

~ Hello Stranger ~

by Ambrosia

The first image shown to readers. The first two images shown to readers. The first two images shown to readers. The first two images shown to readers.

Disclaimers: Xena and Gabrielle belong to Universal (or someone else). However, everyone else in this story belongs to me.

Sexual Situations: Nothing R-rated happens. Though if the thought of a couple of gals gettin' together bothers you, then please read something else.

Strong Language: Don't grab that bar of soap just yet. There's not *that* much ya know. On a scale of 1-10 I'd rate it a 5.

Violence: There is some, but it's mostly spoken of not acted out.

Feedback: Wanna send me some? You may do so at SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thanks a million!

"I feel like I just wasted \$250."

"That's a peculiar response to the question 'how are you doing today'." A ghost of a smile on her lips, she leaned back in her comfortable leather chair, regarding the young woman sitting before her. "Why?"

"Why do I feel like I just wasted \$250 or why did I give that response instead of saying the usual 'fine and you'?"

"All of the above."

"I feel like I wasted \$250 because I don't need to be here. I could put that money to better use, like shopping or throwing it in a garbage can. And I gave that response because I just thought you needed to know that I don't need to be here--that I don't require your help."

"Why don't you?"

"Tell me, do you shrinks have a quota of whys to ask per day? Like 30 per patient? That means you have exactly 56 more minutes to squeeze in 28 more whys. The way I figure, that's two a minute." To say that she was annoyed to be sitting in front of Dr. Anne Perkins was an understatement.

The curly haired brunette's smile increased with amusement. "I see that someone is good with mathematics." Her patient's frown didn't deter her smile. "Why don't we start over? How are you

today?" After a slight pause she added, "By the way I do believe that's three now. I hope you're keeping score because I wouldn't want to go over or have too little." The frown deepened.

"I'm fine considering."

"Considering what?"

"Considering that my parents bulldozed me into coming here. Considering that I lost my lover almost a year ago and no one understands. No one gives a damn." Noticing a small blue stress relief ball on the doctor's desk, she grabbed it, proceeding to squeeze the life out of it.

"Up until last June you were in a coma, correct?"

"Sort of. The proper name is catatonic schizophrenia."

"For six years." A nod was Dr. Perkins' only confirmation. "And tell me what you think happened during that time."

"I don't think it happened. I *know*."

"Okay. Tell me what you *know*."

Snorting, Hannah swiftly tossed the ball back and forth between her hands. "Why? I'm sure the parental units already filled you in."

"I want to hear it from you." There was no response from her newest patient. "Hannah stop playing with the ball and please look at me." Almost begrudgingly, the young woman lifted her eyes to meet those of the doctor as she placed the stress relief ball back where she'd found it. "That's better. Now talk to me about these six years."

"My parents want me to forget them. They want you to make me forget. Though, I won't forget. I never will. Those were the best years of my life. The nineteen years preceding them couldn't even come close."

"Go on."

"While I was in a catatonic state here in the 21st century, I was actually reliving a past life. My past life with a woman named Xena. We went around fighting for the greater good, trying to right wrongs...help those who could not help themselves. It all ended when she died in Japa. My last memory is being on a boat holding a small jar filled with her ashes...and then I regained consciousness here." Tears in her eyes, Hannah looked down at her feet. "I lost her and I feel so empty now. I know that was really over 2,000 years ago but it feels like it just happened...like I just lost her. That was another me...another time...but it was still me." Looking at Dr. Perkins, tears rolled down her cheeks. "It's *still* me and no one understands. They think it was just my imagination but it wasn't. That happened...it was too damn real not to have happened. I'm not a liar and I'm not crazy."

"There's not a doubt in my mind that you're being truthful and I don't think you're crazy."

"You believe me?" Hannah's expression was skeptical. Everyone else aware of her story thought it was just that--a story. Something that a mentally ill young woman trapped in unconsciousness for six years had dreamed up. There was no such thing as reincarnation her parents and the doctor who looked after her for six years had stated several times during the past year. Well Hannah knew the truth.

Tapping the pen she held against her cheek, Dr. Perkins thought of the best way to respond. "I believe that you believe that this happened."

Any hope that Hannah might have had faded away. "In other words you're like everyone else. So, this makes me wonder why I'm wasting my time. I realize that this sounds unbelievable but if you were inside my head you would know that what I'm saying is the truth. My name was Gabrielle and I lived in Ancient Greece where I fought side by side with my partner in more ways than one--Xena. You and everyone else don't believe that then fine. But I'll be damned if I pretend that it didn't occur just to please you all."

"I don't want you to pretend Hannah."

"There's not one good reason for me to be here." Standing, Hannah headed toward the door leading out of Dr. Perkins' office.

"Where are you going?"

Her hand on the knob, the small blonde glanced toward the doctor. "I'm leaving and I won't be back. I don't care what my parents say."

"Why?"

Hannah humorlessly chuckled. "Why won't I be back or why don't I care what my parents say?"

"This time just the first one."

Hannah smirked. "Because I feel like I just wasted \$250." Not giving the doctor an opportunity to respond, she left the office.

Tucked away in her room, Hannah ignored the persistent knocking on her door as she continued sketching. Having been working on her drawing for the past three hours, she was almost done. As the knocking increased so did the volume on her stereo. Soon her parents gave in and just opened her door. Hannah made a mental note to purchase a lock tomorrow.

Continuing to ignore them, she kept her eyes on the large poster board in her lap, her pencil

moving back and forth putting the final touches on it. She heard footsteps moving toward the stereo and turning it down far enough that she could barely make out the lyrics.

"Hannah, I know you heard us," her mother frustratingly declared. She didn't comment. "Don't you have something that needs to be done?"

"I'm doing what needs to be done," the younger woman quietly replied while erasing a tiny error. Just as she was about to press her lead against the thick paper again, it was taken out of her hands. Not bothering to ask for it back since she didn't believe that her father would listen, Hannah merely waited for his outburst. It didn't take long.

"What is the meaning of this?" He asked, glaring at the sketch in his hands. Moving toward him, his wife stared in open-mouthed shock. On the paper was a half-dressed Hannah along with an equally half-dressed bigger woman lying on a pallet with their limbs wrapped around each other, tiny smiles on their faces. Angry green eyes bored into Hannah. "Answer me young lady!"

"I believe that you know what the meaning of it is Father. That's Xena and I on no particular evening. Together...just loving each other." She flinched as her father's arm raised a fraction before it lowered. "I won't allow you to erase my memories, no matter how much they might disgust you."

Trying to change the subject, Hannah's mother said, "Honey, you missed your appointment with Dr. Perkins."

"I didn't miss it because I never intended to go. I don't need any help."

"But you promised that you would go."

"And I did go last week. I don't need to go anymore." *I never needed to go in the first place.*

Thrusting the sketch in front of his daughter's face, her father commented, "When you draw such filth you need to talk with a psychiatrist. I won't have this in my household!" While Hannah watched, he ripped the picture in half before crumbling the separated paper in his large hands.

That was it. Hannah exploded. "And you won't have me!" Jumping up from the recliner placed in front of her window, she hurried toward her walk-in closet retrieving her suitcase. Opening it, she threw various clothing inside not caring if they wrinkled. In Ancient Greece, she didn't have an iron and she'd survived just fine. She could do the same now.

"What are you doing?" Her mother asked her brow furrowed with worry.

"I'm packing and then I'm getting the hell out of your household! I don't need this! I'm 26 years old and I won't continue allowing you two to boss me around. I've had enough."

"Honey, you need our help whether you realize it or not. Mentally you are still a teenager. You need our guidance."

Deciding that she had packed sufficient clothing, Hannah closed the suitcase and zipped it up. She required toiletries but she could always purchase those later. Glaring at the woman who would never win a mother of the year award, Hannah picked up the suitcase, gripping the handle tighter than what was necessary. "You have no clue what I am and what I need." She glanced between the two people who had given her life yet had never made it easy for her to live it. "I'm leaving and there isn't a thing either of you can do to stop me. I'm tired of you trying to make me feel as though I'm a nutcase. It's hurtful and exasperating."

"If you didn't behave like one--"

"Michael!" Hannah's mother interjected, giving her husband a scolding look, which he paid no attention to. "Please don't provoke her any further."

"It doesn't matter Mother. I won't have to put up with him any longer."

"Where are you going? What will you do for money? How do you intend to support yourself?" Her mother rapidly asked one question after another.

"I don't know yet. I just have to leave this house before I truly do go insane. I have some money saved up from my part-time job and I've told you both that my book is in the midst of being published." A few weeks after returning from her 2,000-year-old trip, Hannah decided to write a book based on the relationship and some of the adventures she shared with her partner. For as long as she could remember she wanted to be a journalist, but after being reacquainted with her past life, she found that being a bard was much more to her liking. Luckily, Hannah secured an agent who made a deal with an up and coming publishing company to take a chance on her book.

"You mean that twisted book about you and this fictional woman?" Hannah's father inquired in a tone filled with derision. He'd read some of it and frankly, it made his stomach churn.

The young woman glared in his direction. "I'd tell you to go screw yourself but you're my father so I'm trying my best to respect you." Michael's hand curled into a fist at his side, though he made no move toward her.

"Hannah, don't speak to your father that--"

"That's right Mother. Take his side like you always do." Hannah walked out of the bedroom, which she had grown up in, thinking that she would never return. "I'm out of here." Her mother called out to her several times yet the petite blonde kept walking, not daring to even glance over her shoulder. There was a greater chance of dancing leprechauns greeting her on the other side of the front door before she allowed her parents to see the tears.

3 months later

"Hannah I loved your book. I mean *really* loved it," the awestruck woman gushed as she thrust

her copy into the novelist's hands. "It's amazing how real your characters sound! Oh, to experience such a strong love... Anyone, who writes it so well like you do, must have it. There must be someone special in your life. Your soul mate." It sounded like a statement, but anyone with two brain cells could tell that she sought verification.

Obtaining her fan's name, Hannah began to write on the first page of the book while she answered the technically unasked question. "Now that I realize that I have a soul mate, I'm searching for them. If I keep looking I know that they'll turn up eventually." A bright smile on her face, she handed the signed novel back to the woman. "Thank you for reading Gladys."

Gladys clutched the book to her bosom. "And thank you for writing. One more thing before I leave. What makes you realize that your soul mate is out there?"

Months ago, Hannah concluded that sharing her journey to a past life with people wasn't the greatest idea (she'd yet to make a believer out of anyone), so she had learned to keep her mouth shut. If readers believed that her novel was pure fiction, then so be it. Looking up at the woman standing in front of her, Hannah came up with what she thought to be a reasonable answer.

"One day I woke up...truly woke up...and on that day I realized that anything was possible. It was on that day that I started to believe. And I do believe that a person exists who is indeed the other half of my soul. This person will complete me and I them. In that I believe."

Gladys smiled, resisting her urge to crawl across the table and hug the small novelist. "You keep on believing."

One green eye winked at her. "I shall. You make sure to do the same."

Hannah had just enough time drink a teaspoon worth of sugar-laced coffee before another copy of her popular book was placed in front of her. Picking up her pen and opening the hardback cover, she asked for a name.

"Please make it out to Michael and Rose Webster."

Her blonde head snapping up, Hannah came face to face with her parents, neither of which she had seen since the day she left home. Confused as to why they would be purchasing her book, considering they had been against it from the moment she told them that she planned on writing it, Hannah asked why they were at her Barnes & Noble book signing. Surely, they weren't intending to make a scene in front of all these people. No, that was unlike her parents. They preferred to discuss difficult issues behind closed doors.

"Isn't it obvious?" Her father asked with a benign smile on his face. "We're here to support you."

"Support me." Hannah's confusion gave way to suspicion. This couldn't be Michael Webster talking. "Why now?"

"Hannah," her mother began, "your father and I recently had a long talk and we decided that

regardless of what you say or do we will stand behind you one hundred and ten percent. Your happiness is very important to us so if this is what makes you happy then we support you. We love you Hannah. Please don't continue shutting us out of your life. We've missed out on too much already."

Since Hannah was suddenly unable to speak, Michael filled in the emptiness. "There's a café across the street. After the book signing is over why don't you join your mother and I for lunch? My treat."

The novelist nodded. "Okay." It was the best she could do.

Her father smiled, obviously pleased. "Now the book?" Michael observed as his daughter quizzically glanced at the 355 page novel laid open in front of her. "Will you sign it for us?"

Luckily, Barnes & Noble didn't have a fly infestation. Hannah's mouth was wide open. "Oh." Was she dreaming? This couldn't be real. "You really want that?"

Husband and wife shared a smile. "Of course we do," Michael said.

"We're your number one fans," Rose joyously added.

Head shaking in bewilderment, Hannah started to move her pen across the page. Her homophobic and super pretentious parents wanted a copy of her book about two women in love who dedicated their lives traveling around Ancient Greece as well as other parts of the 'known world' stopping evildoers. How surreal was that?

Upon entering the café, Hannah quickly located her parents sitting at a booth near the back. Sharing a quick hug with each, she took her seat noticing the cup filled with a steaming liquid before her.

"We took the initiative and ordered your beverage for you," her mother explained. "We remember how you used to love hot raspberry tea. Why don't you take a sip and see how it tastes?"

"Okay. Thanks." Lifting the cup, Hannah swallowed a mouthful of the faintly sweet brew. "Mm, that's good. Almost as good as Xe--" Catching herself at the last moment, Hannah smiled and then took another sip of the tea before replacing it on the matching saucer. "Almost as good as some other raspberry teas I've had in the past."

Not commenting on her slip, her parents suggested that they order. Making their selections from the menu, the trio informed their waiter of what they would be having. After he left, Michael started a conversation.

"What are your plans now?"

"Plans?"

"Yes. You finished your book, published it...now what will you do? I heard that it's doing well in sells."

Hannah nodded, remembering that one of her father's favorite topics had always been money. "Yes, it is." Pausing, she drank a bit more tea. "I'm actually working on another novel and my goal is to have it done within the next four months."

"What is this one about?" Her mother inquired. She looked interested enough, but her question seemed almost hesitant as though a part of her was afraid of her daughter's answer.

"It's a sequel to *Night & Day*." Hannah closely watched for her parent's reaction to the reply. Their expressions neutral, she couldn't tell what they were thinking. Perhaps they really were trying to change. She hoped so. Despite a few relatives whom she rarely saw, her parents were her only family. This brought on thoughts of Xena. The warrior princess had been her family for six years--her mentor, sister, best friend, and lover. There wasn't a day that went by when Hannah didn't think about her.

"Really? Wouldn't you like to branch out and try another subject? Not that *Night & Day* wasn't spectacular, but something more orthodox?" Michael inquired.

"Maybe..." Beginning to feel the slightest bit woozy, Hannah closed her eyes while several seconds passed by. Though the feeling didn't pass like she'd expected, Hannah lifted her eyelids anyway. Her parent's neutral expressions hadn't altered. Where was the concern? "Um, maybe for my next book," she finished in a voice barely above a whisper. She softly moaned while the restaurant started to spin like a merry-go-round. Hannah heard the utterances of her name but couldn't respond. And then the lights in the café began to dim until finally there was nothing but darkness.

Cracking open one eyelid, the blonde woman observed her surroundings as best she could in her stupor. It didn't take her long to assess that she was lying across the back seat of a car. Opening the other eye, she blinked several times before she could focus. It wasn't a one hundred percent focus, but it would have to do for now. There was no one in the car besides her.

Silently telling her body that it had to move, she slowly rose until she was sitting. Though a wave of nausea struck her, Hannah took a few deep breaths so that she wouldn't lose whatever contents were left over after breakfast. Where was she and why was she in this condition? Hannah surmised that she had passed out in the café, so shouldn't her parents have taken her to the hospital? Maybe this was the hospital. Maybe they just arrived and had bolted inside mere seconds ago frantically searching for a doctor to help their ill child.

Hannah raised her head until she could make out the words on the large building to the right of

the car. Alarm didn't begin to describe what she was feeling after reading and rereading the words, desperately hoping that they would change into something more pleasant. Of course, they stubbornly stood tall, proud, and bold. *I'll be damned.*

Sanitarium for the Mentally Unbalanced

Heart beating wildly, Hannah watched as her parents along with four people in long white coats headed out of the building and toward the car she sat in. They were coming for her. They wanted to put her in this sanitarium because they deemed her mentally unbalanced. Her parents were behind this? Why? Not receiving an answer to her question, Hannah realized that she had to get out of there.

She pulled on the handle to the door but of course, it was locked. Trying not to panic, the blonde hurried into the front seat and tried the driver's side door. To her chagrin, it wouldn't budge. Quickly coming up with another idea, she sat in the passenger seat and reared her right leg back before thrusting it toward the window, having to repeat three times before the glass shattered.

In her haste to get away, Hannah cut her hand on a shard of glass while climbing out of what was left of the window. Ignoring the searing pain, she managed to reach the pavement before hands clamped on to various parts of her body. Though she attempted to move, the people holding her down were much too strong. Out of the corner of an eye, Hannah could see her parents standing a few feet away, watching as someone pulled her arms behind her back, cuffing her wrists together.

Hannah thrashed from left to right, resembling a fish out of the water as she promptly burst into tears. "Let me go! Please, let me go. I don't deserve to be here!"

"Hannah, calm down. We don't want to hurt you," said one of the male doctors as he pulled a syringe from his pocket. Uncapping it, he inserted the needle into Hannah's arm, removing it within a couple of seconds.

"What did you give me?" She glanced over her shoulder at the 30 something doctor, seeing him drop the now empty syringe back into his pocket. Her eyes began to droop, the medicine working quickly.

