

~ An Audience with the Sidewalk Saviour ~

by K. Alexander

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WARNING: May have religious connotations that upset certain people. Or not. I'm objective so I can't always tell. Give it a chance. Also, I'm a curious lesbian with a dirty mouth, and that's the most all-encompassing warning you can ever get.

COMMENTS: Completely unbeta-ed and therefore not without errors. My apologies.

FEEDBACK: Is always welcomed. Even the unfriendly bits. Find me at kalex@webmail.co.za. Ps. Please don't send corrections. I have friends who will take care of that at their convenience.

Prologue

All in all, if you could measure these sorts of things by something as conventional as beginning and middle and end it took just twenty-four seconds to ruin the life of India Waits.

Let's say you're outside the ticket office at the Coca Cola Dome, waiting to get your hands on a rare ticket for some band you've never heard of, just because the guy you're with has a gigantic unadulterated crush on the angry Goth girl bassist. Even though it's threatening rain, and the clouds above you hover heavily and darkly, and the wind whips about you sharply, there are many people waiting in line with you. Apparently the angry Goth girl bassist is all the rage.

The wind nips and goose bumps rise on your chilled skin. With an involuntary shudder you grimace and shout something rude at your friend, but it's lost beneath the cold breeze and the rumbling of the clouds, and he actually smiles at you. Oblivious. Or not, perhaps, when you consider the fact that he loves storms almost as much as he loves angry girl musicians. His grin is just too innocent - you let loose with another curse that's taken right from your mouth by the wind.

The clouds above hover so low and solidly that they wouldn't be out of place in a horror sci-fi. Combined with the flashing neon of the sign advertising the Dome, and the wailing of the wind, you almost expect the darkness to suddenly part and reveal a spaceship bearing down on the earth.

Wrapping your orange and pink striped scarf tighter around your neck, you stuff your hands as deep in your pockets as you can, and glare with ferocity at your so-called friend. Over his corduroy-covered shoulder you can see another girl shooting her boyfriend a grim glance, and when her gaze slips from him to you, it's merely natural to share a reciprocal twitch of the

eyebrow and a smile.

That damned bassist has a lot to answer for.

Above you, the clouds are rumbling warningly, and then a crash of lightning snaps around your ears, making you cower instinctively before you peek up circumspectly at the sky. The other woman grins. You're still enjoying the unexpected shared amusement when her gaze slips past you. It's a surreal split second, that moment when her smile freezes on her face, when her eyes widen, when she reaches backwards blindly, fumbles to get her fingers around her boyfriend's arm. Still grinning - it's happening that fast, though it seems like slow motion with the wind and the noise and the flickering neon - you turn around too.

Turns out that last one wasn't a clap of thunder.

There's a man in a white parka with darker splashes on it standing in the middle of an empty and ever-growing circle. Everything about him is average, from his brown hair to his brown shoes, and the only thing that would draw your eyes with its incongruity is the gun in his right hand. That hand is pointed at the ground right now, but the people around him are not taking chances, shielding their beloveds as they move back quickly. He lifts his face, his average clean-shaven face, and looks up into the sky. His cheeks are wet, but as you realize this you also realize that big fat drops are plopping down on the ground at your feet. What seems to be a big sigh rolls through the man, lifting his chest and shoulders in a display of lamentation, before he suddenly lifts the hand holding the gun and points it angrily towards the sky, yelling something. At the motion those nearest to him drop on the ground; a few women scream, but above the wind and the rumbling it's barely audible.

A horror movie without much of a soundtrack.

When he lifts his other hand, something at his feet shifts.

She's lying there prone, a girl wearing a pair of pink Nikes and a sweatshirt proudly displaying the same logo, barely visible now at the edges of a blooming red splash of blood in the middle of her chest. Her eyes are open, glassy and staring at him with a mixture of fear and incredulity. When she licks her lips faintly a smear of incarnadine stays behind at the corner of her mouth.

You'll remember that colour in your dreams for weeks, months to come.

There's a woman at the periphery of the circle, crouched down. At the girl's feeble movement she turns, looks, shifts forward slightly when she should be moving backwards. She must be a mother. When she extends a hand, the man catches the movement and whips his head around to stare at her fiercely. The gun is quick to follow, and the woman bends her head, shows her hands in silent supplication. She is so close to the girl lying in a pool of her own blood.

He looks down, at the girl by his feet, then the woman kneeling like a worshipper in front of him, her palms lifted towards him in a plea. His eyebrows contract, first into a fierce scowl, and then into a mute tortured entreaty. Glancing up sideways at the thundering skies - and now you are

sure that they are tears, and not raindrops - he begins to wail.

The woman shifts forward on her haunches, watching him warily, her hands reaching out for the girl blindly. When her fingers come into contact with the rapidly dissipating warmth of flesh she abandons her wary vigil of the man and leans over the girl, her hands searching for some way to put pressure on the wound. There's so much blood. You find yourself thinking again that she must be a mother.

The wailing man spins on his heels, turns toward the tableau (which seems at that moment a grotesque homage to the Pieta) and raises his hand. The gun.

A young man lunges forward to try and cut him off.

The woman looks up; her mouth contracts into a wail, and she throws herself over the girl's body.

In the middle of the chaos - the increasingly fat raindrops, the reverberating thunder, the movement of a panicking crowd, the crack of lightning, the flashing red of neon - in the middle of all of that, the average man with the white parka and the brown shoes stumbles backwards slightly, puts the barrel of the gun to his own temple, and pulls the trigger.

There's more movement after that, but you can't seem to tear your eyes from the woman and the girl. The woman lifts her torso, slowly, as if she can't believe she's still alive. She glances around, sees the dreadfulness, winces, and looks away. With shaking hands she presses down on the girl's chest.

"Help! Someone call an ambulance!"

You can't hear her above the rumble and cracking and noise, but it's chilling how universally recognizable that first word is, even in the silent shaping of lips. The people around her are pulling out phones, making calls, crowding in or pulling away.

"Help! Is there a doctor?"

She's looking about helplessly, the blood welling over her fingers, and then her eyes lock on someone at the perimeter of the crowd.

A young girl - no, she's a woman; small, doe-eyed and young, but a woman nevertheless - is shaking her head at a large lion-haired young man who, it appears, is trying to push her forward as he repeats something insistently.

The woman on the ground calls out to them, but they can't hear. Not with the way the small woman has her back to the scene. The man leans forward and says something, his slanted eyes yellow and pleading in the darkness, and then, after a moment of silence, his friend nods her small dark head. When she turns her shoulders are slumped. Her eyes look haunted. There's something in them that you can't place.

She drops down on her knees next to the still girl. The woman asks her something, "Are you a doctor?" and she shakes her head in the negative.

"I'm a natural healer. Reiki."

You wouldn't be able to read all of that from her lips, but this is what you were told later.

The older woman shrugs. She has no idea what it is. "Can you help?"

"I can" the younger woman is hesitant. "I can find a pressure point."

She reaches out, tentatively, but as her hands touch the girl they seem to be tracing a path they know well. The older woman moves her hands away, issues a question to one of the men holding a phone at the edge of the circle, "how long still?", but you can't stop watching those small hands.

You think you're probably in shock.

The young woman's fingers find the wound, and then she's pressing down. Suddenly the girl below her is moving, trying to shift away from the abrupt pressure. Her eyes snap open, blearily, and she begins to whimper. The older woman is leaning down, trying to soothe her, but the younger woman simply focuses on her hands. As if she is scared to look up.

The girl is moaning. "Ow", it could be, or "no." Or "don't". You can't tell. Then "stop".

Later you'll wonder if you imagined it, the fact that the girl and the young woman close their eyes and seem to stop breathing at the same time. The young woman's eyelashes flutter and her lips move, ever so faintly. Her brow crinkles.

It could have been the combination of the lightning and the neon that made them glow. Many people said so. You, however, have your doubts. After all, in your mind's eye you can still see how that odd shine starts from the young woman's hands, spreading outwards to envelop the girl's chest. How the girl's eyes suddenly open again, and this time there is more in them than pain.

She is afraid.

The people around them are closing in, warily. Scared. Watching as if they expect them to grow wings and fly away at any moment.

The young woman is still murmuring.

"Baby, that was too close."

That is what he said it was, later, one of the guys close enough to hear. There's no one else who

can say. It seems unlikely. She doesn't seem like the sort of girl who would say that kind of thing.

And you can't help but notice how the colour drains back *into* the girl's face. How her chalky white cheeks regain their blush, how her almost-blue lips begin to turn pink gradually. It's as if the film is rolling backwards. She's blinking rapidly; her eyes pinned with grim fascination to the young woman kneeled next to her, almost as if she's getting ready to run.

Now the hum from the crowd is rising. Nobody understands what is happening, but something is definitely happening. Something they've never seen before.

Then, as if an electric current runs through the young woman, something is pushing her away from the girl violently. Catapulting backwards she half-falls on her back, putting her hands out just too late, rolls over onto her side before stumbling to her feet a little clumsily. The man standing closest to her seems torn between helping her up and rearing back.

The older woman who had been helping the girl sits on her haunches, her mouth slightly open as she gawks at the young woman blatantly.

A movement catches your eye, so much like the first one, but this time around the girl is sitting up, her shirt sticking to the thick blood below her for a moment before it tears loose. She's dazed and shivering, but she's moving well for someone with a bullet in her chest.

Except that she lifts her hands torpidly, pats at the mess on her sweatshirt, and by her expression, you - and everybody else - can tell that there's no bullet hole anymore.

A few dozen sets of eyes track back to the young woman who is standing there, lost and small, her eyes locked with the lion-haired young man's. Her hands rise as if they have a mind of their own. Tearing her gaze away from him, she glances down at the blood-covered limbs. Curls the fingers. Looks up at the girl, who is looking back at her with something approaching awe. Her lips move sharply, and then she's running, pushing through the crowd. The throng parts to let her through, but the murmurs follow her until she rounds a corner and is gone.

The thunder rumbles above and the rain starts in earnest.

You may have been wrong, and you very likely are, but you could have sworn that what the young woman said was "Oh fuck".

[Continued...](#)

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1. How low can you go

("Limbo Rock" - Chubby Checker)

She comes to from the pounding in her head - and on her front door. Synchronicity.

She collapsed here, next to her stove, when she came tearing in. Must have fallen asleep, but it can't have been for long. Groggily she reaches out to pull herself up by the cabinet top, and then recoils in horror at the streaked brown layer coating her hands. The pounding on the door becomes more insistent.

"India!"

The thunder is still rumbling. She's disoriented, not sure how much later it is. Rising stiffly she winces at the pain in her knees (did she fall on the way back? She can't really remember) and stumbles across the terracotta tiles to open the door.

Warren stands on the other side, his wild hair somewhat flattened by the water weighing it down. His slanted eyes are vigilant and unblinking. He takes in the grimy coating of blood.

"What the fuck." Statement, not question.

She fights the impulse to shove her hands behind her back like a child. "Warren..."

He cuts her off mid-sentence, knows her well enough to know she's stalling. "What the fuck was that, India? What did you *do*?"

"Please, Warren. Come in. It's raining." India wants to reach out, and then, mindful of the condition of her hands, decides not to. "Please."

He takes half a step forward before he stops, bewildered. "Did you *know* you could do that, India?"

"I..." She shrugs. "Come in, please, Warren. Come out of the rain. I'll talk to you inside."

He's still considering it when the flash goes off, right over his shoulder. For a moment India is

blinded, thinks that it's lightning, but then the reporter is speaking behind Warren.

"Miss Waits? Miss Waits - what happened at the Dome tonight?"

Another flash goes off just as Warren turns. It's one of those photos that's either going to be brilliant or unusable; her dark eyes large in the background, Warren's strong face in profile. Reaching back Warren pushes the man away, ignoring the shouted complaint as he steps out of the doorway and pushes again.

India steps forward, hesitant to be in the reporter's sight, but needing to reach out to Warren. "Please come in. Please."

Looking over his shoulder at her with his yellow lion's eyes he shakes his head. "Sorry, India. I'm a little freaked out... I need some..." He rubs his bristly chin with one large hand and shrugs his broad shoulders meaninglessly. "I've gotta go."

She wants to watch him go, but the reporter is lifting his camera again, and so she has to shut the door on her best friend, who is walking away from her into the rain.

The second time India wakes up is much like the first; the pounding of her head synchronizing with the somewhat more civilized knock on the door. She's back on the kitchen floor, and when she gets to her feet fairly unsteadily her body protests the abuse. Without thinking she runs her fingers through her unruly dark hair, and then grimaces at the smell of old blood wafting up at her.

The thunder is gone. She peers through the peephole of her door warily before sliding off the chain and turning the key. With a small smile Yvonne Constantine steps over the threshold and casts an analytical eye over her.

"You look terrible, India."

"Yeah." Licking her dry lips she turns to the sink and opens the tap, letting the tepid water run over her dirty hands. Behind her Yvonne hops onto the counter with grace belying her rotund stature and perches there, watching silently until India finishes drying her hands and turns around, her dark eyes shifting away nervously.

"So tell me what happened."

India shrugs her narrow shoulders half-heartedly. "Reiki."

"Crap." The other woman shakes her head. "Don't insult me."

"I'm not. Okay, maybe not Reiki, but Quantum healing ... "

"India." Yvonne's voice is sharp, and beneath her arched orange eyebrows her eyes are serious. "Don't bullshit me. Those things don't pull bullets out of people and knit the flesh. Those things don't fix arteries. What's going on?"

"I..." Leaning back against the cabinet on the other side of the small kitchen, India closes her eyes briefly. "I don't know. I just touched her and ... "

Yvonne knows just as well as Warren when India is stalling, and just like him she interrupts. "Just tell me something. Did you know you could do that?"

"No."

"India, you're a very poor liar." Yvonne watches her for a moment before she pushes herself off the counter with a sigh. "Look, I understand that this is a very ... unusual situation. I'll give you some time to regroup. I just don't understand why you want to lie to me about it. We can talk later."

"There's nothing to talk about, Yve. It was just something that happened. I didn't know. I don't..." Running out of steam India shoves her now clean fingers through her hair again in frustration. "I don't know. It won't happen again."

Frowning, Yvonne stops in the middle of the floor and peers at India. "You saved a girl's life last night, and you're treating it like an nuisance. *And* you're lying about it. I've never known you to lie, India." Walking to the door she reaches out for the doorknob, and then speaks with her back towards the other woman. "Call me when you're ready."

The door closes behind Yvonne.

India addresses it softly.

"I didn't mean to."

The story is featured on every channel. Damning the day that cellphones were first manufactured with cameras, India watches in stricken silence as the grainy footage is shown over and over. The colour is terrible and the quality poor, but there's no mistaking the way that the girl's cheeks regain their colour, or the way she finally sits up, unsteady but whole. There's no mistaking the mess of blood on the Nike sweatshirt, or the jagged round hole in the material.

They've found one of India's clients somewhere, and Amelia Jeffries can't stop talking. She's smiling brightly, her manner eager and accommodating as she looks into the camera.

"Yes, it's definitely India Waits. She's a natural health practitioner at the Kundalini Wellness and Balance Centre in Morningside. I'm sure, because I go to her every month to have my chakras realigned." Amelia listens to an off-camera prompt before nodding her head enthusiastically.

"Oh, she's very good. Very good. Of course, I had no idea that she could do something like... that. It's amazing. Just amazing. Wow."

Then, the girl, lying on a stretcher as a medic checks her blood pressure. Her name is Trisha Connor, and she probably looks younger and more vulnerable than she is, lying there with her blue eyes stretched wide and her mouth trembling. She seems to be shining, as if she has been dusted with glitter, but it's probably just the neon flickering behind her.

"It was crazy. Crazy. I don't know where that guy came from. I thought it was the thunder, you know, before I even knew he'd... " her mouth trembles, "... shot me. I can't remember much of it, just that other lady whispering to me, and then she came. It hurt, at first, 'cause she was pressing down so hard, and I thought I was gonna die. I really did."

She looks over to the side for a moment, and the editor's cut a shot of her mother in here, watching her with brimming eyes.

"Yeah. Anyway, so then suddenly it's like my chest gets really hot - like there's hot water on it, kind of - and everything just starts to tingle." Trisha thinks for a moment. "Yeah. A sort of tingle. I can't really explain. And... you know when you're just going to sleep and you get that falling feeling? It was like that as well, except the other way around, like I was ... floating back up." She shakes her blond head. "I really can't explain. It was just totally freaky. I coulda died."

That's when her mother swoops in, sobbing, and gathers her daughter in her arms, mindless of the grime and blood.

It makes for great television, and every time India sees it her heart skips another beat.

Just twenty-four seconds. That's how long the footage goes on for.

Twenty-four seconds to save the life of Trisha Connor, and twenty-four seconds to ruin the life of India Waits.

The press is relentless. They camp outside the Kundalini Wellness and Balance Centre, aiming their long lenses at the windows of the small apartment above the yoga classroom. They keep the clients from coming in, and when Tai shoos them they simply shift into the small park across the road. Every time someone comes in or goes out, a camera is shoved in their face.

"Do you know India Waits?"

"Did you go for a treatment with India?"

"Tell us more about India."

Even the police can't disperse them. The park is a public area. Unless they cause a fuss, they're

there to stay.

Clients become agitated. There are those who are just hoping to catch a glimpse of India, but the ones who have genuine appointments are supposedly there for peace, calm and good health.

Tai takes to escorting the clients into the center, and after being harassed for the fifteenth time in one day he loses his patience and gives them a perfect rude sound-byte. It's not the kind of promotion the center needs, and it is played over and over on every channel.

"That", the people who don't like people like Tai, tell their children, "is what *they're* like."

Two days later Yvonne Constantine is at India Waits's door again. The younger woman has not left her apartment, has not called to talk, and doesn't seem about to.

When India opens the door her eyes are red. She rubs them surreptitiously as she invites Yvonne in, but her voice is as soft and steady as always. Hopping onto the counter, which is her usual spot, Yvonne wastes no time.

"So what's going on, India?"

"What do you mean?" India's making coffee, even though Yvonne did not ask for any, simply so that she can keep her back turned.

"What did you do to that girl? Trisha?"

"Nothing. I don't know." Though India doesn't turn around, her shoulders sag. "Yve, I just did my reiki. That's what came out."

"Since when have you been able to do it like that?"

"I didn't. It was just that time." There is a pause filled with thick silence. "Okay. Since I was a kid. About eight."

"And you never told anyone?"

"No." India puts the steaming coffee cup next to Yvonne, apparently mindless of the heat, before she turns back to her own. "It never came up."

Yvonne blows on the surface of the hot liquid before she takes a quick sip. "It never came up? You work in a wellness center, India."

"I never needed to..." India looks away. "I wasn't planning on ... that."

"It doesn't seem to be the sort of thing you should plan for." Yvonne studies the familiar small frame, the narrow shoulders and disobedient dark hair. "Tell me something, India. Do you think it's a gift? This thing of yours?"

The acidic laugh that bubbles up in India's throat is probably not something she can stop. "Sure. The kind of gift you re-wrap and give to someone else. Like soap. Or socks. The shitty kind."

Yvonne's composure has always served her well, especially in cases like these. She sips at her coffee without comment, and then cocks her head. "You saved a life. Why would you *not* want to have done that?"

Pursing her lips, India looks out of her kitchen window. "*That* is what I get for it, Yve. Bloodhounds and sharks cornering me. I've already seen a news reporter do the 'phenomenon or fraud' angle. Warren looked at me as if I'd ... given birth to a ... a goat with two heads." She chortles bitterly. "Yeah, it's been a real party. Barrel of laughs, Yve. Wish I'd done it sooner."

Putting down the cup carefully, Yvonne jumps off the counter. Her normally expressive round face is carefully blank. "India. Are you telling me that you'd rather have your privacy than to have saved a life?"

For a brief moment India closes her eyes. "No. I'm... I don't... You know me, Yve."

"I've always thought so." Yvonne leans back against the counter. "Apart from that, India, we have a problem. The reporters are multiplying, and the clients can't get in without being harassed. We can't go on like this."

India still doesn't look at her. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"I need you to go somewhere else for a while."

The cup slips out of India's fingers and drops onto the linoleum dully. A streak of coffee smears itself over the floor. Yvonne steps forward.

"Let me get the... "

"I'll do it," India says dully. Turning around, she gets the cloth and drops to her knees, begins to dab mechanically at the mess. "You want me to leave."

"Not forever. I just need you to be away from here for a little while, so that the mess can sort itself out."

"The mess. Meaning me." India is now wiping the liquid around on the floor aimlessly. "You're throwing me out of my home. Where am I supposed to go?"

"It's only temporary, honey." Yvonne wants to reach out to the bowed shoulders, but knows that she'll be shrugged off. "You could stay with Warren for a little while."

India throws the cloth down fiercely and stares at it. "Warren hates me."

"Stop talking nonsense. Warren does not hate you. He was just shocked. Amazed. As we all are. This is a new thing, India. Once the two of you talk it out, he'll be fine."

Getting to her feet India turns her back on Yvonne and wrings the cloth out in the small sink furiously. "You're throwing me out of my home. I'm getting punished. *That's* what I'm getting for all of this."

"This is **not** punishment, India. It's not just about you. We're all involved now."

"But I'm the only one who's getting treated like a leper." Throwing the cloth into the dish rack India spins around and stares at Yvonne. "I saved that girl, and the way you're all going on I might just as well have been holding the gun."

Yvonne frowns. "Are you going to be the proud hero or the reluctant nonentity, India? You can't play both sides. You as much as tell me that you didn't want to do what you did, but when it suits you, you want to claim the glory for it. Make up your mind."

"I can't talk to you about this any more." A bitter twist settles around India's mouth. "It would probably be best if I were alone right now. Fine. I'll call Warren. I'll do that."

"India." Yvonne steps closer. "It is a wonderful thing you did. I can't help but wonder, though, in how many situations you could have done **more**."

"I always did what I could!"

"Under the circumstances, perhaps." Yvonne nods, once. "Things are as they should be, I am sure. We just all need some time to readjust. Everything will be fine, given a little time for thought." She is almost at the door when she hears the small accusatory voice.

"I never should have touched her."

Turning around, she fixes stunned eyes on the young woman slumped back against the sink. "Where is this self-centeredness coming from, India? And you keep lying to me. Why? Where is the girl I know?"

India turns away. "I'll call Warren."

There is a minute of silence as Yvonne considers several words before she dismisses them in favour of something simpler. "I'll ask Tai to take you when you're ready."

Warren is as quiet as she is on the phone. Two normally effusive friends, reduced to ponderous

politeness and hesitant communication. It is excruciating. He agrees to have her over, telling her he'll leave a spare key for her with his neighbour Mrs Olsen in case he isn't around when she arrives, and she knows as he says it that no matter when she arrives, he won't be around.

Tai drives the battered green Mini through the seldom-used back gates, cutting through the school grounds behind the hall before he emerges without a fuss in a side street.

India is slouched in the passenger seat, the hood of her white sweatshirt wide around her small face like the cowl of a monk. They make the twenty-minute trip in silence. India likes Tai, and he has always been fond of her, but she is despondent and he is exhausted.

Warren's apartment is on the third floor of a shabby seen-better-days building. The stairwell smells musty and there are water stains on the hallway roof. He likes the place because it still has large high-ceilinged rooms and wooden floors, and even though some of the windows are broken and in a few places something has eaten through the dark wood, she has always agreed with him. His door has the number 32 on it, in old stained brass, and one of the little screws on the 2 has fallen out at some stage so it hangs lopsided and squeaks when the door opens or closes.

Mrs Olsen in 33 never fully opens her door. With Warren's extra key grasped between two fingers, as if it is about to contaminate her, she extends her hand through the crack and holds it out to India. From beneath her pencil-thin eyebrows and bright-green eyelids her eyes are sharp.

"I never liked you."

Sighing, India takes the key. "Thank you, Mrs Olsen."

"Whatever you did to hurt that boy, it wasn't nice. Hurting such a good boy. I've never liked you."

Considering that Mrs Olsen has on previous occasions told that 'good boy' in exactly such a manner that she never liked him, India should be able to shrug it off, but it hurts.

Warren's apartment is what a poor single male musician's apartment would be. Because he is moderately clean, dishes are stacked in the sink instead of on the floor, and his grungy clothes lie in bundles all over the futon and three threadbare wingbacks he'd found on the street and refurbished once. The only things of value are the massive sound system and the amplifier, which line one narrow white wall, arranged on planks that are carefully balanced on bricks. It looks surprisingly fashionable.

His guitar case is gone, and that speaks volumes.

With another sigh India drops the keys on the kitchen counter and leans against it. Her brown eyes fill with tears, and angrily she wipes them away, shaking her head at herself. When her cell phone unexpectedly rings she starts before lifting it to her ear.

"Warren?"

"Miss Waits," an unfamiliar voice begins, *"I would love to interview you for a special with the..."*

India drops the call. Her eyes fill with tears, and this time she leaves them unchecked to trail down her cheeks.

She has had to switch off her phone. It is now ringing constantly, and all of the numbers register as unknown. If Warren calls, she's not going to know. In frustration she paces the wooden floor, from the scratched front door to the glass sliding door leading to the patio, and then back again. With every pace her gaze finds something that brings back a memory of Warren, and it hurts. She has been here, in this room, so many times, but she has never been here without him. It doesn't feel right.

Later, she curls up on his uncomfortable couch, pulling down the blanket he always keeps draped over the back of it. She is not cold, but when she pulls the blanket up to her chin she can smell the musky smoky scent that always clings to Warren, and it reminds her of home. Drifting off numbly she wishes, just for a moment, that when she wakes up things will be back to normal.

That Trisha Connor will rather be dead.

India wakes up in that confusing space between consciousness and dream. It takes her a while to realise that the clicking sound she hears is not in her own head, and when she sits up, groggy, it is to the sight of Warren on the other side of the kitchen counter, opening a beer. Her first instinct is to jump up and run towards him, wrap her arms around his broad familiar shoulders as she's done so many times, but somehow it doesn't feel right. Instead, blinking a little hazily, she rubs her eyes and untangles her feet from the blanket. The movement may draw his eye, but instead of looking at her he lifts the green bottle to his mouth, throwing back his lion's mane for a deep draught.

Pushing the blanket to one side India gets up, stretching her stiff neck a little, and then she joins him on her side of the counter, peering at him through the hatch.

"Hey."

He smiles slightly, then. "Hey." Leaning down he gets another bottle from the fridge, cracking it open and pushing it forward with his callused broad fingers. Reaching out she takes the cold bottle and lifts it to her mouth. She hates beer, doesn't drink, but Warren either doesn't care or doesn't remember, and at this very moment she doesn't, either.

He watches as she drinks, slips a cigarette from the box and lights it with his large hand cupped around his mouth, shielding the match from her view.

"So what's new with you?" The smoke drifts from his nostrils as he speaks.

"Same old." Taking another sip she shrugs mockingly.

"I bet." It looks as if he's grasping for the right words. "Wanna talk about what happened?"

"Not really."

"India..."

"Warren, I don't want to talk about it. Okay?"

There's a moment when she thinks he's going to let it go. He's not fond of serious talks. But he surprises her. "No, not okay. I need to talk about it."

"Then talk."

"Shit." He shakes his head. "What's up? What's the problem?"

India fights the urge to start peeling the label from the bottle. "There isn't a problem, Warren. What's the problem with you?"

"Fuck, India. Why are you being so defensive? I just want to know what happened, you know? Not such a weird question considering that you went out there and did that shit with that dead girl..."

"She's not dead."

"Thanks to you, yeah."

"She could've been fine."

"With a bullet in her chest? I'm no fucking medical student, girl, but even I know that what happened was anything but normal."

The word hits her so hard that she almost reels back.

"Shit, man, I didn't mean it like that." He wipes his hand over his wild mane of hair. "Look, India, if I suddenly just took off and ... I dunno... *flew*, you'd be curious too, right? You'd wanna know what was happening. Right?"

"I certainly wouldn't walk out on you afterwards and leave you all alone."

It's his turn to reel. Biting his bottom lip he watches her with his slanted yellow eyes. "Don't make it just about you."

"It **IS** just about me!" India slams the bottle down on the counter. "It's about me, Warren! I don't see people throwing *you* out of *your* house! I don't see people following *you* around! How is it about anybody else? Want to tell me that?"

"I would assume that it's about the girl who didn't die, too. Just a little."

"She lives to tell the tale over and over. And over. Everyone's *real* happy for her, but they look at me like I'm a freak."

"That's crap. If you'd just speak to people... "

"You don't get it, Warren. You don't get it."

"How the fuck am I supposed to get anything if you won't tell me?" Crushing the half-smoked cigarette furiously in the filthy ashtray near his elbow, Warren scowls. "All I want to know is what happened, and you're going on like I'm asking you to push drugs." He shrugs. "Fine. I don't know what the hell just happened. Is it so fucking wrong of me to ask my best friend how she laid her hands on some dying girl and brought her back to fucking life? Okay. For now, I'm done. I don't know what kind of issue you got going, but I'm not going to hang around so you can take this shit out on me."

"Fine. Run away. Some friend you are."

Bitterly she turns her narrow back on him.

When she turns back, a little while later, all that's left of Warren is the cigarette butt mashed into the ashtray.

Reaching out she knocks it off the counter in frustration, and then stares at her hands; the square nails, narrow fingers, angular palm.

Hands that have betrayed her.

She flicks on Warren's hi-fi and listens to a bit of the CD still in the tray - it's a little too loud and a little too angry and she can't figure out how to put on something else. Flicking off the switch, and fighting the urge to smash her hand against the smooth shiny silver, she paces for a while; a restless cat. She has never smoked, but when she finally reaches for the packet that he's forgotten on the amplifier and slips the white filter between her lips, the burning spreading itself in her chest is a welcome penance. She revels in it. When she chokes and tears spring to her eyes she wipes them away angrily, snarling at herself.

You deserve it, you brainless little idiot.

There is nothing in the apartment for her to eat, but Warren has left three packets of cigarettes in the torn carton underneath the sink. She wanders out onto the patio and slips her narrow little knees between the iron rails, leaning her forehead against the unfriendly coldness of the metal as she draws in the smoke. Besides taking sporadic, restless, nightmare-plagued naps, this is what she does for two days.

On the second day she finds a bottle of whiskey shoved into the back of a cupboard - it smells cheap and nasty, but India's given up on quality. She's never been much of a drinker, but she puts the bottle to her lips, the old crystallised granules scratching at the tender skin, and takes a long deep sip. It burns her throat, and the sharp cloying smell almost makes her vomit, but when she manages to fight it down she snorts at herself bitterly.

She's so empty that nothing's going to fill that void.

On the morning of day three her only sanctuary is shattered. She is on the patio, shielding her face against the morning sun with one hand, her legs drumming like a child's and her heels thumping against the concrete of the floor in unheard rhythm, when a small sound catches her ear. She is drunk and unsteady, and it could be nothing, but she cranes her head to the side just in case, and catches sight of the photographer below her. His almost comically oversized lens is pointed in her direction, and when he notices her looking down at him he snaps a few rapid shots before calling up at her.

"Miss Waits? India?"

Drawing her legs back she stand up, stumbling against the railing, and goes inside. For a moment she pauses in the middle of the floor, looking around her blindly as she wonders what to do next, and then she goes to the kitchen counter and picks up her phone. The voicemail box is full and has long since stopped offering the option to leave a message. Yvonne's number has registered as a most recent missed call, and with surprisingly steady fingers India dials her number.

"India." Yvonne always sound so calm. "How are you doing?"

"Fabulous."

"Have you been drinking?" It's only a question, nothing more.

"Yes. What do you want?"

There's a moment of silence as Yvonne obviously decides how she wants to deal with this truculent, surly child, and then she chooses to continue as smoothly as always. "The fuss is dying down here. I don't think it will be long before you can return to your apartment. Of course, the press will be bothering you for a while to come, but we'll deal with that when we get to it..."

"How will *we* deal with it?"

