

~ In All the Empty Places ~

by Janneen Brownell

Disclaimers: This story and characters are all mine and any resemblance to anyone living, dead or on television is in the mind of the reader. Readers who are disturbed by references to physical abuse should read this story with caution. As this is my first story posted to the net, I was conservative with sexual scenes. I hope you enjoy my little tale.

Comments, good or bad, can be sent to ga_onmymind@yahoo.com

1.

Jillian Young lived at Windchase, a Spanish villa sitting on the edge of the Pacific. As I drove from my West Hollywood condo to Windchase, I wondered why she never left Los Angeles. The city that made her a household name was also the city that took away every thing she ever loved. I barely remember that Christmas morning almost twenty-five years ago when her husband, director Brian Brent, and their five-year-old daughter were murdered. For reasons only she knew, her retreat from the world did not include the city she ignored or the house in which they died.

I have many questions I would dearly love to ask Jillian Young. If I was coming to her house as a columnist for *The Los Angeles Times*, I would have a book of questions ready for her to answer. However, it is not in my official role that I was invited to join her for lunch. I don't even know if she knows I work for *The Times*. This lunch with her today was for me to meet my step-mother-to-be. My father only told me a few days ago that he asked Jillian to marry him. When she called yesterday and asked to come today, I was stunned. I was expecting the call and my expectations included a secretary calling me, not her personally.

The scenic drive along the coastal highway gave me precious time to calm my anxiety. I was going to meet Jillian Young. *The Jillian Young*, beautiful I Belle from *Time Lost*. The movie that made her a star and earned her an Oscar nomination was also the last movie she ever made. My father was marrying Jillian Young. Regardless of how many times I said it, I still found it incredible that I was meeting her.

I slowed on the highway to turn into the gated drive. A red Mercedes roared down the drive, barely missing me as both the driver and I swerved. I caught a glimpse of blonde hair as the Mercedes skidded onto the highway. I watched in the rearview mirror as the driver swung around the curve on the wrong side of the road.

The young male guard hurried to where I came to a slamming halt. "Are you all right?"

I nodded and took a deep, cleansing breath. "Yes. Who was that?"

He did not answer me. Instead, he straightened and stepped away from my Cherokee. "This is a

private residence. Are you expected?"

"I'm Victoria Senett, Rainer's daughter. I'm having lunch with . . . Miss Young."

Without another word, he walked back to the guard house. The gates swung open silently. Windchase is surrounded by lush, rolling lawns and blooming bushes of brilliant pink hibiscus. I parked my Cherokee on the curved drive in front of the house.

When buzzing the doorbell and knocking for five minutes got me nowhere, I followed a red tile path to the back of the house. I was here at the right time. Where was everyone else? Maybe I should have stopped by my condo before coming and checked my answering machine. Jillian might have changed her mind about meeting me. Maybe she really did not want to meet a columnist for *The Times* even if I am Rainer's daughter.

I stopped when I saw her sitting on the patio. I am not an authority on living legends, but I am sure they do not routinely meet someone for the first time in colorful silk kimonos. I watched her sit on her patio and wondered about the etiquette for this situation. I approached her slowly, hesitantly because she is Jillian Young and I am no one.

"Miss Young?" Startled, tear filled eyes flew to me. Her face was free of make?up and pale and twisted in heart breaking anguish. She did not know me, could not comprehend why I was standing on her secluded patio as a witness to her private pain. As I watched numbly, she struggled to pull herself together. I never imagined meeting her in this condition.

"I'm Victoria Senett. Rainer's daughter," I prompted, when she stared at me with a blank expression. Neither name seemed to mean anything to her.

"Did you see her?" she whispered. The famous voice was cracked, the famous green eyes shattered.

The only person I saw was the homicidal blonde in the red Mercedes. "Who?"

"Kellen."

My jaw dropped as she whispered her name. No wonder she looked as if her sanity was a fleeting memory. If she was seeing her daughter, she was going insane. And you, Victoria Senett, are the lucky winner chosen to witness the occasion.

Carefully, so as not to alarm her, I sat across from her. Green eyes met mine and shaky fingers wiped away her tears. She leaned forward earnestly. "Patrick promised she would forget. He promised!"

I nodded. I was prepared to agree with whatever wild statement she wanted to make. Where was her staff? Why didn't someone, anyone, come out to see if we wanted drinks? God, was I alone with her? I glanced over her shoulder at the dark apparently deserted house. If I could get her inside, I could call my father. If all else failed, there was the guard at the gate.

"Miss Young, would you like to lie down?"

This was not how I imagined meeting Jillian Young. She was not supposed to be having visions of her dead daughter. The woman my father described was not this barely sane, barely coherent woman. She stared at me and, impossibly, smiled. She shook her head, shoulder length hair swayed in the breeze. She shut her eyes and took a deep, calming breath. "You must think I'm crazy."

"No, I don't," I hastened to assure, lying through my teeth. Crazy? I would never tell a crazy woman she was crazy to her face. God only knew who she would see next. Maybe Brian. I wanted to get her inside, get her help, and get the hell away.

She sat back in her chair. Intelligence burned bright in the eyes that met mine. The tears were gone, the red-rimmed eyes their only legacy. "Yes, you do. What else could I be if I think I'm seeing Kellen."

I remained silent. Please, please just let me get out of this gracefully. I promise to never tell another soul that Jillian Young was unbalanced by the death of her husband and child. I would keep the secret that had been so successfully kept from the rest of the world.

"Victoria, I am going to tell you something that, until now, has been a family secret. Come with me."

She stood up and walked into the house. She never looked back to see if I was following. I did not want to go with her. I did not want to know what she wanted to tell me. I followed her cautiously because I knew my father would be furious if I simply left. She was my father's bride?to?be and for his sake I had to believe she was sane. I stepped through the sliding glass door.

I waited while she went upstairs to dress. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness. When I could see, I walked away from the protection of the patio and into her living room. The first thing I noticed was the painting hanging on the wall. Why should I be surprised Jillian Young owned a Chasen Original? Alec was very popular, especially with those who collect status symbols. I was probably one of the few people who could afford a Chasen and did not own one.

"She's very talented, isn't she?" Jillian asked from my shoulder. I jumped and my one hope is that when I stepped away from her, it was with some modicum of grace and style.

She had changed into white slacks and sleeveless white shirt. She was in total control, as if the insane woman she was on the patio was only a role she was practicing. She stared up at the Chasen before sitting next to me on the couch.

"Um, yes she is," I said when it became obvious she was waiting for a reply. Alec could accuse me of many things, some of them even true, but she could not say I ever said she was less than brilliantly talented.

She smiled happily and glanced at the Chasen again. She became serious and settled into the couch, legs tucked under her. She faced me with one arm draped along the back of the couch. Her face was free of whatever trauma had caused her to break down on the patio. If I met her now, I would never suspect that just minutes earlier she was in tears.

"Thee public scrutiny on my life since Brian's death has been brutal. I am an adult and have been able to handle it, certainly better than my daughter would have been able to. Kellen was a small child then, barely more than a baby. My husband's family decided it was better for her not to grow up as Kellen Brent. She would have been constantly reminded of her father's death."

I listened to her carefully phrased speech in mounting confusion. Better not to grow up as Kellen Brent? Kellen Brent had not grown up, not as herself or anyone else. She was buried next to Brian at Forest Lawn. She was five years old when she died. She was Jillian's only child. I was horrified she believed her daughter was alive. She seemed so sane. There was no trace of the hysteria I stumbled up on earlier. How could she look so normal and yet to be so clearly insane?

"Victoria, Kellen is alive. She grew up in England with my mother. I know it's hard to believe, but please try. My daughter did not die that night. She is living in Aubres, in the northern part of the state. I want her to come to the wedding. Will you ask her for me?"

I left Windchase two hours later. My mind reeled from her stunning, impossible revelations. The blonde leaving earlier was, Jillian claimed, Kellen Brent. She was visiting her mother and both became upset. Jillian did not explain and I did not ask. I was still trying to comprehend that Kellen Brent was alive. My memories of that Christmas morning are vague snapshots of police cars parked all over Windchase.

I found myself agreeing to drive up to Aubres, California. I was not even sure I believed her then. Kellen Brent could be alive and in living in Aubres. She could be dead and buried at Forest Lawn beside Brian. I think I believed both and neither. It could be true or it could be the delusional ravings of a woman who desperately wanted her child at this important event in her life.

As I sat on her couch and listened to her fantastic tale, I wanted it to be true. My father was madly in love with her. If Kellen Brent was dead, Jillian was living in an elaborately detailed fantasy. I did not want to have to tell my father that Jillian Young sent me up to Aubres, California to invite a ghost to their wedding. It seemed like the worst of bad omens.

~~~~~

Two books have been written about The Brent Murders. The first to be published, *The Perfect Crime*, was authorized by the Brent family. It did not address the many doubts that persist about that night and for that it was blasted as mostly fiction. It was number one for twenty-six weeks. *Fairy Tale Beginnings* was Jillian's autobiography. I stopped by Walden books on my way home from Windchase. I've seen news reports about the murders and I've watched a few of the television programs that come out around Christmas time. After hearing Jillian's tale, I wanted to read the books. I wanted to know about the night before meeting Kellen.

I turned off my phone and settled down on my bed with the books and a box of sweet and sour chicken. I chose to read Jillian's first. Her dedication read "To Kellen Alecia Brent, forever loved and forever missed." I stared at the dedication for long seconds, chilled by the calculation of it. I was troubled that she felt the need to do this if her daughter was really alive. Did she do it because, as the mother of a murdered five year old, she felt it was expected? If I felt weird reading the lines, I wondered how Kellen Brent felt the first time she read them.

I was halfway through the book before I realized that Brian and Kellen were barely mentioned. Brian was one of the hottest directors in Hollywood at the time of his death and he was often away on location. His appearance in the story usually coincided with one of the many parties he and Jillian threw pool side. Jillian devoted a chapter to her daughter's birth, but Kellen was not mentioned in detail until the Christmas Eve party.

*The Perfect Crime* opens with the Christmas Eve Party. This was supposed to be the last of their parties for a while. Production on their new movies was set to begin when the holidays were over. The guest list was an eclectic mix of Hollywood's A crowd and California's political elite. Brian's father was US Senator Patrick Brent. Patrick wanted his supporters to mingle with his son's movie star friends.

Jillian reluctantly allowed Kellen to attend. Patrick hired professional photographers. He had a strong family image and he wanted to use his blonde angelic granddaughter in his never-ending re-election campaign. He chose the gowns for his wife Celeste, Jillian, and Kellen. Celeste's gown was hunter green to contrast her auburn hair. He chose crimson for Jillian and Kellen.

Kellen Brent, except for gray eyes inherited from her father, was a baby version of her mother. Patrick capitalized on their resemblance by having Kellen dressed identically to Jillian. Their blonde hair was braided before being wrapped into an elegant chignon on their heads. Brian presented them with early gifts of diamond stud earrings. In the photos of that night, there is a surreal quality to the ones with Jillian and Kellen.

The party was in full swing by nine. Furniture from Windchase's spacious ground floor was either upstairs or placed in storage. A buffet table was set up on the patio. Speakers were scattered discreetly through out the house, allowing guests to dance in every room. There was an open bar inside the house and outside by the pool.

The last picture of Brian and Kellen Brent was of them dancing together. Her sleepy blonde head is resting against his shoulder. At eleven, minutes after the photo was snapped, Brian demanded that Jillian take the child to bed. Guests told police he was furious with Jillian for allowing Kellen to remain at the party when she was obviously falling asleep.

Brian never calmed down. Patrick took his son off to the side and whatever was said had the effect of ending the party. Brian, drunk by all accounts, stormed off the patio and told everyone to leave. He threatened to call the police and have them arrested for trespassing when they stared at him in astonishment. Patrick confiscated the rolls of film before the photographers were allowed to leave.

No one really knows what happened next. Patrick and Celeste left at midnight. A call from Windchase woke them at four Christmas morning. Police were summoned to the house and hour and a half later. The tragedy was all over the news by seven in the morning. Guests at the party were stunned to learn Brian and Kellen were dead. The official version is that someone entered the house during that night, murdered Brian and Kellen and savagely beat Jillian. When the story broke, Jillian was on a chartered jet to her mother's home in England.

People who witnessed Patrick taking the film were sickened by the photo accompanying the broadcasts: Kellen's sleepy head on Brian's tuxedo clad shoulder.

Both books claim that Brian and Kellen were murdered in their second floor bedrooms. Brian's funeral was a public event; Kellen's was strictly guarded with only family in attendance. If not for the mystery that surrounds their deaths, neither book would have been a bestseller. The many unanswered questions are left unanswered and no new evidence is introduced. The Brent Murders is a tragedy that fascinates the public. The books were written solely for that fascination.

As I packed for the trip to Aubres, I thought about Kellen Brent. She was five years old when her mother declared her dead. How does someone grow up knowing that? I could not even imagine what her life must be like.

## 2.

Aubres is nestled in the rugged coastline of California. I would have missed the turn?off if Jillian's instructions were less than precise. I followed a road that was little more than a paved path canopied by tall redwoods. I liked nature as much as the next woman, but I prefer to have whatever I want within a three mile radius of my condo. I can appreciate nature without wanting to live in it.

The road crested on a gentle hill, startling me with the dazzling beauty of the tiny village flanked by jagged mountains and wide expanse of Pacific blue. Places like these don't really exist outside movie theaters, do they? Rambling white wood house dotted wide tree line streets. Now I knew why the road to Aubres is not well marked. This is not a tourist town and the locals are not taking any chances of it becoming one.

I drove down what I presume to be Main Street Aubres. Small shops promised everything from homemade breads and pastas to handmade crafts and clothes. A few people strolled along the sidewalk, but otherwise the sloping street was deserted. Most of the townsfolk would be inside preparing to wait out another lashing storm that had been hitting the northwestern coast this week. Los Angeles could use some of this rain. I could not remember the last time we got anything resembling a downpour.

At the end of Main, I hung a left and drove towards the ocean. It was the last place I wanted to be as lightning streaked across the gray sky. Unfortunately, Kellen lived "as close to the water as possible without actually living in it." Jillian's amused, exasperated descriptions of her daughter added to my mounting resentment of Kellen. I would not be here if it was not for her.

Kellen Brent, in keeping with her admittedly necessary reclusive image, lived on an isolate strip of sand at the end of the public beach. I passed a PRIVATE KEEP OUT sign posted on an open gate and parked my Cherokee behind a dark blue Jag, bought no doubt with Brian's money.

I have never seen an actual hermit's house and was appropriately impressed by hers. The weathered gray beach house faced the ocean and was enormous, especially if Kellen lived alone. The roof was slanted towards the ocean and a deck ran the length of the house. A small pier stretched over a few yards of wind tossed blue gray water.

A woman was standing on the pier. I squeaked across the damp sand to a small flight of stairs that led to the deck. She turned as I crossed the deck and I stopped in mid-stride. We stared at each other in shocked recognition.

Alec was dressed in a white T-shirt and shorts. A navy windbreaker was her only protection against the storm. The wind whipped short blonde hair around her face. Dark, dark gray eyes stared at me bleakly. The ever present glass was clutched tightly with white, slender fingers. She lifted the drink to her lips, seeking strength from the bottom of a glass as usual. Alec. Nothing except her hair had changed in the last two years.

"Victoria. What are you doing here?"

I was speechless to find Alec Chasen, celebrated painter and ex-lover, standing in the spot I expected to find Kellen Brent. Either I had the incredible dumb luck to wander into Alec Chasen's retreat from the world or she was Kellen's lover. My luck was not that good. God, I really wanted to be in Los Angeles. Anywhere, but here, doing this and facing the only woman who ever hated me.

I closed the gap between us. "Hello Alec. I knew you lived up here. I didn't know where."

I wanted to make this pleasant for us. There was no reason for it to be added to our list of bad memories. Except this was Alec Chasen. She doesn't forgive, even if she's not entirely blameless.

Dark inscrutable eyes stared at me. "Why are you here?"

The old familiar edge in her voice scraped along my old familiar nerves. Surely no two people ever brought out the worst in each other like we did. Guinness should have put us in the book for the Longest Relationship That Never Had A Chance. How did we ever stay together for three years?

"I'm looking for Kellen Brent," I said without preamble. If she wanted to make this unpleasant, I

could play that game and do it better.

Her stare was blank. "I'm sorry, who?"

"Kellen Brent. Your lover," I added.

Alec tossed her drink over the railing of the pier and scanned the sky with lifeless eyes the color of the black, stormy clouds. A light rain began to fall on us. "We had better go inside before this gets worse."

I followed her across the pier. Bare feet scarcely touched the slick planks as she hurried across the deck. As soon as she opened the sliding glass door, soft light flooded the lower floor of the house. Alec took off her windbreaker and shook it onto the deck before tossing it in nearest corner of the kitchen floor.

The inside of the house was no less impressive than the outside. The roof was skylights that tapered down to the wall of sliding glass doors that faced the deck. A compact kitchen was on the other side of a breakfast bar. The doorway to the kitchen and another room, probably Alec's studio, were under a wide, rail less staircase. A loft overlooked the downstairs. The right side of the house was a living room formed by three navy leather couches grouped around a low glass table. A Chasen Original hung over a fireplace made of seashells. Large chunks of the wall had been removed and black glass panes were embedded to form shelves filled with brass figurines. The floor was highly polished blonde hardwood. Thin, cream cloth rugs protected the floor from the furniture.

I walked over to the fireplace. I knew the painting, of course. I can spot a Chasen Original at fifty yards. I stared up, impressed as always by Alec's talent. My breath caught as I looked at the rare oil. Bright sunlight danced across calm pale blue water. Gentle waves lapped at pure white sand. I knew it was a Chasen by the distinctive photographic style Alec employed. Otherwise, this was not the typical Chasen that sold for thousands at Elane's gallery. This Chasen, Kellen Brent's Chasen, was unique.

"You painted this for her, didn't you?" I heard the angry pain in my voice, but could not hide the jealousy I felt. Alec painted dark, depressing paintings with me. Why did Kellen deserve a happy painting? How did she break through Alec's unyielding wall of emptiness and unhappiness? What did she have that I didn't is what I really wanted to know.

Alec walked up behind me. "For who?"

I glared at her, tired of her silly games. I was not in the mood and if I had been, she was the last person I would have chosen for a playmate. "Kellen Brent."

Alec looked at me before she stared up at the only painting visible. Her eyes were reflective as she considered the question. She sighed and walked to sit on one of the couches. She tucked her feet under her and curled up in the corner feline-like. "I never thought of it that way, but I guess you're right. I did paint it for Kellen."

I sat across from her. "Did you know Jillian has several Chasens?"

Alec continued to stare at me, but her face was again blank. A tiny narrowing of her eyes told me I had unknowingly scored a direct hit. "What game are you playing Victoria?"

"You're playing the games Alec, as usual."

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

I was tired of the charade. "Where is Kellen Brent? Her mother is marrying my father. She wants Kellen to come to the wedding."

As I spoke, Alec froze and her eyes turned to a glacier gray. She stared past me to the wind and rain beating against the glass doors. She spoke softly, "Jill sent you here."

Abruptly, she pinned me to the couch. Her eyes were bright with sudden knowledge. "Jill gave you directions here. She told you to talk to Kellen. She forgot to tell you everything else didn't she?"

She laughed darkly while I shook my head in bewilderment. What else was there to tell?

"Did Jill tell you Kellen is dead?" she asked with black humor.

I sighed impatiently, annoyed with her theatrics. I knew that. "Only legally."

The laughter died on Alec's face. "As far as Jill Young is concerned, Kellen Brent died twenty-five years ago. She's not coming to the wedding. Jill knew that before you left Los Angeles."

My brain seized upon the "before you left Los Angeles" feverishly. I drove all the way up here, put up with this crap and Jillian already knew Kellen wasn't coming? Why was I here? All this accomplished was to bring me back into contact with this annoying woman. "She knew before I left? Did she call or something?"

Alec shook her head. "She didn't have to."

She stood up and walked over to the painting. What was going on here? I could feel undercurrents of emotion that I didn't understand. Alec was angry and hurt and I was not sure why. "I can't believe she just let you come up here without a clue as to what you were blundering into. Tell me, Daniel, how does it feel to be in the lion's den?"

I stayed silent. She turned and looked down on me, something akin to pity in her eyes. The ringing of the phone forestalled any further conversation. Alec's soft lilt instructing the caller to leave a message filled the house.

"Alec, please call me back."

The old reserve was back in place as she walked past me. The husky voiced woman must be important if Alec Chasen was returning her call so quickly. Almost as an after thought, she turned from the door of her studio. "You might as well spend the night. This storm's not going to let up tonight."

She shut the door firmly.

~~~~~

The trip to my car took longer than I anticipated. The rain was coming down in slanted sheets propelled by an icy wind. It was hard to believe it was the middle of summer. It felt as if it had dropped twenty degrees in the short time I was in the house. Luckily, I travel light and was able to bring everything in one trip. I would have been tempted to leave anything else in the car overnight.

Alec was still in her studio when I came back, dripping and shivering. I paused midway up the stairs. What if Kellen had only one bedroom? Oh, well. I would find out soon enough and it really didn't matter. I was going to take a shower whether she had one bedroom or two.

Overlooking the living room, I found a loft bedroom and a closed door. Their bedroom. I wanted to think I was immune to Alec. She threw me out of her home two years ago. The last year of our relationship was less than idyllic so it came as no surprise. Actually, she beat me to the punch because I was getting ready to move out. So, two years later, I should feel nothing for her. Did it matter that I was completely in love with her ethereal beauty and Brit accent? Did it matter that Alec was still the lover I compared all others to?

I dropped my suitcase on the bed in the loft bedroom and opened the door to Kellen's bedroom, the one she shared with Alec I reminded myself. One wall was glass and, of course, had an ocean view. A king-sized bed was the only furniture in the room. An entertainment unit was built into the wall and housed a television and stereo. The bathroom was to the right of the door and a walk-in closet was next to the entertainment unit.

I went back to "my room" and grabbed a pair of jeans and shirt. I was shivering, but thought once I took a hot shower I would be warm in the short sleeve polo shirt. I did not pack anything heavier than a silk dress shirt for this excursion.

The hot water felt wonderful. Kellen's shower was a huge, glass enclosed cubicle tucked in a corner. I doggedly blocked out images of Alec and Kellen in this shower together. I do not know what Kellen Brent looks like, but her childhood pictures are of a blonde imp. When I stepped from the shower, Alec was holding a navy bath towel. Her eyes were modestly downcast.

"Are you hungry?"

I was famished. I do not like to eat on long trips and only brought a cooler of soft drinks with me. I took the towel and quickly dried myself. I watched Alec ignore me from the corner of my

eye. It was nice to know she wasn't immune either.

"Starved. Is there a place to eat in town?"

Alec laughed and walked out of the bathroom. "Not in this storm or this late. Aubres does not cater to the tourist set. I, however, do cater to guests."

I wrapped myself in the towel and followed her into the bedroom. "Give me a few minutes to dress then I'll be down to help."

Dinner was a simple meal of grilled chicken breasts, steamed vegetables and toasted French bread. For the first time I could ever remember, Alec did not spike her drink with vodka. Of course, just because I did not see her pour vodka in her glass did not mean it was not there. Alec was an alcoholic who thoroughly enjoyed being an alcoholic. She could be surly and venomous and too drunk to give a damn that I was hurt or angry.

Perhaps to aid in digestion, our conversation was centered on superficial subjects like mutual friends and current events. We did not talk about Kellen Brent, the wedding or us.

Alec said she was tired after we cleaned up the kitchen. She made sure I had blankets and whatever else I wanted before going to bed. She leaned over the railing, "By the way, Jill called while you were taking a shower. You should probably call her back."

I stared at the closed door. She did that on purpose. She did not want to deal with this anymore tonight and so she tells me a mere second before she shuts her door for the night. Some of my warm feelings turned to icy resentment.

The only phone I could find was in Alec's studio. I sat at her desk and dialed Windchase. I waited impatiently through four rings before Jillian answered the phone. She sounded sleepy.

"I'm sorry to call back so late. I just got your message."

I heard shuffling in the background and guessed that Jillian was in bed. "It's all right Victoria. Is she coming?"

I felt sorry for her. She desperately wanted Kellen at the wedding. How did I tell her that not only was Kellen not coming to the wedding, but that I did not get the refusal from Kellen herself? "No, Jillian, she's not. She's not even here."

Jillian was silent on her end of the phone. She asked, puzzled, "How did you know I called? I left the message on Kellen's answering machine."

"I'm at Kellen's house. Her roommate is here and letting me stay the night."

"Her roommate? Is her roommate Alec Chasen?" Her voice had taken on an edge of anger.

Her tone surprised me. If Jillian did not like Alec, why did she own several Chasens? "Yes, she is."

"Is Alec there? May I speak to her?" Jillian's tone was definitely cold. She sounded furious with Alec. Why Alec? Kellen was the one not home. Kellen was the one not coming to the wedding.

I stared up at the ceiling. "She's in bed."

Jillian took a deep breath. When she spoke, she said the blasphemous words calmly. "Alec Chasen is not Kellen's roommate. Alec Chasen is Kellen."

~~~~~

I loved Alec Chasen. I met her soon after she moved from some cold coastal English town to warm, sunny Los Angeles. Her slight Brit accent led me to believe she was English and she never corrected the assumption. Alec never corrected any assumptions. I have a personality column in *The Los Angeles Times*. My best friend is Elane Rasche, Alec's agent. Elane owns the gallery where Alec's paintings are shown. Alec and I were going to meet, it was only a matter of when.

Elane asked me for a favor. Alec was new to Los Angeles, but a very talented painter. Elane asked me to interview Alec for my column, give her what Elane called "much needed" exposure. I did not know that Alec Chasen was already well-known in London. Alec was not one of Elane's discoveries.

The young woman I met for lunch was not what I expected. Alec showed up wearing a silk navy tailored suit with lacy dove gray handkerchief in the breast pocket. Her pale blonde hair caressed her shoulders in silver waves, much like Jillian's does today. Dark gray eyes skimmed over me and I was dismissed instantly. I was not someone Alec wanted to know better. The interview was brief and to the point. Alec answered the basic questions, brushed the rest away as irrelevant, and left before the meal was served.

Elane explained later that Alec had just come from a distressing appointment and would I please reconsider trashing her in my column? Alec invited me to dinner that night. The woman who picked me up for dinner was not the same woman I met that afternoon. This time she wore a simple black strapless dress. She was charming and funny. She still did not want to talk about her life in England or her family. All she would say is that she lived with her grandmother. She spent the night in my bed. I was living in her Benedict Canyon home within six months.

I never learned any more about Alec than I did that first night. She tolerated my questions in the beginning, mostly with amusement. Gradually, she came to resent my asking almost as much as I resented her secrecy. The more I demanded answers to my questions, the more Alec withdrew. We were barely speaking in the end.

If I had taken a step back, I would have seen Alec was on edge. She was painting madly, as if her sanity depended on painting this seascape this minute. She would paint for days on end with nothing more than 7?Up and vodka for nourishment. The paintings she created during that time,

the last six months we were together, are her best. She has not equaled that haunted brilliance since.

The final straw for Alec were my questions about the soft spoken woman whose calls sent Alec into bursts of anger. I wanted to know who she was, why she upset Alec so, and she refused to listen to my questions. She would walk away, lock the door, stare over my shoulder if I cornered her, do anything not to have to hear me.

"Who is she Alec? She left another message on the answering machine. She calls you darling. Who is she?" I demanded one afternoon after listening to another message on the answering machine. Alec was painting in her studio.

Alec calmly laid her paintbrush on the easel, turned to face me, and casually brushed long strands of blonde hair away from her icy, narrowed eyes. "Do not ever ask me that question again. Do not ever ask me any questions in that tone again. Do you understand?"

Recklessly, I pushed on. "I am going to keep asking until I get answers."

Alec picked up a rag and wiped the oil from her fingers. She turned her back on me and stared up at the hills surrounding her home. "I will no longer be interrogated incessantly, Victoria. I want it to stop." She turned and nailed me with her eyes. "It will stop."

"No, it won't stop. Not until you answer me." Did I really think I had that much value in the relationship?

She walked to my side and faced me with that mask that hid her emotions so well. If it hurt to do what she was about to do it didn't show in her eyes. "I'll be back at seven. I want you to take what is yours and leave my home."

It was over just like that. She walked away and left me speechless. I waited until eleven o'clock, but she never came back home. She sold her home less than two months later and was gone. Yesterday was the first time I have seen her since that afternoon.

Everything I ever wanted to know about Alec, all the questions that ripped us apart, was now mine to know.

After Jillian dropped her bomb, I wanted to go to Alec's bedroom and dump her out of the bed. I wanted to call her Kellen and watch her stoic poise crumble like a sand castle under a tidal wave. I wanted her to know that with one small sentence from her mother, I knew everything.

By the time the black sky was a dull wet gray, I wanted her to confess all to me. After all I went through during our years together, she owed it me to tell me the truth without it being dragged out of her.

Rain and salt water swept across the deck and splashed against the sliding glass doors. Although Alec's paintings are of days like this, she only paints on perfect sunny days. She preferred to read

and cook on soggy days. Or she did once.

The sound of running water alerted me that Alec was up and moving. The moment of truth had arrived. Should I stay in the living room or go upstairs and pretend I slept through the night? Did I want Alec to know I knew who she was or I did want her to play out her charade? I ran upstairs and sat on the edge of the bed. I wanted to see how far she would take it. I scrambled out of my clothes and onto the bed just as the water shut off in her bathroom. At the last minute, I remembered to mess up the pillows and sheets. I had my own charade to carry out. I jumped as she silently appeared in the doorway. Her tan stood out starkly against her white baggy cotton pants and tank top. She briskly dried her spiked hair.

"Good morning, Victoria. I'm done in the bathroom if you wish to use it. Are you hungry?"

How could she look so guileless while being so deceitful? She was the daughter of an Oscar nominated actress. Acting must be an inherited trait. Silver eyes waited patiently for an answer.

"No, I'm not. I would like to use the shower." A long night spent ruminating is tiring on the body. The drive from Los Angeles did not help. Another hot shower would definitely work out the kinks I could feel forming.

She nodded and went downstairs. I stood over the railing and watched her move gracefully through the dark lower floor. She touched light pads as she walked through and brought bright light in the gloomy gray. As she gathered several items on the counter, her eyes strayed to the wind and rain battering her house. Her face was blank as she watched her paintings come to life. Feeling like the voyeur I was, I walked into her bedroom and shut the door. The time was 5:38. Alec was sleeping late these days.

The difference a day makes is amazing. Yesterday I stood in the shower and tried not to imagine Alec and Kellen showering together. Today I stood there and knew that Alec was Kellen. I shut off the water and was somewhat surprised to find myself alone in the bathroom. I stared at my reflection in the mirror as I brushed my teeth. I saw a thirty?six year old woman with short black hair and large blue eyes. She was average in height, average in weight, average in looks. My best feature is an easy smile that shows a dimple in my right cheek.

I was the same woman Alec threw from her life two years ago. Except this woman knew her secrets.

I walked out of her bedroom and stopped at the delicious aroma of bacon and hot coffee that filled the rooms. My stomach loudly protested my earlier rejection of breakfast. Alec was standing in front of the glass doors. She was sipping from a steamy mug. With only a few minor changes, this is how I found her on the pier yesterday.

"Good morning," I greeted, coming to her side.

She peered over the rim of the mug for a second. "Are you hungry now? I remembered you don't like to eat when you first wake up."

She was beautiful in the soft gray light of the storm. Her eyes were silver and her hair ash blonde. Some time in the last two years, her face had lost the last vestiges of baby fat. She broke eye contact first and walked into the kitchen. I stood at the doors a second longer to regain my composure. I knew I was still attracted to her, but I was surprised my attraction did not die with Jillian's revelation.

Alec Chasen was Kellen Brent. I turned and watched her. She poured a yellow liquid into a pan and sprinkled bacon pieces, shredded cheese, and sliced mushrooms over the omelet. She was Kellen Brent. If I asked her, would she deny it? I lived with Alec and I loved her, but I believed Jillian. Everything about Alec Chasen made perfect sense once you knew she was Kellen Brent.

"Victoria?" She stared at me with a questioning expression on her face. "Are you all right?"

I went to the breakfast bar and sat across from her. "I'm fine."

Breakfast was the omelet and toast and we drank fresh brewed coffee. It was storming again and the crash of thunder could be heard every few minutes. Alec was the first to break the silence.

"I do not expect you to leave today. You can stay as long as you like." She turned on her barstool, her face serious. "However, stay out of my face. Start badgering me and I'll throw you out."

She would, too. She did it once and claimed to love me at the time. Besides, her face is not what I intended to get in. I met her gaze with a smile. "Fair enough."

We cleaned up the kitchen and it was nice to move around in a companionable silence. I forgot that when I was not demanding and Alec was not running, we were good together.

"You're not going to be able to paint today, are you?" I asked. If it rained too often, Alec became irritable. I could live without that experience again.

Alec shrugged as if it mattered little whether she painted. "Want a book? I'm going to curl up on my bed with a nice book and a warm blanket."

I followed her into her studio. I did not notice too much about it last night. It was the smallest room in the house. A large desk fitted between the two side walls and was pushed against the back wall. A computer sat on the desk surrounded by papers. The rest of the wall space was floor to ceiling book shelves. Alec had a diverse book collection. Lesbian mysteries and erotica snuggled against mainstream fiction and sci-fi. She grabbed a Stoner MacTavish Mystery and smiled at me as she left the room.

I browsed through the books and felt like I was in a library. Alec had several books I wanted to read, but never found the time. Now all I had to do was decide which I wanted to read more. I finally decided on a book of short, erotic stories.

I left the studio and stopped before shutting the door. I stared around the little office, wondering what it was that bothered me so much about the room. It was an ordinary office. Computer, books, desk. The realization of what I was seeing shocked me. It was an ordinary office in a room that should have been full of paints and easels. This room, tucked under the stairs and without a view, was not supposed to be an office. It was supposed to be the studio where the beautiful Chasen's were created.

I dropped my book on the breakfast bar and made a cursory search through the ground floor. The only room not visible was a laundry room. Alec's windbreaker was thrown on the dryer. I came back to the kitchen. I did not even find a paint brush, much less the usual work-in-progress. Where was Alec painting?

Alec was curled in the middle of her bed, wrapped in a thick forest green Afghan. A mug of coffee rested precariously against her thigh. Cris Williamson was singing softly in the background. I think I looked as frantic as I felt. Alec's questioning smile turned to concern as she stared up at me.

"Where do you paint?"

A frown furrowed her forehead and she laid her book in her lap. "Pardon?"

I ignored the familiar irritation in her voice. If this was the kind of question I could not ask, I was prepared to be tossed out. "I was in your office when I realized it wasn't a studio. You are Alec Chasen. Where do you paint?"

She sighed and laid her head against the headboard to stare at me wearily. I knew this look very well. It meant she wanted to tell me the truth, but did not want to deal with the questions that truth would inspire in me. "No other questions? Do you promise not to ask any other questions?"

This was a new twist. Alec never asked that when we were together. Foolishly, I nodded. Would I ever learn there are no ordinary answers to my questions?

"I'm not painting anymore."

She said it so simply, so matter-of-fact. I sat on the bed, speechless. Not paint anymore? She was the premier painter of her generation. She was extraordinarily gifted and had painted as if her life depended on it. How could she be Alec Chasen and not paint?

"Elane must be ballistic," I replied, biting back the multitude of questions begging to be asked.

Alec stared at me carefully. She knew what I was struggling with, was probably wondering if I could keep my promise. "She's less than happy."

I stood up and walked to the door. She was so different from the woman I thought I knew. "I'm sorry."

Where was the drunken painter? Who was this woman who seemed so content with her life? I turned back and found her watching me. I was sorry, but I wasn't sure why. Because Alec Chasen did not paint anymore? I was never a Chasen fan. I felt as if I had lost something personal. She had taken something from me with that statement and I was inexplicable angry with her because of it.

So Alec Chasen did not paint anymore. Why did I care?