He smiled reassuringly. "Just a little something to help relax you."

Drugged green eyes looked toward the two people responsible for this. Hannah had just enough energy left to ask them one thing. "Why?" Whether they answered or not, she couldn't be sure. She was dead to the world.

Whistling her rendition of the popular children's song *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, Brittany Sparrow strolled along a quiet hall in the hospital while playing with her yo-yo. Well actually, it wasn't her yo-yo since she planned on giving it to today's winner. Having taken one of her

brother's children to Chuck E. Cheese's last night (so Mommy and Daddy could have an evening to themselves), she traded one hundred and fifty of the tickets she won playing games for the yo-yo. Brittany deemed them tickets well spent. Every time she let the transparent toy bungee jump toward the floor, the tiny light bulbs within would flash a number of bright colors. She grinned. *Psychedelic man.*

She was just about to turn a corner when someone yelled her name. Pocketing the yo-yo, Brittany waited for Dr. Harper to catch up to her. She briefly thought about outright ignoring or pretending she hadn't heard him by continuing her walk but then decided that she didn't feel like being rude--even to Alex Harper. The man was one of her least favorite people.

"Good afternoon Brit." Lascivious eyes roamed up and down her body. "I didn't know it was possible for you to look anymore beautiful than usual, but you've accomplished it." The doctor grinned, enjoying every opportunity he had to flirt with Brittany. Though she had informed him on many occasions that she wasn't interested, Alex obviously figured that he could still charm his way into her life on more than a professional level.

Brittany glanced at her outfit--blue jeans, a simple purple short-sleeved shirt, and a pair of year and half-year-old sneakers. With the help of a purple scrunchie, her hair was tied back in a ponytail and the only makeup she wore was coconut-flavored lip balm. Yeah, she was a real fashion statement. Tyra Banks and Heidi Klum watch out! *His middle name must be bullshit.* "Something I can do for you Dr. Harper?" Brittany usually started their conversations with a polite tone and this time was no exception.

"How would you like to see an extra \$200 on your next paycheck?"

One eyebrow slowly lifted. What would she have to do in order to receive that extra two hundred bucks? Dr. Harper's response to her inquiry would decide whether she slapped him or not. "I could always use an extra two-hundred, but what would I have to do?"

"We have a new patient--a schizophrenic case. She's been here a week now and has so far refused to communicate. She goes to therapy but doesn't utter a word, she's given her medications, dutifully takes them but not so much as a thanks. She's fallen into a deep depression and I think someone as cordial as you might be able to draw her out of it. You're lead Activity Coordinator, so coordinate a plan to get her out of that room and in a participatory mood. Think you can do that?"

Brittany started nodding before Dr. Harper could finish saying 'that'. Of course, she could! Often she had been told that her skills were plentiful when it came to reaching people. Her entire life, Brittany had a knack for it, which was why she chose this line of work. She thoroughly enjoyed the creativity it afforded her and loved the patients she worked with. By the end of the day, she felt as though she had brought some joy into their sometimes chaotic lives. She knew without a doubt that they in turn brightened up *her* life.

Dr. Harper beamed. "Great. Her name is Hannah Webster and she's in Room 31." Fishing a key out of his pocket attached to a plastic tag with #31 printed on it, the doctor handed it to Brittany.

"One more thing..."

Hannah Webster. Now why did that name ring a bell? Where had she heard it before? "What's the thing?" Brittany still sounded polite but cautious too.

"You and me on a date this coming Sunday. I know you have Sunday's off so we can take advantage of that." He was wasting his charms once again. Would the man ever learn?

"No." Bluntness worked best. At least it did with normal people.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not interested in taking advantage of anything with you Dr. Harper. Besides, I'm busy on Sunday. My parents are having a bar-b-que."

"May I come? I love bar-b-que." Taking a step closer to the Activity Coordinator, he whispered, "I could lick the sauce off your fingers. You might like that. I've been told that I have a wicked tongue."

Touching the yo-yo in her pocket, Brittany wondered if she swung it at him super fast would it hurt a lot. "No."

"Why not?"

She sighed. Sometimes it was like communicating with a two-year-old. "Dr. Harper, with all due respect, I am not the least bit enticed by the idea of having a relationship with you. Please understand that when we exit the doors of SMU, I don't want us to see each other--ever. If we happened to cross paths on the street, we'd simply nod, perhaps say hello and keep on our separate ways."

Alex feigned hurt. "Ouch. That sounds so final Brit." He would undoubtedly try again. Maybe not on that day, but eventually.

Focusing on maintaining politeness, Brittany smiled at him. "It is final Dr. Harper. Now I must go. I want to stop by Hannah Webster's room before my 2 o'clock starts." Starting to walk away, she added, "See you later doctor." Though she quickly rounded the corner, she could still feel his eyes on her derriere. He must have followed her in order to look. Brittany shook her head.

He's a mix of a jerk and a pervert. Dr. Jerkvert.

She softly chuckled. *I like that.*

Arriving at Room 31, Brittany looked through the door's observation window at the small person curled up in bed with a pair of headphones covering her ears. The moment she saw the younger

woman's face, she knew why her name sounded so familiar. Having taken a trip to Barnes & Noble the night before last, Brittany spotted the novel *Night & Day* and had been compelled to purchase it even before she read the blurb. Usually it was a requisite that she know what a book was about before shelling out any money.

With fifty odd pages to go, Brittany was highly pleased with her purchase. Hannah Webster's novel had managed to touch her more deeply than any story she had ever read. Now what was such a talented young author doing in SMU? She should have been enjoying the success of her first novel. It saddened Brittany that the author was suddenly in this condition.

Well I better get in there and see what I can do. Grabbing the key from her pocket, Brittany inserted it into the lock, turning until she heard a tiny click. She knocked just to let Hannah know that someone was entering and then did so, making sure to close and lock the door behind her.

Though the Activity Coordinator introduced herself, Hannah obviously didn't feel obligated to respond. No problem, Brittany hadn't expected her to communicate so easily. Walking over to the full-sized bed, she gingerly took a seat on the edge of it while looking at the despondent yet pretty face belonging to Hannah Webster. Her eyes were closed but Brittany remembered the color of them from the author's picture on her novel. A luminous emerald green, which drew her like a magnet. She must have stared at the picture for five minutes without blinking.

Noticing the Walkman clutched in a hand partially wrapped with a white bandage; Brittany leaned toward the headphone, listening carefully. Once she recognized the song, she sat upright. "Oh, is that Dido? I love her music! She's one of my favorite female artists. Is she yours too?" No reply- not even a blink of an eyelash. Brittany might have thought she was asleep if it wasn't for the constant tapping of her sock covered foot, which most likely meant that she was trying to keep some rhythm with Dido as she sang about not surrendering. "Okay, since you didn't say no I'll assume that she is." Slight pause as the A.C. repositioned herself on the bed, drawing her legs underneath her and causing the bed to shake in the process. She witnessed a fleeting frown on Hannah's face and grinned. *Am I bugging you my dear?*

Brittany glanced at her watch. She had twenty more minutes to bug Hannah before she had to leave--then she would come back at 4 o'clock. Choosing a random topic, she proceeded to speak as though the author was truly interested in what she had to say. The more she spoke the higher the Walkman's volume increased until it was blasting in Hannah's ears. By hitting the stop button, Brittany effectively silenced Dido. Another frown passed across Hannah's face, but she held her tongue.

"Now, now. You must be careful Hannah. You don't want to rupture an eardrum. Plus I'm trying to have a conversation here. You can't hear me if the volume is too high." Just in case she had ideas to press the play button, the A.C. removed the small jack connected to the Walkman, before putting the rectangular device behind her. If Hannah wanted it back, she would have to open her eyes and get up. "Anyway, as I was saying I totally think Pepsi is much better than Coke, and I'm loving the new Pepsi Vanilla. It's just my opinion, but personally Coke's version is much too vanillaey. Yeah, I know that isn't a word, but you know what I'm getting at. Meanwhile, Pepsi Vanilla is so delightful to the palate and..."

"...and that's how you correctly milk a cow. I know because my Uncle Steve taught me how when I visited his farm when I was twelve," Brittany finished while munching on a bag of baby carrots, which were left over from her lunch earlier. She returned to Hannah's room right after her 2 o'clock class was over and had been talking non-stop for the last half-hour or so. Having accumulated the most points during the game, Dave (a rather intelligent man) had won the yo-yo. He loved it.

"Want me to tell you how to correctly pluck a chicken?" There was no comment from the captive blonde laying in bed without her Walkman and now her pillow, which had been confiscated after she attempted to smother her head with it in order to drown out the A.C.'s voice. "Okay, I will since you didn't say no." Smiling brightly, Brittany made herself comfortable on the bed. "Now I know how to do this because Uncle Steve also taught me to pluck a chicken on that same trip. Consequently, we all had fried chicken for dinner. Though it was delicious--Aunt Patty cooked it--I couldn't help but feel badly for the chicken that had relinquished its life. Anyway, first you..."

*Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream*

"What does this song that I just sang to you mean, hmm? You have any thoughts you'd like to share Hannah? No? Okay, that's alright because I have some." Having just arrived at SMU, Brittany's first stop was to check in with her silent friend. She had come to work thirty minutes early just so they could have a one-sided chat. The moment she said a cheery good morning to Hannah, she thought she heard a groan. This brought an immediate grin to Brittany's face because she considered it progress. "You see, I love whistling and whistling the tune to *Row, Row Your Boat* is something I do at least once per day, yet I've never stopped to think about its meaning. "So, what *does* it mean? Is it telling you not to take life too seriously, sit back, 'row your boat', and simply bask in the life, which you've been given?"

"In this song life is equated to a dream and what is a dream? A glimpse into another world...another place and it won't last long but hopefully you enjoy it while it last. I think we should all take this song's advice and row our boats. Especially these days because there is so much going on. How different the world could be if everyone just decided to gently row his or her boat. Are you a gentle boat rower Hannah?"

Another groan--this one louder than the first.

And then another grin--this one bigger than the first.

"I suppose that's a yes." Pause. "Hey, Hannah see if you can come up with the meaning to this song." Clearing her throat, Brittany began to sing--and not very well.

*The itsy bitsy spider
Went up the water spout
Down came the rain
And washed the spider out...*

"So then he said it's the truth, and then I said no way, and then *she* said he's not lying and I said for real? Can you believe that?" She laughed as though that was the funniest thing she ever said. Unfortunately, she was the only person in Room 31 laughing. It was Friday, Brittany's third day attempting to get Hannah to communicate. She had one more day to try before her two days off. Brittany had given considerable thought to visiting the author during her days off, but had yet to decide whether she would go through with it or not. Perhaps giving Hannah a 48-hour break would loosen her lips.

"So Hannah you haven't spoken much about yourself. What are your interests? What do you like to do?" Nothing but a sharp intake of breath. "Okay, I'll tell you a little about me first. Let's see..." Brittany looked toward the small blonde thoughtfully, "You already know my name and what I do. I'm 30 years old and single as of three months ago. Then I had a girlfriend but...well that's over and we don't need to get into it right now." Her reason for bringing that up, she couldn't say. "Anyway, I come from an extensive family--we have enough people at our reunions to rent out Disneyland!" The A.C. chuckled. "Alright, I know I'm exaggerating, but there are a lot of us.

I have three brothers--I'm the only girl. Through the years people have asked me if I ever wanted a sister, but I've always said no because I'm quite content with those knuckleheads." Brittany grinned, wondering if the slight upturn of Hannah's mouth was a tic or a smile. It disappeared just as soon as she took notice. "Two of them are older than me and both are married with children--my nieces and nephews are spoiled rotten by me. My younger brother doesn't have any children but he does have a sweet girlfriend whom I wish he would just propose to. I know he loves her although they have their share of problems and they've been together forever. I say why not make it official right? They're an adorable couple. I'd show you a picture if you opened your eyes."

They tightened.

"Okay. Let's talk about you then. Well *I'll* talk about you since you're refusing to. What do I know, what do I know?" Brittany tapped a finger to her chin as an idea formed. It was just crazy enough to work. "I know you're an author because I've read your book." Eyelids parted just a smidgen before quickly closing, as though they had temporarily forgotten they were on strike from looking at the Activity Coordinator. "Yeah, I finished it a couple nights ago and if you don't mind I'd like to share a bit of constructive criticism." One golden brow raised just enough for Brittany to detect it. She definitely had the author's attention. "I realize that it was your first

novel--I could have figured that out without reading the short paragraph about you underneath your picture--but it well..." the A.C. sighed dramatically, "it sucked--big time. Your characters were implausible and the plot was like blah."

Brittany's heart nearly stopped when the younger woman suddenly bolted into a sitting position. The words 'it worked' skittered through her bewildered mind as she finally gazed into the emerald eyes she had wanted to see for the past three days. Up until that moment, Hannah's *Night & Day* picture had to suffice.

"WHAT?!?" Hannah started, obviously incensed based on her tone and volume. "Implausible and blah? How do you even use those words in one sentence? I'm not even sure blah is a real word!" The blonde paused, her breath catching while she stared at Brittany like she was a three-headed and six-eyed alien from a planet far far away.

"What?" The A.C. spoke as quietly as Hannah had loudly. "What is it?"

Hannah continued to unblinkingly stare, whispering, "Oh my God." Rising from the bed, she paced back and forth several times before stopping in front of the confused woman still sitting. The author pointed a shaky finger at her. "You're not real. You can't be real."

Brittany barely made out the words they were spoken so softly. Why couldn't she be real? She asked. Shaking her head, Hannah didn't offer an answer as she resumed pacing, telling herself that the Activity Coordinator was merely a figment of her imagination. Brittany briefly thought about going to find Dr. Harper, but then decided that she could and would handle this on her own. Standing, she walked toward the pacing blonde. Intent on stopping her, she was about to place her hands on Hannah's shoulders when she quickly moved away, pressing her back into a corner of the small room. Her green eyes dilated from the drugs she'd been given, she looked like a frightened kitten. The sight was pitiful enough to break Brittany's heart.

"Don't touch me!" Sliding down to the carpeted floor, Hannah wrapped her arms around bent legs. "You're not real--you shouldn't touch me--you're not real."

"Okay, okay. Calm down sweetheart." Brittany used her soothing voice, the one that came in handy when things got out of hand during an activity or her group counseling sessions. Very slowly, she kneeled on the floor, estimating there was about five to six feet of space between she and the young author. "Hannah you don't have anything to fear from me. Remember, I'm Brittany Sparrow--the person who has been talking to you for the past three days." She briefly smiled. "Okay, more like harassing you but talking sounds better." Hannah said nothing. "Tell me, why don't you think I'm real?"

The author opened her mouth then closed it, then tried again. "It doesn't make sense."

"Why doesn't it?"

"This is 2003," Hannah whispered as though knowing the year was a huge secret.

Grinning, Brittany nodded. "I'm glad you know what year it is but you still haven't told me why I'm a part of your imagination."

"If you were real why would you be here?"

"Because you're here and I wanted to get you to talk to me."

"People are going to think I'm crazier than they already do if you continue hanging around and they see me talking. They'll think I'm talking to myself because they don't see you."

Just what did Dr. Harper have this girl on? Brittany slowly shook her head, her brow furrowed. *She seemed perfectly normal--pissed about me ragging on her novel--but normal until she got a good look at me. What about my appearance could have spooked her?* "I'm not sure I follow you. You're saying that you're the only one who can see me?" Hannah nodded. "Because I'm not real." She nodded again. "But I *am* real. I'm sure you're quite imaginative--in fact I know you are--but you didn't make *me* up." Brittany smiled at the author. "I've been around for thirty years. Greg and Beverly Sparrow created me." Her smile broadening, she winked.

A good twenty seconds passed before Hannah spoke again. "You're telling me that you really do work here?"

"Yes."

"That your name is Brittany Sparrow, born in 1973, three brothers, daughter of Greg and Beverly...no girlfriend."

The A.C. chuckled while nodding. Was it just *her* imagination or had Hannah sounded a little happy to mention that she was unattached? *Probably wishful thinking girl. And it really shouldn't matter one way or the other.* "Yes to all of the above."

Again, there was a long pause. "I have a hard time believing that you're here," Hannah finally stated.

"And that I don't understand. When you had your eyes closed you believed I was here but the moment you saw my face I couldn't be real."

Though Brittany put that in the form of a statement, the other woman knew that she wanted an explanation. However, Hannah wasn't sure how to respond. If the person sitting before her honestly were a real flesh and blood woman, then she wouldn't admit the reason why she thought otherwise. The Activity Coordinator would think her crazy along with everyone else.

"I thought you were someone else."

One of Brittany's eyebrows arched. "Someone who couldn't be real."

"Not anymore," was the cryptic reply.

The other eyebrow joined its partner. "Mind telling me what you mean by that?"

"You reminded me of someone I once knew, but there is no way she could be in this room with me now unless I was hallucinating or she was a spirit. She died," Hannah quietly finished.

Crawling across the carpet, Brittany took a chance trying to touch her. Her hand coming to rest on top of Hannah's wasn't rejected. "I'm so sorry. Were you close to her?"

Nodding, Hannah blinked back tears. "Yeah, she was my whole world." Looking up, she gazed into the A.C.'s face. "You look so much like her that I thought you were her. For a second I wanted you to be. I'm sorry if my behavior startled you."

Brittany squeezed the hand beneath her own. "That's alright. I'm just happy to see you talking. By the way, I really did enjoy your book--in fact, it's one of my favorites now. I just wanted to get a reaction out of you so I figured talking about their work was one way to get a rise out of an author." To her surprise and delight, Hannah chuckled.