"We'll sharpen up the security, make sure that you're safe here. Of course you'll have to give an

interview or two, India; I know you're against it, but maintaining this passive-aggressive stance really is hurting more than it's helping."

"Hurting who more, Yvonne?"

"Now India... "

"Never mind."

"India." The woman sighs, unexpectedly aggrieved. "Listen. We're going to have to do our best, all of us. If you let them have the information they want, they'll get bored of it and find the next story and leave you alone eventually."

"The next freak show... "

"You're **not** a freak, India! Stop saying that!"

There's a thick cloying quietness on the other side of the phone that makes even the collected Yvonne nervous. Then, India's voice, soft and breathy, comes back on. "Of course the extra publicity won't hurt the Centre, will it?"

"Stop it! Stop it this instance! You're being a bitch now, and you know it. It's not **about** the Centre!"

"Huh." Yvonne could swear that she hears India dragging on a cigarette. "Everyone keeps telling me what it's not about - and nobody seems to know what it IS about. I don't want to talk any more right now, Yvonne."

Click.

Message 2

"Miss Waits, my name is Derek Du Pont and I'm with the Times..."

Delete.

Message 5

"India, Jack Davis from the Sunday Chronicle here..."

Delete.

Message 9

"India, my mom's very sick and I was hoping..."

Delete.

Message 13

"Elaine Montgomery from 3News; I'd love to do an interview ..."
Delete.

Message 15

"Miss Waits, this is Jody Hudson from Paige Carter's office..."

India's finger hovers above the delete button. Taking a deep drag on the cigarette she frowns.

I would love to speak with you regarding a possible interview. Please contact the office at..."

Paige Carter, possibly the most influential woman in the world. She started out as the hostess of an underrated talk show on a small rarely watched channel, modelled her life on Oprah Winfrey's, and simply set about to conquer the world. Now her slightly asymmetrical face sells anti-wrinkle cream, her too-sparkling teeth sell fluoride toothpaste, her honeyed voice sells expensive insurance, and her short lean body sells clothing from all the most coveted fashion houses. Companies pay her to mention their products, reporters discuss everything from her errant children to her newest jewellery, and celebrities are honoured to spend an hour on her signature red couch telling her about things they'd never let slip to any other member of the media. Paige Carter can be trusted to boost your visibility, making it seem as if she is prying into your deepest secrets, but she can also be trusted never to go too far. Paige Carter understands the business, and she understands who her benefactors are.

That Paige Carter? Jotting down the proffered number in a corner of Warren's composition notepad above one of his hastily scribbled nonsensical lyrics (*I'm yours, you're mine, like a mansion in decline...*), India looks at it for a long time before she dials it slowly.

On the second ring someone picks up.

"Jody."

You have to be important to answer a phone like that.

"This is India Waits."

"Miss Waits." Instantly warmth floods the voice, perhaps not genuine but extremely proficient. *"How nice to hear from you. It's a long-distance phone call for you, I'm aware. Shall I call you back?"*

"No." India's voice is just a little too abrupt, and she shakes herself. "No, thank you. What did you want?"

"Goodness. Right to the point. I like that." Jody chuckles huskily, a cigar-and-brandy sort of sound. *"I'm sure you must be very busy lately, so I'll make this as quick as I can. Paige Carter saw the footage of you ... healing? ... do I call it that? ... Patricia Connor at the Dome on Saturday, and she's very interested in speaking with you. We'd like you to fly in as soon as possible - we'd be covering the arrangements, of course - to tape a one-hour special with Paige"*

Carter."

The silence that follows prompts her into further dialogue.

"Carter International naturally offers remuneration for our very special guests. The usual fee would be somewhere in the vicinity of ... "

At this point she mentions an obscenely large amount of money, an amount that India would not have made in ten years at the Kundalini Wellness and Balance Centre. Used to very little and not really in a state of mind to process the magnitude of what is being offered to her, India does not have any idea of what to say.

Apparently weathering silence is not Jody Hudson's strong point, as she ploughs on nonchalantly. *"We would in this case be prepared to offer you more than that, considering the high-profile nature of the situation. Miss Waits, is there a number I can fax through an offer to?"*

"No. No fax." It now seems to India that she's doomed to sound like a socially challenged child for the rest of her life. "Sorry." She wonders how many times she can do this before Paige Carter realises that she will indeed be a very bad interview subject and lose interest.

"No matter. If you'll give me the physical address I'll have it couriered immediately."

"Look, Miss Hudson..."

Jody Hudson is not deterred. *"Miss Waits, you are naturally entitled to make any decision in your own time. However, it wouldn't hurt for you to look over our offer while you think, would it? Let me get this document to you. There are absolutely no strings attached. All right?"*

She must have learnt from Paige Carter. Or had Paige learnt from her? With a suppressed sigh India gives Warren's address to Jody, who promises to have the offer there in two days' time before she hangs up with a few more pleasant platitudes.

It arrives right on time. The intertwined 'P' and 'C' on the front cover are embossed in gold, inviting her to read further. Inside, the amount with all of the zeros behind it looks even more obscene in writing. Rubbing over the large extroverted loop at the top of the P where Paige Carter has given her million-dollar signature, India bites her lip.

She doesn't want to do this. That much she knows. And yet, she has very little money, nowhere to go, and nothing to her name.

She will return to Kundalini when Yve gives her the all clear, but things will never be the same again. There will always be people haunting her, hunting her, wanting to ask her things that she doesn't want to tell. She has hurt Warren whilst trying to protect herself, and even if she lets him in now, the balance between them has already shifted.

Getting up she reaches for the box of cigarettes, only to find it empty. Checking the carton produces the same result. She has finished Warren's stash. For a second bitter satisfaction and utter guilt war inside her, and for a second bitter satisfaction wins. He has hurt her, and now she has hurt him. Then guilt returns, a more comfortable fit, and she bites her lip and goes back to the contract.

She reads it carefully, a silly idea since her business sense is so underdeveloped that she manages to barter herself *up* at times. If she tells her story, and she tells it on "The Carter Hour", she may never have to tell it again. After Paige Carter, who wants the scraps?

It's all just jargon for selling your soul on camera anyway.

2. If you're healthy and you know it, clap your hands

"I've signed it. What do you want me to do with it?"

"*Ah. Great!*" Jody Hudson offers up a delighted laugh that's probably mixed in with some relief. "*I'm sending the courier for it immediately. He'll be bringing you champagne for the celebration. You do drink champagne, don't you?*"

She never has. "Yes. Can you...Um, never mind."

"*I'm here to help, Miss Waits. What do you need?*"

"I... there's no food, and I can't go outside. Can he bring me bread?"

India is embarrassed to ask, but Jody Hudson merely seems amused. "*Of course. I'll ask him to bring you something good to eat as well. What is your favourite? Thai? Chinese? Sushi?*"

"Just the bread." India's eyes fall on the empty crushed carton. "And some cigarettes. Please. And whiskey. I finished my friend's..." She knows that she's going too far, but she can't seem to stop herself.

Jody Hudson is not flustered in the least. Taking down the names of the brands she announces that the courier will be there within the hour and hangs up with her usual business-friendly platitudes.

An hour later she has her basket of goodies and the courier is gone with the signed contract. If Jody Hudson says something will happen, it certainly will.

The gift basket is massive and elaborate, and filled with all sorts of things she hasn't asked for. Two boxes of rich chocolates (she leaves them, sealed, on the counter - Warren loves chocolate and she has no taste for sweets); two bottles of expensive whiskey (popping the cap on one she smells it tentatively, wincing at the sharp odor before taking a sip; it goes down much smoother

than the cheap stuff); a bottle of champagne (she puts it to one side - maybe, maybe not); a selection of richly filled sandwiches, individually sealed (she cracks open the BLT and wolfs it down hungrily, and then promptly rushes to the bathroom to vomit it up); two cartons of cigarettes (one gets stashed under Warren's counter) and a thank you letter from Carter International, including travel arrangements for the day after tomorrow.

Johannesburg to San Francisco, first class, 19h50.

Putting it carefully on the counter, India blinks away the pesky tears threatening to blind her, and picks up her phone. Speed dials 3.

"Hey hey! Warren's not here! Leave a message, and I'll get back to ya!"

"Warren... It's India. I just wanted to see how you were. I... I miss you. Okay, Bye."

She thinks about phoning Yve and talking to her about this Carter contract she's just sent off, but Yvonne's thoughtful silences will make her nervous. Instead she puts on the radio and smokes a cigarette she doesn't want.

A chauffeur service phones her to let her know that Alistair Jensen will be coming to pick her up at 16h30, and Jody Hudson must have arranged it, because Alistair Jensen is at the front door at 16h29. Taking her small suitcase with a pleasant "Is this all?" he leads her downstairs. She knows that the reporters have been around, but is still slightly bewildered when he has to shield her to the limo, blocking the flashes of lights going off around them.

The ride is smooth, and in the darkness of the tinted window she drifts off into a dreamless solid sleep for the first time in days, only waking up when Alistair calls her name softly.

She hasn't been to the airport in forever, and with the new construction going on she barely recognizes it. With wide eyes she stares at her surroundings, letting Alistair Jensen deal with the baggage. It isn't long before the reporters catch up, though, so any dallying is halted by Alistair's firm hand under her elbow, leading her towards the check-in quickly.

He deals with most of the paperwork and questions, checks in her small suitcase, and then takes her to the first-class lounge, going back to talk urgently and under his breath with the security guard at the door. The man glances back at her with a puzzled expression before lifting his radio to his lips and murmuring into it quickly, and then Alistair Jensen is gone with a wave, a smile and a "good luck".

It becomes clear to her that the security guard has called for re-enforcements. As the first wave of reporters appears, three more guards casually appear from different corners of the floor and assemble at the door to the lounge, blocking off even a chance sight of her effortlessly. There are a few people in the lounge with her, and they seem to sum up the situation correctly, glancing at her with growing perplexity. In her hooded sweatshirt and faded jeans she looks like a teenager;

small, large-eyed and delicate, out of place amongst the obviously prosperous. Trying to ignore the growing commotion India reads without attention through a very boring on-flight magazine, not wanting to put it down and catch anyone's eye.

When the airplane finally boards it's with a muffled sigh of relief that she gathers her small overnight bag and shuffles along to her seat, keeping her head down.

It's after a few hours in the air that she realizes she truly hates flying. Her knuckles are blanched from her tight grip on the armrests, and she cannot concentrate on the music piping in through the headphones.

The air hostess is pleasant and sweet-smelling. "What can I bring you to drink, Miss Waits?"

She wants to say coffee, because it's what she would always have said. But this India is not the same as she was before, and she needs the distraction.

"Whiskey, please."

Noticing the tightly clenched hands, the air hostess (her name tag reads "Mona") nods and smiles reassuringly. "Is this your first international flight?"

"Yes."

When Mona returns she has a glass of whiskey and one small white sleeping pill that she takes care to hide. "It's not usually a good idea, mixing the two, but it'll knock you out for a few hours at least. It's your call."

With a half-smile to Mona and a thank you to whichever god has put her in India's plane, India washes the pill down with the whiskey.

When she wakes up a few hours later she is disoriented and foggy. Taking a bleary look at the world outside, at the clouds below and the blue sky stretching to the sides, she gags at the feeling of whiskey and sediment in her mouth and then falls straight back into a bottomless black sleep.

Somehow word of India's arrival has gotten out. She has no time to admire the overwhelming building, the likes of which she's never seen, before a couple of burly men - who scare her more than they comfort her - rush her through a small gawking crowd. A limo is waiting for her at a side entrance, the 'PC' logo emblazoned on its side, and she is ushered inside courteously but firmly.

The limo driver likes to talk. He has a flat nasal accent that she can't identify and doesn't understand half of the time, and so she leaves him to chatter on while she watches the unfamiliar landscape speed by. Even the sky looks different, as if the master painter swapped palettes

somewhere over the sea. Between the hissing of the tires on the road and the setting sun, she is lulled into a wide-awake lethargy, which is interrupted much later by the driver's cheery voice.

"Here we are, Miss Waits."

A short grinning man in a bright uniform with a jaunty pillbox hat opens her door, and she half-smiles at him shyly, unsure of his role, until her amazed gaze falls on the grandiose lobby behind him. The driver, apparently used to such things, has a short fast conversation with the uniformed man before they lead her inside.

Her room - no, she suspects it must be a suite - is larger than her little apartment at Kundalini, and she has never seen anything like it. A high-ceilinged sitting room with plush oversized armchairs and a silk carpet leads into a bedroom where a flamboyant four-poster bed is the main focal point. One entire wall is windowed, and the skyline of San Francisco takes her breath.

It's only human nature to think that *Warren would have loved this* before she locks it away securely.

The uniformed man puts her little out-of-place bags to one side and hovers until the driver presses a note into his hands. When he has exited with a friendly smile the driver checks the entire suite, and then, apparently satisfied, presses a card into India's hand.

"Ma'am, if you need a ride, please give me a call. Have a great day."

On the beautiful mahogany coffee table there is yet another Paige Carter basket, flanked by a bouquet of orange roses and an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne in it. A white envelope rests against the basket.

Dear Miss Waits,

Carter International welcomes you to San Francisco, and we hope that you will enjoy your stay with us. Jody Hudson will be in contact with you tomorrow morning to arrange your timetable and the interview details.

Please enjoy anything from room service or the restaurant.

*With kind regards
Paige Carter*

There are two cartons of cigarettes in the basket - her brand. Warren's brand. A fancy metal lighter with the 'PC' logo embossed on it in gold. A bottle of whiskey. Healthy glossy fruit, nuts, a gift card for the boutique downstairs. It's definitely the work of Jody Hudson.

Ignoring the food she takes a packet of cigarettes out of the carton, wanders out onto the balcony and lights up. She is wincing against the acrid taste when there's a knock at the door. The man in uniform is holding a tray with a newspaper neatly folded on it.

"Miss Hudson has asked that I deliver this, ma'am."

India is confused until the half-folded photograph on the front page catches her eye. Thanking the man she takes the newspaper inside, folding a leg under her as she scans the headline.

"Alleged miracle girl arrives in San Francisco ~ Phenomenon or fraud?"

The photo has been taken from a distance. India's eyes are still puffy from sleep, her jeans showing up threadbare in the grey grain of the print, and her face child-like in the confines of the sweatshirt hood. Typically the photographer has chosen the frame where her eyes are half-open and her mouth only half-closed. She looks like a juvenile delinquent.

India sleeps restlessly in the too-big bed, and when she wakes up she is sweaty, and her legs tangled in the silk sheets. Kicking them off she stumbles into the bathroom and rests her forehead against the coolness of the mirror. There are tear-tracks on her cheeks. With a scowl she gets into the shower and scrubs herself until her skin is red. Then, for a long time, she simply stands under the stream of water and resolves to pull herself together.

She wants to see the sights, wants to take in all of the new places, but she is not sure when Jody Hudson will call. That is what she is here for, so she stays on the balcony, watching the world below as it passes by. Just after nine, Jody phones to tell her that she will be there in an hour, and just before ten, the reception desk calls up to inform her that Jody Hudson is on her way up.

Jody Hudson sounds exactly the way she looks. Her tall lean figure and skin says that she is in her late twenties, and her eyes say that she is in her forties. A curious combination of lassitude and barely contained energy, she surges into India's room, briefly clasping her hand.

"India Waits? What a pleasure. Jody Hudson. Welcome to our city. Glad to have you." The corners of her mouth flit up into what is almost a smile, and just as quickly it disappears. "This is my team. Meet Fiona in make-up," an elegant older woman with her greying hair swept into a chignon, "Bea in wardrobe," a tall chic woman with black hair and spectacular pale blue eyes who looks like she's stepped out of Vogue for the day, "and Nancy Drew, our director."

The short woman nods at India. "Seriously."

"What?"

Another almost-smile flits over Jody's face at the confusion in India's voice. "Never mind. Nancy will be running through a list of questions with you, and Bea and Fee will be assessing you. I will be making sure you have everything you need. Okay?"

Almost breathless in empathy, India nods.

"Good. Great." Jody smiles. "I'd forgotten how succinct you are. Nancy has her work cut out for

her. Fiona?"

The tall woman's gaze sweeps over India. "No problems here. I'm playing up the big eyes - fairytale meets anime. They'll look great on screen. The audience will eat it up."

Bea struts around India, making her feel even shorter as she takes in the small frame critically with her dramatic eyes. "Have you been to the boutique yet?" At India's confused look she shakes her head impatiently. "The voucher?"

"Oh. No."

"Right. I'm off." With a twirl of her fingers at Nancy and Fiona, Bea leaves the room regally. Leading the way to the gorgeous white couch in the corner (that India has avoided up until this moment, for fear of dirtying it) Jody flips open her phone with an apologetic quirk of her head.

"Sorry. A million calls to make."

She dials, and then, as an afterthought, turns back to India. "Don't worry. You'll be fine."

Jody Hudson even lies well.

India stands in the wings, the fluttering in her stomach worsening with every burst of applause from the audience. Paige Carter's voice is a strong level hum above the noise. India is wondering where Jody is when one of the men with headphones takes her upper arm gently.

"Ready? Five... four... three... " and then he nudges her forward.

She feels as if she wants to turn around and run. Or, if the men won't let her through, maybe she can just run through the audience, keep running until the nightmare disappears. But she's agreed, and she has nowhere left to run to, and so she lifts her head and walks out onto the stage as confidently as she can. The audience breaks into enthusiastic applause, which surprises her until she notices the young guy with the board, 'applause' printed on it in big black letters, speaking into his headset as he displays the board to the clapping people.

In the middle of a raised semi-circular small stage stands two armchairs, both covered in the russet colour that has become a trademark of the Paige Carter brand. In front of one of those chairs stands Paige Carter, her hands clasped together benevolently as she watches the approach of her controversial guest with a slightly predatory gleam in her eyes.

Avid fans of 'The Carter Hour' watch every one of her shows carefully and spend hours discussing the details on forums on the Internet. They will know, for instance, that it is not incidental that while Paige Carter is today wearing a power suit which fits her tight square frame perfectly, India Waits has been clad in a flowing pale blue skirt and a sleeveless white tunic shirt. Combined with the beaded slip-on sandals and the bracelets that rattle around her slender wrists,

the effect created has India looking like a modern hippie. She looks as if she might just be weird and *unpredictable*. Fans will hypothesize that the contrast between the two women is meant to establish Paige Carter's solid credibility and rationality, while anything India says can be construed to be liberal, the level of it only depending on Paige Carter's handling of her. Society likes liberal celebrities, but liberal kooks don't always go down that well.

This is, in fact, the effect that has been strived for. It would have been greatly successful, too, if it hadn't been for one small fact: Paige Carter had had no time to meet with India beforehand. If she had, the wardrobe department would have noticed without difficulty that India is just that much shorter than the already diminutive Ms Carter, and considerably frailer of figure. All of which combined ruins the carefully planned effect, and leaves Paige Carter resembling a stocky threatening bear cub against the vulnerable wide-eyed slowness of her guest.

When India steps onto the platform for the first time and Paige Carter realises what the wardrobe department has achieved for the very first time, her famous smile twists for just a second before she rearranges it as only a consummate professional can. Reaching out both hands she traps India's fingers within her own and leans forward to share a warm smile. Though that smile crinkles the skin around her blue eyes, they are guarded. The audience reacts with just the right amount of enthusiasm, and after the sign-man had cautioned them to silence Paige indicates the chair to the left to India and sinks back into her own with a small smile, meant to convey cautious warmth to her fans.

"Ladies and gentlemen, India Waits." She holds out a hand in India's direction and the applause swells up again before dying down harmoniously. "India, I want to welcome you to San Francisco, to our wonderful city, and I want to thank you for being willing to come out here and talk to us about this miraculous event that has gripped the imagination of the entire world."

"Thank you." Nancy and Jody have both begged India not to indulge in her one-word answers, but she is so nervous that she thinks it better to keep things concise. No doubt Paige Carter has been briefed, for her smile doesn't even dim. Turning her gaze from India she pans over her audience intensely.

"For those of you who haven't yet heard this story - honestly, were you holidaying on the moon? - " the audience titters, "this is the footage that rocked the world." Behind her on the large screen, those grainy shots taken with the cell phone, Trisha Connor's eyes round and scared, her own big and haunted. After watching the first few seconds over her shoulder, India straightens in her chair and stares blankly ahead of her while the tape rolls, picking at the hem of her shirt in a nervous motion that will become a habit. In the audience a red-haired woman yelps at the blood, and then inhales sharply. When the tape stops Paige turns her head to India with a warm smile.

"India, you seemed uncomfortable watching the footage. Were you? Is it awkward for you?"

"No." India looks down at her hands clasped tightly on her lap. "Yes. A little."

"Why is that?"

"It's not every day you see yourself on that big a screen, Miss Carter." Coupled with the big eyes and a nervous blink, her response earns a chortle from the audience.

Humouring her guest Paige Carter nods and smiles supportively. "Please, India, call me Paige."

"Paige."

"So India, can you tell us what happened there?"

India shifts uncomfortably. "I was... we were waiting in line to buy concert tickets. The man with the gun, when he hit a girl - that girl, Trisha Connor - my friend asked me to help - I do reiki - so I ..." she pauses for a soft breath, "... I could feel she was going to die, so I just..." Helplessly India lifts her hands before she lowers them again uneasily, "... I just stopped the bleeding."

"But you did **much more** than stop the bleeding." Paige Carter sits forward in her chair.

"According to the doctors you knitted muscle and flesh closed. You fixed *arteries*. Is that right, India?"

"If they say so. I suppose so."

"Knitted muscle and flesh." This is repeated to the audience with just the right amount of gravity before she turns back to India. "*How* did you do that, India? How did you stop the bleeding?"

"It's not..." India's gaze flutters off as she thinks. "It's not something I can explain. It's just something I can do. It's like reiki, only... more."

"Right." Paige Carter glances at her guest for a quiet moment before she turned to the audience.

"Reiki, for those of you who don't know, is a form of natural energy healing." She shakes her head and smiles conspiratorially at one audience member who is frowning slightly. "Don't worry, I had to read up on it too!" Then her gaze turns back to India. "So this isn't reiki, is it, India?"

"No. It's not. Well, technically, in its purest form, it could be ... Reiki has endless potential, but ... no."

"Okay." A glance to the cameras betrays the host's scepticism. "Have you always had this ability?"

"Yes. As far back as I can remember."

"Have you ever used it before?"

"No."

"Has there never been a situation that warranted it?" This question is more focused, and later on fans will be able to pinpoint this as the moment when Paige Carter quietly broadcasts her intention to begin honing in on her obviously vulnerable guest.

"No. I don't think so. No."

"You don't think so? Wouldn't you have remembered a life and death situation, so to speak?"

"No. I don't think so. I mean yes, I would have remembered, but no."

"All right." Paige Carter's glance to the audience conveys disbelief. "What can you do with this ... power?"

"What?"

"Which situations can you use it in? Can you heal disease? Fix broken bones?"

"I don't know. It doesn't come with a manual."

India's quiet exasperation gives the audience a much-needed break from the intensity and they break into relieved laughter. Even Paige Carter smiles.

"I'm sorry, India. It's a tough subject. So many people wouldn't believe this if they hadn't seen it. And perhaps still don't."

India shrugs her narrow shoulders helplessly. "It happened."

Shifting into best friend and closest confidante mode Paige sits forward, her eyes on India's conspiratorially. "It certainly did, and while some people would question whether it wasn't just a camera trick, I seriously doubt that by the level of uneasiness you appear to be in about this."

"I wanted to help her. That was all I wanted to do. All of this..." India's hands shift again, "I don't know who'd want all of this."

"People do strange things for fame. But I know, and you now know, that it's nothing to be desired." The last words are spoken to the camera for emphasis before Paige Carter continued. "This power you have - is it completely under your control?"

Her host is so solicitous that India relaxes just a little. "I'm not going to short-circuit your cameras, if that's what you mean."

The audience titters. Paige smiles into the stands. "So you could, hypothetically, right here and now heal someone suffering from, say, something common like rheumatoid arthritis, and prove yourself to the naysayers?"

Sensing a trap, India can feel her breath catching in her throat. "Yes, but I..."

"... Because in our audience today is Mrs Ida Roberts! Jack, please bring Ida to the stage. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mrs Ida Roberts!" To thunderous applause the black-clad

stagehand leads a frail bowed woman with frizzy grey hair down the aisle. Her grey eyes have a desperate glaze to them and search out India frantically. Paige Carter stands to welcome her new guest and India stands too, distressed, wanting to run, with no recourse. Once on stage the bent old lady shakes Paige Carter's hand, courteous but barely looking at her, attention fixed to a point somewhere behind her where a small woman stands watching her with dread-filled wide brown eyes. When Paige holds out a hand to India, Ida does not wait for an introduction but surges forward, reaching out for her rescuer's hand with fingers gnarled twisted like an old branch.

"Honey, can you help me?"

Her voice is reedy and breathless, her desperation palpable. Looking left and right India searches for some way out, greeted by the smiling - no, beaming - face of Paige Carter and the quiet speculation of the audience. Even as she stammers out a reply ("Uh, I... You shouldn't ... I can't...") Ida Roberts' face starts to contract, first in perplexity, and then in pure untainted joy.

At the outset sceptics will say that it was a trick, an optical illusion, how Ida Roberts became taller. That she had been bent over and is now straightening up and that the network was in on it from the beginning. There is even that glow on her lined face - *that* glow that you saw when you watched the Trisha Connor tape - which could be a trick of the studio lights, right? But when India pulls her hands away from Ida's and the camera reveals previously gnarled fingers now straight and healthy, pandemonium reigns. The audience's murmurs rise to a fever pitch; some shift in their seats, begin to move forward, their voices disappearing in the general clamour. Ida reaches for India's hand again, unperturbed when the small woman pulls away.

"Thank you. Thank you."

Then she turns to an awe-struck Paige Carter with tears in her eyes. "The pain. It's gone."

For the first time in her entire career Paige Carter does not have time to edit the words before they escape her mouth.

"Oh my fucking God."

In the madness India slips away, dodging the hands of the security guards as they storm past her to restrain the now disorderly audience. She runs down the backstage hallways, trying to find her dressing room, but all of the walls are white and all of the doors look the same. In desperation she storms into a small supplies closet and curls up in the corner, feeling as if she is going to be sick.

India is sitting in the chair that has become her favourite in the massive sitting room, nursing a large headache and a larger glass of whiskey, when the news comes on and illustrated to her just how her appearance has affected the country. Each station has a close-up of Ida Roberts, of that moment when her face breaks into a toothy smile, and no matter what channel India flips to,

there she is. India has no idea of how the episode had ended. She has no idea that Paige Carter had pulled herself together sufficiently to give a small rhetoric on the immense power held by certain people, and the reluctance, in this day and age, to use it for good. India has no idea that in her subtle way Paige Carter has turned India into a sacrificial victim for her ratings.

And what ratings they are! Networks are climbing over each other to offer Paige Carter whatever it is she desires, whatever it is she covets. The head of her current network has visited Paige personally, something he had only ever done when she eclipsed Oprah in the polls. He shakes her hand, towering over her small trim frame like a lofty bamboo, and promises her heaven and earth should she remain loyal and steadfast. This Paige Carter duly promises to do. After all, she has nothing to lose until she starts her own network and obliterates the competition. In all that time, Paige Carter only thinks of India Waits briefly, and then it is with a detached sympathy. She knows the look of someone who had sold their soul.

For two hours India's phone has not stopped ringing, and for all that time she has had her aching head stuffed under a pillow, desperate to drown out the noise, until she realised that should she phone downstairs and tell them to hold all calls, it would be done. Now, after having watched the last speech of The Paige Carter Hour, she pours herself a whiskey from the mini-bar and downs it with one gulp. She can steadily feel herself losing control, has been feeling it since she laid her hands on a young girl who should be dead by rights. She had thought that coming here and being on "The Carter Hour" would make no further impact after what she has done, but she was wrong. The whiskey and the cigarettes burn going down and make her sick, and she figures she deserves it.

Three mini-whiskeys later the phone rings. It is the obsequious manager, enquiring as to whether she wishes to see Jody Hudson. Wiping one small hand over her face in awkwardness and self-repulsion she asks him to send Jody up, and spends a quick minute splashing her face with icy cold water in the luxurious bathroom. Her mirror image is dishevelled; shaggy dark hair stubbornly sticking up in patches, her big dark eyes empty and cheerless. To herself she looks like a lost child from a fable.

If Jody Hudson has the same impression she does not voice it. She is immaculate, as usual; a pinstriped grey suit that speaks of matter-of fact expensiveness, her dark-blonde hair pinned up above her wise eyes. Moving forward in that way that suggests she is being propelled by energy beyond her control, the woman stops in the middle of the room and looks around quietly before she perches on the sofa. Even sitting she seems barely contained.

Sliding a hand into her silver clutch bag Jody pulls out a business card and holds it out between two slender fingers, her eyes crinkling slightly at India's hesitation to take it from her.

"You need it."

As India's dark eyes take in the words "Ashe and Frost: Paul Ashe" the tall blonde sighs.

"He's an agent. Best in the business. He'll take you where you need to go." She smiles, and it is melancholy rather than pleased. "If that's where you want to go, India."

India shrugs. "There's nowhere else. Is he a nice guy?"

"To call him a shark would be insulting to a shark. H's the least nice guy I have ever met, and I've met some corks." Jody's eyes are gloomy. "Make sure to read any contract he has you sign. He will sell you in the blink of an eye... Just take care that he sells the part you want him to, honey."

Peering at the business card India frowns. "You honestly think I need this?"

Jody Hudson laughs that rough laugh of hers. "What are you going to do, India? Go back to your life as it was?"

"I don't have a life as it was anymore."

"Mm." Jody does facts, not pity. "Even if you did, it wouldn't matter. What did you think you were going to do - sell your story to The Carter Hour and that would be the last of it?" Catching the way in which the dark eyes lower to the floor, Jody shakes her head with a regretful smile. "I'm sorry to be the one to burst your bubble, honey, but once Paige Carter has had a piece of you everyone fights for the scraps. We paid you a lot of money, but it's not going to be enough."

India's small frame stiffens a little. "It's more than enough for me."

"Yeah yeah." Jody waves her hand impatiently. "Living the way you **used to**, India, which is not possible anymore. Wherever you go, there'll be someone following. The only way you'll get your privacy back now is to buy an island and disappear for a couple of years, and the only way you get to do that is with money. And the only way you get the money is to sell the commodity. And the commodity is you."

"I screwed up." India's voice is barely a whisper. Jody nods sympathetically.

Tiredly India leans back against a pillar, business card loosely held between two fingers. "If the contract comes, can I ... can I ask you to check it for me?"

"No." Standing, Jody Hudson stretches her neck. "I'm putting myself on the line coming here, India. I belong to Paige. She'll have my heart on a platter."

"What happened to selling the part you want to?"

"Where do you think I get the insight?" Walking past India, Jody pauses and extends a hand, almost laying it on the narrow shoulder before she hesitates. "India, this shouldn't have happened to you. The world is so much more frightened of new things than it is delighted by them. I knew that. I'm sorry."

India looks up at Jody. "If you had known this would have happened, would you still have done it?"

The ghost of a smile flits around Jody's mouth. "Don't give me so much credit. The small print did away with the option of personal morals. Have a good life, India."

At the door she paused. "Oh, and get a lawyer. You'll need one now."

3. One love, one blood, one life

("One love" - U2)

In Guéckédou the sky is as wide as it is everywhere on the African continent. The earth is torn up and the people terrified. The silence is deafening. Liberian rebels have surged across the border of Guinee and are battering the town ruthlessly. Violence rolls in waves, surging over the boundaries to pummel the town before it retreats abruptly and mutely. It is not good against bad, or soldiers against terrorists; it is rebels against rebels, and the citizens - mothers, fathers and children - bear the brunt of a merciless and bloody battle.

