

# ~ Obsessions ~

by J Brownell

Disclaimer: Please don't read this at work. Any resemblance between my characters and anyone else is all in your head. Comments can be sent to [ga\\_onmymind@yahoo.com](mailto:ga_onmymind@yahoo.com)

## Prologue

Tyler Bradshaw was laid to rest on the twenty-eighth day of November. After a brief memorial service, his body was moved to the cemetery where he would spend the rest of eternity in peace. The scent of roses and carnations mingled on the cold air with the smell of freshly dug earth. It was a gray, bitterly cold day. The perfect day for burying a four-year-old.

She watched tiny white snowflakes drift down to melt against the impossibly small mahogany casket. It took every ounce of courage she possessed to stand next to his grave, to listen to the minister inadequately explain why this child was taken away so young and innocent. She knew why he was gone. She knew who to blame.

The minister's quiet words faded away. In her mind, she saw the bright-eyed little boy with the infectious grin. He came to her attention the way all children came to her attention-through a phone call in the middle of the night. An intern at Egleston's called the police when Robert Bradshaw brought his son into the ER. The parents claimed the little boy fell from their car, but his injuries were inconsistent with that kind of fall. The intern called the police, who called the Domestic Violence Intervention Team, who called Dr. Michala Cary.

He was simply another case at first. She saw hundreds of children, all abused on some level, and had long ago built a wall to protect her sanity. She could not do her job if she allowed herself to become personally involved. With most of the children it was easy to stay uninvolved. They were the ones whose spirits had been beaten and defeated by parents who didn't care and a system that could not afford to. She did her best for these children, but she wasn't haunted by the fact that her best wasn't always enough. Then there were the others, they ones who weren't quite so defeated yet, not quite ground down by their lives. These children kept her awake some nights, and then they were gone from her life when their cases were resolved.

And then there was Tyler. A bright, cheerful boy who ran to her for hugs and kisses when he came to her office, who chatted constantly about his friends and his preschool, who was remarkably untouched by the violence his father first directed at him when he was two months old. Perhaps it was because he did not live the same life of poverty and drugs that marked most abusive homes. His father was a successful executive for a computer firm. He went to a private preschool, wore tiny Nikes, romped in Osh Kosh overalls, and never went to bed hungry or dirty. None of that protected him from becoming a memory in one horrifically violent second.

Dark, shattered eyes watched the cool blonde on the other side of the coffin cry delicately into a lacy black handkerchief. The grieving mother. Why she was here instead of sharing a cell with her husband was almost more than Michala could stand. Maybe Rebecca Bradshaw never laid a hand on her son, but the fact that she never tried to stop her husband made her just as culpable for her son's death. Depraved indifference to human life. What else could it be called when a mother watched someone deal such a vicious blow to her child that it was almost instantly fatal? Depraved indifference was the least of Rebecca Bradshaw's crimes.

Reporters rushed forward as they made their way from the burial site. Uniformed officers corralled them and kept microphones and cameras out of their faces. She paused on the edge of the lawn. The photo that would grace the front page of tomorrow's paper was of her looking back, the heartbreaking expression of loss so clear on her pale face.

Now she only saw the media and the police. She used one, relied on the other and both had let her down in the end. She turned away from the small, flower laden casket.

Tyler was dead. Nothing else mattered.

1.

11:23.

Kelly Pryce looked at her watch in growing frustration. She would give Randa seven more minutes before she trekked back through the lunch rush to her office. All in all she'd wasted an hour she didn't have to spare. She was more than frustrated. She was getting angry. What kind of an emergency could Randa be having if she could leave someone sitting in her office for almost thirty minutes? Apparently not the kind that required immediate attention.

For the third time, she stood up to roam the spacious office. Dr. Miranda Cary is a Psychiatrist who specializes in adolescents. Her office reflects the interests of her teenage patients. The larger right side of the room was a casual conversation area with comfortable navy canvas backed painter chairs and a table covered with popular teen magazines. One wall was a white board with typical teenage graffiti written in a rainbow of dry ink. The remaining walls were a soothing sky blue.

Randa's glass topped desk and leather wing chairs were tucked unobtrusively on the smaller left side of the room. Lush green plants were a discreet demarcation between the teen's side of her office and her personal space. Kelly thought it odd her degrees were not hung with pride behind the desk. There was little to denote the success Randa has achieved in her profession.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Kelly."

Kelly turned to the doorway. Instant concern replaced her frustration. Anger furrowed Randa's usually smiling face and narrowed dark brown eyes. She raked fingers through tousled short blonde hair.

"Come with me. I don't want this to be overheard."

The Cary Center is set up on the spacious ground floor of a gracefully refurbished Victorian house. Kelly followed her down several narrow hallways, through several large conference rooms, to the reception area. She'd only known Randa a few months, but Kelly thought she knew her well enough to know Randa Cary is a remarkably calm and poised woman. As she followed her through the Cary Center, she wondered how the bright yellow envelope crumpled in her fist featured in her loss of composure.

A man and a teenage girl flipped through magazines as they waited for their appointments. Randa walked to the reception window. "Is she here?"

The brunette behind the glass shrugged. "I haven't seen her."

"Lt. Pryce and I are going up to talk. Call there the second she walks in."

The second floor of the Cary Center, like the Center itself, belongs to Randa's twin sister Michala. A curved oak staircase in the center hall was blocked at the top of the stairs by locked sliding wooden doors. Kelly was endlessly fascinated by those doors and cast a long stare up every time she visited. She kept hoping for just a glimpse of her or for a tiny view into her life. Since coming to Atlanta to take over as the police liaison for the Domestic Violence Intervention Team, she has developed a silent obsession over Michala Cary.

Randa paused long enough to unlock the doors and push one side open for them to enter the inner sanctum. "I'm sorry I made you wait, Kelly. I was looking for more of these."

She slid the door shut. "I guess she threw them away."

"What's wrong?" Kelly asked, deciding she no longer cared why she was left waiting in her office. Randa was angry and that was the more intriguing puzzle. Kelly was willing to bet Randa Cary didn't get angry very often.

Randa reached for a dimmer switch located just inside the doors. Kelly blinked in surprised at the casual room revealed by scattered floor lamps. This is not how she imagined Michala Cary lived. She followed Randa across the large room to facing black leather couches. The second floor resembled a very spacious studio apartment. One end of the room was a small kitchen and the other end was an office area with desk and computer. The couches, glass coffee table, and an oak dinette table were the only other furnishings. The white walls and dark hardwood floor were both bare.

She was disappointed. Michala Cary has taken on a mythical aura since her abrupt, although not unexpected resignation from DVIT last year. Her name, when spoken, is mentioned in hushed tones of awe. This room was much too prosaic for a goddess.

"I opened this by mistake. It could be read either Michala or Miranda. Cayla gets very little mail

at the office these days." She held out the crumpled yellow envelope.

Kelly reluctantly took the envelope from her and sat. She pulled out the single sheet of matching paper and quickly read the note.

**I saw you today. Pretty roses from the pretty lady. Too bad he's still dead.**

The words were written with a low-end laser printer in dire need of toner. Randa's dark gaze never left her as she read the brief, creepy note. "Did you get this today?"

Randa nodded. Her brow was creased in worry. "Yes. When I realized what it was, I asked Lynne about it. She said it came with the rest of the mail this morning. She also said Cayla receives about one a week and has for months."

Kelly flipped the envelope over. The letter was addressed to Michala Cary in care of the Cary Center. The canceled stamp bore an Atlanta postmark. The handwriting was scratchy. "Why didn't you call the police?"

Randa stared at her blankly. "I did. I called you."

Her earlier frustration returned with a vengeance. She held the letter out to the other woman. "I'm not a detective, Randa. I'm the police liaison officer for DVIT. I don't handle stuff like this."

Randa looked down at the letter in her hands. She sighed and looked up, her eyes dark with worry. "Are you suggesting I take this to Jim Bates? Regardless of how Cayla feels about the department, the police think of her as one of their own. The police cannot protect those who do not want to be protected. Trust me, Cayla won't cooperate with an investigation."

Kelly knew only the bare facts about Michala's resignation from DVIT. The other officers don't talk about Tyler Bradshaw or the legal nightmare that became Michala's life before his death. What little of the story she knew, she learned from Randa.

"Go talk to-" She broke off to stare at the ruffled robed woman who silently appeared out of the darkness behind Randa. As she walked into the ring of light, Kelly knew she was about to meet Michala Cary. They were identical twins and there was a startling similarity in the heart shaped face framed by shoulder length honey blonde hair. Her dark eyes were sleepy and annoyed.

"Miranda?"

Randa's eyes widened and she jumped to her feet in surprise. "Cayla. What are you doing here?"

Michala arched both eyebrows and said, "Hmm, let me see. I'm in a robe and I just woke up."

Perhaps I live here?"

She walked around the couch. Her short white silk robe was loosely tied and fell open to reveal the tanned curve of full breasts. Kelly tensed as she walked across the room. She smiled and held out her hand. "I'm Michala."

Before Kelly could frame a reply, Randa answered for her. "This is Dr. Kelly Pryce. She's consulting on a sensitive case. We came up here for privacy. Where's your car?"

Dr. Pryce? Kelly did have her doctorate in Criminal Justice, but she never used the title. She preferred Lieutenant. Dark brown eyes slid over Kelly with the warmth of a physical touch. Behind her, Randa crammed the letter and envelope into the pocket of her slacks.

"Body shop, I think," Michala answered absently after a pause. As she met Kelly's eyes, panic set in. She wasn't out at work and her blatant appraisal, as extremely flattering as Kelly found it, was unwelcome. Randa was sure to read something into her gay twin staring at her. Michala read her mind. She winked, amused at the panic. She turned to Randa. With both hands, she ran her fingers through her hair. "Do you often bring people up here?"

"No, this is a special case. Very sensitive." Randa sat and she shrugged when Kelly looked over at her. Their conversation was over here; they would have to go somewhere else. Kelly hoped Randa would not make excuses for them too quickly.

Michala walked into the kitchen. She flipped a switch and the tiny kitchen was brilliantly lit by a single row of track lighting. "Anyone want some coffee? I didn't realize I was having company so I can't offer you anything else."

Randa turned to watch her. "Sure. Both of us. What time did you get in last night?"

Michala moved around the kitchen measuring water and coffee grounds. "Fourish. When I came out of the club last night my windshield was shattered. After the report was made and a cab was called and one more drink with my concerned friends, it was four or later when I got home."

Randa and Kelly looked at each other. Was it a coincidence that her car was vandalized last night? Randa asked in a conversational tone, "Who all was there?"

Cups rattled in the kitchen. "Um, well, Leigh. Valerie. Brenda left after a few drinks. Robbie came later. She and Gaye had a big fight over something really stupid. The garbage I think. Of course she wanted to cry on my shoulder so I pretended to care."

Pretended to care? That wasn't the caring, sensitive response expected from the vaunted Dr. Michala Cary. Randa was good, Kelly knew from her own experience, but Michala was supposed to be an exceptionally perceptive Psychiatrist.

"And you made a report?"

A slight pause, her voice edged when she answered. "While I was checking out the damage, Val called on her cell phone. It must have been a slow crime night last night because that squad car was there in mere minutes. Val is on the top of my hit list."

"Why? You'll need the police report to make a claim."

Michala walked over with a tray of slate blue stoneware mugs, coffee pot, and containers of cream and sugar. She poured the coffee and handed out mugs as she talked. "If I was carjacked and raped before being left for dead on the side of the road, I still would not call the police. I didn't give the report actually. Val did. I went back inside and had another drink."

She shot her twin a wicked grin. "I mean since I was coming home in a cab why leave sober?"

Randa's answering smile was faint. "Yes, why leave sober."

They drank the coffee in silence. Kelly felt Michala's eyes drift over her several times and she refused to meet her interested gaze. She was not going to confirm anything for her with Randa here. She chanced a glance over at her. She seemed very much at home, which of course she was, but few people could carry that off while entertaining guests in only a robe. She caught Kelly's eyes and winked over the rim of her mug.

"Are you coming to dinner tonight? Mom and Dad ask about you every week." There was a chastising tone to Randa's voice.

Michala turned away to focus on Randa. Her tone was chiding. "Subtle. When the guilt doesn't work, are you going to try to elicit sympathy? That might work better. I'm fresh out of guilt."

Randa covered her hand and leaned forward. "They're worried about you. I'm worried about you. Hell, Cayla, everyone is worried. All you do is go clubbing all night and sleep all day. This isn't you. This isn't your life."

Michala stood, her eyes cool. "My life is what I want it to be. I'd apologize for not measuring up to your standards, but I don't seem to care if you approve."

Randa said calmly, "You don't seem to care about much these days."

"Oh I care Miranda, just not about the things you want." She smiled down at Kelly. "It's been a pleasure meeting you Dr. Pryce. Come back any time."

She didn't look at Randa as she walked away from them. "Leave your key on the table Miranda. This isn't part of the Center."

Kelly watched Randa stare at her as she went to her bedroom and closed her door. The frustration she felt at being shut from her sister's life must be a special kind of hell. It's difficult to reach out to someone who isn't reaching back and you can't save those who aren't asking for help. This someone was her twin sister.

"Do you still think I should talk to Jim?" She asked, standing. She leaned down to pick up the tray.

Lieutenant James Bates, like everyone who speaks of her, adores Michala. Kelly shook her head. If she didn't want to report a busted windshield, she would abhor an investigation into the letters. "I think that would be the worse thing to do."

"Are you hungry? There's a Ruby Tuesday's near here."

They took the tray of coffee mugs back to the kitchen before they left. Kelly could hear Michala taking a shower as they left the apartment. Randa locked the doors and pocketed the key. It seemed that not caring about certain things ran in the Cary family.

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Kelly got back to her office at two-thirty. The afternoon was shot, but she didn't regret the lost time. They spent lunch forming a plan to protect Michala without her knowledge. They didn't have a lot of options. They decided that talking to Jim Bates would effectively open an investigation and without Michala's cooperation it would be a battle of iron wills. The first course of action was to intercept the letters. Randa would arrange that with the office manager, Lynne. Randa was also going to talk to Michala's friends and quietly suggest the family was concerned about her and would appreciate her friends keeping close tabs on her for them. Randa was of the opinion that her friends, just as concerned as the family about her, would gladly join the conspiracy.

There wasn't anything for Kelly to do, either officially or unofficially. She wasn't in Michala's circle of friends and Randa didn't want her to know about Kelly's association with DVIT. She apologized for the "Dr. Pryce" introduction and explained that Michala refused to talk about DVIT or to the members of the team. If she explained that Kelly was the new police liaison officer, they would have been outside her door within in seconds. Michala would have assumed they were discussing a DVIT case. Certain things are not discussed in her home.

Kelly gave up trying to do paperwork. It was Friday. This week, her week on call, was long and difficult. She received calls five out of seven nights. Three of the calls were after midnight. One of the children was DOA at Egleston. They added six new cases to an already crushing caseload of abused children in need of state protection.

When she joined DVIT three months ago, it was with excitement and a sense of renewed hope in law enforcement. She was burned out from dealing with a system that only picked up pieces after the lives were shattered. The Domestic Violence Intervention Team was formed, by Michala, to respond to any domestic call where children were present. DVIT brought together the police department, Cary Center associates, and caseworkers from the Department of Family and Children services. They had an unprecedented power to protect these children. Kelly would have preferred the power to change their lives.

Michala Cary. She gave up the fight and let her mind wander. Kelly heard her name for the first

time during the initial interview for the police liaison position. Randa and Samantha Jones, the DFACS caseworker assigned to the program, gave her a thumbnail background sketch. Michala conceived the idea for DVIT, talked Fulton County, and the state into a partnership, and headed the program for five highly successful years. She resigned last year and Randa stepped in to fill her place.

Kelly was led to believe that Michala resigned because of her demanding private practice. It was after she was on the job a few weeks that she noticed no one, save for Randa, mentioned Michala. She was their founder and leader for five years and her name was rarely mentioned. Kelly found this odd and asked Randa about her resignation from the program. In a tone that warned questions would not be answered, Randa told her about the death of four-year-old Tyler Bradshaw and its devastating effect on her sister. The nightmare began when Tyler was returned to his parents over Michala's strongly voiced objections. She believed the child's life was in jeopardy and took her fight against the system to the press. The Bradshaw's civil suit for slander never went to trial because ten months later Robert was arrested when his son was admitted to Piedmont. Michala resigned from DVIT three days later after the little boy was removed from life support. Four months after Tyler's death and Michala still has not stepped foot into DVIT's office or her own in the Cary Center. She has effectively retired in the middle of a highly acclaimed career.

How could anyone not find a woman like her fascinating? The fact that she is gay has only made her all the more intriguing. She was a woman who did not bemoan the sad state of affairs or wish she could do something, but had pulled together a program that actually did something. She built the Cary Center into a successful mental health clinic. Kelly had to admire a woman who has the power to make her dreams a reality. So few people have that ability.

Kelly realized unhappily that as much as she would love to get to know her, it was never going to happen. Whatever interest Michala may have had of her in the apartment would vanish the second she knew Kelly was with DVIT.

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Dark, soft wavy hair cut chin length. Eyes midnight blue fringed with long, thick lashes. Body both feminine and athletic under oatmeal colored slacks and hunter green shirt. Michala opened her eyes when she was sure that Dr. Kelly Pryce was worth the pain she was currently suffering. She nodded once, satisfied the woman was as sexy and attractive as she thought.

"Darling, will you get the rolls out of the oven?"

Michala plastered a smile to her face. "Sure Mom."

She walked around the butcher's block in the middle of the kitchen and pulled on a pair of oven mitts. She cast a quick glance over the kitchen. Miranda was tossing a green salad while their mother was carving a golden roasted chicken. She was really here, having dinner with family. She opened the oven with the thought that later, she would be at the bar with friends. This night could not last forever, regardless how much it might feel like it.



"Mm, these smell great. Is this the new recipe you were talking about?"

Miranda looked up from the tomatoes she was slicing to stare at her in question. Michala simply grinned and slid the rolls into a wicker basket. She knew Miranda was wondering when she'd talked to their mother. As far as Paige Anderson Cary was concerned, the one phone call she made every Thursday night was a non-call. She wanted several calls a week on different nights that weren't made in guilt. She wasn't going to admit she ever heard from Michala until she got what she wanted.

Paige came over and hugged her from behind. She was taller than both her daughters. Her sleek auburn hair was cut in a short, crisp style. Warm dark brown eyes were her genetic gift to the twins. "Yes. Do you want it? It's very easy to make."

Michala smiled at her sister. "It's been years since you've gotten me confused with Miranda. I'm Michala, the one who can cook. I don't need easy."

Paige laughed and kissed her cheek. She caught Miranda's less than amused expression and kissed her as well. She patted her shoulder as she left the kitchen. "I'm sorry darling, but it's true."

"If had known you were coming, I would've stayed home. You said no this morning." Miranda dumped the tomatoes over the shredded lettuce in the bowl with a little more force than necessary.

Michala slid over next to her. This was just the opening she'd been waiting for. "About this morning. I noticed you didn't leave your key. Planning to bring her back when I'm not there? Susan's not going to like that. You do know, don't you, that she's a very good shot with her gun?"

She watched in amusement as Miranda cast a frantic glance to the doorway. Michala knew she would. For reasons only her sister understood, she wasn't ready for their parents to know both their daughters were gay. Michala came out in junior high; Miranda only admitted her true feelings two years ago when she started dating one of Michala's best friends.

"Kelly is a colleague. That was a professional discussion. Besides, she's not gay."

Michala grinned. "Oh honey, you should have that fixed. You're missing out on a whole world."

"What fixed and what world?"

"Your gaydar. When you have a woman as sexy as that around and you don't know she's gay, it's time for a tune-up. I knew the second I saw her."

Miranda turned to her with a smirk. "You think every woman is gay. You want every woman to be gay. Kelly isn't gay. I think I would have noticed by now if she was."

Michala laughed. "You didn't even know you are. Why do you think she isn't?"

As her sister launched into a list of why Kelly Pryce couldn't possibly be gay, Michala barely kept the smile off her face. This was so easy, she should be arrested. She buttered the rolls and made little noises of agreement. When Miranda was finished, Michala knew Kelly lived with Dr. Danielle Barrett, had just moved from Seattle, wasn't seeing anyone yet, and hated sports. The most telling point for Miranda seemed to be that Kelly had not picked up on her. Michala didn't bother pointing out to her sister that she was so far back in her closet, she didn't see the light of day when Susan slipped in with her. Michala was as shocked as Miranda when she realized she was gay. The fact that someone else didn't pick up on it didn't surprise Michala in the least.

She said with a smile, "I guess you're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

Dr. Danielle Barrett, the orthopedic surgeon of choice for the lesbian community, was a friend of Shannon's, whose girlfriend just happened to be Michala's other best friend. She knew from Jess that they were all meeting at the bar later that night. If Kelly wasn't with them, she was sure Danielle would be. She would get the rest of the information she wanted from her.

"Will one of you go get your Dad?" Paige asked as came back into the kitchen. "We're ready."

Miranda said she would, leaving Michala to help their mother take the dishes into the dining room. Paige launched into more questions. Michala followed her into the dining room with the rolls and salad.

"No," she said and the smiling face of Kelly Pryce popped in her head, "I'm not seeing anyone right now."

Paige smiled at her over the table. "I met this nice young woman at PFLAG last week. Remind me to give you the number before you leave. She was just gorgeous."

Michala closed her eyes briefly. Why, she wondered not for the first time, couldn't she have parents who took a less personal interest in her private life? Didn't they know they were supposed to ignore her orientation, pretend she was happily celibate? She would have to get parents who were comfortable enough with her life to ask those embarrassing questions and try to fix her up with other women. Thank God her mother wasn't giving her number out anymore. That was something.

Paige smiled at her over the table. Michala returned the smile, hoping that hers was at least half as bright. "Her name is Tiffany. She's twenty-two, but that's not really that young any more."

Tiffany? Twenty-two? Dark, soft wavy hair cut chin length. Eyes midnight blue fringed with long, thick lashes. And once again, she reminded herself this night would end soon. If Kelly was at the bar, she had high hopes that when it did, Kelly Pryce would be in her arms.

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Dani was already there by the time she got home that evening. Kelly parked next to her white BMW and thought, as she did every Friday that soon she was moving to one of the suburbs north

of Atlanta. With teams in all four major sports and other entertainment not offered anywhere else in the state, it seemed that half of Georgia was driving into Atlanta on the weekends. If she lived in the suburbs, she could cruise home instead of sitting in traffic jams.

Dr. Danielle Barrett and Kelly had been friends forever. Legend has it that their friendship, frequently mistaken for a continuous game of one-up-woman ship, began in the hospital nursery when Kelly was a whole day older. Their mothers bonded over a shared terror of new motherhood. They came out together, graduated from Syracuse University together, and then parted for the first time in their lives for graduate school. Dani came south to Emory and Kelly went west to Stanford. Dani remained in Atlanta after getting her medical degree. Kelly began her law enforcement career in Seattle. Three months ago, for reasons that had everything to do with constant rain, she finally made the move to Atlanta. Dani has graciously shared her townhouse without once mentioning that Kelly agreed to live with her "temporarily."

"Hey, come in here," Dani called as soon as she walked in the townhouse.

Kelly found her upstairs in her bedroom. She wore a pair of black slacks and nothing else. Kelly leaned in the doorway with a smile. What is it about a best friend that made them so unappealing as a lover? Objectively, she could admit that Dani was quite a catch. Short jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes, toned athletes' body, and a thriving career as an orthopedic surgeon. The flip side of objective is knowing everything she ever did.

She reached into her closet for a red shirt. "You're not on call tonight are you? Jessica and Shannon have invited us to dinner. Then we're all going out."

Dani and her friends have been trying to get Kelly out for a night on the town since she moved. Kelly wasn't the party animal they are and shamelessly used her job to ward them away. Kelly decided as she watched Dani dress that tonight she wanted to go out with Dani and her friends. A night on the town in the company of beautiful women was just what she needed.

"Sounds great. Do I have time for a shower?"

Dani shot her a look of surprise. "Sure, of course. We're not meeting them until seven-thirty."

Kelly nodded and walked down the hall to her room. Yes, a night out filled with wine, women, and song. Was there a better way to end what had been a particularly bad week? She was used to the late night phone calls because the middle of the night was the time people seemed to lose control of their anger most. What made this week so bad was that the DOA at Egleston was her first fatality. One little girl would never be older than eight for the rest of eternity. That was a hard one for her to pass off as just part of the job.

After her shower, Kelly stood in front of her closet door and debated about her attire for the night. Dani's slacks were dressier than her usual bar clothes. Kelly's seen her leave in faded blue jeans and a sweatshirt. She took her cue from Dani and passed over jeans in favor of black linen slacks and blazer over a white silk shirt. If Dani was dressing up, they were either going to a very nice restaurant or she was trying to impress a date.

The Otherside was crowded by the time they arrived at ten. While Dani and Shannon pushed their way to the bar for drinks, Jess and Kelly scouted the bar for the table of friends they were meeting. They found the rowdy group in the back near the dance floor. Jess left her with the five other women while she went to tell Dani and Shannon where they were sitting.

Dani and her friends play in softball leagues and have tailgate parties before UGA football games. They were Braves fan before the team became winners and they go to every Hawks game in the belief that their faith will do for the basketball team what it did for the boys of summer. Kelly has resisted all attempts at assimilation. She used to think that being gay meant she had to play sports, but she realized that one is not automatically inclusive of the other. Now she limited her sports watching to the World Series and Super Bowl games because those are the only games that count.

Kelly returned welcomes with the other woman and tried to remember their names. Susan was easy for her to remember because she was a homicide detective on the force. Gaye was equally as easy because a gay woman named Gaye is memorable. Gaye was cuddling her young lover, Robin or Robbie or something as equally cute. Next to her was a boyish brunette whose name was a total blank. She was talking about the Falcons with Susan.

Depression hit with a vengeance. So she was out for a night on the town with some people she kind of knew. She only had Dani in common with them. They were strangers and the longer Kelly lived with her the more she realized the same was true of Dani. What they had in common was a lifetime eighteen years ago. They were very different from the young women who set out to conquer the world from Syracuse.

Two beers and a half of bowl of cold popcorn later found Kelly ready to call a cab. She listened politely to the heated conversation over the Braves, tried to care about the Falcons, but drew the line at even pretending an interest in the basketball team. She was trying to catch Dani's attention when silence fell over the table. Suddenly chairs were scrapping and she was pushed to the side to make room for someone else.

Kelly slid her chair closer to Dani and leaned over to whisper, "I'm getting tired. I think I'm..."

Dani wasn't listening as she smiled brightly at someone over Kelly's shoulder. Kelly sat back in her chair, resigned to the fact that she was stuck here for a little while longer. Why did she think coming here would make this miserable weekend on a better note? She closed her eyes and consoled herself with the thought that tomorrow she would sleep until noon.

"Dance with me," a very soft voice purred in her ear. Expensive perfume wrapped itself around her.

Kelly turned to the warm voice and was astonished to look into dark amused eyes. Michala had her arm along the back of her chair. She was dressed all in black and the combination of her blonde fairness against the black made her dangerous and sexy. She took Kelly's hand and kissed her palm. Her half smile was intimate and intriguing. "Dance with me Kelly."

Kelly never took her eyes from Michala as she was led to the dance floor. She went willingly into Michala's arms. Couples swaying against each other to the slow beat of a popular love song surrounded them. Michala felt wonderful. Kelly had not gone out with anyone since the move, but she knew that wasn't why Michala felt so good against her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to enjoy this unexpected pleasure.

"I've thought about you all day," Michala whispered in her ear.

The words raced through her blood like an electric current. Kelly tried to step back, but the hands on her hips slid around her waist to pull Kelly tight against her. Her thighs brushed Kelly's as they rocked in a slow circle, breasts pressed against breasts. Kelly could smell the exotic scent of her perfume, feel the warmth of her body. Michala Cary was dancing with her. Michala Cary had thought about her all day. Feeling bold by her thoughts, Kelly slid her hands under her oversized black jacket.

Just when she thought nothing else could surprise her, Michala reached up to brush her hair away from her neck. Soft lips began a slow, hot trail from her chin up to her ear. Kelly's breath caught with the first touch of her lips. Swallowing became a conscious act of will. The only sound she heard was the hammering of her heart.

"Come home with me," Michala whispered. Before Kelly could answer, Michala took her ear lobe in her mouth and sucked gently. Kelly was lost. She was hers to take on the dance floor if Michala wanted.

She turned to press a soft kiss on Michala's throat. "I'm ready to leave when you are."

She was wrapped in a pleasant sexually charged daze as they left the dance floor. Michala stopped by the table long enough to retrieve their coats. Kelly dimly heard Michala tell Dani not to worry, she would see Kelly home. Neither mentioned that it was her home and that Dani should not expect Kelly back tonight. She hoped Michala wasn't the type to let a woman leave before sunrise.

Her black Lexus was parked near the front door. She was glad they didn't have far to walk in the cool March night. Michala opened the passenger door for her. Before Kelly could slide inside, she was pulled tight against Michala and cool lips claimed hers in a soft, teasing kiss. She was breathing again when Michala slid under the wheel.

As Michala drove competently through the dark streets, Kelly realized where she was, who she was with, and where she was going. She was stunned by how easily and quickly Michala got her in her car on the way to her house and her bed. She turned in the seat to explain that was happening all too fast. They only briefly met that morning. She did not go home with women she had only briefly met.

Michala reached for her hand and her smile was amused. "I had dinner with my family tonight. I thought Miranda deserved a reward for bringing you to my attention. I would have been spared

that excruciating experience if I had only known you know Jess."

Kelly remembered their conversation. It was hard for her not to be impressed that Michala had gone to the trouble to find out more about her. Kelly summoned a smile and shook her head. "I don't know Jess. My roommate, Dani, knows her."

"They aren't friends of yours?"

"No. Dani is the only friend I have here. I moved here three months ago from Seattle. I've borrowed her friends instead of trying to make my own."

As she spoke, Kelly realized the dangerous path she was leading them down. The last thing she needed was for Michala to ask about her life. One little slip was all it would take and Michala was bright enough to put the truth together from just a few facts. Michala kissed the back of her hand. "Well I'm not a friend per se of Danielle's so I guess that makes me your first friend in Atlanta. I shall do my best to make you feel welcome."

Kelly stared at her and their eyes touched before Michala returned her gaze to the empty street. She was going to this beautiful woman's house. That became the only clear thought in her head. Everything else receded to a dark corner. She moved closer and slid her hand slowly up her thigh. "I feel very welcome."

Michala braked for a red light and reached for her. This kiss was long and deep. They broke away when a car honked from behind. Kelly rested her forehead on Michala's shoulder. She didn't know it could happen this fast, be this scorching. She felt electrified, with every nerve ending tingling in anticipation.

She slipped her hand inside Michala's jacket. With one button open, she was able to move her hand inside her shirt. She felt Michala tense under her soft strokes, smiled at the quick breath she took. That she could do to Michala what Michala was doing to her was astonishing.

Michala flashed a quick glance over at her. "If you go any higher, I'll have to park the car right here."

Kelly laughed and pulled her hand from her shirt. "I better be good."

Michala turned into the back parking lot of the Cary Center. The look she tossed Kelly made her anticipation jump a few degrees. "Oh, you are."

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Michala watched Kelly wander through her apartment as she opened a bottle of wine. She'd remembered her perfectly. She looked even better in black slacks and white shirt than she had in her earlier outfit. She was taller than Michala would have thought, a few inches over her own five four. She rarely chose to be the shorter partner in a couple. She wondered idly if it would've made a difference if she'd known before going to the club. She caught a shy glance of midnight blue and knew that it wouldn't have. She was too taken to let a few inches change her mind.

"You don't give a lot away, do you?" Kelly was standing at her desk.

Michala walked over and handed her a glass of golden wine. "Away as in?"

Kelly tossed her a curious smile and her gaze skimmed over the room. "You can usually tell a lot about a person by what they have on display in their homes. It's the one place people are free to be themselves. You must be an incredibly private person."

Michala sipped her wine and used the time to frame a reply. That pause, she knew, pretty much confirmed Kelly's impression of her. She shrugged. "I suppose I am. Or maybe I was an incredibly busy person who didn't spend enough time here to make it a home."

She knew by the thoughtful expression on the other woman's face that she gave away much more than she intended with that ill-thought out remark. She pulled her close, ready to move them back to the reason Kelly was here. She turned her head to trail small, light kisses across her throat. "Shall we dance some more?"

She felt Kelly glance over the room. "Can you sing?"

Michala stepped back with a laugh. "Only in the shower."

She linked one hand with Kelly's and led her down the hallway to her bedroom. She turned off the living room lights with the flip of one switch and turned on her bedroom light in another. Kelly tugged her hand free. Michala put her wine glass on her bedside table and walked to the oak Armoire across from her bed. She opened both doors to reveal an expensive television and stereo system. The stereo was preset to a channel that played soft rock songs.

"Nice," Kelly said behind her. Arms came around her waist and pulled her back. "This is the real you."

Michala turned to face her. Kelly's lips were inviting. Slowly, she pulled Kelly's shirt from the waist of her slacks. With a gentle sway to the music, she moved them to the middle of the room. She leaned over to kiss the soft skin above her shirt collar. "You've seen the real me, Kelly. That's all you've seen."

Her skin was warm and carried a faint scent of vanilla. She pressed a soft kiss to that skin as she undid each button. Kelly raked fingers through her hair, then down her back to tug on her shirt. "I keep telling myself that this is too fast. We don't know each other. But my body doesn't seem to care."

"As a doctor you know how important it is to listen to your body."

Michala's breath caught in appreciation as she saw the lacy white bra she wore. She pushed the shirt off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She looked up into Kelly's eyes. They were dark and wanting. She slid a finger under each strap. "My body wants this off."

With one motion, she touched her lips to Kelly's and reached behind her to pop the snap. Kelly opened her mouth and Michala deepened the kiss. She tasted the cool, fruity wine on her tongue. She stripped the bra away without breaking the kiss. Her breasts were warm in her hands, the nipples hard against her palms. Kelly gasped against her tongue. All thoughts Michala had entertained of taking this slow, to enjoy this beautiful woman and her wonderful body, fled with Kelly's low, sensual moan. She broke off the kiss. "My body wants this all off."

They tore at each other's clothes until they were standing in a pile of silk and linen. Michala pushed Kelly back to the bed and tumbled down with her. Hands roamed to stroke and caress, lips sought sensitive places to tease and torment. Michala kissed and caressed her way down with Kelly stroking her back and shoulders before all that was left for her to touch was Michala's face and hair. Gentle fingers in her hair became fists as she tenderly, slowly opened Kelly with her tongue.