"You were about to get a rise out of me the moment you started singing." They both laughed. "And by the way back atcha, thank you for the kind words. I put my heart and soul into that novel.

"I could tell." Brittany smiled while noticing that she had begun to caress the back of the author's hand, so she removed hers. "Um, would you care to join me for a walk? There's a lovely little garden on the premises."

Returning her smile, the blonde nodded. "Sure."

After they both stood, Hannah retrieved her shoes, slipped them on and tied her laces while glancing at the woman standing near the door. The resemblance was uncanny, well except for one noticeable thing. "Your hair," she said, running her hands through her short 'do, hoping that her blonde head wasn't a messy one.

Mistaking Hannah's finger combing of her own hair to mean that something was wrong with hers, Brittany turned to the small mirror mounted to the wall above the dresser. Having decided not to wear her hair in the usual ponytail, the A.C. left it to fall around her shoulders. Not finding anything wrong, she glanced over her shoulder to discover that a pair of emerald eyes was focused on some buns--and not the kind that provide a jacket for wieners.

Looking back toward the mirror, Brittany grinned. For some peculiar reason, she was instantly thrilled that she had chosen to wear her butt jeans today. She referred to them as her butt jeans because they were the one pair of jeans that accentuated her rear end the best. At least that was what she had been told, so months ago they were nicknamed butt jeans.

There's a little more junk in my trunk than there used to be, but I guess it ain't all bad. Okay, enough thinking about my own ass. Turning around, she met Hannah's eyes. "You brought

attention to my hair. Do you see something I don't?"

Shaking her head, the author stood. "No. I just wanted to tell you that I like it. Is that your true color?" Hannah could have smacked herself. "Um, I'm sorry. That sounded rude."

Brittany laughed. "Never ask another woman if she dyes her hair. That's almost as bad as asking her weight." Hannah apologized again. "Oh, hey I'm just kidding with you. You can ask me anything."

"Really?" She looked like she might actually take Brittany up on her offer.

"Of course." Brittany nodded. "It's highly possible that I'll lie but feel free to ask anyway." She managed to keep a straight face while saying this.

This time Hannah immediately recognized that the A.C. was joking and laughed. It felt good. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Great. And yes it's my real color. I recently added a few 'blondish' streaks, but most of it is the color I've had--"

"For thirty years," Hannah finished with a smile. "Unless you were bald when you were born." Smiling back, Brittany watched as the shorter woman walked toward her. She didn't have to wonder for long what Hannah intended to do as gentle fingers traced invisible lines from her scalp to the tips of her light golden brown strands. Hannah only stroked for a few seconds before dropping her hands to her sides. Meanwhile, Brittany attempted to ignore an oddly familiar tingle running through her.

"I really do love your hair," the author complimented, her voice soft. "It suits you."

The Activity Coordinator nearly tripped over her own words. "Th...thank you Hannah." Pulling the key from her pocket, she glanced toward the door. She had to get out of that small room because she suddenly had an insane vision of herself kissing Hannah. A nice public place filled with others would do her some good. "You ready to go?"

"After you." Though her pupils were still enlarged from the drugs, there was a sudden twinkle in Hannah's eyes. Gladdened to be viewing it now, Brittany wondered when was the last time the twinkle had been there.

I have a feeling that it's been a long time.

I hope it stays for good.

Taking up residence on a bench with the author, Brittany watched as she brought the blooming red rose to her nose, closing her eyes as she inhaled its fragrant scent. As they had ambled along

the cobblestone path within the garden, Brittany plucked the flower and presented it to her newest friend. She was overjoyed to receive a bright smile in return.

Her eyes falling on one of several fountains, Hannah lowered the flower, resting it on her thigh. "Brittany how long have you worked here?"

While Hannah looked at the fountain, Brittany took the opportunity to study her. She was a beauty. "Almost two years," she answered, sounding distracted.

Curious emerald eyes turned to her. "Are you okay?"

The A.C. quickly reassured her that she was okay, but was she? This felt like the beginning of a crush and that simply couldn't happen. Hannah was a patient and she was an employee, which equaled a big no-no. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, the author was here to get help; therefore, Brittany had to get a hold of herself. No touching and definitely no kissing allowed.

"Could I have a hug?"

Yes--no! "Huh?"

"A hug," Hannah shyly looked toward her rose, twirling the stem between her fingers. "I know it might seem strange, but I could really use a hug."

"Wanting a hug isn't strange. It's human," Brittany said, all too late realizing that her reply sounded like a yes. Now she couldn't very well follow that up with a no. That would be cruel. Telling herself that one little hug wouldn't hurt anything, Brittany slid across the bench, bridging the distance between them. Encircling the smaller woman in her arms, she held her tenderly. This felt so right and though she couldn't understand why, familiar too. Brittany shook her head; brow creased just the slightest. *I'm having a serious case of déjà vu today.*

Much to her simultaneous relief and dismay, Hannah pulled back from the hug some twenty seconds after it began. "That was nice. Thank you." The young woman smiled at Brittany in a way that made her heart pick up its beating speed.

"Yes it was and anytime you need one I'm," oops, she realized her slip too late, "here," Brittany finished with an inward sigh. She had just accidentally designated herself as a human teddy bear. There went the no touching rule out the window. She was unprepared when Hannah took advantage right away, hugging her close enough that air couldn't possibly pass between them. Reflexively throwing her arms around the author, Brittany then noticed Dr. Harper headed in their direction. Trying to act as though hugging a patient was no big deal, Brittany didn't release her while motioning the doctor not to intrude. She wasn't in the mood to be annoyed. Though looking back questioningly, Dr. Harper switched directions.

Hearing footsteps, Hannah let go of Brittany and glanced behind her catching the profile of Alex Harper as he walked back inside the building. Based on the look she wore, she wasn't very pleased to see him.

"He was the one who gave me an injection the day I arrived here," Hannah started speaking, her eyes on the now closed glass door. "He said it was to relax me but nothing about this has been relaxing. Well," she looked at a very attentive Brittany, "until you."

Brittany suddenly wondered why she had to gaze at her as though she was the best thing since indoor plumbing and utter such sweet words that did nothing to discourage her mounting crush. *Don't provoke her to say anything like that, she warned herself. Keep this strictly friendly.*

"Yes, I've been told that I'm better than any ol' drug."

Hannah chuckled. "I can believe that."

After a few comfortable seconds of silence passed by, Brittany made an inquiry. "How did you come to be here? Since you haven't been talking to anyone, I've assumed that you didn't choose to be at SMU." All she knew was that Hannah was a schizophrenic--at least that she was supposed to be a schizophrenic. So far, the A.C. wasn't convinced that the diagnosis was correct. She had dealt with many schizophrenic patients and though something was off kilter about Hannah, Brittany wasn't buying that she was one of them.

"My parents brought me here against my will," Hannah replied, both irate and melancholy that they thought she needed to be locked away. She hadn't seen nor talked to either of them since the day they showed up at her book signing wanting to 'support' her. Hannah wasn't sure that she wanted to see them. At least not anytime soon. This latest stunt was beyond cruel. She hadn't hurt anyone. She just wanted to live her own life and her parents obviously couldn't let that happen.

Brittany gently tapped the hand still wrapped with a bandage. "Does this have anything to do with it?"

Nodding, Hannah looked at the only evidence she had of her attempted escape. "Yeah. They showed up at my book signing pretending that they wanted to reconcile. Little did I know what they had up their sleeves. They drugged me and when I woke up, I was in their car parked in front of this hospital. I tried to get out by breaking the window and ended up cutting my hand. And as you can see they caught me."

That was odd. How had her parents managed to get so much control over their grown daughter? "Do you have any idea why your parents thought it was in your best interest to be here?"

Because I came out of the closet to them and insisted that I battled crime along with my female lover during the six years I was in a catatonic state. That's why. "I have some ideas but if you don't mind Brittany, I really don't feel like having this conversation right now. I'm kind of tired." Though she faked a yawn, Hannah really felt fatigued. The medications Dr. Harper had her on kept her in a constant 'not fully awake' state. She couldn't recall ever wanting a cup of coffee so badly.

Brittany nearly smirked. *What a well placed yawn you have my dear.* Looking at her watch, she nodded. "Sure sweetheart, I understand. I have to prepare for a class anyway." Standing she added, "I'll escort you back to your room."

"What kind of class do you have?" Hannah inquired as they headed out of the garden; she carrying the rose that the other woman had given her. She wished that she had a vase to put it in. A Dixie cup would have to do for now.

"I have activity classes and one group counseling. During group counseling a few patients and I gather into a circle and talk amongst ourselves. The sessions can be helpful and if everyone is in a good mood even fun at times. You could join us anytime." Hannah nodded but didn't comment. "And we do lots of things in activities--that's where the fun is really at!" The A.C. chuckled as the author smiled. "We play games, sometimes make up little plays and perform them for an audience, sing--me as you know not so well--dance... When I'm in a particularly Martha Stewardish mood we have arts and crafts."

This time Hannah chuckled. "So what's on the roster today?"

"Today we are going to go on a treasure hunt. We'll split into teams and the first team to locate all of the treasure will win the game."

"A treasure hunt, eh? How exactly will this work?"

Stopping at Room 31, Brittany leaned against the wall near the door. "Why don't you come with me and find out?" She grinned while hoping that the younger woman would say yes. "You'll even get to wear a really neat eye patch and get to hear me talk like a pirate." Why did she feel like she was asking Hannah out on a date?

"Ooh, tempting but I'm gonna have to pass today."

The A.C. hid her disappointment behind a smile. "Pass today. So that means maybe another time?" *Hope you don't notice my thinly veiled begging.*

A blonde head nodded. "Maybe."

"And are you going to start talking to others? Like your therapist?"

"I don't have anything to say to anyone else but you." Leaning on her tiptoes, she lightly kissed Brittany's cheek. "Thank you. I haven't enjoyed someone's company this much in a long while. See you later Brittany." Opening the door leading into her room, Hannah walked inside and softly closed it.

Touching her cheek (another rule flew out the window), Brittany watched as the author placed her rose on the nightstand before removing her shoes and stretching out on top of the covers. Putting her headphones on, she closed her eyes, probably escaping to her own world. With a sigh, the A.C. locked the door as someone touched her shoulder. Turning around, she smiled at

the rotund middle-aged gentleman now facing her.

"Hey Jimmy. What's up?" She knew what he would answer with before he even opened his mouth. This was their usual routine.

"The sky...the birds...But what's right above us is the ceiling." The pair shared a laugh.

"Were you on your way to class?" Jimmy nodded. "In that case would you mind if I walked with you?"

He beamed. Brittany was his favorite person in SMU. Actually in the entire world. "I wouldn't mind a bit Brit." He laughed again. "That rhymes!"

Linking her arm through his, the A.C. broadly smiled as they began their journey to the activity room. "Yeah, you're a poet and I bet ya didn't even know it!"

Brittany had almost made it passed security when Dr. Harper caught up to her. She sighed. If she had been sixty seconds sooner she could have successfully left without having to talk with him. Stupid bladder insisted that she make a pit stop to the bathroom first.

"Brittany may I see you in my office?"

"We can't talk right here? I'm supposed to be meeting my parents for dinner."

"Your family sure does eat a lot," Dr. Harper replied, his tone hinting that he might have been irritated with her.

Brittany allowed her irritation to fully show. "Yes, we Sparrows are an odd bunch. We like to eat on a daily basis in order to live."

He didn't look amused. In fact, Alex was wearing his serious face, which Brittany wasn't that familiar with. However, she recognized his flirty face all too well. "I want to see you in my office right now. We need to discuss something and I would prefer to do it in private. Follow me."

Expecting her to obey, the doctor headed down a hall. Not being able to control all of her fingers, the middle ones saluted Alex's back. Observing this, one of SMU's security guards laughed. Brittany cracked a little smile as she followed the doctor.

Sitting in the chair facing the doctor's desk, she waited for him to speak, wondering what this impromptu meeting could be about. Using his desk for a chair, Dr. Harper sat right in front of the SMU employee.

"First, I commend you for getting Hannah Webster to communicate with you. I had my doubts when you didn't achieve it right away."

"Some take more time than others."

Alex nodded his agreement. "True." Pause. "Second, don't ever shoo me away like that again."

The constant sexual harasser had bought Brittany in here for a lecture? Sarcasm latched onto her like a leech. "In what way should I shoo you then?"

"Brittany I'm not playing with you."

"That extends both ways."

"What were you doing hugging her?"

"She asked for a hug and I gave her one."

"Two," Dr. Harper promptly replied.

Brittany arched a brow. "What were you doing? Hiding in the shadows watching our every move?" How much creepier could he possibly get?

Ignoring her questions, the doctor walked behind his desk and took a seat. "Though I asked you to talk to Hannah, remember that you have other patients. Don't spend most of your time with this one."

She gave him an incredulous look. "I spend a few minutes with Hannah Webster in the garden and now I'm neglecting my other patients? Dr. Harper I assure you that I have not been playing favorites, if that's what you're trying to insinuate. My patients are just fine. However, my *patience* is running thin with you." She began to rise from the chair. "Now whether you will excuse me or not, I have to go."

Brittany made it to the door before Dr. Harper politely asked her to wait. Coming around the desk, he offered her a smile. She still looked as though she ached to kick him in a place where the sun never shined unless he sunbathed in the buff.

"Brit, I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure that you maintain your professionalism."

Do you even know the meaning of that word? She forced herself to smile. "You have my promise on that Dr. Harper." She was on her way out the door when the doctor assured her that she would receive a bonus two hundred dollars on her next paycheck. "Don't bother. I don't want it." *My reward was getting to see those pretty green eyes.*

After climbing three flights of stairs, Brittany took a moment to catch her breath before knocking on Apt. #3E. When someone yelled for her to enter, she opened the door immediately assaulted with the delicious scent of baking. She closed the door just as the same someone yelled that they were in the kitchen. Heading toward it, Brittany stopped at the entrance looking in amusement at the young man putting a hot tray of brownies on the stove with the help of a rooster shaped potholder. All he needed was an apron.

Removing the potholder, he smiled at his visitor. "Hello Brit. You didn't have to come over here to remind me about the bar-b-que tomorrow. I remembered plus Todd already called." Smirking, he rummaged in a drawer for a butter knife. "Apparently, my siblings think I suffer from CRS syndrome."

Chuckling, Brittany fully entered the kitchen sharing a brief hug with the brother six years her senior. "Personally, I don't think you have CRS syndrome--especially when it comes to bar-b-que. How could you forget Dad's tender ribs?" Slight pause. "I actually came because I needed to ask you a favor." She watched as the hand holding a butter knife halted above the brownies, having been about to slice them into squares. Almost in slow motion, Ben placed the knife on the counter and turned to look into sapphire eyes that matched his own.

"Huh?" The simple word was spoken with such disbelief Brittany had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She could only imagine what he was thinking. She had never asked the man for a favor before so what could she possibly want now?

"A favor," Brittany repeated, leading her brother over to the small kitchen table. She pointed at him after they sat. "I need a favor from you."

"Me?" Just in case she might have been speaking to the imaginary person behind him, he pointed to himself for clarification. She nodded. "Wow," Ben softly stated. "What can I do? I'll help any way that I can."

"Great. I need you to do something illegal."

Ben used the word of the day again. "Huh?"

"Yes, it's one of those greater good sort of things. Like Robin Hood stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Now though it was wrong--stealing is a crime--he did it to help those that were less fortunate."

It took Ben further moments to process that his moralistic sister was asking him to delve into illegal activity. "So...whatever you want me to do will be helping the less fortunate?"

Brittany considered the question before answering. "In a way."

"Meaning?"

She began to tell him all that she knew concerning Hannah Webster and how she had spent the better part of the week getting the young author to talk to her. She revealed how Hannah's parents had admitted her without consent to SMU, deeming her to need help with her schizophrenia. After the explanation, Ben wasn't a step closer to figuring out what illegal act Brittany wanted him to commit. He took a wild guess.

"Do you want me to break her out?"

Brittany shook her head. "No. Tell me the one thing you're skilled at?" He grinned lecherously, thoughts of a little redhead entering his mind. She smacked his arm. "Besides that."

Recognition dawned within seconds. "Ah, computers," Ben correctly guessed, his sister confirming with a nod. He loved computers almost as much as he loved his girlfriend. Okay, not quite but barely a day went by when he couldn't be found stroking his keyboard, eyes glued to a seventeen-inch screen. A couple years ago, his family took a trip to Hawaii and Leah (his girlfriend) insisted that he leave his laptop at home. During a week in paradise he experienced a taste of what detox surely must have felt like. Luckily, Leah wearing a different bikini everyday distracted him somewhat.

"I would like you to hack into some files regarding Hannah."

Ben's mouth fell open in shock. Though he didn't know why he was shocked anymore by this point. This couldn't be his sister. No, this being sitting before him was a pod person. "Let me see if I understand you," he started, splaying his large hands on the table's wooden surface. "You want me to perform the activity that winded me up in prison for a year?"

Brittany smirked. "You mean juvenile hall for a year and they let you out after six months for good behavior."

"But if I get caught this time I'll be sent to prison with the major league convicts and become some big muscily guy's pretty boy." Ben shuddered as a disturbing image entered his mind.

His sister snickered, her eyes quickly moving over him. "You are kinda pretty for a dude with the long eyelashes, high cheekbones, slender figure and all. Yep, you'd be real popular." Though he didn't comment, Ben produced a dirty look. "Aw, you won't get caught for doing this--you're too good at what you do." Though what she said was true, stroking his ego wouldn't hurt anything. "You wouldn't have gotten caught the time you went to juvenile hall had you not been trying to impress some of your classmates by changing their grades on your high school principal's computer." He would have been able to escape had he not gotten stuck in the window. To this day it remained a mystery how the skinny teen managed that.