In absurd contrast the Joie Hotel in Kissigoudou is cool and serene. Butlers stride around with stiff straight spines, their demeanour noble. They wear white double-breasted jackets and pristine white gloves, and in the heat they must be suffering terribly, but the pride probably overrides their discomfort. In the Ivory Coast they are men with good jobs. They can support their children, and their wives, and will wear white double-breasted jackets and pristine white gloves with selfless pride for that fact. The rooms are fairly sized and luxurious, lazy ceiling fans and bar fridges banishing the worst of the heat. Foreign journalists laze about the clear blue pool, bantering in rapid, sometimes unintelligible accents while waving around cigars bought cheaply.

Kissigoudou is just far enough from Guéckédou for the horror to be out of sight.

Paul Ashe's room is on India's right, Hunter's on her left. When she walks through her door she can see the patio, ahead of that the blue swimming pool, beyond that the walls of the hotel, and beyond that dust and small thorn trees and nothing more. Food is cheap, cigarettes are cheaper, and yet Paul Ashe still cannot find it in him to tip the waiters well. He is a tornado, a natural force the likes of which Guinee has never seen, fussing and chattering and gesticulating. Sometimes when he calls over a butler to complain about something trivial - for it always is - India can see the handsome black men listen patiently before they gradually simply blank him out with sufficiently attentive expressions. More than once the distance in their eyes and the slow blinking of their lids brings a smile to her face. She knows exactly how they feel.

Outside Guéckédou French and American missionaries have set up an emergency shelter in a dilapidated barn. They call it the *Maison d'espoir*. The innocents come there. The lucky ones walk, or hobble, or crawl in. The others come under sheets on stretchers. To be shot is a small mercy, for the men who don't carry guns carry pangas and knives. Men who have tried to protect their wives come to Maison d'espoir with arms slashed to the bone, boot marks on their bodies, bleeding head wounds. They are broken and ashamed. Women who have tried to protect their

children come to the Maison d'espoir with arms slashed to the bone, boot marks on their bodies, bleeding heads and sometimes thighs. Children who have gotten in the way rarely come in alive. They can't protect themselves, and are small targets. The missionaries have gone in when they can, to evacuate villagers, but after the last large rebel surge they can only wait and pray.

Under normal circumstances the 65-mile trip from Kissigoudou to Guéckédou would take about an hour, but the roads are poor and the drivers cautious about rebels. On the first morning India wonders with rising nausea whether she will be able to endure the drive every morning and evening. She does not know how long Paul Ashe intends for them to stay in Guinee, but the rattling and rocking of the sturdy Jeep makes her head swim. Even though they make an early start, at 6 o'clock the sun is already merciless. It heats up the khaki bodywork of the vehicle and reflects off the dry ground until they are all wiping sweat from their eyes. Initially Paul Ashe mutters and grumbles, but after the first hour passes he too is quiet and bleak.

Maison d'espoir is an ironic name. There is no hope here. From the outside the massive building is so ramshackle that it seemed impossible anyone could occupy it. Someone, probably one of the missionaries, has fashioned a large cross from two pieces of gnarled branches and has tied it above the skew barn door with rusty wire.

India is not sure whether it is her imagination, but stepping from the jeep she can smell decay in the air. It is a cloying sweet smell that hangs about her head and, along with the sudden cessation of movement, makes her vaguely queasy.

The cameramen and Paul Ashe have no such qualms. Leaping from the vehicle Paul immediately makes for the two men climbing from the second jeep and begins to speak excitedly, his hands sweeping to point out the cross and the wind pump that stand off to one side. Then he makes for India, his strides large.

"We're starting with a shot from outside, getting in the cross. This place is such a shit-hole. Viewers are gonna love it."

She truly, deeply, madly hates him.

First the makeup girl - Cammy something (India has the vague idea that she is sleeping with Paul Ashe) - plasters her with layers that feel hot as soon as they hit her skin. Then Paul instructs her to stand in front of the building for the opening shot, and it does not take a special prompt to generate the helpless and shaken expression on her face that the viewers will eventually get to see in the edited version. The missionaries have come out at some stage, and are watching the goings-on with impassive faces. India does not want to be there. She cringes to be the focus of their disdain, the reason for the cameras and the noise and, above all, the reason for Paul Ashe.

After the outside shots have all been set up a lean hollow-faced man approaches them and holds out a hand. "Luc Chardonne."

"Paul Ashe." The two men shake hands, Paul enthusiastically and Chardonne gingerly. "Glad to be here."

"We are glad to have you." Chardonne's pale eyes slip to India. "Please. Come inside." There are three women and a man behind him, and he introduces them briefly. "Gerard Villeneuve, Olga Kruger, Sister Celine. This is mister Paul Ashe."

Suddenly realising he has forgotten something, Paul Ashe steps aside and sweeps his hand towards India as he nods at the group. "Pleased to meet you. This, of course, is India."

It irritates her that he has just relegated her to a single name. Out here it feels brash, formulaic, and presumptuous to assume that these people will simply know who she is, will have had time to follow her career in between the gunfire and blood. She can say nothing, because she feels ridiculous, and so she nods silently and followed them inside.

And then wishes that she hadn't.

The smell of decay, dust and sweat is thick inside, and it is hot. Small camp beds stretch from wall to wall. In some lay what appeared at first glance only to be random selections of limbs. From others, large eyes meet hers with emotions in them that she has never wanted to see.

"We are not doing too badly for the moment," says Villeneuve in a surprisingly sonorous voice. "There's about thirty people in here now, and we have most of the life-threatening injuries under control. It's when the new surge of people comes that we run out of space - and hands, and medication, and luck."

Glancing to her side India watches with sadistic satisfaction as Paul Ashe pulls his shirt collar up over his nose, trying to block out the smell in vain.

"I'm going to check on the crew."

Standing in the middle of the isle she feels alone. The people watching her don't know what she is there for, or who she is. They don't care about the complimentary CDs she'd gotten, signed by celebrities, or the books, or the little gadgets. They look at her with listless eyes and then turn away again, presenting her with bowed backs. Even the missionaries look at her as if they don't want her there.

The silence is shattered by the sudden return of Paul Ashe and the two crew members. They come in chattering and Ashe points up into the grotty roof, "There, you see", and to a corner in the back, before he approaches India.

"They're going to set up quickly - we're going for the documentary style for this one. You ready to go?"

She nods, her head barely moving. "Can I have some water?"

"Sure. Still, sparkling, flavoured, what?"

Looking around at the devastation that surrounded her she feels a surge of shame. "Just water, Paul. Water."

The look he confers on her is calculating and annoyed at the same time. "Still, I guess. Here." Holding out the blue bottle he narrows his eyes. "Don't spill or anything. We don't have time for Cammy to redo the make-up. Okay?"

"Yeah." She takes a long tepid sip. "Can we get this done?"

It is through no desire to be noble, or excitement at starting. Her heart is in her throat and she wants nothing more than to turn around and run away. But she can't stand there any longer while the cameramen move intrusively between the ill and injured.

"First I have to drag you kicking and screaming, and then you can't get going quickly enough." Paul Ashe raises a perfect eyebrow. "You just fucking kill me. Guys?"

"Yeah." The big one is first to answer. "Ready to go."

"Yup." The lean one - India has heard Paul call him 'Mal' - nods.

Rubbing his hands, Paul Ashe grins. "Then let's get this puppy rolling!"

The missionaries stay out of their way, partially fascinated and partially repulsed. Because none of them are gorgeous and fashionable and alluring (even beneath the layers of dust and exhaustion) Paul Ashe and the cameramen do not mind. The shots linger on open wounds, terrible bruising, splintered bone - anything that will make the viewer cringe, yet keep their eyes glued to the screen in morbid curiosity. The best shots are those where India's hands lift from a previously battered area to reveal flesh heavily bruised, but now marked with freshly almost-healed scars.

Though he doesn't seem to possess the actual characteristic, Mal has a feeling for the human touch. He catches the first wide-eyed look from a scared child when India lays her hands on him; the first confused frown when her hands begin their work on the chest of an old woman; the first spark of astonished understanding when India pulls her hands away to reveal an ugly puckered scar. That unmistakable glow in every face. They shine with hesitant joy, with rising delight, with something indefinable that India has planted from within.

He also catches the flutter of India's delicate wrists when her hands tremble; the distressed look in her large dark eyes; the slight quivering of her lower lip; the way that her already pale skin blanches more and more throughout the day.

If it were any of his business he would have called a halt after the third hour, when her hands are shaking noticeably and the muscles in her narrow jaw jump as if she is trying to curb a case of nausea, or perhaps revulsion. But it is none of his business, and so they continue until, after the 18th session, she simply stops.

"Paul, I can't do any more today."

He waves her words away nonchalantly. "We'll just take a break. Mal, Warner, we're"

"No. I'm done for today."

It is unusual for her to put her foot down, so Paul Ashe ponders for a very quick moment whether he can push her any further before he cocks his head at his two cameramen. "Come on, guys. Pack up. Let's get going."

With a quick word to the silent missionaries he ushers all of his crew back to the Jeeps and the craggy rough road to Kissigoudou.

The next day at the Maison d'espoir is much the same, but one thing has changed. The missionaries have spoken about the experience, as have the ill and injured, and when the Jeeps arrive it is to a mass of people camped outside the barn. Though they seem passive and purely interested, India is ushered inside between the cameramen and Ashe, with a glowering Cammy behind them. The missionaries stand at the door, keeping the bystanders out while India moves among the low camp beds, but she can feel the stares burn into her wherever she went.

This time it takes two hours and thirty minutes, only 12 people, before she calls a stop.

Paul Ashe is not amused. "We're behind schedule as it is! I know you're not that big on actually helping people, but for fuck's sakes!"

"I'm tired." She says it so quietly that he has to lean forward to hear her. "If you'd let me rest one day it would have been better."

He fumes all the way back, but there is not much he can do.

At the Joie Hotel he storms off to make enraged phone calls, and India goes into her room where she drinks a glass of whiskey and smokes two cigarettes before she falls into a fitful sweaty sleep. When the loud knock at the door wakes her she jerks, disconcerted and disoriented. It takes two more knocks before she opens the door, and then it is to find a beaming Paul Ashe moving from foot to foot impatiently.

"Can I come in?"

It is a formality, because by the time her brain responds he is already perched on the wicker chair, leaning forward to dig for something in her small bar fridge. Taking out a can of soda he wipes the top fastidiously before he pops the lid and takes a long satisfied sip.

"Guess what?"

Closing the door India wanders to her bedside table and slips a cigarette from the pack between her lips. She doesn't have to answer.

"You know Jude Limas, right?" Shaking his head at himself he chuckles. "Of course you know Jude Limas. Who doesn't know Jude Limas? Of course, you've been under a rock, so fuck knows what you know... you know Jude Limas, right?"

Even someone as disinterested in the media as India knows Jude Limas. She is one of the top photojournalists in the world, revered by the intelligent and the vapid alike, honoured with a vast number of awards for her work. Her exotic face is featured on serious magazines and gossip rags, on the news and on the entertainment channels. Her rich voice is everywhere. Talk shows line up to have her as a guest. She is billed as Spain's best export, when she has lived in California for most of her life.

India Waits knows some of this, but none of it means much to her, however. Taking a deep drag on her cigarette she raises an eyebrow at Paul Ashe. "What about Jude Limas?"

"She's coming here day after tomorrow! She's coming to visit the shit-hole!"

He is obviously thrilled. His pointy-toed leather shoe tap-taps impatiently on the acid-stained concrete floor and his long finger clink his ostentatious ring against the side of the soda can rapidly.

"Why?"

"I'm telling you we get to meet fucking *Jude Limas* and all you can say is *why*?" He shakes his head, and then, to her surprise, barks out a great guffaw. "Some days I'd really like to kill you, India, but then, you're just so fucking... constant!"

India smokes her cigarette in silence and watches as he takes a few deep breaths to collect himself before he continues. "She's in Angola right now, covering some civil war or something. You know; dying people, hunger, AIDS, whatever. Same old. Great for raising the profile. Anyway, she heard about *Maison d'espoir* and you through one of her journo friends who's here already, so she's coming to check it out." He grins, happy with himself. "Some of the other journos asked for a scoop, but I turned them down. Thought we could get a better offer - and we just have. I'm a fucking genius, if I say so myself."

Throwing back her head India blows the smoke in a steady stream at the ceiling. Paul Ashe watches her silently with flat angry eyes, until he cannot contain himself any more. "Fuck it, India, sometimes I don't know if you're slow or just stupid. Even *you* have to appreciate the magnitude of this! Of all the people you get to be interviewed by in your shitty little life, she's going to be the biggest. You know what she gets you?" His finger stabs in the air. "Credibility. That's what. So you might try to generate just a little more of a personality before she gets here."

Getting to his feet he stalks to the door, shooting her a glance over his shoulder. "You know, this was *your* choice. **You** came to **me**. Fuck it, India, I've turned you into a media sensation overnight, and you give me fuck-all credit. Well, I'm fulfilling my part of the bargain, sweet cheeks, so how about you get off your miserable fucking high horse and try to work *with* me some time?"

India watches him blankly. "You're very good at what you do, Paul. I don't doubt that for a moment. I just don't think you're much of a human being."

"Yeah, well, sweetheart," he drawls with a flash of his perfect white smile, "you're not paying me enough for that. Want me to send over some info on her charity for you to take a look at?"

Leaning back against the textured wall India watches him with unconcealed hostility. "Why would you? You've never done it before."

"You know," and he draws it out, "you're putting up a good show for someone who doesn't actually give a fuck. Dinner in ten, if you care." Just outside the door he stops. "By the way, you're resting tomorrow. Can't have you looking like shit."

Two days later, taking advantage of the jittery air surrounding Paul Ashe and the cameramen, Luc Chardonne and his group sidle closer to India for the first time since she has come there. Chardonne shakes her hand with wary respect and then steps back to let the others do the same, watching her from under heavy dark eyebrows the whole time. When she has unresponsively greeted each person, he leans closer to her as if he is going to tell a secret.

"You must be joyful to carry such a gift from God."

"Joyful?" India's dark eyes are first confused, and then disbelieving. "That's not what I would call it."

"Oh?" says Sister Celine. "Ah. I suppose one carries the responsibility with difficulty at first."

"But still," says Gerard Villeneuve, and India wonders whether they always speak in shifts, "the glory of being able to save lives, that is a marvellous thing."

"I do what I have to." Unnerved by the group, India steps back. "There is no glory or marvellousness to it. Please excuse me."

Jude Limas is late, and Paul Ashe will not start without her. He wants India fresh for the camera.

"But the work must go on," Luc Chardonne protests.

"This **is** my work, pal." Paul Ashe shrugs Chardonne off in favour of discussing camera angles with Mal.

Predictably, the arrival of Jude Limas creates a furore, mostly because of Paul Ashe. Where he is usually flippant and supercilious, he instantly becomes ingratiating when he is notified of her imminent arrival. Ushering everyone outside for a makeshift welcoming committee, he offers a beaming white smile as the group of people exit the shiny black Freeland, and approaches the only woman in the group with an outstretched hand.

"Miss Limas. I am beyond honoured. Paul Ashe."

"Mr Ashe, I appreciate your invitation." Shaking his hand, Jude Limas offers a nod as her gaze slips past him to the bedraggled group standing ill at ease.

India Waits, sticky and hot, does not understand how Jude Limas can look the way she does after having travelled in this heat for an hour. The woman's glossy black hair is neatly braided back, with not a sign of sweat on her dusky skin. Her brown cargo pants are uncreased, her white button-down shirt is unblemished. India imagines that if she were to take her reflective Aviators off, there would be not a single indication of the extensive travelling this woman has done recently. The thought irks her, more so as she can feel a single bead of sweat trickling down between her shoulder blades, and knows that even with Cammy's expert make-up skills, the darkness under her eyes remains.

The missionaries need no summons - they swarm forward to shake Jude Limas's hand with barely concealed excitement. Remembering how they have avoided her until this morning, shooting her furtive looks and talking amongst themselves in low tones that never quite reached her ears, India has to swallow the sudden wave of resentment. She reminds herself that she doesn't care.

Paul Ashe beckons to her, but she studiously ignores him, and so he has to lead Jude Limas from the fawning group.

"Miss Limas, I'd like to present to you - India."

His grandiose phrasing and hand motion grates India's nerves. Grasping the friendly hand offered to her, she greets Jude Limas as politely as she can.

"Waits. India Waits."

"Miss Waits." It's a soft responsive burr. Reaching up, Jude Limas removes her glasses to reveal a pair of overwhelmingly emerald eyes. "I am so pleased to be here today."

Not quite knowing how to respond, India looks over Jude Limas's shoulder at Paul Ashe. Having expected his client's less than stellar conversational skills, Paul smoothly steps in without

missing a beat.

"We're pleased to have you here." He beams at Jude Limas blandly. "I'm afraid you'll have to make some allowances for India, Miss Limas. She has not been well recently."

The journalist's smile doesn't falter as she takes in Paul Ashe and his client "Not at all, Mr Ashe. I'm sorry to hear that. I understand the strain that this sort of thing can put on one."

"So if you'll just follow me into the shelter," Ashe is back in control, "I'll take you through our setup, and you can talk through everything with your people. Okay?"

Jude Limas nods, and with a quick inscrutable glance at India she follows Paul Ashe.

It is to Jude Limas's credit that, after two hours, she is still gracious and expectant. Three times they have to start over, with Mal calling Paul to whisper to him urgently. The problem is India. The interview attempts have been stilted; all attempts by Jude to engage India in easy conversation have failed. Next to the cool fluid grace of Jude Limas she is stiff and uncomfortable. It doesn't translate well. After the third time Jude leans over and places the tips of her fingers lightly against India's forearm.

"Relax. Ignore the cameras."

It is meant kindly and India understands it that way, but she is unable to relax, unable to ignore the cameras, and unable to behave anything but affected next to this proficient person she feels so completely inferior with. Awkwardly she pulls her arm back from the cool touch.

"Can we get this done?"

Jude Limas does not respond to the slight, but her smile turns into something more mechanical, and India can see the difference immediately. She wants to apologize, but she isn't good at it. Instead, she sits quietly in her chair, answering all of Jude's questions, trying hard to be more eloquent but only sounding disinterested and overformal. She is also tired, which is obvious in the slump of her shoulders and the weariness of her interaction with everyone around her.

Once the interview is wrapped up, India rises from her chair, for once grateful to be amongst the people.

Paul Ashe stalks at the periphery of the scene. He has considered stepping in more than once, but Jude Limas's warning glances keep him in check.

India brushes a hand here, presses a limb there, and wherever she goes she leaves gleaming amazed people in her wake. There is an old woman lying prone in a low cot, her mouth fallen in around the few teeth left in her mouth, her eyes sunken. A rebel with a panga has slashed her leg open, and the flesh is putrid. The sick sweet smell of rot hangs around her, mixed with the stale

scent of urine. Leaning in, India winces as she places her hand on the hot limb. A shudder of what is almost certainly revulsion travels down her spine.

Beckoning the camera closer to fix on the old woman's face, Jude leans in closer and places a soft hand on India's shoulder. The ferocity with which India spins around and pulls herself from Jude's grasp is startling.

"Don't *touch* me."

Shocked, Jude steps back. This time Paul Ashe does rush in. Taking India by the arm just above the elbow in a grip that is sure to bruise, he pulls her to one side.

"What the **fuck** is wrong with you?!"

India tries to pull her arm from Paul's grasp, but his hand is like steel. "I don't want her to touch me when I'm working, Paul. I can't work when she's touching me."

His voice drops to a hiss. "You will do whatever the fuck you have to, you thankless little shit. I've had enough of you behaving like a churlish child. Get your fucking act together!"

"She *can't touch me*."

India's comment is lost as he marches her back to her spot. "Right, are we ready to shoot? Let's go," and with a warning glare at India, Paul nods at Mal and Jude's cameramen.

That night India does not take dinner in the dining room. Instead, she asks the butler to bring her toast, which she ends up leaving untouched on the little table on her patio. When she decides to go to the bar for a whiskey, she can hear the laughter through the trees. The journalists have taken over the boma, and are sprawled on the comfortable wicker chairs surrounding the fire pit, laughing and telling stories. Amongst them Jude Limas's voice is most prominent; not only she is the only woman, but they hang onto her lips with every tale. There is a reason why she has won four Emmys - she is a consummate storyteller. Her laughter is an animal all on its own; it bubbles up from her stomach and reverberates with rich dark tones, standing out above all of the other sounds. She laughs as if she means it.

Ignoring the merriment India slips into a chair at the end of the bar and orders a whiskey, which she nurses slowly as she thinks about the day with a measure of irritation.

Waits, you're pathetic. Pathetic.

She is still deep in thought when Jude slides onto the chair next to her a while later.

"Same for me," the woman orders from the barman, before she looks over at India neutrally.

"Another?"

India is surprised to find she's finished her drink. "Sure."

When the glasses are neatly placed in front of them, Jude lifts hers with a muted "cheers" before she takes a sip and savours it. Finding herself suddenly compelled to study the other woman's face, India busies her attention with slipping a cigarette out of the pack and lighting it. Feeling Jude watching her, she exhales a stream of smoke and shoots a glance from the corner of her eye.

"What?"

"I wouldn't have expected you to smoke. Or to drink, in fact."

India keeps her eyes on the coaster under her glass. "Why not?"

"It seems at odds with the healing."

Shrugging, India takes a sip of her whiskey. "We all have our crutches."

"Yours will kill you eventually."

Shooting a hostile look at Jude, India frowns. "No - people like *you* will kill me."

Unperturbed, Jude leans forward, propping her elbows on the counter. "Why do you say that?"

"You're always pushing. Always with the **intrusiveness**." Realising that her voice is louder than she had intended, India stops speaking abruptly.

"You chose this way of life, if I'm not mistaken. I hardly think that Paige Carter forced you to be on the show, or that Paul Ashe blackmailed you into being his client. I'm not forcing you to sit here."

"Killing someone's spirit doesn't always take force." Scowling, India takes a deep drag of her cigarette.

Jude's luminescent stare is direct and frank. "If you don't like it, then don't do it."

"It's not that simple."

"What can be simpler? Just... stop." One finger taps at the whiskey tumbler thoughtfully. "You don't even seem to like what you do."

"Should I? It's what I do. It's not me."

Quietly Jude Limas sips from her glass, and when India chances a quick look, the green eyes are resting on her meditatively.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm a science project."

The journalist shakes her head. "This is as much fun as sitting on a cactus. I'd have imagined that being able to do something like you can will bring a certain peace, but I see I'm wrong."

"Peace?" Staring into her glass India grimaces. "No. Responsibility. People expect things from me. You don't understand."

Jude's top lip curls slightly. "Uh huh? I think I might know what that's like."

"Sure." India reaches for another cigarette. "You get to have meaningful conversation and pat people on the back and look beautiful whilst doing it. Not exactly bringing the dead back to life, is it?" As soon as she says it a flood of shame rushes through her.

A flush suffuses Jude Limas's face. "Excuse me?" When India refuses to meet her eyes she gets to her feet angrily, looming over the smaller woman.

"How dare you? How dare you tell me that what I do is inferior? Because I can't do what you can, and have to resort to *genuine* emotion and sincerity?" Her lips draw into a tight line. "I hardly think I *want* to be compared to you."

Slipping a banknote under the glass she turns her back on India. "I can't do it any more. It's been real. Goodnight."

India doesn't have a good night. She dreams of men with pangas and weeping women.

The next day seems like a carbon copy of the previous one to India. There are interviews, healing sessions, and cameramen shoving lenses in her face. Jude Limas is her adept self, and though India imagines that she can now feel a sense of reserve in the other woman, she realizes that she is probably wrong. Her words will not have mattered that much to someone like Jude Limas.

Maybe she wants them to, but she knows that she's behaved badly. She knows that they don't understand how she feels about what she's doing. What's being done to her. That they don't understand how restrained and anxious she becomes when they're all so focused on her, and that she's tired, and that she doesn't know how to deal with all of this.

But she also knows that she's behaved badly.

She is not good at apologies - and often queries whether anyone else is - so the best she can do is

to behave as well as she can today. She answers questions as well as possible (though it's still not very good at all), stands where she's told and smiles when she thinks she should, and everybody looks at her like she's grown five heads. Nevertheless, she pushes herself as far as she can possibly go, and it's only when Jude notices the shaking of India's hands that she calls it a day and thanks everybody for their assistance.

On the way back to Kissigoudou, in the Jeep, Paul Ashe makes a comment about how good Jude Limas had looked in her linen suit that day. He says that he would like to take Limas from her agent, if he can. Then, after a moment, he amends. Well, he says, he wouldn't actually mind taking Limas any which way he can. Nobody laughs.

"Whatever. If I could get her on my books ... " noticing India's sharp look at him he shoot her a sardonic smile, "not that you're not enough, sweetheart, but you're just such a fucking pain to work with. No offense. Now with the two of you I'd be made. You do the magnificent in a mundane way, and she does the mundane in a magnificent way. See?"

Pleased with himself he offers a smile to Cammy, whose expression is slightly murderous. Frowning, he cracks open a bottle of water and peers through the window to the nothingness beyond.

"See, that's the problem with you fucking women. You can't stand one of your own being better than you. Just because she's gorgeous and talented and everything else, you hate the fucking sight of her and imagine that she hasn't deserved any of it."

"That's not it, Paul." India smiles at him sweetly. "It's you. We hate the sight of you because you're a fucking asshole."

From the back seat Cammy agrees icily.

"Asshole."

When India wanders into the bar that evening, Jude Limas is at a table with Paul Ashe, his glistening black head close to hers. Jude's gaze slips over his shoulder to meet India's, and she nods almost imperceptibly, nothing more than an acknowledgement of India's presence. Nodding back and feeling inexplicably disenchanted India slides onto her chair at the end of the bar for her customary whiskey.

She is deep in the throes of a memory about Warren and a day at the beach when the seat next to hers is suddenly pulled out. Jude Limas slips into her periphery, leaning forward to speak to the barman before she turns her head to look at India.

"Hi."

"Hi." It feels absurd to be so casual when just last night Jude walked away from her out of pure

frustration.

Intercepting the fleeting uncertainty crossing her face, Jude interprets it wrongly and rises from the barstool. "If you don't want company I'll..."

"No," India interrupts Jude, "please." Shaking a cigarette out of the pack she adds as an afterthought "If you want to."

"Sure." Sitting down again the journalist lifts the tumbler to her mouth and takes an appreciative sip. She is watching India's hand as the other woman lifts the cigarette to her mouth, but India doesn't say anything about this time. It seems to be a habit, and one that Jude isn't aware of, at that.

Realising that India is watching her, most likely because she is watching India, Jude looks away sharply. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. Consequence of the trade."

"It's fine."

Jude's gaze travels back to take in the slight tremor of India's hand. "You're trembling."

Looking down at her hand India nods faintly. "I'm tired."

"Maybe you should be in bed, rather than drinking?"

"Ditto." India raises an eyebrow. "My bad habits seem to interest you. Are you planning an exposé or something?"

With a small chuckle Jude shakes her head, a motion that appears to have more to do with mild exasperation than denial. "Not my thing. I'm just curious. Again, a consequence of the trade. I'll try to curb it."

They sit in silence for a while, and then Jude leans forward on her arms, cocking her head at India. "Is it the healing that tires you out so much?" Noting the flash of annoyance she continues. "It's one of the things I asked in the interview, I know, but your answer didn't actually tell me anything. You get flustered very easily."

"You don't say," the small woman mutters sarcastically. Taking a deep breath she bites the inside of her lip to compose herself before she speaks again. "Yeah, it's the healing. The energy that I use has to come from somewhere. It comes from me."

"I thought... I don't know... that you channel it from the air or from other people. Something like that."

"No." Aware that she's becoming abrupt again, India takes a sip of her whiskey before she continues. "Other people may be able to do that, I suppose. I don't know. I can't. I just do what I do."

"What does it feels like?"

Her brows furrowing, India snaps "Tiring."

Being perpetually cautious is getting to Jude. She is tired too. Sitting back, she points at the glass. "So - again. Why don't you get some sleep instead?"

With a deep drag on her cigarette, India spins around to face Jude angrily. "Why don't you fucking leave it alone? Why are you even here? Why aren't **you** sleeping, Jude?"

Jude's sharp jaw clenches tightly and she looks up towards the roof, inhaling slowly before returning the angry gaze. Her brilliant eyes are suddenly flat.

"I interviewed a man outside Yéndé Miumou yesterday afternoon. The rebels came for his wife while he was out looking for his brother. They raped her and cut her into pieces. He had to bury her in time to get dinner together for his five children." Clearing her throat Jude finishes her drink and motions for the barman to pour another. "I gave him the provisions we have in the truck, but they're already starving. With his wife gone, it's only a matter of time ..." Nodding her thanks at the barman, Jude pulls the filled glass closer with a slight smile. "Sleep isn't a peaceful place for me."

India watches the emotions surge under the surface of that beautiful face, and then looks down at her own drink. "I always have nightmares. Consequences of the trade?"

A chuckle ripples through Jude. "Yeah."

"Why do you do it?"

Gazing into the dark eyes watching her, Jude sighs. "You should have seen his face when I gave him the supplies. It was nothing. Fruit, coffee, some instant soup. It's something I hardly register as being there, and to him it was miraculous. The smallest things make a difference. I want people to see that." Her expression is ingenuous. "What you can do, India - it may not make a difference to you, but to someone like him?"

India interrupts tersely. "His wife is dead. I can't bring her back."

"Yeah, but how many people like him are out there? Millions. *Millions*, India. God, if I could do what you did I'd be out there..."

"I *was* out there." The other woman's voice is hard as ice.

"Hating every minute of it."

Standing up tersely India takes her glass, her glare intense. "But I *was* out there. Don't you dare tell me how I'm *supposed* to be doing this, Jude. You don't know anything about me. Anything at

all."

With the excitement of Jude Limas concluded, Paul Ashe runs out of patience with the merciless African sun and the dust, and within two days they are on their way back home. Ironically there is a Jude Limas documentary showing on the flight, and India stares out of the window on one side while Paul Ashe is glued to the screen, occasionally licking his slightly open lips with his pink tongue in a way that she finds perverse.

She is unexpectedly glad to see her small neat apartment again. She has never felt at home there, but after this trip it is nice to be in a place of her own.

It also surprises her that Paul Ashe leaves her to her own devices for almost three full days before he phones with his next wonderful idea. Alone in the apartment she sleeps at odd hours, watches hours of ancient Hallmark movies, and in general finds that she has too much time to smoke and drink and think.

Lonely.

That is the word that comes to mind. When she isn't rushed off her feet and exhausted and sleepless, she has nowhere to turn. There are people who say they want to get to know her better, who have sent her books and notes and left telephone messages, but she understands full well that they want her for what she is and not who she is.

She phones Jody Hudson just once, just to hear the voice of someone whom she knows is kindly disposed towards her.

"Jody."

"Hi Jody. This is India. Waits." Embarrassingly she stutters and stumbles over the first two words. There is a bit of a clatter on the telephone line - almost as if someone has dropped something heavy and metallic, like scaffolding - and then Jody's strong sure voice.

"Hello India. So nice to hear from you." It is concise, but the sentiment is sincere. Another clang from the line and Jody swears sharply away from the cellphone. "Be careful with that! Don't just swing it around like some goddamned elephant!" With a short chuckle her voice returns fully to the telephone. "Sorry. These grips are useless."

Now that India has her on the phone she isn't sure what to say. "How are you?" The tried and tested favourites are sometimes best.

"Same old. Overworked, overpaid, overwrought and underrated. How are you?"

"I'm ... fine. I'm good."

"Uh huh." The blonde woman issues another stern warning to an unseen party before she speaks again. "Word is that Paul Ashe is riding you into the ground. Yes?"

It takes India a moment to realise that Jody is questioning her rather than the errant grips. "Um. Yeah. Sort of."

"No doubt about it, India. If your face is in the dirt and you're tasting worms, you're getting ridden." There is a few seconds of silence as Jody obviously moves the cellphone away from her mouth to do something, and then her smooth voice comes back.