"Oh yes," Kelly breathed, "Yes."

~~~~~

*Yes.*

Michala smiled, a slow satisfied curving of full lips. Kelly watched without breathing as she reached out to touch her with the tip of her tongue. Her dark brown eyes stared into Kelly's, watching Kelly watch her. She held Michala's gaze while her tongue moved up and down in light, teasing strokes. She could not watch and feel at the same time. The sensations were too strong, she would explode if she had to watch. She fell back to the bed to only feel what Michala was doing to her.

She heard a low, satisfied chuckle. Michala was the kind of woman who would enjoy making her beg, would want to hear her ask for release. Without an audience to torment, she turned to press hot kisses on the inside of Kelly's thigh. Long fingers held her in place as she squirmed in anticipation.

"No," she groaned when Michala sat up on her elbows. Michala felt so good, it had been so long, and Kelly was willing to do more than beg if she moved away now. There wasn't much she wouldn't do if Michala asked it of her right then.

Michala's answer was to slip her right hand over Kelly's leg to gently stroke her stomach. She gasped when a finger slipped inside her. She was so wet, Michala went deep in one smooth stroke.

"Yes. Oh yes," she moaned. Her fingers were slow and steady. "Yes."

"Yes," Michala agreed, pulling out only to push deep and stopped to move her fingers inside.

Kelly moved under her hands. She was so close. She reached down to touch herself. She was so close to that edge she could see over. She wanted to come, to feel Michala pushing in and out



pulling out of her with quick, urgent thrusts.

"No," Michala said firmly and shot a hand out to catch her. When Kelly didn't try to push lower, she let go of her hand. Her hot, wet mouth made Kelly too weak to try again. The thoughts she had of Michala needing her help were washed away in the pounding of blood. Her fingers and tongue found a rhythm and Kelly's hips moved of their own accord to meet her.

She wanted to touch her, hold her as Michala pushed her over the edge.

Kelly heard herself groan over and over again. Michala pushed deeper and sucked harder until she grabbed her hair in a fist and arched off the bed one last time.

When her breathing slowed and the blood flowed back to her head, she was being held. She draped herself over Michala's body and closed her eyes, enjoying the warm, soft body under her hands. Kelly trailed her fingers across her stomach and smiled when Michala's breath caught. She was empowered by the knowledge that she could do to Michala what Michala had so expertly done to her.

"Tell me what you want," Kelly whispered. Full, perfect breasts were tantalizing close to her face. She leaned into the kiss the soft, shallow skin between her breasts.

Michala pulled her face down. "You," she said, in voice husky with desire.

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Kelly woke with a start several hours later when the phone rang. She blinked in the darkness and felt the wonderful warmth around her roll away.

"Yes?" Michala answered, calm, and professional. She had perfected this voice over years of answering middle of the night phone calls for DVIT.

Kelly moved behind her to slip hands around her waist. She laid her head against her back. Michala. She was in her bed. The last few hours played over in her memories like a wonderful movie. She never thought Michala would be interested in a woman like her. She thought the elegant blonde was cool and poised. Kelly felt herself to be none of those things. She slid one hand higher. She felt very alive, very awake, and wanting. She was going to sleep until noon anyway.

Her eyes shot open when Michala stiffened under her hands. She stared at her back as she tossed the blankets aside and with deliberate calmness replaced the receiver.

"Are you hungry, Kelly? I think I have food of some kind here."

The phone rang again. She turned on a bedside lamp. The phone continued to ring, but she made no move to answer it. She walked to where her robe hung on the back of her bedroom door. She looked over at Kelly with one eyebrow arched. "Well? If there isn't anything edible, we'll find somewhere open. I'm starving."

She left the bedroom without once looking at the ringing phone. Kelly stared at the open bedroom door in disbelief. Without thinking, she reached for the receiver.

"Hello?" She asked hesitantly.

*"You bitch! Don't ever hang up on me again! I will kill you. I-"*

Michala took the receiver from her hand and hung up the phone without listening to the screaming bitter voice. "That was rather rude, don't you think? Do you often answer other people's phones?"

Kelly slipped from the bed. Michala was cool and remote. She pointed to the phone. "Who was that?"

Michala sighed and shrugged. Kelly could almost believe she expected the call, or least didn't seem as surprised as Kelly thought she should be. Then she remembered the reason she met her today and she remembered that Michala was being harassed. She was willing to bet that no one in her life knew about the phone calls. She knew Randa didn't or the letter would have been a little more worrisome for her if she had.

"Does it matter? It was nothing. A prank phone call."

The phone began to ring again. She reached down and turned off the ringer. Kelly grabbed a dress shirt from the floor and followed her from the bedroom.

"Prank callers don't usually call back."

Michala glanced over her shoulder. "Really? I didn't realize prank phone calls were your specialty, Doctor. Your dissertation must be quite a page turner."

She walked into the kitchen and began to open empty cabinets. Kelly stood at the bar and watched her with mounting frustration. "You're not going to take this seriously are you?"

She found a box of Corn Flakes on the top shelf. "I don't remember buying this."

"Michala?"

She looked over in annoyance. "Why are you making a felony case out of this?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell her she knew about the letters. She was sure the calls tonight were not her first. The calls and letters meant she had a more serious problem than Randa knew. They stared at each other and Kelly realized she would not see this as a chance to burden her family and friends with her problem. Kelly could very well find herself outside waiting for a cab.

"I'm sorry. You're right. It's not my problem." It was Randa's and Kelly would make sure that tomorrow she knew about it.

Michala stared blankly for several seconds before saying in a dismissive tone, "It's no one's problem actually. I really should get an unlisted number. There isn't a reason for mine to published any more."

Kelly watched her pour two bowls of Corn Flakes. She meant there wasn't a reason since she was no longer connected with DVIT. Since she was no longer a practicing Psychiatrist with patients who needed her at all hours of the night. Since she was a woman who spent her days sleeping and her nights barhopping.

"Aren't you a Psychiatrist? Like Randa?" she asked, playing dumb. Kelly wanted to see how much she would tell of her own accord. It would be interesting to know her side of the Tyler Bradshaw case.

She took both bowls to the dinette table. Kelly followed her and sat across from her. The only sign that what she was saying still haunted her was the emotionless tone she used. Her eyes did not reveal the nightmare her life became before and after the four-year-old died.

"I don't practice anymore. I'm...retired." The pause was slight, only someone listening closely to her would have heard it.

"Aren't you a little young for retirement?" She was in her mid-thirties.

Her smile was bemused as she stared at Kelly. "Not really. Most people retire when they reach the pinnacle of their career. I reached mine earlier than most."

"Finished?" she asked and took her bowl when Kelly nodded. She watched her go to the kitchen and thought how sad it was for someone that talented to think she had nothing left to offer.

She came back to where Kelly sat and opened her robe so that she could sit on her lap. Without a word, she put both hands behind her neck and brought their lips together. Kelly felt bold. She wanted to take her breath away. With her left hand she held Michala on her lap and slid the right up her thigh to the wet place between her legs. Michala took a quick breath and pushed her tongue deep.

Kelly broke the kiss. "Let's go back to bed."

Michala's answer was to press herself deeper on Kelly's fingers. Her right hand reached for Kelly's left hand and guided her inside the robe. Michala clenched around her fingers as she touched her breast. A low groan came from her throat and she pressed herself closer, driving her fingers inside until Kelly was buried. Kelly opened her mouth, sucked the tongue Michala pushed into her mouth. Movements were restricted, but she pulled away only to plunge herself on Kelly's fingers. She gave in, losing the control that always kept her from going to this place where a little bit of pain only heightened the pleasure.

Michala drew away abruptly, tossed her head, and held herself on her fingers with hands that dug into Kelly's shoulders. Her eyes were closed. She came in bruising waves. Kelly watched her eyelids flutter, saw her name cross her lips on a whispered cry, and felt that first tumble into the big fall.

She held her trembling body close. This time her kisses were slow and gentle, the hands under her shirt were seeking.

"Now I'm ready for the bedroom," she murmured.

2.

"Good morning," Dani called as soon as she opened the door. Kelly stood in the doorway for a second. She knew she should have expected Dani to be laying in wait. Did she really think she could spend the night with Michala Cary and Dani would *not* be waiting for her? No, she didn't think that. What she did think, or hope, was that Dani would've spent the night with someone and was still sleeping. So much for that.

Kelly gave into the inevitable. Whether now or later, it really didn't matter. Dani was not going to let this pass without comment. She crossed the living room with a longing glance to the stairway and her bedroom. She was sleepy. Michala was a considerate, inventive lover. The most sleep she got all night was before the phone call. She walked to the kitchen reminding herself to call Randa that afternoon. She decided to skip figuring out how she knew that did not include outing herself for the moment. She had to use what active brain cells she still had for Dani.

Dani was reading the morning paper over a brunch of herbal tea and plain toast. Kelly bit back a grin. Dani had stayed too late at the bar, drank too much, and then left alone. She poured a cup of tea and sat across from her. "Good morning."

She continued to scan the paper. "For one of us anyway. So?"

Kelly sipped her tea thoughtfully. Michala wasn't just some woman she had picked up at last call. She was the woman Kelly obsessed over for months. Last night was a dream come true. It felt callous to discuss her like it was just another one nightstand. Even if that's all it was.

"Kelly?"

Kelly shook away her thoughts. She sipped the tea and looked across the table in question.

"Michala?"

Michala. Kelly closed her eyes. What a night. The woman was simply gorgeous. The night was beginning to take on an unreal, did-it-really-happen dream quality. She stood up with a yawn. "You know I spent the night with her, Dani. That's all I'm going to tell you. Now, I'm going to bed because I am very tired."

She knew Dani would follow her. She was dying to know the details and Kelly knew she was not going to get off this easy. She unbuttoned her shirt as she walked up the stairs. She could feel the soft bed under her. In her high school and college years, she could go to class all day, party all night, and crash for only a few hours before revving up to start it over again. Those days were a distant, rapidly fading memory. Now there was a price to be paid for staying up all night.

"That's all?"

She threw her shirt near the vicinity of her hamper. She unzipped her pants. "What do you want, Dani, a blow-by-blow? I'm not going to do it."

She looked over at her. Dani was leaning in the doorway. "You spend the night with Michala Cary and I'm not supposed to be curious? I didn't even know you knew her."

Her pants and bra soon joined her shirt on the floor. She thought about searching for a T-shirt to sleep in, but decided against it. Her skin felt incredibly sensitive. "I didn't know her. I met her briefly yesterday through Randa."

Dani was silent for a beat. She asked cautiously, "She doesn't know you're with DVIT, does she?"

"No, but I don't think it matters," she lied. It mattered. She knew it mattered a lot more than she wanted it to. Michala never would have spent last night with her if she knew Kelly was with DVIT.

"It matters Kelly. You better tell her before she finds out herself. Or last night will be the last night you spend with her."

She glared at Dani. She was right and Kelly wanted to hate her for it. "I'll tell her, when the time is right."

Dani frowned and then shook her head. "There won't be a right time. The best you can hope for is that she's still willing to tolerate you in her home if you tell her yourself. If someone else does, I promise you won't get past her front door. She rarely sees Randa as it. Don't think just because you shared her bed you'll be treated any better."

With that, Dani left her alone. Kelly sat on her bed and stared dully into space. Dani's point hit home with all the sharp precision of a laser. She would deal with this later. If there was a later. Right now she had to sleep. And if she chanced to dream about Michala, who did it hurt?

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For the first time ever, Michala skipped Saturday brunch with Jess and Susan. It was the one commitment in her life she had not broken over the last year. She made herself believe keeping that one thing constant in their lives reassured her family and friends that she wasn't drifting too

far away. They needed the reassurance desperately and unfortunately, it was all she had left to give.

She skipped the brunch for two reasons. The first was that she had no intention of sharing details of last night with her best friends. She really liked Kelly. She didn't want to spend several hours dodging first the blunt questions she wouldn't answer and then the subtle probing that might trip her up in the end. Better to skip it all and face their wrath later. The second, and more important reason was that she intended to invite Kelly over for dinner and more that night. Her cupboards were bare. If she wanted to wine and dine her, she would have to brave the market on Saturday afternoon. She was positive her efforts would be rewarded later.

Michala dressed in the only pair of jeans she owned, which Miranda dismissed as not real jeans because they were white, and a white sweater. She left the Center through the spiral stairs in her bedroom that led to the kitchen. She was steeled to find her rental car damaged in some manner. When she made the mistake of answering her phone and hanging up on him, he usually retaliated. She was paying a great deal for total coverage because of that.

The black Lexus sat untouched in the parking lot. Perhaps because this was the first time she got a rental car, he didn't realize it was hers. She didn't bother hoping he was bored with her. She'd given that hope up months ago. He would retaliate, in his way, in his own time. She was just glad that she didn't have to deal with it then. She didn't mind later, as long as it wasn't later that night.

As she drove to the shopping plaza near the Center, her thoughts drifted to Kelly. She was an intriguing mystery. Which of her friends could she hit up for information? Susan might know something. Shannon would be a good source since her best friend was Kelly's roommate. Between the two of them, she should be able to fill in a few blanks. She could always tag Miranda again. The only person she was not going to ask a lot of questions was Kelly herself. If you ask questions, you have to answer them. Michala had no plans in that direction. Kelly could pump her own friends.

She wandered up and down the aisles, selecting the perfect foods for a romantic evening. Her last romantic evening was before and with her ex-girlfriend. She hadn't cared enough to make the effort for candles and romance since. They came home with her anyway, stayed until she politely offered to call a cab, left with the promise of calling later. Why make a production of it when to do so made it seem more than a roll in the sheets?

She wanted it to be a production tonight. A long seduction of kisses, touches, and glances that led to her bedroom. She stood in the florist section of the store and thought about adding a bouquet of roses to her cart. She wanted the night to be special. She didn't want it to look like she was trying to send some message. She liked Kelly. She would like to get to know her better. She did not want her moving in next week. She shook her head and decided to skip the roses. Too much, too soon. She would let the fact that she was cooking be message enough.

By the time she was back home and had the bags brought up, she had four messages on her machine. She stared at the blinking light for a full minute. She pushed the button and let the messages play while she walked back to the kitchen. The first two were from Jess and Susan,

each demanding to know where she was that morning. She grinned, thinking about all the questions they were dying to ask her and how very annoyed they were when she didn't show. The third call was from her mother. She'd slipped away the night before without getting Tiffany's number. Paige happily left it on her machine. She tensed, standing with frozen shrimp in her hand as the fourth message began to play. The last chance for him to have called her.

*"Hey, give us a call when you get in. Susan said you were all over Kelly Pryce last night at the bar. Is that why you were asking me about her? Call, soon."*

Michala grinned at the curiosity in her sister's voice. Now she had three people who were dying to ask her questions. She'd have to be creative to put off all three of them. Miranda would be the easiest. She wouldn't ask any questions she didn't want to answer herself. Jess and Susan would ask anything because they would answer anything.

She finished putting away the rest of her groceries before going to her bedroom to return the calls. She sat on her bed and punched in the most important number. If she wanted her days' preparations to be worth her time, she'd better call the guest of honor. Kelly was sleeping, Danielle told her, and Michala took that as a wonderful compliment. She left a message for Kelly to call when she woke.

Michala held the phone and thought about calling her sister and her friends. She knew from experience that if she didn't call them, they would call only one maybe two more times before they came over to check on her. She bit the bullet and called Jess first. She left a quick reassuring apology for skipping the brunch when she got their answering machine.

"Where were you?" Susan demanded before Michala could say more than hi.

She should've known her luck would run out with Susan. Judge Jessica Newhouse knew how to be tactful. Detective Susan Reid only knew interrogation tactics. Michala hated dealing with her when she was in police mode. "I slept in. That is allowed isn't it Detective?"

"Sure," Susan said through her teeth. Michala stared at the phone in surprise. She could see Miranda standing beside Susan with her hand squeezing a warning on her shoulder. "You sleep in every other morning. You might as well make it seven out of seven."

Michala decided her mood was much too good to let Susan ruin it. "I'm not going to do this, Susan. You're angry, that's fine, be angry. Just not on my time. I'll talk to you later, when you're calm. Bye."

She walked into her bathroom with the phone a demanding shrill in the background. She wondered, idly, if it was Susan or Miranda calling. Probably Miranda she decided. Susan would be livid, too busy ranting to make another call. She'd be more likely to come over to finish the talk in person. She also had a key that she wasn't above using. The answering machine kicked on, but she cut off her own voice with the shower spray.

Whoever it was would leave a message. They always did.

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Her room was shadowed and the townhouse silent when Kelly woke later that day. Her first thought was that she'd spent the night with Michala. Her second was that she needed to call Randa. The second thought wasn't as pleasant as the first so she went back to that one. Few times in her life has reality surpassed fantasy. The first time she saw the sun set over the Pacific. Walking across the stage to receive her doctorate. And spending last night with Michala. She wanted more nights like that. Kelly wanted weeks and months like last night.

She wanted to damn Randa for bringing the letter to her. She was honest enough to admit she wouldn't have met Michala any other way. Fate hated her. There was no other excuse for the position she was in now. She was egotistical enough to hope that Michala wanted more nights with her. She was realistic enough to believe she would know how her sister suddenly knew about the phone calls.

Hunger forced her from bed. She glanced over to her bedside, surprised to see that she'd slept until three. She should be hungry. After last night, she should be starving. She threw on her robe and went to the kitchen. She glanced outside the windows to the bright sunny Saturday. She knew it would be warm and decided she would eat her late lunch on Dani's tiny patio.

She found Dani's note taped to the fridge. She was at the park and Michala had called. She was at the phone punching in her number before she had time to wonder when it was that she'd memorized Michala's phone number. She waited through three seemingly eternal rings.

"Hello." Her voice was the cool, professional tone from last night.

"Hi, it's Kelly." She felt like a high school freshman calling the most beautiful senior girl.

"Did you just wake up?" Michala asked in a warm, deliciously intimate voice.

"Yes. I didn't get much sleep last night."

Her low, rich laugh sent shivers across Kelly's skin. "How would you like to not get much sleep tonight? I thought I would stay in and cook something that goes with candlelight, wine, and you. You don't have plans do you?"

It wouldn't have mattered what she'd planned. She would have canceled anything and anyone after an invitation like that. "What time?"

"Now. Bring whatever you need for staying over."

"Give me thirty minutes."

Kelly could hear the smile in her voice. "You aren't hungry now, are you?"

The quick electric shock of desire didn't surprise Kelly as much as it did last night. She knew



before Michala showed up at the club that she was attracted to her. The fact that Michala was attracted to her added fuel to the fire. The last time she'd wanted someone as much as she wanted Michala was in college. Her name was Emily and she teased Kelly for months. "No and I'll be there in twenty."

She laughed, sending Kelly's normally cautious tendencies up in flames. "I'll be waiting."

Her late lunch on the warm patio was forgotten. She dashed upstairs and changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. She didn't plan on being in her clothes long enough to ruin the romantic meal Michala was planning. By the time they were sitting down to eat, they would be wearing robes. She packed an overnight bag without any real thought to what she needed for staying over. She could always borrow what she forgot. She was throwing her bag in her car when she remembered Dani. She ran back in to write her a note telling her where she was and to call only if 911 was busy.

She pushed away thoughts of Randa and the phone call. She would deal with that tomorrow. Or Monday. For now, she wanted to enjoy every second of this last unexpected pleasure. Besides, how better to keep an eye on her than to be with her? She was a trained police officer. She could be her personal bodyguard. And she planned to guard her body intimately.

Kelly parked in the Center parking lot behind the house. The black Lexus was the only car in the small private area. She noticed the rental plates and remembered that hers was at the body shop. As she stood on the back porch waiting for her to answer the doorbell, she wondered what kind of car a woman like Michala would drive. Something classy and expensive.

"You're late," she said with a warm smile. She wore only her robe. She reached for Kelly's overnight bag with one hand and slid the other around her neck. The kiss was brief and effective. She drew back a step. "I'm glad you came."

Kelly followed her down the dark hallway. "I would have been here sooner, but I didn't want to get a ticket."

She tossed a grin over her shoulder. "Next time don't worry about the ticket. I have friends in high places."

Kelly had to agree with her on that. Lieutenant Bates adored her. She'd only heard him speak of her to ask Randa about her and his whole demeanor changed when he said her name. Her best friends were a State Court Judge and a police Detective. Her mother was a city council member.

The apartment was lit by a single floor lamp near her desk. They walked past the dark kitchen to the bedroom. The bedroom was darkened by mini blinds and lit by several candles. Soft, instrumental music played from her stereo. She put Kelly's bag down by the bed. Kelly slipped her arms around her waist before she could turn and pulled her close. Michala leaned back, her head resting on her shoulder. Michala's greeting made Kelly bolder. She trailed kisses over the soft, exposed skin of her neck.

"Mm, I think you've got me," she said in a low voice. She reached back to run her left hand through Kelly's hair.

"Not yet," Kelly whispered in her ear. She pulled the sash on her robe and reached into the silky folds to cup her breasts. Her nipples grew hard under her caresses. Michala's breath was uneven against her ear. "But very soon."

Kelly wanted to be the one in control this time. She wanted to feel Michala groaning under her hands and lips. With Michala still pressed against her, with her left hand teasing her breast, she slid her right hand down her flat stomach to the soft, blonde curls. She couldn't reach as far as she wanted, she wanted to be buried inside her, but she knew Michala was wet. She knew from the quick breathy gasp when her fingers touched her.

Before Kelly could stop her, Michala turned to her. Her dark eyes were half closed and hot with need. She pushed Kelly back on the bed and fell on top of her. "I don't know why I thought you were shy. You take my breath away, Kelly."

Kelly learned very quickly that she was never in control. Whatever control she thought she had was an illusion Michala allowed her to entertain. She laid back on the bed and gave herself up the demands of her hands, the teasing of her lips. She found that giving up control opened a door to new pleasures.

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The candles were flickering in melted wax hours later. Michala was flat on her back staring up at the ceiling. She wasn't sure she could move. Kelly leaned over her, her half smile pleased by the way Michala's breath caught when her fingers brushed over her stomach. Michala enjoyed Kelly's delight in arousing her. She seemed surprised that she could.

She reached up to run one finger between Kelly's breasts. "I should have asked this before. Are you seeing anyone else?"

Surprise crossed her face before she smiled. She took Michala's finger and kissed it. "No. Are you seeing anyone else?"

"No." Since Melissa, there was no one she'd brought home more than once. She told herself it was because she didn't want to be in a relationship. It was true to a point. The last thing she wanted was to put herself at the mercy of someone else's feelings again. To love was to hurt and she was tired of hurting. Kelly wasn't different, she told herself. Kelly didn't know her well enough to want more from her than what she was getting right now. To prove her point, she pushed her back and laid between her legs. Kelly wrapped her legs around her, opened her mouth for another long, deep kiss.

See? All Kelly wanted was her body. Michala could give her that. As long as Kelly didn't have designs on her heart and soul, they could play together quite happily for as long as they wanted. She broke away to stare into her eyes. "Hungry? I have a wonderful dinner planned."

Kelly took a deep breath. She slid her legs from around Michala. "I do remember you mentioning something about providing food."

Michala rolled off of her and to her feet in a single motion. Now that one hunger was satisfied for the time being, she was ready to satisfy the other. She grinned at Kelly. "Not just food. Food that I will prepare myself."

"Am I supposed to be impressed that you're cooking?" Kelly asked.

Michala watched her bend over and rummage through her overnight bag. The view was lovely. "Yes," she said, with a quick caress on her backside. "I hope you like pasta."

She was in the kitchen organizing their meal when Kelly came to lean in the doorway. She glanced over to see the self-satisfied smile on her face. She grinned, reading her thoughts very accurately. "You look very pleased with yourself."

"You would be pleased with yourself if I made the sounds you did when I was touching you."

Michala filled a pan with water and set it on the stove to boil. If that was the benchmark they were using, she was incredibly pleased with herself. She cast Kelly a sideways glance. Her pleased expression faded, to be replaced by nervous speculation. She was realizing very late that she had issued a challenge of sorts. She went to her slowly, excited that Kelly took a step back with every step she took forward. Michala tugged on the sash of her robe and caught Kelly's gaze when she let her robe fall open. Kelly backed herself into the wall. Michala was pressed against her, pulling Kelly's robe open before she could move. She made her kiss gentle, her hands tender as she held her against her wall. She wanted Kelly to come hard and fast. She didn't want her to feel taken or used. She lowered her head the pulse beating in her neck. Kelly fisted her hands on her robe and pulled her closer.

"When you do this, do I do that?" She asked, sliding her leg between Kelly's

She looked up into her eyes, watched her struggled to breathe. Michala stepped back enough to move her hand down, over hip, across her stomach, into the wet curls. Kelly gasped and nodded.

"Say my name, Kelly," she demanded softly, teasing with the tip of one finger.

She tried, she might have succeeded, if Michala didn't push two fingers deep inside. Her name was groaned out in a gasp of air. All thoughts of toying with Kelly left her head. She lowered her head to lick her nipple and push her over in a rush of sensation. Later, they could torment each other. Now, she wanted to satisfy this gorgeous woman again.

She held her until Kelly lifted her head from her shoulder and took a shuddering breath. She kissed her with small, gentle kisses. "You're right. It is very pleasing when you moan my name."

Pleasing and arousing. She retied her robe and walked back into the kitchen. They were going to have to keep their hands to themselves if they wanted to eat that night. The water was boiling for

the pasta. "I've got shrimp chilled in the fridge. Will you get it?"

"Sure," Kelly said in a delightfully husky voice. Michala watched her tie her own robe before pushing away from the wall. The kitchen was small. Kelly paused behind her, lifted her hair away to press a single kiss to the back of her neck. Michala supposed she owed her that.

"Here you go."

Michala looked over and reached for the jumbo shrimp with red cocktail sauce. Kelly held it away from her fingers. She moved closer, her eyes bright. "Open up."

Michala hesitated before opening her mouth. Kelly let her bite off half and ate the other half herself. She selected another one, dipped it, and took the first bite herself. Michala let her feed the second bite to her and caught her hand to lick her fingers.

"You're dangerous," she said, her own voice husky.

Kelly stared at her in disbelief. "I'm dangerous? Who had who pinned against the wall?"

Michala smiled with the memory. "Mm, I had you. And if you don't behave yourself, I'll have you again."

She picked up a shrimp, dipped it in the sauce, and popped it in Kelly's open mouth before she could say a word. Michala's grin was wicked. "Behave. I'm starving."

Kelly watched her move around the kitchen. She'd prepared the chicken and Alfredo sauce that afternoon. She didn't think it was egotistical to think Kelly would accept her invitation. She popped the broiled chicken in the microwave to heat. The noodles were ready quickly and she poured the sauce over the noodles, letting them simmer in the pan.

"Do you know what they say about payback?" Kelly asked, feeding her another shrimp.

Michala could only grin at the image that came to mind. "And I can hardly wait."

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There was a lot to be said for pay back, Kelly decided. Especially when the person wanted to be paid back over and over again. Michala was laying on her stomach, hands overhead, eyes closed. Kelly leaned over to kiss her shoulder.

"Why," Kelly wondered out aloud, "don't you belong to someone?"

Michala didn't move, only asked in a mild tone, "Excuse me?"

"What's wrong with the women of Atlanta? Why are you just wandering around, getting picked up in bars?"

After the question was asked, Kelly realized she really wanted to know the answer. Michala laughed and turned over to look up at her with merry eyes. "I don't get picked up in bars, honey. The same cannot be said for you."

Kelly opened her mouth to deny that, but Michala jerked her down for a hard, deep kiss. The truth was stunning, and just a little humiliating. She'd allowed herself to be picked up in a bar, in front of her friends, by a stranger. Dani wouldn't need to know anything else about their time together. It was enough that she knew that. She draped herself over Michala. Small, soft hands slid down her back in a slow caress. So what if she was picked up in a bar? Thank you God.

"Do you often let women pick you up in bars? Let them take you home and have their wicked way with you?" Michala whispered the words in her ear.

She laid between Michala's legs. "Oh yeah. That wall thing? Been there, done that."

"Really?" Michala asked softly. Before Kelly could reply, she flipped them. She was astonished by how quickly she found herself trapped against the bed by Michala, with her hands held in vice grips at her side. She could only stare up into Michala's dark eyes. A slow smile spread over face. "I've been gentle with you. I didn't want to shock you with all the things I wanted to do to you, but if you've been there, done that..."

Michala watched her reaction as she reached out with her tongue to lick her nipple. Desire hit hard. She gasped as heat spread down her body. She struggled to free her hands, but the fingers wrapped around her wrist clamped her tighter to the bed.

"I'll have to punish you if you do that," Michala whispered, dark eyes flashing.

Kelly tried to swallow as Michala slowly lowered her head down. She thought Michala would suck on her and was prepared for the rush she would feel. She wasn't prepared for the shock of Michala's teeth closing over her nipple, or the wave of desire that crashed over her. Without warning, she arched off the bed. Michala held her hands down, kept the pressure on her nipple until Kelly thought she would explode. She barely recognized herself as she pleaded, "No more."

She let Michala pull her close. She was boneless against her warm body. She wished she had the strength to open her eyes. "I think I'm gonna die now."

Michala took her hand and slid it down. She said in a voice low in need, "Not until you take care of that you aren't."

Kelly opened her eyes. Michala's eyes were closed and her breathing was ragged. With the tip of one finger, she stroked Michala. She wanted to do to Michala what Michala had done to her. She wanted to make her come in a crashing wave that pounded her against the bed until she was breathless. She sat up on her elbow and slowly pushed two fingers inside Michala. She was hot, tight and very wet. "This? Is this what you want me to take care of?"

"Yes," Michala groaned as she went in deep and hard.

Kelly leaned against her, licked the shell of her ear. "Lift up." She slid her hand under Michala and heard the catch to her breath when she moved her finger up to get wet. Her ass was tighter and Kelly didn't give her any time to not want what she was doing. She went in gently. She matched the rhythm of her hands with her tongue on her nipple. Michala came slowly in spasms Kelly felt deep inside. She held on as Michala groaned and came off the bed. She stayed inside, feeling the aftershocks. She laid her head on her stomach and enjoyed the power she felt. She could make Michala Cary scream in pleasure.

Michala laid her hand on her head. "You can come out now."

Kelly sighed and pulled the bottom hand out first. She turned to look up into Michala's sleepy eyes. She wiggled her fingers a little and smiled as Michala gasped. "I don't want to. I've got you right where I want you."

"Please Kelly," she whispered. "I want to hold you."

How could she say no to a plea like that? She eased her fingers out and laid her head on Michala's shoulder. Michala pressed a tender kiss to her forehead and pulled her against her body. "We should take a shower," she said in a drowsy voice. "We're sweating."

"Later," Kelly promised. She nestled close and relaxed in her embrace. She closed her eyes. Michala's heart beat a slowing rhythm under her ear. Kelly listened to her easy breathing until Michala dropped off into sleep. She stared at the beautiful face relaxed in slumber. Without those dark knowing eyes, she looked incredibly young and vulnerable.

Again, Kelly wondered why she was alone. Someone this beautiful, this talented in bed, should not be picking up women in bars. She knew from Dani that her girlfriend had stayed with her only a few weeks after Tyler's death. Michala's friends were surprised Melissa Davies stuck it out that long. Apparently her main attraction to Michala was her friend's envy. They weren't very envious when Michala was shattered.

Kelly stroked her hand over Michala's cheek. Why would she want to be with someone like that? Was it the shallowness? Her professional life was demanding, Kelly knew that from personal experience. Melissa would've been uncomplicated in her demands and desires. Michala would have had to give her little to make her happy. And now? Kelly backed away from the question. She laid her head down on Michala's shoulder and closed her eyes. She didn't want to know the answer anymore. She didn't want to know what it meant for her being here.

Michala snuggled closer, mumbled something in her sleep. Kelly kissed her on the cheek. She was going to enjoy where she was for as long as it lasted.

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Kelly was sprawled over her the next morning. Michala looked down at the arms and legs pinning her to the bed. The sheets and comforter were twisted at the foot. She gently nudged Kelly's head off her shoulder and inched her way off the bed. She grinned as Kelly reached blindly for the

covers. She hadn't cared about blankets when she was using Michala for warmth.

She pulled on her robe and walked down the hall to the kitchen. She'd start tea and if she felt human after that, she would think about food. While the water was heating, she walked downstairs for the Sunday paper. She'd only just starting reading the paper again. She got bored reading about herself every other day.

She was in the living room reading and sipping hot tea when she heard the click of her answering machine. Sighing, she got up to face the inevitable. She's gotten through last night without it clicking. She turned up the volume before she pressed the play button.

*"All right fine. We're coming over and you'd better have food. Bye."*

Well that was just great. She assumed that "we're" were Miranda and Susan. What did they want? She sighed and knew what they wanted. She'd skipped yesterday with Susan and Jess, skipped giving Susan a chance to corner her at the bar last night, and now she going to pay for it. Michala guessed she had about twenty minutes before they arrived, less if Susan used her police light.

In an automatic gesture, she lowered the volume again. Damn, she wasn't ready to let Kelly go. She was half way down the hall when she stopped. Why did she have to let Kelly go? Susan was at the bar when she left with Kelly Friday night. Miranda knew about it. Why shouldn't Kelly know about Miranda? She turned around and walked into the kitchen. She'd bought a few basic breakfast items when she went shopping. She went to work on making three cheese and mushroom omelet's. When she thought they were close, she started coffee for Miranda.

She was setting the table when she heard them coming up the stairs. She frowned and tried to remember just how many people had keys to her home. Miranda had to have one to the Center; it was Susan's right as best friend. Too many people, really. She made a mental note to begin a collection of the keys. Perhaps it would be easier, and more amusing, to simply change the lock.

"See? I told you she'd be here," Miranda said as they walked into her apartment. They wore blue jeans and white T-shirts under sweatshirts. Susan's strawberry blonde hair was caught in a jaunty ponytail.

Michala didn't smile at them or wish them a good morning. She didn't invite them over for breakfast. "Coffee's on the stove. Butter the toast when it pops up."

Kelly was laying in the middle of her bed, flat on her back and covered from the waist down. Michala sat on the bed and leaned over, and ignoring her more basic instinct, pressed a single kiss to her nipple. Kelly jerked awake, eyes wide and disoriented.

Michala kissed her, keeping it short and sweet. "Your presence is requested for breakfast. We're having omelet's."

Kelly woke slowly. She yawned and stretched, raking fingers through her short tousled hair. She

dropped her hands in Michala's shoulders. "You could bring it in here."

Michala kissed her shoulder. She wished she could do that. She probably would have if the choice had been hers. She stood up and shook her head. "Wear your robe. Susan and Miranda are here."

She left the bedroom before Kelly could voice the question she could see in her eyes. Miranda and Susan were sitting at her table, eating the omelet's she made for them. She sat down and reached for her tea. She looked across the table at her sister. Her smile was a little evil. She should feel bad for not warning her sister. Miranda so hated to be caught outside her closet.

"Can I take this to mean that you've forgiven me?" she asked Susan. "Or didn't you want to brave Miranda's scrambled eggs?"

Susan tossed her a quick glare. "No. Yes."

Michala grinned at her sister. "I would ask how you've kept her for two years, but I don't think I want to know."

Miranda looked up, her fork pointed at Michala and simply stared behind her. Michala smiled. Kelly had perfect timing. She stood up and walked into the kitchen. "I believe I can skip the introductions. Coffee or tea, Kelly?"

She looked over at Kelly. She was disappointed to see that Kelly had skipped the robe in favor of jeans and a T-shirt. Oh well, nothing else about this morning was going her way. She would be expecting too much for that to change. She brought Kelly her plate with a mug of coffee. The silence over the table was thick and embarrassing. The lesson here, should Miranda and Susan want to learn it, was don't invite yourself to someone else's house.

She placed the plate and mug in front of Kelly. While she was leaning over her, she said in a stage whisper, "They're lovers, have been for years." She kissed her on the neck before moving away.

Having Miranda and Susan glare at her and Kelly staring at her plate was not how Michala planned to spend Sunday afternoon. She sat at the table. She glanced over the women sitting at her table in amusement. She reached for her tea. "All right Susan, whatever it is, say it. I have plans for today that don't include you or your girlfriend."

Susan sat back in her chair, her hazel eyes cool and distant. "You always have plans that don't include me or my girlfriend or any of my other friends. Every time I call, I get your answering machine. I think you must flip a coin to decide if you'll call me back. You say you'll be somewhere and you aren't. You don't even have the courtesy to call to say you won't be coming. I don't know who you are anymore. And I don't like who you've become."

Michala sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. She stared at Susan over the rim of her mug. "I'm touched. You miss me."



"I miss my friend," Susan said simply.

Their gazes met, held. Michala saw in her friend's eyes the confusion, anger and pain she saw all too often in the eyes of those who loved her. She wanted to care that she was hurting them. She wanted it to matter. She just didn't have it in her anymore. It was taking all she had just to keep herself together. She wanted to tell Susan her friend was gone. She went away and Michala didn't want her to ever come back again. She might have told Susan the truth if Miranda wasn't sitting across from them, watching every word. If Kelly wasn't pretending not to.

She ordered a bright smile to her face. She held up her hand as if taking an oath. "I promise to never miss another Saturday as long as I shall live. Barring a bona fide emergency. Forgive me?"

"Maybe. You owe us. If you pay up, Jess and I might forgive you."

Michala stood up. She wanted to take a shower. She'd prefer Kelly join her, but she accepted they needed to talk. She leaned over to drop a kiss on the top of Susan's head. "Okay, but I want to do more than hold the camera this time. I'll even let you call me Randa."

Susan merely laughed. Michala grinned over at her twin's dark glare. Miranda was a prude when it came to sex and she despised sexual references to their being identical twins. She and Susan had a lot of fun teasing her. It was one of the brighter spots to Michala's life these days. Or had been until she found a better way to spend her time. She smiled at her newest diversion. "I'm going to take a shower. If they leave before I'm out, come join me."

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Kelly watched her walk down the short hallway to her bedroom. Well that certainly added a layer of tension to the silence. She wasn't sure that she'd ever felt as exposed as she did at that moment with Randa and Susan. She picked at her omelet and sent up a prayer that Miranda would choose to ignore this.

"I'm sorry Kelly. Cayla takes a perverse delight in me. That was solely to out me to you. I knew about you Friday."

Kelly glanced over in question at her last remark. Randa slid a quick look at Susan. She said, her voice curious, "Legend has it that you've turned down every woman whose asked you out and that you left with Cayla less than ten minutes after she came into the bar. Apparently there was a floor show."

Kelly wished she could deny it. She would've tried if there weren't so many reliable witnesses. She shrugged inwardly. She left with Michala, had obviously spent more than one night with her. She could hardly claim it was private now. Kelly looked across at her colleague. "I was going to tell you myself. I thought we could have lunch tomorrow. I have something to add to the case we were discussing Friday."

Randa's eyebrows shot up under her bangs and she frowned. "You can't tell me now?"

She should tell her now. Michala was her sister. It was because of Randa's concern that she had spent the last few nights in her sister's bed. Kelly listened to the sounds of Michala's shower. They probably had just enough time for her to relate the phone call. Kelly admitted the truth reluctantly to herself. She didn't want to tell Randa now because she was sure Randa would confront Michala. Was it a jump for her to think Susan, her best friend, would join in? And from that, Kelly would find herself packing up and getting out. She didn't want to leave yet. She wasn't ready for this to end.

She shook her head. "No. Lunch tomorrow? That's if you don't have other plans." She let her gaze move between them in suggestion.

Susan caught her implication and shook with her with a regretful smile. "She's yours Kelly. I'll have to settle for dinner tomorrow night."

"Settle for dinner with who?" Michala asked as she came back into the room. She wore her robe. Her wet hair was combed back away from her face.

Susan stood up with her mug. "Randa. They're having lunch tomorrow. Want to have lunch with me? We can...compare."

Kelly turned away from Michala to see Randa grab Susan's arm. Her face was stubborn as she looked up at her lover. "No, you won't."

Michala laughed and sat at the table. Kelly was surprised when she took her hand and linked their fingers. "Don't worry Miranda. That wasn't much of an offer. I'll admit I've lived vicariously through Susan with one or two of her other lovers. You, my dear, are quite safe from my prurient little fantasies."

Susan planted a quick kiss on Randa's open lips. "Maybe I should have lunch with Kelly. You two are so different, I'd be interested to see how alike you are behind closed doors."

Kelly bit down on her smile when she saw Randa eying Susan with distrust. Michala's fingers tightened on hers and she hoped her face was bland when she looked over to her. Michala's smile was wicked and her eyes danced with glee. "Don't mention what we did in her office, okay? She'll never use her desk again."

Randa was speechless. Kelly felt sorry for the brief flash of fear she saw in her eyes. "We never left the apartment, Randa."

Susan came back with her cup refilled. "So, can we take that to mean you have left the bedroom?"

This time it was Kelly who was speechless. Susan smiled at her expression. She looked over and saw that Michala was going to be no help to her. The grin on her face was too merry to be sympathetic to her position. She glanced to Randa, afraid she would have the same delighted

expression on her face. Randa picked up her fork and shrugged. "Welcome to my hell, Kelly. It's about time I had a companion down here."

Michala laughed and squeezed her hand before letting go. "We're not that bad, Miranda."

But they were, Kelly soon discovered. The teasing was nonstop and there wasn't a line Susan or Michala wouldn't cross. Kelly chose Randa's position of saying little, and watching all. Their friendship was enviable. It must be nice to know you can say or do anything and it will be understood, forgiven and oftentimes both. She might have had something like it once with Dani.

When Randa and Susan got up to leave, Susan slipped her arms around Michala and pulled the smaller woman tight against her. She whispered something in her ear that made Michala laugh. Their kiss was brief and friendly. Randa made a lunch date for twelve-thirty and they left.

"Well that was fun," Michala remarked in a tone that said she thought otherwise. She began to clean up their breakfast.

Kelly realized for the first time that Michala hadn't eaten anything. She picked up glasses and silverware and joined her in the kitchen. She thought about being diplomatic. She was after all a guest in Michala's home. Michala cleaned up efficiently. Within minutes, the kitchen counters were spotless and the only sound in the apartment was the whirl of the dishwasher.

She followed Michala down the hall to her bedroom. "You didn't eat anything."

Michala turned in the doorway of her bedroom and put both hands on the doorframe. A small frown marred her forehead. Cool eyes met Kelly's. "The people who are allowed to do that just left. If you want to do it, you can leave, too."

Kelly almost asked do what just to hear Michala explain it. She didn't because she saw something weary and resigned in her eyes. People who worried and cared about her were all over her life. She didn't like it, but she understood she had to accept it. Kelly understood she would not accept the same from her. She was just someone Michala picked up in a bar. The fact that they met in her own apartment through her sister didn't change the reality of that. She wasn't ready for the weekend to be over. She didn't want to end like this.

She stepped into Michala's raised arms, slipping her own around her waist. She ignored how stiffly Michala stood in her embrace and began to lightly kiss her neck. When she reached her ear she whispered, "Just remember later that you had your chance for food. Don't think I'll take pity on you."

Michala melted against her. She lowered her arms and brought their faces together for a long, slow kiss that took Kelly's breath away. When the weekend was over, she wanted it to be because they ran out of time. She wasn't going to be the one to let it end any other way than it began. She walked Michala backwards to the bed and fell with her to continue the kiss.

"I'll remember," Michala promised on a whisper and moved on top of her, erasing every thought

in her head.

Later, Kelly watched from the bed as Michala tugged on her robe. She looked over and asked with a smile, "Want something for the road? I'm almost positive there's something suitable for lunch in there."

For the road? Kelly sat up among the tangled sheets and realized that she was being asked to leave. Michala left the bedroom without waiting for an answer. Kelly stared at the empty doorway. So the weekend was over. She glanced around the room and saw from the clock on the VCR that it was a little after six. She supposed that wasn't an unreasonable time to ask someone she picked up from the bar on Friday night to move along. She would've thought Michala Cary would do it with a little more subtlety, but this was Sunday after all.

Michala was sitting at the table finishing one half of her sandwich. She grinned as she picked up her second half. "I hope you like tuna."

Kelly stood at the table. A plate was waiting for her. Michala saw her hesitation. "You don't like tuna? Oops, tell me what you do like, and next Sunday, that's what it'll be."

"Next Sunday?" She repeated, sitting at the table. It was pathetic, but the dark mood she felt descending down on her began to lift away. She didn't want to be someone Michala was trying to brush off.

There was a can of Coke next to Michala's plate. She poured the rest of the can into a tumbler and pushed it across the table Kelly. Her smile was slow and warm. "If you have plans, I hope you let her down gently."

Kelly wanted to ask if she only meant Sunday. It was on the tip of her tongue and she took a bite of the sandwich to make sure she did not ask the question. Where was her pride? So she'd spent the weekend with Michala Cary. So.. Oh who was she kidding? She'd spent the weekend with Michala Cary and she wanted to spend more weekends with her. Her pride was for sell if it was going to keep her from that. Her pride, ego, and self-respect could all take a hike for all she cared.

"Actually next weekend I'm free." She wasn't completely free. Randa's week would begin on Saturday and that would put Kelly on call as her backup if there was an emergency. It was rare for a situation to call for two DVIT members, but it could happen. Kelly refused to dwell on how she would explain that if it came up.

*"I know you're there. I know she's still there. Tell her to leave."*

The voice came from the answering machine without warning. Kelly jumped and dragged her startled gaze from the phone to watch Michala cross the room in quick, ground eating strides.

*"Pick up the phone Cayla. You've been very bad. I haven't pun-"*

Kelly wasn't sure what she thought Michala would do, especially after Friday night. She thought she would do more than turn down the volume on her machine as she waited for the call to end. Kelly sat back in her chair, watching and waiting. Michala popped the tape out and wrote something across the top. She put the tape in her desk drawer and slid a new tape into her machine. Her movements were efficient and practiced without hesitation. It was a familiar routine for her.

Michala came back to sit across from her. Kelly stared at her in disbelief as she calmly reached for the rest of her sandwich. Obviously, there was not going to be an explanation. "What the hell is going on here?"

She was one hell of an actress, Kelly thought with admiration. She looked up in a very good imitation of surprise. She seemed genuinely startled by the question. Kelly knew she was bright. The act was good, but not that good.

"Excuse me?" She asked in her cool tone.

"You don't seriously expect me to believe that was another prank call, do you? Don't insult me that way."

They stared at each other in a battle of wills Kelly was determined to win. Michala sighed in annoyance. "I don't expect you to believe anything, Kelly. This doesn't concern you. It's not your problem."

"Isn't it? He says he knows I'm here. He wants me to leave. Who is he Michala? An old boyfriend? Someone who wants to be a new boyfriend?"

Michala stood up and threw her napkin on her plate. "I don't know who it is. I don't care who it is. This is not open to discussion Kelly. This is my home. You can respect that or you can leave."

Frustration welled up inside Kelly and she gripped the table to keep from shaking some sense into Michala. She stared up at her in the silence. Michala's eyes were black, her hands clenched into fists at her side. When she was sure she wasn't going to grab her, Kelly stood up. She was taller than Michala. Those few inches gave her a feeling of power. "I thought you were smarter than this. The brilliant Dr. Cary. I bet you want me to think these are all just coincidence don't you? That these phone calls have nothing to do with your car being vandalized Thursday night. I bet you can give me a convincing story about how one has nothing to do with the other, can't you? Come on Michala, impress me. Convince me that I'm stupid to stand here and be concerned for you."

Because she was watching, she saw doubt flash across her face. Kelly knew then that it was worse than threatening phone calls, creepy letters, and petty acts of vandalism. Michala's nonchalance was too conditioned for this to be something new in her life. Kelly was willing to bet she'd been living with this for a while now. Her frustration leapt over anger into fury. Michala was an intelligent woman with, as she'd said herself, friends in high places. She was living with this because she had chosen to live with it. Kelly wanted to know why. She knew

Michala wasn't going to offer the reason willingly.

Michala picked up and drained her glass. "Is that your answer? Are you choosing to leave?"

Kelly was torn. She wanted to go to Randa's. She needed to go to Randa's so that something was done before Michala became a statistic. On the other hand, she felt obligated to stay. She had a gun which she was trained to use. She wasn't sure what Michala had for protection other than a mouth that needed to be licensed and a killer glare. Neither of which would actually protect her if someone wanted to hurt her.

"I guess I am." If Randa was truly concerned about her twin, Michala would not be alone for long.

Michala waved her empty glass toward the bedroom. "Bye." She walked into the kitchen.

Fury carried Kelly into the bedroom and had her dressed and packed in minutes. She cast one sweeping glance over the bedroom; saw that she'd left nothing of hers behind. Michala was sitting on the couch sipping wine when she came from the bedroom. Kelly wanted to say something to her, but words failed. What else could she say? She didn't know Michala well enough to know how real her anger was or how unforgiving she might be when crossed.

"Michala I-"

Michala cut her off with a single glance. Her eyes were cold, remote. She wasn't a lover standing in her living room. She was a stranger Michala had asked to leave. "Goodbye Kelly."

It was over that final and fast. She shouldered her overnight bag. "Bye."

She left the Center with only one clear thought in her head. Randa had to be told and the sooner the better. She didn't think that Randa may not be home or that she and Susan would not be up for company. She couldn't forget the bitter, taunting voice and she couldn't shake the feeling that the danger Michala was already in was about to get worse.

3.

Michala stared across the room and frowned at her answering machine. If she had to pick the person who turned up the volume, she would choose Susan. Her very best friend who apparently detested her machine and resented the fact that she didn't return her calls with God's speed. She raised her wine glass in salute. He wanted Kelly gone; Kelly obliged him. She drained her glass and slipped from the couch. Her night was not going to end this way, she decided. She quickly cleaned up their plates and had the kitchen spotless. She didn't want dirty plates on the table or stacked in the sink if she brought someone home.

After a long, hot shower, she dressed in black slacks and red silk shirt. She threw an oversized jacket on in deference to the cool nights. She felt no fear as she locked the door to the Center and crossed the empty parking lot to her car. She refused to give into the terror he was trying to bring

to her life. He was going to have to do much better than phone calls if he wanted to scare her.

It was only when she was walking to the bar that she thought of her friends. She really didn't want to deal with anything else tonight. She steeled herself to blow off more questions and sly remarks and continued inside. Atlanta had other bars and she had other friends. She was not going to spend any more of this day soothing someone else's feelings.

The Sunday crowd was thin. She ordered what passed as white wine. She sipped her first glass while waiting for her second and scanned the bar for friendly faces. She saw Jess' blonde head bent over a pool table in the back corner. She left the empty glass on the bar, taking the second with her as she moved through the crowd to them.

"Hey you," Jess said with a happy, surprised grin. Michala slipped her arm around her waist and returned the tight one-armed hug. She guessed Jess was on her fourth beer. "You owe me big, Cary. I had to eat Susan's Surprise yesterday. I don't love you that much."

Michala shot her a grin. "After last night, I couldn't move until this afternoon."

Jess arched both eyebrows in question then laughed at Michala's single nod. "Val hates you. She's been trying to go there since Kelly moved here. You waltz in and waltz out with her in five minutes flat. Nobody even knew you knew her."

"I don't know her. I'm just that good," she said. She owed Val one for calling the police Thursday. This was an excellent way to repay her. Regardless of whom Kelly went onto next, Michala had her first. She moved away from Jess and dropped four quarters on the table. "I'll play the winner."

Jess closed one eye and looked down her pool stick. "That'd be me. I'll have this game finished by the time you get back with my beer."

Michala stared at her half glass of wine. How much did she drink before she came? She couldn't remember and decided it didn't matter. She would drink as much as she wanted. She didn't want to leave the bar too sober. She let her gaze drift over the room as she walked to the bar. Maybe she'd let one of these women take her home. Maybe she'd call a cab. It would matter little later how she left, who she left with, or how sober she was when she did. Sobriety hadn't mattered longer than she wanted to remember.

She played pool with Jess, won three of the five games they played. She brushed off two women she'd brushed off before and hailed down a cab after she failed to take two steps in a straight line. She didn't mind hurting herself, but she wasn't drunk enough to mind hurting others. The cabbie let her out in the back parking lot of the Center. She hurried through the chilly dark night to the back door. The Center was dark. She was annoyed with herself for not leaving a light on inside. She wasn't usually that careless.

She felt restless, deflated as she entered her bedroom. She shed her jacket and draped it over the bedpost before she walked back to the living room. Her answering machine was blinking. She let

it blink. It had to be him. Who else was left to call her today? She doubted it was Kelly.

Feeling tipsier that she wanted to be, Michala went to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of milk. Her fridge was depressingly bare of real food. She stared into the blinding light and tried to remember the last time the shelves were stocked. Before, she realized. The answer to most questions she asked herself was always before. She shut the door, and blocked the flood of memories that threatened to remind her of just what she was before.

She paused with the glass at her lips. Did she hear something downstairs? Straining, she shut her eyes to listen. She almost convinced herself that she was imagining things when she heard it again. And she knew who it was. Without conscious thought she moved to her bedroom. She picked up the portable phone on her nightstand and was relieved to hear a dial tone.

*"911. What is your emergency?"*

Glass shattered. She thought it came from the front of the house, but from the second floor it was hard for her to know where he was in the Center. She opened the drawer on the nightstand and took out the 9mm Glock. The loaded gun felt heavy in her hand. She was glad for the lessons Susan nagged her into taking. She hoped she wouldn't have to fire the gun. She felt better knowing that if she had to, she could.

Her voice was calm. "Someone is inside my house."

She walked back into the living room and stood in the stance Susan taught her, the gun trained on the sliding doors. She answered the operator's questions and stayed on line with the woman until she was told the police were outside her home. She took her eyes from the sliding doors long enough to glance over at the windows that overlooked the front yard. Blue lights flashed in the black sky.

She unlocked the sliding doors and walked into the middle of the room to wait on the couch. Someone would come soon, she knew. Did they know who she was yet? Would they care that she was Dr. Michala Cary, former head of the Domestic Violence Intervention Team? She was fooling herself if she thought it wouldn't matter. They would care. It would be personal.

The door slid open slowly. Michala watched the uniformed officer edge into her home, service revolver held out in front of his body in rigid anticipation. She had to smile at the irony. Even an hour ago, she would have been furious to have a cop in her home. That part of her life was over; she never wanted it near her again. But then an hour ago, she believed her home was her last safe haven.

"I'm over here officer," she called. She laid the Glock on the coffee table before she stood up. "I'm all right."

The young cop didn't lower his gun. His narrowed gaze moved cautiously over the spaciouly open apartment. When he was certain she was alone, he relaxed the gun. "Lieutenant Bates is on the way, Dr. Cary. He said I should ask to call someone for you."



She shook her head. She would make her own calls. She owed them at least that. "I'll be fine, thank you."