"You know I've reformed. You were one of the main people getting on me about hacking into places I shouldn't be. Plus Leah would kill me."

"Speaking of Leah, wouldn't she also kill you if she knew that you along with some friends went to that titty bar a couple weeks ago when you canceled plans with her to go see that play whose

tickets she paid good money for by stating that you were sick and then she brought you homemade soup only to find that you weren't home, so she called me to see if I knew of your whereabouts and I covered for you saying that I was taking good care of you at my house and that there was no need for her to come over there, risking catching your virus?"

Ben stared at her. Then he blinked his long lashes twice, unable to believe this situation. "One, that is the longest question in history. Ever heard of periods? Use 'em. Two, it was an erotic dance club. The reason I went was because the guys and I thought it would be a good idea to get Jessi out and about. I told you he and his girl broke up and he was heartbroken." Ben smirked. "Call that the greater good. And three, it sounds like you're trying to blackmail me Brit."

"One, I'll use run-on sentences or questions anytime that I feel like it Professor of Nothing. Two," pausing, Brittany raised a brow, her head shaking back and forth, "calling it an erotic dance club is just a fancier way of saying titty bar. Grown men go there to watch women shake their butts and breasts and if they're not too cheap give 'em money for it. As for Jessi, he and his girl broke up before Ariel and I did. And since then, I've seen him with two different girls. Didn't seem too heartbroken to me." Brittany mirrored her brother's previous smirk. "Call that a load of crap. And three, would I ever do that to you Ben?"

"Until this evening I would have said no."

"Please help me Ben?" Switching gears within a millisecond, Brittany suddenly looked like the sweetest woman in the world. "I really need your help. I want to know what's going on with Hannah. You know I wouldn't be asking you to do this if it wasn't important. There's something very wrong and I intend to find out what it is, but I need information on her background. I'm willing to pay you."

Ben sighed. Whether he was related to them or not, he had always been a sucker for women. "Ah damn Brit. Your money is no good with me." He paused thoughtfully. "Alright, I'll do it. What exactly do you--whoa!" Before he could finish his question, he had a lapful of sister on him. Chuckling, he hugged her, good-naturedly suffering through the kisses she planted on his cheeks. After she returned to her seat, he asked, "What do you want me to look for?"

"Medical records and anything else that you think might be helpful. I want to know why her parents think she needs to be locked in a sanitarium."

"You said Hannah has schizophrenia."

"Yeah, but..." Brittany shook her head while looking at her brother. "I think that might be bullshit."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"And you want me to find out what's really going on."

"Yeah. Think you'll be able to do it?" She already knew the answer.

Ben nodded. Of course, he could! He was well aware of his skills and there was no doubt in his mind that he would be able to get his sister what she wanted. "No problem. I'll give you the information tomorrow at the bar-b-que."

Right before she was getting ready to leave, Ben insisted that she take some brownies (he only had to insist once). Cutting them into equal squares, he covered a few in a sheet of plastic wrap and put that into small paper sack, which he handed to Brittany.

"Thanks." She smiled up at him. "For all your help."

He smiled back. "Again, no problem."

"See you tomorrow then."

"Night sis."

Awakening, Brittany took in her surroundings. Immediately, she noticed that her surroundings didn't look a bit familiar. This was supposed to be her bedroom, yet it reminded her of a prison cell--small, dark, and cold. What was she doing in a prison cell? And why was her entire body seizing with pain, especially her back, which felt as though some sadist was sticking her repeatedly with little sharp knives?

She then noticed that she was lying down on the ground dressed in a dirt-laden toga with a pair of arms wrapped around her. Just whom did those arms belong to? Immediately, she had an image of Hannah smiling as she took in the scent of the rose she had given to her during their trip to the garden. Brittany didn't know how she knew, but she had a strong feeling that Hannah was holding her.

Opening her mouth, she whispered, "*Gabrielle*." Gabrielle? Where had that come from? She started to speak again when a gentle hand touched her cheek, pushing just enough to get her to turn her head to the right where she brushed against a soft breast. Anguished blue eyes connected with green ones shining with tears.

"Xena," her companion whispered back. So, Hannah didn't recognize her? Oh, fine whatever. Brittany was more concerned by the tears rolling down the younger woman's beautiful face. Who was it that made her cry? And where were they so Brittany could find them and make them cry like they had the little blonde? At least she would have if she could move. She honestly didn't think that she was capable of doing so. The pain was too intense and Brittany couldn't even feel her legs.

"*You're crying?*" Brittany softly inquired, asking the obvious. "*Don't cry.*"

Hannah offered her a bittersweet smile. "*I wont. Rest.*"

That she could do. She felt so tired and she could really use a dose or two of Morphine. What the hell had happened to them? Brittany's eyes started to shut as she obediently whispered, "*kay.*" That was until she heard a gruff male voice coming from somewhere behind them announce that it wouldn't be long now. She wanted to ask what he was talking about but her tongue refused to cooperate.

After a few wordless minutes passed by, Brittany felt compelled to say things that made no sense to her. It was as though she had zero control over her own body. Words strange to her ears spilled out of her mouth.

"*I made you leave the way of love. That was my fault.*" Tears escaped from her own eyes.

Hannah immediately argued. "*I had a choice. To do nothing or save my friend. I chose the way of friendship.*"

That was sweet although Brittany didn't know what they were saying. A feeling of the utmost shame swept through her, causing her to desperately need to apologize. "*I'm sorry for all the times I didn't treat you right.*" Treat her right? She hadn't known Hannah a full week yet! Yet, it felt like the right thing to say.

Again, her friend refuted her statement. "*Xena, you brought out the best in me. Before I met you no one saw me for who I was.*" She paused briefly. "*I felt...invisible, but you saw all the things that I could be.*" Hannah tenderly smiled at her and Brittany felt her insides turn to mush. Her crush would never vanish if the other woman kept up this kind of talk. "*You saved me Xena.*"

"*I wish I...*" Brittany momentarily loss her train of thought. A hand cupped her cheek again and she smiled.

"*What?*" Hannah gently urged.

The shame made itself known again. "*That I had read your scrolls just once.*" She read her novel--that should have counted. Did Hannah have something else published that she wasn't aware of?

"*You would have liked them.*"

"*I know.*"

Ending their heartfelt conversation, the two women gazed toward one another lovingly. In that moment, Brittany had a strong desire to kiss those lips. It felt like something that would have been perfectly all right to do. Only thing was she couldn't sit up. She was about to ask if Hannah would meet her halfway when several men dressed as ancient soldiers marched toward them,

their faces either blank or filled with abhorrence.

One of the soldiers yelled, "*Time!*"

DING DONG!!!

Jumping to her knees with a start, Brittany glanced around. It was her room. Her bed that she was kneeling on, her nightstands, her dresser, her poster of Chris--

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!!!

Brittany barely stopped herself from toppling to the floor. Someone was knocking at the door! She glanced at her digital clock and frowned. Someone was knocking at the door at 6:11 in the morning--her Sunday morning to sleep in.

Tossing the covers toward the end of the bed, she rose to her feet, grimacing as a sharp spasm tackled her lower back. "Ow." Placing a hand on the right side of her back, Brittany massaged the area she could easily reach while heading into the living room, turning on lights along the way.

Throwing open the front door she frowned again. "Is something wrong with you, with the family or with Leah?" She asked, her voice sounding weary. She suddenly remembered her dream, or at least bits and pieces of it. She and Hannah had been...where? Ah, in a jail cell. They were obviously in trouble for something but she didn't know what.

"No, everyone is fine," Ben quickly reassured her. He showed her what he held. "I have something for you. It couldn't wait until the bar-b-que. I would have come earlier but I wanted to wait at least until the sun rose."

Heavy lidded eyes looked at his hand. "A portfolio? I have a million of those. Get them cheap at Wal-Mart."

Reaching out, Ben lightly tapped her mussed head with the thick portfolio. "Turn your brain on big sister. I have information concerning your Hannah Webster."

Fatigue was shoved out of the way by alertness. Brittany nearly yanked her brother into her apartment before closing the door. She made a grab for the portfolio but he kept it out of reach. When she growled at him, he only wiggled a finger at her, the tiniest smile on his face. Reminding her to have patience, Ben headed toward the kitchen while asking for a cup of coffee.

"Black right?" Brittany inquired, grabbing her coffeepot and filling with it water. At his confirmation, she nodded, setting the heavy pot on the stove and lighting a small fire beneath it. Running a hand through her disordered hair, she plopped down on a vacated barstool. Curious eyes landed on the portfolio resting on the breakfast bar. "So what do you have for me?"

Emitting a short whistle, Ben opened the portfolio. "First of all, it is my opinion that Rose and

Michael Webster, her parents are two of the biggest assholes on the planet. I swear these people should have had their parental rights revoked years ago."

Brittany was almost afraid to ask. "What happened?" She replied, her softly uttered words barely registering with her brother.

Shuffling through the file he had created, Ben sadly shook his head. "Either Hannah was a very clumsy child, or her parents were the cause of the many 'accidents' she had through the years. I found injuries she sustained from the age of three until she was eighteen."

Brittany began to feel sick to her stomach as she listened to what her brother had to report. She couldn't recall ever hating someone so much as the two people Ben spoke of. During her childhood and teen years, Hannah had a total of fifteen fractures in various parts of her body (mostly her ribs), several concussions, contusions, and even a couple of second degree burns.

Falling silent, Ben stared at one particular page. His sister could tell by the expression on his face that whatever had his attention might have been worse than a broken bone. He just didn't know how to put it into words. Catching her worried gaze, Ben quietly slipped the sheet of paper over to her. As she read, the bile started to rise into her throat and by the time she finished, she had to bolt into the bathroom just as the coffeepot whistled, letting them know that the water was sufficiently hot. Turning off the burner, Ben hurried into the bathroom, just in time to observe his sibling kneeling on the floor while she heaved into the toilet bowl. He couldn't blame her--he had almost done the same after making the discovery.

Grabbing the washcloth hanging over the shower stall, Ben dampened it with cool water, placing the small towel on the back of Brittany's neck as he knelt beside her. She heaved twice more, until there was nothing left before raising her head. "Are you okay Brit?" Her brother continued to press the washcloth against her neck. Not answering, tears fell down her cheeks. Immediately, Ben pulled her into his arms, holding her tight. A few minutes passed by before Brittany spoke.

"How...how could anyone do that to their child? Those sick..." Her words trailing off, she released herself from Ben's arms and rose to her feet. Walking over to the sink, she washed away the evidence of her tears before reaching for the bottle of Listerine. Unscrewing the plastic top, Brittany snorted derisively. "She injured herself that badly by climbing a fence on two different occasions? Are people supposed to assume that she failed to learn her lesson the first time?" Brittany kept speaking, not giving her brother a chance to reply. "How in the hell did Hannah's parents get away with all these excuses? There was never an investigation?" When she tossed half a capful of the strong green liquid into her mouth, Ben finally spoke.

He sat on the toilet seat cover. "It's my belief that they had enough prestige and resources to vanquish any thoughts of an investigation. Michael Webster is a well-known and respected judge and his wife is one of the top defense attorneys at a prominent law firm. No one would dare suspect that these people were secretly abusing their child and if they did suspect they kept their opinions to themselves."

After spitting into the sink, Brittany dabbed at her minty fresh mouth with a dry towel. "I don't

intend on doing that." She walked out of the bathroom with her brother falling in step behind her.

"What do you mean by that?" He asked in concern. "Brit, don't get involved in this."

Angry blue eyes regarded an identical worried pair. "Don't get involved? You mean like no one else has bothered to do in the last twenty-six years? I should just let Hannah stay locked up because that's where her sadistic and disgusting parents want her? You think that's the right thing to do?"

"Brit," Ben softly started, his head shaking from one side to the other. "I don't mean to sound cynical, but I doubt it would do you any good to confront those people. You will not be able to take them down. Hey, I wish you could but the only person you'll be making trouble for is yourself--and maybe Hannah too. It's best that you treat her like any other patient. It's obvious that she needs help despite being forcibly admitted."

"There's nothing wrong with her."

"She's schizophrenic."

"I told you last night that I don't fully believe that." Walking into the kitchen, Brittany grabbed the coffeepot and poured steaming liquid into two mugs.

Reclaiming his seat, Ben replied, "Well you should. That part is true and I'm positive that she wouldn't be if it weren't for the way her parents abused her. You didn't know about her six years in a catatonic state?" Brittany's expression answered his question. "Yes, from the age of 19 until last year there was no way of communicating with her--one day she just suddenly...zoned out and remained that way until after her 25th birthday. No clear explanation was ever given why of course."

"She probably escaped into oblivion so she wouldn't have to deal with her parents." Brittany placed an aromatic mug in front of her brother before sitting next to him with a mug between her hands. "There's no doubt in my mind that those bastards screwed her up, but that still doesn't mean she's a schizophrenic."

"Why is it so difficult for you to believe that?"

"Granted I haven't spent a lot of time with her, I honestly believe that she isn't schizophrenic. I'm sure she needs guidance and therapy, but I don't buy schizophrenia."

"What are the symptoms of schizophrenia?"

"Being withdrawn, hallucinating, having delusions--"

"Stop right there," Ben interrupted, holding up a hand. His sister gave him a curious look. "Hannah has been showing major signs of delusion ever since she awoke."

"What delusions? I haven't noticed a thing."

Reaching for the portfolio, Ben flipped through it until he located the page he wanted. "Are you familiar with her book *Night & Day*?" At Brittany's nod he continued, "She claimed upon her awakening that she had somehow been transported back to Ancient Greece where she met a warrior woman named Xena, whom she befriended and they spent years together fighting crime. However, she wasn't exactly herself--her name was Gabrielle. Apparently, Hannah believes that she is the reincarnation of this Gabrielle--she believes that her book is nonfiction. That sounds like a delusional person to me sis."

Lost in her thoughts, Brittany failed to reply. Xena...Gabrielle...reincarnation...her dream. It occurred to the A.C. that her dream had been about Xena and Gabrielle, the characters from *Night & Day*--not she and Hannah. She frowned. Or had it been about she and Hannah in Xena and Gabrielle's bodies? Brittany shook her head. No, that wasn't possible. There was no such thing as reincarnation, right?

"I have a hard time believing that you're here."

"And that I don't understand. When you had your eyes closed you believed I was here but the moment you saw my face I couldn't be real."

"You reminded me of someone I once knew, but there is no way she could be in this room with me now unless I was hallucinating or she was a spirit. She died."

"I'm so sorry. Were you close to her?"

"Yeah, she was my whole world. You look so much like her that I thought you were her. For a second I wanted you to be."

Brittany stared into her coffee while she tried to make some sense of this strange and complicated puzzle.

Hannah believed that the characters in her book existed over a thousand years ago.

Upon seeing her for the first time, Hannah had mistaken her for Xena, which was why she flipped out. Brittany couldn't be Xena because Xena was dead. Yet, she hadn't died in the book.

Hannah thought that she used to be Xena's sidekick, soul mate, and lover Gabrielle.

Hannah's characteristics were quite similar to those of Gabrielle.

Her characteristics were quite similar to those of Xena. And if Hannah had mistaken her for Xena and according to her she actually saw Xena on a regular basis for six years, then that meant Brittany could be the warrior's twin. So did that make her the reincarnation of Xena?

No, reincarnation doesn't exist, the A.C. reminded herself. And even if it did, it's not possible

that Hannah revisited one of hers for over half a decade.

What was that dream about? It seemed so vivid...so real. Brittany shook her head while lifting her cup and taking her first sip of hot java today. The only reason she had that dream was because *Night & Day* was still fresh in her mind. Therefore, she subconsciously created a dream sequence for the main characters of the book. It wasn't real--they were never locked in a prison waiting to be executed. *I just have an overactive mind.*

"Brit?"

She glanced at the young man sitting next to her. Brittany had almost forgotten that he was there. She swallowed the bit of coffee in her mouth before replying. "Yes?"

"Are we in agreement now?" Brittany looked at him blankly. "Is your brain in sleep mode again?" At her smirk he grinned. "Is it possible she has schizophrenia or not?"

"I suppose that it's possible but I wouldn't diagnose her with it just yet. So she had a six-year long dream while in a catatonic state and then decides to write a novel about it after waking up--a highly acclaimed novel I might add. Delusional? I'm not so sure. Creative and intelligent? Definitely."

"Are *you* delusional?"

Though she rolled her eyes, Brittany didn't answer his question. "Will you cover for me today?"

"You're not going to the bar-b-que?"

The A.C. managed to swallow half the contents of her mug and then stood, holding it. "No, I have something important to take care of. Give Mom and Dad my love will you?" Entering the kitchen, she tossed her remaining coffee into the sink.

"What're you going to do Brit? I insist that you stay away from Hannah's parents. Confronting them won't do you any good."

"So you've already mentioned. I'm not going to see them--I promise. I'm going to speak with the doctor in charge of Hannah's care."

"Brit, you're not supposed to be working. You do enough of that as it is. It's your day off. Wait until Tuesday."

"Tuesday?" Her expression plainly showed just how pissed she was--with Ben. He suddenly wished that he could take his last statement back. "This from the person who could barely wait until daybreak to deliver that information to me?" She pointed at the portfolio lying on the breakfast bar. "We have evidence that Hannah was abused fifteen out of twenty-six years by her parents who are now trying to keep her locked in a sanitarium for no damn good reason and you want me to wait until Tuesday? I want to get her out of there as soon as possible so I will not

wait another 48 hours to take action. You got that?"