"Listen, India - when people do something they don't really want to do, it's usually for one of two reasons. One, they think it's the right thing to do. Two, they think they have no other choice. You need to consider which ..." A noise mingles with her voice, and this time it is harsh and treacherous-sounding.

"Damn it! India, I have to go. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

But she is already speaking to a dead line.

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~ An Audience with the Sidewalk Saviour ~

by K. Alexander

DISCLAIMER: [See Part 1.](#)

FEEDBACK: Is always welcomed. Even the unfriendly bits. Find me at kalexy@webmail.co.za. Ps. Please don't send corrections. I have friends who will take care of that at their convenience.

4. If you throw a stone...
(*"Cry Ophelia"* - Adam Cohen)

Curled up on the couch India presses play. Paul Ashe has kindly recorded the Jude Limas special

for her.

Watching as the camera pans through Maison d'espoir it's almost as if India is there for the first time. It's strange how she feels as if she was never there, and yet, when she closes her eyes she can still recall that sick sweet smell cloying the air. The moaning. The soft weeping. When she was standing there she didn't have the time to appreciate the beams of light coming through the high broken stained-glass windows, or the sweeping line of the patched roof.

She can't get used to herself on screen - the hollow-eyed solemn girl seems completely foreign. Jude Limas translates as well as she does in life; the caramel tinge of her skin plays off perfectly against those striking green eyes and the sleek black hair. She is intense without being intimidating, dynamic without being aggressive.

India expects to be extinguished. She has given Jude Limas enough ammunition to paint her as the surly unmanageable person that she knows she is, and so it is with some surprise that she watches as, with careful editing and perceptive commentary, a poignant story is skilfully unfolded.

Instead of using her as the focus of the story, Jude has given the Maison d'espoir an almost human nature, turning it into the main character. India herself is almost on the periphery, less a personality than an essence; a parable to the moral lesson that Jude is presenting to the world.

It is clear that she understands what she is doing; it is now clear to India why Jude has won all of the accolades that she has.

The final shot is a prize-winning presentation. One of the cameramen has fortuitously captured India after a healing session. She stands at the side of the cot, her shoulders drooping and her expression one of infinite weariness. Behind her, the woman she has touched is just visible. Though her image is slightly out of focus, the blaze around her and the pure white radiance of her smile cannot be missed.

Light against darkness. Hope against anguish.

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us." So said the author Marianne Williamson. If you could do just one thing that could change the world today, would you? At great personal cost? At detriment to your own life? We look to others to do the saving, to people like India Waits who pay the price for our disenchantment. We designate responsibility to the shoulders of others, because we are **afraid**. This cannot go on. It is time to step forward into the light. Make your voice heard. Make it count. Make a difference."*

India sits motionlessly as the details of Jude Limas's charity scroll across the screen. She is stunned, and still sitting as the next segment rolls. It's the man from Yéndé Miumou, his brown eyes fixed and impassive as he recounts his story to a translator whilst Jude listens, her cheeks sunken with contained grief.

When the segment switches over to some inane repetitive music video India turns down the volume, and then goes onto her balcony for a cigarette. Taking deep breaths she raises her face to the sunlight, enjoying the warmth on her face, and then goes back inside to fetch her telephone.

Paul Ashe answers on the second ring.

"Ashe."

"Hi Paul. It's India."

"I have CLI, India - I can see it's you. What's up?"

She watches the clouds drift through the sky, and her mouth twitches as if it's about to break into a smile all by itself.

"India?? What's wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing. What's next, Paul?"

5. ...something's gonna shatter somewhere *("Cry Ophelia" - Adam Cohen)*

The Johannesburg international airport is bustling, but smaller than any of the others people are used to. It almost brings tears to India's eyes when she remembers how she'd left. This time they don't have to brave the pack of reporters hanging about - from the private jet's hangar they simply drive through the throngs and onto the busy highways of Johannesburg.

Due to Paul's efforts the sponsors have booked out a small boutique hotel for India and the crew. It is in a bustling leafy suburb, and India has a luxurious penthouse suite that opened onto a perfectly kept garden consisting of, amongst other things, a finely crafted maze laid out with smooth white stones and various fresh-smelling herbs. The group meets downstairs in the wood-rich cozy lounge, relaxing into large leather sofas with drinks in their hands as they examine and discuss the agenda. Afterwards India retires to her suite, first opening the large sliding doors cautiously to check for signs of press before she makes herself at home on a concrete bench outside and watches the vista spread out in front of her.

She has considered visiting Warren and Yvonne - it will not be a long journey - but has finally

decided against it. For reasons she cannot pinpoint she is ashamed of herself, and she knows that they will see it. She has no grounds for shame, she tells herself over and over as she drags deeply on her cigarette. She is touching people everywhere she goes, changing lives, and even if she wakes every single morning feeling that familiar dread, she is still a success. Money, fame... she wants for nothing. If that's what she wants.

There is no reason for shame.

The next morning early they depart for Soweto; a limousine for India, a bus for the crew. Paul sits at his client's sides, finalising last-minute arrangements.

Sister Mary Sibanda welcomes them at the UkuHlonipha Aids Orphanage with a bright smile and ancient eyes. She has a broad smooth face and high slanted cheekbones. The Orphanage itself is neat and clean. They have a Government grant - not an impressive sum of money, but they have used it wisely. In large rooms painted an uneven but cheerful pastel blue, children lie in rows under light linen sheets. Some have sunken eyes, and others still smile when they see strangers approach. Though India has her serious doubts that these children will have any cause to know her, small hands reach for hers with vast trust.

It is at UkuHlonipha that India discovers the first of her limits. She can take away the illnesses and complications ravaging the infected children, but she cannot remove the virus itself. To try feels as though she is picking individual grains of sand from the desert. After the third child she speaks to Paul Ashe, and then asks him to call Mary Sibanda. She tries to explain as clearly as she can, guilt and anxiety gnawing at her gut in waves of nausea, and when Sister Sibanda is silent for a while, India clenches her jaw so hard that her throat feels raw. Finally the woman with the ancient gaze takes India's hands in her own callused ones.

"My friend, what I want for my children is anything you can give. If they are free of the terrible pain then they are happy for today. God bless you. Bless you."

To hide the tears India draws her hands from the gentle grasp and returns to the wards.

Later there is the inevitable press conference, something they end almost every day like this one with. The children shine. India Waits does not.

On the last day in South Africa they fly down to Cape Town and visit a clinic in Alexandria. Word has spread and people are lined up at the doors, their faces hopeful and their pleadings to the hastily assembled security guards loud. India is ushered in through the back door to meet the director of the clinic, a tall large woman wearing a traditional headdress and a tired overworked expression. Serena Mkhize greets them with a respectful firm handshake before leading them through the wards, introducing them to the scant friendly staff. The beds are all full, the waiting room is overcrowded, and the smell of antiseptics hangs in the air so sharply that Paul Ashe

wears a permanent expression of disgust.

India starts in the children's ward. Because there are so many people she is restricted to patients pointed out by the nurses as the most in need, and the remaining have to be contented with her proximity. The bodyguards hang back, warned off-screen in a whisper by Paul Ashe.

In the adult wards the patients watch her hopefully and desperately, and when she skips the first old man in the second ward he reaches out a gnarled hand to her while garbling confusedly to a nurse. Upset, India asks Paul to let Serena explain to the patients while she works on the next man, and over the large woman's words she can hear the first murmurs of distress rising. The man in the next bed and the one opposite them rise with difficulty and approach her, both reciting a soft and pleading litany. Watching them with nervousness India turns her head towards Paul Ashe, even as she keeps her hands on the man underneath them.

"Don't let them touch me, Paul."

He is whispering to the cameraman again, and does not look at her. Sharply she calls towards him.

"Get them the fuck away from me, Paul."

Her brusque words cause the nurses around them to look at her sharply. Ignoring them, she barks at Paul over her shoulder again.

"Paul! Get them away."

Surreptitiously Paul Ashe lifts a finger to the cameraman in the best position, and then moves away slightly. India is moving towards the head of the bed fretfully, but can move no further when the two men drop to their knees and grapple at her feet, her legs, the hem of her shirt. Panicking, she shrinks into the corner, pushing the makeshift bedside table on wheels against the walls.

"Paul!"

Then, leisurely, he steps forward again and cocks a head at a nurse. "Can we get these men back to their beds, please?"

The sick men do not want to be moved, and it takes two more nurses to shift them away. Once she is free of their grasps, India jerks her hands back from the man on the bed in front of her and turns on Paul Ashe.

"You asshole!"

Raising his hands calmly he offers the people standing around them a self-pitying grin. "Now, India, you weren't in any danger. Calm down."

"Fuck you!"

When she storms off Paul Ashe turns to the cameraman. "Let's just cut that last bit, right?" Turning to Serena Mkhize and the stunned crowd standing around her, he shrugs helplessly. "Artist's temperament. Let's take a break - I'll just go and get India."

About fifteen minutes later they turn up. India is pale and dour, and Paul Ashe cold.

That night, when India wanders down to the bar near midnight for a drink, she is stunned to see Jude Limas sitting in one of the leather armchairs in the corner, sipping a whiskey and reading the local newspaper.

She considers retiring to her room, but as she is taking her glass Jude Limas lifts her head and their gazes lock. With raised eyebrows Jude nods at the seat opposite her, and India has no choice but to join her.

After an impersonal handshake India sinks into the chair, suppressing a tired groan.

"What are you doing here?"

"A follow-up on an AIDS piece I did in '99. You're at Usizo Clinic in Alexandria, I believe?"

"Yeah." India watches Jude unenthusiastically. "You're well informed."

Jude's smile doesn't reach her eyes tonight. "You'd be surprised. For instance, I hear that you screamed at the patients."

There's a moment of silence as India sips from her glass, her narrow-eyed gaze fixed on Jude Limas. When she speaks her voice is clipped. "Actually, I screamed at Paul Ashe."

"You told him to get their hands the fuck off you, or something of the sort. If I'm not mistaken, that is." The profanity sounds inappropriate coming from Jude Limas's mouth.

India is clenching her teeth so hard that she can hear the blood thumping in her temples. "Say what you want to say, Jude."

Shaking her head, Jude rotates her glass, swirling the amber liquid in it around and around. "Even for *you* that's a little extreme, isn't it?"

"You say it like you know me." India closes her eyes and leans her head back against the cool leather. "It's none of your business. Back off."

"Fair enough. I can't help wondering, though - why would you even go into a clinic if you don't want sick people near you?"

It is met with silence. Purposely looking away India takes a sip from her glass. The sharpness of the whiskey hits the back of her throat harshly and she almost throws up, fighting back the compulsion queasily. Sitting forward Jude frowns.

"Are you okay?"

"*Now* you're suddenly wondering about me?" The words are antagonistic, but India's tone is flat. "No. I'm not okay."

With a start Jude notes just how pale the small woman is. The hand holding the glass trembles noticeably.

"You really were scared today."

India explodes forward into her seat. "I was not *scared*."

"It's okay to admit it."

"I wasn't *scared*." Sitting upright India leans closer, her jaw clenching and her eyes flashing. "I was in fucking **agony**."

A frown creases Jude's forehead. "What?"

"I was in considerable fucking *pain*, Jude." Sitting back, India shakes her head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"How..." and suddenly Jude is noticing little things like the careful way that India narrows her eyes against the light. "What's going on, India?"

"Nothing. I said it doesn't matter."

"Is there something wrong with you?"

The corners of India's mouth twitch. "I thought you had a handle on that."

Annoyance briefly flares in Jude's eyes before she shrugs. "I'm sorry. I thought I understood what was going on."

"Consequence of the trade, I suppose."

"I suppose."

India sips at her whiskey. "Don't think I'm not mad at you."

"You're allowed to be. I was wrong." Shrugging off the inanities Jude leans forward. "Talk to

me, India."

"I don't want to." India's dark smudged eyes take in Jude's face. "But you're not going to stop, are you?"

"Nope."

Sniffing, India takes one last sip before she puts down the tumbler, its thick bottom rattling on the wood surface of the table as her hand abruptly shakes involuntarily.

"When I have my hands on someone, it's like the floodgates are open and I can't control the flow. And then someone else goes and puts their hands on me and they're tapping straight into me and I can't turn it off. I can't control it, and they can take until I don't have anything left." Abruptly India stops.

Sitting forward, her face stricken, Jude reaches out. "India. I'm sorry. You... I thought..."

"Yeah. I know what you thought."

"That first time in Guinee when you told me not to touch you - that was this?"

India nods, her head barely moving. With concern Jude reaches out to touch the other woman's knee, and then pulls her hands away quickly.

"I'm not hurting you now?"

"No." India gives a little half-laugh. "It's only when I'm ... working."

"Does Ashe know?"

"I tried to talk to him this afternoon, but he didn't want to listen. He thinks I'm just being difficult, and anything that ruins his grand vision..."

"He's an asshole. If you'll pardon me saying so."

"The truth shall set you free." India takes a deep breath through her nose, trying to settle her queasy stomach.

Trying to soothe her Jude rubs the limb under her hand lightly. "How are you feeling?"

A half-hearted chuckle escapes from India's pale lips. "Like I cycled the Cape Argus with a hangover and salmonella poisoning."

Jude winces. "That sounds awful. Can I get the hotel manager to bring you something?"

"I'll survive. Nothing a little sleep can't cure."

"And you can't sleep."

"Shitty conundrum, right? But I'll give it my very best shot."

"Okay." Jude watches India rise cautiously, unwilling to offer assistance lest she sets off the volatile smaller woman. "Goodnight, then. I'm in 305. Have reception call me if you need anything."

"Do you know any lullabies?"

"Nope. I do a mean version of 'Pokerface", though."

"Never mind, then."

The following morning they board a private jet, bound for the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They will be in the air for a few hours, and will be attending a charity dinner that evening. After the jet has climbed to a fair height and the pilot has deemed it safe for them to loosen their seatbelts, India approaches Paul Ashe where he sits in his plush seat paging through a thick document.

"Paul. I want to talk to you about yesterday."

Closing the file with a snap he gives her a sharp look. "Is there an apology in the works?"

"Not quite." Seeing the antagonism that creeps into his eyes she amends. "Well, I should say I'm sorry. I didn't explain to you why I didn't want... the people touching me."

"Other than your general fucking tendency to behave like a bitch, India?"

Rubbing at her thundering temples with one hand, India bites back the immediate retort and fights for a measure of control. "Look, Paul - when I'm working I can't have other people touch me. It ... drains off energy that I can't control."

Drumming his fingers on top of the file he glares at her. "And you couldn't have told me this earlier? Given me the basics when I needed them? You had to shout obscenities at me in front of the crew?"

His harshness is wearing on her. "I'm sorry. I was in pain."

Leaning forward he frowns. "Are you telling me that you won't let them touch you because of a little *pain*? Fuck, India, you're working with people who are fucking *dying*. How about some perspective?"

"You're hardly in it for the charity, Paul, so don't you ... " Suddenly she is just too tired of it. "The point is, don't let them do it. I can't work afterwards. Okay?"

"Fine. Point taken." Opening his file again the agent scans the first few lines before he looks up at her over the page. "Get some sleep, please. You look like shit."

George Taung meets them at the entrance of the Kabila Government Clinic, his pale eyes solemn behind thick glasses.

"The security guys you have with you won't be enough. I've asked our security firm to send more men - the mood is edgy," he informs them even before he extends his greeting.

Paul Ashe shakes his hand. "Why? What's going on?"

"It's your lady here." To India's astonishment he points at her. "They're all so impatient to see her. They heard about the orphanage in South Africa. Also," he cocks his head at the building behind them, "Miss Limas from CNN is inside."

India says nothing. Paul Ashe frowns at Taung. "Jude Limas is here?"

"Yes."

Paul Ashe looks over at India, and then back to Taung. "Well then. Let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

A couple of large men in khaki uniforms appear behind Taung and he half-turns, pushing his glasses up on his nose as he gives them last-minute instructions. Then, with a slightly nervous twitch of the neck, he turns back to Paul Ashe. "Let's go."

Taung is right. The mood inside the clinic is frenetic. When she steps into the waiting room - alone; Paul has once again gauged the situation correctly and set up an entrance that has embarrassed her - the men there cheer and push forward, only to be cautioned by Taung in sharp choppy French. He has been briefed by Paul Ashe beforehand regarding her no-touch rule, and has conveyed this to them. This morning, it appears that they need a fresh reminder.

After a brief chat with Paul Ashe three security men flank India and her personal bodyguard protectively, and though she understands that it is her own request they are considering, she feels intimidated by their threatening bulk, and wonders whether the patients won't feel that way too.

The patients do not appear to share her reservations. Ignoring the burly men they greet India with enthusiasm, and after an hour she is finally free of the uncomfortably wary feeling that Taung has instilled in her with his words. Watching her interactions become marginally more relaxed, Paul Ashe motions for the guards to drop back a little.

When Jude Limas appears from a side room, her cameraman hot on her heels, India nods at her from across the room with a small smile. Paul Ashe, on the other hand, immediately advances with his big white smile and words of platitude.

Shaking off his unwelcome fawning after a short moment, Jude follows in India's footsteps, greeting and chatting to men who have just been touched by the healer, or who have witnessed the miracle. Taung stays by her side, still solemn and grim, and more than once Jude has to maintain her poise when he speaks to one of the patients with barely concealed impatience.

In the last ward India visits the men are alert and bright. Rising when she enters the room, they all greet her welcomingly in French. With a slight blush India lays her hands on the first man. When he smiles up at her wondrously the other men approach silently on bare feet, curious to see what she is doing. Noting the movement from the corner of her eye, she considers turning around to see where the guards are, but Paul Ashe, visible at the back of the room, gives her a reassuring thumbs-up from where he stands. She'll be fine.

Paul Ashe makes mistakes sometimes.

The guards are hovering between the beds and the door, having been given the near impossible tasks of both keeping an eye on India and Jude, who are for the moment in different rooms.

When the first man moves forward and reaches out to India a guard hurriedly steps back to deflect him. Under normal circumstances his response would have been sufficient, but at that moment two more men realise that the first will block their access to the miracle. Surging forward they sidestep the large security guard. One man reaches forward blindly and wraps a hand in India's sleeve, the second dropping to his knees reverently to lay his hands on her feet. Seeing that they have been successful, a few more men approach from where they have optimistically been standing, at the edges of the room.

When the scuffle begins India knows immediately that something has gone badly wrong, but it happens so fast that she barely has time to turn her head before a hand lands on her arm. With a wild jerk she tries to shrug it off, only to feel another pair alight on her feet. With a panicked "Paul!" she tries to step back, but the third man is behind her with his head pressed to her leg, in a posture of genuflection.

"Don't..." she begs, trying to find the guards behind them. Two are trying to pry the men away from her, the third moving closer from the doorway much too slowly. As soon as a guard has one man moved, two more push through, desperate to touch the healer. The fray pushes her back and then pulls her forward, hands pulling and grasping at her, and in the eye of the storm she struggles for breath, feeling her knees weaken. If she drops they might step on her before the guards can get to her. Her hands are pinned to the man beneath them by other hands, heavy grips, and she can actually hear the churning rush of her heart. It feels as though her head is about to split apart. She stops breathing for a moment, the pain devastating, but when she tries to inhale the crushing force on her chest is too much. Gasping desperately she searches out Paul Ashe,

noticing his panicked face at the periphery of her vision just before her sight - and her knees - give out.

She drops straight back. The white ceiling swirls overhead in lazy slow motion. Time stands still.

Jude Limas has just wrapped up an interview with a grinning man when the hurried movement of the guard at the doorway and a muffled call next door alerts her that something is wrong. Realising that Taung is no longer at her side she shoots an enquiring glance at the cameraman before rushing towards the doorway.

In the next room, chaos reigns. The first thing Jude sees is a mass of apparently brawling men; the guards are violently pulling patients aside as they surge forward. Then, as a path opens between them for just a second, Jude sees India. The small woman stands weaving under the grasping of a dozen hands. A trail of blood runs from her nose straight down over her chin. Some of it has dripped onto her ivory shirt, leaving a spreading circle of red right over her heart.

It is the look in India's eyes that sends icy chills down Jude's spine. The healer's eyes are so dilated that her irises are pure black, and though she looks straight at Jude, her expression is sightless. Pushing forward Jude yells her name, yells Paul's name, pulls a guard into the skirmish with her. They are closing in rapidly on the pallid woman when her knees simply give in and she disappears from view.

The security guard reaches her fallen form first, pushing away a wailing man as he falls to his knees beside India. Jude joins him seconds later, roughly hauling away another man by the back of his shirt. Running large hands over India's face, her neck, and then her arms, the guard looks up at Jude, his eyes wide.

"I can't find a pulse. She doesn't have a pulse!"

She can't breathe.

She'd wondered, when she'd had her hands on Trisha Connor.

Now she knows.

This is how it feels to die.

[Continued...](#)

~ An Audience with the Sidewalk Saviour ~

by K. Alexander

DISCLAIMER: [See Part 1.](#)

FEEDBACK: Is always welcomed. Even the unfriendly bits. Find me at kalexy@webmail.co.za. Ps. Please don't send corrections. I have friends who will take care of that at their convenience.

6. Salvation is free

("Salvation" - The Cranberries)

"What the fuck is the **matter** with you?"

Paul Ashe blinks owlshly at the alien expletive falling so harshly from Jude Limas's lips. Lifting a tired hand he wipes exhaustedly at his forehead, unknowingly leaving a black smudge of indistinct origin.

"What do you mean? Look, the clinic should have arranged for better security. How was I to know that..."

"The clinic isn't India's agent! Taung told you that there could be a problem, and you didn't *listen*! She told you that she couldn't be touched, and you didn't *listen*! You should've been right there with her!"

"And what? Have fought off more than a dozen desperate men who couldn't be controlled by trained security operatives?" He is tired, and now he is losing his temper. But Jude isn't far behind, and she isn't about to let up.

"Security guards. Not operatives. There's a massive difference! How could you not have anticipated this, Paul? Were you going to wait for your client to stop breathing before you thought up a plan B? Well, that's *right about now*."

Ballng his fists in frustration Paul turns away from Jude and stomps down the hallway of the Gizenga Private Hospital towards the waiting room. Taking a moment to breathe deeply and calm herself Jude squares her shoulders and then follows him slowly.

"I can't find a pulse. She doesn't have a pulse."

The big man's voice is high, cutting through the diminishing noise like a knife. All action ceases. Paul Ashe pushes through the throng, "Let me by!" and then he drops to his knees beside Jude, reaching out for India. His hands are shaking badly. Pushing them away Jude glares fiercely at him.

"Bastard! Don't you even touch her!"

India feels as though she is drifting upwards from the green darkness of the bottom of the sea towards the faint reflections flickering above her. The murmurs around her gradually begin to turn into voices; low tones discussing things she assumes are not meant for her ears.

She's never believed in mermaids.

There is something in her throat, something bulky and intrusive, but when she tries to lift her hand to remove it she is surprised to find that she can't. Wouldn't water make her limbs lighter? Her chest aches. Taking an experimental breath she chokes on the thing in her throat and begins to cough, and then gag. The pain is intense. The discomfort of her chest and throat brings tears to her eyes. Then a soft hand is on her shoulder, pushing her back lightly.

"Lay back. Lay back, India. Calm down. Take deep breaths. When you can do that I can pull out the tube for you."

She feels the panic rise, but tries to do as the voice tells her to. When her breathing is more or less under control the voice instructs her to cough, and with that cough the tube slides upwards and out of her. It sets off another gagging spasm, which in turn sets off a flaring pain in her chest. The hand moves to her breastbone, rubbing soothing circles.

"Breathe."

As much as her chest and head hurts, India still has the presence of mind to scoff at the instruction. If she can, she will. If she can't, she needs more support than silly directions. The inappropriate thought makes the corners of her mouth twitch. With a slight smile she spirals back down.

"I thought ... I was going to hell."

"Does this look like hell to you?"

"Would've thought less silk."

"But you never know."

"Yes. You never know."

"How are you feeling?"

"Numb. Fine. Good."

"It's the pain killers. Don't move too much."

As practically anyone will when told not to do something, India does it, and immediately feels less fine. With a muffled groan she scowls - or tries to; even her forehead is numb so she has no idea if she is successful - at a visibly amused Jude.

"Middle name heartless?"

"Sorry." The woman suppresses a smile. "It's not really the time to say 'I told you so', so remind me in a day or two."

"Funny."

"Tough crowd."

Her throat is tender. Clearing it India looks about her, at the room she is in. White rough adobe-style walls emphasise the dark wooden beams of the high roof. The window is frameless with a deep windowsill, finished off with a gorgeous ornate Spanish grate. A series of black and white photographs in dark wood line the wall ahead of her. Portraits. When her hand twitches involuntarily she winces and glances down at the needle in her skin.

"Where am I?"

A faint frown immediately appears on Jude's forehead. Cocking her head she leans closer. "You don't remember?"

When India clears her throat again Jude picks up a glass of water from the side table, bringing the straw up to India's mouth carefully. The small woman takes a few sips before she shakes her head.

"Oh." Putting the glass back on the table Jude shoots her a concerned look. "You're at my house. Lake Chapala. Mexico. You really don't remember?"

"No."

"What's the last thing you remember, India?"

"What kind of a name is India?"

The alarm on Jude's face is rapidly replaced by irritation when she notes the smile threatening to curl around India's mouth. "Don't do that. You've scared me enough."

"I'm sorry. I remember being told to breathe."

"That must have been at Gizenga in the Congo. Private hospital. Nothing after that?"

"No. Why does my chest hurt so much?"

"One of your lungs collapsed. You remember what happened at the clinic?"

"Yeah." India's voice is filled with distaste. "How long have I been out?"

Sitting forward Jude lays a cool hand on hers. "That was three weeks ago, India."

"Three weeks? Shit." India moves to sit up, and then decides against it. "Three weeks?"

"It'll come back to you, I'm sure." Jude's green eyes are concerned. "You've been in and out. You were at Gizenga for two weeks, and then we moved you back here. There's a nurse coming in every day. You *did* agree to this, by the way."

"I trust you." India looks up again, at the roof and the uneven walls. "Why here?"

"Chi - my agent - is working on getting you out of the contract with Ashe as quickly - and cleanly - as possible." At the mention of his name, Jude's lips twitch with distaste. "You needed to get out of that apartment and away from him. I needed a break, so I thought..." The journalist shifts slightly. "If you don't want to stay here, we can find a convalescence home in San Francisco for you. It's no problem if ... "

Her eyes already drifting shut, India rests warm fingers against Jude's wrist. "Thank you."

When she wakes again a balmy breeze is flowing over her from the open window, and Jude is in the doorway, talking softly on the phone. When she notices India's eyes opening she rushes a goodbye and wanders over to the bed.

"Hey. I was just talking to Chi - looks like the contract will be sorted out within the week."

"A week?" India finds the idea so pleasant that the feeling is almost foreign. "How much did she have to... ?"

"Don't think about that now." Jude leans against the wall, folding her arms. "She did what she had to."

"She needs to call Jonathon Mackey. He'll take care of it. I think... "

"Relax." Cocking her head Jude smiles. "We'll sort it out when you're better."

"So I belong to you now?"

A rich laugh escapes from Jude's lips and India realises just how anxious she must have been all this time. "If you want to see it that way. How are you at doing windows?"

"Not good."

"Well, that was money in the water, then. Go back to sleep, India."

"Thank you."

"Go back to sleep."

It is another week before Jude and the nurse decide that a very grumpy India can get out of bed. She moves as slowly as an old woman, the bandage around her chest restrictive and reminding her of the damage she has had to withstand. Using a beautiful wooden cane that Jude has found somewhere for her, she shuffles through the large house, taking in the gorgeous but simple décor.

Jude's home is right on the lake, on a large secure property minded by watchful bodyguards.

On her second day up she is helped downstairs by the attentive nurse, Julia, to the sprawling terracotta-tiled patio that overlooks the expanse of bright blue water. Jude has prepared a small brunch and dishes up a delectable selection of fruits, pastries and cheese, of which India is only able to eat a few mouthfuls before she stops and apologised profusely.

"Don't. It'll keep."

Looking over the quiet water - the variations in its fierce colouring reminds her of Jude's eyes - India admires the peaceful setting.

"It's gorgeous. So bright."

As if on cue a serious-looking Spanish woman appears from the large open sliding doors with a small box in her hand. With a smile of greeting she lifts the lid and presents India with stylish black sunglasses, nodding in appreciation as India slides them onto her face, before she takes a few dishes off the table and disappears into the house again.

Leaning back in her chair Jude smiles. "They suit you."

"Good taste. Did she make the lunch?"

"Marguerite? No." Jude raises an eyebrow. "You don't think I can put my own meal together?"

"I thought people like you had people to..." India pauses to draw breath into her weakened lungs, "do things like these for you."

The woman considers her words. "Well, in New York I do. I don't have much time when I'm there, so I have full-time staff. This is my time-off home, so when I come here I like to do things myself. Marguerite stays here to look after things, and sometimes she helps when I have guests." Pouring a cup of sweet-smelling coffee she passes it over to India. "Is there anything else you'd like?"

"A cigarette?"

"Huh. I hardly think you should be smoking. You stopped breathing for four minutes, India."

"Four minutes?" The fake swagger leaves India for a moment, and that is all it takes for Jude to see how frightened she had been. But it also takes just that long for the small woman to put up the barrier and the swagger again. "Oh well. Just enough time for Paul Ashe to cut in an ad break, I suppose."

With a sudden and surprising surge of anger Jude balls up her napkin and tosses it onto the table. "You know, you almost **died**. It's fine to be scared. You don't have to be so *cavalier* about everything."

Jude Limas pushes every single one of India's buttons.

"The last time you thought you knew what was going on you really had no idea, Jude. So don't talk to me like you understand, okay?"

"Not for want of trying!" When Jude raises her voice it surprises both of them. "You talk everything away, India. Everything! One moment I feel like I'm reaching you, and the next moment you just slam the shutters down on my fingers. **That's** what it's like!" Pushing her chair back from the table roughly enough that the legs grind over the terracotta, she stands up and stares at India over the expanse of the table. "You know, I work on getting information from people every single day of my life, and even **I** have to wonder whether the amount of effort I have to put into trying to get to know anything about you is just a waste of time."

"Is that what I am to you? Effort? A *project*?" Taking off the sunglasses India tosses them onto the table, trying not to reveal the pain the movement generates in her chest. "Thanks for everything, Jude, but I don't think this is going to work."

Shaking her head, Jude looks away into the distance contemplatively. When she finally speaks her voice is soft, but it carries over the slight breeze with peculiar clarity. "You almost died."

India takes a deep breath to calm herself, and finds that peace returns quicker here than she's usually found it to. "I probably did die, for a little bit at least. I dreamt about mermaids."

"You said something when you were in the ambulance on your way to the hospital. I couldn't hear."

Studying the way the sunlight falls over Jude's dusky skin and turns her a glimmering gold, India cocks her head. "You were in the ambulance with me?"

"Yeah." Jude crosses her arms defensively, looking away, and her hair falls over her face like a curtain. "I was there."

There is a silent admission in those words. Struggling to her feet India inches over to Jude, cursing her weakness, and reaches out awkwardly. Her small hands come to rest on the warm waist - she can feel the muscles bunching under her fingers.

Giving comfort does not come easily to her.

Leaning forward she does the one thing she can think of. She presses her cheek to Jude's back. "Jude... It's fine to be scared."

There is an explosive exhalation under her cheek - as if Jude has been holding her breath for quite a while now - and then Jude's hands squeeze hers just once, briefly. When the journalist steps away and turns around there is a sad smile curled around her lips.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I had no right to talk to you like that."

"It's okay. I can be a little difficult."

But Jude refuses to bite. Forlornly she sits down, pulling her coffee cup to her and sipping mindlessly at the cold dregs.