He swept his eyes over her apartment one last time. "I'll be out in the hallway if you need me."

"Thank you." She went down the hall to her bedroom. She sat on the bed and stared at the floor for a minute. She knew what she had to do, knew she should have done it months ago. Knowing that she should have done it did not make it easier for her to do it now. With a deep breath, she reached for the phone on her bedside table. She punched in the number quickly before she could take the coward's way out one more time.

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Kelly was relieved to see Randa's Grand Cherokee parked in front of her townhouse. She used the time on the drive over trying to find an easy to tell Randa what she thought was happening to her sister. She didn't want to scare Randa because all she really had as evidence was a few threatening phone calls, one letter, and a busted windshield. But neither did she want Randa to dismiss the fear she felt for Michala. In her heart, she knew without doubt that Michala was being stalked. How did she sugarcoat that?

Randa was surprised to see her. Kelly brushed past her without waiting for an invitation inside. "Do you have coffee? I need caffeine."

Kelly walked an unerring path to Randa's kitchen. She'd been a guest here countless times since she joined DVIT. She sat down at the table and waited for Randa to come into the kitchen. "Are you all right?"

"No. I stopped being all right when you showed me that damned letter. Thanks Randa. I owe you one for that." Kelly didn't know what angered her more, that she had the time with Michala or that someone that beautiful and bright could be so stupid. Both were enough to make her blood boil.

Randa walked around the kitchen counter and stared at Kelly for a few seconds. Kelly returned her stare with impatience. She needed coffee and the sooner the better. "You're angry. Why? Did you have a fight with Cayla?"

Sighing, Kelly stood up and walked into the kitchen to pour the coffee herself. She moved around the kitchen until she held the steaming mug in her hand. Randa had turned and was leaning against the counter, watching her. Kelly mimicked her and took a sip before she answered. She had a hope the caffeine would calm her turbulent emotions.

She met Randa's concerned gaze. "She's getting threatening phone calls. Very scary threatening phone calls. I've heard two of them." She paused as Randa stood straight, her eyes wide with shock. "I think she's being stalked Randa."

"Stalked?" Randa repeated dumbly. She shook her head to clear away the daze in her eyes.

"That's a jump, don't you think? Why would you even think that?"

Kelly sighed and walked around the counter to sit at the small dining table. "Sit down and I'll tell you."

She finished off two more cups of coffee as she told the whole, ugly scene. Randa was silent over her own cup of cold coffee. She'd taken a sip, maybe two while she listened to Kelly. She didn't ask questions. Kelly was surprised she was silent and now had a moment to wish she could have prepared her better. She had already accepted there wasn't easy way to do this, it didn't stop her from wishing there was.

"I'm sorry Randa." As the other woman continued to stare at her in silence, she was truly very sorry. She reached over her and laid her hand over Randa's. "I'm sorry."

Randa nodded slowly. She blinked several times and the fog began to lift from her eyes. She stood up and walked to the phone. Kelly was surprised when Randa merely punched in another number before hanging up the phone without ever saying a word. That was it? She frowned and took a closer look at Randa's face. She was pale, her mouth set in a firm line, but her eyes were clear with purpose. Why then did she only leave a number?

When the phone rang, she snatched up the receiver. "Is Cayla there...Damn...When did she leave...Was she alone?...Well, do you know if she was going home?...Damn it Susan. I thought you cared more about her than that...Okay, I'm sorry. Can you come here? I need to talk to you. I have something to tell you...If you love her, Susan, you'll come."

Kelly listened openly to Randa's side of the conversation. She knew her twin well it seemed. Why call the Center when Michala wasn't home? So it was Sunday night. Why sit home alone when she could go wherever she'd been. She pushed away the tiny shaft of her hurt. They weren't lovers. She didn't have a right to feel betrayed because Michala wasn't pouting in her home over the fact that she left. To her own mind, Michala must think she gave her a very reasonable choice. Why should she feel bad that Kelly chose wrong?

"Susan's still angry with Cayla. She won't talk to me about it. We try to keep our relationships with her out of ours. It's been incredibly hard since Tyler. Susan and Jess are closer to her than I am. Susan won't tell me things I think she should. If she knew about this..."

She looked up, her eyes bleak and desperate. "It's over. It'll be over if she knew. I can forgive that she didn't tell me. I'm used to that. I won't forgive her doing nothing. I can't."

Kelly bit down on the useless reassurances. Michala wanted to pretend nothing was happening. Would her friends, who knew just how far she'd fallen over the months, push her on something she really didn't want to face? She wanted to think they would, because it was the right thing to do, but she just didn't know. She didn't know Michala before Tyler. She didn't know how much of herself she'd lost with the little boy. Her best friends would know. And they would know how close she was to losing it all.

Kelly reached and linked her hand with Randa's. "You'll do something now."

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Wishing for a glass of Chivas, Michala closed her eyes. The phone was answered on the second ring. "Hi Miranda. Is Susan there?"

Her sister paused and her voice had a suspicious edge when she spoke. "Yes. Hold on and I'll get her."

Michala shook her head. "No, don't. Someone broke into the Center. Bring her with you when you come."

"Where are you?" Miranda demanded, the suspicion was gone now and she heard fear in the voice so like her own. "Are you all right?"

Michala opened her eyes to glance around her bedroom. "Home. The police are here. Bates is on his way. I think it's bad, Miranda. There are a lot of cops."

"We'll be there soon, Cayla."

She nodded. "Thanks Miranda. Bye."

She sat on the bed, watching the blue lights slash arcs around her bedroom. Curious she went to the bay window and stared down on the scene playing out on her front lawn. Police cruisers were angled up and down the street in front of the Center. Two officers were busily draping yards of yellow police tape around the perimeter. This is what her life had come to, she thought with only a little shock. Police cars outside her house, calls to 911.

She turned away as another police car and another unmarked car came to a screeching halt outside. Somehow, from somewhere, she had to find the words to explain how her life came to this. She wished she had a clue where to start. She wandered back to the living room to wait. The beginning was always the best place to start, she supposed. If only she could remember when that was now.

*"Are you scared? You should be. You really should be Cayla."*

The low male voice came without warning from the answering machine. She didn't jump or turn to look in the direction of her phone. She'd stopped jumping at the sound of that voice months ago. She hoped he'd go away. She let that hope die when she heard him inside the Center.

Michala closed her eyes and rested her head in her hands. The door she wouldn't open earlier swung free. It was too easy to go back. She sat back against the couch, letting the memories rush into her mind and it was so much easier than she thought it should be for her slip back into time. To go back to those months when Tyler was alive and she still believed. So very easy to lose herself in the grief those memories brought. The guilt crashed down on her in unforgiving waves

and it was so easy to once again let herself drown in the agonizing truth that her best wasn't good enough when it counted most. After all this time, after how hard she'd tried to move on, it really shouldn't have been so easy to go back.

Of all the things she remembered of those months, the only thing she can recall with no effort was her desperation. She'd wanted to keep him from his family, then keep him in the system, then merely keep him alive. She'd done none of those things. She used every resource she had, called in every favor owed, and still in the end, Tyler was dead. Everyone assured her that she had done her best. That was a cold, bitter comfort on those winter nights. She didn't want to know there was absolutely nothing she could do or could have done differently. If that was true, why in hell was she wasting her life in a program that let little children die? What difference did it make what she did if they were going to die anyway?

And somewhere, in all that, he was lurking. How was she supposed to remember when he became part of her life? When your life is turned upside down, when everything is crashing down on your head, how do you know when something begins or ends? She couldn't clearly remember a single day and weeks were passing blurs of activity. Time could be marked not by her own memories, but by the pages in her calendar.

She looked over at the phone as she remembered why she bought the answering machine. Some time in September or October, she had to have DVIT call her beeper when she was on call because of the dozen or so hang-ups she was getting every night. She thought it was Bradshaw, his childish way of interfering with her life the way he imagined she was interfering with his. The messages started when she got the machine.

She stood up and walked to her desk. He was angry about the machine, furious that she was screening his outlet to her. She opened the middle drawer on her desk and stared down at the little box filled with mini cassettes. Each bore a date across the top. She ejected the tape in her machine and wrote the date on it before adding it to her box. His messages grew longer with time, less angry and more conversational as if he enjoyed his one-sided conversations with her. She might not be listening when he left the call, but he believed she would be hanging on his every word later. That seemed enough for him. He would never know that she cut his calls off without listening to his words. Even now, standing with the box in her hands, she couldn't explain why she saved the tapes.

The letters were harder to pin down. She reached into the drawer and took out the stack of letters she never opened. She opened the first few, but quickly caught onto the gist of the letters and simply threw them into the drawer when she got them. Michala never thought the letters were from Bradshaw. It lacked the personal touch of the calls. She dropped the letters into the box of tapes and walked back to the couch. She placed the box next to her Glock. Susan would want the tapes and letters. She was grateful to be able to give her friend something.

Susan. Michala sighed as she realized how much she was about to hurt her. Susan's identity was a cop. It was the first word she would use to describe herself. How betrayed was she going to feel when she was told this and realized that Michala never once asked for her help? She shrugged away the guilt. She couldn't change what she did or didn't do now. She knew all too well

the past was beyond change. There wasn't a power on earth that could turn back time. She was going to hurt a lot of people before this over. She couldn't change that either.

The rest was something that would have to be guessed at. There was the first windshield at New Year's. As she recalled, it was the first he knew of her sexual orientation. He was angry over that, too. Miranda would know about the vandalism committed against the Center. She was certain her sister had the police make reports over every incident. The windshield Thursday was her fourth. Her car had also spent weeks in the body shop to repair broken taillights, headlights and repaint long, deep scratches. There would be a record of the damage and the dates of occurrence with the shop. From that, surely the police could get an accurate picture of what happened to her and when. She would help with what she could remember.

Michala decided to have that glass of Chivas after all. If she was going to have to remember more, she wasn't going to do it as sober as she felt right then. She wanted to feel in control. She wanted to at least give the illusion of poise. She took the glass with her to the couch. She closed her eyes and took her first sip, praying to God that the memories would go back to that dark corner in her mind when this was over.

She prayed it would be over soon.

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Kelly stood shoulder to shoulder with Randa. Susan flanked her girlfriend on the other side. Light spilled from every ground floor of the Cary Center. A single light burned in an upper floor window. Men and women crawled over the wide porch that circled the Center, dusted windowsills, and doorframes, swept the neat lawn and flowerbeds with flashlights. They would be buried in evidence.

"Are you sure she said she was home?" Susan asked in a voice hoarse in shock.

Randa had not spoken since her single "Oh my God" when Susan turned down the street. They were speechless as they stared over police cruisers, crime scene van and various other unmarked cars parked around the Center. They knew, before they ever saw the house, that it was more than a simple break-in, that it was much worse than Michala's "bad."

"I think so," Randa whispered.

In unison, Kelly and Susan took out their badges and clipped the gold shields to their jeans. The initial shock was fading, leaving Kelly feeling numb and empty. She had felt Michala was in danger and she left her alone to this. Her eyes drifted over the scene cast in neon blue. Did telling Randa really mean more than staying here to protect her from this?

Yellow crime tape warned the curious not to step over the line. The three of them ducked under the tape without hesitation. The warning didn't extend to them. Long strides propelled by fear carried them over the yard to the steps, where they could see up close what they had only glimpsed from the street. The tall windows that washed every room in the Center with warm, comforting sunlight were smashed. Dark red graffiti screamed *Dyke* and *Lesbo* among other

obscurities from the white wooden walls. The railing around the porch was broken and jagged pieces of wood hung precariously over carefully cultivated rose bushes. The double front doors, with their beautifully etched oval glass, were laid out on the lawn.

Large clay pots that held colorful, blooming Geraniums were shattered, leaving black potting soil and petals scattered over the porch. Broken wood and twisted brass hinges underlined the reason the front doors were laid on the lawn. Her eyes slid over the graffiti. Kelly wanted to believe it was a hate crime. She wished to God it was nothing more than a right wing extremist. She could understand that. They could fight that. She knew in her heart, just as she had known earlier that Michala was in danger, that it was hate, but not because Michala slept with women.

"Lieutenant Pryce, Detective Reid."

They nodded to the technician dusting the doorframe as they passed to enter the Center. The inside was worse. The long central hallway was littered with large chunks of plaster. Paintings were shredded in their frames. Kelly glanced into the reception area as they walked up the stairs. The perfectly appointed waiting room was destroyed. She saw leather couches and chairs ripped open, magazines ripped apart and thrown around the room like confetti. He was in the Center for a while, she realized in sudden dread.

Kelly looked up the staircase to where Michala waited. Her eyes slid over the guard standing outside in the hall to the open sliding door. She sought some sign that her stalker made it this far and let out a deeply held breath when she saw nothing marring the satin finish of the wood. She took comfort from the fact that Michala would not still be here if she had been physically hurt. Someone would have taken her away if she had been harmed.

"Cayla?" Randa called as she hurried over the threshold. Kelly followed more slowly. She was suddenly uncertain that her presence was wanted. Michala asked her to leave; it was her sister and best friend she called. She would wonder why Kelly was here, how Kelly knew when she wasn't on the short of list of people Michala allowed to care.

Lieutenant Bates was standing across from where Susan and Randa held tightly to Michala. He watched them over the rim of his coffee cup. His face was grim as he watched Kelly walk to the couches. He nodded his head once. "Lieutenant."

"Lieutenant," she returned, just as coolly. She didn't come under his control and she knew that bothered him. He believed that she had been handed the title without having to earn it. She didn't care what he thought as long as he stayed out of her way.

She looked over to find Michala's eyes on her. She watched her gaze slide slowly down to rest on the gold shield snug at her waist. She braced herself when those dark, condemning eyes snapped back to her face. "Shouldn't you be downstairs?"

Kelly took off her jacket and tossed it to the couch. She shook her head. "No. I'm with DVIT, not the department."

Michala took a step back and her face turned a paler shade of white. Kelly ruthlessly shoved the guilt she felt away. Michala had to know everything; she might as well learn it now. Michala closed her eyes and sank down to the couch. She reached for the tumbler on the table and tossed down the amber liquid with the flick of her wrist. She jumped to her feet. "Anyone else want one?"

Bates followed her into the kitchen. He put his cup into the sink. Kelly could see that he was talking to her in a soft voice. He reached out to stroke her hair as she held her glass between them like a shield. She nodded carelessly at what he said, smiled that coolly polite smile and let him kiss her cheek. Distaste flashed over her face as she watched him leave her home.

She sat on the couch Bates had vacated, facing the three of them. Kelly wondered if she felt they were united against her. She noted that Michala still wore her dress clothes. She was dressed as she was Friday night at the bar. Kelly decided she went to the bar that night, that it was from there Susan called Randa.

Michala caught her gaze and said, "He was inside when I came home. He probably watched me come upstairs."

"Who was inside?" Randa demanded. "Do you know who this is?"

Michala shook her head, took a sip from her glass. "No, I don't know who it is. I used to think it was Robert Bradshaw. Then I knew it wasn't him. By then I didn't care any more who it was."

"When did it start?" Susan asked. They had given her a short version of what had happened since Thursday night. By her shocked reaction, Kelly thought it was a safe bet to assume Susan never knew what was happening to her best friend.

Michala sat back with a small laugh. The amusement didn't reach the darkness of her eyes. "I've been wondering that myself. You have to understand that when it began, I had other things on my mind. But I've been thinking and I really do think it was in September. Yes, I'm sure it was then."

Kelly didn't expect the flip answer. She was prepared to learn it was months. Michala was too conditioned for it to be brand new. She never would have thought it was at least eight months. She stared at Michala in disbelief. At least eight months and she said nothing to those closest to her. She had done nothing to protect herself. Was she that devastated over Tyler? Did she really fall that far that fast?

Susan stood up slowly, her hands clenched into fists at her side. "September? You've been stalked since September and you're just now telling us?"

"I had to Susan. This is going to be in all the papers. Bates would have called you himself if I hadn't. I could hardly keep this from you, too."

Randa grabbed Susan's arm before she stepped over the table. Kelly narrowed her eyes at

Michala and saw the glaze of alcohol behind her carefully indifferent poise. Randa pulled Susan down to the couch. "What she meant is-

Michala waved her sister's sharp words away with the hand that held her glass. "I know what she meant, Miranda. You forget, I know Susan much better than you do. I know she wants to know why, over these past eight months, I never said a word to her about this. The answer's simple. I didn't want to deal with it."

"Didn't want to deal with?" Susan repeated in disbelief. "So you just waited until he was in your home before calling the police. What in the hell were you thinking?"

Michala looked down into her glass and watched the golden liquid swirl in the light. Kelly braced herself when she looked up. Michala's face was expressionless, her voice empty as she said, "I guess I was thinking I deserved it."

The words echoed in the silence. The soft words, words Kelly didn't doubt Michala meant absolutely, sucked the anger from the room. Randa didn't try to stop Susan as she stood up and walked around the table to sit next to Michala. Michala allowed herself to be pulled against Susan and held. She allowed Susan to take her drink and finish the alcohol. She laid her head on Susan's shoulder.

"I killed him." She spoke in a voice so full of uncomprehending hurt it tore at Kelly's heart. Her eyes stared sightlessly over their heads into nothing. "I should've walked away. He'd be alive if I had. He would be a little more battered, a lot more bruised. But alive. God, if I had just walked away..."

Susan squeezed her eyes shut and rested her head against Michala's. "I'm sorry you believe that honey. I wish I had the words that could change your mind. I wish to God I could take this away for you."

Michala nodded her head slowly. "So do I."

Susan pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead. "You know this head in the sand routine is over, don't you?"

Michala sighed and nodded. She snuggled deep in Susan's arms. "Yeah."

"Okay then. Tell it all now. Maybe you won't have to say it again." Susan caught Kelly's eye and made a writing motion with her hand. Kelly understood. She reached for her jacket and pulled out the notebook she'd grown accustomed to keeping on her. She sat back and propped her foot over one knee, hiding the notebook from Michala.

Susan held the glass up in front of Michala. "Do you want another one?"

Randa stood up and took the glass from her hand. She walked into the kitchen without a word. Michala peeked over her shoulder and watched her sister move around her kitchen. She turned



around, saying in disappointment, "She's making tea."

"Pretend its scotch," Susan advised. She crossed her feet on the coffee table. "Now, start at the beginning."

Michala put her feet next to Susan's and laid her head against her shoulder. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. With a voice low in remembrance, in a tone that conveyed more than her words the anguish she still felt all these months later, she took them down the road that brought them to this night and her call to 911.

They might as well have been alone, Kelly thought as Michala talked. Randa did nothing more than refill their cups. Kelly unobtrusively wrote down the story Michala told. Susan asked some questions, but mostly she did what best friends have been doing since the dawn of time, she simply listened. The telling was hard as Michala stumbled over the memories. Her voice faltered as she used the words before and after as euphemisms for Tyler's death. She never said his name. When she reached the end, Kelly understood why this bright and beautiful woman allowed this to happen to herself. She was devastated over Tyler's death, more Kelly knew, than even her friends and family realized. The letters and phone calls began during the worst time of her life. Her memories of one necessarily meshed with her memories of the other.

Michala sat up and carefully placed her teacup on the table. She picked up the box from the table and handed it over to Susan. "These are the messages he's left. They'll be the last ones on the tape. Some of the other messages are personal. Use what discretion you can."

She stood up and yawned, raking her fingers through her hair. Susan held up the sealed envelopes. Michala shrugged carelessly. "I read the first few. They were all the same. Short and not very sweet."

Kelly palmed the notebook as Michala stepped over Susan's legs. She said in a weary tone, "I have to pack. I don't want to stay with my parents, Susan. Anywhere else but there."

They watched her walk down the darkened hallway to her bedroom. Kelly was amazed by the cool poise, by her calm acceptance. Could she really be this steady? Was she really this strong? Kelly didn't want her to be either. She would have preferred tears to her stoicism, jumpy fear to her poise.

She reached for the Glock on the table. The gun was heavy with a full clip. "Who bought her this?"

Susan turned to see what she held. "She did. A Christmas present to herself."

"Does she know how to use it?"

"Yes. She's very good with it." She reached into the box and began to search the contents. Kelly felt better for leaving Michala earlier. She had not left her unprotected and at the mercy of her stalker. Michala could protect herself. Maybe she could be faulted for some of the decisions she

made, but when it counted most, she armed herself and she called the police. She didn't just sit and wait to be taken. Kelly took that as a positive sign.

"Mom and Dad are going to want her," Randa said. She sat beside Susan. "They have a right, don't you think?"

"They're certainly welcome to stop her allowance," Susan said archly. "Or ground her."

Kelly bit back a grin at Susan's none to subtle reminder that Michala, for all her very wrong decisions, was still an adult. She looked down the hallway. Light fell from the bedroom to the hallway floor. She didn't stop to think that Michala wouldn't want to talk to her right then, if ever. She slipped from the couch and walked towards the light. She didn't know what she would say when she got there. She only acknowledged the possibility that Michala would not let her say anything at all.

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Time is supposed to heal all wounds. Michala knew that for the comforting lie it was, but she hoped for her friends and family that it would be true for them. She hoped to never sit with her sister and her friends and do what she had done that night. She disappointed them. They expected better of her than this. There was a time when she would have expected better of herself. As she listened to herself, some part of who she used to be was appalled. How could she wait until he was inside her home before she said enough? How could she let it go so far? Why did she let it go so far?

A movement in the doorway caught her eye. She wasn't surprised to see Kelly standing one step inside her bedroom. She was too tired to be surprised by anything else. Her gaze rested briefly on the shiny gold badge. Kelly was a cop. That's what she got for not asking questions.

Kelly held her Glock in one hand and the ammo clip in the other. "I'm not sorry I didn't tell you I'm with DVIT or that I'm a cop. I could say it, but I wouldn't mean it."

Michala dropped the shirt she was folding. "Then say what you mean."

Kelly walked the few feet to her bed and leaned over to slip the gun and ammo into the side of her suitcase. Michala watched her and recognized stall tactics when she saw them. Kelly crammed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. The eyes that met hers were steeled with defiance. "I didn't know. I mean, I knew who you were. I knew what happened. Dani told me Saturday that it would make a difference with you that I'm an officer. She said Randa is barely welcome in your home and that you wouldn't make an exception for me. I didn't think it mattered because I was just someone you picked up in a bar."

Michala would have smiled at the unpleasant truth if she had the extra ounce of energy the effort required. She reached for the shirt and began to carefully fold the soft silk. Even now, after she knew all the steps that brought her to where she was standing, she was still stunned by the place she found herself. How? It was the one question her friends wanted to know more than anything

and it was probably the one she would never be able to answer to anyone's satisfaction. Certainly not her own.

"And later, when you did know?"

She thought for one moment that Kelly would give her what they both knew was the truth. By Saturday, Kelly didn't want it to make a difference. By Saturday, Michala wasn't so sure that it would have. She couldn't remember the last time someone caught her interest so quickly. She sighed and laid the shirt in her suitcase. She couldn't remember the last time anything caught her interest at all. Because Kelly couldn't take that step, Michala moved them away from it.

"I'm sorry you got pulled into this Kelly. If I had known he was so close, I would never have had you here. I never meant to involve anyone else."

"You didn't involve me. You made the fact that it didn't involve me very clear. Randa brought me into this. She got one of your letters Friday. She opened it before she knew it wasn't for her. You were the sensitive case we were discussing up here."

It would be ironic later. Tonight was going to be her last night of living with it whether he did anything or not. Kelly's behavior over the phone calls made sense once she knew Kelly knew about the letters. She said with a small smile, "You were at Miranda's when I called. You told her about the phone calls didn't you?"

Kelly nodded without hesitation. "I was afraid for you. I was almost sure you were being stalked. I never would have guessed to this extent, or for this long."

Michala laughed at the censure in her tone. "Ah, I've disappointed you. The line is long for that right now."

And not all the people who were on it knew it yet. Most of the people who were on it didn't know it yet. Her parents, who were sleeping snug in bed without a clue the plunge their life was about to take. Other friends, those kind souls who had left her alone and would now bitterly regret that kindness. Her colleagues, people who had trusted her professional judgment and who now would question her sanity. The line was long and would only grow longer as the word spread.

Susan walked into the bedroom. "Ready? Jess is waiting for you."

"Waiting, hmm?" She zipped her suitcase shut and watched in amusement as Susan reached around her for the bag. She turned to face her friend. "Why do I feel that this isn't voluntary?"

Susan gave her a light kiss on the lips. "It's as voluntary as you make, babe."

The four of them left the house through the spiral stairs that led from her bedroom to the back of the house. Susan led the way, Miranda fell in behind her, and Kelly took up the rear. Michala was aware, as they hustled her from the house, that they were a shield around her. The quick trip

down the back stairs left her no time to see what exactly he did to her home. She was grateful to be spared that right then. She was also grateful for their solid support as she stepped out into the pale light of dawn. Her brief hesitation on the threshold was known only to Kelly.

She let them talk around her on the drive over to Jess'. She couldn't remember how long she'd been awake. She closed her eyes and let go. It would all be waiting for her in the morning. And she knew nothing would change.

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Less than an hour later, they were driving back to Randa's. Michala was tucked safely behind the security controlled walls of Jessica Newhouse's gated community, snug and hopefully asleep in her guest room. Kelly shook away the image of Michala, pale and exhausted, being led upstairs like a little child. After the night she had the fact that she walked into the house under her own power said much about her strength. Kelly harbored no illusions that Michala would be pale and exhausted the next time they saw her. She would be the poised, arrogant Dr. Cary.

Kelly wished for her sunglasses as she blinked from the rising sun. She shook her head as she realized it was officially Monday morning. They had a staff meeting planned for ten. She glanced over at Randa. Her head rested against the seat. Her eyes, if they were opened, stared out of the passenger door window. Kelly made a mental note to call Sam and bring her up to date. The meeting would have to be canceled. There was no way Randa was in any shape to handle other people's problems right then.

She closed her eyes against the glaring sun. God, but she'd give almost anything to already be in her bed. She could feel her own exhaustion weighing her down. The last thing she wanted to do was make the drive to Dani's. She knew she wasn't alert enough to negotiate the NASCAR race that masqueraded as morning rush hour traffic in Atlanta.

"Wake up, Kelly."

She snapped awake and stared up into Susan's solemn face. Susan held out her hand. "You were sleeping. Come on, you can crash in the guest room."

Kelly shook her head to clear her jumbled thoughts. "No, I need to go home."

Susan pulled her from the car and caught her as she swayed slightly. She slipped her arm around Kelly's waist. "The only thing you need is sleep. You're staying here. It'd be criminal to let you drive like this. You can't even walk a straight line."

Kelly opened her mouth to argue and closed it when she stumbled. Susan held on to her to keep her from falling on the sidewalk. She tossed her a wan smile. "Thanks. The citizens of Atlanta owe you one."

[Continued in Chapter 4.](#)

## ~ Obsessions ~

by J Brownell

Disclaimer: Please don't read this at work. Any resemblance between my characters and anyone else is all in your head. Comments can be sent to [ga\\_onmymind@yahoo.com](mailto:ga_onmymind@yahoo.com)

4.

Michala woke quickly. One second she was in a dark, blissful void and in the next, her eyes were open and she remembered. She wasn't even given that one second of time to wonder where she was and how she came to be there. She was at Jessica's. She was here because he destroyed the Center. She closed her eyes and wished for more time in that black void. She wanted more time to find answers to the questions she knew they would ask. Answers Michala was afraid she would never have for them.

She was given a reprieve of sorts last night because the break-in happened so late. Miranda, Susan and Kelly knew everything. Jessica and Shannon knew only about the break-in. She sat up and sighed with the knowledge that she was going to relive the last of her year life too many more times. She had people in her life that would want to hear the tale from her. They would want to ask her their questions, want to hear her defense for themselves. It wasn't going to end any time too soon.

She threw the blankets to the side. Frowning, she saw she slept in her clothes. She didn't remember doing that. She supposed that was a sign of how thrown she was last night. If nothing else, she would've expected herself to shuck the slacks.

She heard a car door slam downstairs and got up to see who was arriving. Her parents. Miranda was busy. Her gaze skipped over the other cars parked in front of Jess' house. They were circling the wagons. Michala was impressed. The people who were downstairs waiting for her were all busy professionals who surely had important business waiting for them on this Monday. She wondered idly how long she could hide out in the guest room. The knock on the door brought a faint smile to her lips. Apparently, she was already here too long.

She turned when the door opened. Jess poked her head in the room and her eyes widened when she saw the empty bed. She came fully into the room and stopped when her panicked eyes fell on Michala by the window.

"Am I missing a party?"

From the way Jess was staring at her, Michala knew the few hours of sleep had done little to

erase the night from her face. She cleared her throat. "I suggest the first person you go to is your mother. Paige looks worse than you."

She was angry. Michala turned to lean back against the windowsill. Jess' clear blue eyes were narrowed in her pale face. Her jaw was clenched. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared across the room with cold anger brewing in her eyes. No, Michala thought, she was furious. One of the cars below was Susan's. Obviously, Jess knew more than the bare details. Is this how her day was going to be? Did she have that unforgiving icy anger to look forward to?

She said in her patented calm voice, "I'm sure Susan made it sound worse than it is."

Jess stared at her in silence. She nodded slowly. "I want to believe that. I want to believe you haven't been silent while some maniac has been stalking you. Tell me that last night someone did not break into the Center and demolish the ground floor while you were upstairs. Tell me that your car hasn't been vandalized countless times. Please tell me that you have not been receiving those letters since before the civil suit."

She stopped and seemed to bite down on her anger. She shook her head when Michala would have gone to her. In a slow, measured tone, she said, "If you tell me that everything Susan said is a lie, I'll believe you. Because I know you would have gone to the police before it came to this. I know you would not have waited until you were almost killed."

Michala shut her eyes once again. It was awful and having it laid out like that, she heard how horrible it sounded. She would have sought help before it went that far, right? She knew without a doubt that last year she would have gone to the police. But this year was different and this year she did not want to need the police. This year she did not want to need anyone. She opened her eyes when she was sure her mask of professional poise was firmly in place. "You don't understand. I-"

Jess took two quick steps forward, the anger she fought surging back into her voice. "Do you understand? If you do then it explain it to me. Explain how you waited until that maniac was inside your house before you called the police."

"I know I let it go too far. I didn't want to deal with it. It was just more than I could handle." It was more than she wanted to admit, but it was as close to the truth as she could get. She was a Psychiatrist. She knew problems like this did not go away by ignoring them. She knew problems like this usually got progressively worse until it ended in tragedy. Her excuses were pathetic and she could have done better if only it was the truth. She didn't want to deal with it as long as she wasn't hurt.

"Honey what were you thinking?" Jess asked softly. The anger was gone, replaced by concern.

Michala flashed onto Susan's face when she asked that same question. Susan was devastated by her honesty. They were going to be hurt. No matter what she said or did, they were all going to be hurt. The very least she could do was inflict as little pain as possible. She shook her head and met her friend's troubled gaze. "I don't think I was. I think I've just been getting by."

She tensed as Jess crossed the room to pull her into a bruising embrace. She whispered, "You don't know what it would've done to us if you died. You just don't know."

Michala didn't try to comfort away the dark thoughts. She knew it would come down to the what-ifs and a lot of self-blame. The thought that she could have been killed would cross every mind. The recriminations of who should have done what would start sometime after that. She patted Jess' back in a useless gesture and knew she could not help them with this. She should have never put them in this position, but now that she had, there wasn't any way she could get them out of it.

"We need to go down. It's all over the news."

Michala caught Jess' arm before she could turn away. She said the words she would be saying to them for a very long time. "I'm sorry Jessica."

They stared at each other for a moment. Jess nodded and turned away. "So am I."

Michala watched her leave the room. God, how was she going to survive this? She pushed away from the window and quickly followed Jess. The low murmurs died away as she walked down the stairs. She thought about smiling. People who were fine smiled. She was glad she didn't attempt the charade when she saw the pale, drawn faces that watched her every step. As she neared the bottom, they stood as one and waited. She paused and forced herself to meet every grief-stricken gaze head-on. She deserved to see just what she had done to the people who cared the most about her.

Her father stood behind her mother with his hands on her shoulders. Tortured. It was the only word she knew to describe the look in their eyes. They were drained. The vital energy that carried them through their action packed days was gone. They seemed older and frail. She hated herself most for that.

Miranda stood by their side. She, too, had lost something in the night. The arrogance maybe, or the defiance that was her trademark. What, she wondered sadly, did she take from her sister simply by not turning to her? How betrayed did she feel that Michala did not turn to her when she needed help?

Susan stood close enough to Miranda to be supportive. Michala could recall with little effort the dazed expression on her friend's face when she realized it wasn't a simple hate crime.

She went into her mother's arms without a word. She felt her father wrap them both in a crushing embrace. Her mother's tears burned an acid trail down her skin. The weight of guilt pressed down on her painfully until she was struggling to breathe. She heard her mother whisper the single question of why and she couldn't answer. She knew even if she could make her friends understand, she would never make her parents. There wasn't an answer that would take away the pain and disbelief from their faces.

It seemed an eternity that she stood there, giving them all the time they needed to assure themselves that the horror of the night wasn't evident on her in anyway. Their small kisses and warm caresses were tiny grains of salt in the wound. She saw it then, really saw just how close she came to devastating them. In a flash of clarity that left her weak and shaken, she saw their faces over the last months. How could she not see what she was doing to them? How could she so easily ignore their concern and fear? The pain they felt now wasn't new. This pain was only a fresher, deeper cut in a wound she had been slicing into them for months. *God, what did she do?*

The pain of that one thought jack hammering in her head was more than she could bear. She fell into the black void of unconsciousness the way a drowning woman reached for a lifeline.

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By noon, Kelly was ready to call it a day. Sam's weekend added four new kids to the caseload. Two, a brother and sister under the age of six, were eyewitnesses to the stabbing death of their father by their mother. Another was offered by his mother to an undercover cop in exchange for drugs. He was eight and the mother twenty-one. Kelly closed the next file and set the stack on the corner of her desk. For today, it was more than she could take.

Her thoughts kept circling back to Michala. Was she awake yet? Did she sleep the dreamless sleep of the exhausted? Or did the terror in her life invade her dreams? Kelly sat back in her chair and rubbed tired, gritty eyes. She slept little herself. Randa was already gone by the time she stumbled into the kitchen only a few hours earlier. Susan was sitting at the table, wearing a robe and sipping a cup of hot tea. Their eyes met briefly before they both looked away. They kept words to the bare minimum when Susan drove her to Randa's for her car.

Kelly gave into the inevitable and reached for her jacket. She wanted to go to the Center. She needed to see every room in all its Technicolor horror. She stuffed her pager into her jacket pocket and left the office. If something came up, Sam could track her down. She wasn't doing any good in the office anyway.

The drive to the Center passed in a blur and too soon she was parking across the street. Yellow police tape was wrapped from tree to tree around the perimeter. A single police cruiser was parked on the street in front of the Center. A young officer sat on the front steps. Kelly sat for a moment, her eyes drifting slowly from left to right over the Cary Center. The bright sunshine brought out in stark relief the extent of the destruction that was hidden in the black of night. She slipped from her car and slowly walked across the yard. She wasn't sure why she was here. Officially, she shouldn't be here. Personally, she knew Michala wouldn't want her here.

"Afternoon Lieutenant."

She nodded at the young man and stepped around him to walk onto the porch. Her gaze skimmed over the bloody graffiti sprayed over the white walls. Kelly didn't think he just discovered her orientation. The placement of it, on the front of the house and facing the road, pointed to a desire to out her to the world. He wanted everyone to know. Kelly wondered how he was close enough to know Michala was gay and yet far away from her life to not know everyone around her knew it. Whatever edge of her life he was on, it wasn't personal.



A giant yellow X covered the front entry. The front doors were propped against the railing. Kelly ducked between the tapes and stepped into the foyer. Her first instinct was to glance up the staircase. Michala's doors were shut. Kelly wasn't sure if she looked up to make sure the doors were shut or if it was habit whenever she was standing in this hallway. She didn't have to wonder any more what Michala's life was like behind the locked doors.

Steeling herself, Kelly moved forward to see for herself what was done to the Center. The old Victorian house was cut neatly in half by a long hallway. Conference rooms, offices, and shorter hallways branched off left and right. She crammed her hands into her pockets and walked to the first doorway.

The waiting room was large and heavily damaged. She remembered how the room looked before it was destroyed. Michala favored the traditional medical office furniture of wine red leather couches and chairs grouped around corner tables laden with magazines. Large, leafy plants and windows streaming with sunlight had added life to the dark, somber room. One corner of the room was a play area for the smallest of the Center's patients. Child-sized plastic picnic tables held crayons, coloring books, trucks, dolls, colorful Lego blocks, and wads of neon Play-doh. Kelly's eyes skimmed slowly over torn couches, broken tables and potting soil mixed with broken toys and ripped magazine pages. Gaping holes, possibly made by baseball bat, marred every wall. Glass glittered like diamonds under the windows. He'd spent a lot of time in this room.

Turning away, Kelly stared down the long center hallway. She knew a beautiful blue and gold oriental rug lay under the chunks of plaster, broken tables and vases. The paintings shredded in their shiny wooden frames were soothing prints of snow capped mountains, spring flowers, and sun splashed beaches. She could seem him moving methodically down the hallway, viciously lashing out at Michala with every swing of his bat.

The back of the Center was a large, homey kitchen. Kelly didn't want to disturb whatever evidence was still buried along the hallway. She detoured through the larger conference room across the hall from the waiting room. She glanced over the room as she walked through it. The damage here was light. Kelly guessed that Michala heard him in the waiting room, made the call to police and he heard the sirens while in the conference room. He would've had one or two minutes at most to get to the back door.

Kelly's glance to the small corner office that bore the gold nameplate of Dr. Michala Cary was as instinctive as her glance up the stairs whenever she was in the foyer. The door was always closed. But today, when she tossed the quick look over to her right, she saw the door was open. She came to a stunned halt in the hallway and stared at the hardwood floor covered with leather bound books, papers spilling from open folders, pens, and pencils. Somehow, this assault on Michala's personal space seemed more of a violation of Michala than what he had done to the rest of the Center. The Cary Center was hers, the name it bore was hers, but this room belonged to her exclusively. He committed a sacrilege by stepping across the threshold of that office.

Without thinking, she took the few steps that would take her across the same threshold. He

should have spent a great deal of time in here. She braced herself for what she would find.

"Oh." She paused in mid-stride and stared at Susan sitting behind the cherry wood desk.

The surprise she felt at finding Susan in the office was mirrored on Susan's face. She sat up slowly and linked her hands together on the desk. "Hi."

"Hi." Kelly looked away from the speculation she saw in the hazel eyes. Instead, she chose to give the office the same skimming glance she gave the rest of the rooms. She felt a jolt of shock when she realized the damage was far different in here than what he had done to the rest of the Center. The desktop was empty of all typical office items. The bookshelves behind the desk were as bare. Leather bound books were thrown all over the small office, some open, but none destroyed. The only decoration on the unmarked wall was a large cork bulletin board with dozens of Polaroid's. Each picture was pinned to a drawing done by obviously childish hands. She was drawn to the board.

Her breath caught. Each photograph was of a smiling Michala cuddling a small child. The name of the child matched several of the sloppy signatures of the drawings. Others were signed with an adult, very feminine hand.

"She did this," Susan said in a low, somber tone.

Kelly turned around to face her. "What?"

Susan's eyes swept over the room. "This. Someone called the day Tyler was hurt. We don't know who. Randa said everyone could hear her screaming. This is how it looked when Randa got here. Michala was already gone. We looked for her for hours until she finally showed up Jess'. We still don't know where she went that day. It's not exactly something any of us question her about."

Her shocked eyes fell to the thick medical books Michala must have thrown, over the folders and pens she might have swept from her desk with one swipe of her arm, to fall onto the one thing in the office Michala left untouched. She was right. The damage in here was different. There was anger here, but this was borne of pain instead of rage. And even while she was destroying her own office, this collage of photos and drawings was something she could not bring herself to lift a hand against. It meant something to her when nothing else did.

"How is she?" Kelly asked when she could speak. Surely Susan would have seen her today or called. Those were the rights of a best friend.

Susan pushed away from the desk and came to stand beside her in front of the bulletin board. Her voice was hoarse from a pain she didn't try to hide. "Not good. She was so together last night. I went over there with the idea that we were going to have to shake her to make her see the light. At least, to me, she didn't seem to get the whole picture last night."

When she broke off, Kelly turned to face her. Susan blinked away her tears. "She collapsed when she saw her parents. She was out for maybe a minute. She's been withdrawn since. I called Jess

about an hour ago. She's not speaking if she doesn't have to and if she does, she's saying just a few words. I hope its just shock."

Kelly wanted to ease her guilt and pain, but knew that was only something Michala could do for her friends. They'd been losing her for the past year. They'd given her time and space and love in the hope that it would be enough to heal her wounds. Kelly didn't need Michala's degrees to know it would destroy her friends if they lost her now. They would blame themselves because they stood on the shore and watched as she slowly drowned under the weight of her own guilt.

Kelly was saved from mouthing useless clichés by the beeping of a pager. They both reached into their jacket pockets. It was Susan's. Her eyes widened in fear of the number she saw and she cast a frantic gaze over the office. She saw what she was looking for in the corner. The tell tale line was lying next to the receiver. "The apartment."

They hurried through the conference room, down the hallway and up the stairs. Susan barely paused as she used her own key to open the lock. Kelly followed her into the dark, silent apartment at a slower pace. She stood just inside the door and watched Susan run to the kitchen wall phone. They stared at each as she punched in the number. Kelly knew who she was calling.

"Hey it's me," she said, her voice betraying how shaken she was by the page.

Kelly tensed, waiting for Susan to close her eyes, to slide slowly down the wall at what must be horrible news. It was the only kind they were getting these days. She let out the breath she was holding when Susan did the same and watched the other woman lean weakly against the wall for support. She tossed Kelly a relieved grin.

"Sure, I can do that. Is she up for it?"

Everything was fine. Kelly reached out to flip on the lamps. She deliberately forced Susan's voice into the background. She didn't want to overhear her end of the conversation. She was only just realizing what a horrible mistake she made by coming over here. When she thought no one would ever know that she was here, it was all right. But now Susan knew and would read whatever she wanted into the visit. That she would tell Randa was a given. Kelly wasn't sure who else she would tell, however, she was very sure she didn't want others knowing it.

The flashing red light on the answering machine caught her attention. She stared at the small blinking light and knew with a cold dread that it was from him. No one else in Michala's life would call her here. Everyone who mattered and probably a few who didn't knew Michala wasn't in her apartment. Only those who mattered knew she was hidden behind the airtight security of Judge Jessica Newhouse.

Without turning around, she tuned into Susan's conversation. "Good...I hope so, Jess. I really hope so...Okay, so if you need anything else just call. I'll be there soon...Okay, bye."

"We're having supper at Jess'. Just friends. I've been given the job of finding you and bringing you with me. Consider yourself found."

Kelly nodded without thinking. Her eyes never left the message light. "There's a message. It's probably him."

The sound of Susan's shoes on the hardwood floor was deafening in the small, suddenly airless apartment. They stood side by side and watched the light flash in accusing red. Susan reached down with her left hand to clasp hers and with her right, she reached out to play the message.

*"You can run and you can hide. I'll find you. You know I always find you Cayla. And this time you'll be mine. Forever mine. I can wait, but I won't wait long."*

Kelly wasn't sure if she was disturbed more by the threatening content of the call or the chillingly calm, pleasant tone in which it was delivered. He seemed positive Michala would hear the message. Did he really think she was going to be allowed anywhere near this place after last night?

Susan squeezed her hand briefly and let go. "Want some coffee? I'd offer something stronger, but I don't think she has anything stronger than white wine."

"Sure, thanks." Kelly went to sit at the bar and watched Susan move with familiarity around the small kitchen. She turned to stare at the answering machine. Something was wrong with the message. She could almost place her finger on it. With the sounds of Susan rustling through the cabinets as background noise, she mentally replayed the message inside her head.

"Oh," Susan said in a softly shocked tone.

Kelly looked over her shoulder. Susan was staring at the almost empty bottle of Chivas Regal Scotch. She put the bottle back on a shelf. "I guess things change."

The sad note of loss in her voice escaped Kelly. She had finally realized what was wrong with the message. "Susan," she asked and turned to face her, "why does Randa call her Cayla?"

Susan's smile was sweetly amused. Her eyes sparkled briefly with laughter. "Because she can. When they were small, they were called Randa and Cayla. Paige says they were too mischievous for such serious names as Miranda and Michala. Randa doesn't like Miranda. Michala doesn't like Cayla. So of course, they call each other the names they don't like."

"And no one else is allowed to call her that?"

Susan laughed. She poured steaming coffee into cups and handed one over the counter to Kelly. "Well, the children do because she thinks it's easier for them to say. I've heard some of the staffers call her Cayla. Maybe a few of the parents. It's not something she allows easily. She detests the name. I think she was still in grade school when she stopped answering to it."

Kelly wrapped her cold hands around the warm mug. "So only people who are connected to the Center call her Cayla?"

Susan brought her mug around the bar and sat next to her. "None of us call her that. I would think that, yes, only people connected to the Center call her Cayla."

"Susan." she said and waited until Susan was facing her with a silent question on her face. "He calls her Cayla. On the message he calls her Cayla."

Susan's face went blank for a moment and she turned to stare at the answering machine. Kelly watched her and could almost hear Susan replaying the message in her mind just as she had done. Slowly, she turned wide eyes on Kelly. "He does, doesn't he? He calls her Cayla."

Kelly nodded. "He's connected to the Center. One of the children who call her Cayla could be his."

Susan paled. She swallowed and closed her eyes. She shook her head in denial. "God, no. It'll kill her. If this is connected to another one of her kids, this will kill her."

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They were watching her. Michala wasn't sure just who *they* were, but she felt eyes on her. She was sitting on the patio sipping honey-sweetened tea. She was drinking the warm tea to ward away the chill that seemed to go down to the bone. She knew she was pale. She saw how she looked reflected on the faces of her friends.

"That's rude, you know," she said. She sipped the tea and waited.

The door slid open and a kiss was pressed against the top of her head. "You sound better anyway."

"I'm fine," she said automatically. She angled a smile up at Susan.

Narrowed hazel eyes searched her face. Michala met the concerned gaze. "Really, I'm fine."

Susan didn't answer. Instead, she held out both hands. "Well, I'm not. I was invited here for food and Shan says we can't eat until you come in."

The last thing Michala wanted was food. She'd eaten lunch because, as Jess reminded her forcefully, she had not eaten breakfast. She'd eaten a few cookies later for the same reason. How many times did she have to force food down today just because she missed breakfast? She sighed and put her hands in Susan's. Apparently, at least one more time.

"Cool. I haven't had food offered to me in at least an hour."

She was caught off guard when Susan pulled her up into a hug. Susan laughed and pulled away just far enough to smile at her. "I love you."

"Right. You're just saying that so I'll come inside."

"And because I love you," Susan said and gave her one last hug before letting her go. "And because I'm hungry."

Michala allowed herself to be pulled inside the house. She knew Susan wasn't the only friend she'd find inside. As the clock crept close to four, she began hearing car doors slam. Some, she knew, belonged to neighbors, but some, she knew, belonged to her friends. She wasn't going to be given any more space. She wasn't getting any more time to pull her life back together. They were going to have a been there, done that, didn't work kind of attitude. She had to let them because they were so obviously right.

"What are we having anyway? I hope Shannon's making those veggie ka-bobs. I love-" She broke off and stared in surprise at Kelly accepting a glass of iced tea from Randa. She wasn't sure if the day just better or worse. Susan was staring at her and Michala forced her gaze away from Kelly. "Her ka-bobs. I love them."

Susan grinned. "Then we're having them. Everything you love is here."

Michala frowned at Susan's back. Everything she loved was here? Worse, she decided. Her day just got worse. Sighing with frustration, she turned her back on the room to shut the sliding glass doors. She closed her eyes and forced herself to believe she was here because she wanted to be here. She didn't have a car and there was no way in hell that she was getting past these determined women so she had better believe she wasn't a hostage. Otherwise, she was going to make a break for it and someone, she wouldn't take bets on who, would take great delight in taking her down.

"Hey you."

Michala turned at the voice and saw a flash of bright copper hair before she was caught in a bruising, breathtaking hug. She wrapped her arms around Gaye Moreland, another friend who was probably kicking herself. It was Gaye's article in the newspaper that brought her the press attention Michala was so sure would save Tyler. Gaye would now know it had brought her another kind of attention as well. As her friend held her tightly, Michala searched for some words to make everything all right again. Sorry just wasn't enough anymore.

"I can't believe you're okay. I mean, after I saw the Center and..."

Gaye pushed her away and stricken blue eyes stared down at her. Michala smiled and wondered who gave the orders not to mention last night or the last year. This was supposed to be a fun night. "Am I the top story again? I'm not allowed to watch the news or read the papers."

Gaye cupped her face in warm, soft hands. "Nah, you're old news."

"All right, you had your turn." A frizzy brown head ducked under Gaye's arms. Valerie Martin put her hands on Michala's shoulder and stared down at her with solemn green eyes that were trying hard not to cry. She forced a lopsided grin to her face. "Guess who barged into my office

today? She demanded I tell her where you are. I was so touched when she squeezed out a tear. Almost broke my heart."

"What heart?" Michala asked, her tone completely serious.

Relieved laughter broke the tension in the room. Michala grinned and linked arms with Val. "Which number did you give her? Strip club or Dial-A-Porn?"

"Psychic Network. I thought, what the hell, let's see how good they really are."

The tone was set. Her friends were determined to laugh and be merry and only the need to touch her when she was near betrayed their anxiety. She quietly held hands and leaned into covert hugs while laughing at every hilarious remembrance they could dredge from their collective memories. A few she had even forgotten. When she didn't feel the weight of Kelly's gaze on her, she was watching her. If she felt uncomfortable here, she didn't show it. She looked very much at home. Michala was glad Kelly seemed comfortable with her friends. She hoped Kelly found herself surrounded by her friends a lot.

Michala was fighting yawns by eight. She curled up on the couch and laid her head in Susan's lap. She was pleasantly exhausted. She would have to remember to thank them for this when it was all over. She wanted them to know how grateful she was for their friendship. With Susan softly combing her hair with her fingers, she let the conversation drift over her as her eyes slowly closed. Sleep had slammed down on her like a hammer that morning. She felt it descending on her like a warm, safe blanket.

This was how her life could have been all along. From the beginning, when it was only hang-ups in the middle of the night, Susan would have checked into it for her. When it progressed to letters, Miranda would have intercepted them for Susan. When he raised the stakes by vandalizing her possessions, they would have raised the stakes by opening an official investigation. If she had only turned to these women, she would have been shielded and protected. The Center would be whole and they would not be living now with the knowledge of just how close he got to her. She sighed and accepted that her life became what it was not because of him, but because of her. He had the power to do what he did because she gave it to him.

Everything was her fault. Tyler was dead because of her. The Center was destroyed because of her. Her friends and family were shell shocked because of her. What did it say for her that she had allowed it all to happen? What kind of person was she that she simply watched as her life shattered at her feet?

Michala pushed away from Susan and got to her feet. Her eyes skipped over the surprised faces staring up at her. "If it's not too rude, I think I'd like to take a hot bath before I go to sleep. It's been a long day."

Susan stood up and caught her from behind. "Yeah, sleeping late and being waited on hand and foot can be so tiring."

"Exhausting," Michala agreed with a brief smile. "It's been very nice though. I have wonderful friends."

Jess slipped from the floor and walked to stand in front of Michala. She slid her arms around Michala to rest them on Susan's shoulders. "I'm glad you remember. You sort of forgot that lately."

Michala pulled Jess closer and slid her hands into Jess' back pockets. She rested her head back against Susan's shoulder. She could feel tension in the bodies pressed against hers. She met Jess' hurt gaze. "I'm sorry Jess. I know it's not enough. I know it doesn't even begin to make amends, but I am so sorry. I would do everything differently if I could."

It was the only thing left for her to say. She wasn't sure she really meant it. After Tyler died, so little mattered anymore. She lived because she didn't die. She woke up each day and it didn't matter if she worked, saw friends, or buried her head under the covers because she always woke the next day. She did the best she could for her circumstances and her state of mind. But now, staring into Jess' bruised blue eyes, with Susan's arms clamped around her, she knew she had to make them think she would do things right if she could do it all again. People felt better when they heard that and it was an easy lie.

Jess leaned in for a quick kiss. "Easy to say that now, isn't it? Go take your bath. We'll stay down here and talk about you."

Michala laughed and asked, "Is there anything left to talk about?"

Susan tightened her arms briefly before letting her go. "Oh sure. I think we can drag up another story or two for Kelly."

Michala smiled and walked to stand in front of Kelly. Kelly looked up at her with a smile playing around her mouth. "Don't believe everything they tell you. They lie. You might think, because they are respected professionals, that they're honest. They're not. Especially Susan and Jess. Those two tell the tallest tales outside of Texas."

"Says the Queen of Tall Tales," Jess said with a laughing snort.

Michala shot her friend an amused glance. "All I ask is that you make me look good."

She laid a hand on Kelly's shoulder. She wanted to kiss her and might have if every pair of eyes in the room wasn't shamelessly focused on them. She squeezed lightly. "I'm glad you came tonight. Can I call you tomorrow? I'd like to talk to you without an audience."