~~~~~

I must have fallen asleep thinking about Alec and Kellen and Jillian. When I woke several hours later, the loft was dimly lit and the tangy smell of beef stew lingered in the air. I sat up and stretched. I could hear rain pounding on the roof and knew that time was still suspended. I leaned over the railing and scanned the ground floor. The kitchen was well lit. I could see a pot simmering on the stove. I could not see Alec anywhere. Silently, I checked her bedroom and found only the Afghan folded neatly on her bed. Where was she? I went downstairs and crossed the living room to the glass doors. The wind threw waves over the pier and lightning raced across the black, cloudy sky.

"You're awake."

I jumped and spun around at the soft voice that came from the dark living room. Alec, still clad in the baggy clothes, came from the shadows. As usual, she held a glass in her hand. Every time I saw her, she was holding a glass. The sarcastic words left me before I could catch them. "Still clinging to a glass I see."

Hurt crossed her face before she hid it behind a blank mask. I was surprised by the rare show of emotion. She was such a master at hiding how she felt it was easy to forget she had feelings. "It's only coke."

"Whatever," I said as she passed me to go to the kitchen. She placed the glass on the counter and stirred the bubbling stew.

"Taste it if you don't believe me," she invited with a tired sigh.

Gray eyes watched me pick up her glass and sip her drink. The coke was alcohol free. I stared at her, this woman I once knew so well and yet, never knew at all. The Alec I loved, the angry painter hiding behind her secrets and alcohol, was gone. Everything I ever knew with certainty about her was no longer a part of who she was now.

I wish I could blame what happened next on the long drive and lack of sleep. The emotional shocks had knocked off my equilibrium and I was being tossed around like a buoy in the storm. I wish I could say it was anything but the truth. I wanted to knock her off her feet like she kept knocking me off mine. I was hurt and I wanted to hurt her.

"You were never going to tell me that you're Kellen Brent, were you? You'd let me leave here believing she's your lover."

The shock I wanted to see flooded her eyes. She replaced the lid on the pot ever so carefully. Her eyes were black in her pale face. She walked to the glass doors. I was scared she would walk out onto the rain swept pier and vanish. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if suddenly cold in the warm house.

"Jill. She must have told you last night," she said so softly I barely heard the words.

"Why did you wait so long? It's what you always wanted." Her voice was stronger now, bitter and cold in accusation. She glanced at me over her shoulder, icy gray eyes damned me and my never ending questions. "What's wrong Victoria? Not going as planned? Aren't I reacting the way you wanted?"

She walked into the living room, viciously slapping light pads as she passed. She stood under the Chasen she painted for a little child named Kellen. She was tightly coiled, barely controlled anger.

"Come on. Finish this. You started it so long ago."

Did I? Was it so unusual for a lover to want to know everything about you? Was I so wrong to be curious about her life? Anyone would have been curious. She was so secretive, so desperately unhappy. I wanted to help her, but I never knew how. I cannot change what I do not understand. And I cannot understand what I do not know. She was beautiful and talented and living so close to insanity that there had to be a reason.

"I did not start this," I denied. She was not going to blame the past on me. "You did, with all your secrets."

She turned and met my gaze. "You were in my present and you could have shared my future, but I did not owe you my past. Of all the things you could have claimed, my past was never one of them."

Our gazes locked and I remained silent. "What else did Jill tell you?@

I shook my head. There was nothing left to tell. Jillian ended our conversation seconds after telling me that Alec was Kellen. Alec closed her eyes briefly and turned back to the painting. I moved to the couch and sat down. Minutes ticked by as she stared at the painting and I stared at her stiff back. When she turned to me again, her eyes were glacial. Her tone would have frozen the flames in hell.

"Remember this, Victoria, if you never remember anything else I ever say: it's not betrayal if you are betrayed first."

I sat dumbfounded as she went to her office and slammed the door. What did that mean?

~~~~~

She was in her office for hours. I ate some of the stew and stored the rest in the refrigerator. I sat in the living room and waited. I did not know what I was going to say to her or if she would let me say anything. Alec is particularly unforgiving. I had wondered why Jillian did not invite Kellen herself. Now I knew. Alec does not answer her phone. She lets her machine take all her calls and returns messages when and if she wants. Letters are sent back with OCCUPANT MOVED written across the top. Once Alec shuts someone out of her life, they cease to exist in her world.

I sat up when the door opened and Alec came out. We met across the bar. Our eyes met briefly and I was shocked to see the same shadows that darkened her eyes in Los Angeles. She moved around the kitchen and soon a small pan of stew was warming on the stove. She cut off a thick slice of bread and buttered it before popping it in the toaster oven.

"It's not like they said," she whispered hoarsely. If she had been crying, it did not show on her face.

I waited for her to explain. When she continued to stir the stew absently, I asked softly, "What's not like they said?"

I was afraid to speak in a normal voice for fear that whatever fragile thread held her here with me would break. She placed the toasted bread and a bowl on a tray. She poured the stew in the bowl and carefully took the tray to the living room. She seemed small in the corner of the couch, bruised and delicate. Her slender body was tensed under the baggy clothes. This lost wounded woman was the Alec I remembered so well. I saw before that she was not the same woman I knew before, why couldn't I see that she was free of the dark shadows?

She stared out at the dying storm, her eyes holding steady. It was not the storm she saw and it was not the horizon that continually drew her gaze. She was hearing the not so distant echoes of her past.

"Brian. It didn't happen the way Patrick wants everyone to believe."

I held my breath as she continued to stare at nothing. Did I really want to know more Brent family secrets? Did I want to know what horror was being replayed behind her shattered gray eyes? I watched with the kind of sick fascination usually reserved for wrecks on the freeway. I did not encourage her, but I did not stop her either.

"Nobody broke in. There were only three people in the house that night. Brian. Jill. Me."

I went numb from the confession. The shock of that night was on her face. Three people in the house; Brian was dead and Kellen was banished. Patrick declared his only grandchild dead on December 25, 1968.

I came to the only conclusion I could. "You killed Brian."

Alec shifted her gaze to me. Her eyes were black and empty. Without looking away, she put her

tray of uneaten food on the table. She stood up and stared down on me as if she had never seen me before and did not care for what she saw now.

"That would be the logical choice," she said tightly. She stalked to the window. I was numb and silent. I watched her stand stiffly at the glass doors and stare into the black nothingness. Oh God! I was at a loss as to what to do or say. I wanted to go to her and hold her. I stared at her blank reflection and knew that I would never ask her why she killed Brian. Whatever else, I would never ask that.

"Alec..."

"Leave me alone. Just this once, Victoria, leave me alone," she cut me off sharply. Anger saturated her words.

And just this once, I left her alone.

### 3.

I woke to an empty house the next morning. Cold coffee and a used plate were the only signs that Alec was around somewhere. But where? I waited for her to come to bed last night, but I waited in vain. I fell asleep watching her stand at the glass doors. I never heard her come upstairs.

The view beyond the glass was of a perfect blue sky and gently rolling waves. The familiar figure was not standing on the end of the pier holding a glass. I opened the door and walked onto the pier, glancing up and down the private beach.

A warm breeze was coming off the water. Alec really did have a beautiful, tranquil retreat from the world. The only reality that intruded here was the kind Alec invited or, like me, that pushed its way into her life. I was glad she had a place to relax her guard. Everyone needed somewhere like this. Although, most people could not afford the total isolation Alec Chasen could buy. Most did not need it like Kellen Brent.

Where did a non-working painter go so early on a Monday morning? It was not as if she had a job or anything so pressing. Her painting never had set hours or a rigid schedule. When she painted, it was by desire or need, but never because it was eight in the morning.

I wandered back in the house, looking for a note taped to or lying on something. Would she leave without telling me? This was her home, her sanctuary. A sanctuary Jillian and I defiled by bringing in her past. I made her confront a tragedy she tried so desperately hard to forget. Instead of wondering if she would leave, I should wonder why she would stay. I would have left. I would have run so far away Jillian would never have found me again.

A quick search of Alec's bedroom revealed nothing apparently missing. The clothes were all evenly spaced in the closet, no gaps between the shoes. Nothing hinted of a mad dash to pack

and put as much distance as she could between herself and this house.

"Victoria?"

I jumped and spun at the unexpected, perplexed voice. Alec was standing in the doorway. She wore paint splattered blue jeans and pristine white T-shirt. She walked into the room and tossed a rainbow dotted white smock to the bed.

"What are you doing in here?"

I swallowed nervously, elated she did not run this time. "I was looking for you."

She smiled and shook her head. "I guess that means you didn't find the note I left by your bed."

My room was the one place I forgot to look for a note and it was the most obvious place she would have left one. I shook my head and laughed because she was not on a plane with a new name. "Where were you?"

Alec stood up and striped off her jeans and T-shirt. I had a sudden interest in the view from her bedroom. "I teach art in the mornings at the local school. It's a summer program."

I turned, surprised by the preposterous answer. I caught Alec stepping into the shower. Alec was an art teacher. That was the most incredible statement I ever heard. I walked into the bathroom and sat on the tub. Steam was rising from the shower cubicle. Alec Chasen was no longer painting the seascapes that made her successful, but she was teaching children how to paint. She never said or did anything like I remotely expected. Which brought up the question, why did I keep having expectations of her? If I ever sat back and just went along for the ride, I could have the ride of my life.

When she stepped from the shower, I had a towel waiting for her. My eyes were not modestly downcast. "I thought you said you don't paint anymore."

She laughed and I followed her into the bedroom. She patted droplets of water clinging to her body as she walked. "I don't, not professionally. What I paint there will never be considered a Chasen Original. No one would pay money for that."

I sat on the bed. "I thought that about some of your other stuff, but I was wrong. At some point, they start buying the name."

She stood in the closet and selected a pair of khaki shorts and maroon knit shirt. She was incredibly beautiful. Pale blonde hair, silver shadow free eyes, lithe body.

"I know that better than you do. Yes, I'm talented. It's not conceit to recognize that. I also now no one is talented enough to make the kind of money I did and still be alive."

She came back into the bedroom dressed. She picked up her dirty clothes and threw them in the

bathroom hamper. "Patrick asked me when I first came back if I realized the money I could make if my paintings bore the Kellen Brent name. I knew that, too. I never did it for the money. Whatever else it was about, it was never for the money."

She acknowledged her past without faltering, her eyes candid as they mine in a direct stare. How did it get that easy? After our history, how did it get that easy to say? How did she pull herself together so that it no longer mattered that I knew she was Kellen Brent?

"It's easy to not care about money when you have a lot of it," I replied absently. She was Brian Brent's only child, his heir to the Brent family fortune.

She stared at me silently for a few seconds. "Not that I care, but what exactly did I do to you to make you think the absolute worst of me? You never give me the benefit of the doubt. You give me every evil trait and bad motive you can every chance you get. Just what did I do to you that was so bad?"

The question caught me off guard. "I don't think the worst of you."

"Yes you do. Just for the record, I never got any of Brian's money. I suppose Jill sent some to my grandmother when I was younger, but we've never discussed it. What I have now, I earned. The dead do not inherit. And Kellen Brent is dead."

She left me sitting on the bed. The look in her eyes was one I was beginning to recognize. Alec did not like what she saw when she looked at me. On some unknown level, I had failed her. It was not a test that I had failed exactly, but I had gone down in her eyes. I did not like the feeling very much.

Was I surprised to find her on the pier? No. It was the first place I looked for her. She might not paint anymore, but she still found solace in the kiss of the sun on her face and the crash of the waves. I stood in the at the door and watched her. She was leaning against the railing on her elbows. A soft breeze played with her hair. I walked out when she turned and dark eyes flashed. She hated to be watched.

"I'm sorry, I just assumed," I apologized. Was I really apologizing to her every other hour or did it just seem like it?

Without looking at me, she said, "You think you know me, Victoria. All you know is name and a past you think you understand. You do not know me just because you know that once, a very long time ago, my name was Kellen Brent."

A new barrier was between us and I did not know how to make it go away. I liked this Alec. I wanted to get to know her better.

"When are you leaving?"

I could leave any time now that the rain was gone. It would be easy to pack my bags, say

goodbye, and leave Alec Chasen forever. Her chapter in my life would have an ending. I could move on and meet new women who would not have to live up to an image that was never real. And if I believed any of that, I would already be packed.

I leaned against the railing and waited until Alec faced me. Heart wrenching honesty has never been a favorite of mine. Lies are so much easier to smile away. "If you want me to leave, I will. No questions and no recriminations. But I want to stay."

Alec sighed. "Why Tory?"

Tory. I have not heard that name in two years. Some people call me Vickie or Vic, but only Alec ever called me Tory. I never thought I would hear it again. I did not realize until now how I longed to hear her say it in that soft Brit voice.

In answer, I leaned forward and touched my lips to hers.

~~~~~

When Alec came from teaching the next day, I was dozing on the deck. I was alone again this morning, but I was not concerned. I knew where Alec was and knew that she would be back before lunch. I took the book I was reading onto the deck. She woke me by trailing light kisses over my shoulders and back.

"You're turning a nice golden tan. How long have you been out here?" she asked, running her fingers across my thighs. She was wearing an outfit similar to yesterday's.

I turned over and sat up. I glanced at her wrist watch. "About an hour. How was your class?"

Her smile was sweet and excited. "Great. I don't remember the last time I enjoyed painting this much."

She gave me a quick kiss on the lips before standing up. She seemed very happy. The briny breeze tugged playfully at her hair, giving her a carefree air. She walked down the pier with her hands in the air and her face raised to the sun. Happy was never a word I thought I would use to describe Alec Chasen.

"What do you want to do today? We can do whatever you want."

I laughed and allowed myself to be caught up in her reckless abandon. "How private is this beach?"

She turned and watched with intense eyes as I stripped. Finally, when I was naked before her, she grinned. "What makes you think this is a private beach?"

For one, brief horrible second, I flushed in embarrassment. Then I remembered that whoever else this carefree waif was, she was still Alec Chasen, Hermit Extraordinaire. This was a very private beach.

"Because I know you."

It took less time to strip her than it took to strip myself. I was reminded of yesterday. At her first touch, I stopped thinking and went totally on instinct. It was better than any fantasy I had about Alec. There was all the anticipation and heady excitement of the first time plus the knowledge that I wanted this woman, knew her caress. She was the most beautiful woman I ever knew. I live in Los Angeles. I know a million beautiful women.

"Tory," she whispered, standing so close to me our bodies were touching, "What do you want?"

Her words barely registered. I saw her face coming close, saw her eyes staring into mine, felt her lips brush against mine. What was she saying?

One hand slid around my waist and pulled me tight against her, the other hand caressed the back of my neck. I was drowning in the sensations her touches were causing. In the next second, I was drowning in the Pacific. I stood up sputtering, breast deep in cold, almost icy water.

Alec smirked from the pier. "You needed to cool off."

I watched, stunned, as she turned and disappeared. Her turn would come and everyone knew payback was hell. I trudged through the water to the ladder and climbed back onto the pier. Alec was sitting in a steamy hot tub tucked into the corner of the deck and house.

She grinned as I slipped into the bubbly water, her eyes almost a physical touch as she watched me settle myself across from her. It was hard to leave you this morning. I was afraid to open my eyes because it was probably just another dream. I've missed you."

The hot water felt wonderful after my cool dip. "Why didn't you call me?"

Alec stared down into the water. Sunlight glittered across the water on her shoulders, off the silver cap of hair. "I didn't know how to make you stop. I guess secrets kept too long become impossible to explain and forgive."

I stared at the bent blonde head in amazement. It was small, but Alec Chasen was apologizing to me. I moved to kneel between her legs. I put my hands on her hips. "There's nothing to forgive. You are right. You didn't owe me your past. I'm sorry I made you feel like you did."

I chose my next words carefully. I was treading on forbidden ground, but I had to know. "Alec, what was going on back then? The people who kept calling all the time, was it Patrick and Jillian?"

She sighed. I could see the blackness settle around her shoulders. She nodded and looked at me with a bitter expression on her face.

"They wanted to claim Alec Chasen. You see, I wasn't supposed to grow up to be a somebody. I

was supposed to stay five years old and at Moregrove House forever. I wasn't supposed to grow up and I damned sure wasn't supposed to become Alec Chasen. The only reason I never slit my wrists was the satisfaction I knew the Senator would get from burying me for real."

"They wanted you back?" I asked, trying to understand what it was that almost drove her over the edge two years ago. Did Alec not want to be a part of her family? It seemed that way.

"No, not me. Patrick wants the publicity he will get if Alec Chasen is his granddaughter. I have two problems with that. I don't want to be Kellen Brent and his terms were unacceptable."

I asked, confused, "Terms?"

Alec looked away. "I would have to agree to the public version of that night. I am not willing to do that."

I swallowed the rest of my questions. If I pressed, I knew she could explain why she would want the truth of that night to come out. I simply wasn't ready to hear it. I did not want to know what Alec thought she would gain if the world knew she killed Brian. Or what she thought she would lose.

~~~~~

That afternoon set the tone for the next three days. Alec would come home and we would walk on the beach or sit in the hot tub. We sat on the pier and I listened as Alec talked about what it meant to be Kellen Brent.

Life in England was not unpleasant. Moregrove House was an isolated country estate bought to protect Kellen. She lived there with Jillian's mother, Cordelia Chasen. Her name was changed to Alecia Chasen and she was taught by a live-in tutor. She drew pictures before coming to Moregrove House and it was Cordelia who encouraged her with paints. Holidays were spent roaming around the globe. She spoke of Cordelia with a deep love, but never mentioned Jillian. Her mother's visits were either painful to remember or not very memorable at all.

By twenty, Alec Chasen was firmly established in the London art world. She came back to Los Angeles because Cordelia told her it was time to go home.

"Everything I am today is because of Cordelia. I am not grateful for very many things, but I am grateful to Jill for sending me to live with Cordelia."

I did not want the easy rapport that was between us to end. Alec was more open than I ever thought she could be with another person. As I listened to her lonely story, I ached for the hurt child she had been. I would like to think I understand why the oil hanging over her fireplace is the last Chasen Original and why she painted it for a child named Kellen. I would like to think it was because she was coming to terms with her past. The problem with thinking I understand Alec is that I almost never do.

My life could not be put on indefinite hold. I did not want to leave Alec, but I had to go back to

my life in Los Angeles. By Thursday I was searching for ways to bring up the subject of Alec coming back to Los Angeles with me. The answer was so simple I almost overlooked it.

"I am not coming to the wedding," she said annoyance creeping into her voice. We were on the deck enjoying the setting sun. Alec was scrunched down in her chair, feet propped on the railing.

"But, I thought..." What did I think? Alec never said she was coming to the wedding. She said, quite clearly, that she was not coming. "Why not?"

She looked over at me and the expression on her face told me I should know the answer. She sat up and anger was forming in her eyes. "Because I don't want to. I don't have to do things I don't want to do anymore. That's what being an adult is, doing what you want."

Oh really? I thought being an adult meant doing the things you did not want to do with grace and style. Children are the ones who balked at doing the things life required. And life required that a daughter attend her mother's wedding. "Do you really believe that Alec?"

"Why would you even think I would go knowing all that you do now? How can you even ask me to go?"

We were standing face to face and not even the darkness could hide the fire burning in her eyes.

"Because she's your mother, Alec. Because she's reaching out to you. She's forgiven you."

Alec laughed bitterly at that. "Jill's forgiven me? For what?"

"She doesn't blame you for what happened. If you want your life back, you can have it." It was so simple to me. Why didn't she see it?

"I am not coming to the wedding, Victoria. Do not ask me again."

This was the Alec from Los Angeles. The one who demanded not to be questioned, the one who threw me from her life without a backwards glance. The reason she was not going to the wedding was obvious now. She could hurt Jillian by refusing. It was not enough that she never saw Jillian. It was not enough that she would not even talk to her on the phone. She had closed her mother completely from her life and that was still not enough.

"Why are you punishing her?"

The answer came from her immediately, without a pause. "Because I can."

That said it all. She did it because she could. I asked the unbelievable. "You hate her don't you?"

The truth was on her face, but she shook her head in denial. "No, I do not hate her. I just do not love her."

"She's your mother, Alec," I said, as if that made any difference.

She turned her back on me. I did not need to see her face to know it would be empty of all emotion. I knew that whatever she was feeling would be well hidden behind a mask of casual indifference. "She is not my mother. She is Kellen Brent's mother. Kellen Brent is dead."

My world was not all black and white, but neither was it filled with the shades of gray that colored Alec's life. Everything about her, to even her name, was a shadow of doubt. Was she Alec Chasen? Could she be Kellen Brent if the state of California said Kellen Brent was dead? She could deny anything about her life because it was neither the full truth nor a complete lie.

The one thing she could not deny was that Jillian Young gave birth to her, whatever her name. "She is your mother Alec. You owe it to her to at least acknowledge that."

"You think it's that easy? Yes, once, in another lifetime, I was Kellen Brent. Who that child might have grown up to be does not exist. I am not who I would have been if that night never happened. I am not Kellen Brent. I do not owe Jillian Young anything. She gets from me exactly what she deserves. It's too damn late for her to want anything more."

She picked up her glass and walked into her home.

I spent my last night sleeping in the loft bedroom. Alec was gone by the time I woke from a fitful sleep. A note by the bed wished me a safe trip home and offered a six pack of cokes to take with me. I guess I was leaving. I left a note of thanks on the breakfast bar.

I wanted to be like Alec and leave without looking back, but I watched the house disappear in my rearview mirror.

~~~~~

The first thing that impressed me about Jillian is how normal she seems. Her face is not a mirror for the tragedies that have shattered her private life. She does not talk easily about Brian or Kellen. She never mentioned, until I was in Aubres, that Alec Chasen was her daughter. Jillian has borne her fame like heavy cross since their deaths. She is, and will forever be, Brian Brent's widow, the mother of Kellen, the only survivor from that night.

Windchase is heavily guarded today and I was waved through the front gate easily. Why was I here? I could have called and given Jillian the news impersonally. I guess a part of me felt that I had to tell Jillian to her face that Alec was not coming. She already knew Kellen was not coming.

She was sitting on the patio. Several bridal magazines were spread over the table. She smiled when she saw me and I saw what had been before me all the time. Alec is a young Jillian. The only difference is that Jillian's bright green eyes will never be as bleak as Alec's gray. The wind tugged on her shoulder length blonde hair.

"Victoria. Are you back already?" She sounded pleased to see me. I felt sad for her.

Did she think I would have good news for her? I sat across from her. "I got back last night."

The drive back seemed twice as long as the drive up. I replayed all the conversations Alec and I shared and was surprised by the picture that emerged. The woman living in Aubres had moved beyond a tragic past to find a fragile peace.

Jillian stare at me expectantly. "Well? Is she coming?"

What was the best, least painful way to tell her Alec was not coming to the wedding for any price? There was not one and I was surprised she harbored even a tiny hopelette that Alec might come. If someone refuses to talk to you on the phone, you are being painfully naive to expect something like this.

"I'm sorry," I said and meant it.

Alec' mother shrugged as if it did not matter, but her trembling smile betrayed that it mattered very much. She played with the corner of her magazine for a few minutes. We sat in silence, the surf in the background. I let the silence linger and enjoyed the beautiful tranquility of Windchase. I would give her all the time she needed to regain her composure.

"Victoria? Why didn't Alec tell you she was Kellen? Why did she tell you that she was Alec?"

I was suddenly very tired of the deceit. Jillian was asking why Alec didn't tell me and it never occurred to her to tell me herself. We were playing games of half-truths and lies by omission. And I was a mere amateur trying to play with the masters. I told Jillian the truth and let the pieces land where they would.

"Alec and I were lovers two years ago. I knew she was Alec Chasen. She just didn't tell me she was Kellen, too."

Jillian did not bat an eye over my revelation. She either knew or did not care that Alec is a lesbian. "What did she say when you told her you knew?"

"She wasn't happy that you told me. She wanted to keep the charade of Alec Chasen."

"Why?" she asked, sounding truly puzzled.

If I did not know it before, I knew it now. Jillian did not know Alec. They might be mother and daughter, but either by desire or need, neither had reached out to the other. If they had, they might have gotten through this nightmare better.

"Denying Kellen Brent is a very big part of Alec. She's spent most of her life sidestepping questions about her past. I guess that after all these years, it was a habit she could not break."

She was quiet again, absorbing the news that maybe Alec's life was not the kind Jillian would have wished for her. What did she think having to do deny who she was would do to a child?

Alec rarely made friends and when she did, walls flew up at the first innocent question. Lying or making up answers simply never occurred to her.

"Is she very unhappy?" Jillian asked the question softly. She did not want to know the truth. She wanted to hear that Alec was as happy as she was successful. The two should go together.

I always thought of Alec as very unhappy. I was not sure anymore if that really described her. The woman I saw in Aubres, even when she was letting me believe she was Kellen's lover, was not the woman I loved in Los Angeles. She had a calmness I never would have thought Alec could possess. She was content. Maybe that was better than happy.

I met Jillian's fearful eyes. She was afraid of what I might say. "No, she isn't very unhappy. I have never seen her more happy."

I would never say Alec was happy, but in Aubres, in those few days, she was the happiest I have ever known her to be. I could tell Jillian that even if I could not spare her from knowing that her daughter was not a happy person.

"Thank you for trying," she whispered.

Jillian showed me her plans for the wedding. I listened and showed what I hope was enthusiasm. My eyes constantly strayed past her to the sparkling pool and wide emerald lawns. I could see a very young Alec playing happily in this fairyland. Did she get close to the cliff, maybe crawl to the edge and look down the sheer drop to the ocean? I wanted Kellen to be happy here because it was too sad to think what her life was after she left here.

~~~~~

Jillian married Rainer on September 25, 1990. The ceremony was beautiful and planned to the exchange of vows before the burst of golden colors in the sunset. The day would have been perfect for Jillian if Alec had been there to witness it. She did not mention Alec and I was angry that she was beginning this new life without Alec by her side. It could have been a new life and new family for both of them.

It was a small affair. The guests were family and close friends. Patrick and Celeste Brent sent a gift, but declined to attend. I was surprised Jillian invited them. When I asked Jillian which of her movie star friends were coming, she stared at me blankly and said she did not have any movie star friends.

As I stood on the patio sipping champagne and watching my father dance with Jillian, the strangest thought occurred to me. This was the first party held at Windchase since that fateful Christmas Eve party. I glanced at the second floor. I knew I was not supposed to go up there, knew the second floor was off limits to everyone. Maybe even Rainer was not allowed on the sacred second floor.

I was able to slip away from the party easily. I was the last person on their happy little minds. This party, unlike the Christmas Eve party, was confined to the balmy patio. The downstairs was

dimly lit by the flood lights. I edged around furniture and stood, breathless at the bottom of the staircase. The staircase. The staircase that led to the scene of the crime.

Laughter and music drifted from the party. I put one foot on the bottom stair, but paused. Did I really want to do this? What could I possibly hope to learn?

I almost ran up the stairs I was so afraid of being caught. I wanted to do this and I did not want Jillian to stop me. I did not want to guess at her reaction if she ever found out I was up here. This step relationship could get off to a very bad start.

The staircase circled up around the fountain. Wide balconies overlooked the foyer from both sides of the staircase. I counted five doors, two to my left, two in front of me and one to my right. The sunken double doors of the room on my right indicated this was the master bedroom. I peeked into the rooms in front of me and was surprised they were bedrooms. Why have guest rooms if you never have guests?

We should never be allowed to have preconceived notions. I knew from Jillian's book that she was never able to pack up Kellen's nursery. I romanticized how the room would look. I thought everything would be all bright and sunny, still waiting for the five year old who left so abruptly. I imagined a room filled with plush stuffed animals and dolls with houses. I saw a canopy bed with yellow comforter. The room I envisioned belonged to the pampered, adored child of Brian Brent and Jillian Young.

The handle turned easily in my hand. I slipped into the room and shut the door before flipping on the light. I did not want to alert anyone to my activities. I was too close to seeing Kellen's nursery.

I was not prepared for the room. There was a canopy bed, but the comforter was white. The doll house was a replica of Windchase. A Raggedy Ann doll the size of small child was sitting in the bay window. A tea party was in progress at a small patio table. Except for a few details, it was how Kellen Brent must have left it twenty?five years ago.

The few details were why Kellen would never come back. The covers of the bed were twisted and dragged onto the floor. Two feet away from the bed was a tape outline of an adult's body. A dark rust stain covered the area where the head would have been. The white walls and white carpet around the bed and the white comforter and white sheets were sprayed with rust dots and streaked with rust colored stains.

Brian Brent died in Kellen's bedroom.

I walked around the outline, staring in disbelief at the blood splattered walls and bed. I read the books and I knew Brian died on the second floor of Windchase. While neither book made a claim as to where Brian died other than on the second floor, it was never written that he died in Kellen's nursery. Was this why Jillian could not bear to pack the room away?

I tore my eyes away from the bloody scene and walked around the room. Several nursery books

were stacked on a chair and covered by twenty-five year old dust. A picture frame was face down on the bookshelf. I picked it up. It was a color photo of the small Brent family. A somber Brian stood behind a smiling Jillian, who held a laughing Kellen on her lap. Brian had movie star good looks, his mother's auburn hair, and his father's gray eyes. I knew those lifeless gray eyes. They were his legacy to his daughter. I laid the frame back on the bookshelf, face down.

The words Brian died in Kellen's bedroom echoed in my head and my eyes constantly went back to the bed and wall. I was confused. Why would he be in her bedroom? Kellen was sent to bed a half hour before the party broke up. She was sleepy on Brian's shoulder. Why would he go to her bedroom?

The obvious reason hit me so hard I reached for the wall, shaken. I never questioned Alec on why she killed her father. I did not want to know why or how a five year old killed her father. I wanted to get her and me as far away from that subject as possible. I did not want to know then and I wish I did not know now. I wanted to go back to the party, look up at the second floor and not care what secrets were hidden on the forbidden second floor. I always went too far and was never prepared for what I found.

I stepped around the outline and flipped off the light. The door shut softly behind me.

The party was winding down when I rejoined the celebration. Rainer and Jillian were wrapped in each other's arms as they thanked their friends for sharing their special day. All I could do was stare at Jillian and wonder why it was Kellen who shot Brian. She was laughing and hugging friends and I could still see that pristine white bedroom splattered with blood.

"Victoria, where have you been?"

Rainer's deep voice tore me out of my shocked state. I walked over to them and hoped I did not look as pale as I felt. "I've been here. You only see Jillian."

On cue, he smiled down at her upturned face. "You're right."

"Where are you going?" I asked. Jillian slipped from my father's arms and walked to the buffet table. The green glow of the pool cast her in an eerie radiance. Rainer slipped his arm around my shoulders and walked us over to where she stood. She was refilling her champagne glass.

"Jillian hasn't decided yet. I've even offered to take her to Aubres," he said much too casually, his eyes on his new wife in expectation.

I bit my lip to keep my mouth shut. I knew he wanted to meet Alec and was not very happy that she chose to stay away. He reluctantly agreed that it was her choice.

Jillian sighed, her green eyes reproachful. They had discussed this before, obviously. "You know why we can't do that. Alec doesn't want to see me. If I try to force her, she will only hate me more."

I could not have said it better myself. Actually, yes I could. If Jillian showed up in Aubres, Alec would leave and Jillian would never know where she was again.

"I thought you would say that," he told her. "I've booked us on a cruise to England. I've talked to Cordelia and we're going to spend a few days with her before sailing back."

Jillian lit up at the news. "Oh, that's perfect. I can have you all to myself."

What did she think the purpose of the honeymoon was if they were not going to be alone? We went into the house as the caterers came out to begin the clean up. I walked over to the Chasen hanging on Jillian's wall. Did she have the painting because her daughter was the artist? At the few Chasen showings Alec and I attended, I stood behind the guests and listened to them as they tried to explain the paintings. They loved to read deep, hidden meanings into Alec's work. What did Jillian see when she looked at this dark seascape? How could she hang this painting and know why the Chasen Originals were so dark and haunted?

I wanted out of the house. I glanced up at the closed door of the nursery. I had to leave before Jillian caught me staring at Kellen's door. I walked away from the Chasen and the view I had of the upstairs. The newlyweds were inspecting the large stack of gifts piled around the living room.

"When do you leave?" I asked. I was gathering my overcoat and purse. This was their first night of wedded bliss. Hopefully, it would seem rude if I stayed too much longer.

Rainer looked up from a silver wrapped package. "We have to be there at nine."

"Then I'll say bon voyage now. That's a little earlier for me."

I hugged them both goodbye and made my escape. Bright spotlights hidden discreetly in the shrubs lit Windchase. I walked to my car. I could hear the gentle splash of waves in the distant. Windchase is very beautiful, very tranquil. I shivered, sickened by the violence that had taken place behind those clean white walls.

My first inclination was to pack and drive all night to Aubres. I could say I was sorry to Alec, but that would not even begin to make amends for the all that I had done. It was just one more strike I had against me. She told me not to assume anything about her life. *All you know is a name and a past you think you understand*. Naively, stupidly, I really did think that knowing she was Kellen Brent told me everything about her. All I really knew was that Brian was dead and the Brent's made Kellen die with him.

The inclination was strong, but the spirit was weak. I am a coward. I did not want to face Alec with the memory of her bedroom so fresh in my mind. I went to bed and fell into an exhausted sleep a few short hours before my alarm went off.

In my office, I sat before a blank computer screen and pretended to live my life. I pretended to write my column. I pretended to listen to Elane at lunch. Pretended that I wasn't still shaken by

what I saw. I begged off a dinner by pretending to be sick. I sat in my dark condo eating mint chocolate chip ice cream and let the answering machine take my calls.

All day long, during stray thoughts, came the image of that room, its violence imprinted forever on my memory.

Why was the room never cleaned? If Jillian wanted to keep her daughter's nursery, why did she never have the walls repainted, the comforter cleaned, or the carpet replaced? She had kept the room perfectly intact. It was a hideous shrine to what Brian Brent had done to his family. A normal woman would have erased every last shred of that night. Of course, a normal woman would have kept the child.

I knew, somehow, that Alec did not know about the room. Even if the ban on visitors did not include her, I could not see Alec wanting to see it. I would be surprised to know that Alec was ever on the second floor after she left it that Christmas day.

After seeing the bedroom, I stopped wondering why she allowed Kellen to be buried with Brian. Any woman who would keep that room so perfectly preserved would do anything. The price for protecting her husband's image was her child. It was obviously a price Jillian was willing to pay.

#### 4.

I had a life before I went to Aubres. A life where Alec was someone I used to love and Jillian Young was simply a legend my father wanted to marry. I wanted that life back. I tried to get back into my routine, but found my thoughts were frequently on Alec. Was it that I knew too much? Or was it that I didn't know enough? I wanted to get through just one short hour without sad gray eyes haunting me.

I tried to get back into my life as if my troubling detour into Alec's past never happened. But instead of spending my time researching and writing my column, I found myself down in the newspaper morgue scanning old papers. I began my search with the announcement of Brian Brent's engagement to Jillian Young. She was a nineteen year old starlet he found working in one of his family's restaurants. He was the brilliant, twenty-three year old only son of a United States Senator.

The many articles written about Brian and Jillian were gossipy and glowing. Pictures accompanying the articles showed the dazzling young couple smiling in Paris, London, and New York. Kellen was born into their privileged lives two years later. She was shown in rare pictures with her parents, always in Jillian's arms, always with her mother's hand protectively covering her face. By all accounts, they were the perfect couple and the perfect parents. There was not even a hint to the dark side of the Brent-Young marriage.

The flawless picture changed after Brian's death. Stories leaked about his drunken display at the party were the first cracks in his perfect, All-American image. Soon, everyone who ever worked

with Brian confirmed that the Christmas behavior was common for him. Out of control drinking and an insane jealousy over Jillian often led to similar outbursts with friends. Actors who worked on some of his movies admitted that Brian was easily angered and difficult to please.

Death has it's own rewards and for Brian Brent that reward was redemption. His public image was not marred very much by the private one that emerged after his death. He was forgiven for what he was and for what he did because he died a young, violent death.

I think Kellen had to die with him because not even a violent death could save Brian Brent if it became known he died in his five year old daughter's bedroom. America will forgive her dark heroes many sins, but some things are unforgivable. Alec Chasen and her paintings would not be had Brian died in any other room of Windchase that Christmas morning.

I always thought I wanted to know Alec's past. On the surface, it looked like Alec Chasen had it all. She was beautiful. She was gifted. She was young. And she was living like she was simply marking time because she had nothing to live for. I wanted to know why. There had to be a reason and I was so sure it could never be justified by whatever it was in her past she refused to talk about.

I always thought I wanted to know Alec's past. It was too damn late to realize I was wrong. Some questions are better left unanswered. Some mysteries are better left unknown. Some pasts are better left buried.