"I do." Even if he hadn't Ben would have said he did. "I'm sorry...I just...why does she concern you so much?"

Brittany's anger toward her brother dispelled just as quickly as it had come. "I care about her," she replied, her voice soft.

"You haven't known her long."

"I'm sorry for all the times I didn't treat you right."

Slowly nodding, she walked up to Ben and planted a kiss on his cheek before turning in the direction of her bedroom.

Knocking on his already open door, Brittany waited for the doctor to tell her to come in before entering, making sure to close the door behind her. She didn't want any disturbances. Slipping into the same chair she had occupied the last time she was in this office, she cordially greeted Dr. Harper. He looked both surprised and interested by her visit.

"Brit what are you doing here on a Sunday?"

"I needed to speak with you. It's urgent."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes. Hannah Webster."

The doctor looked perplexed. "How is Hannah Webster a problem? I thought you were making progress with her."

"I am. She's not the actual problem--it's her parents." Though it faded quickly, Brittany noticed that Alex looked the slightest bit alarmed at the mention of Michael and Rose Webster. She wondered why.

"What about them?" He sounded nonchalant. Too nonchalant, as though he were making an effort to appear casual.

"Are you aware that Hannah might have been abused by them during her childhood?"

"Abused?" Dr. Harper looked at her in disbelief. "Her father is an honorable judge and an honorable man who would never do such a thing. He and his wife love their daughter, which is why they insisted that she be admitted to SMU. How could you even bring this up? It's ludicrous."

"Not so ludicrous Alex. I have proof that Hannah took many trips to the hospital because of their abuse."

"And where did you get your proof?"

"My source is my privacy."

With a sigh, the doctor glanced down at his desk. "Brittany leave here now and go to your family bar-b-que and I'll forget this little chat ever took place." He sounded nothing short of condescending. In her mind, Brittany called him every name she could come up with that was synonymous with bastard.

"You're not the least bit suspicious of these people? They forced their daughter into a sanitarium when there is nothing wrong with her. She hasn't harmed herself or anyone else, yet her parents have the power to incarcerate her. Why is that? Why did you agree to this?"

"Incarcerate? You're being very dramatic."

The A.C.'s supply of patience was becoming dangerously low. Tapping her fingers on the arms of the chair, she took a few deep breaths before offering a reply. "Answer my question...please."

"Hannah is here for a reason. That reason is she needs help in stabilizing her mental illness. Her parents love her and want nothing but the best for her. They put her here because they realize that she needs help."

"They put her here because they're bastards," *like you*, "who care more about their reputations than their own child. They're ashamed of her so they want her hidden. It simply wouldn't do for a well-known republican couple such as the honorable--and I use that term very loosely--judge and his attorney wife to have a lesbian daughter. No, she has to be put away because she's *sick*!"

Dr. Harper finally revealed his irritation. "You are way out of line Brittany. Remember who you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Blue eyes narrowed as Brittany's hands took out their frustration on the innocent chair's arms with a tight grip.

Dr. Harper indicated the badge attached to a slim red, white, and blue weaved rope she wore around her neck and then his own, which was clipped to the breast pocket of his thin white smock. "Your badge plainly reads Brittany Sparrow, Head of Activities whereas mine reads *Dr.*," he put so much emphasis into that, "Alex Harper. Your job is to play checkers with the patients and I take care of everything else. In other words, I'm the doctor--I don't see a diploma that you have completed your medical training hanging from behind your desk. You didn't bust your ass at Harvard trying to maintain an outstanding GPA so your academic scholarship wouldn't be revoked because otherwise you wouldn't be able to make the tuition since your parents squandered away your savings on booze and every other substance they could think of to

get high. No instead you were probably planning bar-b-ques and weekly dinner get-togethers with your family. I worked damn hard to get to where I am, to be the person I am and I'm the doctor who diagnosed Hannah Webster with schizophrenia. She is here to receive help and only after she receives an adequate amount of it will she be allowed to go. So you can stop playing Nancy Drew and bringing me your so-called evidence. I'm in charge and what I say goes."

"I don't understand how a 26 year old doesn't have a say in whether she's admitted into a mental institution. Hannah's parents hadn't talked with her in three months before they decided that she needed psychological help. When they broke the ice, she had just published a book and her life was going rather well--you call that mentally unstable? I don't need to have a d and an r before my name to know that something isn't right where Michael and Rose Webster are concerned. They didn't put their daughter here for her own good--it's for theirs. I am well aware of what schizophrenia is; some of my patients deal with it everyday. Hannah isn't a candidate."

Rising from his chair, Dr. Harper walked toward the door and opened it while his eyes settled on a fuming Brittany. "This conversation is over. Your sources are your privacy and Hannah Webster's condition is mine. Get out of my office and go home," he said, sounding as though he was having a difficult time not screaming at her. "I don't want to see you again until Tuesday morning at 9 o'clock sharp."

Biting down on her lower lip so that she wouldn't say anything that might get her fired, Brittany kept her eyes straight ahead as she stormed out of the doctor's office. As she walked further away, she could feel Alex's eyes on her a few moments before he finally shut the door. Someone called her name just she was about to approach the security officer. Turning around, Brittany didn't know whether she was happier or more upset to see the person waving in her direction. Since she couldn't very well leave now without speaking, the A.C. hurried over, immediately pulled into a hug on arrival. Brittany smiled at the pleasant looking older woman standing next to Hannah. She recognized her as one of SMU's therapists.

"Hi! What are you doing here? I thought you told me that you didn't work on Sundays and Mondays?" Hannah reluctantly released her.

Glancing in the direction of Dr. Harper's office, Brittany sincerely hoped that he wouldn't come out to notice that she was still on the premises. "I don't. I just stopped by to discuss something with one of the doctor's. How are you?"

Hannah didn't think it wise to tell Brittany that getting to see her was the highlight of her day. She shrugged, a small smile on her lips. "Okay I suppose." Indicating the therapist, she added, "I just finished a session with Dr. Lewis and you'll be happy to know that I took your advice and actually talked with her." The blonde's smile grew bigger. "I figure the more I cooperate the faster I'll be able to get out of here."

Brittany's resulting smile was bittersweet. "That's great Hannah. I'm proud of you." At that moment she spied Dr. Harper, but luckily he was headed in the opposite direction. However, since that was too close for her comfort, she decided to say her goodbyes. "Sweetheart, I really wish I could stay around, but I do have to go now. I'll see you on Tuesday okay?" Noticing

Hannah's disappointment, she couldn't help but feel a great amount of it too. Sharing a few more words, a hug with Hannah and a warm handshake with Dr. Lewis, Brittany left. One question was in her mind.

How was she going to spring Hannah from SMU?

Brittany was busy taking notes via the small tape recorder in her hand when Dr. Harper with a sheepish smile on his face, appeared before her open door. Ceasing to speak into the built-in microphone, she pressed the pause button and placed the tape recorder on her seemingly disordered desk. However, she knew exactly where everything was. It only looked messy to those who visited her small office.

"Come in Dr. Harper," she calmly stated though a mere two days ago she wanted to strangle him with his silk tie.

Taking a few steps inside, the doctor set a tall Styrofoam cup along with a large cinnamon bun covered with Saran wrap in front of Brittany. "I brought you a cappuccino and a sugary treat in the hopes that we can put what happened between us on Sunday in the past. I'm so sorry for the way I treated you. You were concerned for a patient and that should be commended not reprimanded." When the A.C. was about to speak, the doctor held up a hand. "Wait a moment. Brittany I want you to know that I value you, I really do. I know you do more than play checkers with the patients. They respond to you in a way that sometimes amazes me. You would be one of the last people I would want to lose as an employee. You do an incredible job and you are appreciated. So I thank you for all that you do and I'm sorry for acting as though I was superior to you. I hope that you can forgive me."

It occurred to Brittany that this was the closest she had ever come to liking the doctor standing before her. It was a strange though welcome change. She didn't want to have any ill feelings toward him. Glancing at what would turn out to be her breakfast, she smiled up at the man. "Thank you for the apology Dr. Harper. I'm willing to forget about Sunday." After a slight pause she tentatively asked, "Um, was it true? I mean about your parents?"

He nodded. "I've barely spoken to them since I left home after high school."

"I'm sorry Alex. I admire you for your perseverance in achieving your goals." She had the crazy idea of possibly inviting him to the next family bar-b-que. *Yes, that'll get him to lay off the flirting. Take him home to meet Mom and Dad.* "Hey Alex, since we're having an honest moment there's something you should know."

The doctor looked intrigued. "Yes?"

She was by no means in the closet, but this was difficult all the same. "I'm gay."

Not promptly answering, a slow grin appeared on the doctor's face. "I assume you don't mean as in happy."

Brittany chuckled. "No. I mean that I'm only attracted to other women."

"In other words, I have about a snowball's chance in hell."

Even if I was straight Alex. Even if I was straight. She nodded, smiling faintly. "That's about right. I don't know why I never told you before."

"You know, I suspected."

One eyebrow arched. "Really? Why?"

"In two years you've never spoken of a boyfriend--at least to me-- I've occasionally seen you casually flirt with a female co-worker or visitor and that rainbow bumper sticker on your car should have filled me in."

The A.C. released another chuckle. "And none of that tipped you off?"

Dr. Harper simultaneously shrugged and grinned. "I was in denial. I figured as long as you didn't say it, I had a chance. Are you absolutely sure?"

An unbidden image of a beaming Hannah with twinkling emerald eyes formed in her brain. "Absolutely. There's not a doubt in my mind."

Having asked Hannah that morning if she wanted to join her for a picnic in the garden, the two of them now sat underneath a tree on a blanket Brittany had nabbed from a utility closet. Finished with their Subway sandwiches and chips, they drank their beverages while Brittany thought of how to bring up the subject she had been thinking about for the past couple of days. Last week it had become obvious that Hannah did not wish to discuss her parents, but the A.C. needed her to open up. She was the key to solving this.

"Hannah could I talk to you?"

The younger woman smiled at her. "Don't those words that have been coming out of our mouths mean we've successfully been doing that? Though I suppose that I could be wrong." She shrugged. "That doesn't happen very often but..."

Brittany attempted to smirk, yet it came out more as an indulgent grin. Hannah was just so cute when she acted sassy. Well on second thought, Hannah was just so cute period. "Ha ha. You're such a funny girl."

The blonde nodded. "A comedian was my second career choice if writing didn't work out for

me."

"Guess you'll never be a professional comedian then." Chuckling, Brittany took another sip from her can of Pepsi Vanilla. As she swallowed, Hannah asked what was on her mind.

"Your...Hannah how would you describe your childhood?" Casting her eyes to the blanket, she didn't answer. "In one word?" Brittany gently persisted.

Almost reluctantly, Hannah looked at her. "It was...difficult."

"How so?"

Shaking her head, Hannah proceeded to stuff the paper her sandwich had come in along with her empty Ruffles bag into the plastic grocery sack they were using for trash. "Is it really necessary that we have this conversation? This has been such a nice lunch."

"It has, but Hannah I need to get to the bottom of this so that I can help you. You shouldn't be here. You should be working on your second novel and I want to make sure that that happens as soon as possible. It's imperative that you speak to me." Reaching over, Brittany covered one of her hands as she stared into cautious emerald eyes. "Sweetheart, you can trust me."

A bit of time passed before Hannah decided to speak. "My parents were--*are* very dominating. There is a right and a wrong way to do things and if I did the wrong thing they would discipline me until I learned to do better."

Brittany could feel her anger boiling to the surface again. Remembering her promise to Ben about not confronting the Websters, she knew that she was close to breaking it. "Discipline you physically?"

Hannah nodded. "Why are you asking me questions that you already know the answers to?" She didn't sound irritated, just curious.

"Pardon?"

"You know what my parents did. You probably know a lot about me, don't you? I can tell just by observing you." She briefly smiled. "You look...informed."

"You're very observant of people."

"I'm very observant of you."

Brittany was struck speechless. Failing to come up with a quick reply, she removed her hand from Hannah's and used it to take another drink of soda.

"Brit, what do you know about me?"

I know you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. That was the first answer her brain

produced. *Of course, I can't say that.* "My brother is a whiz with the computers and I asked him to find all he could about you and he found a lot. I know about the many accidents you had growing up and how you slipped into a catatonic state at age 19 and stayed that way for six years."

"Are you aware of what happened during that period?" Hannah nervously bit her lower lip as she anxiously waited for a response.

"Yes, I am. *Night & Day*, your book isn't fiction. Right?"

"Are you asking me because you believe that or because you just think that I do?"

Oh, man. How was she supposed to answer that? Truth be told, Brittany wasn't sure what to believe. It sounded utterly ridiculous that Hannah had traveled back to Ancient Greece where she relived part of a past life with her soul mate Xena, but at the same time made some sense. Brittany couldn't recall ever feeling such a strong connection with someone. Hannah didn't seem like someone she was just getting to know, but someone that she was more familiar with than any other being.

"Honestly, I'm not sure." To her surprise the other woman smiled.

"That's a first."

"What is?"

"Usually people flat out don't believe me. Either they think that I imagined those six years of my life or I made them up for attention. At least you're considering that it could be true." Before Brittany could say anything, she added, "Don't you have a class soon? I don't want to monopolize your time."

The A.C. glanced at her watch, noting that Hannah was correct. Her 2 o'clock was quickly approaching. She wondered if she could get the author to join her this time. "I believe that you have a rain check on coming to one of my activity classes Ms. Webster. Care to turn it in today? It's Tuesday and on Tuesday's we play a really fun game--my version of the Newlywed Game called Know Your Neighbor."

Hannah looked thoughtful. "Could I win a prize?"

"Absolutely. Today's grand prize is an all expenses paid trip for two to the Bahamas."

"Ooh, in that case I'll cash in my rain check. I could always use a trip to an exotic island." A bright smile fell on her lips that Brittany discovered was contagious. "Shall we go then?"

"Yes ma'am," Brittany replied, sounding quite eager. Standing, they cleaned up their picnic area and neatly folded the blanket before heading toward the doors leading into the building. With her hand on the doorknob, the A.C. paused, her eyes focusing on Hannah's. "Sweetheart, I want you

to know that I intend to get you released very soon. I'll be damned if Michael and Rose will continue to be allowed to keep you here without your consent. You can believe in me--I give you my word."

Softly smiling, Hannah touched her lips to the taller woman's cheek. "You needn't convince me that I can believe in you. I've always known that."

Usually there were ten people in Brittany's 2 o'clock class. However, two of them were absent today. One wasn't there because she felt under the weather and the other because he temporarily left SMU to attend the wedding of his youngest daughter. During her game Know Your Neighbor the group was normally split into five teams, but since there were only nine people (including the addition of Hannah) the Activity Coordinator had to figure out what she would do. Perhaps they could play in teams of three. Before she could suggest the idea Dave raised his hand intending to give her a suggestion of his own.

"Yes Dave?"

"Cindy and I were talking and we said why don't you be a contestant for once, I'll be the host and Cindy can be my assistant. That way we can have four teams." Obviously agreeing, everyone in the room nodded.

"But if my team wins, which could happen because I'm just that good," Brittany broadly grinned, "I don't want to give myself a prize." The team who accumulated the most points by the end of the game each received a prize, as did the team to come in second place. Every week the prizes were different, so they could never guess what Brittany would bring next. That was half the fun.

Shrugging, Dave replied, "That's easily fixed. Just give your prize to me since I'm today's host." Cindy, his 'secret' girlfriend that everyone knew about elbowed him in his side. "Or um you may give it to Cindy my assistant," he quickly amended. A few people chuckled as well as Hannah. Brittany turned her head to hide a smile.

"Tell you what? No matter if my team wins or not, both of you will receive a prize for being honorary hosts. How does that sound?" Of course, Dave and Cindy liked that proposal. "Alright, then let's choose our teammates guys. Remember, choose someone different from who you were paired with last week."

Though a couple of people thought about teaming up with the A.C., Hannah managed to sidle up to her first. With a smile on her face she asked Brittany if she would like to be her partner. The brunette couldn't have said no if her life depended on it.

Within moments, the group was successfully paired up. During the game a total of six questions would be asked, worth ten points each, except for the last when the teams could wager any points they had. Each team member had to answer three questions about their partner and if they were correct ten points was added to their score. Akin to the Newlywed Game, each contestant wrote

down the answers to questions that their partners had to guess, except they did it before the game started. Sitting far apart from each other, eight people secured their responses on sheets of construction paper. It didn't take too long before everyone was finished and then it was time to start Know Your Neighbor!

Team one consisted of Brian and Keith. Team two, Lauren and Tamara. Team three, Hannah and Brittany. And team four Jimmy and Elaine. Lifting the flashcards in his hand, Dave welcomed everyone to the 'show' and explained the rules, although they were already aware how to play. Each pair sat behind a separate desk a few feet in front of Dave and his lovely assistant Cindy.

"Are you all ready?" They gave a collective nod. "Okay!" Turning to Team 1, wearing a high voltage smile, Dave read from the first card, "Brian, earlier we asked Keith what his favorite color was. What do *you* think it is for ten points?"

Brian's face screwed up in thought. "Aah, well he likes to wear brown a lot so I'll guess that color. Brown Dave."

His disappointment showing, Keith raised his paper so that everyone could see what he had written. "It's yellow Brian. Why would my favorite color be brown? Who loves brown that much? It's just...brown!" He looked as though he secretly wished to slap his teammate with the construction paper.

Brian appeared on the verge of tears. Keith had been his best friend as well as his roommate for the past six months. Therefore, he didn't want to displease him. "I'm sor...sorry Keith. I...I'll do bet...better," he replied, his voice sounding childlike.