Kelly's eyes never left her face, although she did grin at the lewd comments cast in their direction. "Yes. I have a feeling I'll be in the office all day."

"Tomorrow then. Goodnight all."



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They sat in silence until they heard the water come on upstairs. Susan's decision was to not mention anything about the message on the answering machine in front of Michala. Kelly didn't like it. She thought there had been enough secrets kept between this particular set of friends. She deferred to Susan because she one-upped her as best friend. Kelly could only top that as girlfriend. Weekend lover didn't have the same clout.

"We have a problem." Susan said in the no nonsense tone of a homicide detective. She walked to stand at the foot of the stairs and stationed herself so that while she talked, she could keep one eye on the stairwell. "Kelly and I went to the Center this afternoon. I returned your call, Jess, from her apartment. He left a message. He calls her Cayla, which can only mean he's connected to the Center."

Because she knew the bomb Susan was about to drop on them, Kelly was able to sit back and watch the reactions. It was quite a show. They all jerked as if a wire had been pulled and mouths dropped open, eyes reflected shock. Randa recovered first. She pushed herself to her feet. "So he calls her Cayla. Big deal. Lots of people call her that."

"Who else, besides you and people at the Center call her Cayla?" Kelly asked quietly. Randa's gaze was yanked from Susan to Kelly. As she only stared, Kelly raised her eyebrows in question. "Who else Randa? According to Susan, she despises the name."

The truth was a hard blow. Randa shut her eyes and shook her head slowly as she dropped blindly to the couch. "He doesn't have to be a patient. We have lots of people who come to the Center who aren't patients. Vendors are in and out all day."

"We're not saying he's a patient, honey," Susan said in a gentle tone that surprised Kelly. She watched Susan cross the room and sit next to her lover. Her smile was tender. "For whatever reason, he knows her as Cayla. The Center is the only place he could do that. It helps that we can narrow him down like that. Really, honey, it does. We don't want his only connection to her to be that he subscribes to the paper or watches TV."

"Do I need to ask why you didn't tell her?" Jess asked. She walked over to take over Susan's place at the foot of the stairs.

Susan shook her head. "I think that's obvious. One of her kids could be his. I don't think she can handle that right now."

Jess shut her eyes and nodded reluctantly. Kelly shoved down on the frustration she felt as they lined up to share in the conspiracy of silence. Michala belonged to them. She had to accept that. She didn't have to like it.

"We have another problem," Jess said with a frown. "She wanted to call the insurance company earlier. She wanted to get the paperwork on the repairs started. I held her off by saying the Center is still a crime scene. She's going to want her car next."

"I'll take care of the insurance company," Randa said. She looked upstairs. "Too bad she got her car to the body shop before we knew all this. It's part of the crime scene, but I'm sure whatever evidence was there is gone now."

"I'll talk to Jim tomorrow," Susan added. "Whoever's in charge of this investigation needs to know about the Center connection."

Jess sat down on the stairs. "You've missed my point. We can't keep her here until this guy is caught. She may stay put for a day or two. Guilt might work for a few days after that. But she's going to want to go home."

"She can't go home," Susan said in an angry voice. "Go take a look at the Center. It's not *damaged* Jess. It's demolished. She doesn't have a home to go home to."

Jess leaned forward and her eyes glittered with the same anger Susan's did. "We've all seen it. You're not the only one who went over there today. But that's not the point. The point is this, what the hell do we do with her until this guy is caught? Do you really see her sipping tea quietly on my patio until this is over? I don't. I'm surprised she did it for a day. What are we going to do when she wants to leave? How do we stop her?"

"We don't let her," Susan said, her tone final. She looked around the room. "She's safe here. She stays here. Against her will if need be. Even if he finds her here, he can't get to her."

Kelly could only stare as they looked at each other and nodded slowly in agreement. While their intentions were laudable, what they were proposing was quite criminal. She cleared her throat and smiled when they turned to her as one. "I may not know her very well, but I feel confident in saying that friends or not, she will press charges for kidnapping and false imprisonment for every second she's forced here against her will."

Susan slumped back against the couch. "I think you're right."

"She is very right."

Jess jumped and spun to stare up the stairwell. Kelly watched Michala come down the remaining steps, her eyes raking over the women looking up at her. She stepped over Jess' legs as she came down into the living room. She stood in the middle of the room with only her bathrobe on, her hands on her hips as she moved from one gaze to the next.

"What's happening here?"

Susan's gaze was steady. "We were just wondering how long you're going to be a good little girl. Knowing you, we decided it wouldn't be long. We want you here. We want you safe. We won't let you leave."

"I see. So I'm a hostage?"

Kelly didn't like the calm tone of her voice. Her eyes flashed over the room and watched them nod. No one said a word. Her friends and her twin sister met her eyes and nodded. To keep her safe, they were willing to cross any line. She watched Michala's eyes narrow. Michala nodded her head once and Kelly was surprised to find those dark eyes on her.

"You seem bright. You certainly saw the flaw in their plan faster than they did. Here's your chance to score points by telling me the truth,"

Kelly didn't care for the clipped tone in Michala's voice. She didn't agree with her friends, but Michala was seriously mistaken if she thought Kelly was going to take her side over theirs. At least their actions were understandable. "What truth would that be?"

Michala's smile was neither friendly nor amused. "Be careful before you align yourself with them, Kelly. Them I may forgive."

Kelly kept her eyes on Michala's without flinching. She wasn't going to be threatened. She shrugged and said, "That's good. They might say they're sorry."

Michala turned slowly away from her. Kelly could almost hear the wheels turning in her head as she made a circle in the middle of the room. She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Last chance to tell me the truth or we will see just how serious you are in keeping me here. And I promise you, Kelly only started the list of charges I'll make."

Only silence greeted her as her eyes moved over the room. When no one crossed over the line she had drawn in the sand, she turned away and headed for the stairs. Jess caught her by the arms. "Don't do this. We're trying to protect you."

"I know Jess," Michala said and stepped around her friend. She walked up the stairs. "I'll play hostage for a while."

Kelly decided now was as good a time as any to make her goodbyes. She thanked Jess and Shannon for dinner, was hugged by one and all, and escorted to her car by Randa. She leaned against the car to give Randa her full attention. She was one of the two women in the house who did not need someone to walk her to her car.

"You're good for her," Randa began when they were both leaning against Kelly's car. They faced the house. Kelly stared at the upstairs and wondered which of the two lit rooms was Michala's. And how long it would be hers before she tested her determined friends.

"I'm going to ask a favor."

Kelly didn't say anything. She turned her head to meet Randa's troubled gaze. She nodded her head once and braced herself. She didn't think she was going to like granting this favor.

"She's not going to be good for long. She's going to get a cab or get her car and she's going to be

out and about. We'll try to stop her and we'll use every weapon we have, but it won't matter in the end. I can't see Jess handcuffing her to the bed every morning."

Kelly smiled at the picture of Judge Newhouse and Dr. Wade struggling to handcuff a furious Michala to the headboard. How would either explain the bruises and scratches to their colleagues? Kelly was willing to bet that before they got back home, Michala would have picked the lock. "I can, but she'd get to do it only once."

Randa grinned and glanced up to the second floor. "She's coming to you, Kelly. She likes you and she wants to know you better. The favor is that, when she does come to you, just be there for her. Let the rest of us rail at her for putting herself at risk. Let us be the ones who get angry with her. I'll talk to Sam and we'll cover for you with DVIT. She needs someone to go to and right now she wants that someone to be you. So do the rest of us."

She was wrong. This favor wasn't going to be so hard to grant after all. "Okay. I don't know that you're right. If she comes to me, I'll just be there."

"She'll come. Thanks, Kelly."

Only one room was lit now on the second floor. Michala was snuggled in warm covers hopefully to have a night of peaceful sleep. Kelly wanted Randa to be right. She wanted Michala to come to her, to want to get to know her better. She certainly wanted to know Michala better. She wanted a second chance with her. If she got it, she wouldn't be as self-sacrificing as she was the first time. Randa wanted them to be the ones who worried about her and Kelly was more than willing to let them shoulder the burden. Her sole responsibility for Michala's safety was to keep her eyes open and her gun very near.

With the image of Michala sleeping, Kelly left for the drive home. She didn't think about the fact that she was wearing clothes she'd thrown on Sunday for a casual day with Michala. She didn't think about the fact that she hadn't slept in her own bed since Thursday night. Her sleepy thoughts centered on Michala. She wondered how long it would be before Michala came to her. She said she'd play hostage. For how long? How long would her ego allow her to bend her will to others? Kelly smiled. Not long. If Randa was right, Michala would be in her office before the week was over. All she had to do was wait and remember she wasn't supposed to be annoyed.

The condo was dark. Dani left a note saying she was spending the night with someone named Sandy. Kelly was grateful her best friend was gone. All she wanted was to take a hot shower and fall into bed. Because sleep was more important, she made the shower quick. She thought about finding a T-shirt to sleep in, but brushed the thought away. The minutes she spent doing that were less minutes she would have to sleep. She barely had time to think about tomorrow when she was sleeping the peaceful sleep she had wished for Michala.

5.

"If you can't reach me, Shan's number is right here."

Michala was silent as she looked over her coffee cup at Jess. Shannon left for her work an hour earlier. Shannon left for her job as a Forensic pathologist as if today was the same as any other day. She showered and dressed, had a quick breakfast of coffee and blueberry bagel while she read the paper before she kissed Jessica good-bye. Jess was behaving as if today was the first time she was leaving her newborn child in the care of a someone she didn't quite trust.

"I'm not sure what we have in here for lunch. You can order in if you want. We'll bring dinner home. Any requests?"

"Your shirt is buttoned wrong."

Jess stared at her blankly before looking down at her buttons. She sighed and looked back up with a frown. "I can stay home."

Michala clamped down hard on her smile. Jess was not in the right mood to see the humor in the situation. "Or you can just button it up the right way."

"All right. Okay. I know I'm being overprotective. I can't help it."

Michala reached out and laid her hand on Jess'. "I'll be all right. Life can't be put on hold because of this. Yours can't and mine can't. I'll be all right."

"I know," she said but didn't sound convinced. Michala slipped from the bar stool and walked around the counter to wrap her worried friend in her arms. Jess leaned her head against Michala's. Michala didn't say anything. She let the fact that she was close and safe make the argument for her. Jess wanted to go to work or she wouldn't be torn between going and staying. Michala wanted her to go.

"Promise me you'll be here when I get home."

Ah, that was it. Michala kissed her on the cheek. "I promise on our friendship that I will be here when you get home. I'll even make dinner."

Jess turned to look at her. Hope sprang to life in her eyes. In a true sign that life wasn't fair, Michala, along with all her other gifts, was an excellent cook. "Yeah? That'd be nice."

Michala let her go. "You have to go to work first. Otherwise, you can cook dinner."

Fifteen angst ridden minutes later, she waved from the front door as Jess backed down the driveway. She had to promise again she would be here when Jess came home. Michala refused to feel guilty about the fact that while she had every intention of being here when Jess returned, she had no intention of sitting around this house waiting for her. She hurried through a shower and called a cab before she selected a wardrobe for her day. She dressed carefully in dove gray slacks and shirt with a black blazer over the outfit. She wanted to look professional and in control. Even if all it was just an illusion it was one she needed.

She drove through the gates less than an hour after Jess. Her first stop was at the body shop for her car. She walked around the red and white 1959 Corvette convertible. She shook her head at the thought that her car looked brand new. It should. There was very little on the outside that wasn't new and that included the paint. She paid the deductible and left the body shop a little happier. She was glad to have her car back. She had a little more control over her life than she did an hour ago.

Her next stop was at the offices of her insurance company. She wasn't left long in the spartan waiting area. She was grateful for the short wait. In addition to not wasting money on soft leather chairs and ambience, they elected to forgo magazines. The agent who greeted her was as descriptive as the waiting area. The time spent in his office was also pleasantly short. She answered his questions, he took notes, and got some names and told her they would take care of everything. It was the one thing in her life she would gladly turn over to someone else.

Michala began her morning with a short list of things she needed to do. The two things on the list were done and it was only eleven. That left the rest of her day to do what she wanted. Her want list was shorter than her to do list. Long lunch with Kelly. While she shopped for lunch and picked up a few items she was sure Jess and Shannon didn't have in their kitchen, she thought about possible answers to any argument Kelly could make against her plans. The best response she could make was to point out how safe she was in the protection of an armed police officer. It was the one place her friends would like to keep her. Michala wanted her friends to be happy.

The big hand was inching towards the twelve when she parked close to the police station near Underground Atlanta. She was taking a chance that Kelly's office was here. Will had his office here before he resigned from DVIT. Michala didn't know what was his breaking point. She almost cared enough to ask Kelly.

Michala knew her unexpected presence would cause a few heads to turn. She was once a familiar sight around the station. Will's and Sam's offices were both downtown near the Federal and state buildings while hers was at the Center. It was easier for her to come to them. The reason she was no longer around was common knowledge. She smiled at a few of the brave souls who stared at her. Others tried to pretend it was nothing to see her strolling through the desks towards the wall of offices. She used their hesitation to her advantage. By the time someone worked up the nerve to talk to her, she hoped to be closed behind Kelly's office door.

She walked through the room to the office that used to be Will's with a calm assurance she wished felt. Why wouldn't the new police liaison officer use the office of the old police liaison officer? It made perfect sense. She knocked on the solid door and waited for the muffled order to enter. She stepped into the cramped, cluttered office with a smile.

Kelly was sitting at a battered gray metal desk with an open file spread over the surface. She stared up in surprise. Michala watched anger ignite in her eyes and be doused just as quickly. She glanced around the office. "I'm shocked Kelly. This place is just as dreary as it was when Will was here. You should girl it up."

Kelly leaned back in her Government Issue green faux leather chair. "I don't think I could do a

girl office justice."

Michala sat uninvited. "Are you free for lunch? I'm looking for a playmate."

"Yes, I'm free."

"Good," Michala said and stood up. "I'll drive. Don't forget your beeper."

Kelly shook her head, but clipped the beeper to her jeans. She reached into a drawer for her handgun. This she slid into her shoulder holster. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." She paused at the door and giving into desire, she turned and pulled Kelly to her. Kelly leaned into her and their kiss was scorching. Michala broke away and met her dark blue eyes. "And private."

"I like private."

"No matter what, we don't stop," Michala said and threw the door open. The people in the squad room had recovered. She acknowledged the hellos with a smile and a name if she could remember or a nod if she couldn't. Kelly kept up with her brisk stride. They were outside without a pause.

"You know, some of those people wanted to talk to you."

Michala nodded as she walked up to her car. "I know and maybe if I wasn't close to ripping off that T-shirt, I would've stopped."

"This is your car?" Kelly asked sounding surprised as Michala unlocked the passenger door.

"Yes, I picked it up this morning."

"What else have you done this morning?"

Michala spent the next few minutes concentrating on merging with the traffic on Peachtree. Once she was headed to the Center, she shrugged. "Grocery shopping. Jess didn't want to go to work this morning so I bribed her with dinner. I'm sure they don't have the things I need."

"Do your friends know you're not locked safely away?" Kelly's tone was deliberately casual. Michala grinned at the attempt.

"I said I'd play hostage. I never said I would be one. I told Jess this morning that life can't be put on hold. I've got responsibilities. I'm not pushing them off on Miranda anymore."

She was grateful to her friends and family for giving her the last year to do absolutely nothing with her life. They allowed her to pull the covers over her head and heal. She knew with a dead certainty that if she had not taken this time, if she had tried to pretend life went on as normal, the

first child she lost who have been the end for her. She didn't know when she lost her faith in the program, but she knew it didn't begin with Tyler. However, life did go on regardless of how much one tried to pretend it didn't. Lives had details that someone had to handle. Miranda had handled hers for too long now. Michala was ready to at least take the next few steps that would begin to put her life back together. She didn't know what steps to take after that, it was enough that she took the first few. The rest would come with time.

"I don't think Randa looked at it that way."

Michala laughed. "No, she didn't. For the first time in our lives, she got to be the responsible one. She's taken to it quite well. Mom has her problems dealing with it. I think she just pretends that we've switched names. The other night she offered to give me a recipe that was easy. Miranda really can burn water."

When Kelly laughed, Michala reached for her hand. "Thank you for having lunch with me."

The fingers linked with hers tightened. "Thank you for asking me. I was afraid I was persona non grata with you."

"You would've been. Like too many other things over the past year that would have required a little time and effort on my part." Michala frowned as she realized she was admitting more than was wise. Kelly wasn't just a one-night stand she picked up at last call. She was a close friend with someone who was a close friend with Michala's best friend. She didn't think Kelly was taking notes to share with Danielle Barrett. But who knew what could slip out in a how-was-your-day conversation.

"What kind of time and effort on your part do I require?"

"Oh, today the time will hopefully be the better part of the afternoon. As for effort, I'm not using any."

Michala turned down her street. The Center was the most private place she could bring Kelly and still have lunch. She realized her mistake as soon as she saw the front of the Center and no longer heard Kelly's voice. She slowed to a stop on the street, unable to tear her eyes away from the stark destruction. She had known it was bad by the pale faces of her friends when they came upstairs that night. Some part of her had dismissed the number of police officers as a sign. She was Dr. Michala Cary. The police could have overreacted. The reality was shocking. She drove around the corner to the back parking lot.

She jumped when Kelly laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You don't have to do this."

Michala slipped out of the car. The back of the Center was pristine. Her stalker either did not care about the back porch or never made it this far. Michala was inclined to believe her interruption stopped him. He would have done something back here eventually. She opened the trunk for the bags of groceries she bought earlier. Some of the perishable items were for dinner that night.



"I do have to do this," she said. She cleared her throat when her voice came out faintly above a whisper. "I need clothes. I thought everyone would be happier if I came with an armed escort."

It was lie. Kelly's gun and presumed skill with it had nothing to do with wanting to come here. Michala wanted the privacy. No one would think to look for either of them here. The only possible intrusion was Kelly's beeper. Michala wanted to recapture the intimacy of the weekend before it was ruined by his phone call.

Kelly took one of the bags from her and walked beside her to the back door. Michala bit back a laugh when she turned the key in the lock. Why lock the back door? The front doors were gone. She doubted the giant yellow X would deter anyone if they really wanted to come inside. The hallway wasn't dark enough to hide the debris heaped from end to end. She took a moment to stare down the long hallway to the square of light where the front doors should have been. Her eyes adjusted to the light and she saw the gaping holes in the walls. "He was certainly thorough. I'll need to find new office space until this is repaired. Come on."

The apartment felt different. The air, though cool, smelled of emptiness and rooms closed for too long. Michala mentally added cobwebs and thick layer of dust to go with the abandoned feel of her home. She wondered if she had changed or if it was the knowledge that this would never be her home again that made the studio apartment feel different. Then she wondered when she made the decision not to come back. This was her home, and could be again once repairs were made. No, she thought and sent her gaze from one blank white wall to the others. This was never a home. Sadly, she realized she had never wanted it to be.

"Have a seat at the bar. I hope you like deli sandwiches. I wanted something quick and filling. I have turkey and ham on wheat. I thought if I got one of each, you were sure to like one. Which do you want?"

While she spoke, Michala quickly stowed the bag of groceries for the meal later in the fridge. The other bag held their sandwiches, several sliced cheeses, tomato, and large bag of Lay's Potato Chips. "Well?" She asked when everything was laid on the counter top. "Turkey or ham?"

Drinks, she remembered suddenly and turned to see what the fridge held. Which wasn't much. The only thing she had to offer that wasn't alcoholic was water.

"I'll take the ham." Kelly said. Michala brought two glasses of iced water to the counter. Kelly was peeking into the empty bag. "Any onions?"

Michala felt her dark mood lighten as she watched Kelly. This is why she came here today. She wanted to be alone with Kelly, to make love with her. She didn't come here to become depressed over her life. She'd been doing that for months and she had months more to mourn her losses. She moved close to Kelly and leaned over her shoulder. "I have onions. You can have them or you can have me."

Kelly's surprised expression was a delight to see. Michala laughed and leaned in for a quick kiss

on her open lips. She was the one surprised when Kelly pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. They were both breathless when they broke away. Kelly whispered, "If we eat later, I can have both."

Michala smiled and moved away. With quick efficiency, she stowed their lunch in the brown paper bag and put the bag in the fridge. "I'm all for later."

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Kelly was fascinated. She followed Michala down the short hallway to her bedroom and wondered if she should be impressed by or worried for her carefree companion. She wanted to be impressed by the core of steel that allowed Michala to live her life as if nothing was happening. Her poise wilted at her first look at her house since she left in those pre dawn hours after the break-in. She became a little quiet, a little withdrawn for a moment, but she didn't sit down on the doorstep and cry.

She wanted to be worried Michala didn't cry. She didn't know Michala well enough to know if she was really this strong or if she was still in the denial that allowed her shrug off eight months of violence. Did she ever cry? For herself, for Tyler? Kelly didn't think so. To cry, Michala would've had to accept the loss of both and Kelly knew she had yet to accept the loss of Tyler.

Michala was standing at the stereo when Kelly walked into the bedroom. She set the music to a low, background volume. Michala shrugged off her jacket and hung the black jacket on the bedpost. Without a word, she came to Kelly. She lifted her face to Kelly and brought their mouths together in a gentle kiss. Slowly, tenderly, they kissed without touching. They opened their lips as one, tongue sliding over tongue. They both jumped apart and stared at each with startled eyes when a shrill beep pierced the air.

Kelly reached to her side and angled her pager to see the display. The number was all too familiar. "Your sister."

"You can use mine," Michala said neutrally when Kelly yanked her cell phone from the pocket of her jacket. She took several backward steps away from Kelly. The emotional distance was much farther.

Kelly shook her head while she punched in the numbers. "She has Caller ID. We don't want her to know where we are."

Michala leaned back against the wall. She didn't pretend that she wasn't listening to the call. Kelly wished she had the choice to turn the pager off. Michala didn't need reminders like this and Kelly wasn't certain how many she would overlook before the connection was too obvious for her to ignore. She made a mental note to talk to Randa. If they wanted Michala to come to her, they better make sure they didn't remind her of where Kelly worked.

"Hi Randa," she said by way of greeting. Usually, she would wonder why Randa was at home. She didn't now because she wasn't sure where else Randa should be. Her office was closed for

the foreseeable future and Kelly wasn't sure where the Cary twins would relocate.

"Is she with you?" Randa asked by way of greeting. Her tone was too cool to be calm.

"Yes, she is. How did you know she's not at Jess?"

A small smile flashed over Michala's face before she looked down at her feet with a shake of her head.

"Jess went home for lunch. She called me when she couldn't find her. I told you she would come to you."

"So you did. Is this the only reason you called?"

Michala glanced up at her question. Kelly nodded yes at the silent inquiry. Michala pushed away from the wall and without taking her eyes off Kelly, began to slowly unbutton her shirt. Kelly smiled in an appreciation of the striptease.

"Let me talk to her," Randa said.

Kelly shook her head. "No, no I don't think so. She's in an incredible mood. I don't want your anger to ruin it."

Michala grinned and let her shirt fall to the floor. Kelly's eyes were riveted to her hands. She unbuttoned and unzipped her pants and helped them slide down her legs with a sensuous wiggle of her hips. Kelly swallowed hard. She whispered "What?" to Randa.

"God, Kelly is she naked on the bed or something?" Randa demanded.

"Not yet," Kelly said before she realized what she was saying. She turned away from Michala's floorshow. She snapped, "What Randa? What do you want?"

"She made a promise to Jess. If she breaks it, Jess and Susan are going to kick her ass. I may just let them. Give her that message please." She hung up without a goodbye.

Kelly flicked off her phone and would have turned if not for Michala catching her around the waist. "How did they know I was gone?"

Kelly looked down at the fingers busily unhooking her belt and pulling her T-shirt from her jeans. "Jessica came home for lunch. Randa said if you break the promise you made to Jessica, she might let them make good on a promise to beat some sense into you."

Michala laughed and Kelly tilted her head to one side when warm lips pressed against the back of her neck. "I should've known. She really didn't want to leave me alone this morning."

Kelly turned in her arms. She was delighted to discover Michala nude and pressed against her.

She slid her hands down her warm back. She bent her head to the soft skin of her neck. Her mind cleared of every thought except for those that centered on how she wanted to spend the next hour or so. Michala stepped back a step to lift her T-shirt over her head. Kelly stared down into her face, into the eyes hot with desire. "God, you're beautiful."

Michala was startled by the compliment, though Kelly knew it wasn't the first time Michala was told that. Maybe tomboyish Randa didn't hear it often, but elegant Michala surely did. Michala gave her a rakish smile and slipped her hands into Kelly's jeans at her waist. She stepped into Kelly's arms and lifted her face. "Really?" she asked in a throaty whisper. Her eyes zeroed in on Kelly's mouth as she brought their lips closer together. "Show me."

"I would love to," Kelly whispered back and lowered her head to meet her open lips.

Later, with Michala's warm body draped over her, Kelly opened her eyes. The sun had shifted across the room and she wondered idly how much time they had left. Michala was expected back at Jessica's. Kelly had to go back to her office. She accepted their responsibilities in the same instant she acknowledged that she didn't want reality to intrude on this time. She was quite willing to put Randa in the position of having to physically defend her twin against her two furious best friends. She was even willing, if need be, to offer Michala sanctuary for however long she needed it.

Michala stretched next to her. "Ready for your onions?"

Kelly graciously bowed to the inevitable. They couldn't stay in this room forever and she didn't think Michala would want to even if it was an option. She wanted a quick afternoon romp before she went to back to the warm safeness of her friends. Kelly watched her quickly pull on her clothes before leaving the bedroom. She sighed. Michala was eager to get back to her friends. By the time she wandered into the other room, Michala had her lunch waiting on the counter. The lady herself was sitting across the room at her desk.

"Thank you," she tossed over her shoulder and sat down at the bar. She was surprised Michala wasn't standing in the doorway with the bag in her hands. Kelly selected one half of her sandwich and turned to watch Michala. Her lunch sat ignored at one end of her desk while she shuffled through a drawer at the other end. She ate her sandwich and watched Michala compile a slender stack of manila folders.

"What are you doing?" She asked when curiosity got the better of her. If Michala could be rude enough to ignore her, she could be rude enough to ask personal questions.

Michala didn't glance her way. She flipped open a folder and scanned the contents. "I was at my insurance agent's earlier. I would've liked to have had my policy with me. I thought, while I was here, I would get important papers." She tossed over a wry smile. "Who knows? He could burn this place down tonight."

Kelly was irked by the off-hand comment. It was a continuation of her casual acceptance of the whole thing. If she couldn't be terrified, if she couldn't be intimidated, at the very least she didn't

have to be amused. "It's not funny."

"No, it's not," she agreed and closed the folder. She glanced at Kelly before she dropped her gaze to another folder. "It's also not the tragedy everyone wants to make it. So my offices were demolished. Would you prefer I was physically attacked?"

"Of course not," Kelly snapped. "No one wants that."

Michala closed the folder and selected another one to scan. "Kelly, if you want me to be sorry, I am. If you want me to grovel for forgiveness, I won't."

"Don't you think you owe your friends a little groveling?"

Michala froze, a folder open in her hands. With deliberate calm, she laid the folders on her desk, pushed herself up from her chair, and crossed the room with silent footfalls. Kelly was braced for the fire burning in her eyes. "For what?"

Kelly felt the ground slip under her feet. "You were almost killed."

Michala stared at her for a moment. "No, I wasn't. I was never touched."

"It was his choice that you weren't."

Michala shrugged. "That doesn't change the fact that I wasn't hurt Kelly. I refuse to live in an alternate universe where he does attack me. I wasn't hurt. I am not going to live like I was. Don't ask me to. The hard, cold truth is that anything less than what happened would not have gotten my attention. I needed a wake-up call. Forgive me if I like the one I got."

The cold, hard truth was an icy dose of unwelcome reality. Michala wasn't scared, intimidated, or angry because she was relieved. She was breathing a sigh of relief that all she lost was her deductible. She could have lost so much more. She knew what could have happened, but she wasn't going to live as if it did happen. Kelly suddenly understood her cool poise so much better.

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand."

Michala moved between her legs and slipped her arms around Kelly's shoulders. "Now that you do, are you going to stop this campaign of guilt? I can't undo the past. I'm on guard now. I know he'll hurt me the first chance he gets."

The confident, assuring words sent a chill down Kelly's spine. She was on guard for strangers and men who looked like the boogeyman. The clean-cut, friendly man who knew her as Cayla would be welcomed into her life with a smile. She laid her hands on Michala's waist and looked into her eyes. Michala deserved to know and Kelly accepted that she was the only one willing to risk telling her.

"I want to tell you something. Your friends don't want you to know. Can you keep it from them

that you do?"

Surprise crossed the lovely face. "Probably."

Kelly shook her head. "Probably isn't good enough. They really don't want you to know this. I don't want Susan coming after me."

"Okay, I promise."

Now that the moment of truth had arrived, Kelly searched for the best way to say it. Simply would be best, but simply had a way of making bad news seem not quite as bad as it was. Kelly wanted Michala scared without pushing her over the edge her friends were so sure was right next to her feet. She didn't want to find out the hard way they were right.

"Kelly?" Michala cocked her head to one side. "Whatever it is, I can handle it."

Kelly searched her eyes, making herself believe in the strength she saw in the warm, dark brown. She had to believe Michala was as strong as she appeared. She nodded and tightened her hands on Michala's waist. "He's not a stranger. We don't know who he is yet, but he's not a stranger. On your messages, he calls you Cayla. He knows you from the Center."

Because she was watching, she saw her pupils dilate from the shock. The hands on her shoulders tensed reflexively. Michala squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her jaw. Kelly waited in silence. Would Michala accept this? Could she accept it? The next few moments were the longest of Kelly's life. She wasn't prepared when Michala's eyes popped open and for just an instant, Kelly saw only anguish in the dark eyes. Michala leaned into her and Kelly held her close, smoothing one hand over her tense back.

"I don't think this will ever be over," she whispered with her head on Kelly's shoulder.

Kelly tightened her arms in a reassuring hug. "It's over for you. All you have to do is keep yourself safe until he's caught."

Michala moved back a half step. Just as she had earlier, Kelly searched her eyes and was relieved by what she saw. Michala was handling it. Soft hands cupped her face. "Thank you, for trusting me. I love my friends, but let's face it, I'm not the only one who made bad decisions this year. I would've trusted anyone I knew from the Center."

Kelly nodded. "I know. Can you keep your promise?"

Michala sighed deeply and moved away. She raked both hands through her hair. She walked back to her desk, saying, "That you told me, yes I can keep that part. But I need to listen to the tapes. If he's with the Center, I may know his voice. I don't want to get six months down the road and find out that we could have caught him now."

By the time they were ready to leave, Kelly realized Michala was moving out. She finished off

her lunch watching Michala stuff folders into a dark brown leather attaché case and bring two suitcases from the bedroom. Kelly wanted to say something to her, but the words failed to form themselves in her head. Michala couldn't live here now; she had decided she wouldn't live here again. Kelly hoped that one had nothing to do with the other. She wanted the decision for this not to be Michala's home to be Michala's. He didn't deserve to win this round.

"Do you want to drive?" Michala asked in the parking lot. She held the keys up.

Kelly stared enviously over the little sports car. "Are you serious?"

Michala tossed her the keys and slid into the passenger's side. Kelly settled herself carefully behind the wheel. "Are you sure? This car is a classic."

"I'm sure. If I can't trust a cop, who can I trust?"

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Jessica's car was behind hers when she reached the security gate of their subdivision. Michala grinned as they wound their way to the house. She may have only beaten her by less than a minute, but she was in the house before Jess. In the most stringent interpretation of her promise, it met the legal requirements.

Jessica asked coldly as they faced off over the threshold. "Where have you been?"

"Help me unload my car and I'll tell you."

"Why have I never realized just how amazingly stupid you are? We've been friends forever and I've been walking around under the erroneous belief that you are incredibly intelligent. How did I miss that you're stupid?"

Michala was known for her iron poise. She was feared for her lethal temper. Jessica took one involuntary step backwards when Michala tensed. Michala felt the rage building without making even a token effort to rein it in. She had taken all that she was going to take from the people in her life. Granted, she made stupid mistakes, but by God they were hers to make. She was through placating, apologizing, and reassuring. She advanced on her friend slowly, her anger fueled by Jess' retreat.

"That's it, Jessica," she warned, her tone icy. "That's the last shot you get. Do you understand? That is positively, absolutely, the very last shot I'm taking from you."

They glared at each other over the two feet that separated them. "You'll take whatever I dish out. You deserve it."

"No, I won't. No, I don't. I can only be sorry Jessica. Don't want more than that. You will be very disappointed."

"Damn you."

Jessica's fist caught her square on the nose. Michala doubled over as the pain exploded in her head. She felt the blood on her face in the same instant she tasted it in the back of her throat. She saw a flash of color and then she was on her back with Jess straddling her waist. She dodged one punch, but wasn't quick enough to keep the next from landing with a burst of stars on her left eye. Michala struck out with her fist and connected solidly with Jessica's mouth. Blood sprayed over both of them.

Neither of them heard the car come to a screeching halt in front of the house or the shouts as Susan and Randa rushed over to them. They were focused on blocking fists and landing their own satisfying punches. Randa caught Jess from behind and yanked her to her feet. Michala scrambled to her own and threw the last punch. Like the first one thrown, the last one connected with Jess' nose. Susan pushed Randa and Jess away and shoved Michala back a few steps.

"Stop it!" Susan yelled at both women. Randa was holding Jess at bay. "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

Michala wiped blood away from her mouth. She cast a searing glare at the three of them. "Pass this on. The Making Michala Miserable crusade is over. I am not doing penance for this for the rest of my life. I'm not going to be punished. I'm not going to be threatened. I most certainly am not going to be beaten up. If I missed anything, ask yourself 'Will Michala leave without a forwarding address if I do this?'. If no is not your first thought, don't do it. I'm not taking this crap from you anymore."

She spun on her heel and marched to the house. She turned once to tell them someone needed to bring in the groceries and she was taking a shower. She stripped in the bathroom and stepped under the stinging hot water. She was stunned Jess actually hit her. She was astonished they were rolling around on the ground like grade-schoolers. She watched the pink water circling the drain. How badly did they hurt each other? She hoped Jess hurt at least as much as she did. Her face was throbbing. Most of Jess' hits made contact with her face. God, how were they going to explain this?

She left the shower when the water was clear. She toweled off before bracing herself to look in the mirror. She didn't need to look to know her left eye was swelling. She leaned close to the mirror, deciding her nose only felt broken. Her bottom lip was split and swelling. The rest of her face was streaked with scratches and angry red marks she suspected would be bruises by morning. She wrapped the towel around herself and went to her bedroom. They were waiting for her in the kitchen when she went down dressed in white jeans and black sweater.

"Where have you been?" Jessica asked. She had not taken a bath or changed clothes. She had taken the time to wash the blood from her face. Her nice white silk shirt and maroon slacks were ruined. Her face looked as bad as Michala's felt.

Michala noticed her voice lacked the anger it had when she asked the same question earlier. Susan placed a glass of iced tea on the bar in front of an empty bar stool. Michala took the hint and sat. She picked up the tea and held the cool glass to her eye. She closed her eyes and said in



a monotone, "I picked up my car. I went to my insurance agent. I talked Kelly into spending the afternoon with me. I wanted some things from the Center and she was nice enough to go with me to get them. I came back here."

"We would have gone with you to the Center." This from Susan.

Michala chuckled and opened her good eye to look at her friend. She didn't have to say a word for Susan to understand. Susan grinned and shook her head.

"We would have gotten your car. We would have talked to the insurance agent," Jess said. Michala felt her sit down next to her. "There's no reason for you to be out on your own."

Michala kept her eyes shut and enjoyed the cool glass against her face. Because of Kelly's admission, she understood her friend's fear a little better. If her stalker was someone she knew, that made the danger to her too close for comfort. But understanding did not mean she was going to meekly sit in this house until he was caught.

She turned to Jess. "I'll leave if this is too hard for you. I can stay other places. I don't want to hurt our friendship. I don't want to lose you. But I won't live like this Jess. I'm not going to be abused, by you or anyone else anymore. You're angry with me and you have every right to be. But you do not have the right to do what you did today. I didn't deserve that."

"No, you didn't," Jess whispered and reached out to tenderly touch her face. "God I'm so sorry. I can't believe I did this to you."

"One of you was going to," Randa remarked into the silence. "I'm glad it was you, Jess. Although, I'd be a little more understanding than Shannon is going to be. You can stay with us if she throws you out Cayla."

"Deal," Michala winched and agreed readily. She wasn't Shannon Wade's favorite person on a good day. She deliberately ignored asking how Shannon felt about her living here for an undetermined amount of time. Of all the places she could be, here was her first choice. How was Shannon going to feel about her staying here after she saw what Michala did to her lover's face? Shannon wouldn't care that Jess threw the first punch or that Michala was defending herself. Why start defending herself now? After the last eight months, what was one more day? Sadly, Michala saw that point all too clearly.

Jess leaned in to kiss her on the forehead and stood up. "Shan's not going to tell you to leave. She wants you here just as much as the rest of us. She's going to be upset with me. I was so angry when you got here that morning. I think I could have killed. She told me that whenever I got angry over the next few months and wanted to hurt you for never turning to me for help, I should remember how you looked when we tucked you into bed and put my anger away because you didn't need that in your life anymore. She's not going to be happy with me that I forgot that."

Michala watched her walk into the kitchen and begin to unpack the grocery bags they brought in from her car. She smiled. Jess must be feeling very guilty to tell a lie like that. She joined her in

the kitchen and put her arm around Jess' waist. "Why don't you go take a shower and change clothes. I'll have dinner ready by the time you get back down here. Okay?"

Jess pulled her into a bruising hug. Michala laid her head against her shoulder. Could they get past this? Could they forgive her? Michala felt the first doubts begin to stir. If they couldn't get past this, if they couldn't forgive her, where did they go from here? Jess let her go slowly and stepped back to smile down at her.

"I love you."

"I know." Michala turned away to begin their meal. Three little words and she was tired of hearing them. Not the words, but the intensity of them. They were living in the same alternate universe Kelly thought she should be living in. They were too busy remembering what could have happened and what almost happened to see that it didn't. She didn't like being almost dead.

As she battered chicken strips, she wondered how long you let someone mourn an almost loss before you could tell them to knock it off.

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Kelly closed her eyes and sank chin deep into the hot, bubbly water. The water felt wonderful and she intended to soak until the water was cool. Her next pleasure was crisply clean clothes. The roller coaster ride her life became since Friday had left her little time for the little pleasures of life. On the other hand, she wasn't complaining about the compensation. There wasn't a lot she wouldn't trade for time with Michala.

Michala.

Randa knew her sister well. Kelly was grateful for Randa's warning. She wasn't sure she would have been so calm and agreeable when Michala popped into the office. For an instant, she'd been angry that Michala was walking around without a guard, but then she remembered Randa's words. She wasn't supposed to get angry. She was supposed to just be there. Kelly thought she got the better part of that deal. Just being with Michala was a lot more fun than trying to keep the headstrong woman in line. Not to mention easier.

"Hey, you planning to stay in there all night?"

Kelly didn't have to open her eyes to know Dani was standing in the doorway. She could tell by the clarity of her voice. "No. Just until I'm a prune."

She heard Dani come close and felt the water ripple next to her thigh. "I'm in the mood for pork chops. Do you want them baked or barbecued?"

Kelly sighed and forced one eye open. "Why are you in here?"

Dani stared at her for a moment. She looked away she as asked, "How is Michala? Shannon said she was all right, but she and Shannon aren't the best of friends."

"She's all right. She's a tough lady. I think her friends are a lot more shaken than she is." The truth of that statement surprised Kelly. She wished, briefly, that she had met Michala when she was still whole. She only wished it briefly because Michala belonged to someone then.

"They're in shock. It's not fair. Losing Tyler would've been enough. She wouldn't have been any more devastated. She would have done anything to save him. I think she would have traded places with him."

Not for the first time, Kelly had to wonder what was so special about this child. He wasn't her first. He wasn't her worst. There was no reason for him to be special. In fact, the only thing that made Tyler Bradshaw any different from all the other children who came before him was the fact that none came after him. He was her last. Was it the cumulative effect? Was it all the children who came before him that made him different? Was he simply the last child she could emotionally afford to lose? Kelly stared at Dani and knew she was right. Michala would have traded places with Tyler. It would have been so much easier for her to die herself than it was to watch him.

Dani frowned and reached down to check the water again. "I'm going to bake them. Hurry up. We have a lot of catching up to do."

Kelly brushed her thoughts away. She grinned at Dani's retreating back. "Yes we do. Beginning with Sandy and how you met her."

"I'd prefer we start with Michala." Dani called over her shoulder.

Kelly slipped from the cooling water. Dani wasn't going to leave her alone for long. As soon as she had the chops in the oven, she'd be back. She wanted to start with Michala beginning with Friday and Friday felt so long ago. So much had happened. Kelly grabbed a towel from the closet and dried herself off briskly. She decided to let Dani ask her questions instead of hitting the high points of the weekend. Not to mention all the lows.

Dani was sitting at the table chopping tomatoes and cucumbers for a tossed salad. Kelly poured herself a glass of white wine and sat across from her. "Anything I can do to help?"

Dani shook her head with a quick smile. "This, the chops and toasted French bread is it. Unless you want something else?"

Kelly sipped her wine. "Sounds great."

The last real meal she had was Saturday night with Michala. She was glad for a meal that included plates, silverware, and a table. She watched Dani quickly reduce the vegetables to bite size chunks and waited. She didn't have to wait long. She was watching in fascination as Dani missed her fingers with the sharp blade. Kelly knew that she would have had at least a few nicks by now, if not an actual severance of a finger.

"Is she really being stalked?" Dani never looked up from her hands.

"Yes. I'm positive she caught his attention from the publicity of Tyler."

Blue eyes flicked up. "For a while there she was on the front page of the paper every other day. Gaye did several articles on her. Val got her on the station's noon talk show a few times. I guess with that kind of coverage she was bound to catch a lunatic's attention."

"Actually, he's connected to the Center. We don't know how yet."

Dani abruptly stopped slicing and dicing to stare at her in shock. Kelly nodded at her unspoken question. "Start at the beginning."

The beginning she was talking about wasn't Friday. This beginning began eight months earlier. Kelly finished off two glasses of wine as she related as much of the story she knew. By the time they were stacking dirty dishes into the dishwasher, she was winding down the night of the break-in.

"I can see why Jessica and Susan are furious with her," Dani said. "Shan says Jessica feels betrayed. They were supposed to be best friends."

They went to the living room and sat on opposite ends of the couch. Kelly could understand why they would feel that way, but she was beginning to wonder how, if they were really her best friends, they could let her drift so far away without trying to pull her back. Maybe they had the kind of friendship where it was understood that if someone didn't ask for help it wasn't wanted. Maybe they would have pushed her if she wasn't a highly regarded mental health expert. Maybe they would have reached out to her if they had not been afraid of being frozen out. Her best friends would know exactly how Michala dealt with people who stepped over the lines. Kelly doubted she was gentle or kind when she pushed them back over it.

"Are you disappointed?" Dani asked, breaking into her thoughts.

Kelly looked over at her. "At what?"

"Michala. I know you had this fantasy of her in your mind. Are you disappointed now?"

"No," Kelly answered immediately. "I'm not disappointed."

She looked down at Dani and smiled at the speculation on her face. They grinned and Kelly knew she only a few seconds to divert Dani's attention away from her. She still wasn't ready to share Michala. "Your turn. Who is Sandy?"

Dani's attention was easily turned to her new friend. Actually, Dr. Sandra Mitchell was a new orthopedist in Dani's group practice. Sandy was called to the hospital following a car accident. She called in Dani for a nine-year-old girl. Dani was surprised to see Sandy waiting for her after surgery. A cup of coffee to talk about the case became breakfast and a chance to get to know

each other. Dani was in her office doing paperwork when Sandy came in to ask her if she wanted to go to dinner.

"That was fast," Kelly remarked with a smile. She met the woman before dawn on Monday morning and was in her bed Monday night.

Dani laughed and stared down the couch at her. "I followed your example."

Before Dani could launch into more questions about Michala, the phone rang. Dani picked up the extension and answered in her Dr. Barrett voice. Surprise crossed her face. "Yes, she is, hold on," she handed the phone over saying in a whisper, "Susan Reid."

Kelly all but snatched the phone from her hand. There could only be one reason Susan was calling her. Her anxious tone was noticed with interest by both women. She cleared her throat and tried to make her voice sound casual. "Hi Susan. What's up?"

"I'm sorry to call so late. We're just getting in and I didn't want to call you from Jess'. I-hold on," Susan turned away from the phone to mumble to someone in the background. Kelly forced herself to relax while she listened to Susan talk to Randa. Susan's tone was too weary for there to be anything wrong with Michala. She smiled as Susan snapped at Randa, "Get it started, and I'll be there in a minute!"

Kelly bit back on a teasing question about trouble in paradise. She didn't think Susan would see the humor or appreciate it coming from her. Susan sighed heavily and said, "I know they have to have something in common since they are identical twins, but I hope for your sake Michala doesn't act like a cranky two year old when she's stressed and tired."

The image of elegant Michala stamping her feet and whining made Kelly laugh. "I rather doubt she does."

She heard Susan smiling. "So do I. Anyway. Michala wants to hear her answering machine tapes tomorrow. We'd like for you to be there. We're meeting at ten at the Center. I don't know why she wants to do it there, but I didn't want to argue with her about it. Can you come?"

Michala was a fast mover. Kelly already knew that about her. "Sure. Do you know why she wants to listen to them now?"

"She wants to see if the voice is familiar to her. Randa's going to do the same. If he is someone who comes to the Center often, one of them should know his voice."

"Sounds reasonable," Kelly said. Michala had told the truth without revealing how she came to the decision. In fact, the whole Center needed to listen to them. Her stalker had to be known to someone.

"One more thing," Susan said, hesitant. "I don't want you to be shocked when you see her tomorrow. She and Jess had a knock down fight when they got home tonight. She's all right, but

it's not pretty. Neither of them is right now."

Kelly wasn't aware that she was standing. She fought down her rage by reminding herself that she didn't have the right to be angry. Michala didn't belong to her. She blinked away the red when Susan said her name. "I'm here Susan. I'm reminding myself that Jessica is a state court Judge."

She thought she heard Susan choke back a laugh. "I'll see you at ten at the Center. Good night Kelly."

"Yeah, you, too."

Kelly handed the phone back to Dani. She swallowed down the bitter words burning the back of her throat. Slowly, she sat on the couch. She saw her clenched fists on her thighs and very deliberately opened her hands. Dani leaned forward to look at her. She turned her head sideways to meet her friend's eyes. Dani raised her eyebrows in silent question.

"They had a fight. Michala and Jessica."

Dani's smile was understanding. "Jessica's really angry with her right now. Shan was afraid Jess was going to start throwing punches."

"Shannon was right. Susan said it was ugly." Kelly stood up. "She said that neither are pretty."

Dani stared at her in wide-eyed shock. She reached for the phone. "Jess actually hit Michala?"

"Yes, she actually hit her. I'm going to bed." She left the living room before she could hear Dani's side of the conversation. She knew who Dani was calling and the last thing she wanted to hear was Shan defending her lover's actions. She would never agree that Jessica had any right to strike Michala. She just hoped that when she saw Michala tomorrow, she remembered that she didn't have any right to strike Jessica.

Kelly lay awake for a long time. Admitting she wanted to go to Michala was easy. If she had any reason to go to Jessica's, she would. She couldn't even come up with a legitimate reason that she could sell to herself. There was only one reason why she wanted to rush to Michala's side. Admitting the why was harder. She wanted it to be because Michala was hurt. She was a cop. Rushing to the aid of damsels in distress was her natural instinct. This particular damsel wasn't really in distress and it didn't sound like Michala needed a knight rushing to her aid.

The truth was stunning in its simplicity. She was in love with Michala. She wasn't in lust, though Michala was a breathtaking lover. She wasn't obsessed, though she would admit that she was before she met Michala. She was in love. She wanted to hold Michala close and promise her that no one would ever harm her again. She wanted to stand in front of her and shield her from the good intentions of her friends. She wanted to go to sleep at night with Michala safely at her side.

The timing couldn't be worse. Michala's life was in shambles. The last thing she needed in her

life was for a woman she picked up in a bar falling in love with her. Kelly rolled over and buried her head under her pillow. The last thing she needed was to fall in love with Michala. How was she supposed to keep her distance now? She was biting her tongue to keep quiet as it was. The only way she could keep silent was to keep away. And after tomorrow, that's what she would have to do.

6.

Michala smiled as she heard the patio door slide open. She was waiting for Jess to get ready so they could go to the Center. For reasons unknown, Jess wanted to hear her answering machine tapes. She flipped the page on the newspaper she was pretending to read. "Are you going to be ready soon?"

"I'm ready now," Shannon said, "If Jess isn't soon, we'll leave without her."

Michala lowered the paper and peeked over the top at Shannon. Shannon wasn't dressed in her usual business attire. She wore Levi's and a pale blue oxford. "You're going, too?"

"If you don't mind. I think we all need to know what's happening."

Shannon's whole attitude had changed towards her. She was always polite and had never been less than to Michala. Now there was a solicitous overtone to her voice and actions. Michala was still stunned by the furious glare Shannon had sent Jessica the night before when she came home and saw their faces. Michala was the one ordered into a chair so that Shannon could assure herself that nothing was broken. If Shannon did the same to Jess, she did it behind their closed bedroom door.

"I don't mind if you come. I can use all the support I can get."

Shannon's bright smile was beautiful. Michala stared at her and didn't know what to say. This was the longest conversation she could remember having with her. She jumped as arms closed around her from behind and pulled her into a light choke hold.

"Your girlfriend is mad at me."

Jess kissed her cheek before dropping into the chair next to hers. Blue eyes sobered and the smile on her face faded. "I can't blame her. I'm not happy with myself right now."

"You don't look any better," Michala reminded her. When they looked at each, they were looking into a mirror. They both had a black eye, split lip and bruises. "And why is Kelly mad at you?"

Jess grinned. "I could be coy and ask how you knew I was talking about her, but I won't. Susan called over there last night and Dani called here. She said she'd never seen Kelly that angry before. She was reminding herself that I'm a Judge. I hope she remembers that when she sees you."

Michala leaned forward and put her hand over Jess'. "Stop it. Miranda was right. You and Susan wanted to hurt me because I hurt you. I'm glad it was you. Susan would've kicked me all over the yard. You did it, we survived, and it's over. I forgive you. Soon, you'll forgive me."

Jess squeezed her fingers. "Are we ready?"

Michala looked over the patio table at Shannon. "We've been ready. We're waiting for you."

Jess wanted to drive. Michala slid in the back of her Mercedes, glad to let someone else concentrate on the traffic. She had to concentrate on shoring up her walls. This was not going to be fun. This was going to be one of the most trying afternoons in her life.

Michala wasn't really ready for what the afternoon held for them. She would have preferred to listen to the tapes by herself. Susan would have preferred that she never listened to them at all. They compromised and agreed to meet at the Center. Michala thought it would only be her, Jess and Susan. Actually, she thought only Susan would want to hear the tapes and wasn't all the surprised when Jess added that she would come. They were best friends. She wasn't at all prepared for Miranda and now Shannon being there. Just how many needed to hear how badly she screwed up her life over the last year? She cringed inwardly when she thought of what they would hear. If this wasn't her idea, she would not be doing this.

"Later, let's all go to lunch and get drunk."

Michala glanced over at Shannon, who was looking back at her with worried green eyes. Michala wanted to smile and show she was all right. She wasn't up to the act. She looked away. "Sure. It'll be on me."

Just when Michala thought this could not get worse, they turned into the back parking lot of the Center. Kelly, dressed in blue jeans and thin red sweater, was talking to Susan and Miranda. She frowned and wondered which of her friends invited her. Michala would have never invited Kelly here for this. The last thing she wanted was for Kelly to hear the tapes. She wasn't keen on any of them hearing the messages Melissa had left for her, but definitely not Kelly. She slipped from the car and walked a straight line to her back door. She didn't pause to exchange pleasantries. She wanted this over. Lunch and the promise of alcohol could not come soon enough.

While the others settled themselves around her table, she went to the kitchen to make coffee for six. She barely listened as Susan explained how she wanted to do this. By the time Michala had a tray ready to take out, Susan had the tapes lined up by date. The room was silent as she handed out mugs to the group. Susan, Jess, and Kelly were sitting at the table. Miranda and Shannon had pulled bar stools over to sit behind their lovers. She sat in the in the empty between Susan and Kelly.

"Any time Susan," she said. She crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair, staring down at her hands. "When this is over, I'm buying lunch for everyone. Shannon wants us all to get drunk."



The first tape was boringly ordinary. Most of the calls were from colleagues. Susan and Jess each called once to remind her about an anniversary party for Jess and Shannon. Her mother's perky voice calling to say hello. Melissa's husky tone asking where she wanted to do for dinner that night. Michala couldn't recall if they ended up here or Melissa's.

The final call was his, the first of his messages she kept. She closed her eyes when she heard his low voice speak. She concentrated on the deep timbre of his voice and not the words. *"Dr. Cary, you disappoint me. You are not fighting the good fight. Remember, what God put together let no man put asunder. Don't stand in God's way or he will move you."*

Michala remembered how perplexed she was when she first heard the message all those many months ago. Until she thought about Robert Bradshaw and his preoccupation with God. She dismissed the message with the thought that it was him. She didn't like that he brought the case into her home, but thought he would probably believe it was poetic justice.

The next three tapes were along the same lines. She realized absently that most of the calls were professional. Her private practice shrunk as DVIT consumed more and more of her time. When she stepped down from DVIT, she wasn't taking new patients and was selective in taking referrals. In fact, her role at the Center was mostly administrative at the end. DVIT was never supposed to be her sole focus. She never envisioned the program taking over her life as it did.

His calls were blessedly short with the admonishment that she was disappointing him and God. She closed her eyes when he spoke and tried to place his voice with a face from the Center. She didn't know him. She didn't even have that nagging feeling that she should know him.