~~~~~

Alec was constantly in my thoughts, but I did not call her or seriously consider another trip to Aubres. I had my life and Alec had hers. I loved her, but if we were meant to be together, it would have been easier than this.

Of course the day I reached this contented stage, Alec called me. It was now over two months since my visit to Aubres and two days after the wedding. A long day, and stressful week, was just ending when the phone rang. My Wednesday column was due Monday and I still did not have an idea. I did not care either, which was really uncharacteristic of me.

"Victoria, are you busy?" she greeted.

Hers was the last voice I expected to hear. Hers was also the last voice I wanted to hear today. I was tired and did not have the patience I would need to deal with the many faces of Alec Chasen. "No, Alec I'm not. But this isn't a good day. Is this important?"

I listened impatiently to the silence. What could she possibly want?

"I'm here, in Los Angeles. May I come over? I want to see to you."

Alec was in Los Angeles. Two days after the wedding she comes to Los Angeles. Typical. "I'd rather you didn't. Like I said, this has been a bad day."

"I can bring dinner," she tantalized.

I gave up. She was too persistent and this was making an already long day longer. Besides, I was hungry. A dinner I did not have to prepare or go get or call for sounded wonderful. I could even struggle through an hour of Alec's company for that. "Fine Alec. Do you know where I live?"

I changed into cut-off jeans shorts and a UCLA sweatshirt. Alec said she would surprise me. I gathered plates, forks, knives, and glasses and brought them into the living room. I was flipping blindly through channels when the doorbell buzzed.

My condo is large, but not as large as her house. I bought the condo after Alec asked me to leave. In those two years, I have made the condo into a comfortable home. Before the wedding, I would have been excited to have Alec in my home. Now, I just wanted the food.

Alec stood on the doorstep in one of her silk tailored suits, this one a deep wine red. She held a grocery bag. I stared at the bag and felt cheated. I wanted food already prepared. I took the bag and my dismay turned to salivating delight as I smelled the aromas wafting from the bag. Chinese food. Lots of little white boxes of Chinese food. I opened boxes while Alec took off her jacket. She sat beside me.

"You have had a bad day," she said with amusement. "What happened?"

She did not bring any drinks. I went to the fridge for the pitcher of water I keep chilled. I poured both glasses full. By this time, Alec was forking shrimp fried rice next to sweet and sour chicken.

"Nothing in particular. Why are you here?" And why didn't you come two days earlier? I was too busy mixing the contents of my plate to lash out at her over Jillian.

Alec shrugged and sat back, cradling her plate in her lap. "I had some legal stuff to take care of."

I nodded absently, too intent on my food to be concerned about why she was in Los Angeles. We ate in silence. Alec finished her meal and took the plate to the kitchen. I spooned up seconds while she toured the condo. She came back several minutes later.

"Feeling better?"

I took my plate to kitchen. I thought about her question and decided I did feel better. I was even, just a little, happy to see her. She was sitting on the couch, comfortably acting like she had nowhere else to be right now. I sat beside her.

"Yes. Thank you for the Chinese."

"Have you forgiven me?" she asked, surprising me. We were facing each other on the couch. She had kicked off her shoes.

"For what?" For which things? Us? The wedding?

She stared at me, her eyes soft and warm and open. "I love you."

Whatever I expected her to say, that was not it. I wasn't sure I trusted her either. It required a leap of faith I did not think I could make. Alec's love was an elusive quality. Too many times I've had it snatched away to simply hold out my hand and trust her yet again.

She slipped close to me and put her hand on my cheek. "Tory? Why doesn't it make you happy for me to say that?"

"I'm not sure I can trust you Alec. You've always been so mercurial. I don't want to get hurt again."

She smiled. Soft, warm lips brushed against mine. Certain hands pulled me close and caressed my arms, stroked my thighs. My instant response would have surprised me except for Aubres. I knew I was still very attracted to Alec.

"Alec..." I protested, not very hard. Her kisses on my neck were always my undoing. She was unfairly using her experience against me.

"Let me stay the night," she whispered. Once her hands slipped under my sweatshirt, that decision was made for me. I forgot she was Kellen Brent. I forgot the blood stained bedroom. I forgot everything except that this woman in my arms was the one I never thought I would hold like this again.

~~~~~

I woke the next morning surprised by the blonde head nestled next to mine and long legs thrown over me. I never woke before Alec. When she lived here, she was always painting and sleep was forced on her by exhaustion. She was always gone to school by the time I woke in Aubres.

My surprise quickly turned to enjoyment. I pulled the relaxed body closer. I could smell the faint scents of the ocean. Salt, sun, a cool breeze. I doubt if I could really smell any of those things, they were just a natural part of Alec. Like picking up a seashell in the store and hearing the faint roar of the surf.

She was sweet in sleep, like a small child. Dark lashes hid those sad gray eyes from prying stares. Gone from her face were the expressions of hurt and betrayal, anger and defiance.

Unbidden into this cozy scene came the image of that bloody bedroom. For what was probably the first time, I realized what it meant to know that this beautiful woman was Kellen Brent. She was more than a painter of haunting seascapes. Two nights ago, I stood in a child's bedroom desecrated by unspeakable violence. I stood over a canopy bed splattered with blood. I stepped over a chalk outline of a body to see dust covered nursery books. The child Brian Brent committed unthinkable acts against was the beautiful woman in my arms. Those hidden gray eyes watched him die. The slender fingers curled on my stomach pulled the trigger.

Is this why I could not go to Alec after the wedding? Because I could not forget what happened to her in those black, hellish hours before dawn? She is not that child, my mind protested. This woman is no longer that helpless child. She is grown. She is not the child Brian Brent violated.

"Good morning."

I jumped and my eyes flew open. Alec was stretching and did not see the horror on my face. I think if she had been looking at me she would have seen that room reflected in my eyes.

"Hi," I said softly. I was trying to reconcile the defenseless five year old with the strong, capable woman I was coming to know. It was a hard transition to make.

She laid back in my arms. Her head rested on my shoulder. "How long have you been awake?"

I could not stay in bed. I slipped away from her and walked to the bathroom. "Not very. Are you hungry?"

When she did not answer, I looked into the bedroom. She was sitting up in the bed, the sheet bunched around her waist. "What's wrong?"

She is not that child, I repeated to myself. I walked back and sat beside her. "So much has changed between us. Last night was wonderful, but so were those nights at your house. I think I'm waiting for it to end, like it did there."

She sat up on her knees and wrapped her arms around me. Serious dark eyes stared into mine. "I love you Tory. Let that be enough for now. Okay? For right now, for this time, can't that be enough?"

Without a word, I nodded. For right now, for this time, it was enough.

~~~~~

Monday dawned bright and hot. Alec left the night before to go back to Aubres. I wanted her to stay the night, but she said she had to get back to school. The part-time volunteer position she held over the summer was now a full-time volunteer position. I watched her leave reluctantly. The Alec I knew before and the one I met in Aubres paled in comparison to the woman here for the weekend. I fell in love with her again.

My column was due at three. I went to my office and turned on the computer. I wrote a witty article about my weekend. I never mentioned Alec or the things we did. I wrote about rediscovering something I thought I knew and finding out that I did not know everything I thought I did. My editor would love it. I left it on her desk at one-thirty. I could have a late lunch with my best friend.

Elane's "new" studio was a big glass affair that overlooked Beverly Hills. I parked next to her red Mercedes. It was not all that long ago that she was in that cramped two room studio and driving a banged up VW. Cool, welcoming air greeted me as I opened the door. The main gallery, a

sunken circle a few steps down from the entrance, was being set up for a showing. Several empty brass easels were grouped together. A balcony overlooked the main gallery and led to the smaller exhibition rooms.

I went to the large office at the rear of the building. Elane's laughter rang down the corridor. She was sitting with her feet propped on the window sill of the window behind her desk. I sat unnoticed in the chair in front of her desk. She was talking to a client; one of the people whose work was in the upcoming show. She turned in her chair to write in her calendar and stared at my smiling face in surprise.

"Hi," I whispered.

She ended the conversation a few minutes later. "Victoria Senett. Where have you been?"

"Working," I lied. Since coming back from Aubres, I dropped out of my social circle. So much had been happening in my life that I needed time to regroup for the next onslaught.

Elane was happy to see me and let the lie go unchallenged. She knew me too well to really believe I was too busy to see friends and return calls. "Alec came in Friday. Do you want to see the new Chasen?"

My happy mood evaporated. "Alec brought in a new painting?"

She nodded and jumped to her feet. "You've got to see this painting. I can't put it out yet. And you'll see why."

I followed her numbly to the main gallery and up the stairs. I knew the painting I would see hanging on the wall. The last time I saw it, it adorned Alec's fireplace.

"She said you two were trying to get back together. I would love to hear the story behind that," she said, bubbling with excitement.

So would I since I learned about it over the weekend. Alec and I discussed our relationship; what each wanted from the other and what each was willing to give in return. This conversation took place over Saturday brunch.

Elane had a sheet hanging over the new Chasen and a sign warned those who touched it to be prepared to die. She whipped the sheet off with a flourish. I flinched before I realized the painting was not the one she painted for Kellen. However, it was painted from the same palette. Bright, cheerful. If Alec's earlier work reflected her inner torment, these new paintings denoted an inner peace. If I needed another sign that Alec had changed, these paintings were it.

"You look stunned. I was too when I first saw it."

I stared at the painting. Stunned was not the word I would chose to describe how I felt. She never once mentioned bringing the painting over the weekend. "I thought she wasn't painting

anymore."

Elane shrugged, glad that it was not true. "So did I. I guess she meant she wasn't painting her old paintings."

Her old paintings. So that's what the Chasens would be called, her old paintings. She could have periods like Picasso. This is from her pain period; that is from her happy period. I could barely wait for the next phase to begin.

"Is this it?" Alec usually brought several paintings for a show. She was a prolific artist.

"If it's not, this is all she brought. I can't wait for Friday."

I would have smiled at the irony only I did not feel very appreciative of Alec's sense of humor. She was coming back Thursday night, by plane. Stupid me. I thought she was coming back to see me.

Elane was blissfully unaware of my bitterness. This was nothing new. In every argument we had, Elane was always on Alec's side. Friendship was one thing, she explained, but a client like Alec Chasen was everything. I could be replaced.

"Why are you here?" she asked, realizing that I did not come to see the Chasen.

I stared at the beautiful painting and wished I had gone home for lunch. I would not know about Alec's deception and I would have eaten. Now, I did not want to eat at all. "I was on my way home and I thought I would drop by and see what you were up to."

Elane led me around the gallery and showed me some of the new paintings. I tried to listen to her, which would be hard on a good day because I do not like most of her clients work. I probably actually hated the Chasens while I was with Alec. Once we hit the empty main gallery, I lied about work and slipped away. Elane did not believe me, but I got to leave and that's all that counted.

Once in my car, I drove around. I was incredibly angry with Alec. I felt betrayed. If Alec was painting again, why didn't she tell me? I was stunned when she told me she was not painting anymore. And I believed she was coming back to see me. What a fool. I should have pushed her away from me and dropped kicked her out of my apartment Friday. I knew she would do something like this. My only surprise was that I did not expect it.

Well, let's see how surprised she was when she expected me to pick her up Thursday.

~~~~~

Alec called several times over the week and I, taking a page from her book, ducked her calls. I did not trust myself. If I demanded answers on the phone, I knew she would not come Friday. Showing or not. I wanted her here in person talking to me instead of listening to dead silence from her end of the phone.

Her last call was Friday morning. The brief message listed her flight number and arrival time. I listened in her voice for sounds that my absence was arousing some emotion, but Alec apparently saw nothing wrong. I guess someone who doesn't answer her own phone probably would never question someone else not answering theirs.

I was sitting in my apartment eating pizza when her plane landed. I was taking a shower when she would have been waiting at the luggage carousel if she had checked any baggage. I was in my robe watching TV when she would have begin to wonder what was keeping me. I flipped through channels and watched the clock, wondering how long it would take her to realize I wasn't coming.

I let her ring the doorbell a few times before I slipped from the couch to open the door. She knew I was home. My car was parked at my front door. The living room lights were on.

Alec was furious. Dark eyes flashed sparks as she brushed past me two hours after her plane landed. She dropped her luggage in the middle of my living room and turned ever so slowly to face me. "Where the hell have you been? I landed two hours ago."

I was not impressed. Her anger was a pale imitation of the kind I felt all week. The first questions I asked was not the one I had been preparing for the last two hours. "Why didn't you tell me you were painting again?"

"Why would ?" she shot back. "You never liked my paintings. Why would you care whether or not I was painting again?" Her voice took on a sharper edge, as if her anger had been kept in check until she learned I was not laying comatose in a hospital bed. Now that she saw I was perfectly healthy and could have picked her up as planned, she was losing control.

"I felt close to you Alec. Painting meant everything to you. But you didn't care enough to tell me you had started painting again."

She sighed and turned away. Looking for a glass perhaps? She paced around the living room, slender fingers raking tousled hair. "Dammit Tory, this is never going to work if you play these games. Why didn't you call me? If it meant this much to you, why the hell didn't you call me? You left me cooling my heels over this?"

"What about the showing tomorrow night?" I threw down my ace. Why should I have called her? Why couldn't she ever just tell me anything? Why did every little thing have to be dragged out of her like it was some national secret?

She sat in the couch, suddenly looking very much like the weary traveler. The anger was gone from her face and slim body. She was deflated. "You thought I came back for the showing."

It was a statement of fact. "Yes. Didn't you?"

She shook her head. "No, Tory. I came back to be with you."

"You're not going to the showing?"

"I do not attend showings. You know that. And it was only one painting." She stood up and walked over to me. She stopped a few feet away, her face sad. "Will you ever trust me?"

I reached out to her, but she stepped away. She kicked off her shoes and shrugged out of her jacket. She wore blue jeans and a T-shirt. She went to the kitchen for a glass of water. I sat on the couch, feeling as deflated as she looked. I had to ask myself a question and be serious when I answered. Could I have a serious relationship with this woman? Give her the total trust that any relationship needed to survive? I wanted to be with her, but wanting it was only a beginning. A life with Alec would never be easy.

She came back and sat next to me. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I really didn't think you would care."

Was I making a big deal out of nothing? Looking for lies and deceit? So what if Alec Chasen was painting again. My life would not change if she never put another stroke of cobalt blue oil on canvas. I was conditioned to expect her to be secretive, to look beyond her every word and action for the tell tale sign that she was hiding something. "I'm sorry, too. I was just surprised when Elane showed it to me."

She smiled. "I hope Elane isn't expecting me tomorrow night. I plan to be in bed by the time the showing starts."

I laughed and was soon buried under welcoming hugs and kisses. I could get used to this Alec.

She leaned over me. "Next time, call me. I refuse to let this be like last time. I want honesty and trust. Okay?"

Those dark eyes were intense and serious as they stared into mine. I wanted to believe in the promise I thought I read in the soft gray depths. I wanted to believe that this time would be like my fantasies. Most of all I wanted to believe that Alec had truly shed the dark shadows Brian Brent's death had thrown over her life.

[Continued in Part 2](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

---

~ In All the Empty Places ~  
by Janneen Brownell

**Disclaimers:** This story and characters are all mine and any resemblance to anyone living, dead or on television is in the mind of the reader. Readers who are disturbed by references to physical abuse should read this story with caution. As this is my first story posted to the net, I was conservative with sexual scenes. I hope you enjoy my little tale.

Comments, good or bad, can be sent to [ga\\_onmymind@yahoo.com](mailto:ga_onmymind@yahoo.com)

5.

I lived for weekends. Although it was never discussed, I was at LAX at 7:15 on Friday nights. Alec always seemed relaxed and refreshed when she came down the corridor. Most people were at least a little tired when the weekends rolled around. I know I was, but it was different for Alec. Life as a volunteer teacher, some time painter was a good one for her. I hoped life as a part-time lover was just as good.

Alec and I settled into a comfortable routine. She usually brought one painting with her and we took this to Elane's studio late Saturday morning. The three of us, and sometimes other friends, would go for brunch. We would make plans with our friends for that night and then spend the day wandering through old haunts. Sundays were spent alone at my condo. Alec had to leave on the 9:30 flight. My condo felt very empty after she was gone. My routine through the week was jammed with work and friends. I accepted almost every invitation I received. I saw movies and plays, went to awards shows. I did anything to make the week go by faster.

Almost two months after they left, Jillian and Rainer were back home. Rainer called me from the ship and asked if I could meet them. It was Friday and I was annoyed to have my routine interrupted. I usually worked until it was time to go to the airport.

Their ship was coming into port at five. I said I would be there. Elane said she would pick up Alec. The last thing I wanted was for her to be left waiting. I did not have to be especially sensitive to know Alec would not appreciate waiting at the airport while I picked up Jillian.

The ship was, thankfully, on time. I was working with a very tight schedule. My annoyance fell away and I became excited when I saw them waving from the deck. I realized how much I had missed my father. I was grateful that Alec had occupied so much of my time. The last two months would have been very lonely.

"Victoria! You look so radiant," he said. I hugged him tight to hide the flush spreading over my cheeks. I was in love with my step-sister. God, that sounded so awful. Alec would laugh when I told her.

"You both look wonderful," I finally was able to say. Jillian and I shared a quick hug. Although she appeared to be happy, she was clinging to Rainer's arm and glancing around furtively.

"Are we ready to leave?" She asked from behind large, dark sunglasses.

Rainer understood immediately that Jillian did not want to attract any attention. He patted her on the hand and we gathered their luggage quickly. We moved easily through the crowd disembarking from the ship. Jillian asked that I take them to Windchase. I was surprised to learn that my father's belongings were now at her estate. Granted, our house was smaller and not as elegant as hers, but Brian Brent did not die in our house. Was it unreasonable to expect her to jump at the chance to leave Windchase?

"You sold the house?" I asked. I was glad I was driving. My voice sounded normal and Rainer could not see the shock in my eyes.

"No, honey. It's yours now."

Oh goody. I was waiting for even a hint Alec wanted me to be with her in Aubres. What I did not need was another tie to LA. "I like my condo, Dad. Put the house on the market. It shouldn't sit empty."

He wanted me to have the house. We spent the drive to Windchase with Rainer listing the many advantages his house had over my condo. I could not disagree without explaining about Alec so I listened in silence.

I drove through the gates with anticipation. I would be with Alec soon. All I had to do was get through the next few minutes. It was too bad it would be rude for me to stay in the car and leave as soon as they had their luggage.

"Stay for dinner, Victoria," Jillian invited once their luggage was stacked in the foyer.

I glanced at my watch. Alec's plane was touching down at LAX. Elane was to pick up Alec and take her to the restaurant. If I hurried, I might beat her by a few minutes. Although the traffic was horrendous away from the airport, they were physically closer to the restaurant than I was at Windchase.

"I have a date I can't break." They tried to pressure me into coming some time over the weekend. When I would not give them that, they reluctantly agreed to dinner on Monday.

~~~~~

I was nervously toying with a breadstick when Alec came striding from the dimness of the restaurant. I choose an out of the way Italian place for the cozy, dim atmosphere and the private booths. I was going to need the privacy to explain to this beautiful, annoyed woman why someone else was at the airport to greet her.

"Darling," I began with what I hoped was a steady smile. I felt anything but steady inside.

Alec sat down. The waiter appeared at the table and saved me from all but her cool gaze. She ordered our dinner without consulting me. We would start with a tossed salad and have chicken Parmesan and stuffed artichoke hearts for the main course. Alec's tone was smooth and her smile charming; the waiter never glanced my way to see if I agreed with the meal choice.

"Okay, *darling*, impress me." Her eyes shone with a sarcastic light.

I could lie. I could concoct some problem with my article or a personal emergency. I did not know if I could look her in the eye and tell a lie. It would violate the trust and honesty were trying to build. If I got away with it once, it would set a bad precedent. And I had no guarantees Alec would never learn the truth. "Rainer called me this afternoon. Their ship came in, so to speak. They weren't more important than you Alec, I just didn't know what else to do."

Alec stared at me for several long, uncomfortable seconds. Her voice was tired and she looked away when she spoke. "I'm sorry Tory. I never wanted you to be put in this position."

Relief is a wonderful feeling. I was all smiles, but Alec was subdued. "I'm so glad you're not angry."

Our salads arrived and we ate in silence for a few minutes. "Victoria," Alec said suddenly, very serious, "I don't expect you to shut Rainer and Jill from your life. I understand that you have a relationship with them. I don't want them in my life, but I expect them to be a part of yours. Please don't ever be afraid of how I'll react again."

I stared at the blonde head bent over her salad. This woman was so different from the Alec I thought I knew. Where did that woman go? Where was her anger?

For the first time since Alec starting coming on the weekends, we did not make love. She laid her head on my shoulder and asked about the wedding. I was surprised. Why was she asking now? She came two days after the wedding and never asked a single question. Two months later is an odd time to become interested.

I closed my eyes to imagine the wedding. "Well, they were married near the cliff. Jillian's dress was a lacy pale blue. It was a beautiful ceremony. Jillian did an excellent job arranging everything."

"Jill's an excellent hostess. She arranged their parties and they were always successes. I'm sure that arranging something that meant this much to her would have been easy."

When Alec talked of her childhood in Aubres, she spoke of England and growing up with Cordelia. Her only mention of Windchase was when she told me there were only three people present the night Brian died. She was five when she went to England and now I wondered just how much of her Los Angeles childhood Alec remembered.

I spoke carefully. The last thing I wanted was to bring up more painful memories. "Alec, what do you remember about Jillian before you went to Moregrove House?"

She rolled over on her side away from me. I turned and wrapped her in my arms. She was quiet. What memories she had of that time must be nothing more than fragments of scenes that were seen through the innocent eyes of a small child.

Her voice was soft and reflective. "I remember thinking she was beautiful and that I wanted to grow up to look like her. She was gone more than I wanted because of the movies. Remember when we rented *Time Lost* a few years ago? I was on the set a few times, but I never saw it before then. During one scene, I could remember sitting in her chair on the set while the scene was being filmed. She was an incredible actress."

"Did you want to be an actress?" I asked. I felt her smile against my arm.

"Probably, although I cannot recall expressing the desire. I adored my mother. I would sit at her feet and watch her put on her make?up and absorb every word she said."

As she spoke, I could see a very young child sitting at Jillian's feet, adoration on her face. Jillian Young was glamorous and even if Kellen did not fully understand who her mother was, she knew she was larger than life. Magic surrounded her mother and that was not lost on the child.

"What did you learn at your mother's feet?" I asked, playfully.

After a moments silence, she whispered, "I learned to love women at my mother's feet." She snuggled deeper into my embrace and kissed my shoulder. "Goodnight, Tory. I love you."

I stared off into the darkness. Alec's childhood was more than a single act of violence that ended with Brian Brent's death. What steps have to be taken, what acts have to be committed before a five year old child can take a life? I felt Alec relax in my embrace as sleep claimed her. I wanted to protect from everything that would ever hurt her. I was twenty?five years too late.

~~~~~

I dreaded Monday night's dinner. I called Windchase at three?thirty with the vain hope that dinner was canceled. Rainer had just returned from two months on a communication free honeymoon. I was hoping that he would revert to form and want to celebrate his first day back at the office by staying late.

One of Jillian's staff answered the phone. I asked for Jillian and gave my name when asked who was calling. My father greeted me instead of Jillian. My heart sank. Jillian's control over my father was impressive. He not only did he not stay late, but he came home early.

"Hi Dad. I'm confirming tonight's dinner. Is it still on?" I did not sound enthused even to myself. I wanted to see my father. I did miss him. I simply did not want to be in that house. The closer I got to Alec and the more I saw how far she has come, the less I could see of Jillian's side.

"Yes, sweetie. We're going to cook out on the patio."

I rang off by promising to be there soon. Monday's are my worst day. The emptiness I felt at Alec's absence peaked on Monday's. Maybe going to Windchase for dinner would be good for me. I could hear about their trip and by the time I got back home, I would be exhausted.

I changed into jeans and a long sleeve T-shirt at home. The days were pleasant, but the nights were chilly. Windchase was a scenic drive from my downtown condo. I listened to the radio and thought of the past two days with Alec.

She had been quiet. She pleaded a rough week at work and I almost bought it. Every one had an off week. It was the drifting away that alerted me to other possibilities, like Jillian being back in Los Angeles. She reminded me of the woman she was when I first met her. She smiled away my concern and I was loath to ask her any questions beyond "Alec, are you okay?". I did not want to fight with her. I did not want to argue over Jillian Young. All I could do was let her know I was there for her if she needed to talk. I never once felt she would take me up on the offer.

I thought secrets were all that were between us when she lived in Los Angeles. She was open now, happy in a way I never thought she could be. I was beginning to understand that getting on with her life was more than accepting her past. Alec might have come to terms with her part in it, but she had yet to forgive Jillian for hers.

The patio was set for our supper by the time I arrived. Three steaks were already cooking on the grill and I stopped at the edge of the pool to look around. Huge spotlights and the pool cast the patio in a warm, greenish glow. I really did not want to be here. I wanted to be in my living room debating on whether or not to call Alec. I wanted to be eating the leftovers from our Saturday night Chinese take-out.

Rainer walked out to the grill and flipped the steaks. I was here and for him I would have a good time. For him I would forget that my weekend with Alec was ruined because of his wife.

"Vickie. Did you just get here?"

He was so happy to see me that I felt guilty for even thinking of not coming. He was always busy when I was growing up, but I never once felt neglected by him. I always knew I was important in his life. I would not make him feel that he was not important in mine.

"Just this second. And I'm starving. I haven't had one of your steaks in months." He was proud of his steaks. It was the only thing he could cook and his special marinade was still a secret.

He slipped his arm around my shoulders. "How are you honey? You were in such a hurry Friday. I wish you could have stayed. I feel like I've been gone for two years, not two months."

I lied about work keeping me busy and engagements with friends. I debated all day about telling them about Alec. Rainer never knew that I was living with Alec Chasen. He knows now that she and Kellen Brent are one and the same. He wanted to meet her, as his step-daughter. I was unsure how he would react if he knew Alec Chasen was the woman who tore out my heart two years ago. I was less sure how Jillian would react if she knew I was seeing her daughter. In the end I decided to tell them nothing.

Jillian joined us carrying a plate of drinks. "I'm glad you could come, Victoria. Rainer missed you terribly."

Both were dressed casually in blue jeans and Dodger T-shirts. I was used to seeing Rainer dressed so casually, but it caught me by surprise to see Jillian Young in blue jeans. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. How could I not have seen that she and Alec are mirror images?

"And I missed him.@

We had baked potatoes and salads with the steaks. I listened as they shared the more humorous moments of their honeymoon. I always thought of Jillian Young as the Movie Star. Someone who was always gracious and elegant. I laughed as I tried to imagine her pushing a tuxedo clad Rainer into the ship's pool on one of their romantic midnight strolls. It was even harder to see her, in a sequined gown, jumping in after him.

When Rainer went to get dessert, she leaned over and touched my arm. Her green eyes were dark and serious as they looked into mine. "How is Alec?"

I hoped the look in my eyes was puzzlement and not the surprise I felt at her question. "What makes you think I know how Alec is?"

She frowned and leaned back in her chair. I got the feeling that she knew I was seeing Alec. She was not asking me if I heard from Alec, she was asking about Alec. She knew about us. "I know she comes here to see you on the weekends. She stays at your apartment. I want to know how she is. Is that too much to ask?"

Yes, frankly it was. I stood up and stared down on her coolly. Rainer walked out with a tray of apple pie slices. "Let's get one thing straight right now. I know Alec won't accept your calls and I doubt she would read a letter if you wrote it to her. I'm not going to pretend to know why. But don't think for one minute you're going to pump me for information on her. If you want to know about Alec talk to the sources you apparently already have. They should know as much as I do."

Jillian's cold voice stopped me before I left the patio. I turned and she was standing. "Do you know what it's like to have to ask other people about my daughter? Yes, I have someone who keeps me up-to-date on Alec. I know when she comes to Los Angeles. That's all I know. I want to know how she is, how she's coping. There is no else I can ask."

Once I might have felt for her obviously sincere plea. I walked back and faced her. I wanted her to be able to read my face as easily as I read hers. "Then I am sorry for you because I can't help you. I lost Alec once. I'm not going to lose her again just so you can assuage your guilt."

No one tried to stop me this time. Jillian did not say a word. Rainer set the tray on the table and went to her side. I felt his reproachful eyes on me as I left. If I had known she knew about Alec's visits, I would have been prepared. I would have expected her to try this and hopefully would have handled it much better. I was not prepared and I handled it horribly. She paled with each word. All I think was, how dare she ask me about Alec when she never cleaned up that bedroom? Alec hated her, did she really think I would spy on Alec for her?

My phone was ringing when I got home. I knew it was not Alec so I let it ring. My father's controlled voice asked that I call them when I came in. If I learned only one thing from living with Alec Chasen, it was a healthy disrespect for the answering machine. People could leave messages from now until God came, but that did not obligate me to return them. I turned off the phone and pushed down the volume on the machine.

*"Because I can."* Alec said she wanted to hurt Jillian because she could, but that was a lie. Alec wanted to hurt Jillian because Jillian hurt her first. Alec had a dozen reasons to shut me out of her life and yet, she came to Los Angeles. She said she loved me when she had no guarantee that I would love her in return. What did Jillian do to Alec? Where was Jillian when Brian was in their daughter's bedroom?

Alec said she was not betraying Jillian because Jillian betrayed her first. Who did Jillian betray? The child who was Kellen or the woman who was Alec?

~~~~~

Alec called me Thursday night to say she was not coming for the weekend. Her voice was subdued and I knew something was going on with her. The only thought that kept me going was that Alec would be here Friday night. It never occurred to me that she might not come.

"Is this because Jillian's back?" I asked bluntly. I wanted to know now if her mother being back was going to be a problem for her, and us.

"Must every action of mine be related to her?"

I heard resignation in her quiet, tired voice. Was I jumping to conclusions? So she was distant over the weekend. So she was canceling a weekend for the first time in two months. So all of this just happens at the same time her mother returns to Los Angeles. It could be a coincidence. Yeah, right. An incredible billion to one coincidence.

"Of course not. I'll make it until next Friday somehow." I tried to make it sound light. I barely made it to this Friday, next Friday was seven eternities away.

"I don't know about next Friday either," she replied hesitantly. I should have been surprised and angry. Instead, her words only confirmed what I suspected. "I'll call when I know for sure."

"Alec, I love you," I said, but she had already hung up on her end. She was not coming and there was no explanation on why. She said it was not because of Jillian and I knew that she was lying. Alec's sudden mood change had everything to do with Jillian. Alec did not want Jillian in her life. I was afraid that meant the peripheral edges of mine as well.

If I thought calling her back would have done me any good, I would have called until she personally picked up the phone. I would have driven to Aubres if I thought I would get answers. The only answer I was sure I would get was that Alec was never coming back to Los Angeles as long as Jillian Young breathed the smoggy air. That was a long way go to learn what I already knew.

My father and Jillian, once, called all week. I was still ducking their calls. I was surprised that as each day passed without my returning the calls Rainer did not storm into my office. Ignoring problems was not my style and I was not sure what he would do if I did not contact him soon. I had little reason not to talk to them if Alec wasn't going to be here. Jillian could ask questions all day and I would not be able to answer them.

It was late enough that Rainer answered the phone. I could tell from his distracted tone that he was working. He was less than thrilled to be hearing from me.

"I'm sorry Dad. I've been busy." It was a lame excuse.

"Victoria, what is going on here?"

After my phone call from Alec, the last thing I needed was to hear the concern in his voice. Tears were threatening to fall and I did not want him to hear me cry. Was I asking too much? I wanted Alec and I wanted us to be happy. But every time I turned around, her past popped up and drove her farther away.

"Honey, Jillian told me that you were involved with her daughter a few years ago. Is Alec the woman you were living with?"

Alec did not want to meet Rainer. She never told me why, but now I think I know. She could not involve me in her life the way I wanted to involve her in mine. Alec was always fair. She never took from me what she could not give back. I did not understand and I was hurt, but I could never say Alec took advantage of what I offered.

"Yes."

"Is my marriage to Jillian causing you problems with Alec?"

I smiled. My father, the attorney. He was quick to get to the heart of my problems, especially if it was a problem of the heart. "Alec hates Jillian, Dad. I don't think I can have a relationship with her if I have one with Jillian."

"Victoria, can you have lunch with me tomorrow? I think there are a few things about Alec's childhood you need to know."