"Hey Bri," Brittany started, leaning back in her chair so that she could see him, "you didn't do anything wrong. Brown is a good guess. Personally, I love it a whole bunch." When she smiled at him he smiled back. "And Keith don't be so hard on him, alright? This is only a game. The point is to have fun. You guys are buds so there's no need to yell 'kay?'" Thoroughly ashamed, Keith apologized to Brian and the two men shared a hearty hug. "That's what I like to see!" Looking toward the host, Brittany informed him that he could continue.

"Great." Dave gave her a sly look. "And don't think I missed your possible hint about personally loving brown a whole bunch."

Brittany's expression turned into one of complete innocence. "What hint? I'll have you know that I wasn't hinting that brown is my favorite color, 'cause it ain't."

"Brit!" She merely snickered as the host shook his head as if he was wondering what he would do with her. "Okay, let's continue. Lauren, what do you think is Tamara's favorite color?" She immediately answered green, which the other woman confirmed as she excitedly waved her construction paper around. While Cindy used a red marker to write ten points below Team 2's names on a large whiteboard, Dave turned to Hannah and Brittany. "Hannah, do you have any idea what Brittany's favorite color is?"

Glancing into her teammate's eyes Hannah smiled and replied, "I haven't known her long, but she wears blue jeans often so I'll just say blue."

Performing a little dance in her chair, Brittany raised her paper, which had the word blue scrawled across it. "Blue it is!"

"Excellent! Cindy Team 3 earns 10 points as well! Good job!" Asking Team 4 the same question, Jimmy was close with his reply of pink. However, Elaine's favorite color turned out to be red, so a zero was added underneath their names. Both good sports, they kept on smiling. After all, with five questions to go they could catch up. "Now for question two. And speaking of the number two, Team 2 we'll start with you. Tamara, we asked Lauren if she had any tattoos. Does she?"

"I know she doesn't like shots so I couldn't see her getting a tattoo. So, no."

Grinning, Lauren lifted her answer to be viewed. A capital N and O stood proudly. As everyone clapped, Cindy changed their score from ten to twenty.

"Nice one Tamara," Dave complimented. "Brit, what do you think? Is your partner sporting any tattoos?"

Brittany thought her about her answer for less than five seconds. "No, I don't think Hannah is the tattoo type."

Hannah raised her sheet of paper, which had a yes on it. The A.C.'s shocked expression caused her to start laughing. "I'm curious. According to you, what is the tattoo type Brit?"

"Um, I dunno." Distracted by the blonde's unexpected answer, Brittany wondered where that tattoo or *those* tattoos were and what kind of the permanent creations did she have. "Where is your tattoo?"

A devilish grin slipped onto Hannah's lips. Leaning toward the other woman she whispered, "Wouldn't you like to know?" She was pleased when her flirty response produced a blushing Activity's Coordinator.

Moving on, Dave asked the question to Team 4 and 1, both of which guessed correctly, giving them their first points of the game. "Hannah, let's start with you now. Question three. Hannah, would you describe Brittany as a lover, a fighter, or a little bit of both?" Lowering his flashcard he added, "And when I say lover, I don't necessarily mean that in a sexual way."

The author smiled at him. "Understood Dave." Growing quiet, she gave the question considerable thought. "In the past I might have said fighter but that changed. Though I wouldn't call her a straight lover either." An abrupt laugh escaped Hannah at how her statement sounded. Obviously aware of Brittany's sexual orientation, others knowingly laughed. Showing her own blushing skills, Hannah continued, "I think she's a delightful mix of both--fiery yet gentle-- so that's my answer Dave. Brittany is a little bit of both."

Why the younger woman deemed that she used to be a fighter in the few days they had known one another puzzled Brittany, though she didn't question it. However, she intended to do so later. "I am a little bit of both!" The A.C. excitedly stated, further confirming with her written answer. The host congratulated the team members as they slapped hands.

"Good going! You're now tied with Team 2. Now Jimmy, same question goes to you. Is Elaine a lover, a fighter, or mix of both?"

Jimmy looked the slightest bit hesitant as he said, "Lover Dave."

Dave beamed in his direction. "That's correcto mungo Jimmy!" When the host asked Teams 1 and 2, Brian guessed correctly whereas Lauren changed her right answer at the last moment. All tied up, the game continued, starting with Team 4. "The questions are getting a tad harder now," Dave warned. "So think carefully before giving your answers. Elaine, what do you think Jimmy's favorite hobby is?"

She smiled, one hundred and ten percent sure that she knew the answer. "That's an easy one. Nearly everyday I see him asking people for their discarded envelopes. He loves to collect stamps. Just yesterday I gave him the stamp from a letter I received."

With a gleeful giggle, Jimmy raised his paper. "She's right. My favorite hobby is stamps! I have a whole bunch of 'em."

"I know," Dave responded with a smile. "I've given you at least two dozen in the past. Nice job folks. As Cindy has noted," he pointed to the woman capable of taking Vanna White's place, "you two are now in the lead with 30 points!" The host turned to Team 1. "Keith, same question." Within seconds, Keith gave his answer causing his team to remain at 20 points. The most competitive in the group, all in attendance could tell that he was upset by it, but he managed to smile--a little bit. Announcing that Lauren's favorite hobby was knitting, Tamara gained her team another ten points. Hoping that she wouldn't give another wrong answer, Brittany guessed that Hannah's favorite hobby was writing. Luckily, hope was on her side.

"Awesome round team! Teams 2, 3, and 4 are all tied with 30 points. This is a mighty close game." Flipping to the next flashcard, Dave looked at Brian. "Are you ready for the next question Brian?" The other man nodded. "Alright, good luck man." A brief pause and then he began to read. "What Disney character does Keith like best?"

"Aah, Daffy Duck?"

Sighing loudly, Keith showed his answer with disappointed eyes on his teammate. "I'm a fan of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh. Daffy Duck is from Warner Bros. He asked you about Disney characters, not Warner Bros. Brian. Why don't you try listening before you speak," he finished in a reproving tone.

"Sorry Keith." In a vain attempt at lessening his roommate's anger, Brian added, "I like Eeyore

too. He's the best of Winnie's group of friends." Actually, his opinion was that Piglet was the best, but that wouldn't help him to get on Keith's good side.

"Did I ask if you liked Eoyore? That information won't help us to regain those ten points you just lost." Rising from her chair, Brittany walked over toward Keith telling him to leave the room. He looked up at her disbelievingly. "What?"

"You heard me. I gave you one chance and that's the only one you get today. You're disqualified. Brian will receive the ten points from this round and if he wins the game will not only obtain his prize but yours. If you want to rehash this later you know that my office is always open, but I will not allow you to keep mistreating Brian--the person you call your friend. And speaking of friends, why don't you go to your room and think about what being a true friend entails."

Too furious to speak, Keith pushed his chair back and stormed out of the room, the soles of his shoes pounding on the floor as he walked. After checking Brian to assure that he was all right, Brittany returned to her seat. Dave reread question five for Lauren.

Grinning she responded, "Tamara's favorite character is what she is--Goofy." Wrapping her arm around the other woman's shoulders she added, "And I love that."

Brown eyes rolling in a playful manner, Tamara confirmed her teammate's answer. "Look who's talking," she teasingly replied while slipping her free arm around Lauren's waist.

Chuckling at their antics, Dave moved on to Hannah. "And you Hannah? Who do you suppose is Brit's favorite Disney character?"

As if one million dollars was on the line, the petite blonde gazed toward her lap while trying to come up with the correct answer. There were so many Disney characters to choose from. Which of them could be Brittany's absolute favorite? She took so long that Dave had to remind her she had fifteen seconds left. Nodding, Hannah settled on the head Disney character.

"My answer is Mickey Mouse." She sounded more confident than she felt.

The host slowly cocked an eyebrow. "Final answer?"

Smiling at him, Hannah nodded again. "Final answer Dave."

His eyes shifted to Team 3's other member. "Ms. Sparrow please show us your response to the question." Dave barely enunciated Brittany's surname before she flipped her paper over for everyone's viewing. With that, Hannah became the second person (Tamara was the first) in the history of Know Your Neighbor to guess all of her answers correctly. Several people including her partner congratulated her. Her sudden blush increased when Brittany squeezed her hand and much to her delight kept it within her grasp.

As soon as Jimmy gave his answer, which unfortunately was the wrong one, Dave explained how round six would proceed. Lauren, Hannah, and Jimmy would be able to wager however

many points they wanted, depending on how confident they were that their teammates would give the right answer. Securing their bets on flashcards they would only reveal the amounts when their partners responded to the question that Dave posed.

Their heads bowing, all three wrote a number on a flashcard before placing it on the table before them. Dave was just about to reveal the question when Brittany asked him to wait. Despite his ex-partner's recent behavior, Brian should have been able to participate. "Bri, if you want to wager any of your 30 points, Dave could quietly ask Cindy her answer to question six and then you could try to guess it. Would you be interested or would you rather keep the points you have now?"

Wearing a huge smile because he would get to play in the final round, Brian informed the Activity Coordinator that he was indeed interested. Grabbing his flashcard, he quickly scribbled a number on it while Cindy whispered her answer to the host.

"Okay, now it's time for the bonus round of Know Your Neighbor," Dave stated with a smile. "Any of you could win because it's a very close game. Good luck to you all. I'll begin with Team 1. Brian," Dave lifted his flashcard, although he had already memorized the words on it written in Brittany's neat penmanship, "If Cindy were ice cream, what flavor would she be?"

There was merely a two second pause before Brian gave his reply. "I think strawberry because at lunch she eats the strawberry ice cream a lot. She doesn't like chocolate. When she has chocolate she swaps it for somebody else's strawberry. I gave her my strawberry once 'cause I don't really like that flavor." He appeared pleased though he hadn't been told whether he was wrong or not. Dave and Cindy's resulting smiles assured him that he was.

"Congratulations Brian! Cindy did choose strawberry. Now how many of your points did you wager?" His flashcard having twenty written on it, Cindy totaled his final score. With fifty points, Brian waited to see if that would be enough to win the game. Skipping Teams 2 and 3 since they had the most points to wager, Dave repeated the question for Elaine.

The young woman looked stupefied. "Gosh, there are so many flavors out there. I mean Baskin Robbins has what? A couple hundred?" A few players chuckled.

"Just give it your best shot. It's okay."

"Um," she inhaled deeply. "I'll say the most obvious flavor. Vanilla."

Jimmy held up his construction paper that had the flavor cookies 'n cream written on it instead of plain vanilla. Hugging his partner, he explained that at least she had been close to guessing correctly. She merely left the cookies out. That managed to get a bright smile out of Elaine. Having wagered the majority of their points, they ended up with five left, though neither looked upset.

"Tamara, if Lauren were ice cream what flavor would she be?"

"Coconut because she *is* a nut."

Snickering, Lauren showed her answer (rocky road) to everyone. "Great. You're goofy and I'm a nut. We make quite a pair." They lost fifteen of the forty points they had gained from previous questions, yet the duo didn't care because they were secretly rooting for Brian. Having to endure someone like Keith, he deserved to win.

"Brit, it's all up to you now," Dave began. "Your answer will decide who wins this game. Will it be you and Hannah or Brian?"

The A.C. smirked. "No pressure there Dave." She was on the verge of answering when Hannah started coughing so vigorously that Brittany clapped her on the back. One hand partially covering her mouth, the blonde looked at her partner mouthing the words 'don't say chocolate'. No one but Brittany was privy to the message since Hannah shaded her moving lips well. Was chocolate the right answer? And if it was why didn't Hannah want her to say it? Though being competitive wasn't in her nature, Brittany never attempted to lose at anything. *If we lose Brian will win the--oh!* She knowingly glanced toward her now composed teammate. *Aren't you a sweet one?*

"Brit?"

"Yes Dave?"

"Are you intending to answer today?" He grinned.

She nodded. "There's a strong possibility that I might. Yes."

"And?"

"And my answer is chocolate...chip."

Snapping her fingers, Hannah looked saddened. At least that was the way she had been intending to look. With that kind of performance if she ever endeavored to be one, she would have a difficult time trying to make a living as an actress. Raising her card, she allowed everyone to see that her paper had chocolate ice cream written on it.

"Ooh, that's too bad," Dave sympathetically stated. "How many of your team's 40 points did you wager Hannah?"

The blonde showed him her flashcard. "Dave I made it a true Know Your Neighbor and bet all of our points, which means that we end up with nada."

"Ooh, that's right," the host regretfully agreed. Within the blink of an eye he wore a broad smile that he directed toward Brian. "Brian congratulations to you, because with 50 points you are today's Know Your Neighbor winner! Tamara and Lauren, with 25 points you are the runner-ups! Good job." All three cheered as Brittany raised a hand in order to get Dave's attention.

"What can I do for you Brit?"

"In addition to the prizes you and Cindy will receive for hosting and Brian, Tamara and Lauren will receive for winning, I've decided we're gonna have a pizza party on Friday so in a way everybody wins!"

Everyone cheered at the announcement because who didn't love pizza?

"That was fun."

Brittany smiled bright enough to rival the sun's rays. "I knew you'd like it." Opening the door, she waited for the other woman to enter before she did.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed. Think you might be up to joining us again tomorrow? I know you're coming to the pizza party, right?"

Sitting on the edge of her bed, Hannah smiled up at Brittany. "Like you told Dave there is a strong possibility that I will and yes. I could never pass up a good party." Sitting beside her, the A.C. asked her how she knew that the party would be good. Hannah gazed into her eyes as she softly stated, "Because you'll be there."

When her eyes strayed to the young author's lips, Brittany quickly looked away. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Look at me in such a way and say things...sweet things like you've known me for years instead of a week?" She chanced a look at Hannah while she waited for her to reply.

"Perhaps I have." Her brows dancing up and down, Hannah granted her a teasing smile as though she harbored a great secret. "Did you still want to know about my tattoo?"

Clever girl. Changing the subject to something else I wanted to discuss. Brittany decided to let her get away with it. "Yes, I did. Where are you keeping it?"

"I've found that my skin works best."

The A.C. smirked. "Where on your skin I mean?"

Instead of answering, Hannah proceeded to unbutton her shirt. Since she was focused on freeing the little buttons, she missed Brittany's equally horrified and fascinated expression. Just as the brunette spied the edge of a white bra, she stopped her friend from any further unbuttoning.

"If it's in a private place you don't have to show me. I mean you don't have to show me regardless if you don't want to, but especially if it's somewhere that I shouldn't see." Brittany glanced toward the door just to make sure that no one was looking in on them.

Grinning, Hannah resumed what she had been doing. "Trust me, it's not in a private area." Her grin enlarged. "What did you think? I got a tattoo on one of my boobs?"

Brittany shrugged, looking everywhere but at the author's chest. "It's possible. Not like women haven't done it before."

After a pause Hannah nodded while turning to face away from the other woman. "That's true. However, mine is on the back of my shoulder." Pulling her shirt down, she showed Brittany her right shoulder that had a small dark blue symbol imprinted on it. Brittany had no clue what it stood for, but it reminded her of a Chinese marking.

Disobeying common sense, an index finger lightly traced along the lines and curves that made up the symbol. "Is this a Chinese symbol?" The only sound in the room after her question was their breathing. Taking her finger away, Brittany slowly moved until she could view Hannah's face. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes closed and those soft lips slightly parted and glossy as though she had just dampened them with her tongue. "Hannah?" she whispered. Brittany watched as she opened her eyes. Hannah glanced over her shoulder just as the brunette scooted backward.

"Did you say something?" Her voice sounded breathy.

"Is your tattoo a Chinese symbol?"

Nodding, Hannah pulled her shirt back into place and started to button it up. "Yes. It stands for love." She moved until she was facing Brittany. "I had it done about two months ago." Wondering how her new friend would respond she added, "I used to have tattoos when I was Gabrielle." Hannah chuckled. "I was scared out of mind but I went through with it."

Before she could talk herself out of it, Brittany asked, "Do you think that I could be the reincarnation of Xena?"

Cocking her head to the side, Hannah studied her. "Are you sure that you want to be having this conversation?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because it might change your opinion of me and you'll become one of them."

"Them? Who are them?"

"Them are those people who think that I'm crazy. I don't want you to feel that way about me Brittany."

The A.C. placed her hand on a nearby knee. "That's not the way that I feel about you and I never could. Never."

"So how do you feel about me?"

Brittany faintly smiled. "I believe I asked you a question that I haven't received an answer to."

"Yes."

Her heart skipped a beat. Though she had been expecting that response, it was still mind blowing to know that Hannah thought her to be her long lost soul mate. She had to rack her brain for a suitable reply. "Because I look like her?"

"That and because I feel it. As peculiar as it may sound to you, I am one hundred percent positive that you are my soul mate. From the beginning of time you and I might have met countless times as different people in different places. Xena and Gabrielle was one of them. You and I are the latest. I wish that I could prove it to you."

Brittany thought about the dream she had of Xena and Gabrielle on Sunday morning. Could it have truly taken place? If it had then according to Hannah she should know about it. Their crucifixion hadn't been in her book so maybe it happened after she returned to the present. Perhaps Gabrielle and Xena died on the cross and in that precise moment Hannah was catapulted back into the future. Or maybe this was all in Hannah's mind and she was confused about the six years she spent in a catatonic state. Yes, that was probably it because *there is no such thing as reincarnation*.

"I had a dream about Xena and Gabrielle. I thought it was you and I until they referred to each other by those names. The scene wasn't from your book."

Hannah appeared thrilled to hear this. This might have been the proof she needed to convince Brittany that she spoke the truth. "What was happening?"