The fifth call took place on Halloween, her thirty-sixth birthday. Mixed in with DVIT and Center calls were birthday messages from family and friends. As the messages played, Michala looked over at Miranda and they shared a smile. Their birthday was always a Halloween costume party thrown by their parents. Michala began to hate the parties when she was in college, but Paige refused to have any other kind of party for the twins. Michala was enjoying them more now that Paige no longer forced them to come as a duo. Last year she was Marilyn Monroe.

*"Hi, it's me,"* Michala looked at the recorder as Melissa's throaty voice came on, *"I can't make the party. Barb called in sick to the station and I'm filling in. Come to my place when it's over. Bring the teddy. I bet you're gorgeous in black, babe. Happy birthday. I love you and I'll make this up to you tonight."*

Michala felt all eyes shift to her. She turned her hand palm up and curled her fingers over to inspect her nails. She flipped her hand over and held her fingers out to inspect the nails. Finally, as the silence stretched, she flicked her gaze over the women. She allowed a smile small to cross her face. "I do actually. Black is my color."

He sang Happy Birthday to her in a surprisingly good voice. Michala thought now, as she did then, that he was Top 40 caliber. She remembers wondering if Bradshaw had taken voice lessons.

They were now less than a month away from the day Tyler died. Michala found herself tuning out the tapes as those days before that one came to her in blinding flashes. She saw herself careening like a pinball from interviews, to DVIT calls, to overseeing the Center, and meetings with her attorney. Melissa was growing impatient by then. Their careers always came first and they were used to taking second place to last minute obligations. Melissa did not see Tyler as her obligation. She saw him as just another abused kid. "You can't save the world," she lashed out during an argument. Michala didn't want to save the world. She was willing to settle for this one little boy.

She would have done anything to save him except walk away. It was the one thing she could not do. It is now the one thing she believes would have saved him. She put too much pressure on Bradshaw. He was a hot head when his life was running smoothly. Did she really think if she put him under the harsh glare of publicity he wasn't going to snap? When he finally did, he rained so many savage blows on his small son's head that Tyler died from massive brain hemorrhage. She went to his bedside after she got the call. His face was unrecognizable. Blood was matted in his white blonde hair. His tiny hand lay lifeless in hers and she knew he was dead. She knew she killed him. She wasn't there three days later when life support was terminated .

Michala squeezed her eyes shut in a vain attempt to block the image of that beautiful little boy lying mortally wounded in that hospital crib. She was haunted most by that image. She accepted she would see it in all its bright horror for the rest of her life. She failed him and her failure cost him his life.

She could never forget that.

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Kelly realized quickly that she was not there by Michala's invitation. She was stung at first by Michala's cool attitude. She didn't expect Michala to greet her with a kiss, but she did think a simple hello was in order. Michala didn't even look at her in the apartment. By the time they were seated around the table, Kelly was taking it all very personally. Michala was the one who sought her out, who called her, who came to her office. How she could she now act as if they were strangers?

During the first few tapes she was able to ignore Michala and concentrate on the messages. The first time she heard Melissa's voice was a shock. She knew the Channel 2 anchor's husky southern drawl. Her obsession with Michala briefly extended to a curiosity about the beautiful news anchor. She should have expected to hear messages from her girlfriend on the tapes. Didn't Michala say when she handed the tapes over to Susan that some of the messages were personal?

Kelly wished they weren't so frankly sexual. And it was more than just the words; it was the intimate tone Melissa used. Kelly was astonished that she was jealous. She was childishly jealous over a woman who was no longer in Michala's life. Slowly, Kelly began to wonder if Michala didn't want her there because the messages were so frank. People like to keep that aspect of their lives private. Michala had to be uncomfortable her friends were seeing into that side of her life. Kelly knew she would not want Michala to hear what some of her old lovers said to her in private.

She stopped ignoring Michala when she decided to believe Michala's attitude wasn't personal. She began to watch her and was impressed by how intensely she was listening to the tapes. Her head remained bowed, her face hidden behind a curtain of blonde hair. The only time she looked up was to joke briefly at the black teddy comment. Kelly wondered, as the multitude of calls came in from colleagues, how Michala was able to keep up with all her commitments. There were dozens of people who wanted some of her time including a sexy girlfriend. No wonder Michala could not exactly pinpoint when he entered her life.

Kelly sensed the change in Michala before she saw it. She narrowed her gaze over the woman sitting inches away from her and sought some reason for her sudden anxiety. Michala's head was bowed, face still hidden. She was slouching in her chair with her hands folded across her lap. One leather clad foot tapped to a beat only she heard. Kelly watched her and waited for a sign. She didn't wait long. Michala's hands clenched slowly into fists. Her foot tapping stopped. She sat perfectly still. Kelly's heart stopped as she realized Michala wasn't listening to the tape; she was trying not to hear it. How close were they to the day Tyler died? Kelly frantically searched her mind for a date, but came up blank. She didn't know when Tyler died. Michala did and she knew they weren't far from that tape.

Without thinking, Kelly reached over and turned the recorder off. She ignored the startled protests from the other women. Her attention was on Michala. She knelt in front of her and took Michala's ice-cold fists in her hands.

"Michala?" There was no response. Kelly leaned closer and gently shook her. "Honey?"

Kelly flinched when terror filled eyes snapped open. Michala stared at her without blinking. She shook her head in small jerky motions. Soft, stricken words stumbled over each other as she spoke. "I thought I could do this. I can't. I can't do this."

Kelly stood up and pulled Michala into her arms in the same motion. Michala came willingly. She buried her face against Kelly's chest and fisted her hands in her sweater. "It's over," Kelly said in a soothing voice. "It's over."

"I thought I was stronger than this," Michala whispered.

Kelly smiled and kissed her on the temple. "You are strong. You're the strongest woman I know."

Michala trembled in her arms. "I can't relive this. I thought I could. I can't lose him again. I just can't."

Kelly tightened her arms around Michala. "That's not why you're here. You're here to see if you know his voice. Do you?"

Michala shook her head slowly. "I was so sure I would recognize him."

"It's all right that you don't." It was a long shot. He was on an edge of her life. After listening to the tapes, Kelly knew her life had many edges. They just had to find his. She looked over the top of Michala's head to where the others watched them anxiously. She was furious with them and she hoped they saw it in her eyes. They would have done what they've done all along and sat there while Michala struggled to save her sanity. What kind of friends did that?

"We're leaving," she said gently to Michala, but her eyes moved from woman to woman. She stepped back to look down into her bruised face. "Anything you need from here or from Jessica's car?"

Michala closed her eyes as she shook her head. Susan stepped forward with her hand outstretched and Kelly stopped her with a single glance. She put her arm around Michala's shoulder and pulled her away from her friends. She cast them one last condemning glare. "I'll call you later."

Kelly led Michala quickly from the Center. She would call them much later. She didn't care how worried they would be or what rights they had. Kelly was taking a few rights of her own. The first one was the right to protect Michala. She settled Michala in her car and left the parking lot without knowing where they were going. She wanted to leave before they came out to take Michala away. Kelly wasn't sure Michala would go with her if they asked her to choose.

"Where do you want to go?" She asked. She looked over to where Michala sat staring out the window. "Are you hungry?"

"I don't care where we go," Michala replied in her soft, stricken voice.

Now that Kelly had her, she wasn't sure what to do with her. She didn't want to take her back to Dani's. They would look there when they started searching for Michala. Jess' was out for the same reason. She didn't want to drive aimlessly around for hours. She made the decision quickly and drove towards I-75.

"Can we get a drink? Scotch,"

"You can get anything you want," Kelly said and began scanning the stores lining the street for a liquor store. She saw one within minutes. She parked the car in front of the plate glass window. "Chivas?"

Michala opened her eyes and stared blankly at the store. She turned confused eyes on Kelly. "Um, yes, I like Chivas. With ice."

Because she looked so pale and lost, Kelly leaned into her and kissed her lightly on the lips. "I'll be right back. Stay right here."

Michala nodded and watched her leave the car. The hotel would have an ice machine, but Kelly bought a bag of ice anyway. She didn't want to leave Michala alone while she wandered down hallways trying to find ice. She added plastic cups to the Chivas. When they were close to a hotel

she liked, she would find something for lunch. She was hungry even if Michala wasn't.

"Where are we going?" Michala asked once they were again driving to the interstate.

Kelly smiled at her. "To a hotel. You can get as drunk as you want."

She was rewarded with a brief smile. "You might not like me drunk."

Kelly reached over and placed her hand around Michala's. "Do you wear lampshades and sing really badly in your underwear?"

Michala looked away. "No. That would be a loss of control. Dr. Cary doesn't lose control."

No, Kelly agreed, Dr. Cary doesn't lose control. Dr. Cary simply bowed her head, closed her eyes and told herself she was strong. She balled her hands into fists instead of pounding them against the wall. She gritted her teeth to keep from screaming. She was always poised and controlled.

She spoke her next words carefully. "I won't tell if you lose control. You don't have to be strong all the time."

Kelly wanted her to lose control. Michala was trying so hard not to fall apart. As long as she refused to bend, the closer she came to breaking. She was using her iron will to hold back the memories. She didn't want to grieve for Tyler. She refused to mourn for the little boy who should not be dead. Both required a pain she would pay any price not to feel and an acceptance of something she would sell her soul to change. She was in denial over his death and if she had her way, she would never move onto the other steps in the grieving process.

Michala sat with her head resting against the seat and her face turned to the window for the rest of the drive. Kelly took comfort from the fact Michala's hand was waiting for hers every time she returned her hand from the steering wheel. Michala wasn't shutting her out. Kelly didn't know what she would do if Michala did. They were still new enough for Kelly to be uncertain of where she could tread. The last thing she wanted to do right then was push her away. Michala had been left alone too long as it was. She wasn't willing to let her drift now.

They were given a second floor room at the La Quinta Kelly found a half dozen exits north. She left Michala alone with the Chivas while she went across the street to McDonald's. Michala passed on lunch with a silent shake of her head. She was pouring her first glass of scotch when Kelly left the room. Kelly bought her a cheeseburger and fries anyway. Hopefully the smell wafting from the bag could do what the offer alone could not.

Michala was propped up in the middle of the king sized bed staring at the blank television screen. Kelly glanced at the Scotch bottle. The glass resting on her thigh wasn't her first. Kelly sat on the bed and placed the bag on the night table.

"I'm starving. I skipped breakfast." She took the food from the bag and turned to Michala with

one of the cheeseburgers. "Are you sure you don't want one?"

Michala leaned over and reached around her for a container of fries. "I'm sure. I'll take these."

Kelly settled next to her on the bed. She glanced over at Michala and followed her empty stare to the television. "We can turn that on. If you don't like what's free, we can check pay-per-view."

"Thank you for getting me out of there." Michala rolled her head to look at Kelly. She looked down at the bed. "I thought if I just blocked it out, it would be over and I could leave. I didn't want to hear it all again."

Kelly knew she wasn't talking about his messages. She reminded herself to tell whoever answered her call later that she wanted to hear the rest of the tapes. "Why didn't you get up and leave?"

"There's nowhere for me to go."

Kelly was confused. "Your bedroom was down the hallway."

Michala made a sound like she was laughing. "And do what Kelly? Sit in there while they listened to the tapes? Do you really think not hearing the words would've changed anything? Do you think being here now changes anything?"

Michala crawled off the bed and walked to the table to refill her glass. She turned to Kelly angrily. "Nothing ever changes. He's dead and I killed him. I know that every night when I go to sleep. I know it every morning when I wake up. I killed him. Do you really think not hearing the words makes it less true?"

Kelly moved slowly off the bed. This is what her friends feared. They didn't want her to lose control. They didn't want her to fall over the edge because they were afraid she could not make her way back. Kelly knew she was strong, but now with the sheen of tears in her eyes, she hoped she was right.

Michala emptied her glass with one flick of her wrist. She stared down at the glass and said vehemently, "I don't want to remember. I don't want to remember!"

As she began to sink slowly to the floor, Kelly went to her and pulled her into her arms. They ended up on the floor with Michala sitting between Kelly's legs. Michala laid her head against her breasts. Kelly searched for the right words. Finally, she bent close to Michala's ear. "You will always remember him. He was important to you. But you can choose how you remember him. You have good memories of him Michala. Doesn't he deserve for someone to remember him as something more than a tragedy?"

Michala stiffened in her arms and Kelly steeled herself for her reaction. Did she go too far? As much as she wanted to, she could not hurry Michala through her grief. She held her breath, waiting to see if the next step was one Michala could take.

"He was a beautiful little boy," she whispered in a low voice Kelly almost didn't hear. "He was such a beautiful little boy."

Kelly pulled her closer as Michala relaxed in her arms. Kelly leaned back against the bed. She stared down on the blonde head resting on her shoulder. She couldn't see Michala's face. She wasn't sure she wanted to at that moment. She didn't want to watch her finally let go of the hope that somewhere, somehow he wasn't really dead.

"I think I fell in love with him the day he came to my office with chocolate on his face." She spoke softly of the blonde haired, blue eyed child who stole her heart. In her memories, he was an exceptional child. She had a smile in her voice as she recalled his many visits to the Center. The first time she said his name her voice broke. Kelly kissed the crown of her head and wondered if this was the first time she spoke his name since he died.

"His name was Tyler," she said in a fragile tone. Kelly felt the tears fall on her arm. She closed her eyes. *Please God, she prayed, don't let me hurt her. Please let this be good for her.*

"His name was Tyler and I loved him."

She cried silently. Kelly held her close and kissed her as she drained herself weeping for him. She didn't try to comfort her with words. There was nothing she could say that Michala's friends and family hadn't been saying to her since he died. She would rather hold Michala in silence than offer comfortless platitudes.

"I'm tired Kelly. Will you hold me until I fall asleep?"

Kelly let her get on the bed first. Her face was pale and tear streaked. Kelly laid next to her and stared down into her face. Dark eyes met hers. Michala reached up and pulled her down for a gentle kiss. Her lips were salty. Kelly broke the kiss. "I have to call them soon. Do you want to send any messages?"

"Tell them I'm all right. I'll see them later."

"No," Kelly said and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm keeping you tonight. I'll tell them you're all right. You are you know."

Weary eyelashes fluttered closed and Michala rolled onto her side. "I think I will be. I haven't thought that in a long time."

Kelly waited until her breathing was slow and even before she took her cell phone from the room. She sat down on the steps a few doors down from theirs. She wasn't sure who to call. She expected they would all be together somewhere. But where? She punched in the one number she knew would find someone. Randa would have her beeper. Her phone rang within seconds of her punching in her code.

"Is she all right? Where are you?" Randa demanded anxiously. "It's been hours."

Kelly stared into a clear blue sky just beginning to streak with orange. The sun was drifting down to the horizon. Kelly was briefly sorry she had worried them. She also felt it was past time for them to worry over Michala.

"She's fine Randa"

"Where are you?"

"We're at a hotel. We're staying the night here. She's sleeping and I don't want to wake her up. I'll bring her to Jess' tomorrow."

Voices spoke in the background. Kelly tuned them out as Randa repeated her words to the others. She was feeling drained herself. She stood up and walked slowly back to their door. She leaned against the railing. She would be in there very soon. She was going to curl herself around Michala and fall asleep with Michala in her arms.

"Is there anything else Randa?" She asked, breaking into Randa's conversation. They had all night to talk to each other.

"I want to talk to her."

"No. She's asleep. I'm not waking her up." Kelly wasn't giving in to them anymore. Michala was hers.

"Kelly, she's my sister. I want to know she's all right."

Kelly saw the line Randa was trying to draw and stepped right over it. "She's my girlfriend. Get used to me telling you she's fine. Get used to me taking her away when she needs a break. She's mine Randa and I will do whatever I have to do to protect her. When she wakes up, if she wants to talk to you, she will. If she doesn't, she won't. This is how it's going to be from now on. She's not doing anything she doesn't want to do and if I have to stand between her and the rest of you so be it. Goodbye."

The lines were drawn. Kelly pushed away the fear that Michala would not appreciate her grand gesture. She would just have to make Michala see her point of view.

## 7.

It was after ten the next morning before they left the hotel room. Michala didn't want to chance running into Jess or Shannon. The last thing she wanted to do today was rehash yesterday. It was enough that she was staggered by the memories when she finally remembered why she was waking up beside Kelly in a hotel room. Every time she thought it was getting easier to live with the past, she was slapped down. Every time she thought she was coming to terms with her grief, she was reminded. And every time she thought it was never going to end, she was proven right.



She lifted her head and stared out the window at nothing. How did her life become this? Even now, looking back, she could not see how her path veered so horribly wrong. She wasn't sure which of the decisions she made took her from her perfect life to the shambles laying around her feet. She hadn't lost everything, but what she had left wasn't much. She was stunned that she could lose so much in such a short amount of time without noticing it was all slipping away. She looked down at her open hands as if the answer lay in her palms. How could she not see her life slipping through her fingers like sand on a beach?

Everything was gone. Her life was an empty room with bare shelves and echoing with silence. Everything was gone and she was no closer to getting it all back than she was to knowing how she lost it all. The decisions she made were ones she would make again. Given the same circumstances, given the same choices, she would make the same decisions again. Even knowing what she knew now.

Michala was terrified by her thoughts. She didn't want to know that if she had to do it all again, she would. What did it say for her that she would take all those steps that led her here again, foot step by foot step? How could she accept that? If the decisions were right, if the choices were right, why was the outcome so wrong?

"Are you sure you don't want me to hang around for a while?"

Michala glanced over at Kelly. She saw worry in her eyes. She heard it in her voice all four times Kelly asked if she was all right. She turned back to her view. If she hadn't eased her fears by now, there was nothing left for her to say. "Don't take it personally, Kelly. I just need some time alone."

She needed time alone to gain perspective. She was seeing everything in shades of black. She needed to step back and look over her life objectively. She had a job if she wanted it. She had a home if she wanted it. She glanced over at Kelly again. She had a girlfriend if she wanted her. Everything wasn't gone. She just felt like it was.

"Have dinner with me tonight." Kelly reached for her hand. "We'll have a real meal."

Michala smiled at Kelly's none too subtle reference to their three am meal from Krystal's. She squeezed her fingers. "Come over and have it with us. I'm not going to be able to slip away tonight. I should have called them last night. I've got to give them a chance to talk to me."

And she was dreading the discussion. She was lucky to be able to put it off until later tonight. She hoped that by then she felt balanced again. She could answer their questions without faltering over the memories. Time. She just needed time.

As Kelly turned down their street, she saw that she was out of time. Three cars were parked in front of the house. Her Corvette. Jess' Mercedes. Susan's BMW. She closed her eyes. She'd had all the time she was getting. She turned in the seat to face Kelly. "Please don't come in. Call me later."

Kelly stopped next to the sidewalk. Her blue gaze flicked indecisively between her and the house. "I feel like I'm abandoning you."

Michala leaned over and kissed her. She laid one palm against her cheek. "That's the last thing you should feel. Thank you for everything Kelly. I owe you one."

Kelly waited until she was inside before driving away. Michala closed the door as silently as possible. She was half way up the stairs when Susan's cool voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Did you really think we didn't hear you?"

"Hope springs eternal," she said and continued upstairs without looking back at them. If she could only have one thing this morning, she was willing to settle for a hot shower followed by clean clothes.

They walked into her bedroom without knocking. She heard them sit on her bed and knew they didn't care she was stripping down to her skin. Michala turned to face them, covered only by her shirt. She slowly undid each button as they stared at each other. "Yes?"

"Well you look better," Susan said, her tone doubtful.

Michala dropped her shirt to the floor. She almost grinned when both pairs of eyes veered off to look at other things. She reached for her robe and took her time pulling it over herself. "I am better. Yesterday was hard. Yesterday is over."

She didn't even consider that would be the end of this little talk. Her friends should be at work. This was the second day in a row they had taken off. This was going to be the no holds barred talk they had yet to have over all that happened in the last few days, and months. She closed her eyes briefly. She owed them this, she reminded herself. For all their sakes, she owed them this.

"Do you mind if I take a shower first? I feel sticky."

Jess stood up and shook her head. "Nope, as long as it's fast. Do you have a preference for lunch?"

"Anything that isn't fast food." The thought of food wasn't as repelling as Michala thought it would be. She wasn't hungry, but thought she could be if the next hour wasn't too unpleasant.

"How about delivery? Chinese?"

Michala narrowed her eyes at her friend's carefully casual tone. She had known Jess too long to be fooled. Tension rolled off the slender form framed in the doorway. Anxious blue eyes met hers before closing as she turned away. Her casual tone was gone as she said in a strained voice, "I know what to get us."

Susan sighed and got to her feet. "What do you want to drink?"

"Scotch," Michala said, thinking only about the day stretching out in front of her endlessly. She dreaded what lay in the hours ahead. Of the confessions she would make. Of the truths she would reveal. Of the next inch of her soul she would strip bare in amends.

Shock was swiftly covered on Susan's face with a painfully bright smile. "Okay, scotch it is. I'd be snappy about it if I were you. Shannon's not here to keep Jess out of the shower with you."

"You are." Michala kissed her on the cheek as she walked by on her way to the bathroom. Susan fell in step behind her. Michala turned in the doorway. Words died on her lips as she saw the vulnerable expression of loss on her friend's face. Susan looked like she had just lost her best friend. Michala moved to her. Susan threw herself at Michala, stunning her with the force of her hug. Of all the things she had done to apologize over the last week, standing there in Susan's bruising embrace was the easiest. Her words lacked the tangible assurance provided by her physical presence.

Susan squeezed her close one last time. "Don't count on me keeping her out. That shower fits three."

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Kelly walked into her office, shut the door, and promised herself that she wasn't leaving until she was current on their cases. Unless it was five-thirty in which case she had a date. While she sorted the files on her desk, she pushed away all thoughts of Michala. She had already spent the time driving home, getting ready for work and the drive to work wondering what was happening to Michala at Jessica's. She hoped they were gentle with her.

As the red tagged files began to pile up on her desk, Kelly felt guilty for abandoning Sam for the last few days. Any team leader could keep the program running, but for it to run smoothly without people falling through cracks, all three leaders needed to keep up with their end of the paperwork. Red tags were new cases that had not completed the initial evaluation. Once all of them read the case and made recommendations, they were tagged by priority. Green tags were Sam's, yellow tags were Randa's, and blue tags were Kelly's. If a case needed the immediate attention of more than one of them, it was kept red. They were all working towards a time when the case was given the inactive white tag.

Kelly's responsibility was to help the victims through the legal maze. Their clients were mostly battered woman and children. They were terrified and all too often felt that it was them against the world. Kelly was their advocate. She explained what legal services were available and was there to help them make the hard choices. Sometimes she was the first person they saw. Sometimes they never met her at all. Kelly liked those cases best.

With determination, she worked steadily through the red cases without a break. She added her recommendation and moved the case into another pile. Some were ready to be assigned and some still needed to cross Randa's desk. Briefly, Kelly wondered where Randa was working. The Center was closed for the foreseeable future. Someone needed to make temporary arrangements

for the Center's patients.

She was debating about a late lunch when her door opened without notice. She glanced up reflexively and then sat back to give Randa her full attention. Neither smiled at the other. Randa shut the door and sat across from her. Dearly familiar eyes stared at her with anger warming the dark brown. Kelly steeled herself. She didn't even bother to wonder why Randa was here.

"What's going on between you and my sister?"

Kelly thought about being flip. Randa's attitude demanded a sophomoric reply. She went with honest. While Randa deserved to hear she only wanted her twin sister for the sex, Michala deserved better. "I'm in love with her."

Randa sat back in her chair with a sarcastic smile. "In love? You haven't known her a week. How can you possibly be in love with her?"

"Why shouldn't I be in love with her? She's everything I've ever wanted in a woman."

"Everything?" Randa repeated. "In less than a week you know she's everything you've ever wanted?"

Randa's disparaging tone annoyed Kelly more than the question itself. She didn't care why Randa didn't believe she could be in love with Michala in less than a week. Some people didn't believe in love at first sight. Some people thought love could only grow over long periods of time. What she did care about was that Randa thought she come into her office and imply that she hadn't known Michala long enough to love her.

"You don't believe I know her very well. Like you do. Like Susan and Jessica know her. Is that it?"

Randa nodded without hesitation. "You don't know her."

Kelly thought about asking just what it was they knew that she didn't that would change her mind about being in love with Michala. She didn't for one minute believe Randa would give her a laundry list of her sister's worst faults. But she had to admit to being mildly curious at what Randa would say if she asked. Instead she sat forward in her chair and met her determined gaze.

"Then tell me, since you know her so well, and maybe you can answer the same question for her best friends. Just how long would you have sat there letting her listen to those damned tapes before you realized something was wrong?"

Kelly watched without emotion as shock robbed her face of color and bled the anger from her eyes. She should have stopped then. She had drawn blood with her point. "I don't understand how all of you let her fall so far. You almost lost her, Randa. How could you not know you were losing her?"

Their eyes met and Kelly forced herself not to look away from the pain she caused. Randa's gaze slowly dropped to her desk. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. Kelly squeezed her own shut in regret. She knew she went too far. She would have given anything to erase the last few minutes from their memories.

"I don't know," Randa said softly. "Yesterday. Her voice. I've never heard Cayla sound like that."

*Damn.* Kelly flinched from the soft, broken words. She rounded the desk and knelt in front of her. Dark, tortured eyes slowly lifted to face her and Kelly flinched again. For the first time, she saw them as identical twins. "I'm sorry Randa. That was over the line."

Randa shook her head. Those anguished eyes scanned her face. She reached out to gently play with her hair. "How is she, Kelly? I mean really? When it's just you and she doesn't have to be Dr. Cary?"

Kelly wasn't sure how to answer the question. She didn't believe that technically she had met Dr. Cary. She didn't want to give Randa the truth about yesterday. She told Michala she could lose control and no one would ever know. It was a promise she meant to keep. Randa wasn't going to find out she fell apart from her.

She gave her the truth that protected both sisters. "She's finding her way back. She said yesterday she thought she was going to be all right. She said she hadn't thought that in a long time. Give her time."

Randa fought a brief smile to her face. "As long as it's some time in the next fifty years, she can have all the time she wants."

Kelly smiled with her. "Are we all right now?"

"Unless you hurt her," Randa said as she sat back in her chair. Her hurt, teary eyes destroyed the menacing attitude she was trying to affect. "I won't have to do a thing you understand. Jess and Susan will take care of you for me."

Kelly stood up and leaned against her desk. She smiled. "I think I can take them. Are you hungry? I was thinking about lunch before you came in."

Randa glanced at her watch and frowned. "It's late. We're all having supper at Jessica's. They've spent the day with her. It's supposed to be very low-key, though Shannon and I were not allowed to know their plans. Cayla's cooking."

Remembering the kind of meals Michala planned, Kelly lowered her expectations of lunch. She held her hands out to Randa. "Sandwiches? There's a deli around the corner."

"Sounds light. God, how many red files are on your desk?"

Kelly grimaced and reached for her jacket. "Too many. Some need your recommendation."

Randa fanned the files over her desk. "I've got to talk to Cayla about getting new office space. I need a desk."

Kelly locked her door behind them. "You can always use a corner of mine. We need to get those cases assigned."

Kelly was relieved when the conversation centered on DVIT. The program was her first connection with Randa and she was most comfortable dealing with her on that level. Michala was a minefield. Kelly wasn't sure of her own relationship with Michala. She didn't want to have to defend it to Randa.

They took their sandwiches back to her office and ate at her desk. They worked in a companionable silence broken only by case file questions. By the time they left for Jess', Kelly felt she was back on familiar ground with Randa. While she wanted her relationship with Michala to move onto a more personal level, she didn't have that same hope with Randa. For the time being, she didn't want to bring more people into the circle.

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Her friends were talking quietly at the bar when Michala came down after her shower. She paused in the hallway and steeled herself for what she was sure would be a long, emotion filled afternoon. *Please God*, she prayed desperately, *please let this be the last time I have to do this. Please*. Because if she had to keep doing this, scotch just wasn't going to be enough.

Conversation stopped dead as she stepped into the room. They stared at her as if waiting for another head to sprout. They each had a glass of iced tea with a wedge of lemon. She sat down in front of the chair with the tumbler of melting ice and a half bottle of Chivas. She drained the glass of water before filling it with scotch. "Go on. Don't stop talking because I came into the room. Are we talking about the stalker or yesterday in the apartment? I hope it's the stalker."

Michala sipped the scotch, watching them trade concerned glances with each other. Suddenly, for reasons she would never know, it was all too much. She tried to reach deeper inside herself, searching for the cool poise that was her trademark. She wasn't too surprised to find herself empty. She truly had nothing left to give. Carefully, she placed the glass on the table and pushed herself to her feet.

"I can't change the past. I can't change what I did. I can't change what I didn't do. I can't keep saying that I'm sorry." She turned to leave the room. "Just add that to the list of all the other things I can't do."

Slender arms closed around her from behind and stopped her before she could take more than a few steps. Warm lips brushed against the nape of her neck. "This isn't for you to be sorry," Susan said, "this is for us to be sorry."

Michala stiffened at the soft words. She tried to turn to face Susan, but her friend tightened her embrace. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

Jess came to stand in front of her. Her gaze was centered over Michala's shoulder as she sought strength from Susan. Michala felt Susan bow her head, resting her forehead on Michala's shoulder. Jess sighed and shifted her gaze to Michala. "We have a lot to be sorry for. We should have known."

Michala asked the question even though she knew the answer. "Should have known what?"

Susan lifted her head and rested her chin near Michala's ear. "That you were in trouble. That you were floundering. That something was very, very wrong."

"No, you should not have known. I did everything I could to make sure you didn't know." Michala had a feeling where this was going and she was going to end it before they could start down the road. The last few months may be sketchy to her. There were things she should have done, but didn't. There were things she did that she shouldn't have. She may have forgotten more about the past year than she would ever remember. But there was one thing she had no doubt about. She made sure those she loved did not know what was happening in her life.

Jess laughed without humor. She crossed her arms over her chest and cocked her head in challenge. "Do you really think that we didn't know something was wrong? God, Michala, you ripped your life apart. You walked away from everything you love. We knew you were falling apart. We just didn't know how to reach you."

"I didn't want to be reached, Jess. I pushed yo-"

Susan plowed roughly over her words. "No, we allowed you to push us away. You got away with the things you did because we allowed it. Don't think for one minute you had the time and space you had just because you wanted it."

"If you had tried to force the issue, you would have lost me," Michala stated firmly. On this one issue, she wanted things clearly understood. "Don't you think for one minute I would have chosen you over the denial. I did not want to face my life and there is nothing you could have said that would change that."

Jess cupped her face with warm hands. Bright blue eyes bore into hers. "I know if our places were reversed, you would have reached me. I know you would have done whatever you had to do to get my attention. There won't be a next time, Michala. You can deny and hide all you want. You can lock all the doors, change all the locks, and not even have a phone and I promise there will not be a next time. One way or another, Susan and I will get to you because I just can't do this life without Saturdays."

Michala searched for words to make them understand that there was nothing they could have done differently. Nothing she would have done differently.

Susan's voice was soft in her ear. "I want to ask you something and I want an honest answer."

Michala acquiesced with the barest nod of her head. She forced herself to keep her head up and her eyes open. The days of facing her life with her eyes closed were over.

"Is Kelly as hot in bed as she looks?"

The off the wall question caught Michala completely off guard. She blinked slowly as her mind tried to follow Susan. Of all the questions her friend could ask, that one didn't even make the list. She turned her head to peer over her shoulder. "What?"

"We want to talk about Kelly now," Jess said from her seat at the table. "Here you've got this gorgeous new girlfriend and we don't know how you met her."

"I don't want to know that," Susan disagreed. Her grin was evil as she passed Michala to sit in her own chair. "I want to know how she is between the sheets."

Slowly comprehension dawned on Michala. As far as Jess and Susan were concerned, it was over. Apologies were given and received. Hurt feelings soothed. The slate was clean. All she had to do was move forward. She gave up a brief prayer of thanks to whatever benevolent being gave her these two women as her best friends. She didn't deserve them, but she was glad she had them in her life.

"And if we ever make it under the sheets, I'll let you know."

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Kelly was frankly nervous. After yesterday, she wasn't sure what kind of reception to expect from Michala's friends. After today, she wasn't sure what kind of reception to expect from Michala. Did they tell her about the phone call? Everything that had happened aside, Kelly was still the woman she picked up in a bar. She was still the woman Michala threw from her apartment when Kelly dared to overstep the line Michala drew in the sand. She wasn't sure of her place in Michala's life or even if she had one. She was uncomfortable with the thought that she wanted one.

"Hey, there's Shannon. Honk. She can let us in with her."

Kelly fell in behind Shannon as she blew the horn. Shannon waved her hand to show she understood and instead of driving past the guardhouse, she stopped and spoke briefly to the young male guard. Cars without resident tags were stopped and if not on the owner's approved list, were forced to wait to the side while the guard got approval for them to enter the community. This time, they were waved through the gate without stopping.

Randa sighed. "I don't know about you, but I'm almost afraid to go in there. Susan and Jessica are so angry with her over this. I understand they feel betrayed. I know I do. But Cayla's been as sorry as she's going to be about all this. I'm not sure anyone will be left standing if they try to push it."

"How long have they been friends?"



Kelly was curious about the women who inhabited the center of Michala's world. She knew they were best friends. Now she wondered if they were ex-lovers. Lesbians seemed the most determined to convert ex-lovers into lifetime friends. It was hard sometimes to sort out who was merely a friend and who had been more. The passionate, sexual side of Michala was one Kelly didn't want to share with her friends. She wanted a part of the beautiful blonde that wasn't ever theirs.

"Jess' family lives across the street from our parents. I don't think either of them remembers a time when the other wasn't part of her life. They're more twinish than Cayla and I are."

Her voice was matter-of-fact. Kelly had to wonder if she was jealous and outgrew it or if she was never jealous at all. She didn't sound as if it bothered her someone had taken her rightful place in Michala's life. Curious, she asked. "Did you ever resent that?"

Randa laughed and her dark eyes were clear when she looked at over Kelly. "No. They are way too girlish for me. I was playing softball and football with the boys. When Cayla came out, in junior high might I add, Mom and Dad were more surprised that it wasn't me who was gay."

"And Susan?"

Randa grimaced and sighed again. "For my own sanity I have to believe they've never been lovers, but to be brutally honest, I'm not sure. I do know they were set up on a blind date by Jess. She and Susan were Criminal Justice majors together. Jess thought they would be perfect. The official story is that they met, went to a bar, and left with other people. They've been a triad since."

It was a story Kelly wanted to believe. They were friends. Best friends since pre-school and college. They shared and cared, they saw the best and the worst, they accused, and they forgave. But they did not know each other as lovers. Kelly thought, as she followed Shannon's car onto their street, it was a story Shannon and Randa wanted to believe, too.

The three cars were parked as they had been that morning. Shannon drove up the sloping drive to take her place next to the Mercedes in the open garage. Randa's car was still in the MARTA parking lot. When she took up Kelly's offer of a lift she did so with the expectation that Susan would take her to MARTA the next morning. Kelly came to a halt behind the little red Corvette. She was still surprised Michala drove a racy sports car.

Shannon waited for them on the porch. She raised her eyebrows as they mounted the steps. "Should we be concerned that it's dead silent?"

They traded glances. Kelly shook her head. "Let's not. I can't take anymore this week."

Shannon nodded and turned with her key in hand. "Agreed. But if it's not innocent, I get first dibs on your gun."

Kelly laughed as she admitted, "It's locked in the trunk of my car."

"Lucky for them," she replied and opened the door. They were hit with the tantalizing aroma of something Italian cooking and uncontrollable laughter. Silently, the three women removed their coats and laid sunglasses and keys on the cherry wood table in the foyer. They moved as one to the room which was the source of both the smell and noise.

"God, Suz, you're drunk," Michala announced, her slurred voice betraying her own inebriation. "Can you get up?"

"Hmm, prob'ly not. Jus feed me down here."

Laughter echoed across the kitchen. "Only if you let us call you Fluffy. And roll over on your back so we can rub your tummy."

The three women walked unnoticed into the darkened dining room. From the shadows, they surveyed the tableau before them. Jess was sitting on the counter, her legs swinging. Michala was trying unsuccessfully to pull Susan to her feet. She was perilously close to being pulled down on top of the giggling blonde. Three empty wine bottles were lined up across the bar.

"Um, no," Susan disagreed and tugged on Michala. "I don' wanna splain that to them. Who do you think will be maddes'? Randa, Shan, or Kelly?"

Michala lost her footing and tumbled to sprawl across Susan. Jess howled with laughter and rocked so hard on the counter she slid off to land with a thud on the floor. Susan and Michala were laughing so hard Susan wasn't making a sound and Michala had tears streaming down her face. She was struggling to sit up, but Susan's fumbled attempts to help her only added to the difficulty.

Shannon looked over her shoulder with a wry grin. If any of them had harbored any doubts about the three of them being left alone for the day, they weren't thinking about them now. Yes, they were drunk, but of all the things that could have happened, it was by far the most innocent. Without a word, each woman went to her girlfriend.

Kelly slid her arms around Michala's waist and brought her upright. Surprised brown eyes swung around to look at who was holding her with such familiarity.

"Well, hello," she greeted, a sexy smile settling over her face. Michala turned in her arms when Kelly set her down on her feet. To her surprise, Michala slid her arms around her neck and pulled her head down for a deep kiss. Kelly gave into her desire without much of a fight. If Michala didn't care that her friends and sister were only a few steps away, Kelly wasn't going to let it bother her.

Michala leaned back in her arms with a sensual smile. "How was your day?"

Kelly stared deep into the dark brown eyes, searching for lingering signs of hurt or anger from

the afternoon. All she saw in the dark depths was happiness. Whether from a good day spent with her friends or the amount of alcohol consumed, Michala was feeling only good things right then. Kelly wasn't going to rock the boat by reminding her of DVIT, Tyler or her stalker.

She pulled Michala against her. Whispering in her ear, she said, "I've been fantasizing about getting you alone. Any chance of that happening?"

Michala nestled her face against Kelly's neck. "Oh yeah. As long as by alone, you mean here in my room with Jess and Shannon across the hall."

The thought of making love with Michala in someone else's home did not appeal to Kelly very much. She liked the adventuresome, vocal lover she knew Michala to be. She liked hearing her name moaned by Michala as she thrashed against her hand or face. She was, however, willing to make concessions to the circumstances. She kissed Michala's ear, saying, "Whenever, wherever."

This time Kelly was the one to initiate the kiss. Slowly their mouths opened and kissing lips became stroking tongues. Hands wandered to the soft skin of the neck to caress. Legs slid between legs. Kelly only remembered where she was when Michala brought one hand to her left breast. She grabbed the hand before Michala could do anything more than touch.

"There's a bedroom upstairs," Shannon teased, "You can join us for dinner later if you want."

Michala jerked away. Her eyes were black with desire and she was breathing faster than normal. Kelly closed her eyes. She would never rein in her emotions if she could see her own need reflected in Michala's eyes.

Michala stepped around her and walked into the kitchen. "Gee Shannon, that was almost worthy of Jess. I guess couples who live together do start to sound alike."

Kelly turned around when she felt she was no longer blushing like a sixteen-year-old virgin. She already knew Michala and her friends were merciless. She would have to expect the same from their lovers. Jess and Susan were grinning like the drunken woman they were. Shannon was following Michala into the large kitchen. Randa was staring at her Nikes.

"Randa and Kelly, could you set the table please," Shannon asked. "I hate to put you to work, but I don't think it's a good idea to give breakable dinnerware to people who can't walk a straight line."

"Hey," Jess protested and promptly fell sideways from turning to fast. "Yeah, okay. But why does she get to help?"

Michala slid a bubbling lasagna from the oven. "Because I'm sober. We've got salads to go with this. Who wants garlic bread?"

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The day wasn't ending the way Michala feared it would when it began. When this was all over,

when they were all past everything that had happened and that would, she would have to remember to thank them. She knew she was lucky to have them as her friends before, but now she was truly grateful. More grateful than she could express that for today the three of them pretended the last year never happened.

"More?"

Blinking, she looked up at Jess and the carafe of coffee she was holding. Michala accepted a refill with a smile. While she normally didn't drink coffee this late in the evening, she doubted the caffeine boost was going to keep her awake later. If anything, she thought the coffee was the reason she hadn't already excused herself for the night.

She didn't want the day to end yet. She wanted to see stay in the warm company of her friends, held against Kelly as the conversation drifted around her. She wished they could stay like this forever. Wished the outside world never had to intrude on her life again.

"Hmm?" Michala looked up from her cup to find concerned eyes on her. She was sitting in front of Kelly on a chaise lounge while the others sat in patio chairs or on the grass. "What?"

"Where were you?" Miranda asked. From the tone Michala could guess where her sister thought her thoughts dwelled.

Michala took a deep breath and leaned further back against Kelly. "Can you meet me at the Center tomorrow at eleven? I rented some office space in that Medical plaza down the street. Lynn's meeting me there to help get patient files boxed and moved over. We could use some extra hands."

Michala's first clue that something was wrong was Kelly tensing behind her. Before she could turn to see what was wrong, she saw tension on the faces of the others.

Jess was the first to speak. "Are you insane? You're not going near the Center until this guy is caught."

Kelly caught her as she moved to stand up. "At least not without an armed escort."

"Not even with," Jess replied angrily. She got to her feet. "This guy could be anyone."

"He's not stupid Jess. And I will have an armed escort. Kendall Reynolds is the detective assigned to me. She's meeting me there to go over everything. My past actions aside, I am not an idiot. I'm not taking chances. But I do have a responsibility to Center patients."

A responsibility she had all but shirked over the last year. She owed it to the patients and staff to get everything back to normal as quickly as she could. She knew she could hand tomorrow off on Lynn and Miranda. She knew the two would do the job just as capably as they had all along. It was for herself that she had to be a part of it. For her own sanity and ego, she needed to be an active part of the Center again. Her vacation was over.

"Sit down Jess," Susan snapped when Jess would have continued. "He'll have to go through Kendall, Kelly and me if he wants to get to her tomorrow."

Michala opened her mouth to refuse their presence, but stopped when she saw the steely resolve in Susan's eyes. There wasn't anything she could say that would keep them away. In truth there wasn't anything she wanted to say. She snuggled back against Kelly's chest. "The more the merrier."

They would never know just how much she meant those words. The more people she had to help her move to the temp offices the less time she had to spend there. She knew from her afternoon there with Kelly just how deeply she was affected by the destruction of the Center. She did not want to walk through the rooms only to compare them to how they were before. Until the Center was restored, Michala had no desire to go there again. Anything left after the weekend, would either be left until the restoration was over or would have to be collected by someone else.

"What time do you want me to pick you up?" Susan asked and stood up to stretch. While the day had been relaxing, the night before had not and she was ready to go home. "Do you want to do an early lunch?"

Michala didn't even think about offering to drive herself over the next day. That suggestion would fly like lead balloon and she would have no one on her side. She smiled at her friend. "I'll catch a ride with Kelly. As for lunch, I'll either have something delivered or someone can go pick up something."

Susan looked at her strangely before a grin crossed her face. "So are you spending the night with Kelly or is she spending the night with you?"

Michala returned the grin. "Does it matter? Either way I get her in bed."

"It matters," Miranda replied, surprising them all. Sex and her twin were two subjects she never discussed at the same time. "Dani doesn't have the security that Jess has."

"She's right," Kelly said into the silence. "Do you mind if-"

"No," Shannon cut her off. "You can move in if you want."

Michala felt her bottom jaw drop and clenched her teeth before her mouth fell open. She stared at Shannon in surprise. She struggled to find the right words to say. She couldn't believe Shannon said that. Yes, she liked Kelly a lot. Yes, she wanted to see where the relationship would go. But her life wasn't in a place where she felt she could bring someone else into it. How could she say that so Kelly wasn't either offended or trapped?

"I, uh, thanks, but I, ah..." Kelly sputtered behind her.

Michala turned in her arms and kissed her softly on the lips. She looked into her eyes. "You took

the words right out of my mouth. I should have asked you first. Will you stay tonight?"

Kelly reached up to brush a few stray strands away from her face. "I think I should keep a suitcase in the trunk of my car. I seem to end up without clothes when I'm with you."

Michala laughed in delight. "Oh baby you can keep all the clothes in your trunk that you want, but I promise you'll still end up without clothes when you're with me."

She leaned forward to kiss her when Kelly closed her eyes in embarrassment. She heard the others moving around behind her. The night was drawing to a close. Michala was torn between wanting it to go on forever and wanting to already be upstairs in Kelly's arms. She slipped one hand behind Kelly's neck and brushed her tongue over her soft lips in an invitation to deepen the kiss. Kelly didn't disappoint. The voices around them faded away as Kelly became her sole focus. Her world shrunk until it encompassed only them. The embers burning since their kiss hello burst into flames, burning away all inhibitions until their raw desire was all that was left.

"Does Randa kiss you like that?"

The amused question washed over them like a bucket of cold water. Kelly jerked away from her and stared over her shoulder with dazed eyes. Michala closed her eyes as she fought to bring her desire back under her slippery control. When she was sure she was collected, she turned to her smirking friends.

Susan grabbed Miranda from behind and pulled her back against her. Miranda was too surprised to fight the intimate embrace. "Oh yeah. It's like looking in a mirror."

"What dreams have you been having that you think that?" Miranda asked archly.

"We can go home and see," Susan suggested and slid her hand inside the waistband of Miranda's jeans.

Michala watched them in fascination. The only reason she believed they were together, besides Susan's admitting it, was the rare display of affection Miranda allowed in front of others. A small kiss here, hand holding there, but nothing overtly sexual. They were the most chaste couple on the planet. She knew there was something there for Susan to still be with Miranda. Before Shan and Miranda, the three of them were serial daters. In fact Michala thought her relationship with Melissa lasted longer than it would have if her friends weren't in long-term relationships. She wanted what they seemed to have.

Miranda put her hand around Susan's wrist. She didn't pull Susan's hand from the top of her jeans. "Best idea you've had all year."

With that, the party broke apart. Ten minutes later the patio was orderly and the dishwasher was whirling away in the spotless kitchen. Susan and Miranda left after Susan got the time they were meeting at the Center in the morning. The other two couples turned off lights as they went upstairs.

"Kelly, which would you prefer for sleepwear, T-shirt and shorts, or a gown?"

They were standing in the hallway between the two bedrooms. Michala leaned over to hug her ever helpful friend goodnight. "Don't worry about Kelly, Jess. I'll make sure she stays warm tonight."

Michala shut the door on Jess before she could comeback with a witty remark. Now that she could have Kelly to herself, she was eager for the day to end. Tomorrow was another chance for Jess to tease her about Kelly.

[Continued in Chapter 8.](#)

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~ Obsessions ~

by J Brownell

Disclaimer: Please don't read this at work. Any resemblance between my characters and anyone else is all in your head. Comments can be sent to [ga\\_onmymind@yahoo.com](mailto:ga_onmymind@yahoo.com)

8.

"You okay?"

The closer they got to the Center, the quieter Michala became. Kelly reached for her hand. Her fingers were cold. Kelly didn't want to ask, it was obvious Michala wasn't as poised about this as she wanted to appear, but the other gambits didn't sound any better in her head. And Kelly didn't want to step around the tension as if it didn't exist. That plan had not worked out too well for Michala's friends over the last year.

Michala glanced over from her intensive study of the passing scenery. "Do you understand why I didn't do anything? Why I just ignored it as if it wasn't happening?"

Did she? Kelly thought on some level maybe, just maybe, she could. It wasn't so much Tyler's death and it's devastation on her life. It was the fact that she blamed herself for his death. She was the one who fought for him. She was the one who crossed lines for him. And she was the one who failed him. She told Susan the night of the break-in that she never did anything because she thought she deserved it. Her stalker did what she herself could not. He punished her, tortured her, and took parts of her life away. She deserved whatever he wanted to do to her.

But the level of her understanding was very low and she didn't understand it to a degree that counted. She would never see this from Michala's point of view. She would never be able to tell her that it was all right that she did nothing. Kelly would never be able to go there with her. And the truth of the matter was that she never wanted to understand. Michala had gone to a very dark place. Kelly didn't want to visit it.

"Not really."

Michala nodded as if she understood. Her fingers tightened briefly. "Sometimes neither do I. I look back at the last year and the decisions I made. So many were so wrong. I wonder why I didn't see it at the time. Then days like today happen, and I remember why they seemed right. I know precisely why I just sat back and let everything happen."

This was that dark place. Kelly stood at the edge of it and knew with certain dread that she was going to go as far inside as Michala was willing to take her. If Kelly could only give her one thing, she wanted Michala to know she could always talk to her. That more than anything brought Michala to where she was now. Just one friend to share with last year would have saved her. "What about today reminds you?"

The day was actually beautiful. Warm with clear, cloudless blue skies, cooled by a breeze that was a touch chilly in the shadows. A perfect day for only good thoughts and good things.

"The fear. I have given everything that meant anything to me not to have to deal with this. I was willing to die not to have to deal with this. I guess it's only fair that now that's all I do is deal with this."

"Fear of what?" Kelly asked even as every instinct she had screamed at her to stop this now. She didn't want to follow Michala down. She didn't want to know. She didn't want to understand

Michala withdrew her hand. Kelly glanced over to see her staring out of the window. She hoped against hope that Michala would ignore her. She had asked the question because she had to not because she wanted to know the answer.

Her voice was whisper soft in the still quiet of the car. "I hope you never know. I hope you never find out."

Kelly would wonder later if she would have questioned Michala had they not arrived at the Center at that moment. If she would have pushed her for more of an answer. She didn't want to know. And she did. Michala had nothing to fear, without exception she had nothing to fear. Every demon that haunted her would have to breach far more than Michala's fragile defenses to reach her now. Whatever *this* was that she feared, she was not alone in facing it.

The parking area behind the Center was amazingly full for being closed. Michala smiled and shook her head as her eyes drifted over the car lot parading as her back yard. The dozen or so women were standing in groups around the back door. "Unbelievable."



She got out of the car laughing. "Who called you guys?"

The women laughed and pointed fingers at each other. Kelly stood back and watched as Michala was swallowed in a group hug. While the group caught up with Michala, Kelly let gaze wander. Her first instinct was to get Michala inside. They were too exposed here. He could be out there watching even now. He had to know she would come back. If he was smart, he would wait and then follow her. He needed contact with her. He needed to find her.

"He won't get to her," Susan said, appearing at her side. Kelly glanced over to find Susan's eyes searching the same area she had early. "He had his chances."

*Chances.* Kelly shivered in the slight breeze. Yes, he'd had his chances. He'd had all the time in the world to hurt her. Why didn't he? What kept him from crossing that last line? When he was here, inside her home, and he knew she was there, why didn't he go upstairs? Was he in love with her? Or did he hate her? Kelly frowned, remembering something. "Susan, where are the answering machine tapes? I want to listen to the rest of them."

Susan stared at her for a moment without expression. "Kendall probably has them. You should ask her."

Kelly was irritated with herself for forgetting them. Now she had to finagle a way to listen to the tapes now in official custody. God help her if she had to get permission from Bates. He would make sure she never heard them even if Michala herself demanded it. Even though Kelly knew if that was the only way, she would never ask Michala.

"She's the one in the red blazer," Susan said before moving away to follow the group inside.

The woman in the red blazer wasn't hard to miss. She was the one with her hand on Michala's elbow leading her inside the Center. Kelly cast one last lingering glance around the perimeter before following the crowd. She wasn't sure who everybody was, but Michala had brightened and laughed when she saw the assemblage. Kelly hoped there would come a time when they would be as important to her as they were Michala.

Kelly walked into the Center and stared. The long hallway that ran through the length of the Center and was waist high in debris the last time she saw it was now clear. She could see all the way down to the brand new double doors now closed at the front of the Center. Obviously someone, and not Michala from the stunned expression on her face, hadn't been sitting on their hands over the last few days. Kelly watched Michala lead a small group down the hall to the front of the house. She slipped into the kitchen in search of the coffee she could she smell.

An older woman with chin length auburn hair was setting out boxes of donuts. She smiled as Kelly came into the room. "Good morning."

Kelly's eyes skimmed over the kitchen. The room was spotless and orderly. Either he never made it this far or the cleaning fairy had taken care of this room also. She returned the friendly smile.

"Good morning. That coffee smells great. Do you mind?"

A quick grin dashed across the woman's face. The skin around her warm brown eyes crinkled. "Help yourself. There's milk in the refrigerator. Creamer and sugar on the counter next to the coffee."

Kelly nodded and walked to the back counter. She poured two Styrofoam cups and added milk to hers and sugar to both. She nodded to the woman as she passed. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Kelly was two steps from the hallway when the woman asked, "Are you Kelly?"

Surprise nailed her feet to the floor and she turned slowly. "I am, yes. And you are?"

A bright grin came to her face as she came to Kelly. Her dark eyes were curious. "Do you have your gun?"

Kelly blinked at the unexpected, softly asked question. She paused before answering. She didn't know this woman, though she had a suspicion circling in her head. "Yes."

The very familiar eyes went to her shoulder, to the place where her gun was strapped to her side. "Do you wear it all the time?"

"Only when I'm on duty." Kelly took a sip of her coffee, thinking, wondering if the limb she was about to step out on would hold her. She shrugged mentally. The only way to find out was to step out there. "I've never taken a life Mrs. Cary, but I can. For her, I will."

Their eyes met and whatever Paige Anderson Cary saw caused the older woman to visibly relax. She reached out and touched Kelly on the wrist. "I'm glad you're here. I was hoping you would be so that we could meet. Michala rarely lets me meet her girlfriend. I can't understand why."

A warm hand slid under her blazer and rested against the small of Kelly's back. "Is your memory fading, Mother? I can name off a list of reasons if you need reminders."

Michala's voice was warm and teasing. Kelly handed her the cup in her left hand. "For you."

"Mm, thank you." Michala took a healthy drink from the cup. She leaned forward to kiss her mother on the cheek. "And thank you. I don't know how you did this. I was dreading coming in here. I hope you didn't have to call in too many favors."

Paige reached out to tuck an errant blonde strand behind her daughter's ear. "I didn't have to call anyone, honey. I've had to turn down offers of help. I'm beginning to think the people in Atlanta who don't feel they owe you something are few in number."