We rang off after agreeing to meet at his office. After his cryptic statement, I would have met him anywhere, anytime. I would have driven to Windchase that night if he had suggested it. I was not sure what he would know about Alec's childhood that I did not already know. But he did not seem surprised that Alec hated Jillian and I wanted to know why if nothing else.

~~~~~

We did not go to a restaurant for lunch. He ordered in sandwiches and we ate in his office. He forced small talk until the food was delivered. We spread out our sandwiches at his conference

table. I was filled with a dreaded excitement and picked at my chips.

His blue eyes met mine in gentle compassion. "We're in the same boat, you know. We love two people who have a very tragic past. What I am about to tell you was told to me in confidence and the only reason I am telling you is so that you can understand. You're not even to tell Alec you know any of this. Okay?"

I nodded, spellbound, but troubled by the implications of what I was about to hear. How could he know something about her past that Alec herself did not know?

"Brian Brent was a sadistic son of a bitch," he began. He ate his sandwich and told me about Jillian's fairy tale marriage, his voice sometimes bitter, sometimes condemning. Jillian married Brian when she was young and star struck. Her marriage to him opened doors that before weren't even cracking open. By the time she realized Brian Brent was not Prince Charming, she was pregnant with Kellen.

Brian hated the baby, but used her to keep Jillian. Patrick went so far as to have divorce papers drawn up for her. She was poised to sign the papers when Patrick asked if she had kissed Kellen good?bye. Did she really think he would let her take away his only grandchild? The truth was a crushing blow to Jillian. If she wanted to leave, she would have to leave Kellen with Brian.

"Brian hated Kellen, Victoria. I didn't press Jillian for details, but I know Brian hurt the child. And I think, Jillian. Jillian thought Kellen was young enough to forget the abuse. She learned right before the wedding that Kellen remembers too much."

In my mind, I saw Jillian again that first day I met her. Alec had been there and whatever was said almost destroyed Jillian. I could still see her face twisted in anguish, her shattered green eyes. Why was Alec at Windchase that day? Why were they talking about Brian Brent?

"Victoria, we can't chose sides over this. I love Jillian and you love Alec. But remember, I am your father and Jillian is Alec's mother. We are a family."

We are a family. It was a nice sentiment, but the reality was that one member of this family felt betrayed by another member. Alec was not going to leap at an opportunity to be a member of another family that included Jillian Young.

## 6.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are the only two holidays my dad and I celebrate. Alec never liked to acknowledge the holidays and Christmas was especially hard for her. I know why now, but that does not erase the scenes I made. Alec canceled two more weekends without explanation. I accepted Jillian's invitation to spend both holidays with them because of this. Did I really think she would come for Christmas in Los Angeles?

I was beginning to think I would have to go to Aubres if I was ever going to see her again. Alec could drive a few miles to the airport and hop on a plane. The whole trip from her house to my condo took about three and a half hours. I do not fly so the drive took me at least six hours and that was driving like a bat out of hell. After the holidays would be a good time to go. Alec could not accuse me of trying to celebrate with her.

The decision of when I would see Alec again made, I threw myself into the shopping spirit. Los Angeles is a great town for gift buying. I can find anything for anybody and sometimes at a reasonable price. I saw several items I would have loved to buy Alec. One of these was a blue?gray fisherman's sweater for those cold days on her pier.

Rainer was easy. A new Waterman to add to his collection, several shirts and a few books by his favorite authors Jillian was hard. What do you give a reclusive actress who only wanted her daughter back?

"Dad, what would Jillian want for Christmas?" I asked him, when I could come up with nothing on my own. I thought briefly about buying one of Alec's new paintings and wrapping that for her. Somehow, that seemed like a slap in the face. Jillian bought Alec's paintings, but for me to give her one seemed a sarcastic gesture.

Rainer sighed in irritation. "Nothing. I understand that Christmas holds tragic memories for her, but now is the time to make new, happy ones. She's becoming withdrawn. Frankly, I think we should go away."

"Where would you go?" The thought of being alone on Christmas was horrible.

"I was thinking Moregrove House. If I could make the arrangements, would you come with us? Cordelia is a wonderful woman."

I already knew Cordelia Chasen was a wonderful woman. She would have to be to get Alec through her childhood. "I don't know Dad."

How would Alec feel if I went to Moregrove House? I would see her room, see pictures of her as a child. I could not say why, but I knew Alec would not want me there. Nor would she want Jillian there.

"Well, think about it. I'll broach the subject with Jillian tonight."

Christmas in England. I would rather spend it in Aubres.

~~~~~

Alec called that Thursday night. "Got plans this weekend?"

I was confused by her greeting until I realized that it meant, please God let it be, that I would be at LAX on Friday. "No. Why? Do I now?"

She caught the angry thread underlying the eagerness in my voice. I wanted her to come and I was mad that I was so easy. Three weeks without a weekend together, three weeks without a explanation and I past was caring. I wanted her to come if it was only for one day.

"Tory, don't be angry with me. I've got presents to put under your tree."

Presents? As in Christmas presents? Okay, now I had proof that Alec Chasen was really dead and her body had been taken over by an alien. Alec did not give presents and she certainly did not expect them. "I don't understand."

"Christmas, Tory. You do have a tree up don't you? It's a week before Thanksgiving. Isn't that about when you always wanted to throw up a tree?" She sounded almost excited about the holidays.

"I was going to do it next weekend. I usually wait until after Thanksgiving."

"That's great. I can help. I've never decorated a tree."

When the call ended, I was confused and excited at the same time. Was I imagining it, or was Alec planning to celebrate Christmas with me? I had to be making more of the "presents" than Alec actually meant. She was bringing gifts for me to open alone on Christmas morning. She would be in Aubres, doing whatever she did to block out that last Christmas with Jillian and Brian.

I dialed Windchase, but hung up before anyone answered. I did not want to cancel my plans with them until I knew I had plans with Alec. I was placing too much importance on a few presents. A few presents did not mean Alec was moving back to Los Angeles, was forgiving her mother and she and I would live happily ever after.

~~~~~

Alec walked down the corridor. She carried an overnight bag. Her smile was bright, her eyes that beautiful happy silver. I was shocked that her very short hair touched the bottom of her shirt collar and covered her ears. She was letting her hair grow out. I did not think it wise to tell her it emphasized her resemblance to Jillian.

"I love you," she whispered as we hugged. She said that so freely now. Every phone call and every goodnight ended with that wonderful phrase.

I stepped out of her embrace to find a young man in an airline uniform studiously ignoring us. "Ms. Chasen, if you're ready?"

She nodded and we fell in step behind him. He stayed a few feet in front of us. "I brought a crate with me. I told them I was Alec Chasen, the painter, and I was bringing a crate of paintings with me. They've arranged for us to pick it up in a holding area or something. Wasn't that nice of them?"

I barely stifled the giggles I felt rising at her bland expression. Alec Chasen did not like to be recognized. She was uncomfortable in situations where she was The Painter and ceased to be a real person. Now, she was using the advantages that being Alec Chasen gave her.

"It was unbelievable Tory. All I had to do was sign a dozen cocktail napkins and I got to see the cockpit. I think if I let them say, 'We're so safe Alec Chasen flies her paintings with us', they would make me a pilot." The ironic tone in her voice made me smile. She would use her name, but was not buying into the hype that it made her special.

The next half hour was a lesson in privileges. Tim, the co?pilot on Alec's flight, drove my car through DO NOT ENTER gates of Los Angeles International Airport. Alec's crate was waiting outside an open hangar with three official looking men standing guard. Two were airport security because these were, after all, Chasen paintings. The other man introduced himself as Peter Aldridge, a USAir executive.

"Mr. Aldridge, thank you for being so helpful."

Peter Aldridge supervised the loading of the crate into my back seat. He gave Alec his card and told her to call him personally if she ever again needed assistance from his airline. Alec thanked him, the security guards, and the co?pilot.

She laid her head against the head rest and smiled. "I'd feel rather guilty if there really wasn't a painting in there. All that trouble for Christmas presents. Can you believe I only talked to someone at their reservation desk? I didn't know they were going to do all that."

We had to laugh. They were so serious, standing guard over presents until Alec was driven, by no less than the co?pilot, to the hangar. They really believed the crate held irreplaceable paintings. The only real thing about the entire farce were the autographs Alec signed for the crew.

Alec wasn't hungry? "They force-fed me on the plane"? so we went directly to my condo. The crate was heavy enough to actually be full of Chasen paintings. We struggled to bring it into the condo while I silently thanked God I lived on the ground floor. We set it down a few inches inside the door, just enough to shut it behind us.

"How many presents do you have in there?" I panted. I dropped onto the couch.

Alec kicked off her shoes and slipped out of her blazer. She went into the kitchen. I heard her rummaging through drawers and she came back with a hammer. She used the clawed end to pry off the lid of the crate. "Several. It's the painting that's so heavy."

I watched with interest as she took gaily wrapped boxes out and placed them on the floor. Seven boxes were stacked at her feet when she asked me to help lift out the painting. It was covered with a heavy canvas drop cloth. We leaned it against the wall at the end of the couch. It would be out of harm's way for the holiday duration.

She looked at me with guarded eyes. "The presents are marked. Two are for your father and the rest are for you. The painting is for Jill."

"Jill?" I repeated dumbly. She was giving a present to her mother?

She nodded and turned away from me. "Please don't make a big deal out of this. I just thought I should give her a gift since I'm giving some to Rainer. You did say she owned some of my paintings."

I was more curious about the painting than I was about the packages that had my name on them. I walked over to the painting and tried to pull back the drop cloth.

"It's stapled. You'll see it when Jill opens it."

I did not trust her. What if it was a Trojan horse? I could imagine many scenes Alec could paint that would hurt her mother. She had several scenes from which to choose. Maybe I could open it after Alec left. If it was a crumpled body in a child's bedroom, I could buy something else and claim it was from Alec. Who would ever know? It's not like Jillian would ever be able to thank Alec. The chances were slim that she would receive a call Christmas morning.

"Don't worry Tory. It's nothing bad," Alec said, as if reading my mind.

~~~~~

Alec was quiet and distant. She stared off into space and sighed, as if a major decision was weighing heavily on her mind. I wanted desperately for her to talk to me. Tell me Alec, I willed. Tell me and we'll share whatever it is. You do not have to go through anything else alone. But it was the only way Alec knew to do things. It was probably the only thing she would never be able to change about herself.

"Are you coming back for Thanksgiving? I need to know because my Dad and Jillian have asked me to Windchase."

She looked very tired curled at the end of my couch. "No. I only get two days off from school."

The two days she got off were Thursday and Friday in addition to the Saturday and Sunday that followed. She could come for two days, but four was too much? It was this kind of logic that irritated me. It was senseless, God only knew why I even tried to follow it.

She must have sensed by annoyance. "I'm trying Tory. Why isn't what I've done enough? What more do you want?"

I wanted Alec in my life every day and every night, but I was apparently the only one who wanted that. Alec was happy with her life in Aubres and her part-time lover in Los Angeles. She could come and go whenever she liked and I had no control. I dropped my plans if she was coming and made plans if she canceled. I waited eagerly for the weekend. I dreaded every phone call on Thursdays. I wanted Alec to call and say she was coming. I knew she was calling tell me

no. By the time she did call, my nerves were raw. What more could I want? Oh, the list I could make.

"Fine, I'll spend Thanksgiving with my father and your mother." If she heard the sarcasm in my voice, it left no impression. I was not going to harass her anymore about it so it did not matter. I wish my life was that easy.

"I'm sure you'll have a good time," she said softly and slipped from the couch. When I went in search of her half an hour later, she was asleep on my bed. She had bruises under her eyes, as if she had not slept in a while.

I thought back to last night. We made love and the last time I remembered seeing was two?twenty. Alec was still awake. She woke me with breakfast in bed. If she slept, it was not for very long. She was painting again. What did it mean that she was painting again? She was not painting when I went to Aubres. She was at peace with her life. Now, she was restless and tense. She was losing weight. She laughed when I asked her about that last night and kissed me into silence. While caressing her back, I felt her ribs under my hands.

She was beautiful. Dark lashes soft against pale cheeks. How did I miss it? I had convinced myself that this Alec was so different. I wanted to believe that the tormented woman was gone, replaced by this confident strong woman I was coming to know. I thought it was over for her. But painting was therapy for Alec. Brushing oil across a canvas was how she coped, the only way she knew to deal with her life. What was she coping with now? What demons did I stir up for her?

I shut the door behind me and I went into the living room. I would deal with Alec's anger later, but I had to know what she had painted for Jillian. Did she paint it specifically for her mother? Or did she choose an already finished painting because she did not know what else to give someone who was a stranger? I pried the staples from the wood frame and pulled the drop cloth away.

I shut my eyes. Oh Alec. At that moment in time, I would have given anything, done anything, to take away Alec's memories.

A young child was playing alone on a beach. Alec's photographic signature was evident in each strand of blonde hair, the cotton fabric of her blue overalls, the grains of golden sand on the tanned bare feet. The background of sun warmed beach and Pacific blue were blurred. The young girl was the focus of this painting and I did not have to crawl inside Alec's mind to know this child. Her name was Kellen.

I put the staples back into the frame. Alec did not let on if she knew I peeked. She slept until Sunday morning. We spent Sunday in a silence she did not try to break.

I watched her and saw all the things I had been too blind to notice. She was not letting her hair grow out. I could tell by the ragged ends she had forgotten to cut it. She lied about eating on the plane. Airlines do not routinely serve food on a less than two hour flight. The breakfast she made

for me on Saturday did not include a plate for her. I believed her when she said she ate while she cooked it. I believed her again later when she said must have eaten more than she thought for breakfast. She went to sleep around lunch time and slept restlessly through the night. If she ate anything all weekend, it was not with me.

I let her out in the passenger zone. I usually went with her to the concourse, but could not bring myself to do it this time. I would have to watch her walk away from me. I would have to see the shaggy hair and the baggy clothes. I would have to see her dark eyes struggling with a past she had never before faced. It was a journey I could not take with her. And I could not bear to watch her walk it alone.

She normally called when she got home so that I would know she was all right. I went to a movie and treated myself to a late dinner at a quiet, deserted restaurant. By the time I got back home, it was after midnight. The answering machine blinked a solitary message. I erased it without listening.

Alec was not all right. I refused to hear her tell the lie in her soft, empty voice.

7.

Thanksgiving day arrived without Alec. I debated about what to wear to Windchase and decided to wear slacks and dress shirt. My dad and I had a routine that did not fit the glamorous image I had of Jillian. We usually went to a restaurant for a traditional meal and spent the rest of the day watching football games. We wore blue jeans, our favorite team's sweatshirt, and tennis shoes.

Jillian and I had talked on the phone since our confrontation over Alec, but this would be our first face to face meeting. We were both cordial and I believed my father told her of our conversation. I was unsure of my own feelings for her. It was hard to dislike her when I saw her as one of Brian's victims. Both were hurt by Brian, both were living with his memory. I was unfair to think Alec was hurt more by Brian than Jillian. How could I measure one blow against another? Because Alec was a child? In the end, Alec was the one who stopped the abuse.

I rang the doorbell promptly at eleven-thirty. I was glad I dressed up when Jillian answered the door. A cheery red apron covered her black slacks and white shirt.

"You don't have to ring the bell, Victoria. Just come in," she admonished with a smile.

I followed her into a large gourmet's kitchen. Wonderful aromas filled the air. Home cooked food was a definite improvement over our restaurant routine. A golden baked turkey was being carved by Rainer, sharply dressed in dress slacks and shirt. Jillian walked to the stove and stirred a bubbling pot.

"Happy Turkey Day," my father greeted cheerfully. I kissed his cheek and stole a tiny piece of turkey.

I wanted to start off on the right foot with Jillian. If she had been anything other than the mother Alec hated, I think we would have been friends. I walked over to her side. "You know, every time I see you, you blow another image I have of you. Last time you wore blue jeans and now you're cooking. I'm going to start thinking of you as a normal person soon."

She laughed, sounding very much like Alec. "Good. That's exactly how you should think of me."

"How can I help?" I asked, no one in particular.

Jillian pointed to a stack of plates and silverware. "Will you set the table? As soon as Rainer has the turkey carved, we can eat. I'm under strict orders to be finished by twelve?thirty. Something about football games."

By twelve?thirty, Jillian and I were clearing the table. Rainer went off to change into some comfortable clothes.

Jillian tried to wave me away. "I can take care this. Your Dad wants you to watch the game with him."

I knew he did and I would after I helped her. She consented reluctantly and we quickly had the leftovers in containers. When I was rinsing dishes and handing them to her to put in the dishwasher, I got up the courage to tell her something I wanted her to know.

"Alec was here last weekend," I said, trying to be casual. She paused, but that was the only sign that my words had affected her.

She kept her face averted. Her tone was as carefully casual as mine. "I know."

I wondered, not for the first time, just who the source was that informed her of Alec's arrivals. Somebody very close to Alec was a Judas. "She brought some Christmas presents with her. There's one for you."

She did not respond and I wanted desperately to see the expression on her face. I continued to rinse dishes and she continued to place them in the dishwasher.

"Why are you telling me this?" Her voice was strained, the studied casualness gone.

"I didn't want it to be a shock or you," I replied honestly.

We finished loading the dishwasher and swiped the counters in silence. Finally, this was nothing left but to look at each other. She was pale and her eyes a dark, fearful green.

"Do you know what it is?" she asked.

I was expecting this question and was able to lie with a straight face. "I know it's a painting. She

said it wasn't anything bad."

The tension did not leave her face. "If I gave her a present, do you think she would open it?"

The question tugged at my heart strings. A small flame of hope was lit by my revelation. She waited with bated breath for my answer and as I paused, I saw her bracing for the pain my answer could bring.

I smiled. "I think she would."

She nodded quickly and left the kitchen. I found my father in the den comfortably watching the kick-off of one of the games. He grinned at me and patted the couch next to him.

"You should have brought some jeans, kid," he teased.

We watched a few plays, but I really did not know who was playing. A receiver broke away and ran down the sidelines with Rainer yelling for the other team to stop him.

I waited until the extra point kick was good before breaking into his game day enthusiasm. "Alec brought some presents last weekend. She has some for you. She brought Jillian a painting."

His head snapped around and he stared at me as if I had just said football was the stupidest game on the face of the earth. "Did you tell Jillian?"

I nodded. Presents are suppose to be surprises, but I did not want to kill Jillian. "She wants to give Alec a gift."

"Is that a good idea?"

"I think so. Something is happening with Alec and I'm not really sure what it is. But if she's giving Jillian a present, I think it's a good sign." I hoped it was a good sign.

Jillian joined us an hour later. I nonchalantly smiled at her and made room for her beside my father while checking her face for signs of tears. She had changed into jeans and a sweatshirt so big it had to be Rainer's.

"Who's winning?"

Rainer was grumpy as he told her his team was losing by two touchdowns. He left to get dessert when his team kicked a field goal. What was Alec doing today? Here I was enjoying a warm family event while Alec was alone. Of course, it was her choice to be alone. Jillian would have gladly, cheerfully set another place for her. She could be here with us, stuffed and watching football.

Rainer came back with his plate loaded with pumpkin pie and bread pudding. Jillian teased him and as I listened to their gentle banter, I desperately wanted to be with Alec. I understood why

she could not come here. I was uncomfortable myself and these memories were not my own. But if I could have chosen the family members with which to share this day, I would have chosen Alec.

I glanced at the clock. It was three. If I hurried, if I could pack in fifteen minutes, I could be in Aubres before Alec was in bed. The day would almost be over, but who cared? I wanted to be with Alec. I did not really care if the parades would all be over and the games would all be won. I did not want to be with Alec just because it was Thanksgiving.

Getting away from Rainer and Jillian proved much easier than I anticipated. I yawned, stretched and said I was tired. Ten minutes later I was walking out the front door with my keys in my hand and mentally packing my suitcase. It wasn't even a lie; I was tired of being without Alec.

The traffic leaving Los Angeles was fast moving and the city was soon a welcome sight in my rearview mirror. I slipped a Reba McEntire CD into the compact disc player and happily sang off key with the songs.

It never occurred to me on the long drive that Alec would not be happy to see me. When she came to Los Angeles, we got along better than we ever did. Yes, her past caused a few problems, but we were dealing with them rather than brushing them away. We were talking, honestly trying to build a future together. Weren't we?

Cresting the hill was a homecoming for me. The doubts I had about Alec and Jillian that plagued me in Los Angeles vanished under a black, starless sky and fine mist. I drove down Main Street and made a conscious effort to not speed in the slow paced town. I was eager to get to the beach house.

This time Alec was not standing on the end of the pier as if waiting for me. Her Jag was parked in the same spot and light poured from the wall of sliding glass doors. I hurried down the sand dune. Fat rain drops started falling as soon as I hit the deck. I banged on the door and startled Alec almost as much as she startled me. She popped up from the couch. The surprised look on her face did not change to happy delight when she saw my bedraggled self on her deck. I got wetter and wetter as she stared at me from her warm, dry couch.

Finally, she laid a sheaf of papers on the table and came to open the door.

"Stay," she ordered. I stayed. A fire was burning in the fireplace and I was grateful for the warmth. She came back with a couple of towels from the laundry room. "Here. Dry off."

I stammered a thank you and began to dry my head. Alec briskly rubbed the other towel over me. When I was no longer dripping, Alec took the towels and tossed them into the laundry room.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a resigned tone. Gray eyes were dark in annoyance.

"Nothing's wrong. Why?"

Alec did not answer. She frowned and saw that I was shivering despite the warm room. She sighed and motioned for me to follow her. "Why is it that you get drenched every time you visit?"

I followed her up the stairs and into her bedroom. Since this was only my second visit, she really could not say that *every time* I visited I got drenched. Was it my fault that it rained here all the time? Was it my fault she left me standing on the deck in a downpour? I said none of this because the hot water in the shower was too inviting. I hurried out of my wet clothes and into the steamy cubicle.

Now, if she had hot food and hot coffee when I got out, I was ready to marry her tonight.

~~~~~

Her bedroom was empty when I reluctantly left the shower. I found a small pile of neatly folded clothing on the bed. I sat on the bed and pulled on the T-shirt, jogging pants, and socks slowly. Downstairs in her kitchen, Alec was heating up food. My disappointment at her less than enthusiastic greeting faded in the face of her concern.

"Better?" she asked as I walked down the stairs. The living room was clean of the papers that had covered the couch, table, and floor.

I nodded and sat across from her. This routine felt dearly familiar. I should have come before, when Alec was canceling our weekends. If Mohammed won't go to the mountain. "Yes, thank you. What's that?"

"Vegetable soup. I don't have any Thanksgiving food."

Now that I was warm and dry and soon to be fed, I stared at her critically. Her hair was past her collar now and she had acquired a new habit of brushing her bangs away from her eyes. She was thinner under the baggy cotton pants and T-shirt. Shadowed gray eyes met my stare.

"What?" she asked, irritation creeping in her voice.

"I thought you would be happy to see me." I did not try to hide the hurt in my voice. I was happy to be here. Why wasn't she happy to have me here?

She poured the soup in a bowl and handed me a half eaten pack of saltines. She asked what I wanted to drink and I choose hot tea from my limited choices.

"I am happy to see you, Tory, but I told you I was busy," she said when the water was warming for our tea. She dropped a tea bag into two mugs.

"Were you grading papers?" I asked. I was curious about the disappearing papers.

"No." She poured boiling water over the tea bags. I wanted in vain for an explanation. She spooned sugar into her tea and took the mug into the living room. I turned on the barstool. While

I took a shower, she had replaced the papers with a book and an afghan. She laid on the couch and opened the book to a bookmark. Was I suppose to believe she was reading when I arrived?

I ate my soup and reminded myself that Alec was Alec and I could not ask a dozen questions. So what if she was reading now. Whatever she was doing before I arrived did not concern me and was not worth risking a fight. Besides, it was storming outside and I did not want to be tossed out in it. When I was finished, I washed up my dishes and went to sit by the fire.

It was eleven thirty. Twelve hours earlier I stood on the doorstep of Windchase, clueless as to where I would be laying my head this night. Since I was not guaranteed to be sharing her bed, I still did not where I was laying my head.

"You look tired, Tory."

Suddenly, I was very tired. I wanted nothing more than to lay on her soft bed with my head on her shoulder. I nodded. "I am. It's been a fun filled day."

She stood up and dropped her book to the coffee table. She held her hand out to me. "I'm tired, too. Can you wait until tomorrow for your suitcase?"

I walked into her embrace and received the welcome I thought I would get when I arrived. She cupped the back of my neck with her hand, pulling me close for a long, soft kiss. "I am happy you're here."

I crawled on her bed. I barely remember Alec slipping under the covers with me. My last coherent thought was that her body felt perfect, her lips warm against my forehead.

~~~~~

Alec Chasen did not paint anymore because it never stopped raining in Aubres. Friday was as wet and gray as it had promised to be last night. I found Alec downstairs curled on the couch, reading. She smiled when she saw me and I took it as a sign that she was happy I was here.

"I was beginning to think you would sleep the day away," she teased. I knelt beside her on the floor and leaned over to kiss her.

"I sleep so much better when I sleep with you," I revealed boldly. It was comforting to fall asleep with her heart beating steadily under me.

She ran her fingers through my hair. "So do I. I like waking up better, too."

"What's for breakfast?" I asked the important questions first.

"I need to go shopping. We can have lunch in town and then shop. Okay?"

Lunch? I glanced at the clock and was surprised that it was indeed lunch time. I have never slept past eleven in my life, until today. Alec had brought in my suitcase and left it by the foot of the

stairs. She was already dressed for the trip in blue jeans and sweater. I changed into a pair of jeans and borrowed a down-filled jacket from her to wear over my T-shirt.

"I'll be outside warming up the car," she called as I changed.

Aubres was a much colder than it was during my last visit. Alec did not live high enough up for snow, but she did get colder weather than I was use to in LA.

She parked the Jag on a side street. We went to an unnamed restaurant located conveniently next to a Stop-n-Shop grocery store. The restaurant was deserted and a lone waitress was standing behind the counter reading a book. She glanced up at us, saw her customer, and broke into a wide smile.

"Hey Alec. Didn't expect to see you today, with the school closed and all." She grabbed two plastic covered menus and came over to our booth.

Alec grinned up at the woman. "I have an unexpected guest and no food at the house. Miranda, this is Victoria, my friend in Los Angeles. Miranda owns this place, but likes for people to think she works here."

Miranda was probably younger than she looked with frizzy red hair and lively brown eyes. She smiled at me as she handed me a menu. "Get better tips that way."

Alec did not look at her menu as she ordered a grilled chicken sandwich, potato salad, and a glass of tea. After a quick glance over the menu, I ordered the same. Miranda's lunch menu was limited to a hamburger, grilled chicken or ham sandwich. I had a choice of French fries, slaw or potato salad.

Alec smiled apologetically at me after Miranda left to make our orders. "There's not much selection here, I know, but the food is really good."

A few more patrons wandered in as we waited. Alec was greeted by name and in turn greeted each new arrival by name. Soon a group of men were seated at table not far from us. They all wore dirty jeans and heavy plaid shirts. Alec was included in their rambling conversation of football and kids. She grinned at me with a shrug when she agreed with Ed that San Francisco had a team that could go all the way.

Alec ate her lunch in serene bliss. She joined in the conversations flowing around her as if she truly belonged in this small town restaurant with loggers, truck drivers and housewives. She joked about the football games yesterday and politely listened as the mother of one of her student's complained about paint stains on his jeans. I ate my lunch in fascinated silence.

Goodbyes chorused as she paid our bill and we left.

I followed Alec next door to the Stop-n-Shop. Maybe she did belong in this small town with these people who treated her like a friend. I did not need to know all of Alec's past to know what

their acceptance meant to her. It had to be one of the reasons she donated her time to teach art at the school. They would never be able to afford a full-time art teacher, much less Alec Chasen. She could give them something in return for what they were giving her.

"How long are you staying?" she asked me after we had a shopping cart and were walking down an aisle.

"I have to leave Sunday."

"I won't have to get much then," she replied.

I walked behind her as she selected the food for some mental menu she was planning. I stared at her loose jeans and remembered her comment about not having food in the house. Why was she only buying enough food for a few days if she did not have food in the house?

"Alec, aren't you going to need more food after I leave?"

She was staring with a preoccupied frown at the row of canned goods. She walked down the aisle and slowly read the labels. "I'm going back to Los Angeles with you. I was planning on flying in Monday. I didn't want food to spoil while I was gone. I'll be there all week."

I felt very foolish as I watched her walk back with a few cans. She was coming to Los Angeles Monday. If I had only waited. The words "if only" could sum up our relationship. "What about school?"

"The kids are preparing for state wide tests. The teachers are going to use my time to tutor some of the kids who are behind."

I followed her to the frozen food section. Two women were sharing a recipe over the vegetables. I stood back by our cart and watched as the same thing that had happened in the restaurant happened here. Alec was accepted into their little group. They exchanged cheek kisses and quick hugs. Soon they were talking about Thanksgiving. Alec lied about how she had spent the holiday. Both women extended a Christmas invitation to her, probably had invited her to their homes for Thanksgiving. For whatever reason, Alec chose to spend the day completely alone.

Alec paid for the food. A young high school boy eagerly pushed the cart to the car. I thought his excited expression was for Alec until we got to the Jag. He ran a reverent hand over the dark glossy finish. Alec thanked him and gave him a generous tip.

"Miss Chasen, I'm gonna miss class next week. Too bad the kids who don't need no help can't come."

"I'm going to miss you guys, too," she told him and he flushed in pleased embarrassment.

A light rain was falling when Alec parked the Jag next to my Cherokee. All the touching scenes crossed my mind as we carried the bags into the house. Alec was familiar with these people,

knew who belonged to who, knew the parents of her students. Alec had made herself more at home in the last two years in Aubres than she had ever been at home in Los Angeles. She had a few friends in Los Angeles and a mother, but here she seemed to know everybody. And everybody seemed to know her.

"Do these people know who you are?" I asked when the last bag was on the counter.

Alec paused in emptying a bag. She stared into the bag as she asked, "Who am I?"

"Alec Chasen."

She took the rest of the food out of her bag and turned to face me, one hip propped against the cabinet. "They know my name."

I knew the look in her eyes all too well. Alec was getting angry. I watched as the gray became the color of the clouds looming over the water. "Do they know who that is?"

When I knew she was getting angry, why didn't I just let it go? Did it matter if the citizens of Aubres knew that the woman who gave their kids art lessons was paid thousands of dollars for her own work? If they knew they seemed quite happy with the arrangement.

"What is it that you think they should know?" Her tone was frosty.

Our eyes met and I knew that whatever I could say would only make this conversation worse. So I shrugged and reached into a bag. I transferred cans and boxes to the counter under her watchful gaze. She stared at me for several uncomfortable minutes before turning back to her own bag.

"You know, Victoria, that's probably the thing I liked least about you. You never liked the Chasen Originals, but you did like being Alec Chasen's girlfriend. You were so impressed with yourself."

She was furious now. She marched around the kitchen slamming cabinets and throwing food into the refrigerator. I moved out of the small space and ended up standing in the doorway of the laundry room.

"What do you think, Victoria? You saw them, saw how they interacted with me. Do they know I'm Alec Chasen, the painter?"

"No," I answered immediately.

She smiled at me. Her soft voice was mocking as she said, "What gave them away? They didn't fawn over me, their tone was reverent enough when they said 'Hey Alec'. What exactly was it that hinted at their stupidity?"

Her smile dropped away at the end of her tirade.

"Have they always known who you really are?" I asked. I was right, it didn't matter if these people knew she was a well-known painter.

"Who I really am? I never said they know who I am really am. But yes, they've known who Alec Chasen is from the beginning."

She started a pot of coffee and while waiting for it to perk, she assembled the ingredients for dinner. She avoided meeting my gaze. Was that all she thought I saw in her? Few people knew my girlfriend was Alec Chasen and she was right, I never really liked her paintings. I liked her.

"Alec, I liked you when you were nothing more than a bitter alcoholic who painted. I saw a sad, lonely young woman running from something I probably still don't understand. I put up with your attitude and your sarcasm because I love you. But don't ever delude yourself into thinking I stayed simply because you are Alec Chasen."

I was tired of apologizing all the time. Yes, I had made bad assumptions and yes, I let my curiosity get out of control. However, I was not a gold digging bitch and she was not going to cast me in that role.

I walked to the other side of the bar. "And I didn't come back because you're Kellen Brent."

Of course it was raining. That's all it ever did in Aubres. I stared around the house and was heading for her office when she caught me by the arm. I turned and our eyes met. This was the first time Alec came after me.

"Go to my bedroom if you want to be alone. I have work to do in my office," she said flatly.

She dropped my arm and walked back to the kitchen. So much for Alec coming after me. All she cared about was that I pout some place more convenient for her. She poured a mug of coffee, went to her office, and shut the door without once glancing my way. I drove all this way for this?

Well, I did not have to put up with this and especially not from her. First, she let me get soaked in a freezing downpour and then she was not as happy to see me as I was to see her. So I wanted to know if the kind people of Aubres knew their reclusive neighbor was the Alec Chasen. That was not a criminal offense in any state and she was not going to persecute me for it. Coming to Los Angeles Monday? Better call for reservations, Alec, because you're not staying with me and you won't stay with your mother.

I was going to her bedroom all right. I was going to her bedroom to pack my clothes.

Why were we all catering to her whims? Yes, Alec Chasen's childhood was tragic. I would even go so far as to say it was more tragic than most. However, she had survived it so it was not as tragic as some. I was not one of the people who hurt her and I was damned tired of being treated as if I shared the same ranking as Jillian. I was sorry for her, but not enough to continue to pay for crimes that others committed.

I knocked sharply on her office door. Minutes crept by in the silent house. My righteous anger turned to annoyance and as the three minutes became five, I became alarmed. I tried to turn the handle and finding that it was locked, I pounded on the door.

"Alec, open the door," I demanded.

The door flew open and, still holding the handle, I was yanked into Alec. Startled gray eyes stared into mine as we tumbled to the floor. As I fell, I got a glimpse of words on the computer screen and the vanishing stacks of paper.

"What's wrong Tory?" she asked with none of her former anger. Concern was written all over her face.

She untangled our arms and legs and we sat facing each other on her office floor. She laid her hand on my cheek. "Are you all right?"

All the disappointment of this trip burst out. "No, I'm not all right. You don't want me here. You think all I care about is that you're Alec Chasen. What are we playing at here Alec?"

Tears were falling down my face and I impatiently brushed them away. Alec stared at me with impassive dark eyes. This was just great. I wanted to be the one to walk away this time and instead, she was going to ask me to leave.

"No, I didn't want you here. Not right now. I have an important deadline Monday. I want to spend the Christmas holiday with you, but to do that, I must finish this weekend. Besides, I knew I would be with you all week. Tory, I love you."

She got up and walked back to the computer. I leaned against the bookshelf and watched as she saved her work and turned off the computer. She came back and held out her hand. We went to the kitchen. I sat at the breakfast bar and Alec went into the kitchen to begin supper preparations.

"I know you want more Tory. I do, too. I want us to be together again, but better this time. I don't have to hide who I am anymore or what my life is about. I am not playing at anything here. You are the most important person in my life. I do not take that lightly. I want the same things here that you do, Tory, I promise I do. But I simply cannot give it to you right now."

She would not meet my eyes. She kept her eyes firmly on the clear, herb marinade she was preparing. Her voice was soft as she bared her soul. I could have asked about the deadline. I could have cried for her honesty. I could have got down on one knee and asked her to marry me. The first would have broken this fragile thread and the last two would have embarrassed Alec.

"What's for supper?" I asked. Startled, relieved gray eyes flew to my face. I was going to let this pass without comment or question and she was happy. I loved her and I wanted her to be happy.

She grinned. "Roasted chicken."

I curled up on her bed and read while she typed away in her office. I was not as curious about what she was doing as I would have been this morning. All I cared about was that if I left her alone to finish it, I could have her for the Christmas holiday. She clarified what that meant exactly over supper. The Christmas holiday meant she would be flying in on December 16 and would not leave until January 3. Almost three weeks of Alec, in Los Angeles, in my condo, in my bed. For that, I was willing to do anything and not ask a single question about it.