By the next day the uneasiness has dissipated. Either that, or, India recognizes, Jude is simply acting as if it has. Nevertheless, she is glad for the lighter atmosphere. Taking care to keep conversation simple she takes pleasure in Jude's undemanding company, careful to gauge the mood and not to intrude upon the other woman's privacy. They spend time making small talk, and India is hopeful that the other woman enjoys their natural banter as much as she does.

"Did you always want to be a journalist?"

"No. I wanted to be a fire engine for a really long time."

"Stop it."

"True. I blame animation movies."

"So why a fire engine? Why not a singing rabbit or a dancing clock?"

"Well, I'm not that great a singer..."

"I refuse to believe that. And next you're going to tell me that you can't dance?"

"Oh no, I can dance. I'm *great* at dancing. I'm just terrible at keeping time."

"Har har. Don't quit your day job."

"So you were telling me about Warren."

"I was?"

"Well, you mentioned him once. That's practically like telling me everything about him, in India terms."

"There's something I wanted to say... oh yeah. Ha ha."

"Jude? Isn't there someone missing you while you hang around here playing hooky with me?"

"Obviously. Steven."

"Steven?"

"My craziest fan. I left town without letting him know. He's probably exposing himself to an unattended window in New York as we speak."

"Inconsiderate of you."

"I know. I did try to write him a freaky offensive poem to let him know, but nothing rhymes with 'you crazy motherf...'"

Snigger. "You'd never have said it."

"I would too."

"Would not."

"Would too. What do you take me for - a sissy?"

"No. A refined decent lady."

"Now **that** was just unasked for, India."

After a week India is able to move around a little easier, the intense ache reducing somewhat. The friendly old doctor comes down from town and examines her surgery wound carefully, then takes out the stitches with a stern warning to her not to overdo it.

She gets rid of the cane, but her progress is still limited to a shuffle, and after one day her back aches so fiercely that she reclaims the wooden instrument without a word. Jude notices the quick transition, but with her customary graciousness says nothing.

Able to move around a little more, India is now in the position to observe Jude's punishing schedule. The woman gets up at five, goes for a demandingly fast forty-five minute run at the lake's shore, returns for a cup of strong coffee and a quick look at the local newspaper, and then spends an hour in the downstairs gymnasium practising a rhythmic and hypnotic martial art that apparently is called "Capoeira".

The first time India slowly makes her way down the steep stairs and pauses at the bottom for a much-needed breath, Jude does not turn to acknowledge her, though she can't miss her presence with the profusion of mirrors that cover the sunny room's walls. At first, thinking it is some sort of dance, India sits down on the bottom step, both appreciating the woman's smooth movements and grace and enjoying the magnetic accompanying music. After the second leg sweep and the third high kick she is mesmerized. Jude moves in a peculiar never-varying square pattern on the wooden floor, incorporating tumbles and kicks into her efficient motions with what appears to be great ease - which is only belied by the fine sheen of sweat covering her and the visible tensing of her finely toned body at each action.

Following that gruelling workout a generally subdued Jude has breakfast on the patio, after which she makes time to read through documentation from her agent and scripts for prospective projects. During this time India quietly reads the novel she has scavenged from the extensive bookshelves in the study, or gives feedback when asked for her opinion.

Jude also owns a production company, and though she confesses that she is not as involved in it lately, having largely given over control to her business partner, she still takes the time to approve new developments. When she admits to not being able to give as much attention to the

company as she wants to, India is dumbstruck.

Even at her least focused Jude Limas is a whirlwind. Her single-mindedness and attention to detail is astounding. It is almost a shock to find out that her energy is not without limits.

Late afternoon sees them lounging on the patio, enjoying drinks and watching the sun set spectacularly over the water. India drinks her typical whiskey, and usually Jude joins her, though once she comments that it's neither kind to her concentration nor to her figure.

"You worry about your weight? *Seriously*?? There's nothing there, Jude!"

"Thanks, but as I'm sure you know the world isn't always kind, and the press less so. If I pick up three pounds I'm pregnant, and if I lose two I'm bulimic. Anyway, you're hardly one to talk. You're still very thin."

"I'm lean."

"You're scrawny."

"Oh shush."

"You're a scrawny scrappy little thing."

"Don't make me hurt you. I'm against hitting pregnant women."

"Hey, Jude..."

Looking up from her newspaper the journalist raises her eyebrows. "Is that the beginning of a joke? Because I can tell you I've heard them all before."

India smiles ingenuously. "No. Wasn't even thinking of it."

"Sure. Your innocent eyes don't fool me."

"You're a spoil-sport. But I did want to ask you something."

Closing the newspaper Jude takes off the small reading glasses that she almost always forgets to wear and sits back. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh yeah. Everything's great. I just wanted to know how your agent's doing with Paul and the contract?"

"The last time we spoke she said she was wrapping it up." Jude smiles. "He's a bastard, but he's no match for Chi."

"Okay. That's great." India picks at the hem of her shirt. "Because I didn't... I don't want to keep you, just because you feel you have to look after me, Jude."

Shaking her head Jude leans forward to press her cool fingers against India's hand. "Oh no, India; I'm enjoying being at home for a little bit, and I've just finished two major projects... I needed the break." She pauses. "Unless you want to get back home, of course. I'm sorry, I didn't think of that."

Impulsively India turns her hand to squeeze Jude's. "I usually have little more than an address, Jude. This has been more of a home to me than ... But I'm sure you have things to do. I've asked Jonathon Mackey to look at other places around San Francisco for me, but I can tell him to hurry up if you'd like. Honestly. You don't have to be shy to say so."

"You don't have to rush him."

"Okay. If you're sure."

"I like having you around. You're a pain sometimes, but still."

"You're a pain all the time." Squeezing Jude's hand one last time India smiled. "Thanks."

Friends arrive in the least predictable packages sometimes.

Their evenings become a ritual they both look forward to.

Jude is smart, funny and prone to asking terrifyingly direct questions. In direct contrast to her difficulties as a public figure, India is quick-witted and responsive when provided with the right company and a sense of security. Conversations veer from the mundane to the weighty and the downright ridiculous, but when it becomes too serious India is always the one to deflect with an obvious sidestep. Her evasiveness annoys Jude, and Jude's intensity and never-flagging energy intimidates her. More often than not serious discussion leads to a fiery debate and aggravation from one or both parties, especially when it involves Kinshasa.

"You weren't there, Jude. I told them to back off. I told Paul to get them away from me."

"But you didn't stop to explain. You could have told them why."

"That's like telling a surfer to stop and explain to the shark."

"Okay, I get it. I just don't understand how you could blindly put yourself in a situation that was clearly dangerous to you."

"I told Paul. I expected him to protect me. That was his job, wasn't it?"

"But it's your job to protect yourself too!"

"What are you saying? That I shouldn't have done any of it? I don't get you. You criticize me for not liking what I do, and then you criticize me for doing it. What is it you want?"

"I want you to look after yourself."

"I'm trying to! Sorry. I'm trying to. But you more than anybody should understand the mob mentality! I couldn't do anything!"

"I'm sorry. You're right."

"You make me feel like it's my fault."

"I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. I just wish..."

"What?"

"That it hadn't happened to you."

"So do I. I miss my cigarettes."

"I guess that's the end of the serious dialogue, then."

"I've had enough for now."

"Fine. You piss me off so much sometimes."

"Ditto, Limas."

"So Warren."

"Warren what?"

"Exactly my point?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"Big fat liar."

"I thought you said I was scrawny."

"Whatever. Scrawny scrappy liar."

"Your charm really does wear off after a while, doesn't it?"

Jude sits back and folds her arms pointedly. "You're not sidetracking me again, India."

With a sigh India shrugs. "You're persistent. There really is nothing to tell, Jude. Why do you want to know?"

Glancing out over the lake Jude thinks for a moment, and then her eyes lock on India's with unnerving intensity. "Because you don't talk about your life a lot, India. When I push you hard enough, you talk about your talent. Sometimes you tell me about the people you've met and the things you've seen. Just sometimes. But you never say anything about your life."

India's delicate fingers tap the table uneasily. Biting the inside of her lip she peers at Jude from under dark lashes. "My life is about the healing and the places where I go. There isn't any more."

"That's not true, India. You have friends, family, a life outside of all this. An actual life. Don't you?"

Looking away India frowns. "Do you?"

"Don't do that. Don't push me away."

"I don't want to talk about these things." India is silent for a long time, and Jude doesn't interrupt the solitude. Then, suddenly, the small woman speaks again. "I'm an orphan. My parents gave me up. I don't know anything more than that. I grew up in a Catholic convent. After I matriculated I went to secretarial college for a few months. The sisters thought it would be the best vocation for me. I couldn't do it, though. I started working part-time at the veterinarian's office next to Yvonne's clinic, and some of her people sometimes came over to lay their hands on the animals. That fascinated me, for obvious reasons, so I went to visit a few times. Yvonne noticed that I was interested, and asked me if I wanted to learn." She smiles a little forlornly. "Of course, the Catholic upbringing made me sure that I'd be going to hell for doing those kind of things... but then, I thought I'd be going to hell for what I could already do, anyway, so it didn't really matter much."

"Did you ever use your gift on the animals? Or at the clinic?"

"Just a little, sometimes, if I needed to push it that little bit harder. But not the full-on thing, no."

"Why not? It seems like the perfect platform."

India has reverted to that old familiar motion of plucking at the hem of her shirt. "Nobody else could do it, Jude. It obviously wasn't right."

"I'm wondering," and the journalist gives India a lopsided smile, "and kick me if it's a stupid question, but I don't know much about this. Being brought up a Catholic, didn't you ever consider that your gift might be ... divine?"

An incongruous giggle slips from India's lips, but when she sees the look on Jude's face she hurries to reassure her. "I'm not laughing at you, Jude, I promise. It's just ... I'm considering what sister Ruth's facial expression would have looked like if I'd told her I was a saint incarnated." She gives another soft hiccough-laugh, and then raises her shoulders. "I knew I wasn't good enough for divinity. Saints' parents didn't just leave them on doorsteps. The nuns felt the same. They tried to instill the best values they could in us, but we weren't theirs. Who would ever pick me for a blessing?"

"India..." Jude exhales softly. "Did they ever know what you could do?"

The motion of India's hands still. "Yeah. I did it once."

"Just once?"

"Once was all it took. I like to think that I'm a fast learner."

"What did they do to you?"

India can feel the other woman's sharp eyes on her. Looking over at Jude she smiles slightly at the apprehensive expression. "It's not that bad."

"That's always relative."

"Really. You're imagining 'The Magdalene Sisters' with torture or something. I can tell by the look on your face." She runs her tapered fingers over the hem of her shirt meditatively. "No, it was very ordinary. Being stuffed in a dark closet for a few hours, bread and water for a few days. That sort of thing. They didn't want me to do it again, and I got the hint."

Jude's eyes are filled with horror. "That's what you'd call ordinary?"

"It could have been worse." Shrugging, India looks away. "They weren't bad people, Jude. They just believed that what I'd done wasn't right. A lot of people still feel that way."

The journalist leans back, watching the undercurrents flicker through India's expression. "I think that *you* feel that way a lot of the time, too."

"Sometimes. Yes."

When India finally looks up there is a suggestion of shame in her eyes. Reaching out, the other woman places a gentle hand on India's. "Can I tell you something without you running away?"

"I can't stop you."

"You **do** have divinity in you, honey. We all do, but you have something special. You are a blessing."

Biting down on her trembling bottom lip, India closes her dark eyes for a moment. Jude pats her hand reassuringly.

"You've been punished for having an exceptional ability, India, but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't use it. It only means that you have more people to prove wrong. There's no reason at all to be ashamed of who you are. You don't hear it just yet, and you've spent a long time not hearing it. But I'll keep telling you, and eventually you'll have to either listen, or you'll have to call me a big fat liar."

India clenches her jaw. "Why do you keep this up, Jude?"

"Because you're amazing, and you don't even know it." Letting go of India's hand Jude sits back. "You were right when you told me that all I did was to look beautiful and have cozy chats..."

"That's not what I said, and besides, I was completely out of line..."

"You were out of line, but some of it was right. I can only offer what I have. And you know what?" A bitter, unbefitting smile flits across her face. "While I'm doing it, it's impossible not to consider the fact that I'm only doing it for myself. That no matter how humanitarian I am, all I'm ultimately doing is promoting Brand Jude."

"But your intentions are good."

"Are they? I'd like to think that it's not a business transaction, but in the end it always comes down to it for me. The point is - I was talking about you. I do what I do, and the effects are negligible, and people think I'm wonderful for it. You do what you do, even though you don't seem to want to. That's selfless. I suppose I wish I were more like you."

Shaking her head India leans forward. "No, you don't, Jude. I'm not selfless - I'm a fraud. To do these things against my will is pathetic, and to pretend that I'm doing them because of anything more than public pressure is a lie. I have... had... no desire to be the next big thing. I don't want to be in the newspapers. I don't want everybody to know my name. I sure as hell don't want to be touted as a miracle. I just want to be a normal person, with a normal life. Maybe some normal love. And I know this is all downright bizarre, coming from someone who sold herself to the Paige Carter machine, but I didn't see that I had much of a choice then. We live and learn, I suppose."

With a slight smile Jude casts her glance over the still blue water. "I don't always understand you, India, but I like you."

"Ditto, Jude." Leaning back India stretches her neck. "Damn. I really could do with a cigarette. Why don't you tell me about your life to distract me."

"Sure. I was born in Santoña, Cantabria, to Luís Maria and Rosa Limas. I don't remember much about the town, or the country - we moved to America when I was five. My father was a lawyer and my mother a homemaker. He thought I'd have more opportunities in America. My mom died when I was sixteen. She had a heart attack. My father did as well as he could. I went to Columbia to study journalism, but my father passed away at the end of my first year. I had the choice between starving and dropping out and getting a job, so I got an apprenticeship at a small local paper. Left there when the editor offered to advance my career for payment in kind - I just said 'No thank you. I'm not that kind of girl' and packed up and left. And then I got another job at a bigger newspaper, and it just took off from there."

"Wow. After just 'No thank you. I'm not that kind of girl'?"

"You jest, madam, but it's the truth."

"So your break came pretty easily?"

"Well, yes and no. After the first one. But to get through that first job took blood, sweat and tears, I promise you. If it hadn't been for my friends I would have starved a long time ago."

"You only eat ... what... three carrots a day... You must have been very poor."

"Do you want to hear my story or not?"

"Sorry."

"The bigwig from a local TV station spotted me at the back of a press pack on a story, and asked me if I was interested in presenting an analysis of the world news in brief, as it were, every evening. I messed up quite a bit, not having been in front of cameras before..."

India interrupted solemnly. "I've seen a blooper clip or two."

"We're not paying out damages for that anymore. If you're experiencing anxiety attacks it's your own problem."

"Some of it was especially catastrophic."

"Thanks for dwelling on that. Can we move on?"

"Sure. How long did you do that stint?"

"How come you don't know anything about my career? Your agent should have briefed you about my various successes and triumphs just before you met me. So that you could genuflect with awareness."

"Genuflect *this*."

"How rude."

"I try. And then CNN stole you away?"

Jude grins. "You **do** know something."

Groaning theatrically India rolls her big eyes. "I didn't want to let on. Aaaaargh. Now I'm not going to be able to live with your massive ego."

"You'll have to. You're too scrawny to walk far, and I have the car keys." Rocking on her chair rhythmically Jude begins to sing with enthusiasm. "I am such a sta-har, you know who I a-har, I am such a sta-har..."

"You know who I are?" Cocking her head India purses her lips. "Have you been taking writing tips from Fluff Puppy, or whatever the guy's name is?"

"It rhymed. I'm all about the art, dude." Striking a mock rapper pose Jude waits until India has stopped laughing. "Whassup, dawg?"

"I have **no** idea."

Marguerite chooses that moment to enter with a tray of iced tea. Without even so much as a second look at Jude, who shouts an enthusiastic "yo, homie" to her, she dispenses the chilly drinks with a friendly smile before disappearing into the house.

Lifting the glass to eye level India fishes out the sprig of mint and tossed it over the railing before she takes a long appreciative sip. "Do you like what you do, Jude?"

"Like it? I love it." It is obvious. When she talks about her career she grows taller. Her eyes blaze in the way that the camera loves. Her hand signals become bigger, her language more elaborate. "It's a blessing to do what you love and get paid for it."

"Is there anything at all about it that you don't like?"

Sipping slowly at her tea Jude ponders. "Of course. Nothing is without its drawbacks. Privacy is rare. What we've been able to enjoy here doesn't happen for me often. I can't have lunch with a friend without a lens peeping in from somewhere."

"But didn't you sort of choose that, doing what you do?"

A light frown creeps up on Jude's forehead. "Choose to have no privacy? I don't think anyone chooses that, unless they've opted to live in a glass box in the middle of Times Square. I suppose some trades are more public than others, but I'm just like anyone else, doing what I love."

"Actually very few other people get to do what they love. Don't you think, though, that it's a little

hypocritical to complain about the loss of privacy when in the same breath you're admitting that you're using what you do to fuel... what did you call it... Brand You?"

For a moment India is worried that she has gone too far, but Jude surprises her with a hearty laugh.

"My father would have liked you. I don't know what the answer is. I expect I want it all my way. It's just not that easy, having to be perfect all of the time."

"You make it seem effortless."

Jude shares a charming smile with India. "It's entirely wrong, but I'll choose to see it as the compliment it's meant to be. Thank you. That's very kind of you. Not to shatter your image of me, India, but I can't always say the things I like to say. Do the things I want to do. I wanted to do some good in the world, but now it's always tied to what I'm supposed to be. What people know me as is what I'm allowed to let them know. In exchange for the so-called perfect life I have to be the perfect public figure." She shakes her head, almost as if to herself. "You know how it is. I've traded one sort of happiness for another. There always is a cost."

"Is there?"

"You ask me this when you've almost been killed?"

"I suppose I saw it as punishment rather than cost."

"What do you think you're being punished for, India?"

"Being a fake. It's the same thing, Jude. Punishment, cost; they're just two sides of the same coin."

7. Your number has been called

("Butterflies and Hurricanes" - Muse)

It has turned into a ritual, their shared conversations. India has known it is not one that can last, but it is still an unforeseen shock when their time runs out for the moment being and Jude has to fly to Iran for a shoot.

They stand in the kitchen, India leaning on her cane for more than just physical support. Jude looks astounding. She is dressed for the first meeting that will take place on the private jet sent by the production company, and gone is the casual Jude who loiters around in comfortable jeans. This woman is every inch the celebrity in her pressed suit.

"I'm not looking forward to the flight," she admits a little warily. "I've worked with Günter

before and he's such an ass. He'll get drunk and spend the entire time trying to get into my skirt." Smoothing down the article in question she adds for India's benefit, "He's the director for this project."

"Tell him you'll get him fired. You can, right?" India studies Jude's stiletto heels absent-mindedly. "You look ... amazing."

"Thank you." A flush rises in Jude's cheeks, but she hides it commendably. "I'll get Chi to call him. She threatens a lot better than I do. You should hear her screaming in German - it's bloodcurdling. And awesome."

"She speaks German?"

"She speaks six languages, and swears fluently in another four." Lifting her head Jude takes in the gleaming pots hanging from the rail above the butcher's block, the bottles of olive oil neatly lined up on the upper shelves, the rich dark cherry wood of the cabinets. "I'm going to miss this house. I never realised how much I loved it until now. I had a really great time here. Thank you, India."

"Thank you, Jude, for taking me in. I realise it was just pity, but it's a good payoff for staying in this place and ... having you for conversation."

"It was not pity."

"You'll be late."

"Don't change the subject."

"You are going to be late."

"You piss me off so much sometimes."

"Ditto, Limas." They share a smile before India speaks hesitantly. "You're sure you're alright with me staying on while you're gone?"

"Of course. Marguerite's here, the pantry's stocked up, and nobody will bother you with the security on detail. I know you have some things to sort out, so stay as long as you like. I'll probably be back in about two weeks, if all goes as planned." She looks through the sliding doors to the view beyond. "Enjoy that cocktail every evening for me."

"It won't be nearly as much fun without you to provoke."

Instead of the snappy retort India is expecting, Jude pushes herself away from the counter and envelopes the other woman in a very brief but firm hug. "Thank you." Then, quickly and purposefully, she turns away. "I'll call now and then to chat, if you're okay with it?"

"Sure. We're friends, Jude - I'd love that."

"Bye, India."

She leaves as she does everything: as if it is her sole objective.

The house is empty. India has expected it, considering that Marguerite lives in a cottage on the property and not in the house itself, but she isn't ready for the feeling of complete desertion. For two mornings in a row she catches herself on the bottom step of the gym, sitting with her chin propped on her knees, seeing Jude spin and kick in her mind's eye. She even turns on the music, once, and tries to recall which motions go with what rhythm. On the patio she can hear Jude's laughter, rich and throaty - she has always secretly taken pleasure in hearing it because it is a sound that so obviously comes right from the other woman's soul. She can remember how, when she had tried hard to be insufferable and had succeeded, Jude would not lift her head from the document she was reading, but would merely peer at India over the rim of her much-maligned reading glasses with those bright green eyes.

Pulling herself away from the recollections she shakes her head angrily. "You're being pathetic, India."

Jude's voice comes through clearly in her thoughts. "You're a blessing."

"Even when you're not here you get under my skin, Limas."

But India is smiling.

"Hey, it's me."

"Who?"

"Oh, for heavens' sake. Me me. Don't piss me off."

"Your language, Miss Limas, your language... How was the flight?"

"Terrible. Günter's hands should have a separate Visa for the amount of wandering they do."

"Cute. Did you get Chi to give him a call?"

"That was the highlight of everyone's flight ... bar Günter's, of course. Chi screamed so loudly that the pilot thought his orders were changing and almost landed in Munich."

"I hear it's Oktoberfest season there."

"If there were a season for Oktoberfest I would assume it'd actually fall in October, India."

"You really shouldn't assume."

"Fine. Next October we're going over there to prove my point. Verstehen sie?"

"Yes, Captain."

"That's the spirit. How's the house?"

"Empty. Drinking alone closely resembles being an alcoholic, wouldn't you say?"

"Somewhat. Marguerite could always be your drinking buddy."

"She's lacking in the annoying repartee department."

"I'll cut her salary immediately. But seriously, India, are you doing okay?"

"Yeah. I just have to get used to the silence."

"Nice way to say I'm an incessant talker." Silence. "Did you call me cute just now?"

"No, Miss Limas. Now go and get some sleep. You have a long day tomorrow."

"Hey, it's me... "

"Hey you."

"At least you know who it is this time. I can't talk long - I have to be in front of the camera in about five minutes, but I wanted to tell you something quickly."

"Yeeeeees?"

"India, Paul Ashe had a minor heart attack yesterday."

"Huh. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. Although I wanted so much more for him."

"Yeah. While he's in recovery his new assistant, Guy Hunter, is dealing with his clients. They say he's pretty good, too. I foresee problems for Ashe when he gets back into the office."

"Hunter used to be my personal assistant. He's good. His first name is Guy?"

"Uh huh. Rather unfortunate, seeing as Guy Hunter is as straight as they come. Now he has all the closeted macho guys hitting on him something terrible."

"Really?"

"Really. Oh no, here comes that asshole director. They think I'm really into line dancing here, with the rate at which I do-si-do sideways when he gets close. Got to go."

"Hey, it's me."

"Hey you. How's it going?"

"Two weeks have never been this long before. I wish I could just come home."

"You sound really tired, Jude. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, all things considered. I'm pooped."

"... and you don't have a whiskey buddy there?"

"... and I don't have a whiskey buddy here."

"What are you working on?"

"War. Always war. People can't ever stop fighting."

"Be careful, please?"

"I'll try." A whistling sound in the background. "I have to go. Take care, all right?"

"India, it's Jude."

"You're saying it wrong."

"What?"

"You're supposed to say 'Hey, it's me'."

"What are we, the Marx Brothers?"

"What does any of this have to do with politics?"

"Not that Marx. It was a television programme of the early... you're messing with me."

"Never heard of that time period before."

"India."

"Yes. I'm messing with you. But it's fun."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed."

"You really should pay more attention. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Good day today, or at least as good as it can get. I found some positive amongst all of this rubble."

"Good. I think you need that."

"I think everyone needs that. How's life at Chapala?"

"No complaints. I've been talking to Jonathon Mackey - he's cleared up the final dregs of the Ashe contract. He's been chatting to Chi, too. I'm sure she'll let you know when they've crossed their t's and dotted the i's..."

"That's good news for you."

"Yeah. I'm considering buying an apartment in SoMa. Or maybe I can buy something up here. Or even in Cape Town. Anywhere nice. What do you think?"

"I think you should do that. But not at Lake Chapala."

"Why?" There is a slight touch of hurt in India's voice. "You wouldn't like me as a neighbour?"

"I like you better as a houseguest."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. So buy the one in SoMa."

"What about Cape Town? It's lovely there."

"It's too far away."

"From?"

"Everything."

"Hey, it's me."

"Isn't it the middle of the night there, Jude?"

"Yep."

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"How do you know I'm not?"

"Funny. But I'm serious. You need your rest."

"I can't sleep. It might help if you talk to me a little."

"About what?"

"About anything, India. Tell me something about yourself."

"You know everything."

"I doubt it."

"Why do you want to know?"

"No reason."

"There's always a reason with you, Jude."

"Fine. Because I like the sound of your voice. It puts me at ease."

"Huh. Really?"

"Yes. Really."

"Oh. Thank you. I... You always come up with the nicest things."

"That's my charm."

"Amongst other things."

Yawn.

"Okay. I'll tell you about Warren. Real boring, but you keep asking, so you deserve to suffer. I met him when I was twelve years old. His parents lived next to the convent, and even though the sisters would have had several apoplectic fits before they would let us girls talk to boys, I still managed to make friends with him through the holy fence."

"Sounds like an unholy fence to me."

"Cute. Go to sleep. Anyway, we went to the same college, and ended up on the same campus, and that was kind of it. Friends for life. Or so I thought, I suppose. He couldn't understand why I never told him."

"Have you spoken to him since?"

"Yeah. We chat now and then, short little conversations with no substance. It hurts to hear his voice. Every time we talk I remember him and me, the way things were, and then I know it can never be like that again. It makes it a little worse that it's my fault. But I'm fine now. It's bittersweet."

"Were you ever lovers?"

"You certainly don't waste time... No, we weren't. He didn't think of me like that. He liked his girls wild."

"And you?"

"Damn, Jude, aren't you supposed to be sleeping?" Sigh. "Fine. He was my first big love. I never let on, because it would have ruined the friendship. He didn't feel the same."

"How long?"

"A long time. I don't know when it began to peter out; I suppose after Guinee. The amount of destruction sort of took my mind off it."

"Did you ever see anyone else?"

"Sure. If I'd held off he would have noticed, and that would have mortified me. So I dated some. A guy from the college, one of Warren's friends..."

"Do you still miss him?"

"Lyle?"

"India..."

"Sometimes. If I catch a movie we saw together, or hear a song he just loved. He adored

watching wrestling, the real over the top nonsense. But that feels like a long time ago. I'm just interchanging some of the memories with better ones now."

There is a contented silence.

"Jude?"

Just deep and even breathing.

The soothing sounds of string instruments drift through the hallway. Leaving her handbag on a little side table to her right Jude walks quietly into the kitchen.

"What are you listening to?"

At the counter India turns, a dishcloth casually slung over one shoulder and a large chopping knife in her hand.

"You should know, it's from your collection. According to the CD cover it's Albinoni. Am I saying that right?"

"Yep." Leaning back against the opposite counter Jude folds her arms. "I suppose more correctly my question should have been *why*. You don't even like classical music."

India cocks her head to one side cheerfully. "Well, Jude, I for one am never averse to learning new things. There must be something to it if you like it. You have impeccable taste."

Jude's elegant eyebrows shoot up into her hairline. "Hm. Now you're complimenting me? There's something odd going on here." Sniffing the air experimentally she studies India through half-lidded eyes. "Is that a roast I smell?"

With a dashing wave of the chopping knife India makes an exaggeratedly dramatic face. "Creepy. You're positively Sherlock Holmesian."

"Shut up, Waits. It must have been Marguerite, then."

"What, are you insinuating that I can't cook?"

"Not so much insinuating as saying it blatantly to your face."

"Wow. That hurts. Ye of little faith."

"So did you cook?"

"No." At the slight smirk curling around the gorgeous woman's mouth India snuffles pointedly. "But if I had you would just have broken my little heart."

Clutching her hands to her chest Jude pouts. "Oh, poor baby." Then, realising the inadvertent familiarity of the phrase, she speaks again, almost too hastily. "So what is the occasion?"

India's smile is at once shy and a little bemused. "You're home. That's the occasion."

Her smile is echoed by the woman across the floor, and an indefinable flicker passes between them. "That's thoughtful. Thank you."

"I have my moments." Turning away India chops the remaining onion and scoops it into the waiting pan, then put the knife down carefully in the sink. "I realise that you won't eat the roast, but I did add three carrots for you, and also a bushel of spinach, should you be feeling reckless tonight ..."

"Blah blah blah," Jude interrupts her, but the laughter is close behind.

Jude ends up eating a surprising amount of the roast, though she maintains it is just to spite India, and afterwards they sit in their customary chairs outside on the patio enjoying nightcaps. It is later than usual, but it feels as though no time had passed since their last bickering conversation there.

Leaning back in her chair the journalist gives a long satisfied sigh. "I missed the house. And the lake. And the drinks..."

India takes a sip of her whiskey. "The first step is admitting you have a problem, Jude."

"... but not so much the mouthy friends."

"You pined. I know you did."

Taking a sip of her own drink Jude peers at India over the rim of the glass, her eyes a soft green in the dimmed light. "Didn't you used to be a shy retiring girl who hated talking to me?"

"Hm." A little smile appears on India's face. "Once upon a time."

"So what in the world happened?"

"Even the hardest heart will melt in the face of your persistence." Laughing faintly at the sceptical look on Jude's face India looks away. "It's true. You don't know when to quit. That's what makes you a good friend."

There is a moment of silence. "Thank you."

India shrugs. "My pleasure. Do you have to go back soon?"

"I only have a week here. Then I have to go into the studio in New York to do a few voice-overs and re-record some audio." She yawns. "I think with some editing the director may have something really good in the bag. I'm just glad it's over."

"It sounds like it was hard on you."

"When isn't it?" The question is serious, and Jude tries to lighten it up with a smile, but something distant has seeped into her expression. Lifting her hand she rubs absently at her brow.

"Headache?"

Jude nods. "Won't go away. I thought it was the dust in the air over there. Maybe it is. Maybe I just need some time to get the grit out of my system."

Leaning forward, India brushes her fingers over the journalist's hand still resting on the table. It takes a moment before Jude suddenly pulls her hand away sharply.

"What are you doing?" There's an edge to her soft voice that India doesn't like.

"That feel better?"

Jude doesn't say anything, but India knows. The glow rising in the other woman's face is evidence enough.

"Don't you do that again." The journalist's eyes are suddenly hard.

"Jude?"

"I've spent two weeks talking to maimed people, injured people, people who have lost other people. To be honest, the last thing I need is a reminder that I can't help and you can ... and you won't. But for a simple headache you'll do it like it's nothing."

"It's different." India sits forward, her dark eyes fixed on Jude. "It's you."

"Everyone's '*you*' for someone!" The echo of Jude's raised voice circles out over the silence of the lake.

Taking a deep breath India gets up and walks inside, leaving Jude to stare out into the night.

Two hours later she wanders back outside and finds Jude curled up in the hammock. Hearing the footsteps Jude turns her head, but doesn't look at her.

"I'm sorry. I'm horrible and I'm a bitch."

"You're not, Jude." Standing next to the hammock India gazes down at her friend tenderly. "I can hear that you're tired and that it was tough on you."

For once Jude is the one who looks like a vulnerable child. "Are you still angry with me?"