"We--they were about to be executed. Do you remember anything like that?"

"I do," Hannah softly replied. "Julius Caesar ordered their deaths. And you'd know from my novel and maybe even from history lessons that he was quite fond of crucifying people." She looked thoroughly disgusted. "He was a power hungry bastard."

Brittany persuaded herself that that was only a lucky guess. How many ways could there have been to formally execute someone two thousand years ago? It wasn't like they had the lethal injections or the gas chamber. Crucifying was most likely a major thing. Plus, she recalled something about beheading's. Yes, simply a lucky guess.

"In my dream they were waiting in a cell..." The A.C. trailed off, interested to see if Hannah would continue and what she would say.

"Callisto--you remember reading about Callisto?"

Brittany mutely nodded.

"She obtained Xena's chakram, sent it flying toward her and broke her spine while she was battling Roman soldiers. She went down and Gabrielle who had given up fighting in favor of the way of love picked up a sword and started slaying those soldiers left and right. Knowing that Xena was seriously wounded was just too much. She had to fight. She had to defend her partner, her soul mate. Of course, they were apprehended anyway and put into that cell to wait for their imminent execution."

"I made you leave the way of love", Xena's clearly spoken statement echoed through her mind. To her amazement it was all coming together. Hannah's explanation was connecting to her dream very neatly. The broken spine was the reason for the intense back pain that felt so real. Gabrielle's leaving the way of love in order to save her was the reason Xena felt such guilt after awakening in the cell. *I had a choice.*

Looking at Hannah, the A.C. said, "She had a choice. To do nothing..."

Gently smiling, the author smoothly picked up where she left off, "or save my friend. I chose the way of friendship. At least I think those are the exact phrases she uttered. It's been a long time."

"No, that was it," Brittany assured her while shaking her head. Was this really happening? Was Hannah truly supplying the details to her dream? *Oh my God, it has to be real. There's no way she could know the contents of my dream. This is the first time I've spoken about it.* "Um, Hannah?"

"Yes?"

"I wish I had read your scrolls just once."

The author immediately grinned while running the back of her hand across her eyes. "Well you read my book so you're off the hook. However, if you'd read my scrolls I'm sure you would have liked them."

"I know," Brittany whispered, falling into a bit of a trance as she stared into emeralds shining with tears. Aware that she was moving toward Hannah but not being able to stop it, she could feel the younger woman's warm breath as their lips drew closer.

BEEP BEEP!!!

Heart slamming into the pit of her stomach, Brittany wondered what that noise was until it occurred to her that it was her pager. Breathing a sigh of relief, she unclipped the small gadget from the waistband of her pants and read the short message on its screen. She had to leave, which was just as well. *Kissing the patient, even if you now realize said patient definitely shouldn't be a*

resident of SMU, is a gigantic no-no. Kissing Brittany would be terrific. However, kissing her just before running off to the unemployment line would be not so terrific.

"As much as I hate to, I have to go now," the A.C. disappointingly stated as she replaced her pager. "My services have been requested at another station."

Hannah smiled despite not being able to feel those lips. "You're in demand."

Returning the smile, Brittany at least kissed her cheek before standing. In a dramatic voice she responded, "Yes, this place would fall apart without me."

Snickering, Hannah walked her the five feet it took to get to the door. "I shudder to think how chaotic it would be." Pausing she then asked the other woman when she would see her again.

"I might be busy for the duration of my shift but I'll stop by first thing tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good. See you in the morning then."

"So I'm Xena?" Brittany asked while entering Room 31. Barely getting a wink of sleep, she had thought about it all night. She was the main character in the author's book. Though difficult to believe, she knew it was true. Reincarnation existed. *She* existed as a mighty warrior princess two thousands years ago. Utterly amazing.

"You used to be Xena in another life." Hannah chuckled as she returned to her breakfast, which consisted of a croissant, bacon, scrambled eggs and a mixed fruit salad. Offering her friend something to eat, Brittany only took a piece of cantaloupe.

"So what happened? You and Xena were put on the crosses, you died and then were returned to the 21st century?"

Shaking her head, Hannah swallowed a forkful of eggs. "We died but that wasn't the end. Remember I told you that Xena died but that wasn't the death I was referring to. When she died again, Gabrielle was still alive. That's when I was returned, a day after I lost her."

Brittany stared open mouthed. Say what? "If you died on the crosses how could she have died again?"

"Resurrection." Waving her fork in the brunette's direction she added, "You'll find out more about it in the sequel. The crucifixion, the events leading up to and after it will be in my next novel."

"So you're telling me that I'll have to wait?"

Hannah hid her grin behind a glass of apple juice. "Yep."

"But I'm one of the primary people," Brittany argued. "I should know how I died, how I was rejuvenated and then how I permanently died again."

"Doesn't matter. You'll still have to wait. If you'd like, you could read it while I write." Brief pause. "Or you could have another one of those nifty dreams."

"Ha ha." When a grape sailed her way, the A.C. managed to catch it in her mouth.

Hannah looked impressed. "Nice catch."

"That's what a lot of women tell me."

Despite Hannah still being an SMU patient, it had been a good week. Attending Brittany's 2 o'clock activity class on a daily basis, she had gotten to know the group better, including Keith whose attitude had somewhat improved. At least it did when they played games where the winner wouldn't receive a prize.

For the first on Friday she attended the Activity Coordinator's group counseling session as well as the activities/pizza party, which Brittany had went all out for by ordering five different types of pizzas, a bucket of buffalo wings and beverages. Just how much of her paycheck did she spend on the patients every week? Except for Thursday, every day that Hannah had been present Brittany brought something for them.

Since it was Saturday evening now, she was on her way home and wouldn't be back until Tuesday. Hannah had been partially depressed all day, thinking about the long two days ahead she would have to spend in this place without Brittany. Grabbing a pencil and a writing tablet, she began to draw, hoping that that would take her mind off of it. Within ten minutes she had sketched a sailboat floating along calm waters. A small smile turned the corners of her mouth as she thought about Brittany singing *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*--her favorite song to whistle. Hannah had heard her whistling it three times since she mentioned that she liked to.

Continuing to draw, the author added mountains in the distance. She was about to brighten up the picture with a sun when there was a knock on her door, which now remained unlocked until evening. This meant that she was free to come and go as she liked.

Standing, Hannah began to smile as she discovered who her visitor was through the tiny observation window. Opening the door, she greeted the woman standing on the other side of it. She was graced with the most adorable smile.

"Hi," Brittany said, sounding shy as a schoolboy with a crush on the class's prettiest girl. "I just wanted to stop by to say goodnight to you before I left."

"Okay. Goodnight." Pretending like she thought that their conversation was over, Hannah made to close the door. She laughed when Brittany hurriedly stuck her hand in the way.

"Hey! What're you--" Starting to grin, Brittany dropped her hand. "Oh, I see. You tried to fool me."

"I tried *and* I succeeded."

"You always this much of a braggart?"

"No, most of the time it's much worse."

The A.C. expelled a low short whistle. "Two witty replies one after the other. You're good."

"How would you know when you haven't even tried to kiss me yet?" Hannah brazenly retorted. Flirting with Brittany had become a favorite pastime of hers. She had done it nearly a dozen times during the last few days. However, the Activity Coordinator wasn't very encouraging since she rarely flirted back. This obviously hadn't deterred Hannah. She could tell that Brittany wanted to, yet she refrained from doing so.

Having no control of her cheeks, they fused with red. That was becoming a habit. During the past week, Brittany had blushed more times because of Hannah than she had with anyone else in her entire life combined. The playful green eyes staring at her, dared her to come back with something equally flirty. Brittany attempted not to disappoint this time. She had been a good employee all week so one itty-bitty salacious comment wouldn't hurt anything.

"If I recall correctly I intended to kiss you on Tuesday, but my pager interrupted our moment. However, just kissing you wouldn't prove to me that you're good." Allowing her eyes to rake over the smaller woman's body, a deliberate sexy smile (at least she hoped it was sexy) formed on her lips. "I would require a more thorough...examination to conclude that."

If Hannah's resulting smile meant anything, she approved. "Spend the night with me Brit." The flirt in her had quickly dissipated. She sounded earnest and a little timid. When Brittany's mouth moved several times without words coming from it, the author figured she should clarify. "I'm not asking you to make love to me. I just want to be in your arms tonight."

Brittany swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. She couldn't begin to explain how much those few words touched her. "Believe me, I would love to do that, but it's not allowed. Another employee could notice that I'm in here." She indicated the observation window.

"I know for a fact that you'll be safe. I can guarantee you that after my 7 o'clock medication no one checks in on me. Unless there's a problem, the nightshift must stay at their designated stations because rarely do I see someone pass by my door and if they do they don't look inside. Plus, that window isn't large enough to see too much."

Brittany weighed the pros and cons of spending the night in Hannah's room. The pro of getting to

hold her all night outweighed a mountain of cons. After assuring that she was alone in the hall, she fully walked into the room and shut the door behind her. "At seven does the nurse lock your door for the night after giving you your medication?" Hannah nodded. "Then I'll shimmy under the bed until she leaves." Hannah snickered. "What's so funny *Gabrielle*?"

"I doubt that you'll be able to accomplish that *Xena*."

One eyebrow rose trying to look dangerous, yet miserably failed. "Are you implying that I'm too big?"

"Yes, which is a very good thing in my opinion." Hannah glanced toward the bottom of her bed. "You'd have to be Calista Flockhart to get under there and that woman is too damn skinny." She grinned. "I'm no vegetarian--I like a woman with some meat on her bones."

"Well Hannah you are my kinda girl."

"Am I your girl?" The timidity had returned.

A hearty yes was Brittany's immediate thought, but should she say it aloud? What would be so terribly wrong about it? What happened to be truly wrong were Hannah's parents keeping her locked away just because they were afraid of how she might reflect on them. *No, let's not go there tonight. Forget all of it; forget everyone else for this night. Concentrate on the little beauty standing before you waiting for answer instead of talking to yourself you goof.*

"You want to be?" Taking the easier road, she answered a question with a question.

"Answering my question with one of your own, eh?" Hannah looked amused.

Brittany wore a sheepish expression. *You're getting to know me rather quickly my dear.* "Uh, you think that was my intention?"

The blonde laughed. "I see you've got that method down pat."

"Yes."

Green eyes narrowed in thought. "Are you agreeing with me?"

"I'm answering your umm...question."

"The first one?"

"Uh huh."

Running her fingers through her hair, Hannah laughed again. "You are making this *very* easy!" It was apparent by the tone of her voice that she wished to add a 'not' between 'are' and 'making'.

Placing her hands on Hannah's waist, the A.C. pulled until a warm petite body was pressed against her own. Her mouth seeking out Hannah's, their lips merged for the first time in this lifetime. Moving until the author's back made contact with a nearby wall, Brittany cupped a firm buttock while she teased soft lips with tiny flicks of her tongue. Simultaneously, the pair moaned when mouths opened and tongues collided, briefly stroking until Brittany ended it, placing small kisses on the corners of Hannah's mouth before stepping back.

Though her breathing was a tad harsh, she grinned. Her knees felt so weak that she couldn't wait to sit down. "Does that make it any easier for you?"

Hannah could only utter two words. "Oh yeah."

Upon awakening, a smile tugged at Brittany's lips as she felt soft puffs of air against her neck. She carefully scooted backward until she could easily view the angelic face of a young woman whom she had shared the best night's sleep with. Brittany never had much trouble sleeping, but getting to share a bed with Hannah was a major bonus. The thought of sleeping alone in her own bed tonight dismayed her. Her head shook back and forth on the pillow it rested on. *One night and I'm hooked already.*

"I love you," she whispered. The words that felt so right to say effortlessly flowed from her mouth. She loved Hannah so much she ached. Her feelings had nothing to do with her knowledge of the deep love sown between Xena and Gabrielle so long ago. Though she realized the special bond the duo had shared, her feelings for Hannah would have developed with or without learning about them. They had actually taken root the moment Brittany first saw her.

"I love you too," came the soft reply. Slowly opening her eyes, Hannah tenderly smiled at her now blushing bed buddy.

The little author loved her too? If hearts could truly soar, Brittany's would have been sailing above the clouds by then. "Were you playing possum?"

Hannah continued to smile. "I'm a light sleeper." Bridging the minute gap between them, she snuggled closer to her human teddy bear. "Mm, you feel so good."

Brittany circled an arm around her waist. "So do you sweetheart." When it occurred to her that there was sunlight in the room, she glanced over Hannah to look at the time. She had to go soon. It was almost time for breakfast to be served and she didn't want to risk hiding in the bathroom again. Finding the side of Hannah's neck she took playful nips until the smaller woman started giggling. Grinning, Brittany found her mouth, depositing a gentle kiss there. "Hannah?"

"Yes Brittany?" Hannah sounded more joyful than the A.C. could ever recall.

"Please explain this one thing to me. How did we manage to get resurrected? I mean, how is that possible?"

"You don't believe in miracles?"

"I'm looking at one."

Vision blurring with tears, Hannah hugged her tightly. Their lips met again as did their souls.

Since she became extremely busy from the first moments she stepped inside the building on Tuesday morning, Brittany didn't manage to check on Hannah until nearly 12 o'clock. Not having seen or spoken with her since early Sunday morning, she had missed her more than she could say. Stopping at Room 31, she knocked yet the petite form lying on the bed didn't move. When Brittany repeated, Hannah still didn't budge.

Brow furrowing, she tried to open the door only to discover that it was locked. The furrow in Brittany's forehead deepened as she wondered why Hannah's door was locked when it was almost noontime. Her door was supposed to remain open between the hours of eight a.m. and seven p.m. Fishing out the key that she had kept with her, Brittany used it to let herself in.

Walking toward the bed, she kneeled on the floor and brushed the palm of her hand against a soft cheek. She recalled Hannah telling her that she was a light sleeper, yet her eyelids didn't so much as flutter today. An uncomfortable knot settling in the pit of her stomach, she called the other woman's name twice while gently shaking her shoulder until she began to arouse. Eyes opening with what seemed to be a great effort, Hannah focused on her. The first thing Brittany noticed was that her eyes were dazed and dilated. *What did they do to you while I was gone?*

"Hey. Hey you." She tried to smile, but it was little more than a pale imitation. "What're you doing in bed at this hour?"

"Tired." Brittany could barely hear the response. Bless her heart; Hannah managed a semblance of a smile. "Did I...pizza party?"

The A.C. felt physically ill. "Hm? I didn't catch what you said sweetheart."

Eyelids feeling as though someone had dropped a couple of pebbles on them began to close. "I missed...the pizza party?"

"No baby, you didn't miss it. That was on Friday. It's Tuesday now." Small pause. "You don't remember? You and Jimmy had a contest to see who could eat the most buffalo wings in five minutes and you won. Hannah? Sweetheart, are you still awake?" Evidently she had fallen back asleep since she didn't answer.

Starting to become so enraged that it scared her, Brittany left Room 31 and hurried toward Dr. Harper's office. Though she banged on the door there was no answer. Thinking that he must have been on his lunch break, she went to Station 1 where two nurses currently sat conversing with

each other. Interrupting, she asked about the patient Hannah Webster. Taking notice of the expression on her face, neither nurse would dare tell Brittany that it was confidential. They might have given her Hannah's medical file if she told them to.

"Uh, hi Brit," one nurse cautiously stated as though she were afraid to speak. "As of yesterday Ms. Webster started ECT treatments to relieve depression. She had to be given a strong sedative this morning because she was behaving in an extremely difficult manner while the doctor tried to administer her treatment." The nurse wore a please don't kill the messenger expression. Her co-worker tried to make herself invisible with silence.

"They started shocking her? She's not even depressed!"

Wincing, Nurse Lipton wished she had called in sick today. "Brit, I'm sure you're well aware that shock treatments are much more humane than they used to be. And she must have needed them if Dr. Harper ordered them."

"Son of a bitch." Brittany was speaking to herself now so the nurse held her tongue. Without another word she left.

That was it. She was getting Hannah out of there today if she had to kidnap her.

After driving around the courthouse a few minutes, Ben finally located a parking space and pulled into it. Shutting off the ignition, he glanced toward his fuming sibling. When she moved to open the door, he placed a hand on her arm. "Brittany, are you sure you want to do this?"

Showing up at his apartment less than an hour ago, she asked him if he had any knowledge of wiring. When Ben questioned her, she filled him in on the latest news concerning Hannah. Her intention was to confront Michael Webster and to somehow get the man to confess what he had done to his daughter. At least enough to threaten him with. Her thinking: if she had something over his head then he wouldn't hesitate to leave Hannah alone. Though Ben had tried to talk her out of it, she wouldn't listen to him. So, he insisted that he tag along just to guarantee that Brittany wouldn't assault the man. Not that the judge wouldn't have deserved every blow.

"I can't think of another way to get her released."

"Then why don't we go back to my place and put our heads together? I'm sure we could come up with something."

"No." She couldn't have sounded more resolute so Ben caved with a sigh.

"Alright, but please Brit...don't hurt him."

"I'd like to rip his balls off." Brittany's voice was now dangerously calm. The type of calm where the other party wished that they would just scream because it wasn't half as disturbing.

Ben audibly gulped. She looked deadly serious. "Um, we don't want Mom and Dad to have to come bail us out so don't do that either, 'kay?"

"Excuse me, you can't go in there." The anxious secretary hurried after the pair making a beeline for Judge Webster's chambers. They had totally ignored her pleas to stop.