We were going to drive back to Los Angeles after Sunday lunch. She had meetings Monday, but she was mine from Tuesday until I put her on the plane Sunday night. I would not see her again until I picked her up the sixteenth. I could go two weeks without seeing her. It was easy when I knew she was coming back.

This was the first time in our relationship I did not ask her questions. Ironically, it was the only time I really needed to know what was happening. Ignorance may be bliss, but I certainly would have preferred to be forewarned about the media fusillade about to blow our lives apart.

8.

Elane's red Mercedes was parked in front of my condo when we drove up Sunday evening. In my mind, I saw again that red Mercedes that nearly ran me down the day I met Jillian. Alec must borrow Elane's car when she visited. Of course, loaning her precious convertible was small payment for the amount of money Alec brought into Rasche Galleries. Elane's commission off the Chasen's alone could have paid for several red Mercedes'.

"Where do you think she left the keys?" I asked Alec.

"I have my own set," Alec replied.

Elane gave Alec a set of keys to her Mercedes? That was incredible. The car was Elane's baby, but then like me, the Mercedes could be replaced and Alec Chasen could not.

My answering machine was blinking. I listened through the half dozen messages while Alec took our suitcases into the bedroom. Three of the messages were from my dad. They called for me to come to dinner Saturday and his last message was a simple "Where the hell are you?" and an angry click. Elane left a message for Alec to call her when we arrived.

I went into the bedroom as the other two messages played. A few more pieces fell in place for me. "Alec, how is Elane related to you?"

She did not pause in removing her clothes from her suitcase. "She's my cousin."

Elane was the Judas spy, the secret source that kept Jillian Young informed of her daughter's visits to Los Angeles. I was furious with Elane for such a blatant betrayal. If Elane knew the Brent secrets, she would know Alec detested Jillian. How could she tell Jillian everything detail

about Alec's life?

"Brent or Young?"

Alec turned to me with a quizzical expression on her face. "Brian was an only child."

Elane's aunt was Jillian Young. When we shared life stories, she forgot to mention that little detail. She could have told me when I told her that Rainer was marrying Jillian. "Why wasn't she at the wedding?"

"Why should I know? Jill and I did not discuss the guest list."

Alec emptied one of my drawers and filled it with her clothes. I sat on the bed and no longer cared why Elane skipped the wedding or that she betrayed Alec. I watched her put her clothes in my drawer and pretended that it was forever and not just the week. Alec wanted to live with me and it would be paradise when and if that happened. I would even get a bigger place by the ocean.

She sat on the bed. "Honey, I'm tired. Would you mind if I went to bed early?"

Dark circles ringed weary gray eyes. I was asleep before she finally came to bed last night. Or was it this morning? She was quiet on the trip and although I thought she was dozing, her reflection in the window showed her eyes open. She brought a box the size of paper and a couple of inches thick. She kept it by her feet.

"No, of course not. I need to return some phone calls."

I waited while she changed into a night shirt. I tucked her in and gave her chaste kiss on the forehead. "Sleep well, sweetheart."

I bummed restlessly around the apartment. It was too early for me to go to sleep even after the drive back. My calls were quick and painless. My Dad was upset that I left without telling anyone I was going and I dutifully apologized. Two friends had called to invite me out and I turned down the invitations. It was eight o'clock and I was alone. Alec was sleeping in my bed, but I was still alone.

Her itinerary was still a secret. She mentioned "meetings", but never said with who or where. The subject was probably her paintings or the financial accounts of being Alec Chasen. When she said she bought the beach house and Jag, she was telling the truth about having the money. She made smart financial deals with the money she earned from her paintings.

The alarm was set to wake her at an ungodly seven in the morning. I would not see her again until fivish. We were meeting back here to dress for dinner. Alec was excited about the after dinner activity. We were going to pick out a tree and decorate it. Alec said she could not remember decorating a tree. Brian and Jillian's trees were professionally decorated; she and Cordelia did not celebrate the holiday.

I gave up the pretense of reading shortly after nine. If I had to be awake, at least I could enjoy the feel of Alec sleeping in my arms.

~~~~~

Alec was gone when I rolled out of bed the next morning. I never even heard the alarm go off. All through the condo were signs that Alec was, for the week, living in my home. Her robe was thrown on the foot of my bed and the bathroom smelled faintly of her shampoo. Plate and cup in the sink, scattered newspaper on the table, and a brief note with her pager number signed "Love, Alec."

Was this what it would be like to live with an Alec who could cope with life, who could be happy? If this is what it would be like I was ready.

I did not go to my office. I had an errand to run that could not wait. I drove through the mid morning traffic and wondered how Elane was going to get from her Malibu home to the gallery. The Mercedes was her only car and Alec was driving it. Was Alec playing chauffeur?

Elane was standing in the middle of the showing floor directing the hanging of Christmas ornaments. Holly wreaths were being hung around the upper gallery balcony with care and carols played over the music system. She was using a cinnamon air freshener this year.

"Victoria, I didn't expect to see you today. Or at all this week," she said with a wink.

I walked down into the sunken circle and nodded at the festive atmosphere. "Are you going to have a Christmas Eve showing this year?"

"No," she answered briefly. "Michele, dear, that's crooked. Turn it a little to the left. Yes, right there."

She took me by the arm and led me to her office. "You know this is the odd year. I'm off to England."

Oh yes, the famous Christmas trips to England. Five years ago she brought back Alec Chasen. If I recalled the lie right, she went to an art gallery and saw her first Chasen. She was so impressed with Alec's work that she arranged to meet the artist. When she came back to Los Angeles after the New Year, Alec was with her.

I waited until her office door was shut and we were seated to say, "How is your grandmother? I guess she's kind of my grandmother, too, now. You know since Jillian is my step?mother."

To her credit, Elane did not bat an eye. She sat back in her chair and dipped her head in acknowledgment. "She would like the whole family together, but that's not going to happen."

The Brent?Young family was maddening. They lied and lied and then when you caught them, they did not even have the decency to be embarrassed. They just smiled that half smile of

acquiescence and smoothly answered all questions as if talking about this subject was as natural as breathing air. They should have all been actors.

"Elane, all those times I sat in this office and complained about Alec. You never said a word. Why?"

She sighed and looked away. "What was I supposed to tell you, Victoria? You are a writer for *The Los Angeles Times*. Did you expect me to tell you that Alec Chasen is really Kellen Brent and that Jillian Young is my aunt? I mean, did you really expect that?"

"We were friends, Elane. Do you really believe I would destroy our friendship over a story? Even one that would make my career."

Blue green eyes met mine in a direct stare. "I'm sorry if you feel betrayed. I'm sorry if you think our friendship is over. This family has been to hell and back. It was a chance I just couldn't take. I trusted you, but what if I was wrong, Victoria? You wanted to her, and with that kind of knowledge you would have destroyed her."

The sad part is that I did understand. Who knows what I would have done with that story two years ago. I would like to think I would have kept their secret. But could I honestly say how I would have reacted when Alec threw me from her home? Although I am not vindictive, I do like to get even.

I smiled at Elane. "Our friendship isn't over unless you want it to be."

~~~~~

Alec wanted spaghetti for supper. She had changed from her suit into 501's and a red long sleeve T?shirt with white snowflakes. She was excited about buying a tree.

"I want a really big one," she said. She was eating as if she had not eaten all day. "What kind of stuff do you put on it?"

When we lived together, I decorated our tree alone. Alec would give it a glance, call it "nice", and disappear into her studio. I was lavish with the decorations then, believing that sooner or later Alec would catch the Christmas spirit. Now that I know what happened to her on one Christmas, I was surprised she would ever want to celebrate the holiday. Surprised, but certainly delighted to be the one who got to share her unbridled enthusiasm.

"We can put whatever you want on it."

We left the restaurant and began the search for the perfect Christmas tree. For someone who never bought a tree before, Alec roamed the lots with a critical eye, rejecting tree after tree. Most were too short or not round enough.

"What about this one?" she asked, standing by the tallest tree I have ever seen. It had to be over nine feet tall.

I shook my head. "That's taller than my ceiling. It has to be shorter."

Her face fell and she walked away from her tree dejected. I stared at the tree and mentally cut a few inches off the bottom. So what if it was exceptionally round at the bottom? I was letting Alec pick the tree and this was the tree she wanted.

"Hey Tory," she called.

I turned and she was nowhere to be seen. I walked through the trees following her happy voice.

"I want this one."

I stared at the small, raggedy tree. It was in the back of the lot and dwarfed by the other trees. The only thing this tree had going for it was that it had a perfect Christmas tree shape. "Why?"

She came to my side and took my hand. She stared at her little outcast with bright eyes. "Because no one else will want it and it should have a home."

I should have known that the kid no one wanted would pick out the tree no one would take.

Alec decided she wanted to give the little tree dignity. She sat on the floor and looked around in disappointment at my strings of blinking, colored lights, colored balls, and wooden ornaments. "Tory, can I go get what I want?"

She left with a bright grin and a kiss quick. I was getting tired and her energy level was still on high. While she went where ever, I packed up my ornaments and carted the boxes back to my storage unit. I changed into my pajamas during the hour and a half that she was gone. I was flipping through the channels when she blew back into the condo.

"This is going to be so great," she bubbled.

I sat on the couch and we talked as she decorated her first tree. She wrapped a strand of white blinking lights and hung small metallic red balls and brass angels. I had to admit the tree did have a certain dignity when we turned off the lights. The white lights bounced twinkling colors of gold and red off the ornaments.

"Do you like it?" she asked softly.

I stood behind her and wrapped her in my arms. I told her what she wanted to hear because she was so excited and because I loved her. "It's perfect."

~~~~~

Sunday came before I was ready to give Alec up. I loved coming home and finding her in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on our dinner. It was wonderful going to sleep with her in my arms. I knew our time was limited and so I tried to remember every happy grin and flash of

silver eyes. I wanted to be able to take the memories out and flip through them after I put her on the plane.

"The next two weeks are going to be so slow," she complained on the ride to the airport. My heart lifted because she was going miss me almost as much as I was going to miss her.

I reached over and put my hand on hers. "But then it'll be the sixteenth. Are you coming on the sixteenth or the day after?"

"That day. I've already made the reservations."

I walked her to the concourse. We didn't talk as we waited for the loading call. Two weeks. How long could it be really? The past seven days had passed in a flash. How slow could the next fourteen go by?

The condo felt very empty when I got back. We left the tree on and the blinking lights were a better welcome than a dark, cold condo. It was a long way from the kind of welcomes I had gotten used to over the week. The condo was always warm, brightly lit and filled with the wonderful smells of Alec's home cooked food. I should find out how long she was to teach in the Aubres school system. And after the New Year, I was buying a house near the ocean.

When I pulled the covers back on my bed that night, I found the blue silk pajama top Alec slept in. She had left it on my pillow. I did not feel the least bit silly as I cuddled it before going to sleep. I would have preferred her, but I was happy to have the silk top. I should have taken something from her the other times she was here.

## 9.

The first week did pass miraculously quick. I knew that Alec was going to be a guest for the last two weeks of December so I wrote a few columns in advance. I did not want to have to work while she was here this time. So what if I missed out on coming home to Alec cooking dinner? We could do it together.

Jillian called me on that Saturday. I could tell she was nervous by the hesitant catch in her voice.

"Victoria, I know you don't want me to ask you about Alec. I can respect your reasons. But her thirtieth birthday is on the eighteenth. Rainer and I have a gift for her. May we leave it at your apartment?"

In all the excitement for Christmas, I had forgotten Alec's birthday was December 18. Her thirtieth. "Of course. Would you like me to come for it?"

"No, Rainer can bring it by. Will we see you at all Christmas day?"

Alec and I had not talked about Christmas Day yet. She knew I would want to see my father and knew that it meant I would see Jillian, too. I don't think she could think that far in advance about Christmas. If she gave it too much thought, the memories just might overwhelm her.

"Yes, but I don't know what time yet. When I talk to Alec I will try to get a time for you."

"Thank you Victoria," she said softly. I felt that she was thanking me for more than just keeping Alec's present at my house.

Alec's birthday. I was going to have to do something very special. And I was going to have to buy another gift. I had been so proud that all of my gift buying was over. So happy that I was not out searching for the perfect gift in what was left on the shelves. What to buy?

I thought about the gifts under the tree. I bought her the fisherman's sweater, a brass seahorse for her collection, a gold anklet, a bottle of Safari perfume, and a cookbook of traditional English deserts. All nice Christmas presents, but not exactly the perfect birthday gift for someone crossing over into a new decade. I wanted something personal and romantic. Something that didn't say your mother called and reminded me it was your birthday.

We never exchanged rings last time. We discussed it, but it never got past the talking stage. I think I wanted it more than Alec. She had to know that eventually we would separate and decided to forgo what would be nothing more than a gesture. I had found myself checking out the rings when I was searching for the anklet. In the end, I decided against a ring because of how Alec might react to my making such a decision on my own. Now, because birthday gifts are one way, I could give her one. She did not have to know that the ring would have a match, until she decided to return the gift.

Alec would be wearing my ring. I did not even care that I was disguising it as a birthday gift. I wanted a ring on her left hand, third finger, anyway I could get it there.

The perfect ring, gold band embedded with sapphires, was wrapped and beside Jillian's present by Wednesday. I became a coward Thursday afternoon. I was sitting at my desk writing when I was seized by the most horrible of thoughts. If Alec was going to cancel, and a small frightened part of me was expecting her to, it would be that night. There was no way I was going home until it was very late. I went to the same restaurant I went to weeks earlier when I did not want to be home when Alec called to lie that she was all right. After a solitary meal of baked chicken and steamed vegetables, I drove around Los Angeles to see the Christmas decorations.

What if Alec could not bring herself to come? Would I really be disappointed? Yes, but I would understand. That she would even consider spending Christmas in Los Angeles said so much about how far she had come from the Alec of two years ago. If she decided not to come, I would go to her. Yes, Christmas in Aubres. With Alec.

It was easier to go home now that I knew I would see her either way. Besides, Christmas in Aubres would be more special and romantic than Christmas in Los Angeles. I could see us on the deck watching the sun go down on Christmas Eve. The only light from the house would be the

twinkling lights from the tree. Yes, Christmas in Aubres, where all the holiday memories would be new, would be better than Christmas in Los Angeles.

Alec had only bad memories of Christmas in Los Angeles.

I don't know if I was disappointed when I walked into the condo and saw the blinking light on the answering machine or if I was elated. I wanted Alec to come, but I made the holiday in Aubres seem so sweet and innocent, so romantic and festive. If given a choice, I would have chosen Aubres over Los Angeles.

Her voice was soft and weary. "Hi honey, sorry I missed you. Just wanted to touch base about tomorrow. My flight is at six?thirty. I can't wait to see you. I love you."

Now I knew. I was disappointed. I wanted to have Christmas in Aubres. And knowing what I know now, we would have been better off waking that morning far, far away from Los Angeles.

~~~~~

I pretended to work for a few hours, but gave up the pretense a little before lunch. All I was doing in my office was clock watching, which forced the minutes to creep by that much slower. I sailed out the door at eleven?thirty.

What to do with seven hours? Everything I thought Alec and I would need over the next two weeks was already purchased. I stocked up on groceries and added a few goodies to add a few pounds to Alec's pathetically thin body. We were going to a friends only Christmas Eve party at Elane's gallery. Everyone was suppose to bring a general gift for a number drawing during the evening. I bought one for each of us to take. Driving around to see the decorations was out because I did that the night before and anyway, it was better to see them in the dark.

Los Angeles prides itself on plenty of attractions for entertaining people. Usually, I can find something of interest to do with a few spare hours. Unfortunately, it felt like I had a spare eternity and I was not interested in wasting time. I would have gladly, happily given those hours away if it meant that it would then be six?thirty. Let someone else have them because for me the time was nothing more than a cross to bear.

What to do? I was driving around, searching for something or anything to attract my attention. Then I saw her and I smiled. Victoria Senett, you have six hours to waste in your life, what are you going to do? Go to Disneyland. I sat up in the driver's seat with a feeling of purpose and grinned like an idiot at the little girl walking along the sidewalk wearing Mickey Mouse ears. If people could spend days in Disney and still feel like they didn't see everything, surely I could make a few hours seem to fly by.

On any other day, I might have felt a little silly walking into the Magic Kingdom alone and without a child holding my hand. The only times I have ever been here were when I was child myself and with a girlfriend's children. I never came alone.

I did not feel foolish walking along the streets among the families and couples. I stood in line for

a few rides. The waits were long in the warm sun and the small children complained, and I smiled. Because it was now three. Three and a half down and only three and a half to go. Two really if I counted on leaving Disney at five.

Along the way I started a gift bag for Alec. If she ever came to Disneyland it was not with me. I bought Mickey Mouse ears, Mickey sleep shirt, Mickey candy, and a small stuffed Mickey Mouse. My last purchase was a Fantasia coffee mug. I could image her on the deck on some cold winter morning. She would be sipping from the mug, wearing the fisherman's sweater, and the rising sun would glint off my ring on her finger. I was getting very good at imagining Alec in my presents, my arms, my life. I liked the picture.

By the time five rolled around, I was pleasantly tired. I left the Magic Kingdom behind, thankful that my day had been made so enjoyable. While I was imagining things, it was not so hard to imagine me wandering through shopping centers until I was brain dead.

~~~~~

I had enough time to go by the condo to change into some clean clothes. I hurried into a pair of black slacks and a teal dress shirt. Six<sup>ty</sup>thirty was close to supper time and I wanted to be prepared to take Alec to a nice restaurant if she was hungry. I was famished. With all the things I did at Disneyland, buying food was not one of them. I was so intent on wasting time and buying gifts that stopping for a leisurely meal never occurred to me.

The fear that she would not show was still with me. I stood in the waiting area, watching the people come from the plane and knew that Alec could very easily be in Aubres. I would not have been too surprised to learn she simply could not force herself to get on the plane. Christmas in Los Angeles. With her past, it was a wonder she could even say the word Christmas.

The woman who came to me was a sad version of the woman I saw standing on the end of the pier six months ago. She was ashen and the circles under her eyes were so dark she looked like she had two black eyes. Her hair was shaggier and her new habit was to flick the bangs from her face with a toss of her head. She saw me and smiled, another poor imitation of the bright smile she had in Aubres.

I pasted a bright smile to my face and held her gently. God, she felt even thinner. How much weight could she lose? "Where would you like to eat? I am starving,"

She shrugged and kept her eyes on the luggage carousel. "I'm not very hungry, so go where you would like to eat."

When we were in my car, I turned in the driver's seat to face her. I did not try to keep my concern to myself any longer. She looked like a walking corpse. "I wish I never came back into your life."

She had been looking out the passenger's window, her head resting against the seat. She sat that way for another few moments before rolling her head around to face me. "Please do not do this now, Victoria. Is it possible that you could just be happy I'm here and that we are going to spend

the holiday together?"

"How can I be happy when you look like you're going to collapse any minute? I'm not blind Alec. Do you think I can't see how you look? Do you think I don't know why?"

It happened in an instant. The weary indifference vanished and she bolted up in the seat. I know that anybody who walked near the Cherokee heard her righteous indignation. "God, but you are incredible. I am here. It is bloody Christmas in bloody Los Angeles and I flew in just to be with you. I bought you bloody presents. And now you dare to complain? What more could you possibly want?"

Furious dark gray eyes raked over me and I stared at her in shock. She turned in the seat, one hand braced on the dash board. "You do not even have a clue as to how difficult this has been for me. You had better get appreciative, Victoria, or you can bloody well put me back on that plane. I am doing this for you. How dare you think this is not enough?"

We stared at each other. Alec was breathing fast and I could see her heart hammering in the artery in her neck. Anger had brushed her cheeks with some much needed color. I was shocked by her emotional outburst. This was not Alec's style. Her way was to be sarcastic and cynical, to make you feel foolish in the face of her unflappable composure.

"You sounded incredibly British. Do you always use bloody when you're angry?" I smiled at her. I desperately wanted to wash her anger away.

She frowned, unwilling to give up her anger so easily. I could see her point and knew she would never see mine. Maybe knowing that I wasn't blind to the changes was enough for me to be able to encourage her to eat. I would even call and get an appointment for her hair tomorrow if she wanted.

I reached over to the hand tensed against my dashboard. I pulled the cold fingers into my hand and locked our fingers together. "What I meant, Alec, is that I'm worried about you and I'm sorry if my coming back into your life has hurt you. I would never want to hurt you. Ever. I love you so much."

She sighed and shut her eyes. She leaned over until her forehead was touching my shoulder. "You are not hurting me. Your coming back into my life is the best thing that has ever happened to me."

She sat up and looked into my eyes. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I love you. You know my life, Tory. You know I have not had a lot of people to love. Or to love me back."

I slipped my head behind her head, through the shaggy pale blonde hair at her collar. I rested my cheek against hers. "Promise me that you will let me take care of you, just for while you're here. Let me protect you the way a person who loves would."

She buried her face in my shoulder. Her fingers were so tight as they bit into my arms I was sure

to find bruises tomorrow. She whispered so softly I barely heard her, "I want you to take care of me always."

~~~~~

My grand plans for the night were to take Alec to a nice restaurant, laugh with her as I shared our holiday plans, and to take her home where she would open her Disney surprises while I exaggerated my day. It was a good plan. Alec would have laughed and she would have had fun. However, instead of the woman I met in Aubres, the woman who arrived was the one who fled Los Angeles two years ago.

We called for Chinese delivery from my house. Alec curled up on the couch and stared at the tree lights blinking in the darkened living room. Her luggage was in the bedroom. After I made the call, I went into the living room and sat in front of her on the floor.

She met my forced enthusiasm with a blank face. "Want to know what I did today?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes dark and huge in her face. She was sitting in the corner of the couch and she rested her cheek on her knees to look down on me.

I sat up to pull the Disney bag from the floor next to the couch. I glanced up and was rewarded with a flicker of interest in her eyes. She lifted her head from her knees to watch me pull her gifts from the bag.

"I was ready for you to be here at eleven this morning. I wasn't getting any work done at the paper so I left to find something to do. Guess what I did."

Her smile was faint. She swung her feet to the floor and leaned over. "Became a child? I wish I could have shared that with you."

She picked up the shirt and held it up to see the screen printed Mickey Mouse yawning his way to bed in night shirt and cap. "I like this. Did you get two?"

She glanced down at me when I didn't answer. I loved her. I would have gone to Disneyland every day for the rest of my life it meant she would have that soft look on her face, have those happy eyes whenever she looked at the gift I brought back for her. I didn't even care that I would go broke in a month.

I shook my head. "No, I only bought one for you. All of this is for you."

Delighted surprise lit her face and chased away the last of her shadows. "Really? This is mine?"

My thank you hugs were cut short by the ringing doorbell. Alec pulled away and smiled down into my face. "While you get that, I'll slip into something more comfortable."

I watched her walk into my bedroom before answering the door. What poor timing, I thought darkly, peeking to see who it was. What incredibly bad timing, I thought as I opened the door to

the teenage boy bearing a bag of food. I wasn't even hungry anymore. Well, not for food at least. I handed him the money and took the bag all in the same motion. "Keep the change."

I hurried over to the counter and placed the bag next to her birthday presents. I ran to the bedroom, but I was too late. Alec was dropping the shirt over her head as I came into the room. "I love this. Thank you."

I walked over to slip my arms around her waist. "I love you. You are very welcome."

Our lips touched in our first kiss of her arrival. Arguing was not how I wanted to spend her first night here. Or any night. I wanted every day to filled with laughter and every night to be filled with love. They would, too, even if it meant I had to ignore how thin she was and how shadowed her eyes were.

"Not before you eat," she said breaking the kiss, when I was pushing her towards the bed.

"Before who eats?" I asked, my hold on her tight.

She sighed and nodded. "Okay, not before we eat. I'm not hungry, Tory. I think people should eat only when hungry."

I followed her back into the living room. The shirt fell to mid-thigh. Her legs were no longer tanned and toned. The tan could be explained away by the fact that she lived in an area where they really did have a winter. The smooth muscled look she had before could not be explained away so easily.

"Yes well, people should eat every day whether they're really hungry or not. Your body can't get food for itself just because you don't feel like eating."

I flipped on the kitchen lights. Alec was taking the boxes from the bag. "Tory, I do not need a mother. As you are so fond of reminding me, I have a mother. I doubt I could survive another one."

"Speaking of your mother, those presents over there are your birthday presents. One is from me and one is from your mother."

I was in the kitchen gathering plates, forks, and glasses. I turned in surprise when I heard the ripping of paper. Alec was standing at the end of the counter opening Jillian's gift. Her long bangs fell across her face and I could not see her expression. I bit back my initial protest. Who was I to tell her not to open a present from her mother?

I took the dishes around the counter and set them next to the food. I walked up behind her and slipped my hands around her waist and pulled her back against me. She was holding a gold framed black and white photo. A woman who could have been Alec was lying on a couch holding a small blonde child on her body. The child's head rested against her shoulder and small socked feet were propped on the back of the cushions. Jillian's hand rested on Kellen's stomach.

Kellen was sleepy as she listened to Jillian read the book she was holding. I know it was the expression on Jillian's face that was holding Alec in silence. The child in her mother's arms was cherished and adored. It was written in the loving smile, it was bright in the devoted eyes.

"I remember this," Alec whispered. "That afternoon, before the party. She was trying to calm me down. I was so excited."

I knew, as her voice grew softer and her fingers became white as she held the frame, this picture had been a very bad idea. Perhaps, some time next year in far away Aubres, she could have handled seeing this. But not today. Not ever in Los Angeles. Not with the anniversary of that day so very close. I reached around her for the picture but she held it away from me.

"I wish I could forget," she said and laid the picture face down on the counter. She slipped from my arms and walked away from me. "I'm sorry, Tory, but I really can't eat anything."

I was left alone with a bag of Chinese food and an apartment that felt very empty. I reached for the picture. How could Jillian do this to Alec? She knew, *knew*, that this gift would be opened before Christmas. At the very, very latest, Alec would have opened it on her birthday, which was barely a week earlier than Christmas. I knew Jillian didn't really know Alec and I had given her the benefit of every doubt because of that. But she knew better than this, didn't she? What kind of mother would give her child a birthday gift of the day the child was "killed" and with the mother's permission? Of course, logical thought was not something Jillian Young had ever been accused of having.

This was another gift I should have opened. I should have torn the beautiful silver?blue paper off the gift before Alec ever arrived. I stared at the two of them. The love on Jillian's face and the expression of sleepy contentment on a very young Alec. Would I have understood, even now, what this scene would do to Alec? And if I could not, how could Jillian?

It was easy for me to want her to forgive Jillian. It was easy for me to think she could walk away from what had been done to her. It was easy because it didn't happen to me. I did not live every day with memories that only two years ago had driven Alec to the brink of insanity. I would never understand, not the way a person who lived it did. I had seen it and I was horrified by it, but I still did not appreciate how bad it truly was.

By the time I came to bed, Alec was in a restless sleep. I carefully eased into bed beside her and slipped my arm around her. I loved her so much and I wanted so much for her. I would leave her if it was for her best.

Wouldn't I?

~~~~~

I woke with a start around four that morning. I sat up in bed and knew that something was wrong, but was not oriented enough to know what it was. A quarter moon faintly lit my bedroom. I glanced over the shadowed room, over the tangled sheets of the bed. Alec. She was asleep in my arms when I went to sleep and now she was gone.

The only light in the living room was the blinking lights of the tree, but even they were brighter than the moon outside my window. I stood in the doorway and watched her. She was curled up on the couch, staring at her mother's gift. What did she see when she looked so intensely at the picture? Or what was she hoping to find?

"Hey," I said softly, coming into the living room. She turned at the sound of my voice and blinked slowly as she came from the daze. Her smile was fleeting and did little to erase the residuals of loss from whatever she had relived.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she said, as if she had been blasting music instead of sitting in silence.

I sat at her feet and put my hands on her legs. "Let's go back to Aubres, Alec. We can have a really nice Christmas there."

Please, I wanted to beg, please let's leave here before you drift away. I could see her closing within herself and, at this rate, I could not see how she would be anything less than catatonic by Christmas. She thought she could do this and I was proud that she had even tried. But it wasn't worth it if I lost her to the memories.

She dropped her bleak gray eyes to the frame. "I cannot run anymore Tory. I am going to have to face my life, all of it, and I think it best if I begin now. Later will be harder and I do not want to make this harder. Can you understand?"

No, not really. She almost sounded as if the decision of when and if she would face her past had been taken from her. And that she regretted that loss of control. I met her confused, frightened gaze. "I can try."

She nodded and handed the frame to me. "The gesture was very nice of Jill. Will you thank her for me?"

Once again, I was left alone as she went into the bedroom. Sometimes I think I would like to know how Alec thinks. I think it would be nice to know how she reaches the decisions and the conclusions that she does. This was not one of those times. I don't know if I was too tired or just too tired to care, but I really didn't want to know how Alec decided whatever she had decided.

Christmas was in eight days. Her birthday was tomorrow. I had only two wishes for my life that night. I wanted Christmas to be perfect and I wanted her birthday to be special. I got one of my wishes. I would have sold my soul to have had the other.

~~~~~

The Alec who shared my life over the next week was the Alec I would have wanted had I been able to request her. The decision she reached in the darkness of that night gave her a freedom I envied. It was almost as if nothing mattered anymore. So it was Christmas in Los Angeles. So her mother was breathing the same air. So what.

I gave her the ring over a private dinner and was rewarded with a soft, deep kiss in front of God and everyone. I slipped the ring on her finger as she whispered in my ear that she loved me, and would show me how much that night. Before we went to sleep, she laid her head on my shoulder and snuggled close.

"Thank you for making this day so perfect."

One wish down, one to go. I was surprised that Alec was as eager for Christmas to come as I was. I talked to her about Rainer and Jillian tentatively. I was so afraid of her reaction. Here I was asking to spend part of the day with her mother in that house on the anniversary of the day she lost both. I waited until the morning of Christmas Eve before approaching her. At least this way if she got angry, I didn't have to live very long with it.

She smiled at me. Her eyes didn't narrow dangerously or grow a thunderous black like I expected. "That's fine. You can take my gifts for them with you."

Just like that? I didn't trust her. She reached over and put her hand on mine. "Really Tory. I know you have to go. Now, if you asked me to go with you, that would be a different story. I thought I would call Cordelia while you were gone."

She really was all right with it. I was amazed at her ability to accept all this not only without snide comment, but so gracefully.

If I had stopped to think about it instead of enjoying it, I would have gotten apprehensive as I waited for the real Alec Chasen to appear. The angry, bitter Alec Chasen who hated Christmas, Los Angeles, and Jillian Young passionately. Instead, I enjoyed the Alec she could be when she was truly happy and content. I didn't stop to question how she could be happy and content, here and now, with tomorrow coming closer as the hours ticked away.

She was truly happy. I knew that without a doubt. Elane came to stand next to me at the Christmas Eve party. Alec was laughing with another woman in front of the new display of Chasen Originals.

"Okay, who is that?" She gestured with her champagne glass to Alec.

I smiled. "Alec's having a good time."

Elane threw me an incredulous glance. "Can you say Alec and good time in the same sentence?"

I understood her confusion. We were both used to the Alec who came to Los Angeles five years ago. But we weren't the same people we were then, so why did Alec have to be? People grow. They let go of past anger, forgive past hurts. Or so I told myself in the gallery that night. I watched her laugh, shared smiles with her and convinced myself that Alec wasn't pretending to be happy for my benefit. She was happy. Not even the daughter of an Oscar nominated actress can fake true happiness.

As we laid down in my bed, I asked what she wanted more than anything else tomorrow. She leaned over me. The half moon fell on her silver hair like a halo, caught the loving, gentle smile playing around her lips.

"What I want I already have," she whispered.

She trailed satiny kisses down my neck. Her hand moved in a tantalizing caress across my stomach. "I want you."

Well, if that's all she wanted, tomorrow was going to be perfect. I wasn't wrapped, but that could definitely be arranged. I had some red ribbon left and a few bows. Of course, I wouldn't fit under the tree.

"I love you," she said, sliding down beside me.

I rolled over to face her. "I love you."

10.

Christmas Day. It held such promise and it was ruined before it even began. The vision I had of Alec and I opening presents between long kisses shattered in the pre-dawn darkness of a telephone call. I thought about not answering it as I struggled from the depths of sweet dreams. I wish now that I had let it ring.

There was no preamble, no pretense of holiday greetings. "Is she there?"

The voice was a vaguely my Dad's, how I imagine he might sound if he was being strangled. I sat up and tried to make sense of what was happening. It was hard when I did not understand why he was calling three minutes before six on Christmas morning. "Who?"

"Have you seen the paper?" Jillian asked.

Alec sat up. She stared at me with sleepy, annoyed eyes. *Who is it?* She mouthed. I shook my head at her and turned my gaze away from her uncovered breasts. I couldn't think with them in my line of vision.

"I was sleeping. What's wrong?" Something was wrong. Something was horribly, horrendously wrong and it was quickly becoming my problem.

"Let me speak to Alec," Jillian said. If Rainer sounded strangled, she sounded hysterical.

Now I was annoyed. "Just tell me what's wrong," I snapped. God did everything have to be a drama with her?

Alec was frowning at me. When she asked me again who it was, I told her to go get the paper. A two way call with Rainer and Jillian was bad enough, there was no way I could handle talking to Alec, too. I heard crying and the click of a phone hanging up.

"Did you know Alec was writing her autobiography?" Rainer demanded. Jillian was the who was crying and was now off the line. "Do you know what this is doing to Jillian?"

I shut my eyes. It was now six exactly. Three minutes into the day and I was already tired of it. I did not have answers for him. Alec never told me about an autobiography. He knew more than I did, why was he asking me? Because Alec was my lover and if anyone should have known it was me. Logical choice if this was anyone other than Alec.

"Dad, believe me when I say I don't know anything. I'll call you back in half an hour. Okay? Give me half an hour."

"No. You bring her here. I don't care how you do it, Victoria."

Alec came in and tossed the paper in my lap. **WHO IS BURIED IN KELLEN BRENT'S GRAVE?** asked the banner headline. It was worse than I could have imagined. It was more than just Alec's life story, it was about Brian and Jillian. She did what I thought she would never have the courage to do: she told the world the truth.

I don't know why Alec went to Windchase. There was nothing Rainer could do to make her come and yet she did not even put up a token fight. Did she know that she would have to face her mother when it became public she had written her book? I think she did. I think she prepared for it and knew what she would say.

We were quiet on the ride to Windchase. I did not know what to say, what to ask. I would read the newspapers hours later, after the truth was told, after Rainer's news conference. She took the paper back before I could do more than glance over the headline. She asked if the phone call was from Jill and Rainer. I told her Rainer wanted her to come to Windchase. To my astonishment, she said okay and began to dress.

The front door was opened before we got out of the car. Rainer had his arm around Jillian. She was pale enough to faint. They stared at us in accusation., but nothing was said until we were on the patio. A buffet breakfast was prepared and four places were set at the table. Who could eat?

"Patrick will deny everything," Jillian began.

"I know. I also know you will be standing by his side when he does," Alec replied.

The woman standing before us did not resemble the breathtaking movie star I had come to know. Panic darkened her eyes, turned her elegance into stiff, jerky movements. She could barely look Alec in the eyes. Rainer stepped behind Jillian and steadied her with his hands on her shoulders.

"You could have told us. Jillian should have been warned this was going to happen."

Cold gray eyes slid over my father and dismissed him for the outsider he was. He might have married to her mother, but he was nothing to her. His first mistake was to think he could shame her.

"You're naive if you think he's going to let you do this. You don't know Patrick. You don't know what he can do." Jillian was truly scared. Of Patrick or what he could do I did not know, but she feared him. Who was she more afraid for, her or Alec?

Alec sat at the table and we followed. She and Jillian were sitting side by side. This was the first time I saw them together. Alec, holder of all the calls, was poised and icy. The relaxed ease Jillian achieved on the cruise was replaced by tense worry. One had everything to lose and one had nothing left.

"Who knows better than I? But please, tell me what he can do. Just remember in his little world I am already dead."

Jillian grabbed Alec's hand. She leaned forward until their faces were almost touching. "Stop it! This is not a game. This story will destroy Patrick's career. Do you think he is going to let you do that?"

"Patrick doesn't let me do anything. This is my life. Not yours. Not Patrick Brent's. Mine. I can do what I want with it."

Jillian shook her head. "Not this. He will destroy you."

Alec sat back in her chair. "All he can do is deny me. I am used to that from this family."

Jillian flinched. She stood and paced the patio. Alec watched her until she lost interest and turned her gaze to the ocean. She seemed serene and poised compared to Jillian's anxious pacing. Finally, she turned frightened green eyes on Alec. "Why now? Why after all this time?"

Was it a coincidence the story ran on Christmas morning? Twenty-five years ago today another headline declared her dead. I did not want to believe Alec snuggled in my arms last night and knew what the headline of the paper would be this morning. Alec walked to the buffet table and filled a small glass with orange juice. She drank half the glass while we watched. I held my breath as Alec turned to face her mother.

"Because you sacrificed me for Patrick's son."

The soft words jerked Jillian like marionette wires. "I did not sacrifice you. I wanted you to grow up free from Brian. Patrick told me--"

Alec could her off with a cruel laugh. "Free from Brian? My God, after everything that happened, how could you ever think that was a possibility? No, Jill, I remember. I remember

Brian. I remember that I hated him before I ever got the chance to love him. I remember everything."

Jillian stared at Alec in silence. A calm settled over her. "You don't remember everything."

A smile toyed around Alec's lips as she walked to within inches of Jillian. "I remember the husband you have spent the last twenty five years grieving for hated you. God how he hated us. How could you stay with someone who loathed the very sight of you?"

Jillian remained silent. Her only defense was one she could not use without letting Alec know the reason she stayed was because of her. She was judged and condemned in the eyes of her daughter. What Alec considered unforgivable was the only choice Jillian could make.

"What don't I remember?" Alec asked, when it was obvious her mother was not going to defend herself.

Rainer walked to Jillian. He put his hands on her shoulders protectively. "We need to talk about Patrick, not the past. Whatever happened-"

"Does your husband know about that night?" Alec asked, cutting my father off without apology. "Have you told him the truth or does he knew the Brent version?"

Jillian turned to bury her face in my father's chest. Rainer tightened his arms around her. Cold blue eyes lashed out at Alec. "I know the truth."

From my chair, I watched Alec raise an eyebrow in question. "Really Rainer? I'm impressed. You must have amazing talents. I would have bet that by now even Jill believes Patrick's version of that night. God knows she must have wanted it to be any other way than the way it happened."

Jillian spun to face Alec. Her face was ashen and her green eyes had the lunatic sheen I saw the first time I met her. "Why are you doing this?"

Alec stared at them in silence for several long beats. She did not move, but the taunting sarcasm on her face when she spoke to my father slowly slipped away. She turned on her heel and walked to the edge of the patio, her eyes on the endless blue of sea and sky. As we waited tensely, I knew I did not want to hear what she was going to say.

"You let him put that gun to my head."

Jillian staggered as if the words spoken so softly were a blow across her face. Alec faced her and they were separated by only a few feet of red tile, but it might as well have been the universe.

"I couldn't stop him," Jillian whispered, her voice cracking

"You never tried," Alec shot back icily.

"I did my best," Jillian's voice was stronger now. There was no pleading to be understood.

Alec was not impressed. "That's the one thing you never did. The best thing to do was to leave here."

Jillian stared at Alec in understanding. "You blame me, don't you?"

"Can you possibly think you're blameless?"

"Yes."

Alec walked around the patio. She put her glass down on the table. Her gaze slid blindly over Rainer and I. We had ceased to exist for them. They were alone, facing a common demon that had haunted their dreams and darkened their lives for twenty-five years.

"You never understood. I did, even at five I understood. Someone was going to die that night. We were lucky it was him."

As we watched, her eyes took on that distant look that meant she had gone somewhere else. She crammed her hands into pockets of her jeans. She seemed so small and alone facing us. Lost gray eyes stared beyond us, looking into a past that was never far away.

"Just like Mommy," she said, her voice soft in remembrance. "Those were his last words to me. Just like Mommy. I must have heard those words a million times from him. I guess It's only right they were the last ones he would ever say to me."

She drifted further inside herself, listening to her father damn her with what should have been a compliment. She shook her head slightly and her eyes cleared. She focused on Jillian and her voice took on a hard, icy edge. Her eyes narrowed as the dark turn of events paraded across her mind.

"I don't know how long I was asleep before you came into my room that night. I've often thought those hours must have been an eternity for you."

Her gaze shifted to my father. "The books says she was 'savagely' beaten that night. The books are right about that at least. He did it before they came into my bedroom so that is one memory I was spared. Her face was bruised and bloody. She wore only her slip and blood was everywhere. Her arms and face, his shirt and hands were splattered. He threw her on my bed. I was on-"

"No!" Jillian burst out. "You don't remember. You do not remember that night!"

Alec stared at her without even a glimmering of compassion in her eyes. She took up the story as if her mother's anguished words never reached her ears. She walked us through those last minutes, minutes in which she lost everything. She told us how a child's pristine white bedroom becomes blood red.

"He had a gun."

Jillian spun to my father and buried her face in his chest. I heard her muffled sobs. She was trying vainly not to hear Alec's relentless recital of that night. I tore my gaze from them and stared at Alec as she relived that horrific night. She told us of Brian's last atrocious acts against his wife and child. She met my eyes for the first time since beginning her story. Her gaze never left mine as she reenacted the final scene.

"He should have been an actor. He put that one bullet into the gun's chamber with such flair. He would have won an Oscar."

Her voice became hollow, her eyes a black bottomless pit. "He grabbed Jill first. He pushed her on her knees in front of him and made her look up at him as he placed the barrel of the gun against her forehead. I think she tried to pull away. When he pulled the trigger the gun just clicked. Then it was my turn. 'Just like Mommy' he said. I heard Jill whispering 'No Brian, please no.' The barrel felt cold against my forehead. Again, the just clicked when he pulled the trigger."

"He had his left hand on my shoulder. He put the gun to his temple with his right hand. I wonder why he did it. Maybe he hated himself as much as he hated us. I know there is a God because when he pulled the trigger that time he blew the side of his face off."

Her voice never changed, her eyes never wavered from my face. Whatever last image Alec held of her father was one that caused her no emotion. In my mind, I saw Brian Brent raise the gun to his own head and pull the trigger. I felt like throwing up.

Her voice empty, her eyes blank, she said to me, "I did not kill him, Tory. I only wish I did"

I heard Rainer whisper, shocked, "Oh my God."

She did not cry for Brian when he was alive, she did not cry when he died; it was too late for her to pretend to cry now.

The only sound on the patio was Jillian softly crying, "You don't remember."

Alec shifted her gaze to her mother. Jillian was devastated, repeating her litany through gasping sobs. Alec watched her mother cry was cool detachment.

"I never forgot."

~~~~~

All hell had broken loose and it was pure chaos at the gates of Windchase. Our first inkling of trouble was the guard calling to say a news van from KXLA wanted a comment about the news story. Before we knew it, a mob of reporters had set up camp. It was December 25, 1968 all over again.

Jillian was inconsolable. Rainer carried her to their bedroom and tried unsuccessfully to calm

her. When scotch and soothing words did not work, he called her physician. Dr. Poole was an older woman who knew all the Brent family secrets. Alec and I waited silently in the living room. I wanted to talk to her and reassure her, but I had my own demons to wrestle.

Alec did not kill Brian.

*"You killed Brian."*

*"That would be the logical choice."*

She never said she killed Brian. Did she let me believe she killed her father? Or, was she so hurt by the conclusions I jumped to that she did not want to correct me? I know that at some point Patrick, even if he never came out and said it, made Alec believe she would be blamed if she did not keep their secret. Because nothing else made sense. Why else would she be sent away? United States Senator Patrick Brent would do anything to protect his son's image. I thought Kellen was sent away to protect her from what she had done.

"Well, she should be out for a while."

We stood up and waited for Rainer and Dr. Poole at the foot of the stairs. Dr. Poole smiled at Alec and hugged her briefly. Bright blue eyes swept over Alec's face.

"You grew up quite beautiful. How are you Kellen?"

"I see you're still patching up the Brent's bruises, Alec answered, a small uplifting of her mouth hinted at a smile.

They shared a look of old memories. How many times had this woman been summoned here in the middle of the night to clean up after Brian? Too many times, it seemed. She probably came the night Brian died. I would not be surprised to see her name on the death certificates of Brian and Kellen Brent.

The doctor turned back to Rainer. "Keep her away from the television, newspapers and radio. This is all over everything."

The news cameras duly recorded Dr. Poole leaving the house. The police parted the media sea so that she could leave the property. Rainer called in additional security from Jillian's security service and his assistant was handling the phone calls. We were as protected as Windchase and money could make us.

"Merry Christmas," Rainer said to us, his eyes on Alec.

She met his gaze squarely. She was only thirty, but her life had given her a hardness that belied her years. He was going to have be more than merely disappointed with his new step?daughter to make an impression on her.

"Has Patrick called yet?" she asked him. She walked into the living room and sat on the couch.

We followed her. I sat beside Alec and slipped my arm around her shoulders. She was tense. I gave her a reassuring squeeze and was reassured myself when I felt her lean into me for support. I wanted to be as strong as she was going to need.

"I want a drink," she said to no one in particular.

"What would you like?" Rainer asked. He walked to the wet bar and waited.

I held my breath. If she asked for a drink, would I have the courage to remind her that she was a recovering alcoholic? No. I would ask for what she did and I would drink it with her. God knew if anyone deserved the oblivion of alcohol it was Alec.

Alec took a deep breath. "Do you have Coke?"

Rainer handed us our glasses and sat in front of Alec on the coffee table. His glass held scotch on the rocks. He sat forward and rested his elbows on knees. "Why do you think Patrick is going to call here?"

Alec downed the glass as if it did hold mind numbing alcohol. "Because he's going to want to get their stories straight. He'll have to hold a news conference soon to deny the reports."

"And you're sure he'll deny them?"

I felt Alec shake in silent amusement. "I've bet my life on it."

Rainer sat back and stared at her. He did not know her and what little he did know, he did not like very much. She had done nothing to endear herself and more than a little to make him wish he could take her over his knee. But he saw something in her face or heard something in her voice that made him trust her. He nodded. "Then we'd better get ready. I'll prepare a pre?emptive statement."

Alec grabbed his arm and stopped him. "You can't do that. Do you realize what it will mean for Jill if you confirm this?"

Did she really care what this story would do to her mother? Why did she write her book? She was short sighted if she did not foresee until now what this would do to Jillian. What did she think the consequences would be?

"She's not going to deny you Alec. I can promise you that."

He went off to make whatever arrangements one makes to resurrect the dead. Alec sat back, sighing that he did not know what he was doing. Her glass was empty so she took mine and finished it off. She laid her head on my shoulder and we settled back on the couch. We sat in a comfortable silence and watched the red lights blink on the Christmas tree.

"Merry Christmas, Tory," she said sleepily.

"Merry Christmas, Kellen."

~~~~~

A room down the hall from Jillian's was quietly prepared for us. Rainer took me aside and gave me the bad news. The press knew Alec was at Windchase. We would be mobbed if we tried to leave and there was not a place on earth Alec could hide this time. Security had been sent up to Aubres because he was afraid Alec's house would be broken into if left unguarded. Someone was sent to my condo. Clothes and Christmas presents were brought to Windchase.

"Thank you, Dad" His embrace felt as warm and safe as it did when I was a small child and afraid. The words were inadequate to describe the gratitude I felt at his protection of the woman I loved.

The shock of the day was beginning to take its toll on Alec. She sat on the couch and stared at the blinking lights. She heard what was said to her only after it was repeated three or four times. Her response to every question was a careless shrug and the slow blinking of dazed gray eyes.

I knelt in front of her and rubbed her ice cold hands. I spoke to her in a reassuring, firm voice. "Alec, I'm going to take you upstairs now. You're going to go to sleep."

She stood and mutely did as she was told. Hold up your arms Alec. Step out of your jeans Alec. Hold up your arms again Alec. Get in bed Alec. She rolled into a ball in the middle of the bed. I stood over the bed and stared down at her white face. Should we call the doctor again? If we did, could she even get to the house?

"Is she asleep?" Rainer asked when I came back downstairs an hour later.

"I think so." Her eyes were closed, her breathing was deep, and she didn't respond when I said her name softly. She was either asleep or in a coma. "Has Jillian woke yet?"

It was now five o'clock. Jillian had been asleep for about seven hours. "No. The best thing for both of them would be to sleep through the night. It was bad enough hearing all that, I don't want to know what it must have felt like to relive it."

We had yet to talk about the revelations of the morning. Almost immediately following the doctor's arrival, the press set up camp outside Windchase. While Alec slipped away from reality, Rainer began the preparations to protect Jillian and Alec. Everything we had done was what we believed to be in their best interest, but we did not have their consent for any of it.

"Patrick has called four times. He demands to talk to Jillian and refuses to talk to me. I wonder what he'll think of the press conference."

Rainer and his partners were giving a press conference at six. Rainer was going to confirm what

The Los Angeles Times had printed as only a rumor. The article that stirred up all this trouble and had the press camped on our doorstep stated that Alec Chasen was claiming to be Kellen Brent. It was never printed that she was Kellen.

"Dad, do you think Jillian would want you to confirm Alec's identity?"

He stared at me as he thought about the question. Did he realize the consequences of this? Everyone would know Jillian had lived a lie all these years. She was immortalized because her handsome young husband and beautiful daughter were brutally murdered. They would think the tears she cried were faked. The past twenty-five years would be seen as nothing more than one hell of an acting job.

"The only thing I know for sure is that Jillian wants her daughter back. This is the only way that can possibly happen. It's a choice: her daughter or her public image."

He was gifted with a talent for stating the complex in simple terms. But he was not talking about a contract for a client. He was talking about two shattered lives. He was asking Jillian to pay a steep price for a maybe. There was no guarantee that when this was all over, Jillian would have her daughter. Alec could go back to her life in Aubres and refuse to answer the phone. There was nothing he could do to make Alec love Jillian.

There is never a promise of forgiveness when we say we are sorry. We take our chances and hope for the mercy from others that we did not show them. Jillian was making a grand gesture and asking forgiveness from a person who did not know the meaning of mercy. It was not one of the things Alec learned at her mother's feet.

"Good luck."

I gave Rainer a quick hug in the foyer and left him to talk with his partners while I went to the library to watch the press conference. I turned the television to a local station and sat back for the show.

I got my first real glimpse of the madness outside. Huge spotlights threw blinding light over the few dozen people and news vans. Police lights slashed blue over the barricades erected to stop the flow of gawkers in front of the estate. The only people allowed access to the road were news people and our few visitors.

"Good evening. I am at Windchase, the home of former actress Jillian Young." The young reporter held up a copy of the morning paper. "Who Is Buried In Kellen Brent's Grave? We hope to have the answer to that any minute now. We are waiting for Miss Young's husband, entertainment attorney Rainer Senett, to give a statement. For those of you who don't remember, Kellen Brent was the five year old daughter of Miss Young and the late director Brian Brent. Kellen and Brian Brent were supposedly murdered in the early morning hours of Christmas twenty-five years ago. According to this morning's paper, English painter Alec Chasen is claiming in her autobiography to be Kellen Brent."

The young woman stopped as the front door opened and Rainer stepped out. The conference was going to be given on the front steps. He would give his statement and take the few steps back into the house. He was not going to answer any questions. He was flanked by his partners. He looked into the camera briefly before dropping his gaze to the paper in his hand.

"This morning's headline is true. Alec Chasen is Kellen Brent, the daughter of Jillian Young and Brian Brent. The family decided at the time of Brian's death that it would be better for Alec to grow up sheltered from the tragedy and the publicity that has surrounded the family. Now that she is an adult, Alec has decided to come forward with the truth. Jillian and I support her fully in this decision."

Questions were shouted from all directions in futility. Rainer gave his speech and made his exit. The camera swung back to the flushed face of the reporter.

"Rainer Senett has confirmed that English painter Alec Chasen is Kellen Brent, the child thought murdered..." I turned off the television. So it was done and we would never be able to go back. I hoped that we had done what Jillian and Alec would have done if they had been able. I didn't know if a long road was ending or if one was just beginning. Either way, this time neither Jillian nor Alec would not be walking it alone.

[Concluded in Part 3](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ In All the Empty Places ~

by Janneen Brownell

Disclaimers: This story and characters are all mine and any resemblance to anyone living, dead or on television is in the mind of the reader. Readers who are disturbed by references to physical abuse should read this story with caution. As this is my first story posted to the net, I was conservative with sexual scenes. I hope you enjoy my little tale.

Comments, good or bad, can be sent to ga_onmymind@yahoo.com

11.

I woke up alone the next morning. I went to sleep holding Alec, but she gave no indication that she knew I was there. I sat up in the bed, blinking in the hideously bright sunlight streaming through the open window. Before the question "Where am I?" could form completely, I knew where I was and the whole nightmarish day came flooding back to me.

Alec was gone and she was not in the best frame of mind. I jumped from the bed. The T-shirt I dropped over her head the night before was lying on the floor. I snatched it up and put it on and

grabbed a pair of jeans. Alec was wandering around Windchase. Oh, God, what if she ran into Jillian? Or my father? What if she didn't remember about the reporters and tried to leave in my car? What if she simply snapped and walked over the cliff?

With my heart pounding and worst case scenarios playing in graphic detail in my head, I leaned over the balcony railing and frantically searched the lower floor. I scanned the foyer and living room in a futile search for first Alec and, failing that, anyone. Windchase was deadly quiet. Where could she be? Anywhere, answered a voice immediately. Alec could be anywhere. She could have left Windchase at any time while I, and everyone else, slept. She was a grown woman who needed permission from no one to drive through the gates of Windchase. It would have been hard if the reporters were still camped outside, but not impossible.

Finally, there was no where left for me to look but outside. I saw her as soon as I stepped into the living room. I stopped and stared at her sitting so serenely on the patio, her gaze on the wide Pacific. I closed my eyes in silent prayer of thanks to whatever god it was that watched over her.

The time was early morning and a soft breeze off the water ruffled the hair around her face as she stared into the distance. I waited a few minutes before going to her. I did not want to look as terrified as I felt.

"Good morning Alec."

She did not turn from the view. At first I thought she either did not hear or was going to ignore me, and with Alec both were equal possibilities. Then, her chin lifted a fraction of an inch and she said, so very softly, "Is it?"

My heart fell. Did I really think she would survive yesterday without more scars? Yes, Victoria, like a fool you truly believed Alec would come from that scene complete and still the woman you knew in Aubres. I sat across from her and tensed as she turned her face to me.

Staring at me from a face that was pale and carved from stone, were those damned dark, lifeless gray eyes. Gone was the peace she had found in Aubres. Gone, too, was the warmth and amusement that made her eyes that wonderful silver color I loved.

"It's a beautiful morning," I amended with a tentative smile. Alec did not respond to my feeble attempt to lighten the mood. A china cup and saucer sat next to her hand and she took a sip from the cup before returning her gaze to the ocean.

"You could paint it. For the new Chasen Originals."

Please, please respond, I wanted to scream. I wanted to shake her, make her show anger or fury, anything besides this silent indifference. When she remained silent, I reached for her hand and curled my fingers around her icy cold ones. I spoke softly, "Alec, what are you thinking?"

I refused to ask if she was all right because we both knew that she had not been all right for a long time. Since I came back into her life to be exact. If I knew on that long drive to Aubres that

I would be shattering her life, there is not a power on earth that could have made me slide down her sand dune that day.

"That I will never be Alec Chasen again. All I ever wanted was to be left alone, Victoria. I never asked for more, ever. From anyone. Why was that too much to ask?"

"Then why did you write your book?" Writing an autobiography as incendiary as hers was not the best way to stay in the background. But then, neither was being painter Alec Chasen.

Her shoulders dropped slightly, as if the weight she carried had just grown heavier. "Because they are never going to leave me alone. I knew that the second you told me Jill told you who I was. I am Kellen Brent. They might have killed me, but they are not going to let me go."

"Alec, Jillian love-"

She snatched her hand away and faced me, her eyes blazing with fury. "Stop it, Victoria! Don't defend her to me anymore. Jillian does not now nor did she ever love me. God knows what it is she felt, but it was never love. Or if it was, I hope I am never loved like that by anyone ever again."

I chose my next words carefully. I did not want to alienate Alec from me on Jillian's behalf. I liked Jillian, but I was not willing to make that grand sacrifice for her. "Alec, you will never be happy until you can forgive."

A ghost of a smile touched her face before fleeing. "You're wrong, Victoria. You've always been so wrong about that. It was never about forgiveness. I just cannot forget. I cannot forget that this family traded my life for theirs. I cannot forget that when I needed them most, they turned on me to save themselves."

"You don't know everything that happened back then, Alec," I said softly. Did I really want to go down this road?

"I know everything," she replied flatly.

I sat back and weighed telling her the truth against leaving well enough alone. What did I care if Alec hated her mother until the day she died? She was happy in Aubres, I knew that for sure. She would be happy there again. If I kept pushing her, I might not get to share that happiness with her. How far was I willing to go? And was I really doing it for Alec, or was it for Jillian?

In the end, the decision was easy. Although I believed Alec deserved to know all the facts, I also knew it should not be now. She was still reeling from yesterday. Besides, who was I to do for Jillian what she was not willing to do for herself? She did not want Alec to know. Even if I thought she was wrong, I did not have the right to tell Alec if Jillian did not want her to know.

"Alec..."

"Good morning," my Dad's voice boomed over the patio, startling us. Jillian walked from the house with a stack of plates and Rainer carried two platters of food. Breakfast. Alec moved her cup as Jillian placed a plate in front of her. I was surprised when she gave her mother a brief smile.

Jillian looked down at me. She had recovered from yesterday. Either the hours of sleep or the numbing tranquilizers had done for her what the night had not done for Alec, given her time to recover. Her eyes were a bright green and did not have the dark circles that ringed Alec's. "What would you like to drink Victoria?"

I wasn't hungry and I didn't want a drink, but if Alec could sit here and have a family breakfast so could I. I smiled at her. "Coffee's fine. Do you need any help?"

She shook her head and disappeared into the house. Rainer watched her leave before sitting down. Alec sat in his left and I was on his right. He laid his hand over Alec's briefly. "It means very much to her for you to be here. Thank you."

Alec sighed. "I know you won't believe me Rainer, but hurting Jill does not make me happy. I don't want to be the cause of more pain in her life. Or more than I already am."

Her words sounded sincere and I wanted to believe, but I heard her voice from another time saying she hurt Jillian because she could. Which was true? Did she hurt Jillian because she could? She knew the power she had over her mother. She knew that Jillian wanted nothing more of the rest of her life than to spend it being part of Alec's. Paradise for Jillian would be to know what was happening in her daughter's life because Alec told her and not because someone else did. But, for Alec, being part of Jillian's life meant constant reminders of her past. It would mean forgiving her mother, something Alec wasn't ready to do now or maybe ever.

By the time Jillian returned with a carafe of coffee, we had served ourselves and were eating in silence. Alec did not fill her plate, but I was glad she was eating. Jillian held a portable phone out to Alec. Alec stared at the phone and then looked up at Jillian with a blank face. Her mother knew she did not take phone calls. Jillian put the phone by Alec's hand and said simply, "Elane."

We listened to Alec's side of the conversation as we ate. Elane, as her agent, was besieged with phone calls from reporters. They wanted interviews and comments about the newspaper story. Elane was running out of ways to say no comment.

"I don't know what I am going to do," Alec said, her voice uncertain.

I caught my Dad watching her with a frown. Was he realizing, as I did earlier, that Alec was not recovering as fast as Jillian from yesterday? Alec needed time she may not have to deal with the changes in her life. Perhaps she did not realize how her life would change once her book was out. Writing the book may have been as far in the future as she could see.

"I don't know. I'll let you know when I decide."

"Decide what?" Rainer asked. I wanted to ask and I was glad my Dad did not know and would not care that she hated to be questioned. Alec could not hurt him with her silence the way she could hurt me.

"Interviews, with everyone. It seems I can name my price."

"You don't have to do interviews, Alec," I said. She did not owe the public anything, least of all answers about her family. Everything was explained in her book and whatever was left out deserved to be left unknown. There was no reason for her rip her soul open for the entertainment for the masses.

She looked over at Jillian and they shared a bitter smile. If only it was that easy, they seemed to be saying. Alec stood up, her gaze dropping to Rainer. "May I use your office to make some phone calls? I have some people to speak with before I make any decisions."

"Of course. Just let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you," she said and walked quickly from the room.

Rainer left a few minutes after Alec. I became uncomfortable when I realized I was alone with Jillian for the first time since yesterday. I was never really comfortable with her before, but with their words ringing in my ears, I could not meet her eyes. It was one thing to know something horrible had happened to them that night, it was something different to know exactly what Brian did.

"Are you all right?" She asked quietly.

The concern in her voice surprised me. She was asking how I was after yesterday? "Yes. Are you?"

Her smile was brief. "And Alec? How did she sleep last night?"

"Not well. I think the book and...yesterday have shaken her. She gets very closed when her life gets chaotic."

I remembered how she was those last months in LA. Her silence was cloaked in anger and pain. She wanted to be left alone then, left to deal with her memories by drowning them in alcohol. She survived by denying Kellen's memories were her own. That night, those things did not happen to her. That night happened to Kellen Brent and she was Alec Chasen. I was afraid for her. Afraid she could not handle the merging of her past and present without a crutch to lean on for support.

Jillian's next questions was hesitant. "Have you read her book?"

I sighed and shook my head. "I didn't know she was writing one until Dad called. I guess I knew she was doing something, but I would have never thought that. I didn't think she had the

courage."

Jillian sat back, her eyes drifting over the patio. A warm ocean breeze played with her hair. She never looked more like her daughter than she did at that moment. "Patrick thought she was weak. He thought he could manipulate her and do to her what he did to Brian. He destroyed Brian. He took a little boy who only wanted to please his father and twisted him until there was nothing left. My daughter is nothing like his son. She is strong and she will do what Brian never could."

I saw it then, the reason her fear of Patrick was gone. It wasn't my Dad and whatever protections she imagined he could give her and Alec. Her only fear of Patrick was what he could and would do to her daughter. Jillian knew from bitter experience that she could not protect her. Her fear was gone because she knew, or at least believed, Alec could protect herself. She was right, her daughter was nothing like Patrick's son.

She stood up. "Rainer wants to open our gifts this afternoon. I'd prefer not to, but he's like a little boy. Will you join us? Your Dad would love it."

I nodded. She didn't mention Alec and neither did I. I think we both knew that was too much to expect.

~~~~~

Jillian and I were in the kitchen quietly throwing together lunch when Alec came into the room. I smiled at her, but was looking for any signs that she was slipping away from us. Her eyes were not as dark as they were on the patio. She leaned against the counter and watched us.

"Uh...Jill?" She asked hesitantly.

Jillian froze. She looked up and behind her composed expression was panic. This was the first time Alec spoke to her since yesterday on the patio. "Yes, darling?"

Alec looked down at the counter as she spoke. "I talked to my editor. The book is coming out in a few days. I asked her to send over some copies. I thought you....Well, if you want to, you can read the book before it comes out."

Jillian stared at Alec in a silence that seemed to stretch on for hours. Emotions flickered over her face, all them forms of fear. No, she did not want to read Alec's book. She did not want to read page after page detailing how she let her daughter down in every way possible. Her biggest fear had to be telling Alec without losing whatever little ground she had gained.

Alec peeked up from under her long bangs. "If you don't want to read it, I don't mind. I don't know that I want you to either."

Some of the fear left Jillian's face and her smile was tentative. "I do want a copy. One day I will read it."

"Okay," Alec said with obvious relief in her voice.

"Will you sign my copy?" I asked to lighten the mood.

A quick grin flashed across her face. "You know how Alec Chasen does not attend showings? Kellen Brent does not do autographs."

We laughed, but I knew I had ways to get her to write something sweet in the front cover. Alec set the table while Jillian and I arranged the food on platters. Lunch was thick slices of smoked honey ham, potato salad, green beans and buttered crescent rolls. Jillian called to Rainer several times before leaving us alone to get him when he did not answer.

I put my arms around Alec from behind. "Are you okay?"

I wanted an honest answer. If she wasn't comfortable, if she only putting on an act, we would leave. She did not have to stay, even if Windchase offered her the best protection against the media. She nodded and leaned back against me.

"I think so."

She did not elaborate and I let it go. She seemed all right and if it was only an illusion, it was one I did not mind living in for a little while longer. I would watch for signs she was lying or if being here was too hard for her.

We moved apart when we heard Jillian's heels tapping against the tile. She came into the room shaking her head. "Men. I don't know why we..."

She stopped mid-step. I was trying to keep the smile from my face because her expression was comical. She realized too late that she was talking to lesbians. She recovered her poise, saying calmly, "Let's start without him."

I caught Alec's gaze we sat down. Her smile was in her eyes.

~~~~~

Alec laid down to rest after lunch. We decided to open our gifts while she was asleep. I left mine for her and hers for me to open together, later in our room. I felt stupid at first. Christmas the day after? The reason why we were celebrating a day late was never far from my mind. Jillian and I waited for Rainer in the gaily decorated living room.

I caught Jillian staring at the wrapped present from Alec. Could she open it? I think Alec had a lot of courage and I believe she got it from her mother. Regardless of what she thought the painting held for her, she would open it because not opening a present from Alec was never an option.

"Ready?" Rainer asked, coming into the room with a red Santa hat stuck jauntily on his head. I had to laugh. I had forgotten the hat. He stopped wearing it when I decided there wasn't a Santa Claus. It was just the touch we needed to give the occasion a festive feel.

The last gift opened was Jillian's painting. Rainer did not do any of the silly things he had done with the other presents. He knew she was anxious over this gift. He pulled the painting to the middle of the room and propped the canvas against the back of the couch. I already knew the staples could not be removed by hand, but said nothing as my father struggled. I did not want to spoil Jillian's initial reaction by slipping that I had seen the painting. My father is a bright man and he soon realized he needed help. Jillian stood a few feet away and stared at the covering as if she could see the painting if she tried hard enough.

Rainer came back with a hammer and quickly went to work on the staples. I moved in front of Jillian. I waited, feeling as tense as she looked as she gathered her courage to pull away the cloth. Finally, with a deep breath, she tugged the cloth away. Her expression was worth the wait. Her eyes widened in surprise and recognition. She knew this child. She lifted shaky fingers to her lips as she whispered, "Kellen."

My father moved behind her and slipped his arms around her shoulders. She reached out to touch the painting, her fingers traced the strokes of Alec's brush. She wasn't here in the living room with us, touching a painting of her lost little girl. She was in the past, in a time where touching Alec was something she took for granted. She was in a place where her daughter was Kellen and she was Mommy.

"She is incredibly talented," Rainer said softly. Was he just realizing that?

Jillian nodded slowly. "She was painting before she could write her name. You should have seen her. She was so cute. She always got more paint on herself than she did on the paper."

"Where do you want to put it?" Rainer looked around the room as if trying to decide on which wall to hang this newest Chasen.

Jillian looked up and I saw her reluctantly pull herself from away from the wonderful place where Kellen still belonged to her. Her eyes skimmed over the room. Her gaze came to rest on the dark Chasen Original. The paintings were so different they could have been done by different people. "Not in here. The sun room, I think. This one belongs in a cheerful room."

Rainer hefted the painting and they left for the sun room. I did not go with them. I walked out onto the patio instead. I probably should not have watched Jillian uncover the painting. Her reaction was more intimate and open than I expected. She loved Kellen and loves Alec very much. I did not want to know how she survived losing her.

How did either of them survive? Denial can take you only so far into the night, the dark can only hold off the memories for so long before they refused to be denied. What do you do then? How can you forget what is unforgivable? How do you forgive what you can never forget? Maybe I was wrong. Maybe what I saw as survival was merely existence. Being alive and sane was not the same as living and whole. Alec told me she was not the person she would have been had that night never happened. I think the same could be said of Jillian.

~~~~~

I let Alec sleep until late in the afternoon. I think it was in a vain hope that sleep could do for her what last night's had done for Jillian. I wanted to believe time was all she needed to heal. She was curled in the middle of the bed with hands clasped under her cheek. I slipped carefully into the bed behind her. I leaned over and caressed her cheek with gentle fingers.

"Alec, wake up."

She was reluctant to leave her sweet dreams. Thick lashes fluttered, refusing to reveal her eyes. Lips pouted and her brow furrowed as her face frowned. Her body curled tighter and she turned away from me, burying her face in her hands.

"Alec," I singsonged, "Wake up."

She did not move. "Why?"

"Well be eating dinner soon."

She nodded. "Pass. I'd rather sleep."

"You need to eat."

She leaned back against me, turning her face to glare at me. "I am not a child, Victoria. Besides, I do not think Jill will begrudge me a midnight raid in the kitchen if I wake up hungry later."

"No, she wouldn't," I snapped. "There isn't much your mother would deny you."

I rolled off the bed. After watching Jillian unwrap the painting earlier, I was not interested in hearing Alec's caustic opinions of her mother. How could she not care how desperate Jillian was to please her?

Alec sat up and raked fingers through her tousled hair. I watched her and my anger crept away in shame when I saw how weary she was. She put her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees. I cringed when her dark, tired eyes looked up at me.

"Do I have time for a shower?"

I was going to go crazy if this continued. When I saw what this was doing to Alec, I was angry at Jillian. When I saw what this was doing to Jillian, I was angry with Alec. I did not want to choose sides because I knew both women were hurting. However, I either had to stay in the middle or pick one side. "I'm sorry Alec. Of course sleep. That's more important right now."

She stared at me, her silence stretching my taunt nerves closer to the breaking point. I was grateful when she closed her eyes. I wasn't used to seeing her emotions reflected so clearly in the shadowed gray. I almost wished for the time when her emotions were locked away, if only because that meant she wasn't overwhelmed.

"This is not a fairy tale and there is not going to be a happy ending. I don't know what fantasies you have weaved, but I cannot give you this family."

She opened her eyes and her mask was firmly in place. "I won't even lie and say I wish I could."

"Is that what you think I want?"

She shrugged and looked away. "Before you wanted answers more than you wanted me. Now you want me to be Kellen for her. I lost you when I did not give you answers. Is that what happens this time, too, Tory? Do I lose you because I cannot be five years old again?"

Her words were calm and casual, spoken in an ordinary tone that gave me chills. I would lose her if I continued to push for Jillian's absolution. I knew without a doubt that I would never get another chance with her again. I believed she loved me. We both knew she could live without me.

Never before in my life did I see my future so clearly. I saw two roads open before me. Alec was part of my life in one; I heard about her life through Jillian and Elane in the other. I would die if I had to be on the edges of her life, always knowing where and how she was, but from the distant sidelines. I was not Jillian. I did not have to be grateful for what others could give me of Alec.

I moved to the bed. I pushed her back against the blankets and laid on top of her. Her eyes were wide with surprise as she stared up at me. Her hands pressed against my shoulders as if to push me away. I did not have to push hard to lower myself fully onto her.

"I want you. I've always wanted you. All of you. That means knowing everything that makes you who you are today. More than anything else in the world, I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She wanted to believe me. I saw in her eyes the desperate desire to be loved, by someone, for reasons that had nothing to do with her paintings or her name. I saw her fear that she was nothing without either. I knew only one way to convince her to trust me. I slipped my hands under her head into the baby soft hair at her neck. As I slowly lowered my face to hers, I stared into her eyes, willing her to believe she was all I needed.

Her kiss was tentative and questioning. *Do you love me? Can I trust you? Will you hurt me?* Yes, I assured with my hands and lips. Yes, I love you. Yes, you can trust me. No, I will never, ever hurt you. *Show me*, her hands insisted. Every touch, every stroke was a demand for proof.

*Show me. I can only believe if you show me.*

"I'm starving," Alec said.

We were dressing the next morning in our bedroom. While my body did not mind the reason I missed dinner, my stomach was not so understanding. I watched her hurry into a pair of blue jeans and white T-shirt. She stared in the mirror and combed her tangled hair with fingers. She caught me watching and her silver eyes met mine in the mirror.

"Come on, hurry up."

Rainer and Jillian were having breakfast on the patio. A hardcover book was laid in my plate. Dad was reading his copy. Jillian's was by her plate and she was flipping through the morning paper. Both looked up as we walked out onto the patio. I stood at the table and stared down at Alec's book.

*Kellen* by Alec Chasen. The cover was the photo of a handsome young man in a black tuxedo and a little girl resting her sleepy blonde head on his shoulder.

"They came this morning," Jillian said. Her voice was emotionless.

I set the book aside and picked up my plate. I tried to pretend that I wasn't interested in the book. I ate a few bites of food, stared around at the gorgeous day surrounding us all the while my eyes were constantly drawn to the cover. I wanted to hurry back to our room and spend the day reading.

"Are the steps to the beach still there?" Alec asked. She had quickly cleaned her plate.

Jillian looked up from her paper and looked over to the cliff. "Yes. Be careful."

Without another word, Alec left the patio. Jillian watched her until she disappeared and then excused herself. She did not take her copy with her. I did not need to pretend I didn't care with both Jillian and Alec gone. I picked up my book and opened the cover. Breakfast could wait and there was always lunch.

"It's actually very good," my Dad said as he turned a page. "Jillian will be sorry she didn't read it."

I doubted that. What could she possibly learn that she did not already know? Especially when there was much she might read that could hurt her. Before reading the first line, I opened the book to several pages of pictures inserted in the middle. The pictures were my first inkling that her book was not going to be a light-hearted account of her life. She was a laughing, cheerful child in the photos taken at Windchase. She was solemn and unsmiling in the ones taken at Moregrove House. "I'm going to read this upstairs."

He nodded in response, but did not look up from his copy.

I did not see Alec all day while I read her book. She left me alone to read and I was grateful for the uninterrupted time to myself. I settled into the middle of the bed. I thought I knew everything now and I was not prepared for the story that awaited me.

*My name is Kellen Brent. I discovered I was dead the summer I read my mother's autobiography. I was fourteen.*

With that shocking beginning, *Kellen* detailed the lonely, confused life Alec lived in England. I learned all the things she did not tell me in Aubres. She was eight before she understood her mother was not coming back for her. Jillian never visited Moregrove House and they did not see each other again until Alec came back to the states. She learned the Brent version of that night when she bought Jillian's book while on vacation in Sydney.

I was surprised when I saw my name the first time. It never occurred to me that I would be in her book. I've always known I came into her life at a bad time. I just never would have guessed it was her darkest hour. Jillian saw her arrival in Los Angeles as a chance for them to be close. Patrick wanted to announce that Alec Chasen was Kellen Brent. Alec wanted neither. As far as she was concerned she really was dead for them. The three years she spent in Los Angeles began the downward spiral of drinking and denial that pushed her so close to insanity. She believes the move to Aubres saved her life. Los Angeles was a constant reminder of her past and she was only able to put everything into perspective and find sobriety when she left.

She told her story in an uncompromising honesty that cast blame on no one. She offered nothing to validate her claim and yet anyone who read the book would have to wonder how she could know so much if she wasn't telling the truth. She also had one fact that Patrick would find impossible to refute: she knew the truth about that night. While *The Perfect Crime* and *Fairy Tale Beginnings* sidestepped the questions that linger, *Kellen* had the answers. The first question that has never been satisfactorily answered was why Jillian called Patrick instead of the police. The second question is why there is a hour and a half time gap between the call to Patrick and the 911 call to the police. The tragic answer to the first question is that Kellen and not Jillian called Patrick. Her mother was in shock and her father was hurt so the only other person she knew to call was her grandfather. The answer to the second question is that Patrick had to clean up the crime scene. His son could not die from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

By the time I closed the cover, I knew Jillian would never read the book. It wasn't so much that she would not want to read what Alec thought of her. She knew exactly what her daughter thought of her. She would never read *Kellen* because she had missed her daughter's life in the vain hope that she could save her. Now she knew it was all for nothing.

She knew she missed her daughter's life, she would not want to know what she had missed. She would not want to read about the emergence of Alec Chasen, artist. She could never attend the showing that rocked London's art world when Alec was only sixteen. She could never share in Alec's many successes or comfort her after the few failures. More important than Alec's career to Jillian were the personal milestones and achievements that made her daughter the woman she was today. She could never explain to the five year old who waited in the bay window why her mother left her there. She could never reach the fourteen year old who first began to hate her on a fateful summer trip to Sydney. She would never be able to calm the angry young woman who came to Los Angeles determined to prove she could make it without her mother or her name.

Jillian would never read *Kellen*. I bet she would never even open the cover.

~~~~~

Windchase was quiet when I went downstairs hours later that evening. I stood on the bottom step and listened in the silence for a sound that would lead me to the others. I glanced around and my startled gaze came to rest on Alec and Jillian sitting together on the patio. I watched them for a few minutes, looking closely for signs they were talking. Could that possible? As I watched, Alec nodded and gestured with her hands. They were talking.

I debated about going to the kitchen for food or joining them. My curiosity made the decision easy. Jillian smiled as I walked out. I searched her face and found nothing to hint that I was interrupting another upsetting conversation between them.

"Victoria. Are you hungry?" They were eating dinner. I had skipped lunch and whatever they were eating smelled delicious.

"Very. Is there anymore of that?"

Alec pushed back her chair. "Have a seat. I'll get you a plate."

I tried to catch her eyes, but she turned away from me and quickly left the patio. I had spent the day reading about her childhood. Was it too much to think she might be uncomfortable with me? Few people ever get to do what I did that day. I would feel exposed if my whole life was suddenly a book for Alec to read.

"Where's my Dad?" I asked.

Jillian cast a glance to the inside of the house. "Still reading. I think he's in his office. He came out a little earlier for a plate."

Suddenly I was as uncomfortable with her as I imagined Alec was with me. I did not read only Alec's life. I knew about the worst moments in Jillian's. I knew about all those dark nights Alec buried her head under the pillow to block out her mother's screams. Alec had spared nothing from the few years she lived here.

"Do you like Alec's new paintings?" Jillian asked.

I jumped from her soft voice. I expected her to ask about the book, not the paintings. "Yes. I think they are a better use of her talent."

Jillian nodded absently. "Do you think they will sell as well? They're so different from what people have come to expect of the Chasen Originals."

"I don't think it matters anymore what she paints. Her name sells."

She turned troubled green eyes on me. "Yes, her name sells. Her book will be a bestseller because of her name."

I bit back the reply that sprang to my lips. I did not want Alec walking in on this conversation. Besides, I didn't care if she thought *Kellen* would be a bestseller only because Alec Chasen wrote it. Jillian has spent twenty-five years perfecting her ability to live in an illusion. I wasn't going to expect her to rejoin reality now.

Alec walked out with a plate and a glass of iced tea. She managed the amazing feat of placing both in front of me without meeting my eyes.

"Elane can handle the arrangements for us," she said to Jillian, continuing their conversation.

Jillian sat back in her chair and sighed. "When is the release date?"

"The next few days sometime. I am afraid I did not listen to that part very well. Regardless of the previous date, they want to capitalize on the publicity now."

"Patrick is going to be livid," Jillian almost whispered.

I choked as Alec placed her hand on her mother's. She ignored me. She leaned over and waited until Jillian looked at her. "His career is over. Let him have his anger."

"I don't want him to hurt you," Jillian stated, summing up all her fears into that one sentence.

Alec sat back in her chair. "There isn't anything he can do."

"You don't know-"

Alec stood up and shook her head. "We are not having this conversation again. Please trust me. There is nothing in my life he can take from me or hold over me."

She ran paint splattered fingers through her shaggy hair. Silver eyes scanned the horizon without stopping to stare at the distant point that so often riveted her attention. Perhaps the past, with all its pain, was finally slipping away. "Well, I'm going back up to paint."

I watched her leave the patio in surprise. Paint? Here? I looked to Jillian. "She's painting? She didn't leave today did she?"

I hated the thought that while I was reading, she had braved the world without me. I wanted to be by her side when she faced the press and answered whatever questions they shot at her. I wasn't on the edges of her life anymore. I refused to be pushed back to that place again.

"Elane came earlier. She thought Alec might be stir crazy so she brought some paints and easels for her. She is much calmer since Elane was here."

Leave it to Elane. She seemed to have a second sense about Alec, knew how to reach her when all I could do was watch in frustration. I always thought it was because reaching her best artist and keeping her calm were in Elane's best interests. Depression hit as I realized how easily I had missed the bond between them. I bought Elane's lines about money and Alec even as I knew money was never her goal in life. The lies fell so easily from her lips. They were the same lies Alec could have used to keep me, but refused to use if that was the only way I would stay.

"Where is she painting?"

"Her nursery. She said it had the best light."

I stared at her calm face and felt my world take a sickening tilt. Her nursery in September was the one Alec left behind at five. How in the hell did it become a room she could paint in now? Jillian saw something on my face or in my eyes that moved her to explain.

"While Rainer and I were on our honeymoon, I had the room made into a sunroom." Her smile was faint. "A nursery for a thirty year old is ridiculous, don't you think?"

I astonished myself by asking in a normal voice, "It's been the same all these years?"

Pain touched her eyes. "Yes. I guess I wanted something of hers in my life. Silly really because I could never go in there after...Anyway, I decided to have the room redone while we were gone."

I understood in an instant. Jillian had lived in this house for twenty-five years and never knew that Brian's blood was splattered over their daughter's bedroom. She must have believed Patrick took care of the room. He had taken care of everything else. How many times had she stood at the door with her hand on the knob, her fear the only thing that saved her from that final push into insanity? After being in that room without the memory of that night, I did not want to know what hell Jillian would have entered had she walked into the nursery.

She stood up. "I'm going to say goodnight to your Dad and Kellen and then I am going to bed. Goodnight Victoria."

She left the patio and I knew she did not realize she had called Alec by her given name.

A few minutes later, I stood outside the sunroom. The door was open and I leaned into the doorway, watching her. She was standing back from a blue streaked canvas, hand with paint brush under her chin. My eyes roamed the room. It was a very different room from the one I sneaked into months earlier. Jillian had decorated the room with overstuffed white and yellow striped couches and white wicker furniture. Lush green plants adorned every corner and table top. My eyes stopped at Jillian's Christmas present. The painting was hung over the spot where her bed had been. I did not think the placement was either coincidental or an accident. Drop cloths covered the floor where Alec painted and was placed nominally over the furniture. Jillian would not care if Alec repainted the room and all the furniture. Her daughter in this room again? Alec could do whatever she wanted.

"Either come in or go away," Alec said. She reached out with the paintbrush and quickly dotted white foam atop the blue streaks of waves.

"Jillian said this was your nursery," I said as I walked to her side. No one was going to know what I knew about this room.

Alec glanced around as if looking for the dollhouse and nursery books. "Yes. Big room for a little kid."

Some little kid. Her mother was nominated for an Oscar, her father was a brilliant director, her grandfather a United States Senator. There must be something to fate because that little kid grew up to be Alec Chasen. Born to be somebody, she fulfilled her destiny on her own without the Brent name or money.

I grew restless watching her paint minute flecks of white. "Is this how you spent the day?"

"Umm, yes. Well, I stayed on the beach until the helicopters appeared. I made all three networks. Alec Chasen runs into Windchase. Really fascinating footage, right?"

"Alec Chasen does anything is news right now," I replied. I found myself standing in front the other Chasen. Is this how Alec saw herself? A small child alone on the beach?

"This is all insane. Jill and I are going on a talk show tomorrow. Elane said the publishers want me to go on tour. I can't believe she's lived under this all this time."

"Who?"

Alec stepped back to eye the canvas critically. "Jill. Luckily, I am well-known for protecting my privacy. I do this tomorrow and that is it. It's going to be harder to protect her because no one ever has."

I could not be hearing what I thought she was saying. She was concerned about Jillian? What miracle did I read through today anyway? Surely, I would have seen the lights flashing from the heavens and felt the earth shake.

"Are you going to paint all night?" Jillian came into the room and walked to the canvas.

Alec shot her a quick grin. "If I do, can I sleep through tomorrow?"

My jaw dropped as Alec slipped her arm around Jillian's waist and leaned into her to kiss her on the cheek. "Don't worry, I am going to bed soon. My concentration is shot."

Jillian slipped both arms around Alec to give her a brief, tight hug. I managed to close my mouth and replace my shocked expression with something more normal. Jillian came to me and patted my cheek. "Try not to keep her up too late."

I was rooted to the floor. This was too much for me to take in without warning. In one day, when nothing had really changed in Alec's life, she finds compassion and understanding? After one walk on the beach, she can see her mother's side? No. Nothing was that easy. Nothing this complicated became this easy after one day.

"Do me a favor? Start a shower for us. I'll be in when I get this cleaned up."

I had a choice to push her for answers to her abrupt change of heart or letting it go in the hope that some how I could figure everything out. I've been here before. I know asking for answers when she doesn't want to give them is an exercise in futility. I nodded, leaving her to cap paints and clean brushes. A hot shower with her is better than a cold shoulder any day.

~~~~~

"Elane thinks Blair will do the show for me. She's always wanted to go national. Maybe this will help," Alec said when we were in bed. Her voice was tired. I knew she really did not want to deal with this anymore. In the scenario she had of writing her book, she simply wrote it and the world, with her mother and Patrick, went away. She was Alec Chasen mysterious painter and not Kellen Brent child abuse survivor.

Her head was on my shoulder and her body was draped over me. I held her tight, listening instead of asking questions. Maybe I would have heard more if I had tried doing that sooner.

"Patrick's having a press conference tomorrow, too." She paused and her soft voice was barely a whisper in my ear. "I think if I had stayed here, he would have done to me what he did to Brian."

I shook my head in denial of that statement. I kissed her forehead. "No honey, he would have tried. You are not Brian. You had something Brian never had."

She nodded. "Jill."

She sat up and stared down on me. The troubled light in her eyes reminded me so much of Jillian's eyes. Her mother's daughter. There was very little of her that belonged to Brian.

"I was always thought they sacrificed me for themselves, and I knew the Brent's did. But Jillian sacrificed herself for me. She used her life to shield mine. I never appreciated how difficult her life has been until today. I got a small dose of it and it wasn't pleasant. But tomorrow, they better ask all the questions they want because neither my mother nor I will ever again publicly answer questions about Brian or that night. I don't care who thinks we owe what to whom. Tomorrow, it's over."

The troubled look faded to be replaced by steel tempered resolution. That night would be over, she meant. That terrible Christmas Eve and all its dark consequences would finally be over. The lost child was returned, the truth would be known, a murder case solved. Tomorrow that night which began over twenty-five years ago would finally come to an end.

I wanted it to be that easy for her, for Jillian, because after everything, they deserved for it to be

over. I also knew that life is never that neatly packaged. Patrick and the media had the power to make this continue. Maybe not for Alec and Jillian personally, but publicly. Patrick could continue to wage his war of lies and doubt as long as someone within the media was willing to give him the forum.

Alec snuggled down in my arms. "G'night Tory. Love you."

I knew she did. I just wondered if Kellen Brent would love me, too.

### 13.

"The limo will be here in ten minute."

Ten minutes. Time may fly when you're having fun, but it vanishes when you are facing a nerve racking experience. Only ten more minutes before Jillian and Alec faced the media for the first time, if one did not count Alec's adventure with the helicopters, since the Christmas morning headline.

Elane closed her cell phone and walked over to me. "Are you all right? You look pale."

She arrived before the sun this morning. Breakfast was spent with Elane on the phone with Blair Collins agreeing on the terms of the interview. Jillian said very little as Alec okayed and nixed certain subjects for discussion. Rainer, Alec's paintings, and I were all off limits. Brian, that night, the Brent family were within bounds. The interview was over if Blair crossed the line. Blair was a friend of ours. I hope our trust in her was not misplaced. I was nervous, but it went without saying that all of us were on edge. We had bungee jumping butterflies in our stomachs.

She stepped behind me and massaged the tense muscles in my neck. "Don't worry, Vickie. Alec won't let Blair get away with anything. Polite is not one of Alec's strong points."

Don't worry? Someone needed to worry. Someone should worry about the consequences of this interview. Patrick's press conference was scheduled for noon in D.C. *The Blair Collins Show* began taping at nine. The two interviews would be given at the same time so neither side would know until it was over what the other was saying. Don't worry? Get real Elane.

I stood up when Rainer hurried into living room. "Are they still getting ready?"

Elane had arranged for a hairdresser to come to the house and one of Alec's suits was dry cleaned for the occasion. They were getting dressed in Jillian's suite. Elane patted his arm as she walked past him. "I'll go see how it's going."

Rainer walked to the bar and poured a shot glass full. He threw the drink back with one flick of his wrist. "I don't like this. I think we should wait to see what Patrick has to say before we do this."

I had thought of that myself, but was reluctant to suggest it. Alec, once her mind was made up over something, was not easily dissuaded from her purpose. I thought we should at least wait until after Patrick's conference so that we could respond to his statement. We knew he was going to deny Alec, we just didn't know how or how he would explain Jillian's acceptance of her. I really thought we would be better off knowing what he said before we said anything else.

"Have you mentioned that to Jillian or Alec?"

He shot me a dark glare. "Have you mentioned it to Alec? She's the one calling the shots here. Jillian will do whatever Alec wants."

Why he thought Alec would do what I wanted was beyond me. He knew before I did that she was writing a book. I don't know what he saw that made him think I had some kind of magic power, but he was wrong. I did not even know how she planned to respond to the interview, much less how she planned to respond to Patrick.

"Everyone does what Alec wants," I replied. Why should Jillian, and by default him, be any different? I wanted to add *so get used to it*, but I bit my tongue. He would learn that soon enough. Today was going to be hard enough without causing an argument over something undeniable.

Elane came to the doorway. "Ready? They're coming down now."

The three of us were waiting in the foyer, our eyes cast heavenward up the stairs. Expectation hung heavy in the air. A door opened. For one brief moment, my mind flashed to one of the pictures taken of them that Christmas Eve. The picture was taken at the stairs. Kellen stood on the bottom step to give her a few extra inches of height. Jillian was holding her hand. That was how I expected to see them, in crimson gowns and hair piled elegantly on their heads.

Jillian came down first in black slacks and a white shirt under dark teal blazer. Alec was close on her heels. Her silk tailored suit was navy and the handkerchief in the pocket was white. Her hair had been trimmed, but not enough to blunt the resemblance between them. Maybe Patrick could convince the world they weren't mother and daughter, but he would never make anyone believe they weren't related.

Alec stared at Rainer as she walked down the stairs. "May I speak to you for a minute, alone?"

Jillian's eyes widened and she paused on the stairs. Alec moved around her, patting her on the shoulder as if to silently reassure her.

"The limo will be here any minute," Elane cautioned.

Alec followed my Dad to the living room. She tossed back to Elane, "Feel free to leave without me."

Jillian anxiously watched Alec and Rainer talking close to the patio doors. She toyed with her wedding ring, her eyes never leaving their calm discussion. My father nodded and I blinked in surprise as they hugged. My father was actually smiling when they joined us in the foyer.

"Let's go," Elane. "Blair wants us there at least before the cameras start rolling."

A white limo with black tinted glass was waiting for us. Jillian and Alec sat facing Rainer, Elane, and me. We could hear the press at the gates yelling to us as we neared the gates. Alec reached for Jillian's hand and smiled at her as fists pounded on the windows and we inched through the throng to turn onto the highway.

"I want to make up Christmas to you," she said to her mother in a calm tone as voices shouted at us. "So Rainer and I thought we should have a party for New Year's Eve. We could fly to Moregrove and bring in the New Year with the whole family. A New Year's Eve family reunion. I know Cord-Grandmother would love it. So what do you say Mom? Want to have a party?"

My heart stopped in my chest. I stared at Alec and even as I knew she was staging this to get Jillian's mind off the reporters and the interview, I knew she meant it. The delighted surprise that came to Jillian's face when Alec mentioned New Year's at Moregrove House was replaced with a heartbreakingly expression of love when Alec called her Mom. Words failed her and tears shimmered in her green eyes. She swallowed, her fingers linking tighter with Alec's. She dragged her gaze away from Alec and looked at us, the rest of her family, with a trembling smile. "I can't think of anything I could possibly want more."

Alec grinned and winked at my Dad. "Great. Rainer can charter a plane for tomorrow. Elane can call Aunt Julia with the news. Mom can call Moregrove. All Tory and I have to do is show up."

The rest of the drive to Blair's Burbank studio was spent discussing the party. Alec and Elane envisioned a festive affair with lots of food and laughter. Jillian was silent, content to let the conversation happen around her, her eyes on Alec.

~~~~~

Blair's studio was behind high, security controlled gates. The limo swept through the gates and came to a smooth stop in front a single door adorned with the words *The Blair Collins Show*. Rainer led us into the darkened studio. Bright stage lights were on over the simple set. A redhead dressed in white was talking to a camera man when we appeared in her line of vision. A bright smile broke over her face and she came over to us with her hands out.

"Alec, you are causing all sorts of trouble," Blair said with a grin. She was introduced to Rainer and Jillian before she hugged me and Elane hello. She turned to Alec. "My agent has been fielding calls from the networks. I think they are very angry that you picked some unknown for this interview."

Alec shrugged with a smile. "They should have noticed you before now, Blair."

Blair slipped her arm around Alec's shoulder. "Are you sure you want to do this? I've read the

newspapers. The questions are going to be hard."

"I know. I think it will be easier to answer them coming from a friend."

Blair nodded and threw us all a bright smile. "Okay then. Let's take our places."

Every seat in the audience was filled. I recognized the people on the first few rows as press members. They were not allowed to bring in tape recorders so all had notepads on their laps. The three of us stood behind the cameras and watched as Blair settled Jillian and Alec in the guest chairs. Nervousness began to wound itself around me as I watched Jillian and Alec listen to her. Why were we doing this? Why did we care what Patrick told the press and who believed what from which side? Nothing would change for us regardless of what the rest of the world believed.

Within minutes, Blair was standing away from Jillian and Alec, facing the camera and waiting for the sign to begin. Three cameras were focused on the stage. I stepped to my Dad and took his hand in mine. God, please don't let this be a mistake.

Blair faced the camera with a serious expression. "Twenty-five years ago on Christmas Day, the world was shocked by the news that director Brian Brent and his five year old daughter, Kellen, were murdered in their Los Angeles estate. Two books have been written about their deaths and uncountable newspaper reports. Their deaths have remained unsolved all these years." She turned to Jillian and Alec. "My guests today are Jillian Young, Brian Brent's wife and the mother of his child, and painter Alec Chasen. If you've seen a newspaper or watched television over the last few days you know that Alec Chasen is claiming in her soon-to-be published autobiography that she is Kellen Brent."

"Miss Young is Alec Chasen your daughter?" Blair began the interview with the burning question.

The air was charged and everyone was leaning forward, waiting. It wasn't until the world saw and heard Jillian Young say the words herself that it became true. "Yes, Alec is my daughter, Kellen."

Blair paused as if letting her answer hang in the air. "Why should we believe you?"

Jillian smiled in understanding. "I think everyone is wondering that and my only reply is tell me what will convince you."

Blair turned to Alec. "If you are Kellen Brent, why are coming forward now? Why not when you were eighteen or twenty-one?"

Alec was sitting with her hands clasped in her lap. "Our family has been fragmented since my father's death. My mother remarried in September and for obvious reasons I was not there. I don't want to miss any more special events."

I began to breathe again. Jillian and Alec were calm and poised as they answered questions with

just enough of the truth to hide the fact they were not telling everything. Alec reached for Jillian's hand and her voice never changed as she quietly told their spell-bound audience that Brian committed suicide that night. She declined to go into detail, instead explaining with a smile that *Kellen* explained everything. Blair's questions were gently asked and Alec replied with admirable control. Only someone who knew her and had already seen her relive that night once would recognize that she was back in that room, watching her father take her life in the same instant he took his own.

The interview was spent with Jillian and Alec answering questions that Blair asked. The audience, unlike Blair's usual shows, was not allowed to ask questions. They might ask something that was outside the agreed topics. Blair thanked them for coming, wished them luck for the future, and then the cameras went dark.

The three of us walked to the stage. Blair was talking with Jillian and Alec. We joined them just in time to hear Alec ask if Blair had a television somewhere. She wanted to see if Patrick's news conference was over. I was surprised she cared what he was saying.

"In my office," Blair said and led the way.

I don't know how we expected Patrick Brent to explain away Alec Chasen. I thought he would deny her like she thought he would. Politicians liked to keep their lies simple these days. Alec flipped the channel to CNN. We did not have to wait long because Patrick's speech was the breaking story of the hour. He was tall and handsome, his face somber, and his gray eyes sad as they stared out at the cameras.

"Alec Chasen is not my granddaughter," He began with just a hint of anger in his tone. He went on to reveal how Jillian was "never well again" after the deaths of Brian and Kellen. She saw every blonde child as Kellen. Alec Chasen was not the first woman to try to convince Jillian that she was Kellen. He accused Rainer and I of using our relationships with Jillian and Alec to foster this belief in Jillian. He insinuated that Alec was doing this as a publicity stunt to revive her career as a has-been painter.

He stared out at us, his voice deeper in anger as issued Alec a direct challenge. "Ms. Chasen if you are Kellen Brent prove it independently of my daughter-in-law."

Jillian was livid. "I cannot *believe* he did this! It's slander."

Alec clicked the television off and faced us with remarkable calm. I was surprised that she was not furious. I searched her face for signs that she was covering up her anger, searched the silver depths of her eyes for the rage the rest of us felt. Her gaze slid over us before she smiled. "I can prove I am Kellen Brent. Do you really think I would have done this if I couldn't?"

"I know. I also know you will be standing by this side when he does."

I stared at Alec, her reply to Jillian's assertion that Patrick would deny her claims echoing in my head. She never expected to have Jillian on her side. She never thought any member of her

family would stand up for her. She fully expected to face the publicity on her own and with her family lined up solidly against her. Of course she wasn't angry. She expected to have to prove to the world on her own that she was Kellen Brent. She wasn't angry because she was waiting for Patrick to demand proof.

Jillian asked, curiously, "How?"

Alec's smile was amused. She looped her arm with Jillian's and led her out of Blair's office. "Because I am Kellen Brent."

Jillian stopped her and turned to face her. "How can you prove, without me, that you are Kellen?"

Alec glanced back at us, saw the same question on our faces and sighed. "I am going to call Patrick's bluff. I am willing to take a DNA test. Providing that you and Brian really did only have one child, DNA tests will show that I am that child. Patrick's not going to want Brian's body exhumed or my empty grave opened. He can make any challenge he wants because whatever Kellen Brent should know, I know. I am Kellen Brent. This is not a role I am playing."

And with that, she signaled the discussion was over by turning on her heel and walking a brisk line to the door. We followed her from the studio.

~~~~~

The limo was still on the studio lot when Jillian turned angrily to Alec. "You never needed me. Why was I even here?"

Anger radiated from her like heat from a forest fire. Her eyes were a glittering emerald green. By contrast, Alec was calm and poised. She could not have expected her mother to be angry, but neither did she seem surprised.

She faced Jillian. She said simply, "Because we both wanted you to be with me."

"But you did not need me," Jillian persisted. She wasn't going to be swayed by loving words regardless of how heartfelt they were. "You really thought I would be with Patrick today didn't you?"

The dead silence in the limo was deafening as we waited for Alec to say the damning words. They stared at each other, looking into the other's eyes. Jillian searched the gray depths for anything to hint that her daughter had ever believed in her. Alec sought assurances that she was not about to lose the mother she had only just found. I tensed as her face became a mask of stone. She did not find what she was looking for in her mother's gaze.

Her chin lifted a fraction as she said, "Yes."

Jillian did not flinch. She knew, we all knew Alec was going to agree with her. She shut her eyes briefly before turning her head to stare out the window.

*Yes, I believed you would betrayed me. Yes, I believed you would deny me as you have done most of my life. Yes, I did not believe you loved me.*

Emotions chased each other across Alec's face. Shame, hurt, sadness. She opened her mouth, but closed it again when she found no words to comfort her mother. She reached out, but stopped a mere inch away from touching Jillian's arm.

"I'm sorry, I just never knew..." She said softly, her voice uncertain.

Jillian turned to her sharply. "Knew what? I thought you knew everything."

Alec shook her head, her eyes never leaving her mother's face. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "No, not everything. I never knew that Kellen meant everything to you."

The words were spoken so softly, laden with childish hurt and confusion. Alec Chasen was a woman who, on the surface, seemed to have it all. But under that accomplished, successful, and beautiful surface existed a hurt child who never understood. She did not know why she was left alone in England or why her mother never visited or why she told the world her daughter was dead. They did not want Kellen to remember Brian or that night so she was never told anything and in the absence of knowledge, she came to the only conclusion that made sense. Her mother did not, could not love her because if she did she never would have left her.

Jillian cupped Alec's face in both hands and said very deliberately, "You mean everything to me. You asked me before the wedding why being your mother meant nothing to me. It means everything. It always meant everything. If it meant that you never remembered anything about Brian, I would have let you hate me until I died. And I would died happy with that decision."

Alec nodded. She understood. She did not agree, she thought her mother had other, better choices, but she finally understood. She did not have to agree with her mother's choice to agree with Jillian's right to make her own decisions.

"I know," Alec said. "I know it now."

Jillian nodded and sat back, her hands slowly fell from Alec's face. She turned to my father. "I want to leave tonight. I don't want to deal with Patrick anymore."

Rainer nodded and reached for the cell phone. I smiled at Alec. Before the day ended, we would be in England and far away from this madness.

~~~~~

If it was possible, more reporters were at the gate now than when we left for the show. The limo was forced to a stop as the guards attempted to clear a path. We crept through the throng, silent as fists slammed against the black windows. Is this how our lives would be from now on? My step-mother was Jillian Young. My lover was Kellen Brent. I realized for the first time that my life had changed with theirs.

"My God, is this how it was then?" Alec exploded in exasperation. "Is this how you've lived?"

Jillian blinked in surprise at Alec's anger. She nodded. "Yes, when I'm recognized."

Alec shook her head, eyes narrowed in rage. "And Patrick, has he ever tried to help you?"

"Well, no, not really. He..." She trailed off as Alec sat forward.

"Stop," she commanded the driver. Rainer and Jillian both reached for her in alarm as she turned to the door. She brushed their hands away and opened the door. Where before there was a cacophony of voices, there was complete silence as the door swung open. Rainer hurried to follow her from the limo.

"I have a statement to make to my grandfather," she said in a clear, loud voice. The reporters stared at her in identical expressions of astonishment. I could hear what they were thinking. Limos with famous people never stopped and never, ever did that person exit the limo to make a statement. Was this a diversion or a joke?

Alec turned impatiently to the nearest reporter. She did not see Elane, Jillian, and I slip from the limo. She took the microphone from the young woman's hand and faced the wall of cameras that appeared behind her.

Dark gray eyes burned with hatred as she stared into the camera. "Patrick, you have twenty-four hours to retract every lie you've told. If you haven't by noon tomorrow, I will petition the courts to exhume my father's body for purposes of DNA testing. You think I want something from your family? Well, you are right. I want my name off that empty grave next to your son's. I am Kellen Brent. I am not dead. Now what are you going to do?"

With that, she tossed the microphone to the reporter and stalked back to the limo. She frowned at us and waved us inside. Our driver took advantage of the reporters shock to gun the limo inside the gates. We were inside the gates without another hand being laid on the limo.

"Do you think that was smart?" My father demanded of Alec.

Alec shrugged and her face was turned to the window. "I don't care. I want the press on his doorstep for the next twenty-four hours. I want him to be a prisoner in his own home as the media begins the count down to noon tomorrow. I don't want him to even be able to peek out his window without a flash bulb popping in his face. For this small instant in time, I want him to know the hell of being related to Brian Brent."

She turned to face us with a small, private smile. "Or maybe just the hell of being related to me."

I thought we would never get a minute alone. Lunch was waiting for us and although I wasn't hungry, I sat with the family on the patio. Alec excused herself to make a phone call. The conversation, which Rainer kept determinedly on the trip to England, flowed around me. I watched the patio doors, waiting for Alec. I wished that we were upstairs in bed, blotting out everything but being together.

By the time Alec rejoined us, Elane had left to "do things and call people". One of the people she needed to call was her mother. Julia Rasche lived in near Malibu. She had five hours to be packed and at LAX for our chartered flight to England. I did not doubt that she would be there. The Chasen family has not been in the same room since 1968.

Alec did not pretend on interest in either the food or the conversation. She sat with her face to the ocean, her bleak thoughts reflected in the dark, unblinking gray eyes. She wanted to be in Aubres. She wanted to be on her deck with decisions no more demanding than whether or not to paint and whether it should be a Chasen Original or one of the new ones. She wanted the simple, uncomplicated charade of being Alec Chasen. She had choices then, over everything in her life. Now, she was only reacting to the decisions made by others.

"Can we all be ready by seven?" Rainer asked.

I watched Alec, waiting for her to come back to us and answer. I would let her answer for both of us so that she could make a decision in a life careening out of her control. She did not look at us as she said, "Sure, seven is fine."

I jumped as she reached for my hand. "We're going to pack."

Her hand was warm in mine as I trailed behind her. They watched us leave the patio and even if someone had wanted to stop us, I don't think anyone would have dared. This woman was cold and silent and very close to reaching her breaking point. I knew it, I hoped they knew it, too. Too much had happened, too soon and without warning.

She opened the door to our bedroom and pulled me into the room behind her. Before I could take two steps, she turned and pushed me against the door. She shoved her leg between mine, pinning me so I could not move. Soft lips touched mine and gentle hands slowly pulled my shirt from my slacks. She moved away from me.

"I so wanted Christmas to be special," she whispered, staring down to watch her hands unbutton my shirt. "I thought, just this once, I can know how Christmas is supposed to be."

My shirt fell off my shoulders under her tender caress. She slid her hands to my back and soon my bra and shirt lay in a silken puddle at my feet. Her feather light touch slid over my shoulders, down my arms to link with my hands.

She looked into my eyes. "I cannot give you the Christmas you deserved, or even the best that I could do, but I can give you one that you will never forget,"

She turned so that I could see the bed in the soft bedside light. Presents, some I recognized as mine to her covered the bed. She released my hand to select a slim, oblong red and gold wrapped present. She walked around the bed and placed the gift on the night stand. "I want you to open this one last."

I stood next to the bed, stunned by the turn of events, and watched her move around the bedroom. She had borrowed a CD player from somewhere. She pressed a button and soon Bing Crosby was singing "White Christmas." She lit a candle and the aroma of apples and cinnamon began to fill the room. She came back to me.

"I love you," she said and brought her hands to my face. The kiss lasted forever. All thoughts ceased, there was only the feeling of Alec next to me, being with me as if she read my mind on the patio.

"I love you," I whispered when I could breathe again. I stared into her eyes, mesmerized. She could have led me anywhere and I would have followed, done anything and I would have agreed without protest. She loved me, she was with me and I did not give a damn about the rest of the world beyond our bedroom door.

"Come," she said and took my hand. "Let's do Christmas."

And we did Christmas. Presents were unwrapped and delight was expressed between kisses that became longer, slower, deeper. Alec gave me a hunter green herring bone knit sweater "for Aubres." I instantly imagined us in our sweaters on her deck some cold January morning, preferably this January.

"What about that one?" I asked when the only present left was the one on the night stand.

She grinned. She glanced over the floor strewn with presents, wrapping paper, bows, and our clothes. "You want more?"

She pulled me down on top of her. Her hands slid down my back to grab my butt. She opened her legs and pressed me tight against her. Silver eyes stared up at me in a warm gaze of love. "Marry me, Tory. I want you in the rest of life. You can open that box if you marry me."

My heart stopped. I looked down on this woman I have loved for an eternity. Life without her had been an existence bereft of love and laughter. Having the life you have always wanted and had come to believe you can never have suddenly laid in your hands is the same as dying. The body ceases to function and time becomes irrelevant. I don't know how long I simply stared down at her, waiting for consciousness to end. I knew my life was over because it is not possible to be given the one thing you wanted most in the world and then be allowed to live.

"Tory?" She whispered, uncertainty in her voice. Did she really think I would say no? Was it possible that she really did not understand how much she meant to me? How stupid was I that Alec Chasen, beautiful and talented Alec Chasen, did not know that she meant more to me than anyone or anything else in the world?

Without a word, I reached for the box. We traded places and I unwrapped this last gift with her laying between my legs, silver eyes taking in my every move. The box was the kind used for bracelets and was identical to the one I was given for her anklet. I opened the box and gasped. I expected a bracelet or an anklet and was staring instead at a single band of gold imbedded with sapphires. Her ring. She was giving me the match to her ring.

I looked up at her, feeling the tears slid down the side of my face. "How did you know?"

She reached for the ring. "I know you. You wanted to do this last time so I knew when you gave me my ring that somewhere in this town was it's twin. I went to a million stores before I found it."

As she spoke she was sliding the ring on the third finger of my left hand. She took the box from my fingers and tossed it to the floor with the rest of the gifts. Gentle fingers wiped away my tears. I pulled her down to me. I wanted her. More than I needed to breath I needed her on me and in me.

It was three days late, it had little of the festive activity I associate with Christmas, it was in a bedroom that wasn't even in my house or hers, but it was without a doubt the best Christmas I have ever had. She only wanted it to be unforgettable. Instead, it was absolutely perfect. Beginning next year, Christmas for me would always be December twenty-eighth.

~~~~~

Rainer chartered a Lear jet for the flight. Another limo, this one black with black windows, was waiting to drive us to the airport. Alec and I were upstairs for hours. I reluctantly dragged myself from the bed when Alec promised that we would continue our celebration at Moregrove House. I was surprised to find myself embarrassed with Rainer and Jillian. They could not know what happened in our room unless they had their ears pressed to the door. I really could not see either of them doing that even if they had been curious to what we were doing.

We both wore blue jeans and white T-shirts. We carried our new sweaters and jackets in anticipation for the British weather that awaited us. Rainer and Jillian had dressed casually in slacks and matching red knit shirts. They also carried jackets. I was glad that the reporters could not see us from the road. We at least had the hope of getting out town before anyone knew we were leaving. And of possibly arriving in England without a horde of cameras waiting for us.

Elane and Julia were already on the plane when we arrived. Jillian and Julia walked into each other's arms. I've met Julia many times over the years, but now as they hugged, I searched for a resemblance between the two women. Maybe if Julia wasn't taller and more athletic than her younger, feminine sister, maybe if her hair was ash instead of honey blonde, and maybe if her eyes were green instead of clear blue I might have noticed a resemblance between Julia and Alec. There wasn't a startling resemblance between Jillian and Julia so the few times Alec and I joined Elane at her mother's house for dinner, I never wondered about any resemblance between Julia and Alec.

Julia stepped back and took her sister's face in her hands. "You look great, Jill. Absolutely wonderful."

Jillian grinned and her glance swept the faces around her. "I can't believe this is happening."

Rainer came from the front of the plane and urged us to our seats. Engines roared to life as we strapped ourselves down. I shared Jillian's sentiment. I couldn't believe this was happening. This year was ending in a way I would have called Science Fiction even two months ago. This family, my family, was going to ring in the New Year together. Even now, as we jetted down the runway, Moregrove House was being prepared for a celebration the likes of which had never been held in its hallowed existence.

I sat back to enjoy the feeling of relaxation I saw mirrored on the faces around me. The world we were soaring above would be waiting when we came back in a few days, but for now, that world was gone. Once the plane was level, Rainer brought out two bottles of chilled Dom Perignon. Jillian handed out champagne glasses made of real glass. Rainer poured our glasses full.

"To us," he said simply over our raised glasses.

"To us," we chorused together, clinked glasses. Alec and I held each other's gazes before we joined the others in drinking to Rainer's toast.

I found myself sitting next to Alec with her head on my shoulder. She yawned and whispered to me, "I'm exhausted. You were...enthusiastic this afternoon."

She had taken my left hand in hers. I stared at the ring on my finger. "I had a reason to be don't you think?"

I felt her smile. "Yes, you did."

She snuggled next to me and I soon felt the slow even breathing that meant she was asleep. I rested my head against hers to watch the others. Jillian and Julia had gone to the Captain's chairs near the end of the plane to talk quietly to each other. I idly wondered if some time over the past years they had managed to meet clandestinely. It would have been easy for Julia to drive to Windchase. Alec had slipped in and out easily enough.

My sleepy gaze turned to the odd pairing of Rainer and Elane. They knew each other, but neither had particularly liked the other. Dad thought Elane supported herself through a barely legal form of fraud. Elane thought he was too right-wing to be related to me. It would be interesting to see how their impressions would change now that he was "Uncle" Rainer and she was a member of his family.

Family. Funny the things we forgive and overlook and excuse if someone is family.

~~~~~

Alec slept through the entire flight. Hunger forced me awake and away from her several hours into the flight. Someone had thoughtfully thrown a blanket over us. I eased Alec to her side and tucked the blanket around her. Jillian directed me to the galley for a chicken salad sandwich. I found a stash of Lay's Potato Chips and a cold can of Coke. I took my lunch back to the cabin and sat down next to Elane. She was reading *Kellen*.

"Do me a favor?" I asked her.

She took her time looking up. She arched one eyebrow in silent question.

"Don't read that in front of Alec."

She glanced over at her cousin. I followed her gaze. Alec had turned over on her stomach and was sleeping with her head on her folded hands. Even after everything, she looked like a child as she slept. She nodded. "Sure. I'll drop it the second she wakes up."

She used her finger to mark her place and closed the book. Her eyes were still on Alec as she asked softly, "When did you two exchange rings?"

My brain went blank. "I didn't think anyone would notice."

She tossed me a wicked grin. She nodded towards Jillian and Julia. "Aunt Jill noticed at Windchase apparently. She took my aside and asked if I knew anything about it. I didn't notice until she told me. Everyone knows now. Warning: she's furious about it. You've lost major points over this. In the future please remember to invite the mother of the bride to the wedding."

I closed my eyes in the very vain hope that this embarrassing moment could, please God, and never have happened. I had been so wrapped up in the deliciousness of the moment that I did not think about anything else. Of course Jillian was furious. Here was a mother who had missed every event, significant or not, in her daughter's life since she was five and now, when she had every right to think she would never miss anything else, she had missed this. We were lucky Jillian did not cause a scene the second she noticed the matching rings.

"Maybe I should apologize," I said hesitantly. And what kind of apology could I give? I doubt Miss Manners had this certain gaffe in her book.

Elane grinned and shook her head. Damn her for enjoying my uncertainty. "Not good enough. I suggest that you grovel at her feet and promise to allow her to plan the ceremony of her dreams. Anything less than that and I wouldn't turn my back on her."

I glanced over at Alec. She wasn't going to like that. But then I really didn't like the thought of being out of Jillian's favor. She was Alec's mother and she was right to think they should have been included in some way. My father had the right to the same expectation of me. Somehow being gay did not exclude us from the same expectations of other parents.

"Say a prayer for me," I said and stood up.

Elane laughed. "Sure."

The walk from where Elane was sitting to where Jillian sat in her Captain's chair had the same distance as the walk from death row to the electric chair. Jillian sipped her drink and watched me approach over the rim of her glass. She looked very much like Alec when she was annoyed. Julia excused herself and patted me on the shoulder as she passed. I really didn't need that added touch of drama. I knew this was going to be bad.

I sat down across from her and met her gaze squarely. Was I really so wrapped up in Alec when we left that I missed the frost in my step-mother's green eyes? Apparently. Furious probably did not begin to cover the anger she felt when she realized Alec and I were wearing matching rings.

My smile felt weak. I went for broke. "You're angry and you have every right to be. And I'm sorry. Would you forgive me if you could plan a ceremony? It would be whatever you wanted. I promise you can plan it however you want it."

She was silent for several heartbeats. Icy green eyes stared at me unforgivably. Her gaze slid over the face of her sleeping daughter. "I won't miss anymore of her life, Victoria. Promise me that. Promise me that next time and every time after that I will always be there for the special times in her life."

I reached for her hand. I looked into her eyes. "I promise."

She sat back in her chair. She drained her champagne glass. "I want the ceremony, too. Your Dad was looking forward to walking you down the aisle."

I blushed. I protested, "But it's not like a real wedding ceremony."

The green eyes hardened for an instant. "This one is."

I nodded meekly and went back to sit next to Elane. I watched Alec sleep and wondered how on earth I was going to explain to her that very soon we were going to be "married" in a ceremony her mother planned. Maybe I should just let Jillian explain it to her. It was time Jillian asserted her maternal presence in Alec's life on her own. And time Alec faced the righteous anger of her mother.

~~~~~

Our arrival at the Exeter Airport went unnoticed. Another limo was waiting for us. We slipped on sweaters and jackets and wondered why none of us brought a real coat. We were here in England, a country that wasn't exactly teeming in the middle of summer, in the dead of winter. Alec at least should have known better.

*Kellen* had several pictures of Moregrove House and I felt that I was prepared for the Chasen family homestead. Perhaps in daylight, the English countryside estate would not have seemed so majestic. However, in a darkness broken only by distant star light, the sudden light from the

many rooms of the estate made Moregrove House seem a massive, isolated fortress. The perfect place to hide Kellen Brent.

A wide cobble stone drive led a meandering path to the front door. By the time we piled out of the limo, the heavy wooden door had opened. I was anxious to meet Cordelia Chasen. I knew she would be an exceptional woman, as were her daughter's and granddaughter's. She was tall with blue eyes like Julia, but I thought her silver hair was once the same ash blonde as Jillian's.

She stood by the door and each person received a hug before being allowed into the inviting warmth of the house. I was awkward. Was I Alec's lover and therefore really nothing to her? Or was a grandchild-in-law via her daughter? I returned her welcoming hug briefly and fled into the house.

The foyer was large and done in dark paneled wood. A grand staircase spiraled to the second floor. Heavy Oriental rugs covered stone floors. I gave my jacket to a young man and followed the crowd to the library. Alec and Elane warmed their hands by a crackling fire. I stood in the doorway. Every wall in the room was covered in books. The furniture was dark, heavy wood except for several couches made of black leather.

"Anyone want a drink?" Rainer asked.

Cordelia entered the library. She crossed the room and slipped her arm around Alec's waist. "Honey, Celeste Brent called a few hours ago."

Every eye in the room was on her. Alec visibly steeled herself for more bad news. I felt a shaft of anger at Cordelia. Why do this? Alec really did not need to know that Celeste Brent had called. She could call every day twice a day if she liked and there was no reason for Alec to ever know about the calls.

"Patrick suffered a stroke yesterday. He is in ICU. The family released a statement to CNN saying that you are Kellen Brent. Celeste wants you to call. She left a number that she can be reached at any time."

Alec stared around the library blankly. "Then...I guess...I'd better call."

Rainer crossed the room shaking his head. "Let me call her."

"No, but thank you. Someone turn on the TV. Let's see what's happening."

My Dad stared at her in helpless frustration. If only she let him, he would take over and handle all of this for her. Alec was tired of people taking over and handling things for her.

Cordelia pulled a scrap of paper from her pocket. Alec took the number and walked to the phone. Jillian left the couch and went to Alec's side. She put her arm around Alec's shoulders.

"Yes, this is...Kellen Brent. May I speak to my grandmother please?"

Alec's gaze was fixed on a row of books. Her empty tone was one I knew well. She was the ultra cool and poised Alec Chasen.

"Good morning. I'm David Daly. The story we are following this morning is the stroke suffered late yesterday evening by Senator Patrick Brent, the senior Senator from California. Jeanne Gless is standing by at Walter Reed. Good morning Jeanne, what is the latest word on his condition?"

A slim brunette blinked in the camera spotlight. "Good morning David. Senator Brent's condition is officially listed as stable, but a spokesmen for the Brent family told me the Senator has not regained consciousness. Family members have been arriving through out the night to wait out this vigil with Mrs. Brent."

"Where is Kellen Brent? Does anyone know?" The unseen David asked.

The woman reporter shook her head. "She's not here, that much we do know. There is a rumor that she left the country. We've told that Celeste Brent has been in touch with her granddaughter, but we were given no details on the call."

"Jeanne has..."

"Hello Celeste. How are you doing?" Alec asked. I did not blame her for not asking about her grandfather. Patrick stopped being her grandfather the day he stood in front of the media and said his only grandchild was dead.

Alec nodded and reached up to rub her eyes with one hand. "Yes, of course. I'll be on the first flight out....Oh, okay. That's nice of him....Okay...Yes, okay...I'll see you soon."

She stood with the phone in one hand and she pinched the bridge of her nose with the other. "The U.S. Ambassador has arranged transportation for me back to the states. They've sent a car."

She looked across the room at me. "I probably won't be here New Year's Eve."

"I'm going back with you," Jillian said in a voice that brooked no argument.

Alec shook her head anyway. She walked away from her mother. "No. This is the Brent family and you are no longer a member of that family."

"Alec--"

Alec spun on her heel. Gray eyes were narrowed in anger. "I was never able to protect you. I can now and I will whether you like it or not. You are not a Brent. You do not have to deal with that family anymore."

Jillian's anger matched Alec's. "As long as you are my daughter, I will always have to deal with the Brent family."

Alec shot Rainer a dark glare. "Not if you're husband is any kind of man you won't."

With that, she left the library. Cordelia went to her daughter's side. Jillian was stung by Alec's blunt refusal. Cordelia guided her back to the couch. I stalked from the library ready to snap Alec back to a reality. I found her in the foyer sorting through the luggage.

"Was that necessary?"

Alec did not turn to me. "You do realize that she is my mother not yours, right?"

"I'm surprised that you know it," I snapped.

She stood slowly and faced me. "It's that reason exactly that I do not want her involved. I do not want to see my mother's face in every news report or splashed across the paper. Do you understand? I do not want *my mother* victimized by the press or by that family for even one more second. She is not Brian Brent's wife. I am not a child hiding behind my mother's skirt. And I do not give a damn whether or not you, your father, or anyone else agrees with me. In case you haven't noticed, I am not asking for opinions."

She seemed to notice for the first time that her rising voice had brought every one from the library. Her open, pleading gaze stopped at her mother's pale face. "I don't want you there. Please do this for me. Don't make me have to watch my mother be hurt again."

Jillian walked to face her. She put one hand on Alec's shoulder and used her other hand to brush blonde bangs away from Alec's desperate eyes. "You need a haircut. You should get one."

"I will."

"And you'll call if you need anything?"

Alec glanced behind her to Rainer. "I promise."

Jillian slipped her arms around her to hold her tight. "And I want to talk to you every night."

"Every night," Alec agreed with an indulgent smile.

Jillian stepped away from her. "You should eat before the car gets here. Who knows when you'll get another chance before you get back to the states."

~~~~~

Cordelia, a gracious English hostess, had a delicious dinner waiting for us. The seven of us sat down to roast in gravy with potatoes and carrots. Alec's delight tipped us off to the fact that this was one of her favorites. We enjoyed our first meal as a family under flickering candle light. I have to admit it did add a certain air of intimacy.

I did not want Alec to go back to the states. I wanted her here with us, protected from the unrelenting publicity and glaring spotlight of the world. We came here for that. I hated Patrick Brent. I hated him for using his tiny granddaughter as the sacrificial lamb for his son's salvation. I hated him for daring to think Alec would come back into the Brent family on his terms. But most of all, I hated him for pulling Alec back into that family at the exact moment she was surrounded by her real family. This stroke was a golden opportunity for him. There was nothing else that would have taken Alec away from us and brought her to him.

The car from the embassy, a gray Jaguar with diplomatic plates, arrived while we were drinking coffee in the library. Any hope I harbored of being alone with Alec died an instant death. The next few minutes passed in a flurry of activity. Alec was handed from family member to family to be hugged and reassured with whispered words. She buried her head in each embrace as if seeking the strength from us to face the trying days that lay ahead of her.

I watched her with my Dad. I could not help but notice the fatherly bond that had developed between them over the few days since their first meeting on Christmas morning. He was very protective over her and it showed in his frustration at being relegated to the sidelines. He wanted to stand in front of her, to take on the world for her as no man had ever done for this fragile blonde child. He would have loved her for me; her cherished for Jillian.

"I mean it," he said in a voice I remembered from my teenage years. I grinned. Alec better believe he meant exactly whatever he told her.

She nodded and leaned up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Just take care of my Mom and Tory."

My goodbye was saved for last. Alec took my hand and led me outside. Jillian stayed inside paying whatever price to lose these last few seconds with Alec that allowed me this time alone with her. She lost herself in my arms and I held her tight. I wanted my hug to convey all the words that failed me. It hurt so much to hold her and know that very soon she would be far away from me.

"Promise me something," she whispered.

I replied softly, "Anything."

She stepped back to meet my eyes. "Promise that you will sleep in my room. I need that image. Okay?"

I smiled at her. "Your Grandmother will have to drag me from the room personally."

The chauffeur appeared behind her and opened the rear passenger door. Alec quickly stepped to me and gave me a quick, hard kiss. Then, with an abruptness I understood, she slipped into the car. The windows were tinted and I could not see her face, but I waved anyway knowing that she was watching me. I stood in the cold darkness and watched until I could no longer see the red taillights from the Jag.

Alec's departure signaled the beginning of our own vigil, this one around the television. CNN was the only channel we watched. The others came and went, but Jillian and I stayed in the library. We did not want to miss a single glimpse of Alec.

The U.S. Ambassador worked the miracle of getting Alec out of the country without a single camera recording the event. I was glad that she was given those few last moments of anonymity, but over the next few days the few glimpses we had of her were like manna from heaven. As much as I hated her privacy striped away, I needed that small reassurance that she was alive and well.

Her arrival into Dulles was everything her discreet departure of England was not. Camera crews relentlessly recorded the small Brent contingent that waited for her in a cordoned area away from the unloading area. Alec, the voice over called her "Kellen Brent", was the first person off the plane. She was escorted by intense young men in blue jeans and bomber jackets. I thought them to be aides of Patrick's. Jillian sat forward and touched the young men surrounding her daughter.

"These are Patrick's great-nephews," she said. "This is Brent Kenderson. He works in Patrick's office."

Next, her finger grazed a face I was surprised to recognize. "This is Brian Kenderson."

"The actor," I finished for her. He was on the supporting actor tier of stardom.

Jillian nodded. "Emily was pregnant with him when Brian died."

She touched the third man. "Daniel Brent. He works for the Brent company."

I cringed at the crush of reporters that surged forward. Her muscular young escorts formed a protective barrier around her. Uniformed police officers appeared around the family and with lights flashing and questions bouncing harmless of them, they quickly disappeared into the back of a black limo. Cameras were waiting when the limo pulled into the hospital. Alec looked grim and tired as she was whisked into the hospital.

Over the next hours, the few visible shots of Alec were woven and replayed during the updates on Patrick's unchanging condition. Jillian quietly filled me in on the "Brent family" that had gathered around their fallen leader. While Brian was Patrick's only child, his brother had a son and his sister had a son and two daughters. His mother was dead and his ninety-seven year old father was not being told of his son's critical condition. Alec was the only girl in the third generation. The other boy, Paul Brent III, also worked for the Brent company. Jillian confirmed my suspicion that the younger Brent generation was never told Kellen was alive.

"She looks drained," Jillian said, her voice traced in anguish.

We were watching Alec, Celeste leaning heavily against her, leave the hospital later that night. She seemed oblivious to the cameras. She paused as her Aunt, Erin Jillian said, laid a hand on her shoulder. They conferred quietly as the cameras rolled and for the first time in what seemed like days, we got our first prolonged view of Alec. She was still wearing the blue jeans and sweater she left England in so many hours earlier.

Dark eyes flashed across the screen as Alec turned to talk to her grandmother. The camera had zoomed in on her face. She spoke gently to the strikingly regal woman. Celeste nodded and Alec accepted her Aunt's brief hug. They family separated into the row of identical, black limos. The camera followed Alec and Celeste to the first limo. Alec helped her grandmother inside before she disappeared behind the black tinted windows.

Slowly, as Patrick held his own, the focus of the news reports became a parallel story between the death watch the family was holding and the stunning revelation that Alec Chasen was in fact Kellen Brent. Soon, we were watching black and white telecasts of that Christmas morning. Jillian seemed impossibly young in the grimy photos, and very much like Alec today. A younger, vibrant and obviously grief-stricken Patrick Brent quickly took center stage. Celeste Brent was seen only as a figure standing stoically behind her husband.

Jillian was silent as the worst time in her life was once again splashed across the television screen. There she was returning from England. Dark glasses hid both her bloodshot eyes and the bruises inflicted on her that night by her husband. There she was at his grave side, dressed all in black to play the role of the grieving widow. Then came the picture that became the one enduring image of her and that day. Cameras caught her taking a white rose from the top of his casket as a tear drop rolled down her face.

"Patrick told me to do that. He knew how to set a scene," Jillian remarked bitterly. She didn't add, and I didn't want to know if it was true, that the rose she took from her husband's burial wreath was supposedly buried two days later with their daughter.

We reluctantly went to bed when there was nothing new left to report. I was growing tired of seeing the same shots of Alec and hearing her called "Kellen" by every reporter. Her name was Alec. Our last shot of Alec was her vanishing into the black limo.

~~~~~

Jillian showed me to an upstairs bedroom. She spent a few minutes pointing out the connecting bathroom and thermostat control before leaving me to join her husband down the hall. Someone had brought my luggage to the room. After taking a shower, I prowled around the bedroom where Kellen Brent grew up to be Alec Chasen.

The room was smaller than her nursery at Windchase. Her bed was tucked under an alcove and covered with a blue and white checked down filled quilt. Both walls of the alcove were bookshelves stuffed with paperbacks. A bay window was filled with star light. The rest of the small room was occupied with a double door armoire and a wooden desk with straight backed

matching chair. This house was huge and I was sure had bathrooms larger than this room. I stared around the room, my gaze taking in the dark paneling and blue and white throw rug covering the hardwood floor, wondering why Alec was given this room. My eyes fell on the window. I knew we were on the coast. I knew even though I could not see it in the night that this window looked out over the water. Alec could not live without an ocean view.

Sleep was elusive. I sat at the bay window, allowing the dark and silence of the house to close around me. I should have been exhausted and my body was, but my brain was in high activity mode. Alec had not called as she had promised, but it really wasn't "tomorrow" yet and she did have many other demands on her attention.

I wondered for the first if I should have gone with her. Maybe if she had not been so adamant about Jillian staying I might have asked her if she wanted me to go. She seemed so determined to do this on her own that it just didn't occur to me that maybe she would have appreciated having me tag along. My place was by her side now, wasn't it? Isn't that what the rings meant, that we would be together through the good and the bad?

I smiled at my reflection. Alec wasn't conventional. I was in same precarious position here that I was in at Thanksgiving. I could go to her, I could have my hopes high, but I would not know if being there was a good idea until I was face to face with her. I remembered my Thanksgiving reception all too well. I was not anxious for a repeat performance. Especially when Alec was surrounded by family members who may not know she was a lesbian. The last thing I wanted, for anyone in the Brent family, was to cause a problem of any kind. It wasn't just Alec who did not need the distraction right now.

I felt sleep come near and I gladly handed myself over to the restful oblivion. The questions and doubts could wait until tomorrow. I slipped between the sheets. Whenever I thought about the first night I would spend with that special someone, spending the night alone wasn't in my plans.

~~~~~

Someone woke me very early the next morning by opening the door. I sat up, surprised the room was still cast in the gloomy shadows of dawn. Jillian smiled apologetically and came fully into the room with a steaming mug of hot coffee. She walked to the bed and carefully sat down. She handed the mug to me.

"I didn't want to watch by myself," she said in embarrassment. Her green eyes met mine shyly. "Did you sleep well?"

I wrapped my hands around the mug, grateful for the warmth. The cold English weather seeped into every corner of the house. The rooms were almost warm. I shook my head, my eyes darting to the bay window where I had spent a few hours thinking last night. "Not really. I wish I had gone with her."

"I thought about that, too. I know she doesn't want me there, and I understand why. But she can't really say the same about you. I would feel better if they weren't the only family she had around her."

She patted my leg. "Come on. Let's go see what happened while we slept."

I trailed her down the stairs. Jillian confided that everyone else was still sleeping, but the household staff was up. If I was hungry, she could ask that something be prepared for me. I shook my head to decline the offer. I was too tired to feel hungry. Later, I would be ravenous, but for right then I just wanted to warm up with my coffee. We sat down in the library to watch the television by fire light.

The channel was still on CNN and we sat back in our chairs when the station was on commercial break. We were lulled into a false sense of security by the McDonald's commercial. Surely if anything had developed, CNN would be showing that and not this. I sipped my coffee and nearly choked as a recent photo of Patrick appeared on the screen. Senator Patrick Michael Brent read the words at the bottom of the screen followed by the dates 1914-1990.

Patrick was dead.

Jillian gasped and sat forward. I glanced over at her. She sat with one hand covering her mouth. I turned back to the screen as a solemn voice began to speak.

"Our breaking story this evening is the death of Senator Patrick Brent from a stroke he suffered two days ago." He turned the man sitting beside him. "The family was at the hospital when the Senator died, Marshall. Were they expecting this? We've been told all along that his condition was stable."

Marshall Denton, MD, glanced between the reporter and the camera. "The fact that the family came back to the hospital tonight is evidence that they knew his condition was critical. They may have been called back or they may have had every intention of coming back. To me that says they knew he was dying."

"Why is the family still in the hospital? The announcement of the Senator's death was made almost two hours ago. What can we infer from their continued presence here?"

The doctor sighed and shook his head. "My guess would be they are pulling themselves together. To us, Senator Patrick Brent has died. But for this family, a husband and a grandfather has died. Most people are not forced to run a gauntlet of cameras and reporters after losing a family member. I don't believe we will see them until they are composed. They will have to make a statement to the media before they leave. They know that."

The reporter nodded in agreement. He became the sole focus on the screen. "We will continue with coverage of Senator Brent's death when we know more. Now, on the International scene..."

I let the reporter's voice fade away. Patrick had died without regaining consciousness. He would never have to face Alec. He would never be held accountable for his actions that Christmas Day. Death redeemed his son and now death would be his salvation. Whatever had happened, whatever he had done, he was beyond denigration.

"Mrs. Senett," Jillian and I turned to look up at the maid. "You have a phone call. Miss Alec."

Jillian murmured her thanks and reached for the receiver. She looked at me. "Darling? How are you?"

She nodded as she listened to Alec. I pictured Alec standing in a sterile hospital room, the last twenty-four hours showing on her face as years.

"Do you want us to come over?" She shook her head at me, relaying Alec's negative reply.

"Victoria is here, Darling, she wants to talk to you." She held her hand over the receiver and held it. She whispered to me, "Tell her you want to be with her."

I took the phone from her and shut my eyes, pretending that I was alone to talk with Alec. "Hi Honey. I miss you."

I heard the weary smile in her voice. "This isn't how I planned to spend our honeymoon." She paused and her tone was cool when she spoke. "The funeral is in a few days. They're going to allow his body to be viewed by the public for a day or something. I'm stuck here until at least the day after."

I smiled. This was one member of the Brent family who did not need any time to compose herself. Alec was annoyed not grief-stricken. She was doing this because it was expected of her. "How are you getting along with the family?"

She sighed. "They are very...solicitous. I would prefer they gave me some space. I am not Kellen Brent."

The words were familiar, but lacked the bitter edge I had come to know so well. She was Kellen Brent and the inevitable was happening. Alec was taking her rightful place in the Brent family. The first tendrils of fear snaked down my spine. I did not like the Brent family. I could help but wonder how I would like their Crowned Princess.

"I want to be with you," I whispered. I needed reassurances that she was still my Alec. I could not take losing her just when she was finally mine.

"You don't know how much I would love that, but please stay there. This is hell squared. I don't want to make any memories here with you. I'd only lose them because this is not a time I want to remember."

Jillian raised an eyebrow in question. I shook my head in answer. She frowned and sat back in her chair. I shrugged. We both knew she wasn't going to allow me to be with her. We both knew Alec needed to do this on her own. We both knew arguing with her was useless.

"I have to go, honey. I slipped away to make this call. I love you."

I blinked as the connection was broken before I could even say goodbye. I handed the phone to Jillian. "She had to go."

Our attention was returned to the television where they were announcing that the family would be leaving the hospital in a few minutes. We waited in silence. CNN went to a brief station identification before coming back to the entrance of Walter Reed. The somber Brent family exited the hospital and walked the human corridor to the podium that had been arranged for them. Alec, Celeste, and Patrick's nieces, Emily and Erin, were in a male circle. Brent Kenderson stepped to the podium.

My eyes were glued to Alec. She still wore my sweater. I attributed her pale weariness to the long plane rides and lack of sleep rather than to the loss of her grandfather. Her dark eyes watched Brent acknowledged Patrick's death and give the details of his funeral. He was going to be buried at Arlington.

"My family and I are deeply grateful for the cards and flowers that have been sent. Thank you for your prayers. Uncle Patrick would have been pleased to know that he meant so much to so many."

Jillian clicked the television off. "Only because those people never knew that Patrick was a bastard."

I watched her leave the library with a smile. While the rest of the world might believe Patrick was being fitted for his angel's wings, Jillian knew he was searching the flames of hell for his son. I resigned myself to the fact that she would not be watching CNN with me again until the funeral.

~~~~~

I was good. I did not ask Alec if I could be with her when she called. I clenched my teeth to keep the plea from my lips. I played chess with my Dad, I took walks along the shore with Elane, I allowed Jillian to bestow her pent up maternal urges on me. I wandered Moregrove House and discovered several rudimentary Chasen Originals signed with a childish flourish by Kellen Brent. I realized very quickly that damp, gloomy England was not the best place for Alec. Her shadowed life needed sunshine. I could not imagine how she ever survived her dark moods in this chilly countryside.

The best place for her was warm, sunny Los Angeles. I wondered if she could be persuaded to live at Windchase until our own house was built. We could live in Aubres and I would not mind at all, but I did think my Dad would miss Jillian. I did not see her letting Alec very far out of her life. Rainer and Alec needed to get together and negotiate Jillian's presence in their lives. Both had better realize pretty quick that Jillian saw herself in the dual role of wife and mother.

If only I had not seen Alec escorted by Brian to Patrick's open casket. She would have come back to Moregrove House to find me waiting for her. As it was, I stared at her in shock. She was haggard and the black dress she wore did nothing but emphasize her unhealthy pallor. She

nodded to something Brian said to her and I was forcibly reminded of her on Christmas day, after Jillian was upstairs and my Dad had left to prepare his statement. Her eyes were dazed. She turned her head slowly to face her cousin and I saw concern flash across his face. He slipped his arm around her waist to steady her. He whispered something hopefully reassuring into her ear.

"Dad," I said, standing up, my eyes never leaving Alec's ashen face, "A plane. Alec said she was leaving after the funeral tomorrow. I want to be on that plane when it lands. I want to be waiting for her."

My father is a wonderful guy. I was on a chartered flight back to the states within a few hours. I gave them strict instructions. Alec was not to leave the states unless it was on this plane and I didn't give a damn about her own arrangements or any that the Brent's made for her. I also did not want her to know I was on the plane. After the last few days, I wanted to surprise her. I wanted her happiness in seeing me to wash away whatever residuals of hell lingered.

~~~~~

I watched the limo pull next to the plane from my captain's chair. Celeste Brent stepped out with Alec. I watched them speak as Alec's luggage was taken from the trunk and transferred to the plane. Alec was dressed in one of her tailored suits. Celeste needed to touch Alec. Her hands played with the collar of Alec's white silk shirt. Her fingers trailed over the dark blue jacket, stopping only long enough to pluck away pieces of lint. Alec was still as if understanding her grandmother's need. She should get used to her family reassuring themselves that she was once again only a touch away.

A bright grin came to Alec's face. She pulled Celeste to her for a tight hug. Alec took a step back and stared into her grandmother's face. She spoke and I read the words I love you. Celeste brought both hands to Alec's face and kissed her on the lips. Alec waited until the limo was driving away before turning to the plane.

I drank in every inch of her. Her stride was sure and confident. Her hair was caught by the breeze and she reached up her left hand to brush strands away from her eyes. For one brief second, while her hand was reaching up, I saw a glint of blue. Of all the images of her that I cherish, the one of her coming to the plane is the one I will forever treasure most. Her unfaltering stride taking her into a future free from the dark emptiness of her past.

Her past was shaped by one single second of insanity.

Brian will never be gone from her life. Even after everything he did and all that he was, he is her father. She is his legacy. He got so much more than he deserved.

The only thing known about her future is that I am in it. I will go to sleep every night with her in my arms. I will be there should the memories ever try to reclaim her in the middle of the night. I will be there as she paints whatever is next for the Chasen Originals. I will make Christmas the day it always should have been for her. I will love her always. I will love her forever.

"Tory?" She called, bounding onto the plane. "I know you're here."

And I will always be here, wherever here is for her.

The End

Comments, good or bad, can be sent to ga_onmymind@yahoo.com