"I never was. I didn't walk away because I was angry - I thought you needed some time to yourself." Hearing Jude's sigh India gets into the hammock, "Move over," and the two women briefly shift around, trying to find a comfortable position.

When India has pulled Jude's head to her chest and is combing through the long dark hair with her fingers, the journalist sighs, her breastbone rising to meet the small curve of India's ribs.

"I always think I've gotten used to it."

"How can you?" India's nails scratch at the nape of Jude's neck soothingly. "You're singularly perfect, but you're still just human. Right?"

"But I should... "

"Shush. You're always focused on what you *should* be doing. Take it easy on yourself for once."

Jude turns her head into India's body, and her voice is muffled by India's shirt. "Why is there so much hate, and hurt, and so much anger?"

With a sigh India turns the head-scratch into a slightly firmer scalp massage. "I don't know, sweetheart, but you can't fix it all. You can only do what you can do. That needs to be enough for you."

A chuckle sounds against her chest. "Isn't that what I've been telling you all this time?"

"Ironically, yes," and India raises her eyebrows mockingly at herself, "but we're not talking about me now. We're talking about you for once. Let's just say that if I can repeat it, then maybe I've been listening."

"Hm."

With her hands tucked tightly under her chin like a child Jude drifts off, until India realizes this by her even breathing. Wiping gently over the smooth forehead, making absolutely sure that there's no lingering pain, India nudges her.

"Jude?"

"Hm?"

"Are you falling asleep on me?"

"I'm just resting my eyes."

"Sure you are." She smiles over the other woman's head. "But you're resting your eyes on my arm, and it's dead."

"Oh. Oops. I'm sorry."

"Jude?"

"Hm?"

"That's your cue to get up, sweetie. Go to bed."

"Oh. Right." Stretching like a cat Jude groans, and India can feel her chest vibrating. "Thanks, India." To India's surprise the journalist gives her a quick peck on the cheek before rolling off the hammock.

"I'm glad I'm home."

It's no more than a murmur, but it makes India smile.

That night India cannot sleep. She lies awake, staring at her ceiling.

"Everyone's 'you' for someone!"

She has never seen Jude so upset.

India had lied when she said that she wasn't angry. She had felt it reverberate to the soles of her feet, but for once she'd made the right decision when she'd walked away. Because when she'd been inside, on her own, she'd stopped thinking about herself and started thinking about Jude. About how she must have been feeling to snap so suddenly. About what had pushed her so quickly to the edge.

She feels too much, and you refuse to feel at all.

A memory surfaces like a dolphin; Jude's breath warm in her neck, just before the warmth of lips on her cheek. India realizes that she hasn't been touched like that by anyone in a very long time,

and with a grimace of displeasure she pushes it all away. For a moment she is successful; then, as if told by the first memory that the water is safe, a second memory bobs up. The two slight dimples appearing at the corners of Jude's mouth as she is about to smile.

Shaking her head India rolls over and presses her warm face into her pillow.

It is definitely not appropriate to think of one's friend in such a ... lingering way.

As if to taunt her, a sudden memory of Jude, downstairs in the gym, sweaty and weaving rhythmically to the hypnotic music, pops up.

Grabbing the pillow India shoves it over her head and presses down in frustration. Irritation: fine. Sleep: even better.

The faint awareness of desire: unsettling.

No good at all.

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~ An Audience with the Sidewalk Saviour ~

by K. Alexander

DISCLAIMER: [See Part 1.](#)

FEEDBACK: Is always welcomed. Even the unfriendly bits. Find me at kalexy@webmail.co.za. Ps. Please don't send corrections. I have friends who will take care of that at their convenience.

8. And I'm not ready for this sort of thing (*"Anna begins" - Counting Crows*)

She doesn't want to get up too early, worried that Jude might want to sleep in and that she will disturb her, but when she pads downstairs to the kitchen quietly the faint smell of toast proves her wrong.

The journalist sits outside on her usual chair, reading glasses perched on her nose, feet pulled in under her comfortably as she scans the newspaper. Her hair is damp and slicked back from her

face. When she hears India behind her turns her head slightly but doesn't stop reading.

"Morning."

"You went for a run?" Sitting down opposite her India reaches for the jug of orange juice and pours some into the extra glass.

"Yep. Same as always."

"I know, but..." Shaking her head she sips at the fresh chilled juice. "I thought you'd take it easy, what with you just getting back from work and all that. I know - I wasn't thinking clearly."

Raising an amused eyebrow at India over the steel frame of her glasses, Jude turns to the next page with a loud swish and begins to scan through it. "The running clears my head, but I'm very glad to see you're still as snippy as ever, India."

Does everyone look that good in glasses? "Happy to oblige." Leaning forward India snags a piece of toast and bites into it with relish. "Besides, I bet you missed the snip something awful."

"Sure. Nobody gives lip quite like you do."

When India begins to cough suddenly, choking on her toast, Jude leans forward with a twinkle in her eye. "You okay?"

Nod.

"Do I need to come and pat your back?"

Shake of head.

"Sure?"

Nod.

"Do I get a medal for shutting up India Waits?"

Glare.

This sudden awareness of Jude is uncomfortable to India, but almost pleasantly so. Masochistic. When the journalist, concentrating deeply on a document, tucks a strand of her thick dark hair behind her ear with those elegant tapered fingers, India both silently sighs in appreciation and snorts at herself derisively for doing so. When Jude throws her head back and gives that rich honeyed laugh, revealing that tanned neck, India's large brown eyes miss a blink even as her own eyebrow arches to mock her. It is an awkward place to be; both stirred and aware of the

ridiculousness of it - but then, India has been in an awkward place for so long that she really doesn't mind that much. After all, in a week Jude has to go back to do the voice-over, and then India can begin to deal with this stupid juvenile crush that is plaguing her.

However, the first time that she really notices the faint blush on Jude's cheeks as the woman laughs at a silly compliment, India very unceremoniously spits her juice onto the table. Unrequited is awkward, but awkward is familiar. The barest hint of reciprocated affection, however, is not.

Now India wavers between being affectionate for the sheer pleasure of it, and being very reserved to avoid any response that might make her wonder. She reaches out to pat Jude's thigh, and ends up dropping her hand klutzily to her side. Or she leans over to bump Jude's shoulder jokingly with her own, and so suddenly check herself at the last moment that she lurches like a drunk. What Jude thinks of this India isn't entirely sure. She is so busy second-guessing herself that any response from the usually collected woman passes her by.

To skirt the root of her problem she decides to stick to her side of the table, come hell or high water.

No touchy. No feely. No googly eyes; and god forbid, NO HAMMOCK.

That seems to work. From a distance she can admire the object of her (hopefully) temporary and discomfited affection without the capacity to mortally embarrass herself, and more than that she can't truly ask for.

"India - favourite actress."

"You?"

"Nice try, toady, but I'm not an actress. Answer the question."

"It's an unfair question, Jude. You know I don't watch many movies. So I'm sticking with you as my answer and you can't make me change my mind."

"For want of your recognising anyone else? I'm so flattered I think I might cry."

"Have a tissue. Favourite actress?"

"Meryl Streep."

"Oh yeah. 'Fatal attraction'. She **is** good."

"You're kidding, right? Tell me you're kidding... You're not kidding, are you? Oh. India, I think I

really might cry now."

"Unfair. Ask me something I know the answer to."

"Okay, let's make it easy. Favourite colour."

"Blue."

"I wouldn't have guessed. You wear a lot of neutral tones."

"Francois Kahn bought the wardrobe. It's all perfectly nice, and probably very expensive, so I don't want to waste it. Favourite music?"

"It's a toss-up between Vivaldi and Bob Seger. Favourite quote?"

"Hmm. 'Go placidly amongst the noise and haste' etcetera etcetera. Favourite food?"

"Carrots, obviously. Nice quote."

"You're cheating, Jude. Favourite food?"

"I don't know. Tropical fruit. Mangoes. Most beautiful person?"

"Jude, you *know* that's you."

"You really have to watch more movies. You know there are hundreds in the media room downstairs, right?"

"You're hilarious. I'm laughing on the inside."

The first time, it took 24 seconds to ruin the life of India Waits. The second time, it seemed like a heartbeat.

"Here - why don't you pour us each a glass?"

Marguerite is visiting a friend, and they are alone in the kitchen amongst heavenly smells. Jude has just poured a small amount of wine into the bubbling bolognaise sauce, and is now holding out the bottle to India. Pushing herself away from the counter the small woman steps closer.

"Sure. You like wine?"

"Some of it. I'm no connoisseur," Jude shared a smile with India before she turns down the heat on the stove, "but that's just such a good bottle. My favourite, in fact."

"All right." Taking two glasses from the shelf India wipes them both with a cloth before she pours. "Here you go. To new facts."

Clinking her glass lightly against India's Jude takes a small sip, closing her eyes as she obviously savours the taste. "Oh, that is so good."

Ignoring the more carnal connection her mind is desperately trying to make with the husky hum of appreciation, India sips from her own glass. "Mmm, this is excellent. I see your point."

"It's really worth it." Taking another small sip Jude puts the glass down to the side and resumes stirring the sauce.

It is involuntary; the way India's eyes study Jude over the rim of the glass as she sips. Then, she supposes, it is impolite but inevitable, the way her gaze becomes a little too appreciative of the way that the dark hair cascades over the narrow but strong shoulders, the way the comfortably worn jeans have dropped slightly onto the lean hips to bare a stretch of copper skin between the waistband and the white cotton shirt. Jude has put on a CD, something with a Spanish beat that India doesn't recognise, and when the beautiful woman begins to move her body ever so slightly along with the rhythm, India can't look away for the life of her. Jude is humming along to the music, almost sub-vocally, and when the low sound finally registers to India's ears a sudden shiver lifts the hair in the nape of her neck. Somewhere she knows that she has to step outside, that - for her - the mood has turned into something terrifyingly electric, that she'll have to tear her gaze away soon ... but she is still nailed to the spot when Jude turns to grasp the wooden pepper grinder and pauses mid-motion for only a second, her green eyes connecting intensely with India's before she wraps her fingers around the grinder and turns back to the stove. She has seen the way India has been watching her. It is clear: not in what she says, but in the fact that she says absolutely nothing at all.

Flushing in embarrassment, India sips from her glass with rising unease. She can actually feel the blood rising in her cheeks. Rolling the red liquid around in her mouth broodingly she considers how she can step outside without making herself too obvious, but just as she has an excuse established - flimsy, very flimsy, but right now she doesn't care - Jude turns around, the wooden spoon perches carefully in her hand as she holds it out to India.

"Want to taste?"

India's big eyes slip to the spoon, and then meet Jude's. "No. Thank you."

"It's very good."

Taking another nervous sip India looks again at the spoon, and then again at Jude. "I'm sure it is."

"India. Just a taste." India recognises the tone that is coming through in the other woman's voice. Jude is never impolite if she can help it; instead, she slips into her business mode, somewhere between a gentle cajoling and a challenge.

"I really don't want to. It'll be too hot. It'll burn me." But even as Jude says it she is putting the glass down on the surface beside her and moving over.

She isn't sure what they are talking about anymore.

Lifting the spoon Jude holds it out, cupping her other hand underneath it to catch any drips. "Closer, for heavens' sake." When India opens her mouth and inclines her head forward, Jude manoeuvres the spoon between her lips carefully.

The sauce is fantastic. This, however, is as abstract a thought as India has ever had. She is concentrating on where to look; away from the bright eyes so close to hers. Then, Jude's thumb slides lightly across her bottom lip.

"Missed some."

That simple touch is electrifying. It lingers on India's lips, slides down her throat, burns through her chest and tries to ground itself through the length of her legs. Her knees tremble. Jude is so close to her that she can smell the other woman's intoxicatingly subtle perfume. Finally she lifts her gaze to meet the intense eyes pinning her to the floor, and then it seems that the single remaining thing she can do is to tilt her chin up ever so slightly and lean in.

Jude's lips are soft as velvet. Pressed to her own they part, and a soft exhalation forces itself from Jude's throat. Then, a gasp. It is the current that does it - not some flowery narrative of love, but an actual spark that shoots from India's lips to Jude's, creating a cracking noise and a tingle where it touches skin. Jerking her head back Jude stares at India with wide eyes, her normal composure shattered.

"Fuck."

That would sum it up.

At a loss for words India stares back. There is a faint buzzing sensation in her hands - absently she realizes that it's the feeling she has when she's working. Lifting one hand ever so slightly she curls her fingers inwards and rubs at the palm of her right hand. Jude's eyes follow the motion, as if she has all the time in the world, and she watches with blank eyes as India works the feeling back into her limb.

"What the hell."

It is supposed to be a question.

Wide-eyed, India keeps her head down. "I'm sorry."

The silence flowing from Jude is uncomfortable and the smaller woman tries to cover it up. "I seem to be malfunctioning."

Still watching India's hand Jude lifts her own and rubbed across her bottom lip with her manicured fingers - the very same motion that had almost brought India to her knees. Then, turning away abruptly, she grasps her wine glass in both hands, almost desperately, and drinks.

Frowning, uncertain, India rubs at one hand with the other. "I'm sorry, Jude. Jude?"

The woman drinks as if she does not hear her - "Jude?" - and then suddenly spins around.

"Why did you do that?"

"I..." India bites her bottom lip, and when she looks up she notices Jude's gaze gravitating to her mouth, "I wasn't thinking." Tentatively, scared that she is messing up, she adds softly, "It just felt right."

The sound that comes from Jude's lips is something between a shudder and a sigh. Lifting her hand the journalist rubs at her lips again. "And this?"

"I don't know. That's never happened to me before."

"I don't think that's ever happened to *anyone* before, India." Jude silently leans against the kitchen cabinet, her expression distant.

"Jude? Talk to me. Please."

"I don't know what to say."

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't know what to think."

"Not about the..." India's fingers brush her own lips. "The other part."

Jude's eyes light briefly on her, and then the other woman looks away. "I don't *know* what to say, India. I don't know what to think."

"It would help if you said that you were okay with it." Rubbing her forehead India watches Jude with wide apprehensive eyes. "I'm out on a limb here, Jude."

"I..." Jude stops to think. "Was it just the moment for you?"

"No. I feel something for you that..." With a vague motion of her hands India shakes her head.

"Don't make me say something that I'm going to regret if you don't feel the same, Jude."

"I don't know what I feel, India!"

Stepping forward, India catches Jude's gaze and holds it unblinkingly. "Can you tell me that you didn't like it? Can you tell me that you didn't *want* it?"

"We can't always have what we want."

"I'm right here." India holds her arms out to her sides as she approaches slowly. "Right in front of you, and I'm telling you that if you want me, you can have me."

Reaching out blindly Jude drags India closer and wraps her fingers in her short unruly hair, leaning down to crush their lips together with a passion that drives the air from India's lungs. It's almost as if she is testing her own limits. Her lips are fiery when she kisses India as if she is going to consume her, and when Jude's tongue sweeps over India's possessively, the shorter woman's knees buckle under her again. India is reaching out to steady herself when Jude's grip loosens abruptly and the journalist steps away, out of her grasp.

"No."

Frowning, India tries to drag her mind away from the tingle of electricity still blazing across her mouth. "No?"

"I can't do this."

"What?"

"This." Jude gestures, and the motion is unusually brutal. "I'm not ready for this sort of thing."

Expelling a slow breath India steps back carefully, until she can feel the safety of the counter at her back. Reaching blindly she finds her own glass and drinks deeply from it in an unconscious imitation of Jude's earlier action. When she speaks her voice has a slight edge of ferocity to it. "Not ready for what? Can you be a little more specific? A kiss? A relationship? Someone like me? A woman? Just me?"

Jude's jaw works silently before she answers. "All of it. I can't."

"Why?" It is asked quietly, but India has failed miserably to hide the tremor in her voice. At the sound Jude closes her eyes for just a second.

"I don't want anything like this. I can't have it. It's not going to work."

"It's working. It's *been* working. We **work**, Jude! We make sense!" Tears of frustration build in India's eyes. "What happens afterwards just *happens*! You can't control every fucking thing!"

"Maybe not, but I have control over this!"

They stare at each other over the expanse of the room. India's bottom lip is trembling. It makes her look like a lost little girl. Finally she clears her throat.

"Just tell me, Jude - is it me? Do you feel anything for me at all?"

Jude's eyebrows contract, pulling up mournfully before she composes her expression. "It doesn't matter, India."

"It matters to ME!"

"It doesn't matter. The outcome is going to be the same."

Lifting her glass India drains it and then places it carefully on the counter. Taking one last look at the woman standing across from her, at the shining hair and the eyes that she has missed so much, she nods.

"Okay. I have to go."

"India, please don't leave like this."

"Bye, Jude."

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9. Are we ashes and wine?

("Ashes and wine" - A fine frenzy)

For days India sits in her new apartment, still devoid of furniture, waiting for the pain to pass. Finally, abandoning all pretence, she simply cries until she has no tears left. She has lost her best friend again, and she has lost her almost lover. Again.

Then, when she has grieved enough, she starts to consider what comes next.

She can go anywhere she likes. She has more money than she knows what to do with - and she doesn't have to do a thing. But the less she does, the more she thinks, and she doesn't want to have to think at all.

India starts by registering with the American Association of Drugless Practitioners (it's surprisingly easy - sometimes it's beneficial to be India Waits) and hiring an office in an upmarket high-rise not far from her apartment. All it takes is one well-placed newspaper ad to advertise her services, and when she walks into her new office on the first day, her schedule is booked ahead for months already.

She throws herself into her new work with something that resembles ferocity rather than enthusiasm. From morning to late afternoon she heals, and when she goes home she is exhausted enough for no superfluous thoughts to make it into her head.

"Ms Waits, can I make a suggestion?"

India's highly efficient secretary, a young woman with a blue streak in her fringe who refuses to call India by her given name on the grounds that it will be unprofessional, is standing in the door.

Sitting back in her leather chair, India stretches the tight muscles in her neck. "Sure, Hayley, what is it?"

"No offense, but I think you need to see a few less people every day." Catching the smaller woman's raised eyebrow, Hayley presses on regardless. "I admire your work ethic, but we're really squashing the patients in and rushing through them at a terrible speed. And maybe if we slowed down it wouldn't wear you out so much."

"Point taken, Hayley. I'll think about it."

When Hayley has left, India takes the five minutes grace between her two appointments and does think about it. At first she is tentative - she knows that there are tough feelings lying behind her motivation to push herself so hard, and she has been trying to avoid thinking about certain things for about six months now - but then, with surprise, she realises that where that ache used to be is now only a soft spot. When she thinks of Jude she doesn't exactly smile, but at the very least the

pain has settled into a placid sadness.

Time is indeed a healer of some perverse sort.

India presses the intercom button. "Hayley?"

"Yes, Miss Waits?"

Rolling her eyes at the formal tone of voice India sighs. "Okay. Do what you have to with the schedule. It's in your capable hands."

"With pleasure, Miss Waits."

The press has almost uniformly slammed her for deciding to open her own office, rather than to continue her charity work. They conveniently ignore her infrequent forays into war zones, and she ignores them for the most part.

When she thinks of Kinshasa she can almost taste the blood in her mouth, hear the rushing of water around her. She still wakes up breathless and shaking sometimes; sleep doesn't come easy, and most of the time it doesn't stay for the duration of the night.

There are still a lot of people trying to make friends with her, but she is never sure of the intention and so she discourages them regardless. The only person at the office that she thinks she could like is Hayley, and Hayley refuses to call her by her name, never mind be her friend.

She is not completely alone, though. She has struck up an unusual friendship with an old lady who lives two floors down. Dorothea Vallgren is a retired Swedish opera singer who cares very little for sensationalism and only knows India as a medical doctor of sorts. India does not dissuade her from her opinion, and they sometimes spend evenings playing Rummy whilst Dorothea goes on flights of fancy, reminiscing about her profligate youth.

India understands very little of these episodes, as half of the stories degenerate into a dreamy Swedish monologue, and the other half consists of Dorothea belting out little-known arias in her powerful cigar-and-whiskey voice. Eventually Dorothea will remember that India is listening, and she will draw her attention back in with a sharp questioning "Ja?" which India answers with a solemn "Ja" even if she has not understood a thing. She likes the old woman's vivacity, so the words don't matter much.

There is also Anthony Allan on the third floor, who sometimes takes her to coffee shops just to argue with her. He calls himself a professional protestor and doesn't see his trust fund status and high-end residence as inhibiting him from being "one of the people". Between protests (he's not a one-trick pony; as long as the ideology suits him he'll support anything) and producing his little

poor-quality liberal fliers he arrives at India's door, leaning against it lankily, and when she wants to let him in it's always the same thing. He refuses to come in because she's a supporter of capitalism, shoots down her comment that he's exactly the same for living in such an expensive apartment building, and then takes her to a hole-in-the-wall coffee place about five blocks down where he proceeds to flood her with political tirades. She takes Anthony much the same as she does Dorothea - she doesn't understand half of what he's saying, so she settles for enjoying his enthusiasm and gives inadequate answers when he needs them. He says that he gets frustrated, but this is a part of their dynamic; he wants to believe that he can break through to her and she doesn't mind him trying.

Anthony doesn't believe in her skill as a healer, either. Every now and then he'll bring the newest article about her with him, and slam it down on the table as if it's personally offensive to him. Then, an argument will follow, he more passionate than she, until something else grabs his attention. It is this part of him that appeals to India. She likes the fact that when everyone else is sycophantically deferential, Anthony thinks she's a fake and doesn't hesitate to tell her so. In detail. He is not there because she is who she is - he is there because he is who he is. He will not even let her lay her hands on him for proof; there is much mumbling of gamma rays and radio-activity and just plain germs that makes her laugh rather than insults her. She thinks that if she has to touch him, their interaction will fall apart, and she's learned from her mistakes.

Jude Limas is difficult to avoid, even if one is trying. She features on talk shows, has a new actuality programme on CNN, and makes an appearance on every newsworthy video clip. Now she is in Afghanistan, now in Angola, wincing at the sound of explosions too close to be safe even as she continues with her script, ducking down behind barrels whilst shots ring out around her.

Every time India sees something like that her heart shrinks in on itself. She dreads the time when the story of the day will be that Jude got too close to the danger zone. She sometimes considers pulling a few strings to stay close to Jude, to be a clandestine groupie who keeps watch, but she knows that 1) Jude will not appreciate it, and 2) she simply cannot go back there.

And so she heals at her own rate, by her own rules, not loving it but finding it imperative to do *something*.

Bzz. Bzzzzzzzzzz.

Hayley's efficiency sometimes gives India a pain where she can't do anything about it. The girl even presses the intercom button as if she's buzzing India by her surname. Yawning, India leans closer, deciding on a whim to be haughty.

It's fun to mess with Hayley.

"Waits here. Who's this?"

"Hayley." She can almost picture the woman's arched thin eyebrow rising in exasperation, and somehow that gives her a great deal of pleasure.

"Why hello, Hayley. How are you?"

"Tolerable, Miss Waits. Are you quite finished?"

India has to fight the urge to giggle. She knows she's being silly, that she's probably been in the office too late for a few days now and has lost the plot completely, but cheerfulness is rare and has to be savoured when it comes along, even if it is unreasonable.

"Good of you to be so stern with me, Hayley; I wouldn't want the fact that I sign your paycheque to inhibit your disapproval in any way."

There's an audible sigh. "Are you finished *now*?"

"Yes. I think I am. What can I do for you?"

"I have a walk-in. Can I disturb your lunch?"

Looking at the barely touched noodles on the edge of her desk India grimaces. "Yes. I'm done. Go ahead."

"Thank you, Miss Waits." If she didn't know better she'd swear that was sarcasm. She considers pressing the button and asking outright - it would be worth the amusement to her - but when the door opens and Jude Limas steps through it, the smile dies on India's lips.

She stands awkwardly, and then wonders if she should have stayed seated.

"Jude?"

"Hello, India."

Jude looks awful. Her skin is sallow, her eyes are dull, and her hair is in disarray and falling out in clumps. Terrible what loss will do to some people.

At least, this is what India would like to tell herself. The truth is that Jude looks lovelier than ever. Her glossy dark hair is plaited back, emphasising the high cheekbones and obstinate triangular chin, and her green eyes stand out against her honey-hued skin. She looks cool and casual in her white linen shirt and beige cargo pants, but India notices the restless way in which her thumbs twitch against her thighs, and knows that she's nervous.

"Sit down, please?" Apprehensive herself, India indicates the chair opposite her, and then she can't resist any longer.

"Are you okay, Jude? Are you sick?"

She has to stop herself from reaching out to lay her hands on the other woman, to run her hands down Jude's thighs as if the journalist is a racehorse on show, checking for any of the imagined hurts she has seen playing out behind her eyelids at night.

Though Jude doesn't smile, the corners of her eyes crinkle slightly at the concern seeping involuntarily through India's attempted careless tone of voice. Sitting down in the comfortable chair she nods up at India.

"No, no, I'm fine. I'm good. Thank you."

"Okay." Sitting down herself India picks up a pen and begins to toy with it uneasily. Her hands are still burning with the need to touch, and she must keep them occupied. "I... What can I do for you?"

She's trying hard not to look at Jude, because the memories she has so carefully put aside in the last few months are flooding back and demanding that she drinks in the sight of the woman sitting across the table from her.

"I hope you don't mind. I was in the area. How are you?"

It's obvious to India that the usually collected woman is floundering, and trying to cover it up with small talk - before, she would have teased Jude about it. Now, that level of interaction is gone. She craves the banter, the easy teasing, the repartee, but it's not her place to initiate that. It's probably not even her place to ache for it.

"Not at all, Jude. It's nice to see you." The first honest sentiment of the day falls vulnerably between them, and India wishes she could unsay it. She covers it up with a hasty "I'm fine, thanks. No complaints," but not before she spots the slight smile starting to curve around the other woman's lips.

*Oh, dear God, please don't let her smile at me. I beg of you. Anything else. **Anything**. That smile will be the beginning of the end for me. Have mercy.*

Jude rearranges her expression almost guiltily and India sends up a small word of thanks to the heavens.

"So ... you have an office." Looking around the sterile white walls, taking in the massage table set up near the window, Jude nods almost pensively. "It's really the last thing I thought you'd do."

"People change," India snaps defensively, cringing at the pitch of her own voice even as she says

it.

The small smile flits over Jude's mouth again, more pronounced in its amusement this time, and India is caught between wanting to be affronted and wanting to worship those lips.

"Not that much." Jude's green eyes are twinkling, though her expression gives nothing more away. "At least, that's what I hope." Her gaze travels over India's face, up to her tousled short dark hair, and India resists the urge to run a hand over what she knows is most likely a mess of flips and wild ends. She has given up on trying to control her hairstyle - it is an entity of its own.

"Sorry."

"Don't be." Rubbing at one hand with the other in a motion that to India is strangely reminiscent of that night, *that* night, Jude is hesitant. "I wanted to speak to you, India."

Bemused, India frowns.

Jude corrects herself. "I know we're talking now, but I meant ... at length. Somewhere else. I'm sure you have a client coming in soon."

Looking up at the chrome clock over the doorway, India does a quick calculation before she nods. "In about ten minutes. Yes."

"Okay. Can I buy you dinner tonight?" Jude picks up the slight alarm fleeting across India's face, and misreads it. "You *can* say no."

A slight self-deprecating chuckle escapes India's lips. "You're wrong." She thinks for a moment. "Okay."

"Is there somewhere you'd prefer?"

"Umm... there's a little Italian place I go sometimes - it's about three blocks from here. It's fairly unknown and the booths make for great privacy." A slight blush suddenly rises in India's cheeks. "Not that... it's just... we probably won't be bothered by the other patrons."

"I got that." The smile is threatening to appear again.

Biting the inside of her cheek, India tries not to focus on Jude's lips. "Fine. Seven thirty? Okay. I'll get Hayley to make a reservation. You can get the exact address from her on your way out."

"Good. I'll do that." Jude rises. "I'll see you tonight."

"Yep. Okay."

When the journalist closes the door behind her, India leans back and sighs.

She should have said no.

She can't take this again.

India's there a few minutes early, but Jude is already sitting in the corner of the private booth, studying the leather-bound menu by the light of the sconce mounted against the wall above her. The journalist's glasses are perched on her nose, and India's heart lurches uncomfortably in her throat. Looking up, Jude smiles.

"Hi. You look great."

"Thanks. You too. Hi." Sliding into the seat opposite Jude, India grasps the other menu. "Have you ordered something to drink?"

"A bottle of wine - they stock my favourite." Jude smiles hesitantly. "I hope you don't mind."

"No. That's great." Or something completely unlike it. The memories are dragging India down, and she doesn't know how she's going to get through this dinner. She has no idea where to look, because she has a suspicion that if she looks at the other woman she won't be able to look away. And then, she suspects, Jude will be able to read the ache and uncertainty and pure plain *want* in her eyes. Paging at random through the menu she keeps her head down. "Have you decided what you're going to order?"

"I'm wavering between the chef's salad and the spaghetti bolognaise." Jude peers at her over the menu. "Anything you'd care to suggest?"

That we both go home and you don't break my heart again?

"The 'Pollo con Limone' is excellent."

Reading through the short description Jude nods and closes the menu, putting it to one side. "Sounds tasty. I'll try it."

When the owner comes over and insists on kissing both their hands before he pours the wine reverently for Jude to taste, India orders for both of them and waves away his compliments familiarly.

"You come here often, I take it."

"Often enough, but he doesn't seem to be getting used to it."

Jude lifts the glass to her lips and takes a sip, closing her eyes in enjoyment. At the sound of the slight murmur slipping from her throat India frowns, trying to will away the unwelcome flashback.

"Jude. I can't..."

She wants to tell Jude that she can't do this, that she can't stay; but as Jude's eyes fix on her with a sense of inevitability reflected in them, she realises that if she were to say this, Jude would actually let her leave. And then she would leave, because she'd asked to in the first place. And if she left, she's fairly sure she won't see Jude again.

Which is worse - the ache of being with her? Or the ache of being without her? India has been without her for a while, and thinks that most likely she will be without her again soon (forever?). So, the only thing that remains is to enjoy the moment for what it is.

"India?"

Realising that she's pensively staring at the scone, India blinks and returns her attention to Jude. "Excuse me?"

"You were saying something."

"I was? It must not have been important."

"Okay." Jude almost looks relieved. "You're not smoking anymore?"

A semi-neutral topic. Good. "Sometimes, but not much. After ... After Kinshasa my lungs can't handle much more than one a day."

"That's silly. You should just stop."

Raising her eyebrows India sits back. "I'm doing better than I used to. That should count for something."

"Of course." Jude is immediately penitent. "Sorry. It's none of my business. Are you enjoying San Francisco?"

"Yeah. It's a great city, though I don't do much sightseeing lately." India sips at her wine. "How about you? Been home much? It doesn't seem like it."

"Not much, no." Jude traces the simple square pattern on the table cloth with her finger. "Every time I think I'm done someone else phones with another proposal, and I can never let them go. You know how I am."

All too well. "You should take on a little less. You'll work yourself into the ground like that."

Spotting the wince that India fails to hide, Jude reaches out, stopping just short of touching her hand. "It's okay to show that you're still concerned about me, India. I won't think anything of it. I worry about you too."

At a loss for words - what do you say to someone who can sum you up so quickly and so accurately? It's terrifying - India sits back, trying to put more distance between them, just as the food arrives.

Thankful, India tucks into the delicious chicken, making sure to keep her head down. Every now and then she feels Jude's gaze on her, but she eats resolutely.

"You're back to being bristly."

It sounds like an accusation, but when India looks up Jude's expression is one of fond indulgence. Poking at the remainder of her meal, India bites the inside of her lip.

"Why do you worry about me?"

"Why?" Jude frowns. "Because I care, India - I haven't..."

"I didn't mean it like that," India interrupts, eager to stop the direction of Jude's statement, "I meant: what is it that you worry *about*?"

"Oh." Jude dabs at her mouth with the napkin before she drops it onto the plate and sits back. "I worry about how you are. That something will go wrong, like in Kinshasa. I worry that you're safe. That kind of thing."