Throwing open the door, Brittany stormed inside with her brother following not far behind. Two startled faces swiveled in their direction. Brittany gave them a smile devoid of warmth. "Isn't this convenient? I've found you two together. That'll make this impromptu meeting that much easier." Making herself at home, she dropped into one of the chairs situated in front of the judge's desk. Occupying the chair next to her, Ben silently hoped that this would be over soon.

Standing behind them, the secretary looked at her boss apologetically. "I'm sorry Judge Webster. They wouldn't listen to reason."

Failing to take pity on her, Michael glared. "Why don't you go fetch a couple of guards to escort these people out of this building?"

"No, you don't really want her to do that," Brittany responded, causing the secretary's steps to falter. Having come prepared, the brunette opened the folder in her lap, sliding the first page across the desk. It landed in front of the judge who appeared hesitant to pick it up. "Oh, please read it your Honor. I think you might find it quite interesting." Pulling her flip phone from her pocket, she dangled it between her fingers, her expression quizzical. "I wonder if a lot of other people read that document would their interest be piqued?"

"What are you saying?" Michael ground out between clenched teeth. Moving closer to him, his wife read the sheet of paper over his shoulder, her mouth dropping open after the first sentence.

Scooting close enough so that the secretary wouldn't overhear, in a low voice Brittany replied, "What I'm saying is if you insist that your secretary find guards to take us out, then I guarantee you that that document will immediately show up on computers across the country." Indicating the phone, she added, "You see, I happen to have a computer expert for a close friend and he's agreed to help me out. If you disregard my warning I will call him--he's on speed dial by the way--and he will make sure that millions know of your shady past."

"You can't prove any of this," the judge argued.

Brittany grinned. "That's the thing about gossip. It can be true or fictional, but either way once it spreads you could be screwed. Now what're you gonna do? I think you're best bet is to listen to what I have to say."

"Leave us Joan," Rose Webster finally spoke up, making the decision for she and her husband. She couldn't tell whether the young woman was bluffing or not, but just in case she wasn't it was

better to do as they were told. "Never mind about the guards and please hold all of Michael's calls." Though still worried and now curious about the two unknown people the secretary nodded and left them to their privacy. Promptly after the door closed, Rose asked Brittany and Ben what they wanted.

"Simple. You stay out of your daughter's life and I'll stay out of yours."

"Where have I seen you before?" Michael questioned his uninvited guest.

"I've never had the displeasure of meeting you."

The judge ignored that comment. "I've seen you." A small pause ensued before he snapped his fingers. "Her drawings. She drew you." His eyes narrowed. "Are you the one who corrupted her? Made her believe that she's a dyke?" He started to rise as though intending on confronting Brittany physically when she ordered him to remain seated. For some reason he obeyed. When Rose placed a hand on his shoulder he shrugged it off.

"Corruption? You want to discuss corruption Mikey?" Brittany sat forward in her chair. "Okay, let's do that. How corrupt could you and your wife be, hmm? For years you abused Hannah, no doubt physically *and* mentally. What you both did to her was so horrible that it most likely drove her into that catatonic state for six years. Then after she recuperates from it you say to yourselves 'hey, let's fuck with our daughter's life some more by getting her locked in a sanitarium although we realize that we are the true mentally unbalanced ones'. And even that isn't enough. No, she needs electro convulsive therapy to battle her nonexistent depression. You paid to have your own flesh and blood endure premeditated seizures and to be pumped full of drugs. If none of that is corrupt I don't know what is."

Michael's face was nearly red with anger. "Listen you nosy bitch--"

"Judge, if you call my sister out of her name again I will gladly go to jail for assaulting you," Ben warned, looking as though he meant every word. "She's here on behalf of Hannah because she wants to protect her, which is something neither of you have ever accomplished or even attempted to. How could you have no shame?"

"We have nothing to be ashamed of," Rose insisted. "We love Hannah and want what's best for her." Her voice sounded mechanical as if she had repeated the phrase many times before.

"You mean you want what's best for you," Brittany remarked. "You couldn't care less about what she wants because if you did she would be in her home right now working on her second novel and living her life the way she chooses. Instead she's doped up lying listlessly in a bed. Explain to me how that's best?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Brittany Sparrow the Activity Coordinator at SMU and I've gotten to know Hannah over the last couple of weeks. She's a wonderful young woman and for the life of me I can't fathom why

you and your wife would want to hurt her."

"We don't want to--"

"What's with all the broken bones Judge?" Ben questioned. "Your daughter wasn't that clumsy growing up."

"We don't have to put up with these accusations." Michael nervously twirled his wedding band around his finger. "I don't know what you expected to come of--"

"I told you right off what I expected. I want you and your wife to stay out of Hannah's life. She's a grown woman and doesn't need either of you making her decisions for her. She's fully capable. If you don't, everything we have discussed and more will become public knowledge. All of this," Brittany raised the folder in her hand, "has been stored onto a neat little disk that other neat little disks could be made from, which could fall into hands I'm sure you both rather not have them fall into. Now there are those who might believe you are innocent. As for the rest..." She trailed off with a shrug. "I don't know what this would do for your careers."

"You don't have anything on us." Michael's voice didn't appear fully confident, nor did the look on his wife's face.

"Don't I? Okay, let's say the years of abuse is pure speculation. What about the money you spent to have Hannah committed? You two are well aware of the law so you must realize that bribery is illegal."

"We've done no such thing."

Brittany shook her head. "Continuing to lie. You'd think after all these years you would be tired of it. Mikey, you refuse to admit that you paid Dr. Alex Harper \$50,000 so that he would assist you in keeping your daughter locked away for who knows how long?" She had expected that the doctor might have been compensated to keep quiet and her brother confirmed it with more research just before they headed to the courthouse. That Ben with his computer knowledge could find out what President Clinton ate for breakfast.

"We did not give any money to Dr. Harper."

Not immediately responding, Brittany rummaged through the folder until she found a particular page, giving it to the judge. "Is that not a copy of a check made out in your handwriting to Alex Harper for fifty-thousand dollars? It's quite a coincidence that Dr. Harper deposited that check only one day before Hannah was admitted to SMU. True, it is a requirement that Hannah's treatment be paid for, but you wouldn't give your payments to Dr. Harper. They would go to the hospital and fifty-thousand is far too much money."

"Once again, we never gave any money to Dr. Harper."

"That's not your check? Prove it. Let me see your checkbook."

Sitting back in his chair, Michael folded his arms over his chest. "I don't have to show you anything. You don't know what you're talking about. I suggest you leave before I have you arrested. My wife and I are decent people who dearly love our daughter despite what you foolishly believe."

"You call what you did love?"

"Everything I've ever done for Hannah has been out of love. *Everything*."

Something about the expression on his sister's face alarmed Ben seconds before she grabbed the double-edged blade letter opener from the judge's desk and then grabbed the judge around the collar of his shirt, slamming him against a wall. Her left arm pressing against Michael's throat, Brittany used her free hand to hold the letter opener inches from the crotch of his pants. Other than releasing a small whimper, the judge didn't speak nor did he fight to get away. However, both Ben and Rose pleaded with the angry woman holding him.

While glowering at Michael, Brittany spoke to them. "Ben please step back and Rose you better sit down in your husband's chair before I use this blade to open something besides envelopes. Do it." Without further protests, Ben took a few steps away from them and Rose slipped into the Italian leather chair. "Though my eyes are on your husband, Rose I'm talking to you too so listen up." Pausing, Brittany attempted to keep the hand gripping the letter opener's handle from shaking. Never in her life had she felt such malice toward another human being. She never realized that hate could be so intense.

"I can't understand how you and your wife can live with yourselves after everything you've done to Hannah. You both deserve to rot in a prison cell for the rest of your miserable lives. And if you did, maybe you'd be unfortunate enough to have cellmates who perform the acts on you that you forced on your child. You bastards would deserve every moment of it. However, I'm willing to make a trade. Your freedom from possibly going to prison for Hannah's freedom from you. And even if you managed not to do any time, no more judging and defending. You might have to learn to say 'would you like fries with that'." Brittany eased some of the pressure her arm had on Michael's neck. "So what will it be, hmm? You don't do what I want and I'll make your lives a living hell. You say you love your daughter then let her go."

"We," Rose started to stand before chilly blue eyes pinned her down. "We only wrote that check to help her," the lawyer sounded frightened, but not necessarily truthful. "It might have been the wrong thing to do, but--"

"Everything you've ever done was the wrong thing. Now what are you going to do today? I'm quickly losing any patience that I might have left with you." The tip of the letter opener grazed across Michael's zipper causing him to tremble.

"Okay, we'll leave Hannah alone if that's what she wants," Rose hurriedly replied.

"If you were Hannah would you want to be in your company?" Not answering, the other woman

glanced toward the desk, a guilty look flashing across her face. Brittany focused on the judge. "Are you in agreement with your wife?" With beads of sweat forming along his forehead, he nodded. "Good." To everyone's relief, Brittany released Michael and dropped his letter opener back on his desk.

"Oh, and just to have further insurance this entire conversation has been recorded so Rose thank you for confirming that you and Michael committed bribery. A truly honorable judge would appreciate the added evidence."

"You're getting what you want so I'm sure that could remain between us," Michael stated while trying to fix his wrinkled collar.

Brittany stared at him disdainfully. "I'm sure."

"Will you and your brother exit my chambers now?"

"Gladly." After obtaining her folder, she and Ben headed for the door.

"Ms. Sparrow?" Brittany looked toward the lawyer. "Will you please tell Hannah that we're sorry?"

"Mrs. Webster I think that she already realizes just how sorry you both are."

"You okay Brit?" Ben asked after having just removed the wire while they were still parked in the courthouse's lot. "For a moment there I thought you were going to make ripping the judge's balls off a reality. You might have been the first person to try severing someone's privates with a letter opener." Brittany laughed right before bursting into tears. Pulling her into his arms, Ben rubbed her back. "Hey, it's alright sis," he said, his voice gentle. "Why are you crying? It worked. They'll stay out of Hannah's life and she'll be just fine."

"I hate what they did to her. No child deserves what they did to her."

"No, they don't. But honey it's over now. Everything is going to be okay. She's got you in her corner."

Pulling back, Brittany looked at her brother. Her lips were quivering and damp with salty tears. "I love her Ben. That might seem strange to you since I haven't known her very long but I do love her so much."

Using his shirttail to dab at her cheeks, Ben caused his sister to smile and smiled in return. "Brit, I kinda already figured that one out."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I'm a young guy but I know love when I see it. Plus, you assaulted a judge for her. If that's not love, I don't have a clue what it is." He winked at her. "So what do you say we go get your love?"

She kissed his cheek. "When did you get so grown-up?"

"Relax. It's only temporary."

While Ben stayed in the car, Brittany headed into SMU, intent on going directly to Room 31. However, an angry doctor caught up with her first, grabbing her arm to keep her from getting away. Those who were in the area looked toward the pair curiously, including the nurse who had informed Brittany about the ECT treatments.

"Alex get your damn hand off of me," Brittany growled. "I'm not in a particularly good mood right now so don't tempt me."

"Neither am I," the doctor retorted while removing his hand. "I can't believe you confronted Ms. Webster's parents. How could you do that?"

"You know she shouldn't be in here. Don't you dare try to act like I'm the bad guy here. You were the one who accepted dirty money. You busted your ass at Harvard for what? To be a doctor who isn't above bribery? Evidently you forgot about the Hippocratic oath. Any respect I might have harbored for you is gone."

"And so is your job. You're fired."

Brittany humorlessly chuckled. "That's fine by me Alex because I was going to quit anyway."

"Clean out your office right now or your belongings will be tossed in the trash." With one final glare, the doctor walked away.

Gathering her courage, Nurse Lipton walked up to Brittany. "Brit, what's going on? Why did he...why are you quitting?" She hadn't heard much of their heated conversation before Dr. Harper loudly exclaimed that Brittany was fired.

The brunette sighed softly. "Um, it's a long story Sam."

Realizing she shouldn't pry, the nurse nodded in understanding. "I'll miss you Brit. It was like having a constant supply of sunshine with you working here." She looked as though she wanted to cry.

Smiling, Brittany hugged her. "I'll miss you too Sam. Listen, I'm sorry about earlier. I was upset, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"Don't you worry about that. You want me to get you a box?"

"Yes please. Thank you Sam."

Almost finished in her office, Brittany started removing the pictures from her walls when there was a knock on her door. Hoping that it wasn't Alex again, she glanced over her shoulder. Jimmy stood in the entrance of the door looking puzzled.

"Hiya Jimmy." Brittany carefully laid her framed pictures in the cardboard box. "What's up?" Instead of giving his usual response, he asked her what she was doing. Looking into his eyes, she hated to tell him. Placing the top on the box she then walked over to him. "Jimmy, I'm not going to be working here anymore."

"What? Why? Did we make you mad?"

"No, no. You didn't do anything wrong--I promise you. It's just time for me to move on. Marsha will be your A.C. until they find a permanent replacement. You like her right?"

"Yeah, but she's not you."

Blinking back tears, Brittany wrapped her arms around him. "I'm gonna miss you buddy, but I really do have to go, okay? We'll always be friends though. You have my number so will you please use it sometime?"

Jimmy nodded. "I will. I...I love you Brit. You've been my best friend."

She smiled at him. "I love you too man."

Her box of belongings in the trunk of Ben's car, Brittany had one more stop to make before she left this place forever. Finally making it to Room 31, she had to use her key since the door remained locked. Hannah was still sleeping, so while hoping that her back wouldn't give out, Brittany pulled the covers back before carefully lifting the author into her arms. The only item she took from the room that she thought Hannah wouldn't want to leave was her Walkman. With it tucked inside the deep pocket in her jacket, she headed out.

Ignoring the looks of those who wondered why she was carrying a sleeping patient, Brittany kept walking. As she had suspected would happen when she reached security, she was stopped by the guard on duty.

"Carrying out your stuff--that's your business," he started. "However, carrying out a patient is not something I'm going to allow you to do."

"She's no longer a patient. You can check with Dr. Harper on that. I'm sure he'll tell you the same thing."

"Oh, please just let her go," Alex said from behind them, saving the guard from having to page him. "She can leave with Ms. Webster if she wants to."

Though confused, the guard assisted Brittany in her departure by opening the double doors for her. Thanking him, she walked out and down a flight of steps to where her brother was parked on the curb. Hurrying to her, he held out his hands to take the small blonde. When Brittany showed the slightest bit of hesitance he smirked.

"I may be skinny but that doesn't automatically mean that I'm weak too. I promise not to drop her." Ben glanced toward her straining biceps. "You, I'm not so sure you'd be able to keep such a promise much longer. I'll put her in the car. Gimme my future sister-in-law."

Grinning because she liked the sound of that, Brittany allowed him to take Hannah. While Ben placed her in the backseat, Brittany turned around as she heard footsteps coming down the stairs. As he reached her, Alex held out an envelope to her, which she didn't take.

"Please accept this. It's a personal check from me."

"I don't want any money from you."

"It's not the money that the Websters gave me. I'm returning that to them. This is mine to you. Consider it a check for all the flirting you had to put up with." Although he smiled there was no joy in it.

Shaking her head, Brittany started toward the car, which her brother was leaning against, waiting. "Brittany, I'm sorry. Seems like I've been saying that a lot lately, but I really am. You were right. You were right about everything but I let my greed overrule my common sense and I'm so ashamed of myself. Could you forgive me?"

"It's not up to me to forgive you Alex." She opened the passenger door. "I have to go."

"You're unfired."

Brittany appeared faintly amused. "Then I quit."

Quickly extracting a hundred dollar bill and five twenties from his wallet, the doctor pressed the money into Brittany's palm. Before she could protest he said, "If you won't take the check at least accept that. It's the two hundred dollars I owed you for getting Ms. Webster to open up. I know you already turned it down but don't this time, okay? Let me give you something."

Looking at him, Brittany actually felt sympathy for the man. "Fine. I'll take it."

"You take care of yourself, alright?"

She nodded. "You too." Getting inside the car, her brother followed suit. After he put the key in the ignition, Brittany handed him the money she had just been given. "For all your help. Hush and keep it."

Ben smiled, folding the money and slipping it into his pocket. "Cool. Thanks sis. I think I'll use it to take Leah out on the town tonight. Maybe a candlelight dinner."

"You *are* my little brother right?"

"Ha ha."

2 months later

"Okay, so some dude named Eli with angel Callisto's help put his hands on us and we came back to life? That was all it took?"

The author chuckled. "First of all, Eli was much more than a dude and yes. That's pretty much how it happened?"

She looked dubious. "And this really happened? You're not making it up so this will be more interesting? I mean your writing is already terrific sweetheart. You don't need to embellish. This is an amazing chapter with a battle between demons and angels...evil and purity..."

Hitting the save button, Hannah closed the program before walking over toward the couch, which her beloved was sprawled across wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt that was delightfully tight. Straddling her, Hannah smiled. "Babe it happened. Trust me. I was there."

"You're not yanking my chain?" Brittany's lips curved into a grin.

"I don't want to yank your chain, but I would love to play with your padlock." A wandering hand found the apex of those silky boxers causing the one wearing them to moan.

"Mm, sweetheart I'm not done reading this chapter." Brittany lifted the stapled pages in her hand.

"So you would rather read than f-"

"Hey young lady, watch your mouth!" Snickering, she tossed the chapter onto the coffee table and wrapped her arms around Hannah's waist.

Innocent emerald eyes gazed down at her. "I wasn't going to say *that*!"

"Sure. What were you going to say then?"

"So you would rather read than frolic with your girlfriend?"

"I've changed my mind. I rather frolic now and read later."

"Positive?" Hannah was already headed toward her mouth.

"100%. Kiss me senseless Gabrielle."

"You've got it Xena."

The End

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive