I love you too Risa."

"This is truly a Kodak moment," Taj inserted, causing everyone to laugh.

Moving over to her, Larisa wrapped an arm around Micaela's waist. "Taj, I want you to meet my new friend here. Her name is Micaela."

Taj gave Micaela a welcoming smile as he shook her hand. He thought back to yesterday when Larisa gave him this woman's license plate in the hopes that he could locate where she lived using it. The Jamaican man started to mention it, but knew that he would most likely have to listen to Larisa's mouth later if he did. So instead he just said, "It's nice to meet you Micaela."

She smiled at him. "Likewise Taj."

"Say, why don't we all go get some breakfast. My treat," Taj offered.

"Well Micaela and I have already-"

"Oh! I need to check on him," Micaela said, interrupting Larisa. She glanced between Desiree and Piper. She could be wrong but there seemed to be an abundance of tension there. The Latina had an idea. Turning to Larisa, she asked the woman if she could use her phone. Taking her cell phone out of her pocket, she handed it to Micaela, with a questioning look upon her face. Micaela began to walk away with the phone in hand. About fifteen feet away she called Larisa over, exclaiming that she did not know how to work it.

Wearing a curious expression, Larisa walked over to her. She was about to show Micaela how to use the phone when the Latina began to speak in hush tones. "I think we should give Desiree and Piper a little time alone together if you know what I mean. They should go to breakfast together without the rest of us. Maybe then they'll begin to talk and work through this so that they can mend their relationship."

Larisa nodded, grinning. "I like the way that you think. Okay, how do we do this?"

"Just follow my lead," Micaela replied. "Now I want you to go back over to them while I pretend that I'm talking on the phone." She then pretended as though she was dialing a number before putting the phone to her ear. Following orders, Larisa jaunted back to where Taj, Desiree, and Piper were standing. Moments later, Micaela joined the small group. "Darn, I'm sorry. I can't go to breakfast with you all." She handed the cell phone back to Larisa. "My son isn't feeling well, so I should be going home." She looked at Larisa. "Sweetie, I know you probably want to spend time with your sister, so Taj, would you mind terribly taking me home? I'll be willing to pay you. I don't live far from here."

Before Taj could say anything, Larisa did. "Actually, I can't go either. I have a bar mitzvah that I'm catering to and I need to plan for that." She looked at Taj. "So how about this? You drop Micaela off and then take me to work. I'll even buy you an Egg McMuffin on the way. That way, if you take Micaela and I, then Piper and Desi can take my car. And then Desi could pick me up later."

Taj raised an eyebrow. Hmm. An Egg McMuffin or a stack of buttermilk pancakes at the IHOP. Who in their right mind would pick the former? Now he could have suggested that Larisa just take her own car and drive Micaela home before heading to work, while he, Piper and Desiree went to breakfast but Taj kept his mouth shut. He knew that they were up to something. Larisa and Micaela wanted Piper and Desiree to be alone. Well he thought that it was a grand idea, so Taj decided to go along with it.

"Throw in a hashbrowns and you've got a deal."

Larisa tucked her tongue against the inside of her cheek as she pretended to think before nodding. "You drive a hard bargain Mr. Potter, but it's a deal." She grinned at him and he grinned back. Fishing her keys out of her pocket, Larisa tossed them to Desiree. "Take care of my baby."

"Wait a minute," Desiree started, looking at her sister. "Why can't you just drop Micaela off in your car and then go to work while the rest of us go to breakfast?" Desiree had grown suspicious. This resembled a set up.

"That won't work because I just remembered that I have plans with Valerie. We're supposed to go shopping for plates."

Desiree arched an eyebrow. Was that the best he could do? "Plates?"

Taj nodded. "Yes, for the wedding. I can't believe it slipped my mind. She'd kill me if I were late." He glanced at his watch before looking at Micaela and Larisa. "Say ladies, we better get a move on. I have to be there by eleven -thirty." Snapping his fingers, he then took his wallet out of his back pocket. Extracting some money from it, he handed it to Desiree. "That's for breakfast. I know Piper doesn't have any money." He grinned at Piper receiving a smirk in return. "And I don't expect for you to pay. Plus, breakfast is supposed to be on me." When Desiree started to argue, trying to give the money back, Taj shook his head, not wanting to hear it. Finally, the young woman gave up as she pushed the money into her pocket, thanking him in the process. Piper did the same.

"You and Valerie made up?" Larisa asked, smiling. "Well that's terrific news."

Taj nodded with a smile on his face. "Yes, indeed. I called her up last night and explained everything to her. So we better get going." He turned to Desiree and Piper, hugging them both. "I'll talk with you lovely ladies later."

All three waved as they began to move away, heading towards Taj's car. Desiree and Piper stood there silently watching them until they got in the car and sped out of the parking lot. The strawberry-blonde then turned to Piper. "Well...I suppose we should go too. Where would you like to eat?"

"Anywhere," Piper replied, smiling down at the woman, glad to be alone with her now. "I don't mind where we eat." *As long as I'm with you.*

Desiree started towards her sister's car with Piper in tow. "I know a café near my apartment that we could go to. After that, we could go to my place and you can pick up your belongings. I packed them for you."

Piper nodded. So, she still wanted her to leave. "Okay."

Soon the two were headed down the street. Not being able to stand the silence between them, Piper asked if she could turn on the radio. When she received a nod, she reached over and switched it on. LeAnn Rimes was currently singing her song *How Do I Live*. Piper thought about changing the station, but decided against it. The song was appropriate. She listened as she stared out of the window at the passing objects and people.

*And tell me now How do I live without you? I want to know, How do I breathe without you? If you ever go, How do I ever, ever survive? How do I, how do I, oh how do I live?*

*Without you, There'd be no sun in my sky, There would be no love in my life, There'd be no world left for me. And I, Baby I don't know what I would do, I'd be lost if I lost you  
If you ever leave, Baby you would take away everything real in my life...*

Looking around to Desiree, the blue-eyed woman studied her for a few moments, wishing that she could take Desiree in her arms and never let go. Piper had a feeling that whatever the two of them had shared was truly over now. She put the blame solely on herself. *Why couldn't I have just left well enough alone?* Feeling eyes upon her, Desiree glanced over to Piper. She smiled albeit it was a strained one.

Piper inwardly sighed. *She doesn't even want to be around me.* "Thank you," she said out loud, breaking the silence.

Stopping for a red light, Desiree looked at her again. "What did I do?"

"For bringing me the clothes." Piper indicated the blue jeans and sweater, which matched her eyes perfectly, that she was wearing.

"Oh, that." Desiree nodded. "That was Taj's idea. He figured that you didn't have anything to wear."

"Ah, well I'll have to thank him then." Piper tried to smile before returning her gaze to the passenger side window as the car began to move again. Was it just her imagination or was this situation becoming chillier as time progressed?

Soon Desiree turned into the small parking lot of a café. Since there were only three other cars, it was easy to find a parking space. In the hopes of making Desiree laugh, Piper jokingly inquired if the food here was bad. Getting out of the car, the strawberry-blonde let out a small chuckle as she explained that the food was terrific, but there were never many customers since this café was not well known.

When they walked up to the entrance to the restaurant, Piper sought to be a true gentlewoman as she pulled the door open for Desiree. Thanking her, the younger woman walked in, Piper following along behind her. Since the restaurant was far from being crowded, the two women were quickly shown to a table and presented with menus. After having decided what they wanted, they each ordered their meals, both choosing to have pancakes. As Desiree sipped from a cup of hot coffee, Piper stared out of the window their table was near.

"I'm sorry," Desiree suddenly stated, ending the heavy silence between them. Piper's eyes fell on her, but the dark-haired woman chose to keep her mouth shut. Desiree went on, "I'm sorry for not believing in your innocence. No matter what has happened between us, I think that you've always been honest with me, though every time something happens, I doubt you. And that's not right."

The dark-haired woman shook her head, not agreeing. "You were justified Desi. I don't blame you for not believing me. Back at the cabin and after what occurred yesterday, I looked guilty."

"But Taj and Larisa believed in you," Desiree replied softly as she looked down at her cup of coffee, feeling ashamed.

Piper softly smiled. "Well that's probably because they knew me way back when." Not being able to stop herself, Piper reached across the table and covered one of Desiree's hands with her own causing the younger woman to look up at her again. "Desi, don't beat yourself up about this. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I know I've disappointed you...more than once, and I'll never be able to forgive myself for that. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you baby," she softly finished.

Blinking away tears, Desiree gently removed her hand from under Piper's and placed it around the cup of coffee, bringing it to her lips and taking a sip. Placing the cup back on the table, Desiree waited until her heartbeat returned to its normal pace before looking at Piper again. The touch of her hand combined with the words she spoke affected Desiree more than she cared for them to. It was time for a subject change and the strawberry-blonde had something she needed to tell Piper about.

"Piper...there is something that I think you should know about."

"What's that?" Piper placed both of her hands in her lap, inwardly sighing again. Desiree could not even stand for her to touch her. She must have been disgusted. *I really screwed up this time.*

Lifting the coffee to her lips, Desiree took another sip before beginning. "It's about your mother."

A look of surprise appeared on the dark-haired woman's face. "What about her?"

"She didn't leave you," Desiree gently replied. "Not on purpose."

"What do you mean?" At that moment, the waitress brought their food over. After she left, Piper continued, "My mother killed herself while I was in prison. She even had a suicide note."

Desiree nodded. "Yes, she did have a suicide note but she was forced into writing it." At Piper's confused look she went on, "When I was at the cabin and your bro- Victor arrived, he told me that he went to see Marie and he made her write that suicide note and then he had her kill herself. He said that if she didn't do it that something would happen to you while you were in prison. She killed herself to protect you. I would have told you before, but I didn't know how to, but I finally decided that you have a right to know no matter how painful it may be," she paused gathering her thoughts. "In a way this might be better because you now know that Marie didn't leave you on her own." A tear fell down her cheek as she said in a faint voice, "She didn't do what my father did."

Piper closed her eyes momentarily, as Desiree's words sunk in. If Victor was not already dead, she would have tracked him down and ended his life slowly and very painfully. Piper felt her heart wrench. Her mother had been taken away from her and it hurt more than she could put into words. Marie was practically the last family member that she had left and if it were not for Victor, perhaps she would still be alive today.

Looking at Desiree, Piper noticed the sadness in her blue-green eyes. Her father had committed suicide, and had it not been for Piper's need for revenge, then the judge would still be alive as well. Sometimes people did not give thought to the consequences that their actions could bring about.

"Maybe we should get out of here," Piper said as she glanced down at her plate, failing to notice the delicious aroma. "I suddenly don't feel very hungry. What about you?"

Desiree shook her head. "Neither do I." She hated to waste the food though. "I'll get a doggy bag." Signaling the waitress, the strawberry-blonde asked for two doggy bags and the check. While they waited for both, Desiree finished the last of her coffee as Piper took a couple of sips from her glass of milk.

"Thank you," the dark-haired woman said. At Desiree's questioning look, she explained. "I mean thank you for telling me about my mother. I know that it must have been difficult for you to tell me the truth about what really happened."

Before Desiree could offer a reply, the waitress arrived with two Styrofoam square boxes and the check. Desiree and Piper began to transfer the food on their plates to the boxes. The dark-haired woman commented that it was an awful lot of food on the plates.

"I'll give Tobias my scrambled eggs," Desiree said as she closed her box and then fished in her pocket for the money Taj had given her earlier for breakfast. "I don't know about you, but I can't stand re-heated eggs."

Piper chuckled. "Furball eats scrambled eggs? No wonder he's so fat. Fat and spoiled."

Picking up an orange wedge laying on her plate, Desiree tossed it at the other woman. Piper was able to successfully dodge it as she continued to chuckle. Desiree joined in. "What did I tell you Piper? He's not fat just-

The other woman nodded, a smile playing on her lips as she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah. He's just big-boned. You know, de Nile just ain't a river in Egypt, Desi."

Her ribbing earned her the flash of a tongue.

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He winced as he touched the bruise on his cheek. So he was unable to get ten thousand dollars, but Dennis was not going to let that continue to bother him. He had obtained something that was a complete surprise, so it wasn't a total waste of time. He picked up the piece of paper with Micaela Chavez's phone number and address on it. Dennis grinned, knowing that he was about to make someone a very happy camper. He thought back to when he was at the police station. He was waiting for the taxi he had called to pick him when he saw her drive up with Larisa Love. She looked as good as he remembered. Actually, Micaela looked even more beautiful. What a very small world it was after all.

Grinning, Dennis moved so that he was sitting on the side of his bed. Picking up the phone, he called a number that he had on speed dial. He immediately recognized the rich southern accent of the person who answered. "Hey Uncle Clint! How're you doing?"