Kelly watched a shadow darken Michala's face for an instant. She shrugged and stared down in

her coffee. "It was just a job."

Paige lifted sad eyes to Kelly and Kelly knew they shared the same thought. It was never just a job. If it had been just a job, Michala would never have been destroyed by it. Tyler really would have been just another kid. Kelly would never say DVIT was her life, but she would say that it did become Michala's definition of herself.

Someone called for Michala from the front of her house. She sent them a smile and quickly left.

Kelly was startled when Paige looped an arm through hers and led her into the hallway. Voices punctuated with laughter came from various parts of the house. Kelly assumed assignments were handed out and the women were getting busy. "Where are you from, Kelly? You don't sound southern."

"Originally Syracuse. I moved to Seattle after college. My best friend came here. I think I complained about the rain one time too many because Dani really started pushing for me to come here. I'm glad she did."

Really, very glad. She'd have to reward Dani for her constant nagging. She owed her one. Kelly had lovers in Seattle and a few she had even loved. None were Michala. None took her breath away, or made her heart race, or erased all thoughts in her head with just a kiss. She had loved and been loved, but until Michala, Kelly knew she had never been in love.

Paige patted her arm. "Randa said you're with DVIT. Can you stay awhile?"

Michala's laughter came from her right. Kelly glanced into the reception area to see Michala standing in the file area. She was dressed in olive green slacks and the sleeves of her navy shirt were rolled to her forearms. She grinned thinking this was probably dressing down for Michala. She had yet to see the woman in a pair of jeans. She said absently to Paige, her thoughts on what Michala would look like in a pair of tight faded 501's. "I'll be here as long as she is, Mrs. Cary."

"Call me Paige."

Kelly tore her eyes away from Michala to smile at her mother. Her smile became puzzled at the bright grin directed at her. "Um, thank you."

Paige squeezed her arm briefly. "No, thank you."

Before Kelly could ask why she was thanking her, Paige disappeared into the conference on her right. Michala laughed again and Kelly's attention was pulled from the mother to the daughter. Paige's cryptic comment was forgotten. Kelly wandered into the reception room, wondering if she offered to help, what job she would be given. She stopped in the middle of the room and cocked her head to one side. Yeah, tight faded 501's and nothing else.

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Finding a quiet room away from her friends was proving an impossible task. They had broken

from work for lunch and now as Michala wandered through the Center with her sandwich and chips, with Kelly trailing behind her, she wanted a quiet corner to be alone with Kelly. Since their brief talk in the car, they hadn't really spoken. Every time Michala got close to her, someone came up to them or called for her. She smiled, thinking Kelly was never hard to find. Kelly was wherever she was, a solid warmth giving her a feeling of peace she hadn't had in too long.

"What are you looking for?" Kelly asked when she stopped in the hallway between the reception area and the conference room. She looked right and then left, saw her friends settling down to eat their lunch. God knew she loved them. But right then, she wished the lot of them anywhere but here.

She sighed and looked back at Kelly. Kelly's smile was puzzled and her eyes were steady as she returned Michala's stare. Michala dropped her eyes and let her gaze slide up Kelly's blue jeans, over her black blazer and linger on the white T-shirt before moving back to her face. She got the desired reaction. Blue eyes darkened with desire flicked up to the locked door of the apartment. They smiled and fled up the stairs.

"They're going to look for you," Kelly whispered when Michala threw the lock on the doors. "Your mother and sister have keys."

Michala frowned, wondering if either would use the key if they thought Michala was making love with Kelly in her bedroom. She sighed as the image of her mother knocking discreetly on her door came to mind all too clearly. She could see Miranda fleeing the Center if she thought they were having sex. Paige accepted her sexuality and that meant everything that came with it. Michala having sex with Kelly in the middle of the day in her own apartment was not something that would raise her mother's eyebrows. It was also not something that would keep Paige on the first floor of the Center.

"Let them come. I just want to have lunch with you."

It was almost the truth. When Michala began her search it really was for a quiet place where they could eat with the illusion of privacy. They had been getting amused glances all day. But once she looked Kelly over, other possibilities came to mind. Like how it felt to have Kelly pressed against her body.

Kelly grinned and stole a potato chip from her plate. "You shouldn't look at me like that if all you want is lunch."

Michala laughed and walked to the table. "Well, it was all I wanted in the beginning."

Lunch was subs, chips, and sodas from a local sandwich shop. Michala was knee deep in files when her mother announced lunch was ready. Michala was astonished to realize the morning was gone. They had most of the files boxed and someone, who Michala wasn't sure, was already trucking stuff over to the temp offices. Another hour or two and they should be finished.

"I hope my mother didn't make you uncomfortable. I didn't know she knew about you yet." She would corner Miranda later. Remind her that Michala wasn't the only daughter with a girlfriend. Actually, if they were being strictly honest, Miranda was the only daughter with a girlfriend. Michala wasn't sure where she was with Kelly. She was sure she didn't want her family to chase her off before she found out.

Kelly shook her head. "She didn't. I like your mother. She loves you very much."

"Don't like her too much, Kelly. My mother has one agenda when it comes to me. She wants me to be happily married with children. Every woman I date becomes my potential soul mate. I've learned to keep my mother far away from my relationships. She tries to make them a lot more serious than they are."

"How serious is this one?"

The question, and the somber tone in which it was asked, caught Michala off guard. She'd been speaking lightly, laughingly about her mother's quirky outlook on her life. She didn't mean to make this into "the talk". Kelly was staring at her, waiting for an answer. Her face was closed and Michala couldn't get a read on her feelings. Michala wanted her to want them to be serious. She wanted them to be serious. She didn't want to step out on that ledge by herself.

Hedging she said, "It could be very serious."

It could be the most serious relationship of her life. Kelly could be the first one to come before anything else. She could matter. She could count. She could be the one. Michala watched Kelly carefully, hoping for some clue in her reaction to how this was going.

"Could be? Like Melissa?"

Annoyance shot through Michala at the mention of her fickle former lover. She raked fingers through her hair. "God no. Melissa did little more than share my bed. She didn't share my life. She didn't want to. I love you more now than I ever did her. If I ever did her. Melissa was nothing, Kelly. I was never hers. I-"

Michala trailed off as the soft adoring expression on Kelly's face caught her attention. She was about to launch into reasons why Kelly shouldn't feel she had to compete with Melissa. She stared at her as Kelly stood up and came to pull her to her feet. The kiss was slow and deep and took her breath away.

When Kelly broke the kiss, she laid her forehead against Kelly. "What was that for?"

She felt a light kiss pressed to the top of her head. "I love you. I think I fell for you the first time I saw you, here. It's funny that I should know one twin for months and fall for the other in minutes."

Michala glanced up with a grin. "We're identical twins, Kelly. It's okay if you thought Miranda

was hot."

Kelly's gaze traveled slowly over her face before she shook her head. "You know that you're not identical. You could cut your hair, dress identically and Susan and I could tell you apart. Don't misunderstand, Randa is a beautiful woman. In that All-American tomboy way. I was never interested in her. I never even wondered if she's gay."

Michala understood the sentiment. No one who knew them ever mistook them for the other. They were different not only in dress and appearance but in movement and expression. Kelly was right. They could look like a mirror image of the other, but those who really knew them could tell them apart. It was why Susan could be her friend for years and fall for Miranda. It was why Kelly could know Miranda and be interested in her.

"How long before they start looking for you?"

"You mean us," Michala corrected and then laughed as someone knocked firmly on the locked door. She slipped away from Kelly and went to slide the door open. She bit her lip to keep from smiling at her sister's frowning face. "Yes?"

Miranda's eyes darted past her, to where Kelly was standing and over the table with the remains of their lunch. She visibly relaxed and allowed a brief smile when she looked back at her sister. "Mom wants you where she can see you. I caught her half way up the stairs."

Michala leaned against the doorjamb, grinning. "Oh, Miranda, that's so sweet. That you'd throw yourself in front of her that way. I wish we had been doing something for you to stumble in on."

"That lie might come off better if Kelly wasn't wearing your lipstick. You can finish whatever it is you're not doing tonight."

With that, Miranda turned and moved swiftly down the stairs. Michala shook her head. She laughed as she imagined the psyching her sister must have had to do before she knocked on the door. There was a hundred unpleasant things Miranda would rather be subjected to than seeing her twin kiss another woman. Michala didn't understand it. It's not like they were mirror images of the other.

She turned when she heard the unmistakable sound of bags crunching. She watched Kelly quickly clear away the remains of their lunch. Yes, this could be the most serious relationship she ever had.

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As much as she wanted to, Kelly turned down an invitation to spend another night with Michala. The details of her own life needed attention. She had clothes to wash, bills to pay, a friend of her own, be on call for DVIT. The clothes and bills sent her away from Michala. She could do without her friend's curiosity. The last thing she wanted to do was come out of her blissful rose-colored world. She didn't want to examine anything too closely right then.

So of course Dani was home. There was a chance she could have been spending the night with her new girlfriend. Kelly parked next to her BMW and wondered what the odds were that Sandy was spending the night. That would be nice. An occupied Dani was just as good as an absent one. Kelly would take either. The way her luck was running, she didn't hold her breath.

The bottom floor of the townhouse was lit by the second floor hallway light. Kelly stood in the foyer and smiled. She was surprised how much this felt like coming home. As much as she loved sleeping with Michala in her arms, she really did miss her own home. Even if it was just a home she was borrowing for a while.

"Dani?" She called and headed for the stairs when she received an answer.

Dani was standing in the doorway of her office, still dressed in the slacks and shirt she wore to her office. "I didn't think I would see you tonight."

Kelly grinned at the happy expression on her friend's face. "Are you busy? I'm starving. How about we go to Trader's for dinner?"

Dani glanced into her office and obviously debated over something before she tossed the pen she held onto her desk. "It's a date. I could use a good meal."

"Been eating at the hospital?"

While Dani related her heavy workload, Kelly changed clothes. They moved onto talk of girlfriends on the drive. By the time they had eaten their way through the seafood platter and shared a pitcher of beer, they were caught up on each other. Kelly was happy that Sandy was still in Dani's life. She had seen too many women make the short trip from lover to friend. This was the first woman Dani seemed to be connecting with since Kelly's arrival. She was glad for her friend.

By the time they were back at the townhouse, Kelly was pleasantly exhausted. She was ready for a nice hot shower and a warm, soft bed. They parted for the night at the top of the stairs. Once she was dressed for bed, she picked up her mail from the bureau where Dani stacked it for her every day. She took the thick bundle to bed with her. She hadn't done her laundry, but thought she could get by with sorting out her bills and getting them ready to mail tomorrow. She wanted to feel like she had accomplished something was this night away from Michala.

It was the color of the letter that caught her eye. The bright yellow color was out of place among the business class white. But it wasn't the color per se that draw her attention; it was the memory of that same color clenched in Randa's fist that fateful Friday morning. Carefully she isolated the envelope from the others. Although she wouldn't make any large bets on it, Kelly thought the thin sketchy handwriting matched the one on Michala's letter. She barely caught herself from reaching for the envelope. Damn, she really wanted to open the letter.

She reached for the bedside phone instead. It took four calls before she finally had the home phone number for Kendall Reynolds. The fact that Michala's stalker was able to get her address

concerned her. It's not supposed to be easy to get the address or phone number of law enforcement officials. How had he found out who she was and gotten hers so quickly?

"Hello?"

Kelly glanced at her clock belatedly and was glad it was only a little after ten. She wasn't calling too late. "Detective Reynolds, this is Kelly Pryce. We met at the Cary Center today."

Their introduction had been very brief. Kelly was never given the chance to ask about the tapes. She didn't want to make the request with Michala nearby and she didn't want Michala out of her sight. She had planned to call Kendall tomorrow.

Kendall's voice lost the brisk official tone. "Hi Kelly. You're with DVIT, right?"

Kelly stared down at the yellow envelope. "Yes. I don't know if you picked up on it, but I'm also dating Michala."

"No, I didn't pick up on it," Kendall said with an obvious smile. "I might have tried my own luck if I wasn't straight."

At any other time, Kelly would have been amused by the admission. "On the letters she got, have you found any prints?"

"Several and all on the outside. Hers, different staff members of the Center and the mailman. Nothing inside the envelope. No DNA on the flap or the stamp."

"I'm not sure Kendall, but I think I got one of his letters. I only saw the one, but the color's the same and the handwriting looks familiar."

Now Kendall was brisk and official again. "Have you opened it?"

"No, but not because I don't want to in the worst way. I don't want to screw up catching this guy."

Kelly heard rustling in the background and doors opening and closing. "Where do you live Kelly? I'll come over and take possession and open it."

Kelly gave her the address. She didn't think about telling her she could do that tomorrow. Kelly wanted to know what the letter said. She wasn't sure she would sleep if she had to wait and she knew she'd never be able to resist if she had to sit up all night. After the call, Kelly threw on her robe and went down the hall to Dani's bedroom. Her door was half open and the room dark. Kelly listened to her friend's even breathing and decided there was no reason for Dani to be awake for this.

She had coffee made and the letter downstairs waiting on the table when Kendall knocked on the door. Kelly checked to make sure it was the tall brunette cop before she opened the door.



Kendall was wearing blue jeans and what looked like a dark blue man's pajama top. She had evidence bags and latex gloves in her hands.

"You okay?"

Kelly nodded. "Anxious. It might not be from him. You could have come over here for nothing."

In her heart Kelly knew it was from him. She wasn't sure how he found her so fast. She didn't hope that she would attract his attention away from Michala. "Do you want some coffee?"

Kendall snapped on the gloves as she walked to the kitchen. "Sure. With milk and sugar if you've got it."

While Kelly made her cup, she watched Kendall lean over the table. "Good call, Kelly. It looks like you've been invited to play."

Over the next few minutes, Kendall carefully opened the letter. She dropped the envelope into its own bag as soon as she had the letter out. Next she opened the letter before sliding it down into the second evidence bag. She read the few lines Kelly could see before she stepped back so that Kelly could read it.

**Enjoy her while you can. She won't be yours for long.**

Kelly was disappointed. She had hoped for something a little more dark or taunting or at least threatening. "I'm glad I didn't have to sit up all night for this."

Kendall laughed and sat down at the table. "He's been a cool customer so far. He's only lost it once on one of the tapes. When he found out she's gay."

"How did he find out?"

Who the hell was this man? How was he in her life? They had to find out what edge he was hanging on and flick him off.

"He followed her to a bar. It was the first he knew of it. He smashed her windshield. I think it was New Year's Eve."

Kelly quickly did the math in her head. By Michala's calculations, his first contact with her was in September. So for four months he's writing her and calling her without a clue to her sexual orientation. How many of those months was she with Melissa? They break up and she goes to a gay bar. Then for the next four months he's writing her and calling her but also vandalizing her car and the Center. What happened for him to escalate now? Did her presence over the weekend

push some button for him? Was she the reason Michala's home was destroyed?

"Are you going to tell her about this?"

Kelly thought of Michala's reaction if she didn't tell her and she found out later. She laughed and nodded. "Yes. This concerns her."

Kendall nodded in agreement. She took a sip of her coffee and stared down at the letter. "Kelly, if it's not too personal, how long how have you two been dating?"

Kelly watched Kendall frown as she read the few lines. She knew Kendall wasn't asking for social reasons. "We met the Friday before he broke into the Center. Randa got one of the letters and wanted me to look at it. While we were talking Michala came into the room. We didn't tell her about the letter, but she told us about her windshield being broken the night before at the bar. Randa and I left and talked about it. We weren't sure then if anything was going on."

Here she paused the story and wondered how much to tell. The fact that they met later at the bar and spent the night together didn't paint either of them in a good light. For her own self, Kelly knew she would have left with Michala on any night. She thought for Michala it was just a continuation of the risky behavior that was becoming a habit of hers. She wasn't ashamed of how they met and got together. Neither did she want it to be a story told around the water cooler at work.

She looked over at Kendall. "I was with her later that night when he called. She hung up on him. He called back and I answered the phone. He was screaming, saying she better not ever hang up on him again. He said he would kill her. She refused to talk to me about it. Got annoyed when I pushed. I let it go and decided I would tell Randa. I started thinking then that the problem was more serious than we thought."

Kelly smiled in remembrance. If Randa and Susan had not come over that morning and if Michala had not outed Randa to her, how would she have finally told Randa the truth? She never did work that out in her head. She wondered now if it had come down to outing herself to Randa or not telling her about the phone calls, which she would have chosen. She had to believe in her own mind that she would have protected Michala.

She sighed and shook the thoughts away. That was a road she never had to travel.

"I spent the weekend with Michala. I don't think he called Saturday night. I never heard the machine come on. He did call late Sunday afternoon. He said he knew I was there and he wanted me to leave. We argued over the call. She refused to talk about it all. I left and went straight to Randa. I was pretty sure then that she was being stalked. We were talking about what to do next when Michala called to say he had broken into the Center."

Kendall frowned and sat forward. "You're new to town aren't you?"

The question came from left field. "Yes. I moved here right after the new year."

"You've been here almost four months. You've known her less than a month. How did he zero in on you so fast? He shouldn't have been able to find you."

"I thought about that when it took me about twenty minutes to get your home phone number."

"You know, we don't have a single suspect," Kendall rubbed her forehead tiredly. "This guy could be anybody."

Kelly was shocked by that statement. She knew that wasn't true at all. "No, he's not anybody Kendall. He's connected to the Center. Didn't anyone tell you that?"

Kendall's expression matched the one Kelly knew was on her face just a minute earlier. Anger flashed across her face. "How do you know he's connected to the Center?"

"On the tapes, he calls her Cayla. Michala hates that name. The Center is the only place he would hear people call her that and have her answer to the name. Randa is the only other person in her life that calls her Cayla."

Disgust wiped the anger from Kendall's face. "Damn it, I knew there was something odd about those tapes. I even remember thinking how weird it was that he called her that. I just thought he was giving her a nickname."

Kelly's smile was brief. "I only picked up on it because I noticed Michala is the only one who calls Randa Miranda. I asked Susan about it. She said it was a twin annoyance thing, but that Michala allowed it at the Center because it was easier for the kids."

Kendall stood up and reached for the evidence bags. "I hate to say this, but I'm glad you got this. You've given me my first lead."

Kelly followed her to the front door. "Then maybe you'd be willing to do me a favor. I want to hear the tapes."

Kendall turned with her hand on the doorknob. "You said on the tapes he called her Cayla. How do you know that if you haven't heard them?"

She was quick. Kelly was glad. She wanted a sharp detective on this case. "Michala was listening to the tapes to see if she recognized the voice. We were getting close to the day Tyler died. I could tell she wasn't handling it very well. We left and I didn't get to hear the rest. I'd like to."

"Why?"

A very good question. It was late. A long day was ending hours later than should have. Otherwise Kelly knew she would have censored herself better. "I love her. I need to know what he's been saying to her."

Kendall stared at her for several moments, pale blue eyes sweeping over face before she nodded slowly. "Okay. Maybe you'll pick up on something else that I didn't. Call me."

Kelly watched through the window as Kendall got into her car and drove away. She had a lot to do tomorrow. She should go upstairs and go to sleep. If she could turn her mind off she would. Thinking she wandered through the downstairs double checking the locks on the doors and windows. Her only concern with him targeting her was that this wasn't her home. It was Dani's. Kelly knew all too well that no security system was completely fail-safe. Especially if someone was determined to get in.

She would deal with this tomorrow. There wasn't anything she could do tonight. She'd let everyone get a goodnight's sleep before she dropped this newest bomb. She wasn't sure of Dani's reaction. She was afraid to even wonder about Michala's.

Tomorrow. She would deal with the fall-out tomorrow.

9.

"It's my turn."

"I don't think so. I know we had Belgian Waffles last time. Don't try to convince me I chose that."

Michala watched her friends bicker like five years over the rim of her first cup of coffee. She shook her head and pushed away from the counter. Today was Saturday, the day they got together for brunch and gossip. Today wasn't the typical Saturday. For one thing, they weren't at Michala's. Since she was the one who cooked, she chose to do so in the comfort of her own kitchen. Second, and more important, Shannon was also sitting at the bar. As a rule girlfriends weren't allowed.

"Shannon, what would you like?"

Her question ended the argument between Susan and Jess and had both of them staring at her in shock. Michala ignored them. Shannon's head lifted cautiously from the newspaper she was reading. Michala smiled at the deer caught in headlights look. Shannon hadn't wanted to join them. She had protested the break in tradition. Michala had insisted, saying they could go back to tradition when things were back to normal.

"Um, whatever you make is fine with me," Shannon said and dropped her gaze back to the paper.

Michala leaned on the counter in front of her and summoned her brightest, most persuasive smile. "Come on Shannon, you can have whatever you want."

"She wants a western omelet. With toast." Jess' voice was smug. Her girlfriend, her choice by proxy. Michala was willing to give Shannon that, if that's what she wanted.

"Really, I don't want to play. Let them decide and I'll have whatever's made."

Michala inched closer and was about to do her best to cajole Shannon into "playing" with them when the phone rang. Because she was so close, she saw the sheer utter relief that came to Shannon's eyes at the interruption. She slid hastily from the barstool. "I'll get that. You guys decide."

Michala frowned as she watched her hurry to the phone. Was Shannon really that uncomfortable? Was it just the break in tradition? Or was it her? Was Shannon that great an actress that Michala didn't realize just how uncomfortable she was with Michala in her home? Jess had said Shannon wanted her there as much as the rest of them did. What else was Jess going to say? She wasn't going to tell Michala that Shannon would rather run naked through the stands of Turner Field than have Michala in her home. You just didn't say that to a friend.

"Let's do pancakes. We both love those," Jess offered to Susan.

"Before I agree to that, what do you have to put in them? I don't want plain."

"That was the gate. Kelly's here," Shannon said coming back to the bar. "You can let her decide."

"Too late." Jess said. She was standing in the kitchen, searching the fridge. "Strawberries. How does that sound?"

Michala reluctantly shelved her thoughts about Shannon for another time. She had too many other things to do now. She would pull out her thoughts later when she could give them the attention they required. She took the green basket of plump strawberries from Jess. She had a big breakfast to make.

With the addition of Kelly to the group, Michala noticed that Shannon loosened up considerably. The four of them sat on the other side of the bar and kept a running commentary while she made strawberry pancakes, bacon, and toast. They ate the meal on the patio. The sun was bright in the clear blue sky. A cool breeze brought the light scent of Kelly's perfume. Michala was watching her and wondering how long her friends would want to continue the morning. Kelly looked sexy in dark green T-shirt tucked into blue jeans. Of course, she thought Kelly looked sexy in anything.

"Is Randa coming over?" Kelly asked, the change in tone a warning bell for Michala. She sounded serious.

Susan laughed. "No. Actually you and Shan shouldn't be here. It's Saturday. Michala needs to explain that to you."

Michala caught Kelly's eyes when she glanced over. She grinned at the perplexed expression. "The three of us get together on Saturday mornings. We do brunch and catch up. No girlfriends."

Kelly darted a look over at Jess and Susan. Michala blinked as she caught the flash of anger in

her blue eyes. There was something about that that Kelly didn't like. Was it the brunch with no girlfriends? Michala mentally sighed. Kelly wouldn't be the first girlfriend to dislike the tradition.

"I'll try to remember that," Kelly replied, her smile too amused for her to be really upset about it.

Their gazes met and the warning bell sounded louder. Michala put her cup down and braced herself. Kelly hadn't just dropped by to see her. "All right Kelly. What's wrong?"

Michala was prepared for Kelly to say she wanted them to talk in private. She told herself she was ready for Kelly to tell her that this had gone too far too fast. She had tried not to be hurt when Kelly declined to spend the night with her last night. She tried to believe it wasn't because she had scared Kelly in her apartment that afternoon. It was hard to sell it to herself.

She wasn't prepared for Kelly to reach for her hand, to slide her chair closer. She didn't know what to think when Kelly sat forward and met her eyes in a direct gaze. "I love you. I never thought I would find you and now that I have, I'm not letting you go. Do you understand? No matter what I am not letting you go."

Michala's world stopped. She stared into Kelly's determined eyes and her world came to a screeching stop. The hands holding hers tightened when she would have pulled away. She searched Kelly's eyes and saw the truth. "What did he do to you?"

Her heart thundered painfully in her chest. She wasn't sure if the buzzing in her head was from lack of oxygen or only a prelude to her fainting. This couldn't be happening. Whatever it was, and she knew with every cell in her body that he had done something, it could not be happening. She tried once more to pull away from Kelly. Kelly shook her head.

"He sent me a letter. At Dani's. Kendall already has it."

So many questions. Michala fought to sort out the questions bombarding her mind. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Okay, he sent Kelly a letter. A letter to her home. He knew who she was and where she lived. "What did it say?"

She opened her eyes when Kelly remained silent. "What did he say to you Kelly?"

"He told me to enjoy you while I can, you won't be mine for long. I was disappointed. I thought I would at least rate my own threat." She tried to smile.

Michala's own smile was bitter. "Sounds like a threat to me. If he kills you, he'll be right. I wasn't yours for long."

"That's not how he meant it Michala." The words were sharp and angry. "This wasn't directed at me."

Michala stood up. Kelly followed her. Michala tried to take a step back, but Kelly held her next

to her with a vice grip on her hands. "Don't tell me what he meant like you know. You don't. Unless you're channeling him, you're just trying to spin this so I won't freak out. He knows who you are. He knows where you live. I'm not going to just sit here and nod while you try to convince me he's not coming after you."

"He's not coming for me. He doesn't want me. He wants you."

"Let go of my hands Kelly. Now."

"You aren't pushing me out of your life over this Michala. Don't even try it. I'm not losing you over this. Nod that you agree and I'll let go."

Brown warred with blue. Michala saw the steely resolution in Kelly's eyes and believed she would stand there forever if Michala didn't agree with her. Michala reached for the cool poise that was her trademark. When she felt calm and in control, she nodded her head once. She could say whatever she had to say. She needed space to think. To get that, she could promise anything and feel no remorse when she broke it.

Kelly released one hand. She pulled Michala against her and used her free hand to cup Michala's face. "I'm not that stupid." The kiss was soft and gentle, an oddly comforting contrast to the brute force Kelly had used to keep her next to her.

Once free, Michala walked to the edge of the patio and wrapped her arms around herself. How could she have been so stupid? Any one of the women she brought back home could have been targeted. How could she not have realized that? Behind her she heard Susan speaking. She deliberately blocked out the words. She didn't want to be reasonable. She didn't want to be rational. She knew her friends were going to be both. Let them. This wasn't their life flaming down around them. It was hers.

It was her life and she was tired of having to deal with it. She sighed and dropped her head as the thought came to mind. She knew that feeling all too well. It was the feeling that got her where she was today, exiled to live in someone else's home. Standing in someone else's yard while her life was discussed like the soap opera it was. Decisions made by a committee she was on only grudgingly.

"I need a drink," She announced to no one in particular. She moved quickly to the kitchen and went through the motions of taking down a glass and standing at the sink. When she was certain no one had followed her inside, she headed for the front door. She had to go somewhere else, be anywhere but here. Her keys were on the hallway table along with her sunglasses. She snatched up both and shrugged away the consequences of her actions.

She was a grown woman. She was single and over twenty-one. She could always say "I'm sorry" later.

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Well that couldn't have gone much worse. Kelly watched Michala flee the patio and her heart

sank because she knew Michala was running away from her. She wished many things right then, but chief among them was a wish to have had a choice in telling her about the letter. Absolutely nothing was gained and way too much had been lost. It was a perfect Saturday and Kelly hated him for making her the one who ruined it.

She walked to the table for her coffee. The cup was halfway to her lips, her eyes on Michala's place setting, when realization hit. "Son of a bitch."

With the others trailing behind her in confusion, Kelly moved quickly through the house. She knew the kitchen would be empty. Just as she knew Michala wasn't upstairs. She went to the front door and slung it open already knowing she would see an empty spot instead of a shiny red Corvette. Susan and Jess pushed past her with violent oaths to stand in the yard. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. If she hadn't been so busy beating herself up, Kelly hoped she would have seen Michala's leaving the patio for the ruse it was. She should know by now that running away from her problems was how Michala coped with them. The lesson was hard to remember because it was such an immature attitude coming from someone like Michala.

"Any ideas where she went?" she asked them. She didn't expect them to know. For best friends, they were astonishingly clueless when it came to Michala.

Susan turned to stare at her. "None. You?"

Several places flitted across her mind. The new offices, her parents, the Center, Georgia, the Eastern seaboard. She shook her head as no place stood out in her mind. Michala could literally go anywhere. She had the money and the time to go on an extended vacation anywhere in the world she wanted. Would she leave without saying anything to anyone? "Call Randa. She can't leave without telling her. They're expecting Michala to be working Monday."

"Then I'll call Lynne. Michala can leave without telling Randa. She can't leave Lynne without telling. Lynne isn't going to demand anything from her."

"Fine." She turned to Jess. "Is there anything you can do officially?"

Jess shook her head and walked over to stand next to her. "But I can do a lot unofficially. So can Paige."

"Come on," Shannon said when they were the only ones left, the only ones with no one to call or anything to do. "Let's go inside."

What Shannon really meant to say was "Let's go inside and wait on the patio." And that's what Kelly did. She sat on the sun washed patio and waited as phone calls zipped around the city. An APB was out on Michala's car. Police cars added more patrols around the Center and the new offices. Someone called Michala's cell phone every ten minutes. Her credit cards and bankcard were being monitored for activity. Theoretically Michala couldn't make a move without them knowing. The actuality of not knowing where she was six hours later was wearing on Kelly's nerves. She wanted to do more than sit and wait.



Kelly had gone through all the emotions. From thoughts of killing Michala to save them all the trouble of him doing it to making a deal with God that if he brought her back soon she would not strangle her. Now she just wanted her back so that this day could end. She knew when it started that it wasn't going to be one of the better days of her life. She had no way to know it would be this bad. She wasn't sure if she had known she would have told Michala about the letter. She would have preferred for Michala to be angry with her for keeping something like this from her.

"Shan's calling for pizza. Any preferences?"

"Say Supreme extra cheese no mushrooms."

The voice tried to be cool and controlled. She sounded weary and defeated. Kelly stood up and turned to face her. Michala, her clothes rumpled, stood a step onto the patio. Her eyes were huge and black in a face drained of color.

"Oh God," Jess said and rushed to envelope Michala in a full body hug. "Oh God."

Michala allowed herself to be held for several long minutes. Finally Michala pulled away and reached to wipe away the silent tears on her friend's face. "Go order pizza. We'll be in a minute."

Kelly wanted to follow Jess' lead and simply hold Michala. Everything in her wanted to pull Michala tight against her, to reassure herself that Michala was as unmarked as she looked. Michala came over to stand in front of her. The uncertainty in her eyes almost broke down Kelly's resolve.

"I'm sorry."

If only she had said anything else. If only she had said nothing at all. Kelly would have pulled her close. Those two words were the last two words Kelly wanted to hear. She stepped away from Michala. "I can't do this. I won't do this. What you did is inexcusable and so is saying you're sorry when you know you'll do it again. I'm not your friends Michala. I don't want a ringside seat to watch you self-destruct. If you get your act together call me. Otherwise I'll keep vigil with the newspaper. I know your murder will make the front page."

She didn't touch Michala as she left her standing on the darkening patio. Her iron will kept her voice calm and even as she told Jess she was leaving. She saw the questions on their faces, saw their eyes dart to the open patio door. Let Michala explain. Let her tell her friends whatever she wanted to tell them. She paused by Randa long enough to tell her she would be at her office tomorrow working and Randa should come by at some point to pick up files.

"We're way behind," she said pointedly. "Sam's been holding down the fort long enough."

The silence she left in her wake was tangible. She forced all thoughts of Michala and the day from her mind as she drove away. She believed every word she told Michala. She also knew she would not be able to keep her end of it if she allowed herself to think about Michala. Work, she

would think about work. She had a lot to do before Monday. She wanted to be up to speed by the time they met at ten Monday and she was going to have to put in a lot of hours for that to happen.

By the time she reached the dark townhouse, she was calm. Whatever happened tomorrow could never be as bad as today. And as bad as today had been, she was still standing. She could do this because it was the right thing for her to do. The other option was to be a silent witness as Michala destroyed herself. Kelly didn't love her enough for that.

Kelly spent the rest of the night finishing up the tasks she had neglected. She felt like her life had been on hold and was now moving forward again. Yes, whatever happened tomorrow had to be better than what happened today. She lost Michala today.

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"Cayla?"

"I'm fine Miranda. I'll be in soon."

What a day. Michala dropped down onto a chaise lounge and stretched out. It neither started nor ended the way she would have chose, but if had to start the way it did she was grateful for the way it ended. Her only thought when she left here was to get as far away as she could. She drove aimlessly, her thoughts wandering from plan to rejected plan. Leaving Atlanta wasn't an option. She was just getting her life back on track. She refused to let him run her off now. Once she knew she was staying and dealing, the rest of her time was spent on what to do with Kelly. She wanted Kelly as far away from her life as she could get her. It was the how that kept hanging her up. Even when she came back and walked onto the patio, she still wasn't sure how she was going to arrange it.

She smiled her first heart felt smile of the day. *Thank you Kelly. Remind me that I owe you one when this is all over.* Providing of course when this was all over that Kelly was still speaking to her. She had to acknowledge at least the possibility, however unlikely. Kelly wanted more with her. She was sure of that.

"Cayla?"

Absently she turned to look up at her sister. "Hmm?"

"Are you all right?"

Michala pushed herself to her feet and looped her arm with Miranda's. "Is that pizza here yet? I'm starving."

Miranda resisted her tugging. Michala stopped and faced her. "What?"

Eyes identical to her own searched her face. The mirror image of her face frowned in confusion. "What happened with Kelly? She wasn't out here long enough for you to have a fight."

Michala was astonished her sister chose to tackle that subject, and by herself, too. She thought Jess and Susan would be the ones asking her questions. She forced the amusement she felt at the situation down deep. "She said I'm childish and selfish. She told me to get in touch with her when I grow up."

Miranda's reaction was comical. Her eyes popped open, her mouth opened and from that expression, Michala guessed her brain was frozen. She laughed and reached over to close her mouth with one finger. "She was right. And I will call her, when it's over."

"When it's over? You mean when he's caught?"

"Yes."

The seconds ticked by as Miranda stared at her without expression. Finally she nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. "You planned that didn't you? You wanted her out of her life and you wanted it to be her idea."

"You give me too much credit Miranda. Yes, I wanted her out of my life. But I was more than willing for it to be my fault. This way is better. This way she doesn't come back until I let her." This way was so much better than any she would have planned.

Miranda laughed and slid her arm around her shoulders. "Don't count on that, Cayla. I think you've met your match with that one. Kelly's told me she's in love with you and that you belong to her. I doubt very much this is going to keep her away for long."

Michala shrugged and followed her sister inside. "There's always my righteous anger. I get to say 'How dare you' and 'You have a lot of nerve'. Not to mention a few pointed silences. Whatever it takes." She grinned at Jess. "You'll give me a restraining order if I ask for one won't you?"

Jess looked up from her slice of pizza. "Sure. I won't even ask for who or why."

Michala went to the counter. She was starving and her tummy was getting vocal now that it could smell food. She'd had only one priority over the day and getting food wasn't it. She grabbed a slice, dropped it on a paper plate, and reached over to pour herself a glass of Coke.

"You should. It's for Kelly."

Michala threw her sister an exasperated glare, but gave into the inevitable without a fight. She had to tell them and this worked. They finished off the two medium pizzas, several liters of Coke and rehashed her day from the moment Kelly left until Kelly mentioned her letter. By that time it was several hours later. Michala was never so happy to see one day end.

Later, when the probing was over and she had been hugged by one and all, she was allowed upstairs for a hot shower. She slipped away gratefully. She wanted nothing more than to wash away this day and start over fresh tomorrow. Or rather, start over on Monday. Her sabbatical

from life was over. The absence had its purpose and she was stronger for it. She was ready to move on.

10.

One month. Four weeks of silence. Twenty-eight days of no contact. And now, for the first time since she walked out of Jessica's house, she was parking her car near the temporary offices for The Cary Center. Kelly stared at the double glass doors. Randa was useless, or circumspect depending on your point of view. Every one of Kelly's carefully indifferent questions was answered with equal indifference. Michala was fine. The Center was fine. Kelly stopped asking. It might have been worth seeing Randa's knowing grin if she actually learned something.

She knew a little more than that. The work was beginning on The Cary Center. Michala wasn't just repairing the damage, she was remodeling. Kelly got that from the onsite foreman. For some reason he believed her when she said she was a staff member. She knew Michala was haunting the bar several nights a week. She knew she hadn't left with anyone. Kelly wasn't sure what she would have done if Shannon told Dani Michala was leaving with women. Reasonable didn't seem within the realm of possibilities.

With a deep breath, she left the sanctuary of her car. She wasn't here to see Michala. There wasn't any reason for butterflies to be dive-bombing in her stomach. She was here for a DVIT meeting with Randa and Sam. All things considered, she was a little skeptical they hadn't had to meet here before now. She paused a few steps from the entrance and adjusted her blazer. She belonged. She had a legitimate reason to be here.

The temp offices reflected their status. Unlike the Center, there was little care given to the ambience. The furniture was the functional generic kind typical of overworked and under funded government offices. She knew Michala hadn't chosen the pea green paint or brown carpeting. The only added touch was the magazines scattered over the spindly tables. Apparently any space was a doctor's office as long as it had magazines.

"Hey Lieutenant. We haven't seen you in a while."

Kelly smiled at the cheerful greeting. She went to the makeshift reception area. "Yes, it's my first time here."

Jayne, receptionist and Georgia State student, grimaced at her heavy wooden desk and file cabinet. She was seated next to the hallway that led to the smaller rooms serving as offices. "I'll be glad when we move back. Randa's last appointment is still in. If you want some coffee, go to the end of the hall. Michala setup a break area in last room. It's on the right."

Kelly walked slowly down the hallway. Her gaze slid over the first two closed doors. No names adorned the plain paneled doors. She paused to listen to the voices. Which office was hers? Kelly blinked as she realized what she was doing and disgusted with herself, she marched down to the last room on the right. She was pathetic. And after four weeks, she was angry Michala had made no effort to talk to her.

The break room was generously stocked with brewed coffee, gallon jugs of tea, and a variety of snacks. Kelly made herself a cup of coffee and was pondering over a selection of pastries. The cheese Danish was calling to her. She heard a door open and turned to face the doorway.

Randa strolled into the room and paused when she saw her. Her smile was brief. "Oh good, you're here. Sam called. She's running a little late."

"Is this going to take long? I skipped breakfast." Kelly was planning on an early lunch until Sam called. Randa couldn't get away and they needed to bring the Monday meeting to her. Now Kelly was hoping for a snack before supper.

Randa waved her hand over the room. "Get something. We've got a ton of food here."

While that was true and Michala probably didn't buy all of it, Kelly was uncomfortable with the thought. She didn't even believe Michala would begrudge her if she did partake. "No thanks. I don't want empty calories."

Randa leaned over the box of pastries and turned to glance at her once before reaching into the box. She withdrew the cheese Danish Kelly was contemplating. She put it on a small plate and handed it over. "Take it. I don't want to pig out alone."

Kelly could only smile as Randa selected a chocolate croissant and cheerfully bit off an end. "Come on. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish."

They finished two hours later. The first hour was spent going through hers and Randa's files. The first half of the second hour was spent getting more coffee, another Danish and seeing Michala walking away from her down the hall. Kelly left Randa's office hoping Michala had left for the day. She could barely keep her mind on their conversation as it was. She wanted to leave the building and go for an early supper without having to face that particular demon today. She didn't think she had it in her to be indifferent face to face.

The three of them were walking down the hall. Sam and Randa were behind her discussing a case. Kelly saw daylight in the form of bright sunlight coming through the double doors. All she had to do was walk through them. She was looking ahead thinking only of escaping when one side of the doors opened. Randa called out to the smartly dressed strawberry blonde before she could take two steps into the office.

"Hey Bre. I don't think Cayla's ready yet. You can wait in my office if you want. I'm finished for the day."

The woman brushed past her leaving a trail of Chanel. Kelly turned to watch her move down the hall. She paused at one of the doors and knocked twice before moving onto Randa's office. Kelly looked over at Randa when the woman vanished into her office. The dark eyes refused to meet hers. So that's how it was. Kelly turned and headed for the door.

"I'm going to find a burger somewhere. You both have a good day." She called as she lengthened the distance between her and them. They were standing in front of the offices when she drove by and lifted a hand to wave at her. Kelly forced herself to return the gesture. She wasn't giving Randa any reason to think Bre bothered her. After all, she was the one who left Michala.

The line between reason and irrationality was painfully thin and way too easy to cross. There she was driving down the road, her thoughts forcibly locked on the search for food and in the next second she was making an illegal U-turn into oncoming traffic, her thoughts on that strawberry blonde. How dare Michala. How dare she have another lover without at least talking to her? As a Psychiatrist she should know Kelly wasn't serious about not wanting to see her. Right? Right!

This time she barely had her car parked before she was leaping out and covering the distance to the front doors in ground eating strides. She flung the door open and barely paused at the desk.

"Which office is hers?" It irked her to have to ask. She should know which office was Michala's. She had earned the right to know which office was hers.

"Um, well, Michala's is third on the left," Jayne said uncertainly. "Her last patient just left."

"Thanks," she muttered as she was moving down the hallway. She opened the door to the third office on the left and stepped into the room without warning. One part of her was afraid of what she would walk in on and the other was seething and ready to accuse if she did.

Michala was sitting at her desk making notes in a file. Her head snapped up when her door opened and the surprise on her face quickly turned to anger. She tossed her gold Cross pen to the desk. "I could be in here with a patient."

"No you couldn't. Jayne said your last patient just left."

Kelly shut the door a little harder than she should have and approached the desk. After two steps Bre blocked her path. Kelly pulled up short and stared at the woman in open hostility. She hadn't realized she was in the office. "Get out of my way."

The woman crossed her arms over her chest and met her furious stare calmly. "You have two choices lady. You either leave on your own or I'll toss your ass out. I don't have a preference."

She was taller than Kelly by several significant inches and out weighted her just as impressively. Her shoulders were broad and well-defined under her black silk shirt. The expression in her narrowed black eyes was hard and challenging. Kelly was reasonably certain she would lose in a fight. "Then I guess you toss me out."

"It's all right Bre. Why don't you go get yourself a drink?"

Bre didn't budge a muscle. "I'm not thirsty, if it's all the same to you."

"She's not going to hurt me."

Very grudgingly Bre relaxed and tossed Michala a quick look over her shoulder. "Whatever you say." She stepped even with Kelly. "I hear any yelling I'll be on you like a two ton truck."

The door shut behind the woman with a sharp click. A bemused smile graced Michala's face. Kelly crossed the remaining space. "Well that didn't take long."

Michala shrugged and reached for her pen. "It never does. Why are you here?"

Kelly sat down without invitation. "Monday meeting. Sam and I came to Randa."

"No, not here in general, here in my office. I know you have no business with me."

The next few seconds were hard for Kelly. It wasn't so much the words that cut. It was the cold distance in Michala's eyes that met hers in a steady gaze. She realized in that instant just how much she really didn't know the blonde woman. Apparently learning what made her moan was more important than learning how she reacted to ultimatums. It was a tactical error she wasn't sure how to correct.

"How are you?" Of all the questions she could ask, that seemed the safest. The others bordered dangerously on the jealousy line. Michala wasn't going to let her get away with that.

The answering smile was sly and amused. "Great. And you?"

Why did she come in here? Michala didn't come after her when she walked off the patio that night. Michala had neither called nor tried to see her in the time since. She had no reason to think Michala wanted to see her so she really had no reason to be surprised that Michala wasn't happy she was in her office wasting her expensive time. "I'm sorry. You're right. I shouldn't be here. I won't make this mistake again."

Kelly left as quickly as her shredded dignity allowed. The walk from Michala's office to her car was made without conscious thought. She was driving away before she truly realized where she was. She took a deep breath when she saw that her hands were shaking. That had to be the most unpleasant conversation she'd ever had in her life. Here was the most important person in her life acting as if they were mere acquaintances. She pulled her car off into a shopping center parking lot and rested her forehead against the steering wheel.

How was she going to stay in Atlanta after this?

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Michala didn't look up as her office door opened less than a minute after Kelly left. She knew it wasn't Kelly. Not after she saw the hope in Kelly's eyes curl up and die. Michala squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't think about that. She couldn't not hurt Kelly if it meant giving her any reason to come near Michala again. She was angry Kelly had gotten as close as she had. After the sacrifices she made, she didn't want it to be for nothing.

"Everything all right?"

"I only have a few more files. I won't need you tonight Bre. I think I'll stay home." And it wasn't like the last few times she had gone out had made an impression on him. She was still getting letters, though she had not actually seen them. Someone was calling for her during office hours and always hung up when asked for a name. Kendall told her the calls were being made from phone booths. Michala wondered to herself if they were being wise in keeping her so out of reach. Because unless something happened to push him over the edge, he could keep the status quo forever.

"She's pretty. I think she would have taken me on."

Michala cast a glance up as she signed her name. Bre was leaning near the door. Her grin was cocky. Michala chuckled and closed the file. "I think you're right. You might have been surprised. Kelly's a Lieutenant."

"Really?" Bre drawled, intrigued. "Maybe next time-"

Michala's head shot up at the challenging tone. "There won't be a next time. She's my girlfriend. I don't want her hurt."

*Except the wounds I inflict myself,* Michala added silently. Wounds she hoped she would be given the chance to kiss and make better. This had to end soon. They had to catch him or he had to slip up because Michala knew time was running short. She couldn't put Kelly off forever, if only because she didn't want to. She wanted Kelly back in her life.

Bre stood up at her tone and nodded before sitting in the chair in front of her desk. "I'm sorry. I thought she was out of the picture."

"No, I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting to see her. I don't like playing this charade. And she's very much in the picture."

Her friends weren't making it any easier. They thought Kelly deserved a vote and failing that, that she at least deserved to know the truth. Michala didn't much care what they thought. She knew Jess and Susan would take her same stand if this was Shannon or Miranda. It was easy for them to criticize. They weren't standing in her place; their girlfriends weren't targeted by a maniac.

"Are you sure about tonight? I was looking forward to playing pool with your friends."

Michala sat back in her chair and regarded the executive bodyguard. An interesting thing was happening to Bre on her latest assignment. She had gone from being obviously uncomfortable with Michala's orientation and the places it was taking her to making little statements like that one. "I don't have to be there for you to go. It's not like you have to be a card carrying member to get in the door."



Now let's see what she does with that. Bre flushed, predictably, before smiling. "You're right, I don't. Do you think Valerie will be there?"

"You never know who'll be there." Although Michala was certain if Valerie hadn't planned on being there before, she would after Michala called her. Valerie was single and didn't pass up on interested, available women.

"Is she, um, seeing anyone? I wouldn't want anyone to get upset if I played with her."

By sheer will, not to mention hundreds of hours of listening to people make the most outrageous confessions, Michala managed not to laugh. Play with her? Did Bre even realize how that sounded? She bent her head over her files to hide the gleam she knew she was in her eyes. "You know I don't think she is."

She spent the next fifteen minutes finishing up her files and answering other questions about Valerie. Michala tried not to be too amused by Bre's enthusiasm. She could barely recall her own awakening, but conceded she probably had not been too different. Of course she was fourteen at the time and Bre was a twenty-year vet of the Secret Service.

They were the last to leave. Bre waited patiently by the doors while Michala locked up. In addition to the alarm system, they had twenty four hour video. Kendall was checking out people who stood out. So far only a few men had caught her eye. Michala had to assume he wasn't one of them. When everything was set, she let Bre lead her to her car. When she first contracted with Bre's company she found their operating procedures to be somewhat draconian. The list of rules was as long as her arm. The penalty for flagrant violation was abandonment. She was told pointedly they only bothered with people who wanted protection. If she was going to make independent decisions, she could make those without paying them. Rule one was no driving herself anywhere.

"Bre if I wanted to go away for a weekend, how would that be handled?" It was a risk. He could follow her out of town just as easily as he did in Atlanta. She might even be a better target in some small cabin in the woods. She closed her eyes and laid her head against the car seat. Maybe if she registered under someone else's name and left in some car he couldn't connect with her in any way.

"Are you serious?" She couldn't see Bre's expression behind her sunglasses.

Michala nodded decisively. "Yeah, I am."

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The last person Kelly wanted to see sitting on her doorstep was Randa. Well that wasn't exactly true. The last person she wanted to see was Michala and as they were twins it was pretty much the same thing. She thought about going to the bar. She thought about finding someone to spend the night with, but gave that thought up the second it crossed her mind. Unlike some people she didn't make a habit of bed hopping. Her mood was already surly and seeing Randa waiting for her didn't improve it.

"Bre's her bodyguard."

Kelly's plan was to step over Randa and shut the door in her face. She had her supper, barbecue chicken with the works, and she was looking forward to washing it down with a six-pack of Coronas. She stared down at Randa, her mind suddenly empty of every thought save the echo of her words. She sat down next to her. "What?"

"Bre's her bodyguard. She takes her to work. She picks her up. The only time Bre's not with her is at work or home."

Bodyguard. That did explain the attitude quite satisfactorily. Now that she could think of Bre in a better light, she was relieved when she recalled how willingly she stepped in front of her. How certain she was that Bre could take her. "Why are you telling me this?"

Randa peered into her bag and took one of her beers. She twisted off the cap. "I didn't want you to do something stupid. She wants you away from her Kelly. Her plan is to make this up to you after it's over. Right now she doesn't want you anywhere near her."

Kelly opened her own bottle. "I've already done something stupid. She made it very clear she didn't want me around."

"What?" Randa asked in confusion.

Kelly was glad her mad dash to and from their offices had at least one less spectator. Not that it mattered since she was about to tell Randa all. "I went back to her office. Stormed in. Faced off with Bre. Got asked by Michala why I was in her office since she knew she didn't have any business with me. Left badly."

She drained half her bottle. She didn't come off any better in the highlights than she did during the whole scene. However, then at least, she didn't realize she was making a fool of herself. God, how she must have looked to Michala. She wondered how much less Michala thought of her now. Sighing, she finished off her beer. "Do you want to come in? I bought a lot."

Randa nodded and followed her inside. "Sure, thanks. Is it any consolation that she misses you?"

Kelly found that hard to believe. The woman she saw in that office wasn't missing her. She was furious with Kelly for being there. Everything she said was calculated to force Kelly to do exactly what she did. She did take comfort in the fact that Michala didn't let Bre throw her into the street. That had to mean something.

"Very little. I can take care of myself. I don't need her standing in front of me." She was a trained and experienced police officer. The last thing she needed was someone protecting her.

Randa was silent while she gathered eating utensils. She handed her a plate and fork. They served themselves and took their supper to the patio. She spoke softly when they were settled.

"You said you know her. You said you love her. Tell me, how much of her do you think will be left if something happened to you?"

"Nothing is going to happen to me." The words were harsher than she intended. She hated that Randa had a point.

"Are you really willing to risk her sanity on something you can't promise? I'm not. I don't care how much this chafes you. I don't give a damn about your ego. Let her do this however is best for her. You aren't the one who has to live with the consequences."

*Aren't I?* Kelly barely stopped herself from asking the question. Randa was right, she couldn't make that promise and that made anything else she could say moot. Michala needed that reassurance and keeping Kelly out of her circle was the only way she could have it. As hard as it was on her, Kelly had to give her that. Michala was living with enough guilt.

"I'll make you a deal. I'll stay away if you tell me what's going on. I don't want to be blindsided again."

Without thinking it over, Randa tapped her bottle against Kelly's. "Deal."

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Michala was enjoying her own drink on the patio. Hers was white wine, a crisp Chardonnay. It would go well with the chicken she had roasting in the oven. She closed her eyes as a fragrant breeze drifted over her. She groaned as the image behind her eyes wasn't a relaxing vision to go along with her pleasant surroundings. Kelly's face and those wounded blue eyes. How was it that her life kept taking wrong turns? Even a simple day at work couldn't go as planned. She could still feel the vibration of shock as Kelly stormed into her office. Her only hope, and she had precious little of that commodity left, was that somehow some way nothing would come of it.

The idea of getting away was appealing. They could go to a cabin or to the shore. Two nights with no distractions, with nothing to do but indulge in each other. She closed her eyes again and sipped from her glass. Could she arrange it? Through phone tag and friends, with whatever subterfuge her cop friends could pull, could they risk it? She sighed and realized it wasn't a question of could, it was should. Should they risk it? No plan would be perfect. There was no way she could guarantee he wouldn't catch on. And if she couldn't have a guarantee she wasn't going to put Kelly at that kind of risk.

"That was sad. What are you thinking about?"

The warm voice brought to her feet. Shannon was smiling at her. Michala wasn't getting used to this new Shannon easily. After years of polite smiles and stilted conversation from Shannon, she was caught off guard by her warmth and compassion. Shannon raised an eyebrow in silent question. She sat down in the chair next to Michala's and gestured for her to sit.

Michala met the patient hazel eyes and smiled. "I'm glad I got this chance to get to know you, Shannon. Jess is a very lucky woman."

Shannon blinked as if surprised by the sincerity. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She sat in silent for several long minutes. Michala finished her glass of wine. Shannon held a glass over for her when she picked up the bottle. Michala filled both glasses. This was nice way to end a bad day at work. She could do this more often.

"So what were you thinking that was so sad when I came out?"

Or maybe not. As much as she liked Shannon, and she was beginning to like her a lot, she wasn't at the point where she felt comfortable sharing. Sadly, she didn't feel that she had much of a choice at the moment. Shannon had welcomed her into her home and helped her to feel safe and secure. She wasn't going to throw that in her face because they weren't bosom buddies.

"I hurt Kelly today. Maybe if I had known she was in the office or if I thought she would come into mine, I might have handled it better. I was just so furious that she took such a risk. On the way home I asked Bre what would happen if I wanted to get away for a weekend. She said it could be done. When you walked out I had just given up on the idea. I can't take that risk with her."

"How did you hurt her?"

Michala laid her head back and stared up at the darkening sky. "She thought Bre was my new lover. I let her."

Her life really didn't need this added complication. Why couldn't Kelly just stay away until this was over? It was easier not to think about her if she didn't have reminders. She could pretend the attraction wasn't as strong and that her desire wasn't as deep. Now all she was remembering was how Kelly felt in her arms. How soft her lips were when they kissed. The sounds she made when they touched. How after today memories could be all that she had left to remember Kelly.

"That had to hurt."

Michala tipped her glass and finished off her drink. "Very much by the look in her eyes."

They needed another bottle of wine. She was reasonably sure she saw another Chardonnay hidden on a bottom shelf in the fridge. If not, she would see what they had in the wet bar. There was always that bottle of red.

Shannon caught her arm when she sat forward to stand. "I meant for you. I know you don't want to cause Kelly pain. I happen to agree with what you're doing. Doing what you did to today must've been hard for you."

Michala wasn't sure which statement surprised her more. She didn't think anyone agreed with her

plan. Jess and Susan had been vocal enough in their disapproval. They thought Kelly was a big girl who could take care of herself. Her family thought she owed Kelly the courtesy of telling her the truth. She was astonished Shannon of all people saw her point of view on this. She grinned at the other woman. "How would you like to replace Jess as my best friend? I think I like you better."

"I wouldn't take her up on that offer, Shan. She's a pain in the ass at best."

Shannon's delighted smile erupted into laughter at Jess' droll reply. They both turned to look at Jess standing behind them. She held a glass in her left hand and the other bottle of white in her right. As if they had rehearsed it, they both held out their empty glasses.

"Call her," Shannon said and stood up. She leaned into Jess to kiss her. "I understand why you're doing what you're doing. If I were Kelly, I would forgive you when this was over. I don't know that I could forgive you for today. You don't have to tell her anything other than the truth about Bre."

Jess watched her girlfriend walk inside the house before she sat in Shannon's chair. "Something happened today with Kelly?"

Michala didn't bother trying to sort out her feelings or wonder if what she was about to do was right or wrong. She wanted to talk to Kelly. Their confrontation gave her a reason to call. She needed to call her. For her own sanity, she needed to know she had a chance with Kelly when this was over. Shannon's words hit a nerve. She didn't need doubts over Kelly plaguing her thoughts.

"Ask Shannon. I have a call to make."

Michala took her wine to Jess' office. She knew Shannon would keep her lover occupied until she was finished. Sitting down at the desk and picking up the receiver was the easy part. Even dialing the number came without hesitation. It was only when the phone began to ring that she panicked. Suddenly she wasn't so sure this was the right thing to do. What if Kelly misunderstood the purpose of the call? What if she didn't care who Bre was anymore? What if she preferred to never hear Michala's voice again in this lifetime?

"Hello?"

Michala closed her eyes as her phenomenal string of incredibly bad luck remained unbroken. Of course Danielle couldn't answer her own phone. Of course Kelly wasn't out drowning her memory in some dark bar. No, she was sitting in Danielle's townhouse with nothing better to do than answer a phone that wasn't even hers. "Do you know someone who can remove the curse on me?"

"What?" Kelly asked in her official I-carry-a-badge-and-gun voice. "Who is this?"

"Bre is my bodyguard. I don't go anywhere without her."

"So you're not a complete idiot. I had my doubts."

The words held just enough smugness for Michala to get over feeling bad about letting Kelly believe she was with Bre. Michala stood up in anticipation of ending the call. She'd done what Shannon said she should do. "You're not the first. You won't be the last. Goodnight Kelly."

This time she did hang up the receiver. She felt oddly better for having made the call.

[Continued in Chapter 11.](#)

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~ Obsessions ~  
by J Brownell

Disclaimer: Please don't read this at work. Any resemblance between my characters and anyone else is all in your head. Comments can be sent to [ga\\_onmymind@yahoo.com](mailto:ga_onmymind@yahoo.com)

11.

It was finally Friday. Finally Friday on a week that began badly and was seemingly endless. Michala wondered how she ever got through the past month of no contact with Kelly. By Wednesday she was trying to come up with a plan. By Thursday afternoon she had one that satisfied Bre and her company. Michala wasn't sure who was happier, her or her friends. Jess threatened to hire a hit man if she didn't get laid soon. She claimed to know several.

"Hey you."

Shannon's head shot up and she stared at Michala in question. Michala leaned in the doorway of their bedroom and let her gaze roam freely over the woman's scantily clad body. It was seven o'clock on Friday night and while she and Jess were dressing up for a night on the town, Shannon was dressed in a rather sexy maroon nightgown. The book in her hands was at least two inches thick.

Michala grinned as a blush covered Shannon's face. "I can't promise Jess and I can protect you against the ravishing horde in that. As much as it pains me to say it, you got anything less sexier?"

Shannon squirmed on the king sized bed, but didn't reach for the covers. Michala gave her points

for that. "I'm not going. I want to finish this book."

Michala crossed to the bed and sat down. She didn't usually enter other women's bedrooms without permission much less sit on their bed. Shannon was staring at her as if she truly thought Michala was about to make a pass at her. Michala steeled herself against the unexpected hurt. It was her own fault that Shannon was uncomfortable with her. Granted, they'd made great strides during her stay here, but Shannon was still unsure of how to take her. Michala was sorry she hadn't tried to rectify the situation before they were forced into close quarters.

She reached over and took her hand. She brushed her thumb across Shannon's palm. She kept her voice low. "Please come with us Shannon. I know Jess would be happier if we were all friends."

Michala knew Jess was behind her because she saw Shannon's eyes dart from her face to something over her shoulder and back again. She leaned forward and cupped Shannon's face. "I promise you'll have fun."

Hands that were none to gentle came down on her shoulders. Jess spoke next to her ear. "There'd better be a good reason you're in my bed with my lover promising her she'll have fun."

Shannon was staring at them in wide-eyed fascination. Michala turned her head to look into Jess' eyes. She purred, "Oh there is."

The hands on her shoulders became a hug. "Uh-huh. If I thought that, I'd take you back to the Center and leave you there."

Michala laughed. "Make her come with us. The three of us have always done things together and left our girlfriends out. It should be different now that we're all settled."

It was a simple truth. The three of them always kept everyone out of their inner circle, even after it was obvious Shannon and Miranda were different than the others for her friends. Kelly was the one who was different from the others for her. She didn't want her life to be compartmentalized anymore. She wanted Kelly allowed into all areas of it. She wanted to allow her best friends lovers into hers.

"We are huh?"

Michala slipped from the bed and headed for the doorway. She wasn't getting into that now. "I'll be waiting downstairs. Bre should be here soon."

She didn't go downstairs immediately. She went to her room to make some last minute touches to her own outfit. Michala had grand plans for tonight. Plans that she wanted more than anything to come off perfectly so she was dressed to kill. She stood in front of the full-length mirror on the back of her closet door eyeing herself critically. Her white slacks were tailored to hug her hips and flared out on the legs. The matching vest was form fitting. She was wearing white leather boots for height. She checked herself out from all angles until she was sure she was undeniable. The finishing touches were light make-up, a quick spray of Obsession and gold jewelry.

She smiled at her reflection. She knew she would have whatever, and whomever, she wanted that night.

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It was Sam's week on call. Kelly knew it was the only reason she agreed to go out with Dani. Otherwise she would have had a perfectly legitimate reason to stay home. Dani pressed her case also by saying she couldn't take another week of Kelly just moping around the house. Michala had cut back on her bar visits during the week, but she was out every Friday and Saturday night. Randa explained she was trying to draw out her stalker. Kelly clamped down on her own violent reaction to Michala being used as bait because she had to believe Kendall knew what she was doing. She also had to believe Bre would be there if Kendall was wrong. Kelly went because she hoped she could at least dance with Michala.

The bar was half full by the time they arrived. Dani usually liked to be late, but Kelly was in a hurry to get there. She wanted as much time with Michala as she could get. Especially as she expected to have to fight Michala into giving in. They were sitting in the back near the dance floor with a clear view of the entrance when she saw them come in. She might have been amused at Dani's reaction to seeing Shannon with them if she hadn't been struck mute by Michala. It was almost like a scene from a beer commercial. The stunning blonde enters the smoky dim lit bar in slow motion, her hair swinging around her head and her smile bright as she laughed at whatever Susan was saying to her. Kelly couldn't have torn her gaze away if her life depended on it.

Susan laughed and nodded at the group before she left them to make her way to the bar. Kelly gulped her own beer as she drank in the vision that was Michala. God she was gorgeous. Kelly watched them scan the bar for an empty table. Michala's gaze came to her almost as if Michala knew she was there. Their eyes met in a long stare broken by Bre, who took Michala's elbow to lead her to the table. Kelly's eyes followed them to the table and frowned as Bre set up camp almost in Michala's lap. Her eyes narrowed as the bodyguard laid her arm on the back of Michala's chair. She was still just a bodyguard, right? Surely Randa hadn't broken their agreement and not mentioned that Bre had become more.

"Let her come to you," Dani suggested in her ear.

Oh how Kelly wanted to be that strong and so seemingly uninvolved. She wanted Michala to be the one to cross the crowded bar and approach her. She knew she didn't have it in her. It had been too long since she'd seen Michala. It felt like years since their last kiss on that fateful Saturday. She wanted Michala in her arms more than she wanted to seem strong or save face. She needed Michala against her. More than anything else in the world, she wanted Michala.

Kelly stood up and drained her beer. She said without looking at Dani, "I can't."

Kelly would wonder later how long that walk might have been, if it would have felt like every eye in the room was on her, if Michala hadn't seen her coming and met her half way. She was surprised to feel her heart start beating again. Soon the air she breathed smelled of her. They didn't touch at first. They stood mere inches apart, eyes locked on each other. Kelly was gratified



when Michala took the last step, bringing their bodies in contact. Kelly was afraid she had come as far as she was able.

"I love you," Michala whispered and just like that everything was right in her world again. Now it was easy for her to put her arms around Michala and meet her lips. Kelly bit back a groan because her memories paled against the reality of how good Michala felt against her. Michala slid her hands around her as she opened her mouth. Kelly let herself fall into the feelings. She didn't care who was watching or how they looked to their friends.

The need for air forced Kelly to pull away first. Michala leaned on her and rested her forehead against Kelly's shoulder. Kelly stood there holding her close and knew they could stay like this all night for all she cared. This was all she wanted. This was all she needed. She could survive however long it was before they could do this again if they stayed just like this. "I love you."

Michala snuggled in her arms, squeezing her tighter. "I've rented a suite at the Grand Hyatt. Can I interest you in spending the weekend with me there?"

Kelly's world tipped on its axis. She stared down at Michala's head until Michala looked up with her uncertainty painfully clear on her face. Kelly searched her eyes and was stunned Michala thought she would turn her down. "Is it safe?"

She didn't really care if it was safe or not. She asked because a good caring girlfriend would. She was going regardless. Because she had been as good as she could be for the time.

Michala's smile was amused, almost as if she could read Kelly's mind. "Well, I did have to agree to be escorted there by Bre and she is in the suite next to ours and there is a connecting door. I can't leave for any reason, not that I want to anyway. Can you live with that?"

Kelly returned her smile. "I'd pay a great sum of money for that."

She was rewarded with a delighted grin. "I put a key card in your jacket pocket. I'll meet you there."

"We could stay for a while," Kelly offered. She knew Michala was here for a reason and it wasn't just to slip her a hotel key.

Michala's eyes flashed with desire and she pulled Kelly's head down for a thorough, rough kiss. "No we couldn't."

Kelly was rooted to the floor as Michala walked back to her table. She reached for her purse on the table and spoke briefly to her friends. Whatever she said had eyebrows raised and gazes turning to stare at her. Bre was frozen to her chair long enough for Michala to be almost to the door before she jumped up to follow her.

Dani appeared at her shoulder. "What was that all about?"

"Will you take me home? I need to pack a few things. I'm spending the weekend with Michala."

She needed to pack very few things. She didn't plan on taking more clothes than she needed to wear home Sunday. She hoped Michala felt the same.

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Why was she so nervous? Michala tied the sash on her robe in the bathroom. Even that first night with Kelly didn't feel like this. She felt jumpy and unsure, like a virgin who knew tonight was the night. She ran shaky fingers through her hair. Maybe she should have a glass of champagne. The last thing she wanted was for any part of this night to be wasted to foolish emotions. If all they had was this weekend to last them for a while, she wanted every moment to count. She left the bathroom when she felt steadier.

"Wow."

Michala flicked a quick glance to where Bre was sprawled in a chair. The door connecting their suite to hers was open. Bre had insisted that she be the one who answered the door. The first knock was room service with the bottle of Dom. The next one should be Kelly.

"Do we need to have our food delivered to your room or can Kelly take care of it?" She heard the annoyance in her voice and frowned. She stopped and faced the slouching woman. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to take this out on you."

Bre's smile was faint. "I'm not taking this personally. I won't say I know how you feel. I will say I don't want to be in your position. As for your food, as long as you're willing to put the woman you love in the line of fire, let her answer the door."

Michala continued on to the champagne. "How would you have put that if you were taking my attitude personally?"

"Can I ask you something?"

Michala turned with her glass and nodded her head once. Anything to make the time between now and Kelly's arrival pass quicker. She thought if the room was dead silent she could hear her nerves stretching tautly to the breaking point.

"You don't want me here. You resent the precautions. You're always looking for ways to get around the rules. Why are you wasting money on a service you clearly don't want?" Bre's tone was conversational. She wasn't judging or criticizing; merely asking about something that puzzled her.

Michala didn't have to think about the answer. "Because left to my own judgment I'd be dead now. I wouldn't have cared three months ago. I might even have welcomed it. And while I do care now, it's not easy to give up control of my life. That's why I'm wasting money on a service I resent."

Bre hadn't expected such brutal honesty. She sat up and her usually guarded face was open, making her look years younger. Michala would never know who was more relieved by the knock at the door. Bre knew the facts of her case, but as of yet, they had not discussed it between themselves. Michala had talked about the last year of her life more times than she ever wanted to. She did not want to do it again.

"Come in Kelly," Bre said graciously and opened the door to allow Kelly into the room. By the time Kelly's gaze found her, Michala had another glass poured. "These are the rules. No leaving the room. No one comes into the room. The connecting door stays unlocked. Food is delivered to my room. Any questions?"

"No. I only have one rule. You don't come in here without knocking. Any questions?"

Kelly took both glasses from Michala and reached behind her to put them on the bar. She untied Michala's robe and brought their bodies together. Michala didn't hear Bre's reply. She vaguely heard the connecting door shut.

"You're wearing too much," she whispered to Kelly. Kelly caught her hands when she reached for her belt. She looked up into blue eyes almost black.

Kelly pressed a light, gentle kiss to her lips. "I'm sorry for everything I said that day. The thought of losing you makes me crazy."

This wasn't how Michala wanted to spend the night. She didn't want apologies or explanations; she didn't want to apologize or explain herself. This time was limited and she didn't know when they would be able to carve out another weekend. She didn't want to waste a single second on something they could do after this was all over.

She reached up to cup Kelly's face and stared deep into her eyes. "If you need to talk about that day or anything else that's happened, we can do it on the phone. We can talk every night if that's what you need. But not this weekend, Kelly, please. I need for nothing else to matter this weekend but us. For the next two days, please just let the world stop and forget anything is happening. I've missed you so much."

For what seemed like forever, Kelly simply stared at her. Michala waited, fear warring with desire. She wanted nothing more than to strip Kelly's clothes off and push her back on the bed. She feared that Kelly had issues that needed to be settled before she could allow that to happen. Michala was a master at putting her feelings on hold so she could live guilt-free in the present. She had made it an art form over the last year.

Finally, just when Michala was teetering on the edge of the inevitable, Kelly pulled Michala's hands from her face. She never broke their locked gaze as she kissed each palm before guiding her hands to her belt. That was all the encouragement Michala needed. Her fingers were shaking as she hastily released the clasp.

"Is it just me or does this feel like the first time?" She asked when her fingers fumbled with the

zipper on Kelly's slacks. Not even on the first time was she this klutzy.

Kelly laughed and embraced her. Michala relaxed against her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself the simple luxury of being held. Every time she thought of Kelly, this was how she pictured them. She liked being in Kelly's arms, breathing Kelly's scent with every breath she took. Warm hands stroked her back in a lazy caress. She had more than missed this. She craved it.

"Do we really have all weekend?"

"Until Monday morning at eleven if we want."

Kelly's hands moved slowly down her back to rest on her bare hips. Michala shivered from the soft kisses Kelly trailed over her shoulder. She tipped her head back to allow Kelly to kiss her neck. Soon Michala forgot that she was nervous. She shut her mind against all memories except those of Kelly and the nights they spent together. Her body responded to the hands and lips she knew so intimately.

"I want," Kelly said as she laid Michala back on the bed. "I want this every Monday until eleven."

The fervent words erased every reservation Michala had about what she was doing. She didn't care how dangerous this may prove to be or how it looked that she took the first step. Since that night when Kelly walked away from her, Michala had assumed the next step was hers. She never thought she would take it before he was caught. She wouldn't have believed her need for Kelly would override her common sense. But it was and they were here and Michala knew regardless of what happened, she was right to do this. She didn't know which of them needed this weekend more.

She hooked her ankles around Kelly's legs. "You can have whatever you want, baby."

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Kelly was content to remain where she was for the rest of eternity. Michala was snuggled against her left side sleeping. She felt lighter than she had in weeks. Even after her talk with Randa, Kelly felt uncertain over her future with Michala. She kissed the blonde head on her shoulder. She appreciated the risk Michala had taken to arrange this and she didn't just mean her stalker. She walked out on a limb and had faith Kelly would walk out on it with her. Kelly didn't think in the same situation she could have done it.

"I can hear the wheels turning. What are you thinking?" Michala nuzzled closer and slowly ran a hand down her side. "I could be insulted that you're not sleeping."

Kelly closed her eyes. This was for real. She was holding Michala in her arms. "I don't want to miss a second."

Michala pushed herself up on her elbow. "I've missed you, too."

Missed? Missed didn't begin to describe how she felt without Michala. Lost. Adrift. Alone. Added to that was the fear she felt that she couldn't fix what she'd done when she walked off that patio. She didn't know how Michala became so important to her life and as long as she knew Michala would be a part of it, she wasn't going to analyze it.

"I'll miss you less if we can do this every weekend," she replied. Some limbs she just wasn't ready to walk out on. Telling Michala that she needed her like she needed air was one of them.

Michala moved on top of her and settled herself between her legs. Kelly's breath caught at the sensation of Michala's bare skin sliding over sensitive places on her body. Michala snagged her earlobe in her mouth. Kelly's eyes closed at the heat flowing over her.

"Even the weekend you're on call?"

That question hit Kelly like cold water. Her eyes snapped open and she turned her head to see what expression Michala had on her face. They had carefully danced around where Kelly worked. Kelly wasn't bringing it up if Michala wasn't. She knew how Michala felt about DVIT and nothing that happened made her think anything had changed. Dark brown eyes met hers in a warm gaze. "Can you do that? I will get paged."

Michala nodded and leaned over to press a gentle kiss to her lips. "I know. The hard part will be letting you go knowing that I can't and don't want to go with you. I'm not sure if Bre will let you come back."

The past month crossed Kelly's mind in a kaleidoscope of feelings. All of them forms of fear. Kelly knew in the core of her heart she doubted she would be given another chance with Michala. How many times would Michala let her walk away from her and come back? She'd done it twice now. Both times she left knowing it could be her last time with Michala. It wasn't a risk was willing to take again.

Kelly sat up and gently reversed their positions. Slowly, Michala's hands slid down her back as brown eyes watched her with patient intensity. Kelly slid her hands under Michala and laid her face in her neck. She breathed deeply the intoxicating smells that were unique to this beautiful woman. She turned her face to Michala's neck.

"Are you all right?" Michala whispered in her ear. One warm hand came to rest on the nape of Kelly's neck.

Kelly nodded without saying word. She didn't trust her voice not to break. Didn't trust herself to voice her fears without being overwhelmed by the emotions. Michala's earlier plea for this weekend to about them being together had been desperate. Kelly understood that feeling all to well. She too wanted nothing more than to bury herself in Michala. To hear and feel and think nothing but this woman. But now that initial need was sated and Kelly knew, without a single doubt she knew, she couldn't go back to her life if Michala wasn't in it.

Michala brought her other hand to the back of her head. She laid her cheek against Kelly and her hands moved softly in a soothing caress. "I'm starving. I was so nervous I couldn't eat earlier. I mean, I was hoping you would want this, too. But I didn't know and there's that little voice reminding me that I'm a lousy catch and you could do a whole lot better than me. Jess says I'm a pain in the ass at best."

Kelly had to laugh at that. She lifted her face to look at Michala. She could see in her eyes that Michala shared her fears, and yet had somehow overcome them to bring them where they were now. She kept their gazes locked as she dropped her lips to Michala's. The kiss was sweetly reassuring.

"Are you hungry Kelly?" Michala asked against her lips.

"For you? Always." The words come from her heart. "I'm not letting you go this time."

Michala reached to brush the hair away from her face. She grinned. "That's good because holding someone against their will is illegal in this state. I'd really hate to use my friends to keep me out of jail just because I had to handcuff you to my bed."

"Would you use my own handcuffs to do it?" Kelly asked, laughing, as she moved off Michala. She was amazed at how quickly Michala allayed her fears. She knew intellectually that it wasn't a great feat for Dr. Michala Cary. It's what she did day in and day out in professionally. But emotionally, she felt that her words came from Michala's heart not from her training.

Michala sat up and raked her hands through her tousled hair. The sheet was bunched around her waist. "Of course not! I have more class than that. I'd use my own."

Kelly reached for the menu next to the phone on the nightstand. "Are they gold plated and monogrammed?"

Michala scooted to her side and leaned against her shoulder as she perused the limited, expensive choices. "Gold plated? You think that's class? They're platinum."

Kelly pointed to a sampler platter. "Solid gold or plated?"

Michala nudged her finger to the other side of the menu to a broiled seafood combo. "Geez, Kelly, I didn't realize I was such a step up for you."

Kelly leaned over for the phone. She grinned at Michala's amused expression. "Yeah, you've been wasting five star treatment on a woman you coulda had with two."

Michala got off the bed and tugged on her robe as she headed for the connecting door. "Two? Please. I coulda had you with a half a star."

Kelly watched Michala open their door and knock once on Bre's before she entered the connecting suite. She said softly, with feeling, "You got that right."

"Excuse me?"

Kelly blinked at the puzzled voice in her ear. "Sorry, I was talking to someone else. Is it too late to place an order? Great. This is what we'd like...."

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This wasn't how Michala thought she would be spending any part of the weekend. Michala glared over the group of women draped on the king-sized bed. They burst into the room at the obscene hour of eight that morning and had the nerve to ask about breakfast. Before she could say any of the vile obscenities circulating in her head, she was reminded it was Saturday. That was four hours ago.

Michala was stunned that her friends would show up as if this was just another Saturday. As if she hadn't seen Kelly for what felt like forever. As if they had every right to be here.

"...don't want a burger. We don't have to order from just the menu do we?"

Michala frowned as she realized she had missed part of the conversation. An important part if she thought they were actually talking about lunch. She pressed back against her human pillow. "You're a cop. Don't you have a gun?"

Kelly laughed and kissed her ear. "Where's yours? They are your friends."

Her friends. Her gaze took in the four women taking up most of the space. Susan and Miranda were stretched out across the foot of the bed. Jess and Shannon had taken the left side. Kelly was sitting with her back against the headboard. Michala reclined between her legs and was held in a loose embrace. They looked relaxed, as if they didn't plan to move for hours yet. She could already hear the discussion over what to have for dinner.

"Hey Bre!" Susan called lazily.

Some bodyguard, Michala thought grouchy. After all the planning she put into the weekend, and Bre had been there for every step, how she could let them barge in was beyond her. What good was a bodyguard who let her fall prey to this?

"Yes?" Bre asked from the doorway. Her gaze skipped over the bed before locking on Michala's face. "Do you need something?"

"Do you have a gun?"

Bre blinked slowly before nodding. "You know I do."

"Is it in your room?"

"Of course."

Michala smiled. "Good. Shoot them for me. You'll at least dispose of the bodies, right Kelly?"

Susan kicked Michala gently on the foot and stuck her tongue out. "Can we order food from a delivery service, or is the menu here it? We're thinking about lunch."

Bre leaned against the door with a shrug. "Delivery's fine, but I want to make the call. I want it delivered to my room."

"Cool," Jess said and jumped from the bed to fetch the phone book. She threw herself down on the bed. She began to thumb through the pages, asking, and "Any requests?"

Michala gave up. Short of actually shooting them and dumping their bodies, they weren't leaving. She could sulk. She could make snide comments. While Shannon and Miranda might be uncomfortable enough to leave, her attitude would roll off their lovers back. Jess and Susan would simply not care that she wanted them to be any place else on the planet. And while she might have done it to Jess and Susan anyway, she was trying to make Shannon more comfortable around her. And it was time Miranda became a part of their little circle. She might as well grin and bear it. Besides, if they tried to spend the night, she'd shoot them herself.

"Hey, Chinese?"

She nodded at Jess' questioning gaze. "Sure. I want something with shrimp in it."

Once she decided to give in, she would later remember the day as one of her favorites. It was more like the Saturday's they shared in the beginning. The tradition of Saturday's began after they graduated college and entered the real world. Suddenly they didn't see each other much. Soon they didn't know the every day happenings in the other's lives. Michala couldn't remember who suggested it, but one of them did and the tradition was born. Those early days were pointlessly silly. Saturdays became more focused as they became busier in their chosen professions and their love lives got more complicated. She realized now that Saturday's changed again when Tyler entered her life. She sent up a prayer that afternoon that she would know many more Saturday's like the one she spent that day.

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Monday came much, much too soon. Kelly sat on the bed and watched Michala move around the room as she gathered her belongings. Kelly didn't want to let her go. She didn't want her contact with Michala to be limited to phone calls. This arrangement didn't seem so bad when she had the next two days to spend with her. Now that it was Monday and she had to get through the next four days on her own, it sounded like a good definition of hell.

"You can't be ready," Michala said testily.

Kelly bit back a grin. She was touched by Michala's fractious attitude because it meant the good doctor was as unhappy with the situation as she. She also knew that Michala did not appreciate how touched she was that they shared this common ground. To Kelly it seemed that the fears she



had about them being together were not shared by Michala. And that more than anything eased Kelly's fears. Michala simply assumed they were together and would be again. Kelly latched onto that confidence with both hands. So while she was irritated they had to be a part all week, she was giddy with relief that she wouldn't spend the week wondering what Friday held. She knew. Their reservations for the next weekend were already made.

She lounged back on the bed with her hands behind her head. "Unlike someone I won't mention, I didn't pack as if I would be changing clothes all weekend."

"Aren't those the same clothes you were wearing Friday at the bar?"

"Yep." Kelly felt no shame. She didn't wear them long Friday and it wouldn't be the first time she didn't go home to change before she went to work. "I've learned to travel light when I'm with you."

In the blink of an eye, Michala was laying on top of her. Kelly's arms closed around her instinctively. Warm brown eyes looked down on her mischievously. She was trying not to grin. "So next Friday you won't be bringing a suitcase?"

"A small one. I don't think Bre will come in here with our food if we're only covered in sheets."

When Kelly remarked on Bre's obvious discomfort around them, Michala had laughed saying she was doing much better now. They giggled as Michala recounted Bre's first foray into the Otherside. She refused to act as Michala's "date" which left the attractive bodyguard open to the advances of other women. By the end of the evening, Bre was hanging onto Michala's hand like a lifeline. She was able to actually speak to the women when they asked her to dance now. She wasn't saying no every time either.

"I'm going to miss you this week," Michala said and laid her head on Kelly's shoulder.

The words were Michala's new litany. She began saying them Sunday afternoon. While Kelly loved the sentiment, she didn't want Michala missing her before she was gone. Kelly slipped her hand under Michala's face and turned her so that she could press their lips together. She could give Michala something better to miss than just her. The kiss went from chaste to pornographic in less than a second. This is how it should have been Friday night when instead they were hesitant and unsure.

Michala straddled her and yanked her shirt from her slacks without their lips losing contact. She groaned in protest when Michala sat up and could only stare as her buttons went flying in all directions. Any protest she might have made was forgotten as Michala slid her bra over her breasts and latched herself to her left nipple. Her right nipple was pinched between two fingers. Kelly slid both hands into Michala's hair and held on. She groaned deep in her throat.

A noise somewhere close reminded her they weren't alone. Dimly she remembered they were packing. She fisted her right hand in Michala's hair and tugged until Michala's gaze flicked up at her. She could barely believe she was about to say what she was about to say. "We can't do this

now."

Michala's eyes were half closed in desire. She put a hand on either side of Kelly's face and braced herself as she rocked herself against Kelly. "Why not?"

The question was confusing. Why not what? Kelly released Michala's head and let her hands drop to her waist. The silk shirt Michala wore slipped easily from the waist of her slacks. They both watched her quickly release the buttons. Michala didn't wait for her to remove the dark red silk as she shrugged the shirt off her shoulders. When she was bare from the waist up, she leaned over to brush her nipples across Kelly's.

Their eyes met and they each saw into the wide-open depths of the other's soul. Love mixed with lust, fears unspoken and trust unbroken, gratitude for the present and trepidation for the future. Kelly would never know if she pulled Michala down or if Michala lowered herself so that their bodies touched along every inch. It didn't matter. All that mattered right then was satisfying the hunger burning inside.

"Pants off," she ordered and rolled them to their sides. Kelly watched as Michala unzipped and slipped out of her slacks. When she was nude, Kelly was on her, pushing her back against the bed and moving down between her legs.

"Ah, oh," Michala said, first in surprise at the unexpected attack and then desire as Kelly spread her open. "Oh yes, baby, oh."

Kelly was riveted to how easily her fingers slid inside. They'd made love several times over the weekend. And at one point on Saturday when Michala's friends were lounging around, Michala had covered them with a blanket and tortured Kelly with stealthy touches. Seeing Michala so ready for her threw gasoline on Kelly's own desire. She lowered her face to the blonde curls and was rewarded with a long groan from Michala when her tongue touched her.

Too soon, Michala's hands were clenched in her hair as she came. Kelly slid out of her and used both hands to hold herself to Michala, sucking on her as Michala arched from the bed. Kelly released her when Michala fell back against the bed unmoving. She kissed first one thigh and then the other. Michala jerked and moaned weakly when she kissed her center.

"You're going to kill me," she said once Kelly was leaning over her.

Kelly shook her head. "Uh-uh. I have too many plans for you."

Warm fingers closed over Kelly's right nipple. A warm thigh nudged her legs open. "Do you? I have plans for you. Want me to tell you one of them?"

Kelly shut her eyes and focused on Michala's throaty purr. "Yes."

Warm fingers closed over her left nipple. The thigh between her legs slid higher. Kelly fought to keep herself braced on her side. She was in Michala's capable hands and if Michala wanted her

on her back, she'd be there. She felt Michala lean into her. "How...experimental are you?"

Kelly swallowed as a single image filled her mind. She saw herself pressed against the wall in Michala's apartment. That was the single most erotic thing she had ever done in her life. Her past lovers had ventured from the bedrooms a few times and then it was only in the shower or on the floor. "For you, very."

Michala released her nipples. She reached down to pull Kelly tight on her leg. Her mouth was next to Kelly's ear. She spoke softly. "I want to fuck you Kelly. Will you let me do that?"

Kelly eyes snapped open. Was Michala asking what she thought she was asking? Michala's eyes were dark and heavy lidded as they met hers. "Tell me what you want to do to me."

Michala reversed their positions. She reached down and stroked Kelly with a single fingertip. "I want to watch you watch me put on a harness. I want to watch you watch me come to you and I want you to be so, so ready for me. Like you're ready for me now."

Kelly's hips moved of their own accord as Michala teased her. She could see the picture Michala was painting for her all too clearly. She was astonished to find herself turned on by the thought of Michala coming to her like that. She could feel Michala's weight on her body. Michala opened her with two fingers, but didn't go inside.

"Oh baby you're so wet," Michala whispered in her ear. "You want me, don't you? Right now, you want me inside."

Kelly nodded. She knew she was so close to coming. "Please."

Michala slid into her in one deep thrust. "I want to fuck you Kelly. I want to feel you holding onto me."

Blindly, Kelly reached for her and pulled Michala down to her. She held Michala against her, felt her moving in and out, and exploded with Michala whispering in her ear.

"I can't wait for next weekend," Michala said and kissed her cheek.

Kelly forced her eyes open. Michala was smiling tenderly down her. "I have to go shopping this week."

She was serious, Kelly realized with fear. "Um, I don't know honey."

Michala's grin was cocky. "I do. Trust me. You'll be begging me."

"And will you be begging me?" Maybe if she could do Michala first, she could allow Michala to do that to her. It was one thing to have it whispered like a fantasy in your ear. It was something else altogether different for it to happen in reality.

Michala leaned over and met her gaze. The look in her eyes had Kelly looking forward to Michala's plans next weekend. "Do you want me to beg? Or would you rather know now how much I want you to fuck me?"

Both options had appeal. Kelly licked her lips. "Let me think about it."

"You have all week," Michala said and moved off the bed.

Kelly sat up on her elbows and watched her lover shift through the clothing scattered over the bed. Michala held up her shirt with a sly grin. She fingered one of the dangling strings. "Do you have another shirt to wear?"

"No, I don't. Did you do that on purpose?"

Michala tossed her the shirt and laughed. "Will you believe me if I say no?"

Kelly grinned and held her ripped trophy up for inspection. She'd never had clothing torn off her body before Michala. She'd done several things with Michala she'd never done with anyone else. A few of her past lovers would be astonished to know she wasn't as rigid as they thought. Her gaze traveled to Michala. She was tucking her shirt into her slacks. She was astonished to realize she would let Michala do whatever she wanted to her. Should she be concerned over the power Michala had over her? No, she thought, watching Michala stand at the dresser and put on her jewelry, her trust wasn't misplaced.

"I'll see if Bre has anything you can borrow. I think anything I have will be too small."

Kelly watched her leave the room. She reached for her slacks and began to dress. Funny how leaving the room wasn't as hard as it was earlier. She had a lot to think about over the next four days. She grinned as Michala's amused voice drifted into the room. She had a lot to look forward to also.

## 12.

Memories from the weekend popped into Michala's mind throughout the day. She realized she was grinning like the town idiot whenever she wandered the halls. She didn't care. For the first time in too long the life she was living was one she truly liked. No, it wasn't perfect. She would agree that it was far from anyone's idea of perfection. But it was a lot closer than it was at any other time in the last year.

Michala glanced at her watch and saw that it was close to four. She'd asked Bre to pick her up early today. The interior decorator wanted to meet her at the Center and finalize Michala's choices for the new designs. Michala was more than ready for this meeting. No one liked the temp offices and they were all eager for the move back. This meeting with Tara Carlisle was several steps closer to that happening.

When the last file of the day was complete, she gathered the stack from her desk and took them

out to Jayne for filing. The young woman had a psych book open on the desk. "Finals?"

Jayne's head snapped up with a guilty expression on her face. "Um, yeah. There's no one waiting."

Michala sat the folders on a clean corner of the desk. "It's all right Jayne. I don't mind if you study."

Relief flooded the young woman's face. "Thanks. This is a hard class."

Michala leaned over to read the title of the textbook. "Abnormal Psych. If you need help, ask Miranda. As I recall she did very well in that subject."

"Really? Gosh, that'd be great."

The sound of the door opening drew their attention. Michala grinned at the man came into the office. "Hi Will. How are you today?"

The shy mailman smiled at her. He'd grown a goatee in the months since she last him. She thought it suited him, made him look older. "I'm fine Cayla. How are you?"

Michala crossed her arms over her chest and sat on the edge of the desk. "Great. I'm going over to the Center this afternoon to make a few decisions on colors and stuff. We're hoping to be back in the Center in a few weeks."

Will handed her the mail. "That is good news. Do you have a minute? I have a package for you to sign for, but I didn't bring it in. Your car isn't here."

Michala laughed and stood up to follow him from the office. "I'm not driving myself to work right now."

The white mail truck was parked several spaces down from the doors to the Center. Will walked to the back of the truck. "Why?"

Michala hesitated. She didn't want to tell him the truth. She didn't like people outside of those who had to know what was happening in her life knowing the truth. As far as she was concerned too many people already knew. She didn't like feeling anymore exposed than she already did. Not to mention the truth never painted her in the best light.

"My car was damaged during the break-in," she said simply and hoped Will would leave it at that.

They were standing at the back of the mail truck. Will was piling packages to the side and he stopped to stare at her over his shoulder. His hazel eyes were narrowed at her. "That's not true. Why are you lying?"

"What?" His attitude startled her. "Why do you think I'm lying?"

He spun to face her and held up a little gray box with a large red button. "Get in the truck. Don't do anything else or I'll blow us both up."

Michala could only stare as reality hit her hard. Will gripped her by the arm and dragged her with him into the cramped little truck. He pushed her down on the boxes and slammed the door in one motion. *Will was her stalker? Shy, unassuming Will the mailman?!* Michala fought down the hysterical laughter she felt at the absurd situation. She wanted to say this wasn't really happening, but it was and all her safeguards had failed.

"Why are you doing this?" She asked calmly. She had to stay calm to get herself out of this. She could not depend on the cavalry coming to her rescue.

Will ignored her as he concentrated on getting out of the parking lot as quickly as possible. The packages she was sitting on tumbled as he turned the corner too fast, slamming her into the opposite panel. Pain exploded across her left temple. She reached weakly to brace herself as she felt the truck turn again.

"It didn't have to happen this way, you know. You made me do it like this."

Michala relaxed when she thought they weren't going to be turning again anytime soon. She reached up to her head and knew before she felt the wet trail that she was bleeding. "This didn't have to happen at all."

The sound Will made was between a laugh and a sob. "You wouldn't listen. All you had to do was listen. I didn't want to do this."

"I'm listening now." As unlikely as she thought it, she might actually learn his motivations. Maybe he could make some sense of the chaos he brought to her life. He had to have a reason somewhere in his confused brain. Michala didn't hope to understand it. She just wanted to know the reason why he chose her of all people. Even if it was a reason that had her throwing her hands up and saying 'Are you kidding me?'

"Who cares? It doesn't matter now."

Chills snaked down her spine at the cool finality in his voice. She stared at his profile. She had to reach him. "If it doesn't matter, why not tell me? I didn't understand what you wanted before."

"You wouldn't understand now either," he sneered and shot her a glare of pure disgust. "You people never understand until it's too late."

Michala closed her eyes. Her head was pounding. Talking to him in his riddles wasn't helping. She wasn't sure which people he meant by his comment. Women, doctors, activists, lesbians. She fell into several categories that were characterized by the 'you people' label. "What don't we understand?"

"Just shut up. I'll tell you what you need to know when I want you to know it."

Michala laid her arm on a stack of boxes and rested her head on her forearm. The time on her watch was a few minutes after four. Bre would be at the office by now. She was usually early. When would they realize they couldn't find her? How far away would she be before they knew something was wrong? Would anyone even pick up on the fact that she never came back inside after leaving with Will? The mailman. Her stalker was the damned mailman. Who would have thought that?

They knew he was on the edges of her life. They just never checked out the men who were on the edges of it. Men who were supposed to be on the edges of it. Every life had people who fit in the background. She was that person for patients who came to the Center, for the people she met for DVIT, as a customer for places that she shopped. They were the people whose presence you never questioned because you expected them.

Belatedly she thought she should have mentally followed their path. She had to believe she'd have a chance to save herself. She'd have a better chance at that if she knew how to get away from him. She lifted her head and stared over his head. She prayed a street sign or familiar billboard would flash by so that she could get a fix on their location.

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Kelly was sitting with Randa and Sam in her office near the Underground. It wasn't easy to keep her wandering thoughts on their cases. Several times she had to be prompted by Randa or Sam. Sam at least didn't have a little knowing grin when she did it. Randa was enjoying her distraction far too much. Kelly was waiting for Randa to ask her what she was thinking about. She was certain she could make Randa blush with her answer.

They were nearing the end of the folders when two beepers went off. All three reacted to summons by reaching for theirs. Kelly smiled as she recognized the number as the one for the new offices. She wondered why Michala was beeping her rather than calling her. She shrugged it off, thinking Michala wasn't sure where she was and knew she'd reach her by beeper.

"Your sister," she said to Randa as she dialed the number. Randa nodded and held up her own beeper.

Kelly's first clue that all was not right was the cacophony of noises she heard in the background when the phone was answered. Her second was the terse voice who answered the phone. "Detective Susan Reid."

Kelly stood up as her mind computed how wrong it was for Susan to be answering the phone in the Cary Center. She stopped breathing and her heart slammed into her chest. "Is she there Susan?"

"No."

Her world shattered with that one tiny word. There were a million innocent reasons why Michala would be gone from the Center. She was free to come and go as she pleased. None of those reasons would have led to Susan being at the Center answering the phone. There was only one reason for Susan to be there. Only one reason for she and Randa to be paged at the same time with the same number. The phone was taken from her without a struggle.

"All right. We will."

Kelly blinked at Randa in silence and waited for her to say the words. Michala's twin looked as shell shocked as she felt. She reached out to lay a hand on Randa's arm. "What?"

"There's uh, a car coming for us. Cayla, um, her day was over. She was waiting for Bre. Will had a package for her. She had to sign for it. She went outside." Her disbelieving gaze met Kelly's. "She never came back in."

The next few minutes happened in a blur. Her door opened without warning. Two uniformed officers and Lieutenant Bates came into her office with grim faces. Bates told them what they already knew in a dispassionate voice. They were hustled from the building and into a squad car. Kelly doesn't remember if she reached for Randa's hand or if Randa reached for hers. She only knew the warm hand in hers on that seeming interminable drive to the temp offices was the only thing that kept her grounded.

The scene in the parking lot was eerily reminiscent of that morning of the break-in. Official cars were parked everywhere. They were dropped off at the front doors. Kelly didn't want to go inside. She didn't want to know what she only suspected which was that they didn't know where Michala was or who had her. She went because Randa's hand was on hers like a vise and she had no choice but to follow her.

"How?" Randa demanded as they stood on the threshold. Her harsh voice coldly silenced every other voice in the room. Radios crackled in the background. Everyone stopped to stare at them. "She was supposed to be safe here."

Susan came to stand in front of them. "It's Will. He lured her outside. We have him on tape pulling her into the mail truck and leaving."

"Where the hell was Bre?"

Susan shot a quick glance to her left. Kelly looked over to see Bre sitting with her head in her hands. "She wasn't here yet. Michala's day ended early."

"Okay, where is the investigation?" Kelly asked. The shock was wearing off and she felt herself fall into police mode.

"We've got units out looking for the truck. We're tearing his life apart. We've got teams at his house and where he works."



It wasn't enough Kelly knew, just as she knew there was little else they could do. They had to get inside his mind to know him. If they were very lucky, they would find him before he could harm Michala. She didn't want to think about what would happen if they weren't lucky. She had to believe the system she had devoted her life to wouldn't let her down. The system owed Michala one.

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It was dark. She was on her stomach on the floor. Michala couldn't tell much more than that. Her hands and feet were bound, tightly she realized, and grimaced from the pain. She turned her head and had to close her eyes when pain lanced across her temple. She relaxed completely on the floor and while she waited for the pain to subside, tried to piece together the last few hours.

The last thing she remembered clearly was being in the mail truck with Will. She must have passed out somewhere along the way. How she got from the truck to what was obviously a house, she didn't remember. Which meant she most likely had a concussion and had lost consciousness. She was awake now and felt somewhat clear headed. But she'd lost valuable time while being out. She didn't know the time, her location, how long they'd been here, how long it took to get where they were. The only thing she knew was that she was trapped and mostly likely those who loved her knew it by now.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes. She was in a small unfurnished room. Moonlight came through an uncovered window. The floor under her was rough hardwood. Like you'd find in a cabin in the woods. Which would explain the complete lack of sound. They were not somewhere heavily populated. She just hoped they weren't completely isolated. She didn't want to have to take refuge in a forest when she got away from him. She was positive she wouldn't last long if she had to rely on her own skills in the woods.

The door opened and she cried out from the pain as bright light hit in the eyes.

"You're a sound sleeper, Cayla. You didn't move a muscle when I was carrying you around." He sounded extremely pleased.

"I was unconscious," *you idiot*. Was he really so out of touch with reality he thought the woman he kidnapped just fell a sleep? She drastically lowered her expectations of his sanity. She wasn't going to be reasoning with him anytime soon.

He came to stand over her. He had changed from his post office uniform into blue jeans and a red plaid shirt. He knelt down next to her. Gentle fingers touched her head. "You had blood in your hair. I tried to get it out. How did you get hurt?"

He leaned close to her face and she saw it, the sheen of insanity in his eyes. She didn't even need to hear the lilt of childish bewilderment to know. Sweetly shy, unassuming Will was cracked. What she wanted to know now is, was just how cracked was he. And how she fit in it.

"I hit my head." She didn't see the point in telling him it was his driving. He would either get angry that she was accusing him of her hurting her or angry with himself for hurting her. Neither

scenario had an upside for her.

He patted her on the back. "Dinner is ready. Are you hungry?"

No and she knew she wouldn't keep anything down long if she tried. But she needed to get unbound and she needed to see more of her prison. She smiled. "Yes. I had a light lunch."

While he slipped the ropes from her ankles and wrists, he boasted about the meal he had made for them. The stew was home made, but she was sadly informed the bread was bought. He didn't know how to make bread. Michala sat up slowly and leaned against the wall as she waited for the room to stop spinning. "I know how to make it. I can show you."

He grinned brightly. "I knew you were the right choice."

She asked because she knew she had to. "Choice for what?"

He stood up and held his hand out to her. "My wife."

Oh. My. God. Cracked didn't quite cover it. And she had a starring role in his delusions. How did her normal little life come to this? She didn't remember anymore.

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They gathered at Jessica's house. Kelly didn't know where she would have gone left on her own. She wasn't given the choice. Randa was holding tight to her. She wanted Kelly close, preferably next to her with their hands linked. Kelly wasn't sure if it was for herself or her sister. She didn't care. She wanted Randa where she could see her, too. For herself and for Michala.

Too many hours had passed with too little information. Will's mail truck was found abandoned. His furnished apartment yielded few clues. The biggest being his pictorial of Michala. His obsession with her began long before Tyler Bradshaw. Kendall thought it began when he took over the route for that area two years earlier. Kelly had to smile when Kendall said they might never know why he fixated on her. She thought she understood that all too well.

William Grier was thirty-nine and the youngest of three children. He was born and bred in Atlanta and had left only for his four stint in the Marines. His parents were speechless when police converged on their home. If he had friends, they weren't stepping up to be counted.

"Here."

A Corona entered her line of vision. She took the bottle from Randa. "Thanks."

She wasn't sure but she thought she felt Randa lay a hand on her head. "Dani called. She wants to know if you need anything from home. My sister and clothes aren't a good combination for you, are they?"

Kelly had to laugh as an image of Michala ripping her shirt off came to mind. She wasn't

complaining. If being out of her clothes was her biggest problem with Michala, she'd take it and be quite happy with it. "I'll call Dani later. I want to hear the latest before I go home."

"Go home?" Randa asked and sat up. "Why do you want to go home?"

The question wasn't as odd as it sounded. And Kelly didn't want to go home. She wanted to know what was happening while it happened, not be given the details later. However, this wasn't her home. She couldn't stay here indefinitely. She wasn't Michala; she wasn't Jess' best friend. "I can't move in here until this over, Randa. Jess and Shannon have enough people here without adding one more."

"You aren't leaving," Jess said as she sat down with them at the patio table. Her face was set in stubborn lines. "You want to be here and we want you here. Just give in now and save time."

Because it was true, Kelly gave in. If she left, she would want to call every hour. There was no way she could just live her life as if everything was all right. She was going to be sitting somewhere, waiting somewhere, and this where was the first one she would chose. "Thanks. I'd just be tying up your phone lines if I went home."

"Well tie it up now and call Dani. The sooner she knows what you want, the sooner she's here waiting with the rest of us. You can use my office if you want some privacy."

The house was packed, Kelly realized with a start as she stepped off the patio into the kitchen. It was wall-to-wall women. She edged her way through the groups. Michala was unsurprisingly the center of all conversations. More friends, she guessed. Perhaps had she met Michala in a normal way, she would have met more of her friends by now. She hurried through the kitchen and living room. She really didn't want to meet them now.

The call to Dani was short. She didn't care what Dani brought her. What she wore over the next few days didn't interest her. She only cared about Michala. They had reservations Friday at the Plaza. She hoped that in a few days, she wouldn't need any clothes. She closed her eyes. God how she wanted to be there, letting Michala do things to her she never thought she would ever let anyone do.

Kelly hated feeling helpless. Hated having to sit and wait while others got to do what she so desperately wanted to do herself. She wanted to be out there following leads. She wanted to be shifting through the evidence. She needed to know that everything that could be done was being done to find Michala. It didn't mean she thought all the officers involved weren't giving this case their very best. She believed they were. She just needed to know for herself that no stone was left unturned. Because if the worst happened...

If the worst happened.

What was she going to do if the worst did happen? If Michala was found too late. If she was never found at all. Kelly knew the statistics all too well. Despite what Hollywood would have the world believe, happy endings didn't happen often. Those were reserved for fairytales and

miracles. Not for ordinary people living ordinary lives.

No, she thought angrily, and stood. She wasn't going to sit in here by herself and imagine the worst. They would find her. Michala would do whatever she had to do to keep herself safe until they did. Kelly had to believe that. The only way she was going to survive this was to believe they would find her.

They would have a happy ending. Because anything less was simply unacceptable.

13.

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Day Two of their vigil started early. Kelly was in Michala's room with Michala's twin curled up in her arms. She was awake more than asleep during the night, mostly because of Randa. The nightmares Kelly feared would visit her had tormented Randa instead. Kelly quieted her down with a solid embrace, soothing words, and little kisses on her forehead. By the time the sun was rising, Kelly knew Randa would never be just a colleague again. She was only fooling herself if she thought they could be just that while she was in a relationship with Michala anyway.

The door opening caught her attention. As she waited for the head to emerge, she tried to guess which of the women who spent the night it would be. Before she was even aware of it, Kelly was pulled into the Cary family as if she was one of them. She realized it when she watched Shannon talking to Paige. She sat close to her, one hand holding one of Paige's and the other making soothing circles on her back. She went to Randa next and did the same thing. When she sat down beside Kelly and reached for her hand, Kelly was struck by the significance of the gestures. Kelly wasn't here to give comfort and support to the Cary family; she was here to receive it with them.

The strawberry blonde head that poked into the room made her smile. Poor Susan. How she wanted to be the one comforting her girlfriend. Randa was allowing little hugs and would hold her hand for a few minutes, but for the most part Susan was not being allowed to comfort her as anything more than a friend of Michala's. How much of that was Randa not wanting her parents to know the truth about her and how much was just the truth of how she felt Susan fit in her life Kelly wasn't sure. She did hope this wasn't the end of their relationship.

"Good morning," she whispered as Susan crept to the bed.

Red rimmed hazel eyes met her gaze briefly before sliding to rest on Randa. Susan swallowed once before she sat on the bed. Taking a deep breath, she reached out to brush short blonde strands from Randa's face. The night must have been endless for her. "How did she sleep?"

Kelly glanced down at the peaceful face nuzzled on her shoulder. "Badly. She had nightmares."

Susan nodded, her eyes never leaving her lover. "She has been since the break-in. She didn't want to talk about them. I didn't want to push, not now. They're very much alike in that. If they don't want to talk about something, they won't. With Michala, I know when I can push. But this one. She's a minefield. I'm never on solid ground with her. I always feel like I'm one step from

being out the door."

Kelly was searching for something to say when a voice from close to her ear asked softly, "Is that really how you feel?"

Randa rolled over to stare at Susan's pale face. Kelly watched Susan's gaze meet Randa's. Whatever she saw had her shoulders slumping and she bowed her head. "Yes. You never let me in completely."

Randa sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "Do you ever pretend I'm her?"

Susan's reaction might have been amusing if the question hadn't been so very, very sad. Her head snapped up. Her jaw hung open. Disbelief quickly gave away to anger. "Do you think that? I couldn't have her so I settled for you? Is that really what you think Miranda?"

Randa buried her face against her knees. Kelly fought the urge to comfort her. She may sound like her and right then she even looked like her, but this woman wasn't her lover. Randa said wearily, "I don't know what I think."

Kelly suddenly wanted to be anywhere else. This was much too private. She didn't like being a part of this kind of scene when she was one of the participants. The silence in the room was nerve racking. She could only stare at Susan as Susan stared at Randa. Because she was watching, she saw the truth in Susan's eyes. She was in love with Randa. Hopelessly, helplessly in love.

The decision was made in an instant. Kelly leaned over and wrapped her arms around Randa. "You should see how she's looking at you. How she feels is written all over her face."

Cautiously the blonde head lifted. Kelly smiled at her tiny gasp. She kissed her on the top of her head and gave her a tight squeeze before moving away. She slipped from the bed and walked behind Susan to hug her. "I'll try to keep Paige out of here."

She didn't look back as she left the room.

Sounds from the kitchen warned her that someone else was up. It was late, after midnight, when they headed for beds last night. Most of the friends had stayed until well after eleven. Everyone was hoping Michala would be found before the day ended. They left reluctantly with promises to return. Kelly would be surprised if one of them had returned so quickly. She took a deep breath and stepped into the dining area. She wondered which of Michala's nearest and dearest awaited her—her other best friend or her mother.

Jess was standing at the sink, leaning against the counter, and sipping a cup of coffee while staring out into her backyard. She turned as if she saw Kelly coming to the kitchen from the corner of her eye. Her smile was fleeting. "Coffee's fresh."

Kelly nodded and made herself a cup. When this was over, she didn't want to even smell coffee

for at least a month. Jess was watching her so she took a sip. "Thanks."

Jess nodded then turned back to the window. Kelly felt an overwhelming need to say something. Of all of them, Jess was the most silent. As day turned into night, as the news became less, the more withdrawn Jess became. She was one of the first to leave, excusing herself to take a shower. She never came back down. She wanted to be left alone in her suffering, if her repeated brush-off's of Shannon and Susan were any indication. Kelly didn't want to leave her alone. She knew Michala would not have allowed it.

"I almost feel sorry for him," she remarked casually. She forced a smile to her face when Jess glanced at her over her shoulder. "She's gotta be furious. Come on, the mailman? I can just see the look on her face when she realized what was happening."

It shouldn't have been funny.

Certainly the situation itself wasn't.

But it was because in times of great stress sometimes you just have to laugh.

Jess closed her eyes. Kelly waited tensely for her reaction. As Jess simply stood there, she feared she had overstepped the line. How to fix this? She should have gotten her coffee and excused herself to the patio. Jess couldn't have been more obvious with her desire to deal with this stoically, silently on her own. She wondered if this was a trait she coincidentally shared with Michala or if they had developed it from growing up together.

"I hope he turns his back on her," Jess said finally. She faced Kelly. She wasn't laughing, but her smile had the same effect on Kelly. She felt the tension ease inside her. "He's hurt her pride. Michala doesn't like being made a fool."

Kelly sat down at the bar and cradled her cup in both hands. "He better hope we find her before she takes him out."

"You know what's going to happen, don't you? While we're running around in circles trying to find her, she'll be saving herself. We'll get a call from some small town sheriff. She'll either kill him or leave him tied somewhere. The most we'll have to do is bring her home."

Kelly didn't have a problem with that scenario. She didn't care how Michala was saved. She didn't care who got the credit. As long as it ended with Michala coming home, Kelly didn't have a preference for anything else. "I can live with that."

Jess grinned. "Can you live with her reminding us of it forever?"

Kelly laughed and nodded. "I can live with anything that brings her back to us safely."

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The cabin was small. He built it himself, he told her proudly. She could tell. She also saw his

handiwork in the crudely made chairs and tables. Ethan Allen had nothing to fear from him. The same could not be said for her. Michala kept that firmly in mind when she allowed him to take her hand and lead her outside. In a macabre imitation of lover's strolling hand in hand, he took her on a rambling tour of his little slice of heaven.

They were as isolated as she thought. A single, overgrown lane was the only road. She was pretty sure from the terrain that they were in the mountains. He had cleared away just the trees needed to build the cabin. In any other situation, she might have been charmed by the alcove he had made his own. Now she was frustrated because the only escape route she saw was his Ford pick-up. With her luck, he kept the only key in his jockey shorts.

"How's your head?"

She forced herself to stand still as she reached out to touch the bruise across her left temple. His fingers were gentle. "Hurts."

He cupped her chin. His smile was teasing. "The headache excuse worked last night, but don't expect it to work tonight."

Michala smiled at him. "You won't have to worry about that."

He'd have to kill her first. If she didn't get away today, he would kill her tonight.

"Oh I know. I've got to get some supplies. I put aspirin on the list. Is there anything special that you want?"

Michala stared at him for several long moments. He wasn't a bad looking guy. Dark hair styled in the severe cut favored by the military. His hazel eyes were more green than brown. He wasn't very tall for a guy, but he was buff. He had a good job. He wasn't a troll who had to kidnap women. Yet, here she was, kidnapped. And he was acting as if yesterday never happened. As if she was here of her own free will.

She shook her head. "No thank you. Is the store very far?"

He laughed and turned them back to the cabin. "A few miles. I'd take you, but it's nothing but an old mom and pop place. We can go to Charleston tomorrow if you want. They have malls."

"That would be nice." So this is what it felt like to be in The Twilight Zone. She was living the reality of a kidnapped woman. He was apparently living the reality of a man on vacation with the woman he professed to love. Michala saw more opportunity for escape if she joined him in his reality than if she tried to drag him into hers. She leaned close to him and wrapped her arm around his. "I know I said I didn't want anything special, but I wouldn't say no to chocolate."

Ten minutes later, Michala was standing on the front porch waving goodbye. Was it going to be this easy? All she had to do was walk into the woods and find her way home? She waited until she heard only the sounds from the woods before making a break for the trees. Her plan was to

stay several yards away from the road as she followed it down the mountain or hill or whatever it was they were on. Should he realize his mistake, she wanted to hear him before he saw her.

Carefully, she began to forge a path through the thick underbrush. She didn't care that she was leaving a trail for him to follow. She had time on her side. Time and a determination for this to end without one of them being hurt. She felt sorry for him and it had nothing to do with Stockholm's Syndrome. He needed help. Professional, locked away for some time, possibly medicated help. Lucky for him, she was in a position she make sure he got the best of it.

Michala thought it went with the current theme of her life that once she got to the end of this road, she would be coming back.

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The phone rang for the one thousandth time that day. Kelly had long stopped getting up to see who it was. If it wasn't the press wanting quotes, or a friend wanting news, it was Kendall calling to give them pointless updates. Kelly stared up to watch the setting sun. She couldn't believe another day was going to end without Michala being found. She didn't want to spend another sleepless night wondering if Michala was alive.

"Kelly!"

Kelly was out of her chair and into the house in less than a second. She was reaching for her gun before she remembered she had locked it in her car. She stood in the doorway and stared around for the reason someone was yelling her name.

Susan grabbed her in a bruising hug. "She's all right. The police have her."

The dining room and kitchen was crowded with people leaning against each other, watching Jess cry as she listened to someone on the phone. Kelly felt shaky as the tension left her body in one giant release. She held on to Susan because she knew she couldn't stand on her own. Michala was all right. She was with the police. It was over.

"What?!"

Jess' furious voice brought her head up and her eyes wide. Whatever whoever said to her had enraged her. Kelly stared at her. Jess was looking around the room at the rest of them in disbelief.

"And they let her?"

Oh, this didn't sound good. Jess and Susan stared at each other. She said, sarcastically, "Dr. Cary has offered to help the police take him into custody."

Jess' stunned, shocked reaction was mirrored across the room. Susan began to hit her forehead against Kelly's shoulder. Kelly bit down on the laughter that was bubbling up in her. She thought it was such a Michala thing to do. She wasn't surprised in the least that she wanted to help her



kidnapper. It was that desire that led her to form DVIT, to fight for Tyler with everything she had. She was more surprised the rest of them were surprised. She would have thought they were used to this.

"All right Kendall. Thanks for calling us. Tell them we want to talk to her as soon as possible, okay? All right, bye."

Jess hung up the phone blindly, one hand covering her mouth. She swallowed several times before she faced them. Her eyes darted over their heads. "Michala was found by a South Carolina state trooper about a half hour ago. Technically, she's fine. Apparently she got away some time this morning and has spent all day walking in the woods looking for a road. She's talked them into letting her go back in with them to get him."

The room was dead silent. No one breathed or cried or moved. They were staring at Jess as if waiting for her to laugh and say it was a poor joke. She didn't. She refused to meet their horror stricken gazes.

"You were right Jess," Kelly said, her voice sounding loud in the room. "You said she'd save herself."

"Why does she have to save him, too?" Jess demanded. "Why can't she walk away this one time?"

All the reasons why lined up in her head. Before Kelly could list any of them, Paige went to Jess. She put her hands on Jess' shoulders. "She can't walk away. Haven't you learned that yet?"

And that said it all. If Michala could have walked away, she would have.

The spell was broken over the room. People began talking as one. Kelly slipped back onto the patio. As much as she understood that it wasn't in Michala's mental make-up to walk away, she understood Jessica's frustration. Just this once, she wanted Michala to say to hell with someone else. She wanted her in a helicopter on way her back to them right now. She didn't want to spend the next few hours waiting and wandering what was happening. She wanted it over completely.

At least the hard part was over. She had to smile. She couldn't wait to hear the whole story. How did Michala get away from him? Did she use her brains to outsmart him or as Jess suggested, was he lying injured or dying somewhere? Maybe Michala wanted to go back with them to answer that question for herself. Kelly could see her having a hard time dealing with it if she did kill him.

It was nice to know that ordinary people living ordinary lives could have a happy ending.

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Camden, South Carolina was a tiny town that bordered Georgia on the Atlantic. Their police force consisted of three full-time officers and two part-timers. Two rooms in the county courthouse served as the Sheriff's office. Michala sat exhausted at a battered wooden desk,

sipping the worst coffee she ever tasted. She was on her third cup because it was hot. She didn't remember a time when she felt dirtier, colder, or more tired than she did right then. She looked like a victim from an explosion. Her clothes were slashed beyond repair. Her shoes never made it off the mountain. Her body was covered in cuts and scratches. The state trooper who found her thought she had been raped.

She wanted to go home. She wanted to get into the back of a police cruiser and just go home. If she thought she still had one, she would have sold her soul to be heading back to Atlanta with sirens blaring. She'd only been gone a little over twenty-four hours. It felt like twenty-four days. She lifted her head to gaze without interest around the room. She wasn't going home anytime soon by the number of men and women gathered around her. Some were FBI because she was taken over state lines.

"Dr. Cary? I'm Dr. Kimble. If you'll come with me, we'll get you washed up and into some clean clothes." He held out his hand to her.

Michala was painfully aware that all conversation stopped. She looked behind the older doctor to see concerned eyes watching her. The state trooper hadn't believed her fantastic tale easily. The shock on his face when dispatch confirmed that a Dr Michala Cary had indeed been kidnapped the day before in Atlanta told her that. They were treating her like spun glass and every time someone talked to her, they seemed to be waiting to see if this would be the time she shattered.

"Thank you," she said and stood up without assistance. "That's the best offer I've had all day."

Startled laughter followed them from the room. Michala avoided all eye contact. All she saw in their eyes was pity. How long would it be, she wondered, before she was no longer *that* woman? That woman who tried to take that poor little boy from his parents. That woman who was being stalked. That woman who was kidnapped. How long did she have to wait until she was Michala who? Surely her fifteen minutes had to be over soon.

"There's a shower in the back," the doctor said as he led her into an oak paneled antechamber down the hall from the Sheriff's office. A striking woman smiled at her from where she stood removing a small pile of clothing from a duffel bag. "Dr. Cary, this is my wife Karen. Those fellows out there don't want you left alone. I thought you'd be comfortable with her. She's a nurse."

Before Michala could say a word, he stepped out of the room and shut the door.

"Why just look at you!" Karen said and hurried over to her. "If your momma could see you now."

Michala watched Karen reach for the buttons on her shirt with a strange detachment. One part of her brain ordered her hands to catch the woman's wrist to prevent the nurse from undressing her. Instead she smiled, saying, "She wouldn't care how I looked. She's glad I'm alive."

Karen slid her hands inside her shirt to slip the ruined cloth from her shoulders. She paused at

Michala's soft words. Dark brown eyes stared at her in understanding compassion. "I know, honey. I've got four girls of my own. I hope I never know what your momma's gone through since yesterday."

Michala debated telling her that her mother's journey to this particular hell didn't start yesterday. Yesterday was more an ending than a beginning. Although none of them knew it at the time. Her train of thought was broken when she felt fingers at her waist. This time she did catch Karen's hands. "I prefer to do that myself."

"Whatever you want honey. I'll start the water. How hot do you take your shower?"

Michala cast a glance over her bare torso and arms. Her skin was crisscrossed with scratches. Blood was dried in many of the small welts. "Warm, I think. These cuts are going to sting."

Under Karen's watchful eyes, Michala took the quickest shower of her life. She was feeling more like herself once she was dressed in blue jeans a little too large, red Gamecocks T-shirt and Nikes that surprisingly fit. She grinned at her reflection in a small locker mirror. Actually, she was feeling more like Miranda. "I look like my sister. We're twins."

Karen laughed. "Shouldn't you look like her then?"

Michala decided to skip that conversation. Karen was technically right anyway. She should look like Miranda. She turned to the woman. "Thank you for the clothes. I know the media is waiting outside. I'm glad my family doesn't have to see me the way I looked before."

"Have you talked to them yet?"

The offer to call home was made to her from several people. Michala declined now just as she had declined then. She needed to finish this and she knew one plea from anyone she loved would send her home. She had put them through enough. It wasn't fair that she was adding this to the list of things she had done to them. She had to do it anyway. For own self, she needed to see this through to the end. She needed to know in her own mind that it did actually end. She didn't want to read about it. She didn't want to hear someone else's account of it. She wanted to know it because she was there.

"No. I will later." Michala wasn't so sure she would do that either.

She saw that Karen, with four girls of her own, was revving up to plead her mother's case. A sharp knock at the door was a welcome interruption. Michala didn't know if she could find the worlds to explain to Karen why she hadn't made that all important call to Atlanta. "Come in."

"Dr. Cary?" A young black man stuck his head in the room. She saw from his tan shirt and insignias that he was a member of the local police. "They're getting ready to head out. Sheriff Owens wants this on you."

She took the vest from him without a word. The times were few, but she had worn a bulletproof

vest for DVIT calls. She strapped the heavy vest on with skilled hands. She smiled at the young officer. "Let's go."

The next few minutes were spent standing back as the FBI agent in charge gave last minute instructions. Michala felt small as she walked out of the courthouse surrounded by armed and armored officers. She didn't turn to look at the cameras recording their progress as they crossed the lawn to two black vans. She heard her name and gave a small prayer of thanks that she had learned not to respond to shouting reporters. She was shepherded to the first van and ducked quickly inside.

The younger of two FBI agents sat in front of her. He braced his elbows on his knees as he sat forward. "This is how we want to play this Dr. Cary."

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The Waiting Game was never one of Kelly's favorite games to play. She was more of an action kind of woman. It didn't help that she wasn't alone in this leaky boat. The time didn't pass faster and the nerve shattering tension didn't lessen one iota just because others knew how she felt. If their frustration and agitation were any indication, no one was being comforted by anyone else's presence.

She stayed on the patio because they were flipping through the channels hoping that one channel would have something the others didn't. So far, the breaking news was only that Michala was safe. Kelly thought Michala would call at her first opportunity. She hadn't and as the hour passed, Kelly stopped holding her breath every time the phone rang. She was resigned to the fact that the next time she spoke to Michala it was going to be in person.

"It's almost over."

Kelly turned to the subdued voice. Susan dropped down heavily in the chair next to hers. Her brief smile was sad. "I'm trying not to imagine all the many terrifying reasons she's not wearing her own clothes. Jess says she hasn't seen her in jeans and a T-shirt since high school."

Kelly's breath caught painfully in her throat. She swallowed hard, trying to force her heart back to its rightful place in her chest. "You saw her?"

Susan nodded slowly. "Yeah, they just left to go... wherever they're going. She's with a SWAT team."

"How awful am I that I hope they kill him?" She could see the scene so clearly. Her fantasy of his bullet ridden body crumpled on the ground wasn't marred any by the fact she couldn't have picked William Grier out of a police lineup. She wanted him dead. She didn't care how.

Susan glanced over at her. "You're a better person than I if this is the first time you've thought that. I've wanted to kill him since the break-in."

"I've been too busy playing catch-up. Until now, I just wanted him caught."

Now she wanted today's sunset to be his last. She couldn't even say she wanted that solely for Michala or a desire for her not to have to testify at his trial. She didn't want the state spared the expense of extradition. She didn't want to spare the rest of them the pain of having to relive this in court. She wanted him dead because she couldn't stand the thought of him alive somewhere. Of him getting parole. Of him having a shot to do in some tomorrow what he did not do today. More than anything else, she didn't want Michala living with that fear shadowing the rest of her life.

Kelly closed her eyes and rested her head back against her chair. The rest of her life. She was looking forward to the rest of Michala's life. She smiled and had to admit she was looking forward to her place in the rest of Michala's life. She didn't want to seem like she was complaining. Because God knew there wasn't much about her time with Michala she would change. She would like to have a few of the "first times" as memories. The anticipation of the first date. The terrifying expectations for that first end of the date kiss. Knowing that tonight was *the* night. She missed those little dating rites of passage.

Of course, she didn't miss the doubts, insecurities, and insanities that went along with getting to know someone. Always wondering if you on the same page in the relationship. Questioning if the significance of something was the same for the other person as it was for you. Feeling your way through the emotional minefield left behind from the last person who tread this way. Kelly didn't hope that she had escaped all the potential setbacks of a new relationship, but she was grateful for the ones she did.

The phone rang. Kelly rolled her head to the left to look at Susan. "You don't think it's over yet do you?"

Susan shrugged. "I haven't been right about anything else so I'm not going to guess about this."

Kelly nodded. Michala's luck, if she had any, seemed to operate under Murphy's Law. The myriad of things that could go wrong with a SWAT team attempting to take a psycho into custody was mind-boggling. Add Michala to the mixture and the mind was blown by the possibilities. "It'll be over when it's over."

"It's over now."

Kelly froze at the flat announcement. Every instinct she had screamed at her not to turn around and see with her eyes what she heard with her ears. Words of denial bombarded her mind. She stood up slowly, shaking her head as if that alone could change the horror of what she was about to hear. The hardest thing she ever had to do was stand up and face Randa. Whose bloodless face said more than any words she could use.

Susan spoke first, her voice low and urgent. "No. No, no, no. Don't say it, Randa. No."

Randa slumped back against the sliding glass door. She tore her gaze away from Susan. Kelly stepped back when those dark anguished eyes pinned on her. Randa cleared her throat. "There

was an explosion. It started a fire. They're trying to get rescue crews into the area."

"Rescue crews? So there are survivors?" Kelly seized on the important part.

Randa closed her eyes. "They don't know. That was Kendall. She wanted to tell us before we heard it on the news." Her eyes snapped open. "She'll call when she knows more."

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The Ford F-150 was parked to the side of the small cabin. The setting sun filtered weakly through the Pine trees, casting the clearing in shadows. Michala prayed their simple plan worked. She wanted to go home.

Both vans came to a rolling stop several yards from the front door. Soon doors opening and bodies, weighted down with guns and armor, shattered the silent evening. Michala stood next the van. She had the easiest job. Let him see her and lure him out of the cabin. Once he was outside, they would take him into custody.

"Are you ready, Dr. Cary?"

Michala took a deep breath and walked out into the open. "Let's get this over with Mr. Redman."

She flinched the first time his voice echoed from the bullhorn. In the silence that followed, she waited tensely. Her gaze flicked over the door, over the uncovered windows, and back to the door. The FBI agent spoke again after several minutes had passed. Michala stared hard at the cabin, willing him to let this end without bloodshed. All he had to do was walk out. Just walk out and it was over.

Michala would never be sure if she first saw the door opening or if she heard the creaking. Suddenly he was there, taking a few steps into their trap. Michala took an instinctive step forward. "Hi Will."

Will turned his head to look over his left shoulder. Slowly, with calm deliberation, he moved his head until he was looking over his right shoulder. Michala was ready when he turned his bemused smile on her. "I trusted you."

"I know." Michala took another step closer.

He crammed his hands into the pockets of his worn blue jeans. He looked down at his bare feet, saying, "You could've been happy here. You didn't even try."

Redman grabbed her arm when she would have taken another step. She glanced at him over her shoulder. He shook his head at her. "No, Will, I couldn't have been happy here. You know that."

Will darted a quick look at her. "It's her, isn't it? You love her. You couldn't be happy here because of her."

"I couldn't be happy here because of me."

Will suddenly stood tall and pulled his hands from his pockets. His smile was brilliant. "It doesn't matter now."

The absolute finality in his voice chilled Michala. Something was off and she couldn't put her finger on it. But then something had been off about him since he snatched her in the parking lot. His behavior, even for someone not operating on all batteries, was confusing. On the one hand he seemed to know what he had done and on the other, he didn't understand the consequences of his actions.

"You said that before-it doesn't matter now. Why doesn't it matter now?"

Will didn't seem to hear her. His eyes were sweeping over the trees as if looking for the police he knew were hidden there. His smile never dimmed. Michala wondered if he was hearing voices. The expression on his face indicated an internal debate or dialogue.

"Will? Why doesn't it matter now?"

His head cocked as if he heard something behind him. He shot her a bright, happy grin. "Bye."

Michala opened her mouth, but any sound she might have made was deafened by the fiery eruption that consumed her field of vision. She turned to run from the explosion. A scorching blast of air picked her up and slammed her against the side of the van. She was unconscious before she hit the ground.

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Kelly didn't know where Camden, South Carolina was and she didn't know where to begin to look for the place Will had taken Michala. Neither of those facts dissuaded her from wanting to get in her car and drove until she found both. She was pretty sure that all she needed to do was find Camden. She could follow the emergency vehicles and news vans after that. Almost anything was better than sitting at Jessica's waiting for the phone to ring.

What did keep her on the patio, waiting, was fear. She would rather sit on that damned patio for the rest of her life and never know if Michala survived the blast than go up there to see her in a body bag. Usually not knowing is so much worse than knowing. Kelly didn't want to know. She shut out the voices when the phone rang. She refused to look up whenever someone came onto the patio. When it was over, when nothing could turn back time, she would face it. But she refused to ride the wave of uncertainty until they knew absolutely.

"Here, take this Kelly. You haven't eaten all day."

Kelly saw her hand reach for the steaming mug before her mind could frame the rejection for her mouth. Instead of no thanks, she glanced up and forced a smile. "Thank you."

Paige nodded her head once. Kelly found she couldn't meet her eyes. "You should come inside."

"No," she began, her voice hoarse. She cleared her throat and took a sip of Chicken Noodle soup. "I'm fine out here."

Please go away, she silently begged. She could ignore Michala's friends. She could brush away her twin's concerns. But not her mother. Unlike Michala's friends, Paige was innocent. She had left her shattered daughter in the hands of her friends, believing Michala was safe with them. She was wrong, not that it mattered anymore. She had Kelly to watch over Michala now.

"Look at me," Paige commanded. Kelly felt her heart pounding in her chest and wished for the courage to defy Paige even as she was lifting her gaze to Paige's face. Paige was standing over her with her arms crossed and a severely disapproving frown on her face. Kelly felt the years drop away until she felt like a recalcitrant five year old. "Do you feel better suffering through this alone?"

"It's not the same for me," Kelly muttered, hoping that was enough to send Paige back inside.

"Oh really?" To Kelly's horror Paige sat in the chair next to her. She watched her lean back and cross her feet, settling in for a chat. "Why are you so special?"

Kelly did not want to have this talk. She put her cup of soup on the patio table with a sharp click of ceramic on glass. "It's not the same for me. I barely know Michala."

"Then I owe you an apology Kelly. My information must be wrong. Someone told me you're in love with my daughter."

Kelly didn't need two guesses to know who that someone was. She closed her eyes, waiting for embarrassment to color her face. She could lie. She could deny it. Kelly almost convinced herself she could even look Paige in the eye as she did it. Then Michala's face popped into her mind. How she looked Friday night in the bar, with her feelings shining so clear in her eyes. Kelly squeezed her eyes hard and sighed before she turned to face Paige. "I am."

The hardness on Paige's face softened. "I know. I saw how you looked at her that day at the Center. You failed miserably if you were trying to hide your feelings."

Kelly had to laugh. It was poetic justice that she outed herself to Paige. "I didn't realize I was so obvious. I hope I didn't embarrass you."

"You made my day. Do you know how long I've waited for someone to look at her that way? Do you know how many times I've been forced to smile and be polite to a woman who was looking at her and seeing only the doctor title and successful practice? Do you know what makes it worse?"

Kelly shook her head silently. She had no clue what could be worse than seeing Michala with someone who looked at her to see only dollar signs.



"I've had to be happy that Michala at least tries to find someone. I've never looked across the table at one of Miranda's mistakes and wondered what she could possibly see in this man."

Oh, no, Kelly thought evilly, that would be so very, very bad. She shouldn't do it. The cardinal rule was never, ever out someone else, especially to their mothers. Unfortunately for Randa, Kelly was a firm believer that rules were made to be broken. Paige only wanted her daughters to be happy. She had no guidelines for what that had to be so she had no expectations to be crushed.

Kelly stared at her face. Whatever expression Paige would have at her words would be clear in the light coming from the house. "They are identical twins."

Paige cast her a look of confused amusement. "Yes I know. I realized that when I had trouble telling them apart when they were born."

Kelly smiled and shook her head. "They are *identical* twins."

Comprehension dawned slowly as they stared at each other. Kelly forced herself to sit without fidgeting under Paige's seeking eyes. Randa's success at keeping her orientation from her mother was starkly evident. Paige's face lost all expression. She blew out a deep breath before slumping in her chair. "Well," she said softly, "that explains so much."

Kelly felt she had to say something. But what? This wasn't her secret to tell, she knew better than to do this, and it was too late to take the words back. "Are you all right?"

Paige nodded slowly. "I don't understand why she didn't tell me. She knows I don't care. Doesn't she? I couldn't love Michala anymore than I already do."

The hurt bewildered tone made Kelly feel an inch tall. She'd made a huge mess and at a time when Paige didn't need more doubts about her daughters. She tried to salvage the situation. "Maybe she thought you could be all right with Michala because you still had her."

"I see." Her tone said not only didn't she see, but there was little chance Randa could say anything to make her understand.

"Look Paige," Kelly sat forward and took her hand. "I'm sorry. This wasn't my secret to tell."

Paige linked their hands together and sent her a brief smile. "You're probably right, but you were the only one willing to tell me. Thank you. I didn't realize Randa thought I had given up on Michala. That was never a message I meant to send."

"Come," Paige pulled her by the hand from her chair. Kelly was too surprised to do anything but follow. Paige picked up her cup. "This is cold now. You shouldn't be sitting out here."

Kelly didn't fight it anymore. After breaking the news about Randa, she felt obligated to give into Paige. She owed her something for canceling out her dreams for Randa. The least she could do was give into her demands that she join them in their suffering. Even if it made her own

worse.

Paige came to an abrupt halt a few steps from the sliding glass doors. Kelly barely managed to miss slamming into her back. She was a lot closer to Paige than was comfortable. Paige turned her head to whisper, "She's with Susan, isn't she?"

Kelly might have tried to lie. She'd done more than enough damage as it was. She didn't get the chance. Her face gave the truth away. Paige's answering smile was happy and relieved. The fingers around hers tighten briefly. Kelly was pulled into the house. She knew she was being pulled into something much scarier. This family.

"That was Kendall," Shannon said as she came from the living room. Her gaze skimmed over the room. "They've got the blaze contained and paramedics are up there now. They'll be bringing people down soon."

Kelly tugged her hand from Paige and turned to go back onto the patio. Paige caught her before she took a single step. With a look that brooked no argument, she pulled her into the kitchen. Kelly leaned against the counter and let their conversation just drift over her. She would be here. She would pretend to be a part of them. No one had to know that without Michala, it didn't mean anything.

#### 14.

Michala became aware of two things-she was laying flat on something hard and hands were roaming her body with impunity. Alarm bells shrilled in her brain. Urgent signals went out to her body to stop the attack. She reached out for the hand on her chest and went limp as bone crushing pain took her to the black edge of unconsciousness. Suddenly her eyelid was forced open. Brilliant, excruciating light blinded her left eye and then her right. She thought she was groaning, but heard nothing. Before she could worry about what was happening to her, she felt a needle prick her arm and a numbing warmth dulled the worst of the pain.

Soon, she could open her eyes without wincing. Her head was immobile, but as carefully as she could, she scanned the area around her. She was confused by the unfamiliar brightness of the room. The question of where she was fled from her mind as faces appeared above her. Her fright must have been clear for one woman leaned over and laid a calming hand on her chest and smiled. Michala frowned as she realized the woman was talking to her but she heard no sound. Alarmed, she tried to sit up. Hands reached to hold her to the bed. She felt another needle prick and her last thought was that this one was going to knock her out.

Consciousness came in stages. A warmth surrounding her, protecting her from a pain she could almost feel. Slowly she became aware that she was in a bed and someone was holding her right hand. Finally her eyes slit open. The room was lit from a light spilling through the open door. A hand came to her face and she jerked away in surprise. Her mother was suddenly leaning over her, smiling. Paige reached over her head and obviously spoke to someone. Michala reached for her mother's arm. Why was she whispering?

Before she could get her mother's attention, the light was turned on and people clad in hospital scrubs surrounded the bed. One older white man in surgical green bent over her and was talking while shining a pen light in her eyes. Michala blocked his hands and pushed him away. She tried to speak, to ask him to talk louder, when everything stilled around her. Her mother was staring down at her with undisguised shock.

The doctor leaned over and asked with exaggerated care, "Can you hear me?"

"Barely."

He nodded and bent closer to her ear. "Do you remember yesterday? The explosion?"

Explosion? She searched her mind for memories of yesterday. She remembered being in her office. "Was there a gas leak?"

The doctor patted her hand. "Do you know what city you're in?"

Okay, she was getting scared now. Michala turned to her mother. "What happened to me?"

"Michala," the doctor said and ducked his head into her field of vision, "You were in an explosion yesterday. You've been unconscious for almost eighteen hours. You've got a small hairline crack in the back of your head. It's important that you tell us the last thing you remember."

She could feel the pain now. Throbbing aches everywhere. She forced herself to focus. She had a head injury, obviously had some memory loss. She closed her eyes. She saw herself in her office, sitting at her desk writing in patient files. "Being in my office. A patient must have just left because I've got a folder open. I'm writing notes from the session."

"Honey," Paige asked in a hesitant tone, her eyes darting between Michala's face and the doctor. "Your office at the Center?"

Michala laughed weakly. She shook her head as much as the pain allowed. "No, the new offices. I remember about the Center."

Paige sagged with relief and her smile was a thousand watts. She said to the doctor, "They've had the temporary offices for only a few weeks."

The doctor returned her mother's smile. He nodded at her. "That's good. Short-term memory loss is to be expected. Your head injury was our major concern, but you've also got four broken ribs and your left scapula is fractured. We had to put in a pin."

While that explained the pain, it did not explain how she came to be in an explosion. "Was there a gas leak at the offices? Was anyone else hurt?"

She knew by the looks that flashed over her head that something extreme had happened. If her

head wasn't pounding she might have tried to force her brain to give up the locked away memories. They were there; she just had to access them.

Her mother brushed hair away from her face and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. "You're weren't in the office. I'll be back. You've got some people who really want to see you."

Michala could only watch as Paige quickly left the room. She knew who the people were who wanted to see her and as much as she loved her friends, she didn't want visitors. Drained didn't even begin to describe how weary she felt. It wasn't just forcing words out over the pain of four broken ribs, it was the strain of trying to hear and understand. She closed her eyes, hoping she would fall into the deep well of oblivion before her mother came back.

Her thoughts drifted to the explosion that had put her in the hospital. She didn't go very many places these days. If it didn't happen at the office, where else could it have happened? Her eyes opened in fear as she thought about Jess. She was alone except for a blue clad nurse. The red head smiled at her as she hung an IV bag. Michala turned her attention to the doorway. She was now anxious for her mother to return.

She let out a shaky breath as they filed into her room. Her eyes skipped over the ruffled, red eyed group eagerly until she saw that no one was missing. If anything, she was pleasantly surprised that Kelly was among them. That her mother had talked to them was obvious when one by one they leaned over and spoke loudly before kissing her. Kelly kissed her on the lips. She was glad Kelly didn't let their little quarrel keep her away.

They didn't stay long. Paige let them speak to her for a few minutes, so they could see for themselves that she was all right, and shooed them from the room. She held onto Kelly's hand to keep her from leaving with them. She had missed her and if nothing else, this gave them a reason to talk. Michala wasn't letting the chance slip by without a fight. Who knew when they could talk again?

When they were alone, Kelly lowered the side rail and sat beside her. They stared at each other in silence for several long moments. Michala searched for something to say. They last time they talked Kelly accused her of being childish and selfish. Michala never thought the next time they talked she would be in the hospital with a concussion. She never thought Kelly would be smiling down at her so sweetly with tears glistening in her eyes.

"You should sleep. Your eyelids look like they weight a ton each."

Michala nodded. Her whole body was being to feel like it weighed a few tons. She squeezed Kelly's fingers. "Will you be here when I wake up?"

Kelly leaned over to give her a soft, lingering kiss. She drew back to stare into her eyes. "I promise."

Michala fell asleep with Kelly's hand wrapped around hers, with the comforting press of her body next to her. For the first time in a long, she remembered how peace felt.

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Kelly waited until she was sure Michala was asleep before letting herself react to Michala's appearance. Paige warned them she was bruised and covered in cuts and scratches. A white cotton brace immobilized her left arm and gave support to her broken ribs. They could tell as they talked to her that she was having trouble hearing them. Kelly was prepared for all that. What she hadn't prepared for, could never have steeled herself against, was the confused vulnerability in her beautiful brown eyes.

It was all too clear to her that Michala was surprised to see her there. That she didn't know what to say was painfully evident. When Paige told them she had short-term memory loss, Kelly was only glad Michala didn't remember the kidnapping or the events that followed. Foolishly she didn't stop to wonder if their weekend together was something Michala remembered. It hurt to realize that Michala remembered them apart.

"Is she asleep?"

Kelly nodded, but didn't look at Paige. She couldn't tear her eyes from Michala's bruised face. She felt torn. One part of her thought she shouldn't be here if Michala didn't remember they had made up. Michala deserved to make a choice she could remember. The other half of her wanted to keep her promise for so many reasons. She loved Michala and there was nowhere on earth she'd rather be. A part of her would die if she had to go back to Atlanta and wait for Michala to either remember the weekend or make the same choice again. She was angry that the uncertainty of where she fit in Michala's life was back with a vengeance. They were past that. She didn't want to go back.

The last thing Kelly expected was Paige to sit behind her on the bed and pull her into a loose hug. "We're taking her home tomorrow."

"And her doctor's all right with that?" Kelly admittedly didn't know much about head injuries. What little she knew came from medical shows. The part about not moving people with head injuries was moot. Michala was already in a hospital.

Paige asked, amused, "Didn't you two get to the part where you trade family histories? The twins followed in their father's footsteps. Well almost followed. Holden's an Internist."

The fundamental truth of that statement left Kelly numb. No, they hadn't traded family histories. Or past histories either for that matter. She knew about the last year of Michala's life. She knew how she came to be a sleep-all-day-bar-hop-at-night-take-anyone-home-who-would-go-with-her retired Psychiatrist. But she didn't know who Michala was before that. Michala knew less about her.

Would they be together if the last year never happened for Michala?

Kelly stared at her sleeping face.

Last year, before her life fell apart, Michala had a girlfriend. If last year never happened, if Tyler never entered her life, Melissa Davies would still be sharing her bed. Melissa left Michala. Kelly was still someone Michala picked up in a bar. Even if Michala remembered the weekend, Kelly knew she would never really know how Michala felt about her. But that wasn't exactly true either, was it? Michala made it very clear that she didn't want Kelly in her life when Kelly was asking questions about the phone calls. What did she say that Sunday after Randa and Susan left? The people who were allowed to care had just left and if Kelly wanted to care she could leave, too. Kelly remembered that she didn't leave.

"I'm going to get a drink. Do you want something?" She carefully moved out of Paige's arm and away from Michala.

Lucky for her, Paige only had eyes for her daughter. "If you find coffee, I take mine with cream."

Kelly nodded and hurried from the room. She knew the others were waiting there. Where else would they go? Kelly called upon her years of facing difficult situations calmly and rationally. All she had to do was get away from here, away from them, and then she could fall apart. She smiled at their questioning faces. "She's asleep. Is there a coffee corner or something like it around? Paige would like a cup. Cream only."

As she expected, Holden, Randa and Susan offered to go search. They had caravanned down in three cars. None of which were Kelly's. Hoping her voice sounded casual, she turned to Jess. "Listen, now that we know she's fine, I need to go back to Atlanta. Can I borrow your car? I don't want to leave Sam on her own with DVIT."

Jess was leaning next to her against the wall. She crossed her arms over her chest. She stared at the opposite wall. "You want to go back to Atlanta?"

"Yes. I'm sure that Sam's been handling everything exceptionally well, but the program is set up for three people to administer. Randa needs to stay so I should go back."

It sounded perfectly reasonable to Kelly and she was patting herself on the back that she had come up with a legitimate reason to go back to Atlanta. How could anyone argue with that?

"Yeah, you're probably right. I saw Michala's desk when she was still with DVIT. Sam should be buried under folders by now. But I know Michala would prefer you stay rather than Randa. She and Susan can go back in Susan's car."

"Michala's her sister. I'm sure she'd rather stay."

Jess pushed away from the wall and stepped in front of her. Anger made her clear blue eyes a stormy sea tossed gray. "And you are her lover. Or should I say was her lover?"

Because she couldn't bear looking into Jess' eyes, Kelly closed her own. She should have known Michala's best friend would see through her. She supposed she should count her blessings that it was Jess instead of Susan. The police tended to act before they thought. She hoped Judge

Newhouse would be sensible.

"If you want to leave, leave. You haven't wanted to be with us since this began. I thought you were just uncomfortable with us. We haven't had a chance to just be together like normal people. But if it's really that you don't want to be with her anymore, then go. I don't want her with someone who would dump her while she's in a hospital bed. She deserves better."

The words chosen so carefully to cut as deep as possible left her shredded. She couldn't have stopped the tears even if she had tried. And she had been trying since she left Michala's bedside. She opened her eyes when she felt Jess move closer. She was braced against the wall, her arms on either side of Kelly.

"Are you crying for her or for you?"

Kelly tried to look away. She could lie to Jess. She could say it was for Michala. She thought she could say anything that would get her away from here. She couldn't do it and look in her in the eye. Jess obviously knew that because she moved her head with Kelly's, forcing her to see her face. "For me."

"What happened in there? Why are you so sure Michala wants you to leave?"

Kelly reached for what little dignity she had left. She wiped away her tears. She took a deep breath. She didn't dare hope Jessica would agree with what she was doing, but she did hope she would understand just a little. "Would you say Michala's made good decisions the last six months?"

Jess didn't smile. She shook her head. "Michala wouldn't say she's made good decisions the last six months."

"How do you know I'm not one of the bad decisions she made? If her life hadn't been turned inside out she would still be with Melissa. She didn't want me in her life before the break-in. She threw me out Jess. You said it yourself, this hadn't been normal. I don't want to be here when she goes back to her normal life and realizes I don't fit in it."

It was brief and she covered it up quickly, but Kelly saw Jess' eyes soften. Jess looked down the hall and then turned back to her. She nodded her head once. "I think you're wrong. But just in case you are right, this is what we'll do. When she wakes up, you tell her you're going back to Atlanta. I'll go with you. I do need to get back to my courtroom. There's something there I think you should see. After that, if you still think she doesn't know what she's getting into, you can walk away. Susan and I will personally make her regret she ever thought she was in love with you."

Kelly agreed because she knew she didn't have a choice. She met Jess' cold steel blue eyes. "I'm sure you will."

"Count on it."

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She heard voices. Soft laughter. Someone was holding her hand. Michala opened her eyes and found Jess sitting beside her bed holding her hand. Her friend wasn't looking at her, she was grinning at someone on the other side of her bed. Michala turned her head. Susan was sitting up from her chair to smile at her.

"Hey you," she said loudly.

Michala smiled back at her. "You don't have to talk so loud. I can hear you."

Both women were instantly standing over her. Jess squeezed her hand. "You're improving almost by the hour. How do you feel?"

"Like I was in an explosion. Care to fill in the details?"

"Sorry, we've been sworn to secrecy. The doctors think it's better for you to remember on your own."

Michala turned soulful eyes to Susan. Jess was the enforcer of rules. Susan was the breaker. "Susan?"

Her friend kissed her on the forehead. "No, babe, not this time. You need to do this by the book."

"That bad, huh? Everyone's acting so weird I'm going to think my stalker got me."

And then she knew that he did. Susan and Jess were too stunned by her careless words to do more than stare at her with their mouths open. She looked from one to the other as they tried desperately to change the last minute. Fear chilled her and she made herself ask, "Was there really an explosion?"

"Yes, there was an explosion," Jess said impatiently. "Do you think we'd make that up?"

"I think you would yes, if you thought you were protecting me. If I was raped."

Michala watched Susan's face. Jess was better at hiding her emotions. Susan wasn't. Whatever happened to her, she wanted to know the truth. However painful that truth might prove to be. She just hoped the truth wasn't as bad as what she was imagining.

"You weren't raped," Jess said softly. She tugged on Michala's hand to get her attention. Susan walked around the bed and sat down next to her. Michala let her gaze flicker between the two of them. "We're in South Carolina. He-"

"He?" Jess looked up at Susan. Susan shrugged, as if saying they'd come this far they might as well go all the way. Michala looked expectantly at Jess. They had told her this much, they might as well tell her everything.



Jess sighed deeply, a sign that she was giving in. "Your mailman. He was your stalker."

The story Jess told was too bizarre to be anything but true. Michala was bewildered by the identity of her stalker. Will was never anything less than pleasant to her. He also never said or did anything that raised a flag for her. Will wasn't the last man she would have thought was her stalker, but he was only one or two men ahead of him in line. He had seemed normal to her.

"I don't remember any of it," Michala said almost to herself. Even now, after she heard the story, she still didn't remember any of it. Was it the truth? Would they lie to protect her from some awful truth? Michala believed they would. She didn't doubt that she would do the same for them. If something too horrible for words happened to one of them and by some grace they were spared the memory, yes she would lie to keep it from them. She accepted they would do they same for her.

Susan slipped her hand under theirs. "You will in time. The doctor thinks it'll be a few days, no more."

"Yes," Jess agreed and met her eyes in a stare that didn't flinch. Either Jess really agreed with the doctor or she really hoped he was wrong.

Michala hoped she was prepared when she knew the truth. If she knew the truth. She didn't think the others would contradict Jess' story. They might even pretend to be outraged by Jess going against the doctor's advice. But if Jess' story was the one they wanted her to believe, she could see all of them lining up behind her. She could always send for her medical records if her memory didn't return. The truth was out there should she ever want to know it.

When her door opened, Michala wasn't sure which of them was more relieved. Kelly paused by the foot of her bed. Her gaze slid slowly over them. She took in how close Jess and Susan were sitting to her, lingered on their linked hands, and then she was smiling at Michala.

"This looks serious. Am I interrupting something?"

Susan slid from the bed and leaned over to kiss her lightly on the lips. She left the room without acknowledging Kelly's presence. Jess kissed the back of her hand. She shot Kelly a look she couldn't decipher. "I'll be waiting outside."

Kelly stared at her for a moment and then nodded. "Thank you."

Michala would think later that if she hadn't been rattled by the talk with her friends, she might have noticed that Kelly was nervous as she stood there watching her. Her hands moved restlessly on the end of her bed. Her smile was strained. Michala held out her hand and she noticed that Kelly hesitated before she came over to sit on the bed. She watched Kelly closely as she asked, "Are you all right?"

Kelly's laugh was stilted and she had trouble meeting Michala's eyes. With Jess' words ringing in

her ears, Michala jumped to the only conclusion she thought explained Kelly's odd behavior. She slipped her hand away from Kelly's. Kelly was having enough trouble being in the same room with her. Michala didn't want to compound that by making Kelly touch her.

"I'm fine," Kelly said, her tone betraying her. "Now that you're okay. In fact, I thought I would catch a ride back with Jess. She was saying she needed to get back to court. I don't want to leave Sam on her own too long. You know how it is."

"I do know." Kelly's relief confirmed her worst fear. Michala closed her eyes. She used the ready-made excuse being in a hospital bed gave her. "I'm tired Kelly. You should leave."

She didn't open her eyes to watch Kelly. She didn't want to see the pity or revulsion she knew she would see in her eyes. She just wanted Kelly to go. Kelly didn't disappoint her. She left quickly without the pretense of a kiss. Michala was grateful. She much preferred Kelly forgo kissing her than suffer through a chilly goodbye kiss. She wished she could go back to sleep. She didn't know which horror to dwell on—the fact that she was raped or the fact that Kelly could barely bring herself to touch her. Not that it mattered, both were making her nauseated.

Her laugh was a hollow sound in the room. She really had to stop asking how her life could get worse. Some twisted fate seemed to take her words as a personal challenge. She really didn't want to entertain what else could happen to her.

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The four and a half drive to Atlanta was made in total silence. Kelly spent the drive staring out of the passenger window, trying to imagine a life in Atlanta without Michala. She could possibly avoid being in the same place at the same time as Michala. They had enough friends in common she should be able to manage at least that. She would have to resign from DVIT. That was a given. She wasn't going to spend the rest of her life staring at the mirror image of Michala's face.

As they got closer to Atlanta, Kelly became curious about their destination. She couldn't even guess at what Jess wanted to show her. She didn't believe for one second it would change her mind. She wasn't sure what would. Her time with Michala was tainted by the extreme circumstances of Michala's life. How could she ever trust that Michala's feelings for her were real? How could she ever know that Michala wanted to be with her just because?

Kelly was so lost in her thoughts she didn't realize they had reached their destination. She sat up from her slumped position in the seat and stared. Jess turned the car off and shot her a quick glance. "Come on."

Kelly followed her slowly. She didn't have a good feeling about this. They were at the Cary Center.

Jess said as she unlocked the door, "Susan and I were supposed to meet her here that day. She had an appointment with the interior designer to pick out fabrics and colors. The construction part of the remodeling is over."

The air smelled sharply of wood and fresh paint. She trailed behind Jess down the long central hallway. She couldn't stop herself from peeking into rooms as she passed them. Kelly wanted to wander through the offices and conference rooms. She saw the Center after he demolished it. She wanted to see for herself that every hole he put in the walls was filled. This was Michala's dream. She wanted it handed back to her in pristine condition.

"This way," Jess called to her.

Kelly pushed her thoughts away. Jess brought her here for a purpose. Maybe when she had made whatever point she needed to make, she would let Kelly roam around the place. Kelly didn't see herself coming here again. She walked to the front of the Center and saw Jess moving up the staircase. Kelly stopped and frowned as Jess reached the top. She unlocked the doors. Well that was just cruel. Did Jessica really think she was going up there? "Whatever it is bring it down here."

"I can't. You have to come up here." Jess' voice was ice cold.

"I'm not going up there Jess. Just tell me what it is."

"I don't think very highly of you right now Kelly, but I do think you're a woman of your word. I can't bring this to you. You have to come up here. You told me you would."

Angrily Kelly stormed up the stairs. She paused on the threshold. "This better be good."

Kelly was several steps inside the apartment before she realized it wasn't an apartment anymore. The spacious room was completely empty of all furniture. Kelly walked to the kitchen and was speechless to see that the kitchen was gone. The fridge was still in place, but the other appliances were gone. In their places were a microwave, Espresso machine, coffee maker, and a lot more counter space. It looked like a smaller version of the kitchen downstairs.

"What is this?" She asked, turning around to face Jess.

Jess shrugged. "How would I know? Michala never made it here remember?"

"If you thought I would be surprised that she's moved out, you're wrong. I already knew."

Jess gestured to the hallway. "Then I suppose the rest won't surprise you either."

Both doors were half open along the hallway. Kelly didn't stop at her guest room. She knew that whatever Jess wanted her to see was in Michala's bedroom. She put her hand against the door and pushed it open. Sunlight flashed across the gold nameplate on the door. Kelly stopped and angled the door so that she could read the black etched letters.

*Lt. Kelly Pryce.*

Kelly stared at her name on that door for an eternity. At first her mind was blank. She was too

stunned to think. Too stunned to understand what it meant that Michala put her name on this door. What did it mean? Did it mean anything at all? Finally Kelly walked into the room. This time she expected the room to be bare. She stood in the center of what was once Michala's bedroom and turned slowly. Honey oak bookshelves gleamed in the bright sunshine. The walk-in closet was converted to filing cabinets and storage space. Michala put a lot of thought into making this an office. For her.

"The other room is for Sam. Can you imagine how Susan and I felt when we saw that Michala was moving DVIT into the Center? She was finally moving on."

Kelly nodded, but she wasn't really listening to Jessica. The implications of this room were sinking in. Even if Kelly wanted to believe she was never important to Michala because it's easier to lose something if you told yourself you never had it, she couldn't dismiss this so easily. Michala invested a lot of time and a lot of money into this part of the remodeling. She had done it when she had every reason to think Kelly wasn't available to her anymore.

"So do you get it now?"

"Yes." And she did. Maybe if the last year never happened for Michala, she would still be with Melissa. Maybe if she hadn't lost Tyler, they would only be co-workers at DVIT. For every decision made in every life there is an option left unexplored. One, if chosen, could change everything. The other, rejected, changes nothing. The last year did happen and all the choices Michala made and all the consequences that followed were set in infinity. Kelly didn't lie to herself and wish there was a way she could change some. She would change nothing in the last year of Michala's life if there was even a tiny chance that would change her meeting Michala.

"What are you going to do?"

Kelly stood there in that sun-drenched room, a future before her she would have paid dearly for, and laughed as all the dark doubts faded away. She put her hands on her hips and turned around in the room. "Well, first, I'm going to put in an Oscar performance when she shows me this room. I don't want to ruin the surprise for her."

She glanced at her watch. It was a little after eleven. "Are you hungry? I'm starved. Let's get lunch."

Isn't it funny how everything is brighter and life is better when you get your heart's desire? Suddenly the future was something Kelly was eager to meet. "Where are they taking Michala? Is she staying at your house?"

With her thoughts bouncing all over the place, Kelly quickly left the Center. She had all the time in the world to see the changes. She had the rest of her life.

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Even with painkillers, the drive back to Atlanta was excruciating. By the time their little convoy pulled in front of Jessica's house, Michala was more than ready to be knocked unconscious. Her

mother and Shannon helped her into bed and sat with her until she feigned sleep. She wanted to be left alone and knew that as long as she was awake, they would stay by her side.

Michala didn't want to think or feel. She wanted to sink into the nothingness of sleep. That should have been easy enough with the drugs in her system. The pain wasn't her problem. If she could shut her thoughts off, she knew the drugs would dull the pain enough to allow her to sleep. Unfortunately for her, her brain didn't come with an off switch.

What made it worse is that what she was remembering wasn't what actually happened. She was substituting her own feminine nightmares for the black hole where her memories should be. She tried to tell herself she was imagining it worst than it was. She had gotten away from him. Her injuries were from the explosion. The only scars from being with him were emotional. Having sex with a man wouldn't kill her. Millions of women did it every day and lived to tell the tale.

She would have bet major bucks that she would never be one of them.

She caught her door opening and closed her eyes to a slit. Her parents were supposed to be going home. If her mother couldn't bring herself to leave yet, Michala could understand. She was lucky Paige didn't move into Jess' house when she did. She was grateful her mother never asked her to come home. Michala admired her mother's strength. She hoped she inherited some of it.

The woman who came into the room took her breath away. Kelly had changed into tan jeans and white polo shirt. Michala watched her slip silently to the bed. God, what now? She didn't think she could pretend sleep for long if Kelly was going to stare at her. Kelly didn't stare at her. She balanced herself against the bedpost and kicked off her shoes.

"Do you want me to get behind you? You might be more comfortable if you laid on me."

"Go away." Michala winced at how childish she sounded. She wanted to be an adult about this. She had to save some dignity at some point. Now looked like a good place.

Kelly waved her hand over the bed. "Front or back?"

"I'm not kidding Kelly. Just go away." When she got her hands on that damned little fate who kept doing this to her, she was going wring his neck. Cheerfully. Happily. Premeditatively.

"I'm not leaving, Michala."

Suddenly it was all too much. The pain, both of her body and in her heart, was too much to bear. She didn't care what had changed in Kelly's little world. As usual, not a damn thing had changed in hers. "I don't want your pity. I've think I've gotten more than my fair share already."

Kelly sat down next to her and reached for her hand. Michala pulled the covers up to her neck. Kelly stared at her, startled. "I don't care if you can handle it now Kelly. I can't. Now please, go away."

"You're talking in riddles. I'm going to assume it's the drugs. What can't you handle that you seem to think I can?"

Michala was so tired. She closed her eyes and relaxed against the bed. Sleep was near. She could feel it creeping closer. All she had to do was make Kelly leave and sleep would claim her. She was so tired. She wanted to give in, give up. Let go for once. She opened her eyes for what she hoped was the last time for many, many hours. "That I was raped. You've done your good deed. I'll make sure you get your points. Okay? Can you leave now?"

Of all the reactions she thought Kelly would have to her harsh words, her face paling wasn't one of them. Neither was Kelly moving closer to her. Kelly's eyes were wide and direct as she stared at Michala. "You were not raped. The trooper who found you thought you were. I understand you looked pretty banged up. You were very clear that Will never touched you."

Michala wanted to believe her. She didn't remember and if she didn't ever have to, she would rather think it didn't happen than that it did. But if that wasn't why Kelly was so uncomfortable with her, what was? She didn't imagine Kelly's behavior in her hospital room. "You could barely touch me in the hospital. If that wasn't why, tell me what it was."

Kelly bowed her head. Without looking up, she tugged on the blankets until Michala's hands were uncovered. Her left was bound to her side. She clasped the right in both of hers. Michala wasn't prepared for her glance up with tears in her eyes. "I can't believe you thought...I guess that's how it looked to you, but it hurts that you thought that."

"Then tell me how it really was."

Kelly let her hand go with a kiss. She brushed away her tears with shaky fingers. Her back was ruler straight as she sat up. She braced her hands on her knees. "You don't remember spending last weekend with me at the Grand Hyatt, do you?"

Michala just shook her head.

"You were surprised to see me at the hospital. I knew that your last memory of me was me walking off Jessica's patio that Saturday. Because you didn't remember, I didn't feel I should be there. You were confused enough without me adding to it."

"I didn't care why you were there, Kelly. I was just glad you were."

This time, Michala reached for her hand. "Don't make me try to pull you over here."

Carefully, they tugged, pulled, and rolled each other and the blankets until Michala was propped against Kelly. When she laid her head on Kelly's shoulder, she felt comfortable for the first time since she woke up in that hospital.

"Where do we go from here?"

A very good question. Michala tipped her face up to Kelly's. She didn't have long now. Sleep was calling her insistently. She smiled at Kelly. "We'll find out together."

The End

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