"Denny?" Clint said in surprise. It had been a couple years since he had heard from his nephew. The boy's father did not want his son around the man and Clint's sister agreed with her husband wholeheartedly. "Hi there! I'm doing pretty good. How are things going with you? It's great to hear your voice."

"Oh, I can't complain. Listen, I have some information that I think you would wanna hear."

"What's that?"

"Remember Mickey?"

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line. "Of course I do. That ungrateful twit shot me twice in the chest and then left me for dead, stealing some of my money. How could I ever forget her?" Clint felt the anger rising at the thought of that woman.

"Well guess what uncle? I found her." The teenager grinned like the cat that ate the canary.

There was such a long pause, that Dennis started to think that his uncle might have fainted after hearing his good news. Finally, the man bewilderingly said, "Bull..."

Dennis' grinned widened. "No bull." He picked up the paper. "I'm looking at her address right now."

"Where is she? Are you sure it's her?" Three years ago Clint had looked for months but was not able to find any leads to where Micaela could have disappeared to.

"She's right here in Los Angeles, California. And yes, I'm sure it's her because I saw her. But don't worry 'cause she didn't see me. Though, she probably wouldn't recognize me anyway."

Dennis on the other hand could never forget her. He was fourteen years old the summer he went to visit his uncle. It was the last time he was permitted to go there. From the first moment he laid eyes on Micaela, he could not get his mind off of her. His uncle noticed the boy ogling his girlfriend and one night arranged for them to be "properly introduced." Dennis could not believe his luck. He was going to lose his virginity and to a woman who was a goddess. Micaela however, protested the whole time. In fact, Clint had to tie her up and stuff a gag in her mouth since she was squirming around on the bed and screaming so loud. Despite her unwillingness, Dennis had enjoyed himself thoroughly.

"Well," Clint grinned into the phone, "I guess I'll just have to pay my ex-lover a little visit soon."

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Desiree closed the door as she and Piper entered the apartment. Tossing her keys on the table next to the door, Desiree asked the other woman if she would like anything to drink. Wanting to prolong this for as long as was possible, Piper asked for a cup of hot chocolate. The strawberry-blonde indicated for her to have a seat on the couch as she walked into the kitchen to make the drink, a plastic bag in her hand containing their doggy bags from the cafe.

Plopping down on the couch, Piper stretched her long legs out before her. A moment later, she heard a soft meow and looked to her left where Tobias had jumped onto the arm of the couch. He was staring at her intently and Piper could swear he looked annoyed by her presence. She chuckled. "Don't worry furball. I'm not staying." Her chuckling ceased as she admitted that, a tinge of sadness in her voice. After the drink, she would have to go. The question that kept running through her mind was when would she be able to see Desiree again. *Would* she be able to see her again or was this it?

Piper looked at Tobias again. He was still staring at her, now with an 'unreadable' expression on his furry face. The woman shook her head as she arose from the couch. "Hey, furball would you like some eggs?" The cat meowed. "I'll take that as a yes." Piper headed towards the kitchen.

Standing at the entrance, she studied Desiree as she stood at the kitchen sink looking out of the window with a mug in her hand. She seemed to be daydreaming and did not notice as Piper walked towards her, standing directly behind her. The blue-eyed woman put her hands on Desiree's shoulders and the young woman still did not budge. Her eyes remained unblinking as she stared out of the window.

"Hey you," Piper said softly, close to Desiree's ear, "what are you thinking about?"

The strawberry-blonde accidentally dropped the mug into the sink when she felt Piper's warm breath against her ear. Placing her hands on the edge of the sink, she leaned back a little, drawing

comfort from Piper's nearness. She quickly decided that she would just stand there for a few seconds and then move.

"Just...um...everything." Desiree rested the back of her head on Piper's chest as the woman gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"Everything, hmm?" Piper kissed the top of Desiree's head, taking in the scent of her hair. Her hands slid down the other woman's arms before she wrapped them around Desiree's waist.

Desiree nodded, beginning to feel a bit flushed. Piper's closeness was starting to have an effect on her and she knew that the smart thing to do would be to move. However, the strawberry-blonde stayed right where she was. She then felt Piper's soft warm lips on the side of her neck before the woman whispered in her ear. "I've missed you baby." She pulled Desiree back into her more as she kissed her neck again. "I've missed you so much."

Piper turned Desiree around and gazed into her eyes as she cupped her face between her hands. Desiree gazed back at her, knowing that she should stop this before it went any further, but it was as though Piper had put her under a spell that she just could not shake. Leaning down, Piper gently captured her lips with her own. Wrapping her arms around the taller woman's neck, Desiree kissed her back, increasing the pressure of their lips a bit. She softly moaned as Piper caressed her lips with the tip of her tongue. Wanting more, Desiree parted her lips causing Piper to enter her mouth, her tongue beginning to duel with Desiree's. The two women prolonged the kiss for as long as they could without breaking for air. When Piper started to kiss her again, Desiree gently pushed her away as she shook her head, her face completely red.

"I...can't," Desiree managed to say as she attempted to catch her breath. "We can't do this...not anymore."

Piper hooked her thumbs into the pockets of her jeans. "By anymore do you mean never again?"

The younger woman nodded. "Yes."

"Why not?" *I love you...I need you...I want you.*

Desiree leaned against the sink with her arms crossed over her chest. "Because..."

Piper waited for her to go on but Desiree did not offer anything else. "Because what?" the dark-haired woman asked in a quiet voice.

"Because...I'm afraid of you," Desiree admitted, though her words could barely be heard she uttered them so softly. She saw the look of pain and hurt that crossed Piper's face before it vanished. "I'm sorry Piper, I just can't...I just can't give us another try because I'll constantly be worrying if you're going to pull something else in the future. Most of the time you can be so sweet and charming, and yet there are those occasions when I see another side of you that frightens me. Like yesterday morning, you scared me so badly. You had a right to be upset, but you were so cold and malicious. I don't want to see that side of you again."

Piper adamantly shook her head. "Baby you won't. I promise you that. I've learned my lesson and I will never behave that way again." She knew that she was begging, but Piper could not help herself. She wanted to be with this woman more than anything. She was one step away from collapsing to her knees and begging for another chance.

"I can't do it Piper." Desiree shrugged. "Call me a coward, but I really don't have the energy. I care about you...but I can't be with you."

"Give me a chance to prove myself." Piper felt as though she were hanging on to a rope for dear life, yet she sensed that it was about to unravel.

"You did what you had to do yesterday morning, and now I'm doing what I have to do. And that is let you go." Desiree felt a knot forming in her throat. She was desperately trying not to cry but was quickly losing the battle.

"What if I don't wanna be let go?"

"You don't have a choice in the matter Piper," Desiree replied in a near whisper.

Placing her hands on her hips, Piper slowly shook her head. "I think that you are making the biggest mistake of your life," she said in a quiet voice. When Desiree did not comment on her words, she went on, "Desi, you would be a fool to let me walk out of that door and out of your life because despite the ass that I have been, you and I should be together. I know in my heart," reaching up, Piper placed a hand over her chest, "that you and I were made for each other. My life was so barren and lonely before you entered it and made it so much better. You've made me happier in the short time that we have known one another, then all the positive moments in my life combined." Her eyes became glassy as the tears threatened to spill, "And now you want to throw it all away. I realize that I have to rebuild your trust in me...give me the chance to because I know that I can change for the better. With you by my side I can do anything."

Desiree did not trust herself to speak, so she merely shook her head. She could not take the chance of anything like this happening again. A relationship with Piper was not a risk that she was willing to take.

Piper nodded as she bit her lower lip. "So that's it, huh? You're just gonna give up on me...on something that had the potential to be so wonderful...so special. Well years from now you're going to look back on this and wish that you'd given me a chance to prove myself...my love to you. Whether you choose to believe it or not you're going to kick yourself for letting me walk out of that door and out of your life forever, because that is exactly what I'm going to do when my feet touch your threshold. I'm gone. Forever," Piper enunciated the syllables of the last word while wondering if her words were having their desired effect on the other woman. "I have caused you to feel more alive than you have ever felt in your entire life Desiree, and you can't deny that." Taking a step towards the strawberry-blonde, Piper looked her straight in the eyes. "Now tell me you *want* me to go. Tell me you *want* me out of your life and I'll leave. You won't ever have to see me again."

Desiree just stared at her not saying anything until she finally moved around the woman and briskly walked out of the kitchen on her way to the bedroom. When she came out of her bedroom moments later, she found Piper leaning against the wall next to the front door. Walking up to her, Desiree handed the woman a duffel bag explaining that her belongings were inside.

"I'm still waiting," Piper stated quietly already knowing what was about to happen.

Desiree swallowed, feeling a small lump in her throat. This was harder to do than she had ever dreamed it would be. "Go," she finally was able to whisper.

Opening the door, Piper walked out, not bothering to close it as she headed towards the elevator, tears falling down her face. After watching her walk down the hall for a few seconds, Desiree placed her hands on the door and pushed it closed gently, before she pressed her forehead to the door as she allowed the tears to come. Never before had she ever felt such anguish.

Concluded in Part 12.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Hostage of the Heart ~

by Ambrosia

**Disclaimers:** Can be found in Part 1.

**Feedback:** I love receiving feedback, so if you have anything to tell me at all, just send it to: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you very much.

### CHAPTER 12-The Finale

With her eyes closed, she gritted her teeth at the sound of loud crunching near her ear. She had had just about all she could handle. Opening her eyes, Desiree looked over at her sister with an annoyed expression plainly written on her face. "Will you please eat your nuts more quietly or just move to a vacant seat? Some of us are trying to get some rest."

Larisa cocked her head to the side as she gazed back at her sister curiously. "You know what I'm wondering?"

"Not really," Desiree retorted testily.

The other woman smirked. "Well I'll tell you anyway. I'm wondering when was the exact moment that you decided to become a...oh how should I put this? Ah, I know. A female of the canine persuasion."

"That was when I decided that I wanted to be more like you because I *so* admire your smart-ass remarks."

Larisa laughed good-naturedly as she tossed another peanut into her mouth, working on the fourth bag. "Nice one sis."

Desiree turned her head, looking out of the small window at the land far below, which seemed so small from this altitude. "Thank you. I'm thrilled that you approve," she replied, not sounding thrilled in the least. The two sat in silence, both women lost in their own thoughts before Desiree let out a long sigh as she turned to her sister. "I'm sorry," she stated in a quiet voice. "I know that I've been difficult to deal with this past week. I don't know how you, Richie, and Mom put up with me. It's just been hard to be pleasant when all I feel like doing is climbing into bed and boo-hooing."

Placing a hand over Desiree's, Larisa gave it a squeeze. "It's okay Desi. I understand perfectly. Mother, Richie, and I love you and we're all trying to work through this. In times like these, it is highly common to feel anger. I've felt that way too. I'm pissed off. I'm pissed off because Father chose to die rather than deal with people confronting him about his past. I'm pissed off that he left our mother a widow and his children without a father, though we're all grown...well except for that baby who will probably never know who his or her father was," Larisa paused, "And I'm pissed off at you."

Desiree looked at her sister. "Me? Why? Because of the way that I've been behaving as of late?"

Larisa shook her head. "No, because you blew off the love of your life."

The strawberry-blonde turned her attention back to the window as though she was putting an end to this discussion before it ever really got the chance to get started, but Larisa was not having it. "We should talk about this."

"No we shouldn't," Desiree replied in a stubborn tone of voice.

"Allow me to rephrase that. We're *going* to talk about this."

Desiree turned back towards her sister, unable to suppress a glare. "What are you doing? Trying to fix my relationship with Piper? For the life of me, I can't figure out why you would want to do such a thing."

"And why is that?" Raising the bag to her mouth, Larisa polished off the small bag of peanuts.

"Well since Piper and I are no longer together, seems like you would want to move on in. After all, the two of you did have a relationship years ago. It all makes perfect sense now. The looks you've given her...you still love Piper don't you?" Desiree stared at her sister intently, waiting for an answer.

"Yes, I do," Larisa admitted softly. "I do love her and a part of me always will, but I have no plans to make a move on her as you put it. You and she should be together. What Piper and I shared was over long ago, and I've come to accept that."

"What she and I shared is over too."

"You're making a terribly big mistake Desi."

Desiree stared at her sister with a look of surprise. "Piper said the same thing to me last week. What? Do the two of you share a brain or something?" Desiree gave a momentary pause as Larisa smirked. "Listen, if I'm making a mistake then allow me to make it. I'm a big girl and I'm fully capable of making my own decisions. Play matchmaker with someone else, okay? Better yet, stay out of everyone else's business and mind your own."

Larisa chuckled, being highly amused, which caused Desiree to scowl at her. "Look at my little sister. Trying to acquire an attitude."

Desiree unbuckled her seat belt and started to rise when her sister gently yet firmly pushed her back into the seat, asking where she was going. "I'm going to find another place to sit and if I can't find one, I'd rather stay in the tiny restroom until we get ready to land, then sit here and put up with you."

Larisa concealed another chuckle. "I'm sorry." At Desiree's disbelieving look she went on, "I *really* am. I shouldn't be teasing you." She smiled. "You're just so cute when you become indignant."

The strawberry-blonde shook her head, though there was a faint smile on her lips. Big sisters could be such a pain sometimes. For one thing, they think they knew everything and for another, they often attempted to run your life. Desiree would not give up hers for anything in this world.

Larisa grinned as she looked at her sibling. "I know, I know. You've just got to love me."

Leaning towards her, Desiree kissed her sister on the cheek. "You drive me crazy sometimes, but I love you all the same."

"Yes, I know you do kid." Larisa winked at her as she wrapped an arm around Desiree's shoulders. "Now, back to Piper."

"Larisa..."

"Okay, okay," the older woman said quickly. "I'll drop it." She smiled to herself. *For now anyway.*

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After knocking on the door, Larisa stood on the threshold waiting for someone to answer. Moments later, the door opened to reveal Taj. He smiled at her as he drew her into a tender hug.

She returned the warm embrace with a smile on her face. Releasing her, Taj invited Larisa inside before closing the door behind her.

"It's good to see you back Larisa," Taj earnestly admitted. "How did everything go in San Francisco?"

"Everything went well," Larisa replied while desperately wanting to forget that the last week ever happened. "It was a nice service." She decided to change the subject, not wanting to elaborate. "How are you and Valerie doing?" She smiled at Taj. "Set a date for the wedding yet?"

Taj chuckled. "We're great. We don't have a date as of yet, but when we do you'll be the first to know."

Larisa smiled. "I feel privileged." She looked around the quiet living room. "Are you the only one home?"

The Jamaican man nodded. "Yes, besides Tobias. By the way, he was an exceptional guest." Taj smiled. "Please tell Desi that he is welcome here anytime. Leroy went to lunch with some friends and Val and Pippy are at work."

Larisa chuckled. "I'll be sure to do that. So Piper got a job, huh?"

Taj nodded, looking proud as he replied, "Yes, she did. A few days ago, she gained employment. She's working at a restaurant, which is in walking distance from here. That works in Pippy's favor since she doesn't have a car." Reaching into his pocket, Taj removed a business card that he handed to Larisa. It displayed the address and phone number of the restaurant that Piper worked for.

Quickly reading the small card, Larisa tucked it into her pocket. She recognized the place instantly. Having been there a few times, Larisa knew that it was one of the trendiest restaurants this side of Los Angeles. *Way to go Piper*, she thought to herself. "How is she doing?" Larisa asked Taj.

He shook his head. "She's trying to act like everything is peachy-king but I know better. She misses Desiree like crazy though she won't admit it."

Larisa sighed. "Women."

Taj grinned at her. "So are you here to pick up Tobias?"

She nodded. "Yep. First thing Desiree asked when we arrived in town this morning was if I'd come over here to pick up her 'son'. I started to tell her to come get him herself, but I've been pushing her buttons a lot lately so I thought she might finally go over the edge and give me a swift butt kicking." Larisa laughed.

"Maybe that's just what you need." Taj laughed as he headed towards the stairs. "I'll be right back."

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Pulling up to the restaurant, Larisa cut off the ignition before turning to her passenger, who was sitting in a cage big enough for a full-grown Great Dane in the back seat. "I'll only be in here for a few minutes little buddy. You hang tight, okay?" Granting her with an 'as if I have any choice' expression, Tobias lay down and wearily closed his eyes. He couldn't wait to get out of this prison, which the human's insisted he be in for no good reason. This was simply cruel and unusual punishment.

Ignorant to her 'captive's' internal musings, Larisa exited the car and strolled towards the entrance of the restaurant. On walking inside, she noticed people milling around waiting to be seated at their tables. Walking up to the hostess, Larisa asked if she could speak with Piper Redding. The hostess went to the kitchen and soon returned with Piper walking closely behind her. Larisa checked her out as she approached. The tall woman was wearing a pair of black slacks and a white short-sleeved shirt with a black kerchief tied on her head, which made her look like a gorgeous pirate. Over her shoulder was thrown a once pristine white apron, which was laden with stains, but Piper was completely spotless except for a couple of small stains that were visible on her cast.

"Hi," the woman said in her husky voice as she neared Larisa. "Glad to see you got back to L.A. safely."

Larisa smiled. "Thanks. How are you?" She was chagrined to feel that old familiar tenseness between them.

"I'm doing all right," Piper replied, lying through her pearly white teeth. It was difficult to make it through each day, but she kept trudging on. "Can't complain. How are you? And your sister?"

"Us Love girls are hanging in there," Larisa replied, smiling again. "I know you probably should be getting back to work, but I just wanted to ask you if we could talk later. I could pack us a picnic basket and we could go to the beach or somewhere. I'd like the chance to clear the air between us."

Piper nodded. "I do owe you a talk so sure. That's fine. You want to pick me up at Taj's? My shift ends at four o'clock."

"I'll pick you up at five then?"

"Sounds good," Piper replied. "I'll see you later then. Gotta get back to the kitchen. I have a duck in the oven." She winked as she waved at Larisa before turning and hurrying towards the kitchen.

Larisa waved back and watched as she left, attempting to keep her eyes off of the other woman's derriere in those pants that fit her so very well. *I am so very very naughty*, she thought as she turned around and headed out of the restaurant. Glancing at her watch, Larisa started to think about Micaela. Taking out her cell phone, she paged the woman before making her way to the

car. As soon as she was settled in and ready to start the car, her cell rang.

"Hello?"

"You paged me," Micaela said in a cheerfully warm voice.

A delightful smile spread across Larisa's lips. "Yes, I did. What time is your lunch break?"

"One o'clock."

Glancing at her watch, Larisa saw that it was twenty-five minutes to one. If she hurried, she could make it to the mall in time to pick Micaela up. "I have an idea...why don't I take you out to lunch?"

The Latina smiled into the phone. "Chinese?"

"You've got it babe."

"You're on."

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After searching the beach for the perfect spot, Larisa finally settled on a place near the water. She and Piper spread out the blanket they brought with them before settling on it. Larisa looked around, noticing that there were few others on the beach at this time of day. It was almost as though she and Piper had the beach all to themselves. Opening the picnic basket, she took removed a couple of sandwiches, a can of *Pringles* potato chips, a container filled with freshly cut carrots and celery, two bowls of fruit salad, and a couple of ice cold cans of soda.

Piper admired the spread, her stomach starting to growl. She suddenly realized that she was hungry, having not eaten anything all day. Ironical, since she worked in a kitchen. "Everything looks so good," she said to the other woman.

Larisa's eyes trailed over Piper in her khaki pants and navy blue tank top that showed the feminine muscles in her upper arms. Indeed, everything did look quite good. Opening her soda, Larisa took a long swallow before replying. "Thanks Piper. I'd hoped you'd like it."

Blue eyes peered into hers. "I do. Thanks for this. I needed it." Piper glanced around their surroundings. "It's so peaceful here. I should get to the beach more often. I haven't been since Jamaica."

"That's what I wanted to speak with you about," Larisa started as she opened the *Pringles* and handed Piper a sandwich encased in Saran wrap. Larisa picked up her own sandwich and started to peel back the plastic. "I wasn't honest with you when we broke up all those years ago."

Removing the plastic from her sandwich, Piper took a big bite out of it as she silently waited for

the other woman to continue. Unbidden, the memory of that dreadful day entered her mind. *You know what? You're really pathetic. Sitting there crying like the baby that you are. Frankly, I don't now what I ever saw in you. You may have the body of twenty-five year old but you've got the mentality of a child.* Piper shook her head to clear it of the memories that had caused her such pain.

"The truth is," Larisa went on, "I was just scared."

The other woman looked at her. Had Desiree not said that same thing to her last week? "Scared? Did I somehow scare you Larisa?"

"No." Larisa shook her head. "I don't mean that I was scared of you. No, I adored you," she said softly. "I was frightened of what my parents might think of my having a relationship with a woman. Back then I was not ready to deal with any hostility that they might have about it so instead of being brave and telling them the truth, I let you go. You were my true love but I was afraid of my father's resentment. Breaking up with you might have been the hardest thing that I've ever had to do. I never wanted to lose you Piper, but I was too afraid to keep you."

"Why didn't you just tell me this years ago?"

"What would you have said...done?" Larisa asked.

"I never would have let you go," the blue eyed woman replied with confidence. "I would have found some way to persuade you into staying with me."

Larisa placed her sandwich on the blanket as she looked down at it. "I'm sorry that I said all of those horrible things to you. I didn't mean any of it. It was tearing me up inside to see the pain that was evident in your eyes, but I had to make sure that you wouldn't try to win me back." She glanced across at Piper who was watching her intently. "I had to cause you to hate me in the hopes that you would get over me more quickly if you did."

Growing thoughtful, Piper didn't respond right away. "I'm not sure whether I should thank you or not."

"Thank me?" Of all the responses that she could give, Larisa never expected Piper to bestow gratitude upon her.

"Yes," Piper replied while nodding. "If you'd been honest in the first place, then you and I might still be together...though on second thought perhaps we wouldn't have been because I probably still would have went to prison."

"I would have waited for you," Larisa quickly interjected, knowing that it was the truth.

Piper grew momentarily speechless at the declaration. "Well...in that case we probably would have been. And Desiree never would have had to endure the pain and heartache that I put her through. Your father undoubtedly would still be alive," she paused. "On the other hand, I never

would have taken your sister hostage and fallen in love with her. Despite everything, I'm glad that I did because she means everything to me. I love her more than I thought it was humanly possible to love. So I suppose that I should thank you."

Larisa swallowed hard as she tried to muster up a smile. "Anytime," she said in a light-hearted voice. "So...are we okay? I won't say that I never meant to hurt you because that was the whole point, but I'm awfully sorry that I did."

Piper playfully punched her in the arm. "We're more than okay." She smiled at Larisa, causing the other woman to smile back. "Now let's eat."

The two women began to dig into the food. "Hey Piper I just had a thought."

"What's that?" The blue-eyed woman picked up a carrot and began to munch on it.

"Though you would have been with me had things been different, you still would have met Desiree."

Piper nodded as she finished off the carrot before verbally answering, "True."

Larisa smiled. "So you know what I think? You two *still* would have ended up together. I have a feeling that somehow it would have happened anyway."

The other woman wore a thoughtful look. "Hm, you might be right about that. Though I would have fought hard to remain faithful to you, Desiree probably would have seduced me before long." Piper started to grin mischievously and ducked as Larisa tossed a piece of celery at her.

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*She stood on the beach as the sweet summer wind blew gently in her face. She closed her eyes as the breeze caressed her body much like a lover would do. In her mind, she imagined that her lover was here. That her lover was touching and caressing her body, taking her to heights that she had never before known. The touch of those soft inviting lips on hers, the feel of those arms wrapped so tightly around her waist...she yearned it...craved it. Why had her lover traveled so far away? And would she ever return?*

Highlighting the whole paragraph, Desiree stabbed the delete button with her index finger as she shook her head. It sounded too much like a Harlequin romance novel. Not that she had anything against them. She had read her fair share of those types of novels, but Desiree did not write them. Subconsciously, she knew that the woman standing on the beach was she and that the lover spoken about was Piper. Desiree tried not to think about her, but it was difficult not to. Piper had become a large part of her life within a small amount of time and Desiree secretly admitted that she missed her terribly. It had been over a month since she'd laid eyes on the woman and she often wondered how she was. Desiree sincerely hoped that all was well.

Letting out a loud ragged breath, she was about to start the third chapter over when the ringing of the phone pierced the silence in the room. Reaching over, she quickly picked it up with a

cheerful greeting. Immediately recognizing the caller as Micaela, the strawberry-blonde smiled into the phone.

Over the past few weeks she had come to know the woman more and now thought of her as a dear friend. Desiree often teased her sister saying that if Larisa played her cards right, Micaela could become her sister-in-law. So far, the two of them appeared to only be friends but who knew what the future held? Desiree thought that Micaela and her sister would make quite a cute couple. Only one question though. Was the Latina beauty interested in women? Larisa and Desiree had their suspicions that she might be, but had yet to figure it out.

"Hey Mickey," Desiree started in a jovial tone. "What's up?"

"Nothing much sweetie. How is the writing coming along?"

Glancing at the blank page on her computer screen, Desiree frowned. "Well...my fingers seem to have a mind of their own and they're typing things that I don't want them to say." She chuckled. "My Muse is not being very nice to me right now."

"Oh, that naughty Muse. Would you like me to beat her up for you?"

"Will you?"

Micaela laughed. "Anything for you sweetie. Just let me dig my boxing gloves out of the closet and I'll be right over."

Desiree chuckled. "I'll be waiting."

"Oh, will you now?"

The strawberry blonde arched an eyebrow. Was it just her imagination or had Micaela's voice just grown a tad sexier? Was she flirting? Desiree grinned. She and Larisa finally had their first real clue. "Yes," Desiree answered. "I'll be waiting with bells on."

Micaela asked in a low and definitely sexy voice, "And is that all?" The Latina could not believe what she was doing. She was actually flirting and Micaela found that she was thoroughly enjoying it.

Rolling her computer chair back a bit, Desiree raised her legs and propped her feet up on her desk, one ankle crossed over the other. "Well should I be wearing anything else?" she asked, while trying not to feel guilty that she was flirting with the object of her sister's affections. *It's harmless. We're just having some fun.*

Just then, Larisa walked into the room. Hearing her footsteps, Desiree quickly swiveled around in the chair facing her sister, who was staring at her with one eyebrow raised in question. "Oh!" Desiree exclaimed, a blush rising to her cheeks. "Hi Risa."

"Hello," Larisa said in a curious tone of voice as she wondered just whom her sister was talking with so brazenly. It couldn't be Piper could it? As far as Larisa knew, nothing had changed between them. They hadn't even spoken. Larisa watched as her sister returned her attention to the phone. A moment later, Desiree handed the phone out to her. With a quizzical look, Larisa took the phone and spoke into it.

"Hey you," Micaela said in greeting. "How goes it?"

Larisa's eyebrow arched again. Desiree and Micaela had been flirting with each other? Attempting not to feel jealous, Larisa blithely said hello back. "It goes well. What's going on?" She watched as her sister swiveled around to face her computer.

"I need a huge favor. I would really appreciate it if you could help me out. I'd be willing to pay you."

"No need to pay me babe," Larisa replied. "What can I do for you?"

"You're too sweet," Micaela warmly stated. "A friend of mine has fallen ill and she teaches this art class every Saturday evening at a little studio that she rents. Well she asked me if I would teach tonight's session and since Carly has plans tonight, I wondered if you could watch Dante for me. I shouldn't be gone any longer than a couple of hours."

"I'd be delighted to," Larisa replied, smiling. She absolutely adored the three-year-old. Dante had become her little buddy over the past few weeks. "I'll be right over."

"Perfect. Thanks Larisa. I really appreciate this."

The two women then ended the conversation. Larisa quietly placed the phone on Desiree's desk and then studied her sister as the younger woman's eyes remained glued to the computer screen. Larisa noticed that though Desiree's fingers were on the computer keys, they were not moving. Arching an eyebrow, Larisa stood quietly as she waited for the strawberry-blonde to look up at her. Finally, Desiree did with a slightly guilty expression on her face. Larisa attempted to hide a smile, noting that the younger woman looked as though she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"It was just casual flirting," Desiree explained, the silence getting to her.

Larisa laughed lightly. "It's okay Desi." Reaching out a hand, she patted her sister on the back. "I imagine that Mickey would be fun to flirt with."

Desiree nodded slightly, still looking a tad guilty.

Leaning down, Larisa pecked the other woman on the cheek and watched as Desiree smiled at her. "It's no big deal. I'm just delighted to see you in an upbeat mood. And if flirting with Mickey causes that to happen then by all means do it." Hearing her choice of words, Larisa went on as Desiree started to grin, "Umm...flirt that is."

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The black Cadillac pulled up in front of the apartment complex. Four doors opened almost simultaneously before four men exited the car. A distinguished looking man with silver-colored hair reached up and smoothed it back before he fixed his black trench coat. He nodded to the other three and they began to follow him as he walked towards the apartment buildings. He glanced at the young man...teenager really, walking next to him.

"What apartment did you say it was?"

"2C," the teenager replied as he pointed to a building about twenty feet away. "This is the one. I checked it out a few weeks back," he stated proudly.

The man nodded. "Upstairs or down?"

"Down." The teenager studied the older man's walk and tried to mimic it. If there was anyone on this earth that he had admiration for, it was the man next to him and he aimed to be just like him.

The man nodded again as he headed in that direction. A sinister grin appeared on his lips as he anticipated what was about to happen. He had waited a long time for this moment and it had finally arrived. She was going to pay dearly. Ending her life would be payment enough.

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Larisa rubbed up and down the toddler's back as he slept soundly in his bed. She smiled adoringly as she watched him. Not long ago, she had finished reading Dante *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Half way into the story he fell asleep but Larisa kept on reading anyway until she reached the end.

After rubbing Dante's back for a few more minutes, Larisa arose from her chair and quietly headed out of the room, intent on venturing to the kitchen to fix herself a snack. Moments later, she was removing the ingredients needed to make a sandwich when she suddenly heard a noise coming from the front door. Looking at the doorknob, she noticed that it was jiggling as though someone were trying to come in. Putting a small bottle of mustard down, Larisa quickly walked over to the door and looked through the peek hole.

*Damn. Burglars*, she thought as she saw four men who were oddly well dressed for burglars. Turning around, Larisa ran back to Dante's room and gently shook the boy awake. Groggily, the toddler sat up in the bed as he wiped at his eyes with his balled up little fists. Dante sleepily asked his baby-sitter what was going on, but Larisa declined to answer as she picked him up in her arms. Seeing his earphones on the dresser, Larisa obtained those before she headed out of the bedroom. She glanced at the front door to see to her chagrin that it was slowly opening.

Entering the bathroom, Larisa quietly closed the door behind her before she turned on the night-light plugged into the wall, thinking that they would be able to see the bathroom light from underneath the door if she flipped the switch. Kneeling down on the floor with Dante still tucked safely in her arms, Larisa opened a cabinet underneath the sink and told the boy to climb inside.

Though he gave her a questioning look, Dante did as he was told, pushing a few bathroom toiletries out of his way. Sitting down, the toddler crossed his legs Indian style as Larisa placed the earphones on his head.

"Hon we're going to play a game okay?" Larisa said in the calmest voice that she could muster at this moment. Her heart was beating rapidly in her chest as she wondered what would happen. Her main concern was to protect Dante and she hoped that this would work. "I want you to stay in here and not make a sound okay? Whatever you may hear don't come out of this cabinet all right?" At the little boy's nod she went on, "If you stay in here until I come back you'll win the game and I'll give you five dollars."

"Cool," Dante said as a smile appeared on his face. The young boy had no idea that anything was wrong.

Larisa gave him a smile back as she pressed the play button and turned up the volume enough to make sure that Dante would not hear any noises. As the toddler began to listen to one of his favorite narrated fictional tales, Larisa winked at him before closing the cabinet. Standing, she grabbed a plunger sitting by the toilet, thinking that it was a sorry excuse for a weapon but it would have to do. Switching off the night-light, she headed out of the bathroom quietly and closed it behind her.

She stopped walking as she saw a man going into Micaela's bedroom. Breathing a sigh of relief that he did not see her, she took a few steps so that she could look around the corner into the living room. There she saw three men standing together. They were saying something but she could not figure out what it was. Larisa was trying to decide whether she should confront them or not when she heard a clicking noise. Swiftly looking in the direction of Micaela's bedroom, she saw the man who had went in there just a moment ago, pointing a gun at her. Though it was dark, she noticed a grin on his face as he told her to put her hands behind her head. Dropping the plunger, Larisa did as she was told, her heart beating so loud now, that she was sure he could hear it.

Quickly walking behind her, the man put an arm around her waist and pressed the cold barrel of the gun against her temple. He then instructed her to walk into the living room. As she did so, the man said something to the trio waiting by the front door.

"Hey boys, look what I caught." He chuckled as one of the other men turned on a light.

"Clint...she's as pretty as you said she was." He then kissed Larisa on the cheek and as her stomach churned, she resisted the urge to elbow him in the stomach.

Clint Reynolds glared at the man standing proudly behind Larisa. "That's not Mickey you idiot. Didn't I tell you that she's Hispanic?"

The man looked at Larisa more closely. "Oh, yeah. That's right. Then who is she?"

"How the hell should I know?" Clint yelled as he took off his trench coat and tossed it towards the couch. "But I intend on finding out." Removing a silencer from the waistband of his pants, the tall Southern man ambled over towards them. He told the man holding Larisa to let her go.

The man quickly did so, taking a couple of steps back. Clint charmingly smiled at Larisa who merely gave him a dirty look in return. "Hey darlin'," he began, ignoring the look, "why don't you tell me what your name is?"

"That really is none of your business, but I *will* tell you one thing. It's not darlin'."

Clint laughed, but it was devoid of any humor. Before Larisa could move out of his way, Clint backhanded her across the face hard enough to cause her cheek to become a brilliant red. His handsome face took on an evil look as he sneered at her. "You don't want to upset me beautiful," Clint stated in a soft tone of voice.

"It's Larisa Love," the youngest of the four men stated. All eyes turned to the teenager.

"How do you know that?" Clint asked his one and only nephew.

"Because I saw her on television a few weeks ago. Did you happen to see the news when that woman, Desiree Love, was taken hostage about a month and a half ago?"

The Southern man quickly jogged his memory. "I don't have that much time for the news but I think I recall that." He glanced at Larisa who still had her hands behind her head. "Is this her sister?"

The teenager nodded. "Yep."

Clint looked back at Larisa, the silencer in his hand pointed towards the floor, though she was aware of the fact that he could raise it at any moment and pull the trigger. "Did Mickey tell you about me?"

Larisa shook her head, though she figured that Clint was the man Micaela said she had fled away from three years ago. She had not given Larisa much information, but said that it had turned into a sour relationship and that the man whom she was involved with started beating her. One day she had had enough and decided to leave him after finding out that she was pregnant after having been raped by her sister's husband while visiting in Mexico during Christmas time. Micaela had never heard from him again.

"She didn't?" Clint cocked his head to the side. "She didn't tell you how she tried to kill me and left me for dead, running off with money that belonged to me?" At Larisa's disbelieving look, Clint unbuttoned the top four buttons on his silk shirt before pulling it open to show the woman two scars that the bullets left. He then buttoned his shirt back up, making sure that it was neat.

*You forgot to mention that part Mickey,* Larisa thought. *Though, I know this bastard probably deserved it.* "Well I'm sure you had those coming to you," Larisa boldly stated while wondering if she had a death wish. She thought back to the first tape her father made the day he died that Desiree let her listen to. *He was right. I do have a big mouth. Must work on that. That is, if I'm able to make it through this night.*

Switching his gun to his left hand, Clint balled up his fist and struck Larisa on the jaw, causing the woman to stumble to the floor. Pain radiating through her jaw, Larisa touched it as she winced. She tasted a warm fluid in her mouth and knew that she was bleeding. Spitting into her hand, Larisa saw one of her molars fall to her palm. Blinking her eyes rapidly to clear the stars clouding her vision, she looked up at Clint who was hovering over her with the silencer now pointed at her head.

"You really need to drop the attitude darlin', because it's gonna get you killed. Now...I want to know where Mickey is. Tell me."

Keeping her mouth shut, Larisa raised her right hand towards Clint and bent all of her fingers except for the middle one that stood proudly. Quickly reaching out, the man wrapped his hand around Larisa's middle finger and pulled forward until there was an audible snap. The woman screamed in pain as Clint let go of her finger, fully enraged now. Turning to his men, he motioned them over.

"Gentlemen," Clint began as he glanced down at Larisa who was now cradling her hand. "Why don't ya'll show Ms. Love what happens when I become irate."

Heading towards her, the three began to pummel Larisa while Clint stood watching stoically. After a few minutes, he yelled for them to stop, thinking that she might have changed her mind now. The two oldest men did, but the teenager kept going. He was about to deliver another kick to Larisa's stomach when Clint grabbed the back of his collar and snatched him back, glaring at the youth.

"When I tell you to stop," Clint started between clenched teeth, "I mean it. You understand?"

The teenager swiftly nodded, hoping that his uncle was not too upset with him. "Sorry Uncle Clint," he uttered.

Giving him one last glare, Clint looked down at Larisa, who was balled up on the floor in the fetal position. She was attempting not to cry as waves of pain went through her body. Larisa knew that no matter how much they tortured her, she would not ever reveal Micaela's whereabouts. Even if it meant that she would die.

"Ms. Love, surely you're ready to talk now. Where is Micaela? It doesn't appear that she's home now so where did she go?" Again, Clint pointed the gun at Larisa's head. He saw her shake her head negatively and growled in frustration as he kicked her in the stomach, forcing the woman onto her back as she yelped. Moving the silencer down her body, Clint pulled the trigger as he aimed at her kneecap, shattering it. Larisa screamed again as Clint repeated his question. She managed to shake her head and then cried out as a bullet entered her other knee. She fervently prayed that he would just get it over with by killing her.

"You are a stubborn one, aren't you?" Clint asked the woman. "You're willing to give up your life for Mickey? She must be pretty special to you." There was no response from Larisa as she closed her eyes, willing this to be a horrible nightmare. "Well Ms. Love, I'm going to ask you

one more time. Where is Mickey?"

Opening her eyes, Larisa looked up at Clint, thinking that if these were the last moments of her life then she was going out tough. Opening her mouth she managed to reply, "Bite me asshole."

Clint stared at her for a few moments before shaking his head, the expression on his face an odd mixture of irritation, sadness, and respect for the woman refusing him despite the vulnerable position she was in. Glancing at his nephew who was standing right next to him, he handed the teenager his silenced. "Dennis, I want you to have the honors," Clint started. "Finish her off for me."

Dennis stared at the gun in his hand. Never in his life had he killed anyone, but if his uncle thought that he was up to it, then Dennis would not fail him. Licking his lips a little nervously, the teenager pointed the gun at Larisa's head.

"No," Clint said, shaking his head. Reaching up, he pushed Dennis' hand down until the gun was aimed at her chest. "I want this to be symbolic. Shoot her twice in the chest."

Putting his finger on the trigger, Dennis looked into Larisa's face and noticed that she had her eyes closed waiting for him to end her existence. Taking a deep breath, the teenager steadied his trembling hand and pulled the trigger twice.

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After the story ended, Dante pulled the earphones off of his head and sat it along with his Walkman beside him. He did not know where Larisa had learned this game from, but he was not enjoying it in the least. It was one of the least fun games he had ever played. Knowing that he was relinquishing the five dollars, the little boy pushed open the cabinet door and climbed out. Standing up, he felt around for the doorknob in the dark. Finding it, Dante turned the knob and opened the door, walking out.

Peeping in his room, he noticed that Larisa did not appear to be there so he headed in the direction of the living room. That was when he saw her lying on the floor with blood soaking the carpet around her. Dante gasped as he ran to her, kneeling down. With his little hand, he shook her shoulder but the woman would not wake up. The little boy began to cry, knowing even at his young age that something was desperately wrong.

Suddenly he remembered what his mother had taught him in case there was ever an emergency. Standing, the toddler ran over to the cordless phone and picked it up. Pressing 9-1-1, he put the phone to his ear as someone picked up after the first ring.

"Hello," Dante started in a shaky voice as he continued to cry. "Risa has a big boo-boo! I need an ambulance fast!"

"Sweetie," the operator started in a calm voice hoping that it would have an effect on the young boy she was speaking to, "can you tell me what happened?"

"I dunno," Dante cried. "We were playin' a game and I came outta the bath womb and saw her asleep on the floor. She's beeding."

"She's bleeding? Okay sweetie, there is an ambulance on the way. They should be there soon. Can you do me a favor?"

Dante nodded as he sniffed. "Yeah."

"Can you go outside in a few minutes and see if the ambulance has arrived? I see that you live in an apartment and they might need directions on how to get to your home, so do you think you can do that for me?"

"Yeah, I can do that Ma'am."

The operator smiled. "Okay sweetie. Why don't we talk until you go outside okay?"

"Okay." He listened as the operator began to talk. She told him how she had a little boy who was probably around his age. Walking back over to Larisa, Dante knelt by her and took her hand gently in his smaller one. He gave it a squeeze wishing that Larisa would open her eyes.

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As the sunlight began to glare through her eyelids, Desiree opened her eyes. Moving her head, she winced because she had a crook in her neck from sleeping in the chair all night. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she waited until they focused before looking at the woman lying in the hospital bed. It did not appear that Larisa had moved an inch all night, which meant that she was still unconscious. Standing up, Desiree stretched before walking the short distance to the bed. Leaning down, she placed a tender kiss on her sister's forehead before she started to rub Larisa's cheek gently with the back of her hand.

Whoever had broken into Micaela's home had beaten the young woman badly. Larisa had two gunshot wounds to her chest, both of which had thankfully missed her heart by bare centimeters. A bullet in each of her kneecaps had shattered them both, so a surgeon had to remove them. Larisa also suffered from a broken jaw, which was now wired so that it could properly heal. Three of her ribs were broken, along with the middle finger on her right hand. There were multiple contusions all over her body, especially her face where Larisa's eyes were swollen with dark purple circles around them. To help with her breathing, the doctors had inserted into her nose, nasal prongs, which were connected to a tube that ran into the wall where an oxygen tank was stored.

Desiree looked at her sister in amazement. Not everyone could survive what she had been through the night before. Continuing to caress Larisa's cheek, Desiree once again sent a silent prayer of thanks that her sister was alive. If she had lost Larisa, Desiree did not know what she would have done. It was times like these when one recognized just how precious life was. That it should never be taken for granted because it could be stopped at any given moment.

*Who did this to you Risa?* Desiree thought. Though the police had interviewed Micaela's neighbors, none of them had anything to report, which meant that the only witness was the victim, who now lay unconscious.

Taking her seat again, Desiree glanced at the other bed in the hospital room to see Dante there fast asleep. *Poor thing*, she thought as she looked at him. The toddler had cried on and off last night while constantly inquiring if Larisa was going to be all right. Micaela started to make arrangements so that someone could keep him last night while she was at the hospital with Desiree, but Dante insisted on staying as well. He said that he did not want to leave until "his Risa" woke up.

Finding that her bladder was full, Desiree arose from the chair and quietly walked towards the bathroom so as not to disturb Dante. By the time she came back out, Micaela was walking through the door with two Styrofoam cups in hand. The Latina smiled at Desiree as she handed her one of the cups.

"I found one of those hot beverage machines. Thought you might like a cup of coffee," Micaela started as both she and Desiree took their seats next to Larisa's bed. "Though I warn you, it ain't *Starbucks*." She softly chuckled, as did the strawberry-blonde.

"Thanks Mickey." Desiree smiled at the woman before lifting the cup to her mouth and taking a sip. She found that the coffee was already lukewarm. As the women drank their coffee, Micaela informed Desiree that she had called Taj and Piper about half an hour ago to let them know what happened last night. Having not thought about doing that, Desiree thanked her as her heart rate began to increase. Did that mean that Piper could show up at the hospital at any moment? What would she say to her?

"Are you sure you don't want to call your mother?" Micaela asked as she leaned down, setting her coffee cup on the floor.

Desiree nodded. "She's been through enough lately, so I'd like to wait until Larisa is completely out of the woods." Blue-green eyes brimming with fresh tears, she looked at Micaela while softly inquiring, "She *is* going to be okay, right? I don't wanna lose her." Her voice starting to crack, Desiree added, "I can't lose my sister too."

Standing up, Micaela opened her arms wide as she replied, "C'mere."

Coming to her feet, Desiree all but ran into Micaela's arms and buried her face in the woman's neck. The Latina held her tightly as she stroked up and down her back while Desiree cried. The two women stood in a tight embrace for what seemed an eternity until Micaela took a step backwards before turning Desiree around so that she was facing Larisa. Standing behind her, Micaela wrapped her arms around the younger woman's waist before Desiree folded her own arms over hers. She asked Desiree to look at the woman in the bed and the strawberry-blonde did so, almost starting to cry all over again.

"She is going to be just fine," Micaela said in a confident tone of voice. "You just have to have some faith. Your sister is one of the strongest women that I have ever met...just like you, and I know that she will pull through this. Now it's going to take some time for her to recover... it won't be an overnight process... but she will. She's going to make it sweetie. Believe that. Draw comfort from it."

Looking back at her, Desiree softly smiled at the woman. "Thank you Mickey. I'm so glad that you're here. I think you really are an angel."

Micaela smiled back. "*You're* the angel." While giving the younger woman a small squeeze, Micaela kissed the top of her head.

As she reached the correct hospital room after having gotten lost a couple of times, Piper was about to enter when she saw Desiree and Micaela in what could only be described as a very intimate embrace. Telling herself that what she saw was nothing more than two people comforting each other, Piper lightly knocked on the already open door.

As they looked up, they noticed that Piper was standing at the door with a bouquet of lilies in her hand. Micaela disengaged her arms from around Desiree's waist, as she got the feeling that Piper did not appreciate them being there. Micaela greeted Piper with a smile as the strawberry-blonde motioned her to come in.

"Hi Piper," Desiree said in a pleasant voice. Her heart was beating even faster now and was it her imagination or had it suddenly become stifling hot in there? "Is Taj with you?"

"Hey there," Piper replied. "No he's not. I came in my own car. He should be here soon though."

Returning Micaela's smile, albeit a bit tightly, Piper walked into the room. She then placed the flowers, which were already in a vase, on the small dresser next to Larisa's hospital bed. Looking down at her, Piper felt her blood began to boil. At that moment, she would have loved to get her hands around the throat of the person or persons responsible for this.

Piper looked up at Desiree and Micaela. "There aren't any leads?"

Both shook their head. "My neighbors didn't see anyone and they didn't hear anything. The only person who knows what happened in my apartment is Larisa," Micaela replied as she crossed her arms over her chest. Last night when she came home to find the police at her place, the thought that Clint had found out where she lived and then did this horrible thing to her friend crossed her mind, but then Micaela remembered that this could not have been Clint's doing. She had ended his life three years ago and watched as he died.

"And they didn't take anything? Whoever put Larisa in this condition?" Piper inquired.

Micaela shook her head again. "Not one thing was missing. It's like they just broke in, tried to end her life and then left."

Piper glanced at Dante sleeping in the other bed before she returned her eyes to his mother. "Your son didn't see or hear anything?"

"He said that Larisa wanted to play a game. She woke him up and then carried him into the bathroom where she told him to get into the bathroom cabinet. She then put his earphones on his head claiming that if he stayed in there until she came back, that she would give him five dollars. After that she left and soon Dante got tired of waiting for her to return so he climbed out and left the bathroom. That's when he found her lying on the living room floor. She was of course unconscious."

Piper nodded. "So this person or persons broke into your apartment. They beat and shot Larisa and then left without taking any of your possessions," she paused a beat. "There has got to be a motive. I don't think that people normally do that sort of thing without a motive. Micaela, you don't know anyone that would want to do you harm?"

"If you'd asked me that a few years ago I would have said yes."

Piper cocked her head to the side. "Why has your answer changed?" She had grown suddenly suspicious. Piper did not know what it was, but Micaela was hiding something. She was sure of it.

"Because the person that would have done me harm then is not trying to do it now," Micaela slowly replied as she carefully chose her words.

Blue eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How can you be so sure?"

"Piper," Desiree started, "please leave Mickey alone. You're acting like *she* pulled the trigger. Why don't you stop and just let the police do their job, okay?" She gave Piper a pleading look.

"Sweetie, Piper just wants to know what happened to Larisa."

Desiree ran a hand through her hair in frustration. "We all do, but attacking you is not the way to go about doing that."

"You know what?" Piper started. "I'll just go. Desiree, I was not attacking your new...friend. However since you got the impression that I was, then I sincerely apologize. See you around." Turning, Piper started to march out of the room when Desiree called her name. "What?"

"Don't go Piper." She sighed. How had things got out of hand so quickly?

"Why stay? You don't want me around," Piper replied, a hurt look appearing on her face before it quickly vanished.

"How can you say that?"

"Over a month ago you made it crystal clear that you wanted me out of your life." Piper nodded

towards Micaela. "Why would you want me here when you've got Super Mickey? I bet she's stuck by you like glue ever since the night she brought you home drunk from that bar, hasn't she?" Piper knew that she was acting childish, but she was helpless to stop it. The thought of Desiree and Micaela possibly being a couple rubbed her the wrong way.

"Guys..." Micaela started softly, but neither of them was paying her any attention. She glanced at her son to see that he was still sleeping soundly.

"Piper just shut up."

The dark-haired woman raised an eyebrow. "Shut up? You want me to shut up Desiree? Tell you what...I'll just leave. I'm out of here." With that said, Piper stormed out of the room.

On her way out of the hospital, Piper ran into Taj...literally.

"Whoa!" The man put a restraining hand on his friend's shoulder. By the expression on her face, she was seething about something. Taj asked the woman what was wrong. When Piper attempted to walk past him without answering, the Jamaican man quickly moved so that he was standing directly in her path. Taj repeated his question.

"Everything!" Piper shouted loud enough for everyone within a twenty-foot radius to hear.

"That's a little broad," Taj said. "Could you please be more specific?"

Piper suddenly burst into tears as other people looked at she and Taj curiously. "I'm an idiot," Piper said as she wiped at the tears strolling down her cheeks.

"Pippy, you are not an idiot," Taj gently replied as he wrapped his arms around her.

The dark-haired woman nodded as she put her arms around Taj's waist briefly before letting go and taking a step back. "Yes, I am." She sniffed as she stopped crying and wiped away at the remaining tears. "I don't know why I act the way that I do sometimes. Why I just fly off of the handle for no good reason. Desi probably hates me now."

"What happened with you two?"

"It would be better if I just left her alone. Who am I trying to kid? I'm no good for her. She deserves much better. I'll talk with you later Taj. I have to go now." Piper started to walk out of the hospital. Taj called after her, but the woman merely kept going refusing to turn around.

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Desiree glanced at her watch. It was nearly twelve o'clock now. Except for Taj, she was the only one in Larisa's hospital room. Not too long ago, Micaela had taken Dante down to the cafeteria to get something for lunch. Standing up, Desiree asked Taj if he would care for anything because she was going to get something to drink. When he declined the offer, Desiree started to walk out

of the room saying that she would be right back when she suddenly heard a low moan. Quickly turning around, she looked at Larisa, as did Taj. Both walked over to the bed, one on either side of it as they gazed down at the woman. They then heard another moan escape her lips.

"Larisa," Desiree started softly, "please wake up hon. Come back to us."

Slowly Larisa's eyes opened. She blinked several times before she looked between Taj and Desiree the best she could with her eyes being swollen. Both Taj and Desiree noted that her right eye was blood red.

"Hello there," Desiree said softly. "Welcome back hon." Reaching out a hand, she gently brushed her sister's cheek. Larisa then tried to speak but Desiree quickly shook her head. "No, hon. Don't say anything. Your jaw has been wired so you won't be able to talk for a little bit. Do you feel like writing on a sheet of paper?"

When Larisa nodded, Taj walked out of the room. He soon returned with a notepad and a pen that he obtained from the nurse's station. Handing the items to Larisa, he located a button on the hospital bed that would elevate her head. Inquiring if she wanted to be raised, Taj then pressed the button as the woman nodded. Both watched as she began to write something using her left hand since it was difficult to do it with the right. Larisa then showed them the paper.

*"How long have I been unconscious?"*

"You've been unconscious since last night Risa," Desiree answered. "Do you remember what happened to you?" At Larisa's nod, she went on. "Do you know who did this to you?" Nodding, Larisa began to write again. This time it took her a few minutes before she finished. She had to turn the paper over because she was writing so much. Taj and Desiree then began to read what she wrote.

*"Three men and one teenager broke into Mickey's apartment. They assaulted me, because they wanted to know where Mickey was but I would not divulge that information, so this is what happened. I remember them like it happened...well yesterday. The leader of the quartet's name was Clint. I don't know his last name though. Anyway, he had silvery short hair and I'd say he was about forty-four or five. He stood about six feet and two or three inches and had a Southern accent. The teenager's name was Dennis. Probably about seventeen or eighteen. He was about the same height as Clint, but he didn't have an accent. The other two, I don't know what their names were, but one was about five feet ten inches and had a dark beard. He was bald as an eagle. Around thirty-five years of age. The other was about the same height, but he had long blond hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. He was probably about forty."*

Taj's expression grew thoughtful. He then looked across at Desiree. "Little one, remember that teenage boy who was trying to extort money from you in exchange for that tape?"

The strawberry-blonde nodded. "His name was Dennis right? You think this might be the same Dennis?"

The man nodded. "It's possible." Feeling a tap on his arm, Taj looked down at Larisa, who had a hand on his arm. She then showed him something that she had just remembered and written down.

*"Dennis referred to Clint as his uncle."*

"Uncle Clint," Taj started. "Okay, I'll do some research on Dennis' family background and see if I can turn up an Uncle Clint."

"Did you say Clint?"

Everyone turned to look at Micaela, who was standing at the door with Dante beside her. The Latina hoped that she had heard incorrectly. Taj nodded, causing Micaela to sigh. "Clint had something to do with Larisa's attack didn't he?"

"He was there," Desiree offered the information. "Do you know a Clint?"

Micaela sighed again as she nodded. Saying that she would be right back, Micaela picked up her son and headed out of the room. Walking towards the waiting room, which was not far from Larisa's room, she set the boy down. Explaining to Dante to stay put, Micaela assured him that she would be back soon. Heading back to the room, the woman tried to gather her thoughts. Micaela felt her palms become wet as she entered the room and walked over towards the trio, choosing to stand next to Desiree. She smiled down at Larisa, overjoyed to see her awake. Larisa smiled back as best she could, since her jaw and cheeks were sore.

"Clint...Clint Reynolds," Micaela said, "is a man that I was involved with three years ago. I met and moved in with him when I was twenty years old. To make a long story short, after a while he started to physically and mentally abuse me." Micaela took a deep breath as old memories that she rather had forgotten flooded back. "He allowed others to physically abuse me as well. I took it for all those years but three years ago I ended up pregnant so I knew that I had to leave him. Otherwise, he would try to make me give up my baby. Plus, I just couldn't take it anymore. So," she paused, "one night I shot him. Twice in the chest while he was in the shower. And then I took ten thousand dollars and fled. I ended up here in California a couple weeks later. For the past three years I've thought that Clint was dead." She glanced at the other three and softly smiled as Desiree put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "That must have been him last night. He and his nephew Dennis."

Larisa drew everyone's attention to her as she waved the notepad in the air. They read the latest note she jotted down.

*"That was definitely him. It was Clint Reynolds. He basically said the same thing...leaving out the abused part however. Mickey...that...I hate to use the word man...is insane. I don't think you should go back to your apartment because he obviously has revenge on his mind."*

"She won't," Taj said as he finished reading. He looked across at Micaela. It was clear that he was furious, but not with her. "I want you to stay at my house tonight, until I can get this taken care of." Taj's eyes moved to Desiree. "And the same goes for you."

"Why me?" she asked.

"Because this appears to be a cycle. First Dennis tries to get money from you in order for you to have your father's tape. Then a few weeks later, he and his Uncle Clint show up at Micaela's apartment evidently looking for her. Now all of these years Clint couldn't find Micaela, but he suddenly does now? Why now? Because his nephew led him to her."

Desiree replied, "Could be just a coincidence. I couldn't have led Dennis to Micaela. I didn't even really know her then."

"But I gave you my address, remember?" Micaela interjected. "After you and Larisa got back from San Francisco, I called and invited you over for dinner one night. You said that your sister was busy that night but you could make it. You asked me for my address again because you'd misplaced it..."

Desiree thought back, her brow crinkling in concentration. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen that paper you wrote your address on since the day you gave it to me. And Dennis came over the day afterwards. He could have taken it."

"Then it's settled," Taj said. "You both are staying with me tonight. I've got plenty of room." He looked down at Larisa. "Risa, I'm going to have a couple friends of mine come here this evening to guard you. I really don't think these guys are going to come after you again, but just as a precaution." Taj glanced at Micaela and Desiree again. "Meanwhile, this evening I'll escort the two of you to your places to grab a few belongings and then I'll take you to my house where you'll stay until I can take care of this."

Desiree looked at Micaela. "We're in good hands now. You see this is Taj's occupation." She smiled faintly. "He's a problem solver."

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That night while lying wide-awake in her bed, Desiree glanced at the clock for the hundredth time noticing that it was now after midnight. She then looked at Tobias who was sleeping peacefully curled up next to her. Thinking about her sister, Desiree sent a silent prayer that Larisa was resting well. This evening the doctors were quite positive about a full recovery. More than likely, Larisa would be in the hospital for at least two weeks, but it appeared that she would be just fine.

Turning on her side facing Tobias, Desiree's thoughts drifted on to Piper. She had moved from Taj's house into her own apartment nearly three weeks ago, so Taj and Leroy were the only ones living there now. Desiree softly smiled as she thought of Taj's little brother. Earlier that evening, he'd offered to fluff her pillows, tuck her in...everything but do the actual sleeping for Desiree. Leroy did not attempt to hide it. He had a huge crush on her, which Desiree found endearing.

The strawberry-blonde glanced at the clock again. It was 12:24 now. Leroy, Micaela, and Dante

were probably all fast asleep by now. Leroy was in his own room while Micaela and her son shared one. Taj most likely was not at home. After taking them to their homes to pick up a few belongings (Desiree picked up Tobias as well), Taj dropped Micaela and Desiree at his home, informing the women to make themselves at home. He explained that he and some other people, whom he would not give names to, were going to locate Clint. However, he neglected to mention what would take place if they were successful in doing so. Whatever they were going to do, Taj specifically asked Larisa not to tell the police what she told them that afternoon about those that attacked her. She was to pretend that she could not remember anything. Desiree wondered what Taj and his crew would do, but part of her would rather remain clueless.

Having an idea, Desiree pushed the covers back before getting out of the bed. Tobias opened one eye looking at her before closing it and going back to sleep. Standing up, Desiree slipped her feet into her slippers and put her robe on, tying the straps as she walked towards the door. Opening it, she walked down the hall quietly and headed towards the stairs on her way to the kitchen to get a cup of warm milk, hoping that it would work in helping her to get to sleep.

As Desiree reached the bottom of the stairs, she spied Micaela sitting on the couch watching television. At least she hoped that it was Micaela, because all she could see was the back of the person's head and it was dark except for the glow emanating from the television screen. Quietly tiptoeing towards the couch, Desiree softly called out the woman's name. Looking over her shoulder, Micaela smiled as she watched Desiree approach the couch and take a seat next to her.

"Hey, what are you doing up?" Desiree asked as she tucked one leg underneath her, glancing at the television where an infomercial was currently on. "Can't sleep?"

Micaela shook her head. "Nope." She pointed at the television with the remote control. "I'm thinking about buying these knives. They showed one of the knives cutting through a brick. And they said that I better act now 'cause this is a once in a lifetime deal and that you can't and never will be able to find these special knives in any store."

Desiree laughed.

Micaela joined in as she reached over and switched on a lamp before turning the television off. She turned so that she was facing Desiree. "You can't sleep either?"

"No, I can't. My mind won't allow me to settle down."

The Latina nodded. "Mine either. I keep thinking about Larisa lying in that hospital bed and how if it weren't for me that she wouldn't be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Micaela went on, "that it's my fault. It's my fault that she almost lost her life." Tears formed in her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away. Micaela figured that if she had never tried to take Clint's life three years ago that he never would have came after her and ultimately almost kill her friend. She blamed herself because she deemed what she did wrong, although

Clint was a sinister man. Who was she to decide when his life should be ended?

"Mickey," Desiree said softly as she pulled the woman into an embrace. Micaela tightly wrapped her arms around the smaller woman as she rested her cheek on her shoulder. Desiree began to rock her gently as she said, "I believe that everything happens for a reason and this is not your fault. You did what you thought you had to do. In your place, a lot of people, myself included, might have done the same thing if there were no alternative." She pulled back so that she could look into Micaela's eyes. "You were trying to protect the life of your unborn child, which is what every mother is supposed to do. Who knows? If you had done differently, perhaps that precious little boy of yours wouldn't be here today. You didn't make Clint and his men break into your home and attack Larisa. Please don't blame yourself for this. No one else does."

Smiling softly at her, Micaela said, "You are indeed an angel Desiree." Raising her hand, Micaela brushed it across the other woman's cheek.

Desiree returned the smile as a small blush appeared on her cheeks. Before she knew what she was doing, Desiree found herself leaning towards Micaela and pressing her lips against hers softly. A little surprised at first, the Latina returned the kiss, both of her arms going around Desiree's waist, gently pulling her closer. Desiree touched the tip of her tongue to Micaela's lips, silently asking permission to enter. Her lips parting, the Latina moaned as Desiree's tongue slipped into her mouth searching for her own. Their tongues intertwined as the women's hands began to wander on each other's body. Both wondered what they were doing, but they found themselves unable to stop. They craved this contact and it felt so exquisite.

Breaking the kiss, Desiree stood up, taking Micaela's hand in hers. The Latina stood and Desiree led her towards the stairs after switching off the lamp. They held hands the whole way to Desiree's bedroom. Tobias scurried past them out the door as the two women entered. As the door closed behind them, the strawberry-blonde sought out Micaela's lips again as the other woman loosened the straps of her robe before pulling it down her arms and off of her body. Micaela wrapped her arms around Desiree's body again, feeling her warmth now without the robe in the way. Her hands slid down until she was cupping the smaller woman's rear, squeezing her firm cheeks gently. Desiree moaned as she did so, her lips keeping contact with Micaela's.

"I've wanted you since the first time I laid eyes on you," Micaela softly admitted against Desiree's lips. Her hands slipped under the short nightshirt that the younger woman wore, warm palms gliding up the back of Desiree's thighs until they reached her rear again, squeezing and kneading her cheeks.

Taking a step back, Desiree crossed her arms over herself and in one easy motion pulled the nightshirt over her head before tossing it across the room as she kicked her slippers off. She stood there in front of Micaela wearing only a pair of dark blue french-cut silk panties. The Latina's eyes roamed up and down Desiree's beautiful body, spending more time on her full high breasts with their rosy tips. Micaela felt a dampness forming in the crotch of her underwear as she began to strip out of her own clothes. Discarding her flannel pajama bottoms, panties, T-shirt, and socks Micaela took Desiree's hand and led her towards the bed where Desiree laid

down on her back. She tried not to think about the possible consequences of this happening, only feel as she felt Micaela's lips on her neck, gently sucking the skin between her teeth. Raising a leg, Desiree rubbed her thigh against the other woman's mound, feeling Micaela's wetness and warmth as the dark-haired woman moaned into her neck.

Kissing along Desiree's jaw and chin, Micaela captured the woman's lips in a searing kiss as she moved her center up and down Desiree's strong thigh. The strawberry-blonde sucked Micaela's tongue into her mouth as she felt the woman's fingers making contact with her own mound. Micaela's fingers rubbed up and down Desiree's outer labia eliciting low moans from her lips. Desiree's back arched as the Latina entered her slowly with two fingers, beginning to pump in and out of her at an unhurried pace. Desiree pressed her thigh against Micaela's center more as her hands slid down the woman's back and cupped her derriere as it moved back and forth. Using her thumb, Micaela flicked it over Desiree's clitoris, causing the smaller woman to jump beneath her at the pleasure it produced.

Ending the kiss, blue-green eyes stared into brown ones as Desiree breathlessly said, "I want to come with you Mickey."

"Then let's do it together sweetheart," the Latina whispered before leaning down and tenderly kissing Desiree's lips as her digits plunged deep within the woman while she moved her mound along Desiree's thigh, the friction sending waves of pleasure through Micaela's body.

Soon, both women felt themselves nearing the edge as their imminent climaxes drew closer and closer. Micaela's fingers pumped in and out of Desiree faster and harder as she ground her mound onto the woman's thigh. Both began to come as moans of ecstasy filled the room. They called out each other's name as their overheated bodies moved against one another.

After lying on top of her for a few minutes, Micaela gently slipped her fingers out of the woman before moving so that she was lying next to her. Wrapping both of her arms around Desiree, the Latina pulled her closer. Desiree rested her cheek against Micaela's chest, feeling the woman's rapid heartbeat beneath. She listened as it slowed until it reached normal speed while Micaela quietly stroked up and down her back. Desiree's eyelids began to grow heavy and soon she drifted into Morpheus' realm. Micaela was soon to join her there.

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Hearing an insistent knock on the door, Desiree quickly awoke from a deep sleep, her head snapping towards the closed bedroom door. She heard Taj tell her to get up in jovial tones. In fact, he said, "Rise and shine little one." Letting out a long yawn, Desiree sat up in the bed as she ran a hand through her messy hair. Looking down at herself, she noticed that she was completely naked as thoughts of last night ran through her mind. She had sex with Micaela, who was the woman that her sister was falling for. Desiree felt the guilt due to her actions. What had gotten into her?

Glancing around the bed and the room, she found that she was the only one there. Micaela must have slipped away earlier. Desiree wondered what Micaela was feeling as she got out of the bed, searching the room for her nightshirt and underwear. Minutes later she was dressed and tying the

straps of her robe before leaving the room to make a pit stop at the bathroom to wash up and relieve herself.

Desiree heard whistling coming from the dining room as she came down the stairs. She smiled as she saw Taj putting platters of food on the dining room table while he whistled a little tune. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, Taj looked her way and smiled brightly at the woman.

"Good morning little one," he said, motioning her to come over and take a seat. Desiree said hello back as she walked towards the table. She thanked Taj as he did the gentlemanly thing by pulling a chair out for her. "You're welcome," he said warmly as he placed a cup of steaming coffee in front of her. "Did you sleep well?" Taj asked as he leaned against the table, studying Desiree's face curiously.

She nodded as she picked up the coffee and took a few tiny sips before putting it back down on her place mat. "Yes, I did once I got to sleep."

"And how was that exactly?" Taj grinned at her.

Raising an eyebrow, Desiree was about to say something when she and Taj heard footsteps. They looked towards the stairs to see Leroy, Micaela, and Dante walking down the stairs. Actually, it was more like trudging. All three still looked sleepy after having been gotten out of bed at six-thirty in the morning. Taj greeted them all with a cheery good morning and a smile. Desiree smiled at them, doing her best not to look sheepish when her eyes fell upon Micaela. The older woman smiled at her, though there was nothing sheepish, shy, or guilty about it. Though, Desiree figured that Micaela had nothing to feel guilty about. It was not as if Desiree was still seeing Piper, and Micaela as far as she knew, had no idea about Larisa's feelings towards her.

Nearing the table, Micaela leaned down and placed a tender kiss on Desiree's cheek, missing the blush that appeared as she turned to put Dante in a chair that Taj had put a plump pillow in so that the toddler could reach the table easily. Soon, everyone had taken their seat and was beginning to fill their plates, Micaela making both hers and her son's.

"This all looks terrific Taj," Micaela said as she added eggs with bits of ham and melted cheese in them onto her plate and Dante's.

"Taj is an awesome cook," Desiree remarked as she smiled over to him. He winked in return, that grin from earlier reappearing for a moment. Desiree pretended as though she did not see it. "You seem like you're in a happy mood," Desiree directed the statement towards Taj. "What happened last night? Were you able to find who you were looking for?"

He nodded as he took a long swallow of orange juice. "Mission accomplished. You and Micaela can go home today if you like. There is no..." Taj glanced at the young Dante as he cautiously chose his words. "There is nothing to be alarmed over."

"That's it?" Desiree asked. "It's over?"

Taj nodded again. "That's right. It's over." He smiled at her. "I did my job. My guys and I solved the problem. Let's just say that you won't have anymore infestations, because the roaches have been exterminated."

Both Micaela and Larisa audibly gasped. Leroy looked at his older brother in shock as his fork clanked loudly on the plate. Taj glanced at the three of them while Dante did the same curiously, wondering what was wrong. He also wondered why Taj had exterminated their apartment when he and his mother did not have any roaches. There were hardly even any spiders, which he thought was a bummer since he was fascinated with the creepy crawlers.

"You exterminated the roaches?" Micaela quietly asked.

Taj slowly nodded. "Though it doesn't have to be in the way that you probably think."

"In what way is it?" Desiree asked.

The Jamaican man picked up a slice of bacon and took a bite of it. "Don't worry about it. Just be comforted by the fact that the problem has been taken care of."

"It's never going to bother us again?" Micaela inquired.

Taj looked straight at her. "Never."

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After having visited with her sister the whole day, Desiree was about to get into her car to go home when she spotted Micaela getting into her own car. Leaving Dante with the baby-sitter, Micaela had arrived at the hospital about two hours ago to spend some time with Larisa. She and Desiree had barely said a word to each other during that whole visit.

Calling out the woman's name, Desiree then jogged over to Micaela's car, saying hello as she arrived.

"Hello yourself," Micaela returned as she leaned against her car. "How are you doing?"

"I'm hanging in there. What about you?" Desiree shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

"Same here." The Latina smiled at her, knowing that something was on her mind. "This is about last night, isn't it?"

Desiree nodded as she chose to look down at her sneakers. "I...I don't..."

"Desi," Micaela called, causing the woman to look up at her. "It's all right. You don't owe me

any explanation. What happened, happened. I will always cherish our night together but it's fine if you don't want history to ever repeat itself." She shrugged. "You were lonely and so was I. I think in a way we helped each other. We found solace with each other even if it was only for one night," Micaela paused. "It was really nice."

The strawberry-blonde smiled. "Yeah, it was pretty nice." She glanced back at her car. "Well I guess I better head on home," she said turning back to Micaela. "You drive safely Mickey."

Micaela took a deep breath while realizing that she wasn't ready for this woman to leave just yet. *Of all the women in the world, I fall for one that is in love with someone else. Cupid should be fired.* "You too Desi." She watched as Desiree turned around and started to leave. The woman was able to take three steps towards her car when she faintly heard Micaela ask, "May I have one last kiss?"

Smiling softly, Desiree turned back around and walked up to Micaela. Removing her hands from her pockets, she reached up to cup Micaela's cheeks. Leaning in, Desiree tenderly pressed her lips to the Latina's as their eyes closed. Micaela's arms encircled the other woman's waist as she languidly traced Desiree's lips with her tongue. Parting her lips, Desiree coaxed Micaela's tongue into her mouth, chasing it with her own. They held the kiss until needing air became a definite requirement. After ending it, the two tenderly smiled at each other.

"Goodnight sweetie," Micaela softly said before opening her car door and getting inside.

Reaching out, Desiree closed the door after the other woman was settled in the driver's seat. "Goodnight Mickey."

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Tucking Larisa into the bed, Desiree asked her sister if she could get her anything. When Larisa shook her head, the strawberry-blonde leaned down and hugged her gently. She smiled as Larisa wrapped her arms around her neck, returning the hug. Straightening, Desiree pushed her sister's wheelchair next to bed, warning Larisa not to get out of the bed without calling her first. The woman promised that she wouldn't as she happily snuggled beneath the covers. It felt wonderful not to be in the hospital anymore. Spending nearly three weeks there was more than enough. Larisa was overjoyed when the doctor informed her that she could be released today.

Turning her head to the right, she looked at the wheelchair next to her bed. Her goal now was to start walking again. If she had merely lost one kneecap then she would only have to use crutches or a cane, but since both were removed, Larisa had to get around in a wheelchair for the time being. It was going to be a real pain using the thing, but Larisa told herself that it was only temporary. She could not wait to start physical therapy.

"It's good to have you home," Desiree said as she brushed a strand of hair out of her sister's face.

"It's good to be home," Larisa replied, her jaw still hurting when she spoke. She tried not to open her mouth too wide.

Desiree smiled as she switched off the lamp and headed for the door. "Goodnight Risa," she softly said. "Have sweet dreams."

Quietly closing the door behind her, Desiree walked across the living room to her bedroom. When she entered, she began to remove her clothes before putting on a pair of shorts and an old T-shirt to sleep in. After making a trip to the bathroom to brush her teeth, Desiree got in the bed. She was alone tonight since Tobias had decided to sleep on the living room couch. Looking at the other side of the bed, Desiree felt a deep ache within her that it was empty. Not of Tobias, though she loved him dearly, but of Piper. It appeared that instead of the pain and loss lessening as the days went by, hers only seemed to increase. Desiree missed gazing into those baby blues and having those powerful arms around her.

Glancing at the top drawer of her nightstand, Desiree sat up in the bed. Reaching over, she opened it and removed a bottle of whiskey. She simply held the bottle in her hand as she stared at it for Desiree did not know how long. Finally, she twisted off the cap before raising the bottle to her lips, taking a few swigs. Desiree closed her eyes as the alcohol slid down her throat. She hoped that it would numb the pain, even if it were just temporary. Screwing the top back on, Desiree placed it back in her drawer before she turned out the light and lay back down in the bed. Closing her eyes, she began to drift off with thoughts of Piper running through her mind.

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Propping up pillows behind her head, Piper stretched out in her bed as she turned on the television, beginning to switch the channels. She had worked overtime and it had been a tiring evening at the restaurant, so all she wanted to do now was relax. Stopping on a talk show, she watched as a young woman wearing a skirt that was three times too small yelled at her twin sister who was currently sleeping with her husband and possibly pregnant with his baby. Piper laughed as she shook her head, wondering why some people chose to come on television with these outrageous confrontations.

As a commercial came on, Piper reached toward the nightstand where an airline ticket lay. Picking it up, she looked at it while deep in thought. In five days, she was to leave for Florida where she would start her new life. With Andrea's help, she had come to the decision to leave California, because there was nothing for her here. Not anymore. Everything was settled. Andrea had a cousin named Lindsay, who lived in Tampa, Florida. She had been looking for a roommate. After getting the phone number from Andrea, Piper had gotten in touch with her cousin. They talked on the phone for nearly half an hour and it was decided that she and Piper would become roommates.

Where she would be living was close to the restaurant that she would be working at as a chef. Though Piper liked where she was currently working, she had to admit that it would be worth her while to take the other job. The pay and benefits were better, it was in another state, one which she had always wanted to visit, and since she would have a roommate, Piper could save even more money that she would someday use to start a restaurant of her very own.

Five days and then she would attempt to put this all behind her, though Piper knew that she would never be able to forget the short time that she shared with Desiree. The younger woman was forever branded on her mind. Putting the airline ticket down, Piper reached for the remote and switched off the television, having had enough of the talk show. Deciding to listen to some music for a while, she turned her clock radio on. Turning off the light, she settled back on the bed and began to listen to a song playing. Seconds later it ended and another one that Piper recognized as *I'm Wishing On a Star*, began to play.

"What a perfect song to have playing right now," she said aloud to herself as she closed her eyes. She wished that Desiree were with her at this very moment.

*I'm wishing on a star  
To follow where you are  
I'm wishing on a dream  
To follow what it means*

Hearing the bed faintly creak, as there was pressure put on it, Piper opened her eyes to see Desiree hovering over her on her hands and knees. Piper smiled up at the woman as though she fully expected her to be there. Sitting up, she started to say something when Desiree pressed two fingers to her lips. Keeping her mouth shut, Piper closed her eyes as the other woman leaned in, replacing her fingers with her lips.

*And I wish on all the rainbows that I've seen  
I wish on all the people who've really dreamed  
And I wishing on tomorrow praying it'll come  
And I'm wishing on all the loving we've ever done*

*I never thought I'd see  
A time when you would be  
So far away from home  
So far away from me*

The kissing seemed to last endlessly before Piper broke away, gazing at the woman before her. She watched as Desiree unbuttoned the thigh length shirt that she was wearing and shrugged out of it. This left her completely naked and Piper took her all in. Desiree was absolutely breathtaking. The dark-haired woman quickly shucked her boxers before she got to her knees, mirroring the strawberry-blonde's position. Desiree helped Piper out of her tank top before she leaned down and took one of the woman's nipples into her mouth, beginning to lightly suck, causing Piper to let out a throaty moan.

*Just think of all the moments that we've spent  
I just can't let you go  
For me you were meant  
And I didn't mean to hurt you  
But I know  
That in the game of love you reap what you sow*

*I feel it's time we should make up baby  
I feel it's time for us to get back together  
Make the best of things oh baby  
When were together  
Whether or never*

Moving her mouth to Piper's other breast, Desiree gently pushed the woman back until Piper was once again lying down on her back. As Desiree began to suckle on her lover's nipple, Piper arched her back letting out another moan, putting a hand on the back of Desiree's head. The strawberry-blonde gently tugged at the nipple with the edge of her teeth as she flicked a thumb across Piper's other tip.

Leaving Piper's breasts, Desiree started to slowly kiss her way down the woman's body. Piper's breathing increased as she nearly squirmed with anticipation. Desiree's soft warm lips and the way she trailed the tip of her tongue along the older woman's skin were giving Piper goosebumps. It felt incredible.

*And I wish on all the rainbows that I've seen  
I wish on all the people we've ever greeted  
And I'm hoping on all the days to come and days to go  
And I'm hoping on days of loving you so*

*I'm wishing on a star  
Follow where you are  
I'm wishing on a star  
Ooooh  
And I wish on all the rainbows that I've seen  
I'm wishing on a star  
To follow where you are...*

Reaching Piper's center, Desiree winked up at the woman as she placed soft kisses on the woman's dark curls. Piper squirmed on the bed as the amount of her wetness doubled. She felt as though she were on fire. Piper shuddered as Desiree lightly ran her tongue along her opening before starting to move up the woman's body, nipping and kissing on her way. Making her way to Piper's lips, Desiree kissed her passionately, darting her tongue in and out of her mouth as she pressed her body to the one beneath her.

Ending the kiss, Desiree sat up and scooted forward until her mound was hovering over Piper's mouth. As the blue-eyed woman stuck her tongue out to taste her, Desiree raised her body so that Piper would miss. The smaller woman grinned and Piper found herself grinning back as the woman turned around to face the opposite direction with her mound over Piper's mouth again. Desiree then slid down her lover's body until her mouth was directly above Piper's center. She slowly entered with her tongue, causing Piper to let out a moan before she slipped her own tongue into Desiree while she rested her hands on the smaller woman's derriere, pressing Desiree into her more. Piper knew that it would not take long before she came as Desiree's tongue found

her hardened nub and started to suck on it. She in the turn did the same.

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Desiree hurriedly pumped her fingers in and out of herself as she began to experience the impending orgasm. She plunged her fingers deep within her center as she moaned, beads of sweat covering her entire body. "Ooooh, Piper gods!" she screamed as pleasure soared through her. Desiree began to thrash on the bed as she came, imagining that the dark-haired woman was with her right now.

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"Aaah, baby I love you!" Piper called out she as pressed her fingers against her clitoris. Her heart was hammering beneath her chest as she came hard and fast while imagining that Desiree's tongue was deep inside of her. Piper rocked her hips back and forth, as a low moan escaped her lips.

Minutes later Piper's breathing slowed as she opened her eyes and glanced around the room. As she had suspected, no one was there but her. She had no idea that her imagination was so vivid. Piper sighed as she turned over onto her stomach, wrapping her arms tightly around her pillows. Resting her cheek on the pillow her eyes made contact with the phone. She had to hear her voice one more time.

Sitting up, Piper switched on the light before picking up the phone and punching Desiree's number into the keypad. The phone rang a couple of times before it was picked up. Desiree's voice sounded slightly breathless as she said hello. Wrapping a hand around the telephone cord tightly, Piper closed her eyes as she listened to that voice, knowing that she would and could never forget it. Desiree repeated the greeting but Piper said nothing. She had to bite her lower lip to keep from doing so. The other woman waited a few seconds before she hung up the phone, leaving Piper listening to the dial tone.

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Curling underneath the covers, Desiree lay on her side as she stared at the phone. Instinctively, she knew that the caller was Piper. It had to be. Part of her wanted to call the woman back but Desiree refrained from doing so. Closing her eyes, Desiree soon fell back asleep, wondering if she would wake up again from another erotic fantasy about Piper.

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Finishing the next chapter of her book, Desiree saved it before shutting her computer down. She glanced at the clock and noted the time. Desiree nodded, very pleased with herself. It had taken her a little over an hour to complete six pages, which was not bad at all.

Deciding to fix herself a snack, Desiree stood up and stretched. Since it was cold today and was pouring rain, a cup of hot tea along with a bowl of chicken noodle soup and sandwich sounded good. She turned to walk out of her bedroom when the phone began to ring. Jaunting over to it, she picked the phone up and said hello. It was Taj.

"Hey little one," he said. "I started not to do this, but there is something you should know about."

He sounded as though he were in hurry. "What's that?"

"She'd kill me if she found out that I told you, but oh well. I'm willing to take that chance. Piper is on her way to Florida today. She's moving there."

"Florida?" Desiree sat down heavily on the bed. Piper was leaving?

"Yes, Florida. I just thought you might want to know. You might also want to know that her plane departs at two-thirty this afternoon at gate seven."

Desiree glanced at her clock again. It was nearly two o'clock now. Could she make it in time to LAX by two-thirty? And was she actually going to go? "Thank...thank you for telling me Taj," she said.

"You're welcome little one. I'll let you go now."

He hung up the phone before she could say anything more. Quickly making up her mind, Desiree stood up and looked around the room for something to put on. She couldn't go out wearing nothing but a flannel shirt. Well, she could but then she would most likely be arrested for indecent exposure before she could successfully arrive at gate seven. Hurrying over to her closet she opened it and found a pair of blue jeans on a hanger. Snatching the pants off of the hanger, Desiree put them on in record time before slipping into a pair of sneakers.

Grabbing her keys off of the desk, she ran out of the room and across the living room. Knocking on Larisa's door, she waited until the woman granted her access before entering. Larisa was sitting up in the bed doing a crossword puzzle.

"Hon, I'm going to the airport to stop a plane," Desiree quickly explained as her sister stared at her quizzically. "I'll be back soon. You think you'll be all right by yourself for an hour or so?"

Larisa nodded. "Sure. I'll be just fine. But what do you mean that you're going to stop a plane?"

Desiree ran over to the bed and kissed Larisa on the cheek as she smiled. "I'll explain it all when I get back 'kay? I really must run now."

Larisa smiled back, though she wondered what was going on. She had a feeling that this had something to do with Piper. "Well...go get your woman sis."

The strawberry-blonde looked at Larisa in surprise before a grin spread across her lips. "I fully intend to."

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Managing to locate a parking space, Desiree pulled her Honda into it before jumping out of the car and running towards the entrance of LAX. The raindrops fell down upon her, but the young

woman did not notice as she ran as fast as she could. Heading into the huge airport, she found out where gate seven was and ran towards it. Other people stared at her, most thinking that she had a plane to catch and was late getting to her gate.

Reaching gate seven, Desiree groaned as she noticed that the plane with Piper in it was pulling away. She placed her palms against the glass and watched as it left the gate. Coming to a decision, Desiree ran outside, heading in the direction of the plane. She called out Piper's name, although she knew that the woman would never be able to hear her. She had a feeling that she would not be able to catch up to the plane, but Desiree knew that she would always hate herself if she did not at least attempt to.

Though hearing people yelling at her to stop, Desiree kept going. She sighed in relief as the plane stopped moving as she continued to run towards it while wildly waving her hands in the air and calling Piper's name, her throat beginning to ache with the effort. Hearing hurried footsteps behind her, Desiree ran even harder to catch up to the plane. She was running towards her life...towards the love of her life. Just as Desiree drew next to the plane, two men grabbed her by her arms, trying to pull her back. Desiree tried to fight them off, but the men were too strong. Effortlessly picking her up, they began to carry her towards the building.

"All right, all right!" Desiree yelled to the men in irritation. "I'll walk."

They put Desiree down on her feet before beginning to walk, one on either side of her as they watched her cautiously to make sure that she would not bolt towards the plane. One of the men asked Desiree what her problem was. When she did not give any sort of reply, he repeated his question a bit louder.

"I was trying to stop someone from walking out of my life forever," she stated softly as she glanced at both men. "I apologize for what I just did, but I had my reasons."

"That was a very dangerous move Ma'am."

Desiree nodded. "Yes I realize that."

As they entered the building where people were talking in small groups after having just watched the obviously psychotic young woman run after a plane, the two men continued to tell Desiree how what she did was wrong. She nodded as they talked, not really listening to a word they said. All she wanted to do now was go home and have a good cry. They finally ended their reprimanding by asking Desiree if she was going to be all right. Both men could tell that the young woman was distraught. The strawberry-blonde nodded, assuring them that she was going to just fine, though Desiree did not actually know if the reply was true. Would she be all right now that Piper had walked out of her life, seemingly for good?

When the men allowed her to go, Desiree slowly began to walk back in the direction she had come earlier. Her clothes were nearly soaked through but the young woman still did not notice as she began to feel that familiar ache. Running a hand through her wet hair, Desiree finally exited the airport and walked towards where her car was parked as the rain continued to pour. As she

came upon the lot where the Honda was, she noticed a figure leaning against her car. Her eyes squinted as she looked at the figure curiously. Desiree's pace suddenly sped up, as did the beating of her heart. Could it be? No, it couldn't. Could it?

Coming closer, Desiree had her answer. It *was* her. Desiree did not know how, but Piper was leaning against her car at this very moment. Her face lit up as she began to smile. Desiree stopped walking when she was within twenty feet of the figure and just stared in amazement.

"What can I say?" Piper shrugged as she grinned at Desiree. "I'm a sucker for a girl that chases after an airplane." Standing upright, she opened her arms wide. "C'mon Dino. You know you wanna."

Desiree squealed in delight as she ran towards Piper. Reaching her, she jumped into the woman's arms. Both laughed as Piper swung her around in circles before putting Desiree back down on her feet. Cupping the younger woman's cheeks, Piper offered her a warm smile before leaning down and gently capturing Desiree's lips with her own in a tender yet passionate kiss.

"How did you know I was here?" Desiree asked as the kiss ended. She kept her arms around Piper's neck, both of them completely wet as fat raindrops continued to fall on them.

Piper grinned. "Well I happened to glance out of my window and see a woman who looked just like you. I knew then that I had to get off the plane, so I told the pilot that you were my crazy cousin and that I had to help you to get back to the asylum before they knew you were missing," she teased.

Desiree gently slapped her on the arm though she had a broad smile on her face. "Ha ha. Very funny. And how did you get to my car?"

"I walked."

Desiree smirked.

Piper laughed. "I found your car by sheer luck. I just kept searching the rows until I did. It was actually very easy. I was surprised that you hadn't left yet." Leaning down, she kissed Desiree again. "Anyway, the important thing is that I caught you before you left and this time I don't plan on ever letting you go."

Desiree smiled up at her dreamily. "You'll keep me forever?"

"If you'll allow me to."

"I'm yours," Desiree replied.

Piper smiled. "And I'm yours baby. I love you."

The strawberry-blonde had tears of joy strolling down her cheeks along with the raindrops. It

was difficult to tell which was which. "I love you too Piper."

Piper and Desiree shared another tender kiss as they embraced one another. Both were extremely happy to be together again and this time they silently vowed that it would last for eternity.

*~The End~*

**Okay, that's all for now folks. Hope ya'll enjoyed. There is going to be a sequel, though I know it's taking an awfully long time. However, I'm going to get working on it, so be on the lookout if you care to read further adventures starring Piper and Desiree. Thanks for reading! ;-)**

**~ Ambrosia ~ May 28, 2003**

**The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive**

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