Not sure now why she even asked, India shrugs. "But I'm okay."

"I wouldn't know that for sure unless I see you." Picking up her wine glass Jude swirls it thoughtfully. "And I'm still not sure. You seem smaller than you used to, somehow. "

With a shake of her head India shrugs. "I'm *fine*, Jude."

"... I bet you think you are, India, but the last time you and I really *spoke*, you didn't want to do this anymore. Now you're in an office, taking clients, making money... It's all very... "

"Capitalist?" India supplies drily.

"Yes." But Jude has to chuckle, and the sound is so contagious that India grins despite herself. Gazing at her, Jude sighs. "It's nice to see you smile, India."

Just as suddenly as it has arrived, the easy atmosphere dissipates. India turns her gaze from the woman opposite the table to a scone three booths over, more to collect herself than for any other purpose. Scones can only be so interesting. "I still do that sometimes."

"I'd hoped so."

After a moment India returns her gaze, her expression serious. "What would you have me do,

Jude? Keep going until something gets out of hand?"

"No." Shaking her head empathically, Jude leans forward. "But to criticize your own skill, and then to go to selling it - that's a strange leap. I just don't understand it. I thought you'd stop when you could."

"I need a whiskey." Beckoning the waiter, India orders. She waits until he was out of earshot, gathering her thoughts, before she speaks.

"I also thought I'd stop, Jude. I wanted to, so much." Her voice is soft, solemn. "But then I thought about how scared I always was. How I'd been running away from everything. My ability, my life, confrontation... you. And I realised how goddamned drained I was of running. I didn't want to do it anymore." She shrugs. "The best way to deal with a fear that the world won't let you forget is to approach it on your own terms in a controlled situation. Oh, and it happens to be the only marketable skill I have."

Smiling at the last words, Jude shakes her head. "You amaze me. I don't know what to say, now."

"Now **that** amazes *me*."

With a snort Jude sits back, but her mind is a million miles away. It gives India ample opportunity to study the flickering play of the light over her strong jaw and the curve of her bottom lip.

When she realises that she is staring it's already too late. She's lost. Her heart is in her throat. She never should have come.

"Why are we here?"

Startled by India's sudden outburst Jude snaps back to attention. "I assume you're not being philosophical." When the dark eyes stay on her without any reaction she sighs and sits back. "I was half hoping that we could have dinner and I could just get up and leave without having to offer collateral."

India doesn't smile. "We could still do that. You can get up and walk away right now."

When Jude looks over at the door the longing in her eyes is unambiguous. Setting her jaw she turns back to India. "What was it you said? Deal with fear by approaching it on your own terms in a controlled environment?" India nods and Jude sits back, indicating the table between them with a nod of her head. "Controlled environment."

"I don't understand." The confusion eats at India's gut. "What's the fear?"

Jude looks at her unflinchingly. "You."

"Me?" Staring at the journalist across the table India scowls. "You're afraid of *me*?" She looks

down nervously. "Is it what I can do?"

"No. It's what you did. To me."

When India looks up, Jude has turned her head away. Her profile is strained.

"Jude, I know I shouldn't have kissed you, but I thought you... Why would that scare you, though? It won't happen again."

Jude looks at India for a long moment, her expression thoughtful, and when she begins to speak she's deceptively matter-of-fact.

"I've never had any real roots since I started building this career. So I get to see most of the world, have incredible experiences, and meet the most remarkable people all over the globe, but in the end I go home - even for the shortest while - and I get to be all by myself. I'm selfish. There's usually so much misery and distress and upheaval around me, that when I'm not working I really just want the keel to be as even as possible."

"And you thought I'd rock the boat."

Leaning forward, Jude smiles unexpectedly sweetly. "Oh, you would. Trying to grasp you is like dancing with a centipede, India. You go four steps forward ... and seven back. You're not sure what you want, and whenever you meet resistance you think you're being punished for something."

India frowns angrily. "I didn't come here to be... "

"Please. Wait a minute. Let me finish." Jude holds up a hand and waits for India to nod grudgingly before she continues. "Now me, I've never *had* to fight to reach people. But then, I've never actually had to maintain that connection for long. I'm all touch and go - however much long-distance consistency there is in me, I wouldn't bet on. I want it my way. All the way. And the way I like it is - simple."

Sitting back she studies India with a self-deprecating smile.

"You and me together, India - that's like a tsunami just waiting to happen."

The smaller woman's jaw is twitching. "So why did you invite me out, Jude? Just to tell me this? I could have gone without hearing it. I got the point when you pushed me away."

"I still wanted to talk to you about it! *You* were the one who ran!" The dinnertime hubbub around them suddenly hushes, and Jude waits silently until calm is restored before she continues. "Have you ever had a sore tooth? And you just *know* you shouldn't, but you keep poking at it with your tongue to check that the pain is still there?"

India sighs. "Jude, what does this have to do with anything?"

"That's what I was doing in your office today." When Jude bites her bottom lip, India perceives for the first time the uncertainty that the journalist is trying to hide. "I thought that maybe I'd see you, and that feeling wouldn't be there anymore, and I could just greet and go on. I was hoping I'd be lucky, but ..." Nervously she stops, looking away as she rubs at her forehead.

"Jude?" India's voice is still. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Ha. And I always say you're the one who's flustered easily." When Jude laughs tensely India reaches out and grabs her motioning hand in mid-air, bringing it down to the table.

"Jude. What are you trying to tell me?"

Looking down at their clasped hands, Jude sighs. Her eyebrows contract when she looks up. "The two of us are a hopeless combination. Useless. You're going to misunderstand me and get angry; I'm going to get overworked and snap. And sulk. I'm going to want you to do more, and you're going to want me to do less. You're deserving of more, and I'm going to have to fit you in as my career and my visibility dictates. With you, my life is going to be absolute madness. Guaranteed." Then, lifting their clasped hands to her mouth she drops a feather light kiss on India's wrist. Her eyes shimmer so that India thinks there might be tears in them.

"But without you...it looks like my life's going to be pointless. There's a connection that I don't understand. A flash - beyond the weird physical one - that ignites me in a way I've never had. I didn't think I could be with you, India... but it seems more and more likely that I can't be without you either."

"Oh." It is little more than an amazed exhalation from India's lips. Wiping her eyes fleetingly with one hand, Jude clears her throat.

"I know the moment is gone, and you've probably moved on. I waited too long. That's okay."

India chuckles breathlessly. "Moved on? Where could I move on *to* when you filled my entire universe, Jude?"

Now it is Jude who exhales, overwhelmed. Lifting India's hand to her mouth again she presses another kiss to her wrist, and the sudden spark under her lips is undeniable. This time she doesn't pull back, but smiles at the tingling sensation. Feeling the motion against her skin, India opens her hand and cups the strong jaw softly.

"I can't believe this yet. It's... I don't know. It's surreal." She can feel tears pool in her eyes. Her fingers trace a pattern over the smooth cheekbones, causing the journalist's green eyes to close slowly. "You want me."

Jude's gaze is suddenly on hers, and the pure fire there sends rapid currents from her throat right down to her toes - and everywhere in between. "Oh yes, " Jude whispers, "I very much want you."

"Oh God." Taking a deep breath through her nose India exhales raggedly. "Please don't look at me like that."

Suddenly unsure, Jude frowns. "India?"

India's fingers slip over her cheekbone, skims her hair, barely brushes the dark strands over her ears. "If you still want me, you can still have me. I'm yours."

The smile that Jude turns on her is not the blinding type that she so easily charms people with. This one is secret and scorching and slow.

"I *want* you, India. I want all of you. Take me home."

10. Light up, light up... as if you have a choice
(*"Run"* - Leona Lewis)

Somehow they manage to take care of the cheque and get to the car park before Jude is suddenly, urgently, pinning India against the side of a car with her lean body.

Her breath is rushed and smells faintly of lemon when she leans in and claims India's lips roughly, and it is all the shorter woman can do to wrap her arms around Jude's shoulders and pray that her trembling knees don't give in.

The rasp of Jude's warm tongue against hers sets off a shiver that runs all the way to her heels. Shifting with the fiercest of willpower she grasps the lapels of Jude's jacket as much to put some distance between them as to stabilize her trembling frame. When she leans away Jude tries to close the distance between them, frowning as India pushes her back.

"What?"

Her hot breath leaves a puff of white in the chilly air, and her voice is so ragged that India almost leans back in and gives herself over anew to Jude's fierce blaze. Closing her eyes for a moment she tries to pull herself together. Her nerve endings are on fire.

"Wait..."

As she says it a thread of uncontrollable energy snakes from her hands into Jude's veins. The journalist's mouth drops open and she exhales shakily.

"Uh... If you want me to wait you'd better stop doing that, India."

India loosens her grip, prying her fingers from Jude's jacket and regretting it the moment it's done.

Placing her hands on either side of India's head, the journalist closes her eyes and takes a shaky breath.

"Okay. I'm good. What's going on?"

Unsure of where to put her hands, but fairly certain that running them inside Jude's shirt as her body is urging her to do would be counterproductive, India settles for stuffing them in her pockets and pushing down tightly.

"We can't do this here."

She's entirely correct. Though until now the car park has been deserted, and though they are in a pool of shadow that shields them somewhat, it will just take one observant passer-by and their moment will be immortalized on every major news station. And Youtube, too.

Looking left and right Jude finally pushes herself away from the car and runs a hand over her face soberly.

"You're right. That was stupid."

Reaching out, India takes her hand. "Careless? Definitely. Stupid? No. By the way, you could kiss for the Olympic team."

"Nonsense." The word is light, but there is still a rasping velvet deepness to Jude's voice that ignites shivers deep inside India. "I thought it was you."

"Liar." Lifting the hand clasped in hers to her mouth India kisses the knuckles. "Your hands are cold."

"I've got gloves in the car, I think." Pulling her hand gently from India's, Jude gazes at her. "I think it's time for me to go home."

Unbidden panic rises in India. *Silly. Be calm.* She concentrates on keeping her voice blithe. "No nightcap?"

"No. Invite me another night. Tomorrow."

"Okay. Come over for dinner tomorrow night." When Jude nods mutely India cups her face. "So you're finished with me?"

"Oh God." With a groan Jude removes India's hand from her cheek and steps back. "If I had my way ... I can't go anywhere with you tonight, India. I'm a little too wound up."

That damned unmanageable shiver comes back and settles in a decidedly uncomfortable place. Taking a deep breath through her nose India stares at Jude. "What are you doing to me? I've never ... This is... You're going to be the death of me."

The low chuckle that escapes Jude's mouth is sinful. "Ditto, Waits. I told you we were mayhem just waiting to happen. Welcome to the tsunami."

"I don't know how I'm going to survive you..." and India takes in the other woman's uneven breathing, her slightly parted lips, the glint in her languid eyes, "but I don't care. Bring on the gales. I'm about to get wet."

Even as she realises what she's just said and the blush begins to rise in her cheeks, Jude leans over, her breath warm on India's ear.

"I'm counting on it. I shouldn't have to suffer alone."

And then, with a suddenly tender kiss to India's neck, she turns around and walks away.

India's sleep is scant and disturbed, but this time she dreams of Jude Limas, instead of war. That is a good few steps up. She wakes from what feels to be only a few minutes of deep sleep, just before her alarm goes off, and wonders if last night is just a hallucination.

Maybe she has finally gone insane.

But when she stretches, and stands in front of her mirror, she feels the burning energy inside her at the same time as she sees her shining face. She's glowing. If this is a hallucination, if she's lost her mind, it's a lovely place to be.

Even the usually detached Hayley picks up the transformation and can't help but comment.

"Whoa. Who got laid last night?" she blurts out before, with an absolutely mortified expression, she slaps a hand over her mouth. A hint of a blush rises in her cheeks. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

With a grin India raises an eyebrow. "Why Hayley... you're *human*! Please give yourself a bonus for that."

Hayley frowns, trying to regain her composure. "It wasn't appropriate."

"Luckily for you there's no-one in the reception area yet, so it really doesn't matter," India says drily. "Loosen your panties, Hayley. You'll be much more fun that way."

The day drags and flies at the same time. India asks Hayley to send in walk-ins as well - she wants her day to have as little free time as possible, because any spare moment distracts her fiercely.

The object of her euphoria phones around lunch.

"Hey, it's me. Are you busy today?"

"Hey you. Yes, the office is seeing a lot of walk-ins. How are you?"

"Mmm. Just fine. So I'll see you tonight at eight?"

"Yes. I look forward to dinner."

"Ditto, Waits. Want me to bring a bottle of wine?"

"Sure. That would be nice."

"I'll see you then. Bye."

"Bye, Jude."

The journalist is warmly gracious, but somehow India finds that more tempting than if Jude were whispering wayward things in her ear. The smooth surface hides a whirlpool, she is sure of it, and there is some allure to being dragged slowly but surely closer to the danger zone.

A clenching sensation in her stomach brings her back to the present, and when she realises that thinking about Jude has set forth a lazy burn through her veins, she shakes her head and throws herself into her work anew.

She is stirring the pasta when the doorbell rings. The sound sets off a delicate fluttering in her stomach, which is almost instantly replaced by an unpleasant clenching sensation. Damning her nerves she tosses the tea towel to one side and leaves the kitchen to answer the door.

Jude seems calm, but from the small signs that India knows she can tell the journalist is slightly ill at ease. Offering a smile, Jude holds up the bottle.

"Hi."

"Hey." India's gaze briefly takes in Jude's form before she smiles back at her. "You look great."

Wonderful, she actually wants to say. *So good that I hurt when I look at you*. But this is very new, and she doesn't want to scare Jude, and she doesn't want to scare herself either. Knowing that - more likely than not - her emotion is radiating through her expression in any case, she lowers her eyes and leads Jude to the kitchen.

The two wine glasses are standing there, ready, and only once the wine is poured can she look at

Jude again. Raising her glass, India thinks.

"To... to you. Being back."

"You shouldn't waste a toast on me, India."

"It's *not* wasted. Honestly. Everyone's a critic." Raising an eyebrow, India cocks her head. "Fine. You go."

That smile slips onto Jude's face, the one that crinkles her eyes and brings out the dimples. She looks at India for a long moment before lifting her glass.

"To benevolence that I don't quite understand, but that I certainly appreciate."

"Oh." Lost for words India takes a sip and then puts the glass on the counter and picks up the spoon, stirring for a moment before she continues. "I couldn't blame you for being unsure, Jude."

"I hurt you."

"It wasn't on purpose, was it?"

"Definitely not, but that doesn't change the fact that it must have hurt."

"It did, yes. But now I can either keep blaming you, which would just extend the hurt, or I can have what I wanted in the first place, which sort of brings a point to the heartache." India smiles to herself. "Everybody hurts sometime, Jude. It's what you do with it that makes the difference."

"When did you become so astute, India?"

"I was born like this. You just haven't seen this side of me yet." Poking at the paste she tries to gauge the texture. "I'm sorry. I wanted to have it done before you came, but my day was longer than I'd expected."

She feels, rather than hears, Jude silently walking up behind her, and then the taller woman's hand is at the nape of her neck, fingers brushing softly through the hair there.

"I thought you looked tired. No wonder."

India almost closes her eyes against the sensual experience, her eyelids fluttering before she realises that she probably needs to pay attention to the pot of boiling water on the stove.

"Umm... Jude, as nice as that is, you really need to stop. Please." Her voice cracks a little on the last word; to her relief, Jude withdraws her hand. "I can't think when you're doing that."

"You don't have to think, India. It's okay to stop once in a while."

"Says the queen of contemplation?" India nearly lets loose an undignified squeak when she realises that the feather light touches now dotting the base of her neck is courtesy of Jude's lips. Leaning back slightly she sighs, enjoying the warm brush of the other woman's mouth against her skin.

"I don't know how you think this is helping."

"I'm not trying to help."

"Obviously." A slightly rougher gasp forces itself from India's throat when Jude suddenly scrapes her teeth over the soft skin. "Jude. *Stop.*"

"You're a killjoy." The words are warm against her neck, and then she feels the heat dissipate as Jude steps away.

"And you're a danger to me. And society. Drink some wine."

There's a moment of silence, and then Jude speaks quietly. "I don't know what you're doing to me."

"Me? Doing to you?" Wooden spoon in hand, India turns around disbelievingly. "You're the one who..." Noting Jude's crest-fallen expression - which the other woman quickly tries, and fails, to hide - she pauses. "Jude? You okay?"

"Mmm." The journalist murmurs half-hearted assent as she drinks, and then catches India's sceptical look. With a sigh she puts the glass down and leans back against the counter. "You must think I'm some sort of terribly deprived pervert."

"Yes. In the best possible way." When Jude doesn't smile, India quirks her lips self-deprecatingly. "Okay. No making light of it. Why would you say that, Jude?"

"Because one moment I'm pushing you away, and the next I'm incapable of keeping my hands off you." Shrugging, Jude looks at her feet. "I'm not always like this, I promise."

Turning off the stove India walks over and joins Jude against the cabinet. Her first instinct is, in fact, to put her hands on either side of the other woman and box Jude in against her own body, but as with most of her other instincts concerning Jude she realises that this will be instigation rather than pacification. Instead, she stands side by side with the other woman, leaves a small gap between them, conscious not to let her hands wander.

"More's the pity." She smiles, but dares not look in Jude's direction. The distance between them is too small. "Jude, I know this is a special sort of situation. Not exactly normal, I mean. I'm not trying to push you away - just trying to keep us from hurtling headlong into the deep end. That's what's going to happen to me if this goes too fast; and the consequences..." India shakes her head slightly. "I need you to be sure."

Jude frowns, and her bottom lip juts out a little. "I've never been as unsure of the universal as I am right now, India, but of the specific? I'm sure."

"I'm just still so overwhelmed with you here. If you changed your mind ..."

"India," and Jude turns, propping her lean hip against the edge of the counter, "I can't say what will happen tomorrow. Unfortunately, that guarantee nobody will be able to make, but now? Tonight? I know what I want." She lifts her hand to her forehead pensively. "Ever since that time you touched me, that first time, it's as if there's an invisible thread connecting us. There's this lingering tingle where you've healed." She smiles, and as usual the brilliance of it takes India's breath away. "It feels like sunshine. Something I can't shake."

"But..." India compresses her lips, thinking, "I can't help but wonder what would have happened if I hadn't touched you. Did my ability interfere with the ordinary order of things? Is this just a by-product?"

"You know what?" Stepping closer, Jude cups India's cheek and gazes down into her eyes deeply. "Right now, I could tell you that I would have loved you regardless. I can tell you that it's the way of the universe. That we would have found each other anyway. But I'm not going to say any of that."

Hypnotised by the green eyes so close to hers, India forgets to blink. "Then what?"

"I'm going to say..." Jude leans in, her eyes fixed on India's lips, "fuck it." She stops when her lips are so close to India's that they're sharing a breath. "What matters is that I'm here, and you're here, and I want you... and I'm struggling to control it."

Studying the beautiful face in front of her at her leisure, India shakes her head in wonder. "You're usually so composed ... it's kind of nice to see you out of your element. I didn't think you ever got this flustered."

"I'm just me, India." Jude's eyes track down to her lips. "As normal a person as you are - except without the sparks and the mojo, of course."

"Oh, I beg to differ. You have mojo to spare." When Jude licks her lips India's eyes follow. "Jude?"

"Yes?"

"You're either going to have to move away so that I can finish preparing the food, or you're going to have to kiss me."

"How far are you from finished?"

"Done. I've turned off the stove. Are you hungry?"

In answer Jude closes the scant distance between them. Her lips are soft and skilful, her mouth gently insistent as she pushes all practical thoughts out of India's mind. Abandoning any pretence of control, India finally gives in to her impulse and runs shaking hands over Jude's hips, brushing at the hipbones ever so fleetingly with her thumbs before she slides her fingers back searchingly. When they make first contact with the band of skin between Jude's low-cut hipsters and her white cotton shirt the journalist groans into her mouth and arches forward, away from her touch but into her body. The resulting motion brings their hips together tightly.

"Oh," India breathes against Jude's lips, and again "oh," but there's nothing more to articulate. She can feel the heat rise in her, seeping down to her fingertips, and when she presses her hands again to Jude's lower back, to her warm skin, she is not surprised to feel the taller woman's hips jerk against her own.

Pulling her head back, disengaging their lips with a strained exhalation, Jude stares into India's eyes. The green eyes are dilated and wild.

"Not fair." Jude's voice is little more than a tight moan that sets India's teeth into a clench with pure desire.

"Don't care," and then India runs her hands up inside the shirt, tracing Jude's spine, cupping her shoulder blades, gripping her shoulders. Leaning forward she searches out Jude's lips again, a little more hesitant than the other woman. Their mouths clash and finally conform to a hungry rhythm. Releasing one hand from its white-knuckled grip on the counter next to India, Jude flexes it before splaying it over India's narrow waist, running tight fingers over India's butt, her hip, her thigh.

With each firm stroke India can feel the fire being fuelled inside her. A single throbbing point at her centre is growing, expanding; and every caress of Jude's tongue, every brush of her fingertips, every uncontrollable twitch of her hips is feeding the flame. Running her hands frantically down the corded muscles parallel to Jude's spine India spreads her fingers, slips them just into the waistband of Jude's hipsters, kneads the tenseness there, shifts her hands outwards to grasp the desperately twitching hips.

She can feel the heat radiating off her.

She can feel the energy chaotically jump from her fingers in jagged sharp bursts.

Jude's eyes snap open, her expression feral. Her hands still their orbit of India's hips stiffly. Her lips - now shining, the golden hue spreading over her face faintly - part in a silent groan.

With a low groan of her own India shifts her hips against Jude's, dragging them closer together. When her thumbs again brush over Jude's hipbones, the journalist lets out a small choked grunt.

"Please..."

India pauses, frowning in uncertainty.

Lifting one hand from its berth on the narrow hip Jude grasps India's wrist and pulls it inwards, her grip gentle but desperate.

"Please."

When India finally slides her hand downwards, pushing away the cotton barrier underneath her fingers, she gasps with pleasure at the unfamiliar sensation of the scorching liquid smoothness. Running her fingertips through the drenched folds she relishes in the small incoherent sounds slipping from Jude's lips, and when her fingers flick over the distended button Jude gasps out a breathy expletive.

"Oh fuck." Reaching down with a trembling hand she stills the motion of India's fingers. "I'm going to fall."

Stretching up India kisses her ferociously, twisting away as she does so to spin them around, placing Jude against the kitchen counter. Bending one knee between Jude's she nudges the other woman's legs further apart, and then her fingers are stroking and kneading and persuading in rhythm with the energy pulsing from her. Reaching back blindly Jude grabs at the counter as her head drops back, exposing her throat. Wrenched away from the kiss India leans in, her lips brushing against the convulsive flesh.

"Then fall, Jude."

It starts with the stiffening of the other woman's muscles under her, the twitching of those long thighs and the arching of the back. Wrapping her other hand around Jude, India presses forward, body propping up body. She can feel the shivers rising right from Jude's feet, radiating through her legs, her hips, her torso, her arms. Jude's teeth are clenched, and when she finally does open her mouth there is one quick indrawn breath, and then no sound.

Holding on as tightly as she dares India plants light kisses on Jude's collarbones and her clavicle, feeling the thunder of blood pumping under her lips. Her fingers don't cease their movements, and she feels so hot that she doesn't know how she isn't burning the woman with her touch. Jude shakes, arches, almost drops, and then begins to shiver again violently.

"Oh shit."

The first sound out of her mouth in a while is hoarse and juddering. Reaching down, Jude places a trembling hand over India's, gasping as the movement places a gentle pressure against her centre.

"Stop." India does as she's asked, but Jude is still shaking against her. "Stop. You need to move your hand, honey. Please."

When India withdraws her hand through the wetness she sets off a last judder that builds from Jude's hips and rises slowly through her body. The shudder of Jude's groin pressing against hers

melds into the heat blazing through her and the pleasure radiating through her, and with a muffled exhalation she presses forward, meeting the thrust with one of her own. Jude's eyes slip open languorously with the motion, and with a gasp she presses back, scissoring their legs so that her thigh is pressing against India's centre. When her hands slip down over India's hips to resume their journey, the smaller woman rocks forward again, groaning as Jude meets her movement. They thrust deceptively slowly against each other, the agitation simmering just under the surface, until the languidness can no longer be maintained, and then it is not long before India collapses against Jude breath-and bonelessly. It is no longer clear who is holding up whom; there is only Jude and India with their arms around each other and their hearts thundering and a steady glow spreading from them like the sunrise.

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~ An Audience with the Sidewalk Saviour ~
by K. Alexander

DISCLAIMER: [See Part 1.](#)

FEEDBACK: Is always welcomed. Even the unfriendly bits. Find me at kalex@webmail.co.za. Ps. Please don't send corrections. I have friends who will take care of that at their convenience.

11. Are you breathing what I'm breathing?

("The consequences of falling" - kd lang)

They lie torpidly on the massive leather couch, passion sated for the moment, muscles unwilling to obey to anything other than the occasional gooseflesh on an arm.

Jude is sprawled out on her back, her hipsters unzipped, the top button snapped off in one of the incidents on the way from the kitchen to the lounge. Her cotton shirt is somewhere under a bookcase. India, clad only in a shirt and cradled between Jude and the bank of the couch, rubs her cheek against the lace-covered breast under her cheek lazily as she shifts her bare legs with a wince.

"Hey Jude?"

"Don't you dare," the honeyed drawl comes from above her head. Shifting a little - and enjoying

the sudden tightness of the nipple under her cheek - she peeks up at the green eyes peering down at her idly from under heavy lashes.

"I wasn't."

The glow has dispersed, but there is still a faint golden glimmer around India's hands. Rubbing one of them over the silky caramel ribcage she grins a little at the way Jude shifts under her, replete and still enticed all at the same time.

"Mmm." Almost as if in the wake of Jude's contented murmur a trail of gooseflesh rises on her torso. Running her hand up to the stiffened nipples India slides a soft palm over one of them.

"There's a blanket on the chest against the wall."

Her head bounces as Jude chuckles under her. "You're on top, India. No chance in hell I'm the one getting up."

"It was worth a try." With a last fond caress of the nipple - which elicits a soft gasp and a soft playful swat to her shoulder - she rolls over Jude, off the couch, rises to her feet and promptly goes down again. As her head meets the wooden floor Jude is already there, crouching, her expression concerned.

"India?"

She runs her hands under India's shoulders and shifts her up awkwardly into her lap.

"India??"

Blinking owlishly against the light and the dull blow to her head India lets out a surprised laugh.

"I'll have you know this is your fault. My knees used to work fine before you."

Somewhere between concern and wanting to join in the joke, Jude scowls. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." India rubs at her head. "Between the kind of day I've had, and the kind of night I'm having, it's no wonder."

Leaning over India - and giving her the most wonderful view in the process - Jude plants a kiss on the spot that India is rubbing at.

"You work too hard, then."

"Ditto, Limas." Craning her neck India lifts herself up and dots the valley between the breasts above her with kisses. "Pot, kettle, all that jazz."

Jude closes her eyes briefly against the sensation. "You'd better cut that out before you get into trouble," she warns even as her hands reach out to unbutton the loose shirt and cover the small breasts beneath.

Arching into her touch India sighs. "That's exactly where I want to be."

"Let's play hooky tomorrow and stay right here," Jude murmurs against the pillow in the dead of night. Curled up behind her, India smiles into the warm satin skin of her back.

"Mmmm. Why do you torture me? You know I can't." Running her hand lethargically from Jude's thigh to her side, down over her stomach and barely brushing her breast, India pulls the other woman closer. "Why don't you stay? I'll come home earlier if I know you're waiting for me here. Promise."

"Classic bribery," the journalist mutters, "but I can't, either. I have to go to the studios in LA for a voice-over. And then I have to fly to Florida for an AIDS centre inauguration."

"Skip it."

"Heathen."

India's hand slips down Jude's arm, over her stomach again, down her thigh and around to cup her butt, almost as if she's reminding herself of something. "How long are you going away for?"

Catching the slight hesitation Jude turns around in her embrace and pulls her closer, so close that India feels the puff of the other woman's breath on her forehead. "I won't stay away, India. I'm taking next month off. Will you come to Chapala with me?"

There's a moment of hesitation. "Are you sure?"

"No. Never mind." Jude leans closer, laughing into India's wildly untidy hair. "Silly. Would I have asked otherwise?"

"Maybe you feel sorry for me."

"Sorry? For *you*? Are you kidding me?" Running a warm hand up India's side Jude slips a leg between hers, pressing her thigh up against hot and already moistening flesh. "I'm going to walk like a penguin for the next five days, India. If anything, I'm sorry for *me*."

India's hand snakes down between them. "I could fix that."

Trapping the roaming limb with her own, Jude pulls it up and rolls over, pinning India beneath her and her hand above her head. "Close, Wait, but no cigar. You're not trying to fix anything."

Besides," she leans down for a quick kiss that leaves India breathing heavily and straining for more, "I kind of like the ache. It reminds me."

Lifting her head, trying to reach Jude's mouth, India groans. "What of?"

"This. You." Jude leans in for another kiss, this one all ferocity and fervour. When she pulls back again India moans and rocks her hips against Jude's thigh. Shifting a little Jude pins India down with her greater weight, impeding movement. Brushing her body against India's, skin to skin, she takes India's other hand and pushes it up too.

"Keep them there."

"I want to touch you."

"I won't survive that. Keep them there."

India wants to complain, but then the warm lips are moving, searching, everywhere. Too incoherent for further protest she lays back and lets herself be loved.

Heavy-eyed from too little sleep and heavy-limbed from too much activity they say their goodbyes before they leave India's front door, cautious to be brief. It would not do to awaken their temporarily satiated senses again. Jude brushes her swollen lips across India's mouth, over her cheek, and then she's whispering something that India doesn't quite catch.

"What was that?"

"I'll call you." But that wasn't it. India doesn't mind. She has so much of Jude that one small thing doesn't matter. Besides, it sounded like an endearment, and Jude does not let those roll off her tongue easily.

"I look forward to it."

Jude looks at her as if she is about to fall upon and devour her, and then she stuffs her hands quickly, deeply in the pockets of her jacket.

"Okay. I've got to go."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Okay." Feeling her body leaning forward India stuffs her own hands into her pockets too, and steps back. "Okay."

"Right." Turning, Jude strides down the hallway. She peers over her shoulder just once, and it's all India can do not to groan at the sight of those heavy-lidded eyes taking her in.

After India's energy has crackled and flowed from her uncontrollably all night, weariness is not far behind. When she lays her hand on the third patient of the morning a wave of nausea rises in her so strongly that she has to clamp down on the urge to vomit. Buzzing Hayley on the intercom she instructs her to reschedule all of the afternoon appointments.

She is curled up on the couch, somewhere uncomfortable between an unpleasant dull persistent headache and vivid memories of last night, when her phone rings. Picking it up with a wince she peers at the display - Jude's number.

"Hey you."

"What's wrong?" Jude's voice is low and fretful. "I phoned the office first by mistake. Hayley says you took the day off and you're not well."

"I'm just worn out. Don't worry; please don't worry." India shifts to tuck in the blanket. "Last night took a bit more out of me than I had realized. I don't have much energy today."

"Oh." Jude is moving - the background sounds shift and distort. "I didn't... I didn't realise that it would impact like... Excuse me..." and then she's apologizing to someone in the background for being in their way, "... sorry about that. I didn't realize that it would impact like that. If I had..."

"Then what? Would you have wanted to do anything differently?"

"No. Oh no." Her voice drops furtively. "It was incredible. But maybe we could have taken it a little easier. Slower. Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't know. I..." India closes her eyes against the headache, "Jude, this has never happened to me before."

There is a silence before Jude responds. "Never? You mean..."

"No, I'm not a virgin, but... my body has never responded like this before. It's..." She smiles, "It's completely new to me."

"Hell, me too." The smile is echoed in Jude's voice. "But we have to be careful, then."

"I don't want to be careful with you, Jude. I want to be shaken to the core."

A soft groan slips from Jude's throat before she can contain it. "You need to not say that kind of thing to me when I'm 300 miles away."

"Sorry." India gives a low laugh. "No chance at all of you coming back tonight?"

"Nope." Tight and tense. "I wish I could."

"I want you."

"India..." It's a low warning rumble. "Don't tease me, honey. I have another four hours in an enclosed space with no relief at hand."

"Which begs the obvious comment, but I'll take pity on you. When do I see you again?"

"Three days, and even that's just a vague possibility." Someone calls out to Jude in the distance, and she covers the phone to give two or three quick commands before she comes back on the line. "Two weeks. You. Me. Chapala. I'll call you."

India is listlessly pushing at a file on her desk, cursing the paperwork that comes with the job, when Hayley buzzes her.

"Are you prepared for a walk-in, Miss Waits?"

Eyeing the growing stacks of files India sighs. "Probably not, Hayley. Is it important?"

Hayley is off-line for a moment before she responds. "It's Miss Limas."

Excitement rising in her, India begins to push the files into an untidy stack to one side. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Send her in."

She stands behind her desk, barely able to control her wide smile, when Jude Limas walks in, looking suave; all made up and coiffed with her tailored chocolate leather jacket.

"Hey you. I wanted it to be a surprise, which is why Hayley didn't tell you it was me. But you had to go and spoil it, didn't you."

India shrugs and points at the files, her attention barely with her actions. "Paperwork."

Jude's gaze takes her in, and then slips to the large window behind her which offers a fantastic view of the city. "Can we draw the blinds?"

"Sure," India finds the remote and presses a button, sending the blinds skittering across the

window, "but nobody would really be able to see in, you know."

Jude watches as the room darkens slowly. "It's a chance I don't want to take, India. There's a photographer from some gossip rag who's been following me around for the last few days. The last thing I want is to be featured on some front page."

"You don't think you should be seen with me?" It's said jokingly, but Jude reads the insecurity behind it.

"It's not a personal thing, India." She waits for the windows to be completely covered before she approaches India slowly. "I don't want them in my personal life, that's all. Would you want stolen photos of us plastered everywhere?"

India steps forward into her arms, sighing as she is firmly embraced. "Honestly? I wouldn't care." Reaching up she cups the other woman's cheek. "But I understand."

"Good." Leaning into her touch for a moment Jude smiles at her. "Besides, I *really* wouldn't want them to catch me doing this." She lowers her head and captures India's mouth for a sweet long kiss that has them both breathing heavily when they finally separate.

"Okay, I wouldn't want them to have that. Or this." India pulls Jude down for another kiss, exhaling heavily in pleasure when the other woman tightens her embrace and walks them to the couch. Dragging India down with her Jude lies back, pulling the shorter woman on top of her.

What has started as a fairly innocuous kiss is turning rapidly into something far more lustful. Whilst Jude's lips are playing havoc with India's senses, her hands have found the edge of India's shirt and are edging under it and over her skin agonizingly slowly. When she curls her fingers and runs her nails lightly down India's back she is rewarded with a moan which is quickly muffled against her mouth. Deciding to duplicate the motion, she slips her hands down this time, underneath the waistband of India's jeans, and drags her nails over the pliable flesh there.

Another moan that India desperately tries to muffle against her mouth.

Putting her hands on either side of Jude's head, the healer pushes herself up and graces the woman under her with a stern look.

"We can't do this here."

"I beg to differ." Taking advantage of India's lifted torso Jude runs her hands around the narrow ribcage and up to the small breasts, cupping them firmly through the lace bra. Her thumbs shift to rub over the rapidly tightening nipples, and she smiles at the resulting suppressed groan.

Closing her eyes India summons every ounce of willpower she has, and then pushes herself off the warm body and the comfortable couch.

"Jude..."

"Are you sure?" The journalist is laying back, her caramel skin set off beautifully against the camel colour of the couch, her hair slightly mussed. She's watching India from beneath her lowered lashes, one hand rubbing slowly against her stomach where the shirt has ridden up.

Gritting her teeth against her suddenly contracting muscles India walks over to the door and locks it. Then, with another hungry glance at the woman on her couch she summons her assistant on the intercom.

"Hayley, I'm going to take a break. No walk-ins until my next appointment, please."

"Done, Miss Waits."

Turning around India leans back against her massive desk, biting her bottom lip at the sight awaiting her.

Jude blinks innocently, running her hand up under her shirt. "Are you coming back here? Or should I stop?"

India's fingers clench around the edge of the table. "We can't use the couch, Jude. It's where I treat people. I'd never be able to concentrate on my work again..."

"Hmm." Jude's fingers slowly traverse her breast before she sits up and looks around. "Your desk?"

"I..." India swallows nervously when Jude rises like a panther and strides towards her, watching her intently. "I... there are people right outside the door, Jude. We can't..."

Walking around her, the journalist drops into her large chair and sits back, looking around the room. "So this is what it's like to be India Waits?" Her eyes lock onto India again. "Are you going to come over here?"

Noting the glint in the green eyes India shakes her head. "I *want* to, Jude, but we really shouldn't. And we don't have the time."

"How long until your next appointment?"

India shrugs. "Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes."

"Mmm." Leaning back, Jude locks her fingers over her stomach contemplatively and sighs. "Okay. I surrender. I'd rather take my time. Tell me about your week?"

"It was boring."

"That's all you can tell me? I need something more interesting, India. You need to distract me from my roaring libido."

"It's the truth. How can it possibly get any more interesting after a beautiful woman mauls me?"

"Mauls?" Jude raises her eyebrows. "I take exception to that."

"It's meant in the best possible way, of course." Wrapping her hands around the arm rests, India fights the urge to resettle in Jude's lap. "It was the same as any other week, with the impressive addition of you. Tell me about your week."

"Well," Jude shrugs, "it was also same old. Except for the part where I did the voice-over and my mind wasn't exactly on my work, so I kept mispronouncing words. Not the best topic for it, either."

"What was the documentary about?"

"The Falkland Islands." Watching India trying unsuccessful to smother a snigger, Jude pulls a forlorn face. "Yes, you get to laugh about it, but now the producer is putting together an outtake section. They've never had so much material to work with. It's going to get ugly."

"People deserve to see that you're human. It's the most attractive part of you."

"Really?"

India swallows as Jude watches her amusedly from under heavy lashes. "One of them." Then, in frustration, she scowls. "Jude. Stop it. You're doing that on purpose."

"Doing what?" The green eyes are glinting, and there is a slight grin curling around the edges of Jude's mouth.

"That!" With a wavering hand India indicates roughly in the other woman's direction. "You know what I'm talking about! The *looking too good and driving me insane with want for you thing!*"

A quick smirk flits over the journalist's face, but it is immediately replaced by a sweeter smile. Leaning forward, she props her elbows on the table and rests her face in her hands.

"I'm very glad to hear that."

"What?" India shakes her head in annoyance. "That every time I see you I have to hold onto whatever I can find so that my hands don't find their way onto your body by themselves? That my fingers spark - that my **body** sparks - when I even just *think* about you? That I start yammering like an idiot when you smile, much like I am now?"

Jude's smile grows and her eyes soften. "No - though that's all delicious to hear. I meant that I'm glad I'm not the only one feeling a bit like an out-of-control hormonal teenager."

"Oh." India can feel her gaze dropping to Jude's lips, and she forces it back up through sheer will.

"Yeah. Oh." Raising her eyebrows exaggeratedly the journalist cocks her head. "Did you really think that I go around randomly pinning people to cars? Or kitchen cabinets? Or dining tables? Or ..." She pauses and takes in the blush rising in India's cheeks, and then her inspection turns into a gentle examination of the other woman's features. "I've never felt such a ... compulsion for someone before. On the pro side, it's amazing. You're amazing. You do things to me that..." She bites the inside of her lip. "On the con side... I kind of miss our long conversations. That's the side of you that I liked first."

India sits forward and reached for Jude, changing her mind and drawing back her hand at the last moment. "We do still talk. We're talking now."

"Yes, we are." Looking down at the hand resting on the table in front of her, Jude smiles faintly. "But every time you open your mouth I want to climb over this desk and kiss you senseless. That's all I'm thinking about. And you and I both know that you just wanted to touch me, but you can't, because the moment your hands are anywhere on me we'll be very deep in trouble."

India studies her own hand, turning it over so that it lays palm-up between them. "Maybe I should try to... control myself better. My ... ability, I mean. It could just be that. Maybe if I could tone it down a notch..."

"It's not something you should feel guilty about, India. Maybe it'll settle down over time and... ah," Jude gasps sharply as she runs a finger over India's palm and immediately feels a faint pulse of energy answering, "... reach some stability... I'm conflicted about it. On the one hand I don't think we can sustain this level of..." Her voice peters out as another crackle travels up her finger and into her arm, "... uh... intensity. It's going to burn us out."

"On the other hand," closing her eyes India tries to control her body's reaction to Jude, "what a lovely way to burn."

With a groan Jude jumps up from her chair and charges around the table. She is met halfway by a body that slams into hers, hands that draw her closer and slide into her hair, her shirt, her neck. Grasping India around her waist Jude lifts her onto the edge of the table and steps in between her thighs hungrily to resume a kiss that is pure fire.

In the midst of fingers roving impatiently and mouths clashing, Jude draws an irregular breath and draws back.

"Time..."

Her voice is ragged. Pulling her head back down with one hand India tears at her shirt buttons with the other.

"Fuck it."

"Hey, it's me."

"Hey you. Hold on a second, will you?" There is a quick muffled discussion in the background, something Jude can't quite make out, and then India is back on the line. "Sorry about that."

"Are you busy? I could call back later."

"No - that was my last patient for the day. I'm all yours."

"I should hope so. It's late, India. Why aren't you at home already?"

"I had a walk-in. Poor woman's just found out she has lung cancer."

"Can you do anything?"

"Not much. It's too advanced already. I could only take away some of the pain."

"Are you okay?"

"It's nothing I haven't seen."

"That doesn't make it better, does it?"

There's silence, and then a quick laugh. "No. Used to be I could just do the work and walk away. Now I have to get emotionally involved." She sighs. "I'm tired."

"I worry about you."

"Then come over and give me TLC."

"If I came over you know you wouldn't be getting TLC."

India gives a warm chuckle and can almost hear Jude smile. "If you came over I wouldn't care."

"One more week. One week."

"I can't wait, Jude."

"Me neither. We both need the break. I know I do."

India smiles into the receiver. "Maybe you're the one who needs TLC."

"I'm not averse to pretending, if that's what gets you here."

"That's not what'll get me there."

"However, a nurse's uniform might not go amiss..." there's a moment of silence, "Can you hold on for a second, India? There's someone at the door."

"Sure." India can hear Jude's footsteps on the carpet, and it seems like the ordinary thing to do to whisper with the rhythm of it:

I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you...

"What was that? Did you say something?"

"I was talking to myself. Who was it?"

"Courier with my flight tickets. I'm just signing... Okay. Ecuador, here I come."

"You're such a jetsetter. Exciting."

"Sure. I'm in such a permanent state of jetlag that there'll have to be a GMT+Limas soon."

"I'd like to live in that time zone."

"One week."

"It's going to drag."

"Yes, it is." There's a silence on the other side of the line.

"Jude?"

"I just wanted to tell you... There never seems to be the right time, because the second we're near each other things just ... detonate, but I wanted to let you know that you're special to me. It's not all flash bang. You're a blessing."

"Oh" India can feel herself blush, "thank you, Jude. You're..." *I love you.*

A sudden commotion comes through clearly on the line, and Jude frowns at the receiver. "Hello? India?"

Something like the screech of metal, and then raised voices in the background.

"India?"

"Jude." India's voice is rushed "Something's going on. I have to go. Speak to you later."

"Okay, I'll..." and then Jude is speaking to a dead line.

The phone only rings twice before Jude picks it up.

"India?" Her tone is concerned.

"Miss Limas, this is Jonathon Mackey. I hope you don't mind my contacting you on your private line - I got the number from Miss Stuart at Miss Waits's office."

"Miss Stuart?" Anxiety is dulling her thought process.

"Hayley Stuart."

"Mr Mackey, what's going on? What's wrong? India...?"

"Miss Limas, you need to get to San Francisco General as soon as possible."

"San... What's going on?"

"Miss Limas, you need to get here **now**. There's been an accident."

12. Can't push it underground, can't stop it screaming out

("Time is running out" - Muse)

The press has caught wind. They band together in clusters at the doors, pointing microphones and cameras at every likely entrant. Hospital security has ushered them as far back as possible, warning them that should they block the entrance to emergencies, action will be taken against them. Now they're like an underwater tide, drifting forward and backwards to try and intercept information whilst making sure not to give any cause for trouble.

It's not the thought that they might be locked in a cell that drives them to be cautious, but the knowledge that should they be removed, they will be missing the biggest story of the year.

Usually Jude Limas would have enquired ahead of time about a separate entrance, but tonight she does not care. For once in her life she has used her stature to commandeer a private helicopter, but even so she has been stuck in the air for more than two hours with nothing but her imagination to keep her company, and that has proved to be a very bad thing.

She has tried to contact Jonathon Mackey more than once, and each time his mobile phone switches over to voicemail without fail. She has even contacted the Hospital, but due to their

privacy policy they cannot tell her anything over the phone. She is not a next of kin.

When she gets out of the taxi and rushes towards the door the cameras are on her in an instant.

"Jude? Jude!"

Where she would normally have been able to flash her dazzling smile at these guys - almost her kind, if you blur the lines a bit - and get them to step aside, the desperation of getting the best account (one that might make a career) is driving most of them to rashness. Crowding in, they block her entrance. She is a key player in this story, that is clear.

"Jude!"

Where she would normally have been able to flash her dazzling smile at these guys - almost human, if you move the boundaries a bit - and get them to step aside, tonight she doesn't care. She doesn't want to be nice, she doesn't want to be polite, she doesn't want to give them the best sound byte. She wants to be inside those doors.

"Are you a close friend of India's?"

She knows, from a conversation a long time ago, that India resents these people using her first name as if they know her, or as if she is a rock star.

"Get out of my way!" To emphasize her words she pushes against the closest cameraman, but her smaller figure doesn't do much damage. "Move!" Craning her neck she finds the security guards. "Get me in there!"

The burly men immediately step in from where they have been hovering on the edge, unsure of protocol when the harassed is also a part of the pack.

"Move it! Back!"

The mood is teetering on the edge of ugliness. The press hounds know that they can get in real trouble here, but the story seems to lie with the admired Jude Limas, who is about to disappear through the doors.

Their dilemma is quickly solved when one of the security guards wraps his arms loosely around Jude and shoves through towards the doors, using his broad turned back as a battering ram. As the doors open a quick hand grasps Jude's arm tightly.

"Jude! What's happened to India?"

Glaring at the eager face suspended too close to hers Jude snarls, "You call her *Miss Waits*, do you hear me?" before the burly guard simply slams his elbow downwards, dislodging the grip and likely breaking the man's wrist.

Later she will thank him for his help and quick thinking. For now, as soon as the doors are closed behind her and his grip eases, she is off towards the reception desk, running as if her life depends on it. She knocks over a bench and careens into a young woman -

"Hey!"

- but barely takes the time to throw a breathless "sorry" over her shoulders. Skidding to a halt at the desk she leans over and fixes sharp wide green eyes on the woman behind the computer.

"Slow down, take a breath. How can I help?" Jude can see it in the woman's lovely grey eyes the moment she looks up and recognises her, but Nurse Finney - so her nametag says - does not shift her expression.

"India Waits. Where is she? What's going on?"

Nurse Finney types in a command and clicks the mouse button a few times, and then lifts the phone.

"Gene, please send down Mr Bartholomew. Miss Limas is here."

She puts down the phone and rises. "Miss Limas, I'm going to ask one of the nurses to take you to a private waiting room. The CEO of San Francisco General, Mister Damon Bartholomew, is on his way to speak to you."

Feeling the iciness clutch at her heart Jude wrings her hands together. "Tell me what's happened."

"Miss Limas, I'm not at liberty to..."

"Screw *at liberty*!" Her voice is loud, and when some of the people in the waiting room look around they do comical double takes. "I want to know **now**!"

"Miss Limas." Reaching out, Nurse Finney places a cool hand on hers. "I'm not involved in the case. There's nothing I *can* tell you. Please, go with Nurse Jameson. Mr Bartholomew will be with you as soon as possible."

Defeated, Jude trails the young blonde nurse down the hallway to a plush private waiting room where she sinks into a soft couch listlessly.

"Mr Bartholomew will be with you shortly."

Looking up, Jude fixes distressed eyes on the young woman. "Do *you* know what's happened?"

"I'm sorry." Jameson shakes her head. "I don't. Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea? You look like you need it."

"No thanks."

At that moment the door opens and Jude jumps to her feet as a broad bald man with a hook nose comes in and heads straight for her, offering his hand.

"Miss Limas, I'm Damon Bartholomew..."

Jude ignores his outstretched hand. "Mr Bartholomew, where is India? How is she? What happened?"

Leading a resisting Jude to a couch, Damon Bartholomew pulls her down with him as he sits down.

"Miss Limas, Miss Waits is currently in the OR. Her condition is considered critical. Amongst other things she has suffered cardiac arrest, collapsed lungs, a ruptured spleen, and massive internal bleeding. It's not looking very good, I'm afraid."

Jude opens her mouth and then closes it, choking back a sob. "What happened?"

"At this time reports are sketchy. Let me get you a cup of tea."

"I don't want any."

"You need something for the shock." Getting up with an awkward pat to her hand he proceeds to prepare her a revoltingly sweet cup, which he hands to her and she puts to one side without even looking at it. "According to what we do know, a bus crashed into a sedan on Folsom Street between 1st and 2nd Avenue and flipped ..."

Jude stares at him blankly. "India's office is on Folsom."

"Yes." Bartholomew nods. "We know from Miss Waits's assistant that about five minutes after the crash happened - that was at about seven - Miss Waits ran down to the scene of the accident. According to eyewitnesses she went into the wreck and ... helped a lot of people. Then she collapsed and fell unconscious. More than that we don't know."

"Did anybody touch her?"

Unnerved by the fire in the green eyes, Bartholomew shakes his head and then shrugs. "I'm not sure. They would have had to, to help her. Is that what you mean?"

"I..." and suddenly Jude is crying. Reaching blindly for the cup of tea she takes a long sip and then tries to put it down, missing the table by inches. Damon Bartholomew takes the cup from her hands and puts it on the table, then offers her a handkerchief.

"Doctor Daniel Marshall will be in as soon as he's available to speak with you. In the meantime, can I suggest that one of the nurses bring you a mild sedative? It might be a few more hours, and

I really would suggest..."

"No thank you."

"Miss Limas, it really would be better if you got some ..."

"Mister Bartholomew, could you sleep if a member of your family were in critical condition? I want to be awake. If I were to sleep now, I'd have nightmares."

"Okay." Rising, Bartholomew nods. "Understandable. I'll have one of the nurses bring you a blanket."

"Thank you."

And so Jude Limas sees out the night under a blue medicinal-smelling blanket curled up in the corner of an oversized couch.

She must have dozed off, because when the doctor walks through the doors she jerks as if she has been dreaming about falling. Jumping up - and getting her feet tangled in the blanket in the process - she approaches him anxiously.

"Miss Limas. Please sit."

Because she is still a little dazed, and because he looks exhausted, she plods back to the couch and sinks down onto the blanket. He sits down next to her, a tall handsome man with a cleft in his slightly stubbly chin.

"Miss Limas, we've just finished operating on Miss Waits. She's in the Critical Care Unit as we speak - her condition is still critical. At this stage, the greatest concern to us is obviously the cardiac arrest - we only have a very vague idea as to how long her heart stopped as per the eyewitnesses' statements, so at this stage we can't say just yet whether..."

"Brain damage? Is that what you're saying?"

"Perhaps." He shrugs, his tired eyes kind. "We really can't say just yet. Aside from the scans the only thing we can do is wait." Sitting forward, he twists to face her completely. "That aside, Miss Limas, there is another vital matter that I must discuss with you. According to Mr Bartholomew you're Miss Waits's next of kin - is that right?"

"I don't..." Jonathon Mackey. "I assume arrangements have been made, Doctor. India has nobody here but me."

"Okay." He interlaces his hands. "Miss Limas, whilst we were operating on Miss Limas we

found some irregularities."

Jude watches him with mute confusion.

"Most of, if not all of her internal organs, have sustained extensive tissue damage, which seems to have occurred before the accident. The other thing is that her bone density is that of a woman twice her age, not unlike the early stages of osteoporosis."

"I..." Looking at him as if his face could provide the answer, Jude frowns. "I don't understand."

"Quite frankly, neither do we, yet." He shrugs helplessly. "It looks like a degenerative disease, but it's like nothing I've ever seen before."

"Cancer?"

"Not likely... but not completely out of the question," he concedes. "We've sent monsters of Miss Waits's blood to the lab, but until the results come back I'm afraid I won't be able to answer any of your questions."

"Okay." Nodding dumbly Jude looks away, and then at Doctor Marshall. "What could have caused it?"

"Well," Daniel Marshall thinks carefully before formulating his answer, "it's all conjecture, you must understand..."

"Would she have been in pain?"

"Some. Nausea, cramps, palpitations, dizziness, and then a myriad more."

"Things that you could, perhaps, miss if you were under severe stress?"

"Maybe." But the way he shakes his head says the opposite. "I'm not sure. We'll have to wait for the test results." He moves to get up, but Jude leans forward and clasps his hand.

"Doctor Marshall, did India know?"

"Well, I really couldn't..."

"In your opinion."

"Yes." He holds her gaze. "There are many reasons why people choose to keep this sort of information to themselves, Miss Limas. It won't do to dwell on it now. Your thoughts are needed elsewhere."

"Can I see her?"

"I'm sorry. Not yet. She's at a very sensitive stage right now. But I'll keep you updated."
Standing, he pats her arm softly. "Keep positive."

A day later, perhaps. The light in the waiting room is deceptive, and she has not gone out. She sits blankly, wrapped in the blanket, running through their last conversation, looking for consolation. Looking for answers.

At some stage the nurse brings in Hayley Stuart. The young woman stands, ill at ease, the angles of her limbs shouting discomfort.

"How is she?"

"She's still on life support. No change." Brushing a weary hand through her hair Jude sits up.
"What happened, Hayley?"

"I... We heard the crash from the offices. Miss Waits immediately took off downstairs. I stayed to phone the emergency services. When I got there she was already gone. Into the bus, I mean. She was in there for about 20 minutes, and then one of the guys came out with her. She'd... she'd collapsed. I don't know..."

Indicating that Hayley sit down on the couch next to her, Jude bites the inside of her lip. "I just don't understand."

"I... I knew she'd been tired. I shouldn't have..."

Laying a hand on the distressed girl's shoulder, Jude tried to soothe her. "Hayley, you know as well as I do that she doesn't listen to reason."

"But I should have..." and then Hayley is crying so hard that she shakes. Shifting closer Jude wraps her arms around the other woman and begins to rock her, and it is in that embrace, where she does not have to pretend, that she starts to cry herself.

"Hey Jude..."

"Don't you dare, India."

"Oh, don't make it bad."

"I knew it!"

She is bleary-eyed and disorientated when Doctor Marshall touches her shoulder.

"Miss Limas?"

"Mmm." Her breath catches like a sob and she sits up suddenly, almost hitting her head against his in the process. "India?"

"Miss Limas. I have news."

"Is she...?"

"Miss Waits's condition is still the same, Miss Limas." He crouches down to her level and rests his elbow on his knees. "We got some test results back. The MRI seems to indicate no brain damage. Of course, we can't confirm anything until Miss Waits regains consciousness, but it is a good start. Then, the blood tests." He lifts his shoulders slightly. "We haven't been able to identify the disease - my colleagues and I are at a loss. This is nothing we've seen before. We're flying in Professor Lange from New York tomorrow morning - he's done extensive studies into certain degenerative diseases. If anyone has an answer for us, he will." Briefly patting her hand comfortingly, he continues. "What's important to know at this time is that whatever disease this is, it appears to be in remission. The dead tissue is damaged beyond repair, but there doesn't seem to be any further activity."

"Okay. That's good." Rubbing at her forehead tiredly Jude peers up at Marshall. "How does this impact her in the future?"

Shifting slightly he sighs. "Well, of course I can't make any definite diagnoses, but precedent tells me that as long as the disease stays in remission, Miss Waits will be able to continue as normal, provided that she's careful about her stress triggers."

"That's hardly likely." Thinking of India prickly and obstinate works better than thinking of her pale and dead. "And if it doesn't stay in remission?"

"Not knowing how fast this spreads, I'm at a loss to offer an accurate time frame, Miss Limas, but she can't afford much more damage."

Biting down on her trembling bottom lip Jude swallows. "How much more can go wrong?"

"I don't know."

Smiling into his kind eyes tremulously she nods. "It was rhetorical, but thank you. Can I see her yet?"

"Yes." Rising, he dusts off his knees pointlessly. "Though, honestly, I think you should reconsider. It can be very disturbing to see a loved one in this state."

"The fact can't be much worse than my imagination is making it, doctor." Pushing the blanket off

her legs she rises and stretches, and then bends to slip on her shoes.

The CCU is two floors up. Jude has to slip into scrubs before she can enter the pristine area, and even then the doctor only takes her as far as the window flanking India's room.

"Take your time."

She's left looking through a giant square of thick glass, giving her the distinct feeling that she is watching a hi-tech hospital show and the character on the other side will be waking up and declaring herself perfectly fine any moment now.

It doesn't seem likely.

India Waits is heartbreakingly small in the middle of the bed, her pale skin almost blending in with the white sheets under and over her. Around her a legion of machines stands guard, each emitting its signature sound, and it seems to Jude that India is connected to each of these by a tube of some kind. Her chest is rising and falling in the artificial rhythm of the ventilator, and it reminds Jude of how India really breathes - how she snaps in puffs of air quickly as if she's afraid or aroused or preparing for something terrifying.

Or maybe as if her lungs are damaged and scarred on the inside.

Leaning her forehead against the glass Jude stares at India's face - the dark lash crescents on her pallid cheeks, the way her hair sticks up in the crown at her fringe as if it still refuses to be controlled.

Skimming the sight of India's lips wrapped and taped around the tube Jude studies her hands, lying curled in and vulnerably at her side. Even when India has been at her most unforthcoming, those hands have remained restless; flexing and closing at random, fingers rubbing over the palm, thumbs rubbing over the fingertips.

It is as if India can be condensed, in her purest form, to only her hands and her eyes.

Jude lays her palm flat on the glass for a moment and then turns away to search out Doctor Marshall.

"Thank you," she says evenly. "I think I'm going to go for a walk."

"Can we reschedule that for ... Oh, I don't know when, Chi. I don't know if ... Can we do it in a month?"

"I will find out what their cut-off date is." Jude can hear Kaneko Bachiko paging through her diary. *"All right. Do you want me to cancel what can be cancelled?"*

"Yes please. I'm just not in the best state of mind right now."

"You need no excuse, Jude. I will do so." Chi's vowels are round and beautiful, as a non-native English speaker would pronounce them. *"Call me if you need anything. I will be in contact."*

"Thank you, Chi."

"Take care of yourself, please. Goodbye."

When she turns around, slipping her phone into a pocket (its nervous *beepbeepbeep* is reminding her that she does not have her battery charger with her), Doctor Marshall is just stepping into the room.

"Doctor?" She walks closer, slowly, careful not to let the anticipation seep through.

"I have good news." When he smiles the crows' feet at the edges of his eyes crinkle. "Miss Waits is breathing on her own. We have been keeping her under careful observation, and feel that we can safely remove the ventilator."

She exhales a breath that she has been holding forever. "That's great."

"It is. But apart from that," he cocks his head, "we also feel that it is safe for you to visit with her for a short amount of time."

Jude is almost loath to touch the small hand curled in on itself. Taking a deep breath she reaches out and brushes the tips of her fingers across the cold palm, and then jerks away. The nurse who has been checking India's IV is instantly at her side.

"Are you okay, Miss Limas?"

"Yes. Thank you." Offering her a smile that she hopes is reassuring, Jude looks down at the small woman in front of her. "She's so cold. I got a fright."

The nurse nods understandingly. "It's disconcerting, I'm sure."

More than disconcerting. India's hands have never been cold, even when the rest of her is. Perhaps it has to do with the energy running through them. Besides, this is not what has startled Jude, but she only nods at the words meant to be kind and reaches out again.

"India? It's time to wake up, honey. I ..." and this time her reaction is more pronounced. Pulling away her hands she stares down at India, and then up at the puzzled nurse. "You might want to fetch Doctor Marshall. She's coming back."

The nurse's smile remains kind. "It's good to remain positive, Miss Limas, but..."

"I feel it."

"Comatose patients sometimes have involuntary muscle twitches..."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Laying her fingertips in the palm of India's hand, Jude closes her eyes and feels euphoria building in her like a wave as a familiar heat begins to form under her touch.

The nurse must have become worried, for Doctor Marshall is suddenly at her side. Touching her shoulder tentatively to get her attention he studies her quizzically. "Miss Limas? Nurse Chapman said you had something you wished to discuss with me?"

She keeps her eyes closed, allowing the faint glow to seep into her tired bones. "She's going to come to soon."

Walking around to the other side of the bed Doctor Marshall studies all of the monitors. "Her vital signs are stable, Miss Limas, but I'm afraid there's no sign of..."

"Nothing that you can see."

"Miss Limas. How long is it since you've slept properly? You should..."

Right in the middle of his sentence he looks down and the words just peter out into a static silence. India Waits is staring up at him. Her large brown eyes are dull and bloodshot, but she is very much awake.

"I thought I'd died."

Jude strokes the thick long fringe away from India's forehead gently, her eyes tracking the pale features. "I was scared."

Turning her face into the warmth of Jude's hand, India sighs. "Me too. For the first time I had something to stay for."

A sound somewhere between a soft gasp and a sob escapes Jude's lips, but when India looks up, concerned, she already seems to have regained her composure. India traces the line of the stubborn jaw, the proud nose and the delicate cheekbones above her with her gaze before she closes her eyes tiredly.

"I heard mermaids again."

She is smiling faintly. Jude runs one finger briefly over her bottom lip before pulling her hand away abruptly. "It's Lake Chapala calling you."

One brown eye peers up at her tiredly. "I'm ready to answer that call."

"You've only been conscious for a week, honey. Don't get gung-ho on me."

"I'm sick of this place."

"You're sick, full stop." Jude runs her fingers gently through India's fringe again. "Chapala will wait." She strokes India's forehead with the back of her fingers for a moment before sitting down and leaning back in the uncomfortable armchair.

A faint frown creases India's forehead, though she doesn't open her eyes. "Jude?"

"Hmmm?"

"What's up?"

"Nothing." When India suddenly fixes blunt brown eyes on her she shrugs. "I'm tired. I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking that if I closed my eyes you'd drift away."

"I'm here. Why don't you go to my apartment and get some rest? Feed the cat?"

Jude raises an eyebrow. "You don't have a cat."

"More time to sleep, then. That works out well."

Offering a half-smile, Jude stands up. "India..."

The smaller woman's expression becomes cautious. "You have that tone in your voice."

Jude frowns. "What tone?"

"The one that you get on television when you're getting ready to tear someone's defences to pieces. *That* tone."

"I do not."

"Do too." Scratching lightly at the site where the IV needle enters her skin - and getting a smack for it - India peers up at Jude. "You're making me nervous, Jude. Whatever you want to say, just say it. Please?"

"Doctor Marshall told me that when you were in the operating room they found irregularities. Your organs had been damaged a while ago, and your bone density isn't what it should be -

they're not sure..."

India is motionless. "He didn't say anything to me."

"I asked if I could speak to you first." Wrapping warm fingers around the slightly cool hand resting on the sheet, Jude studies India worriedly. "I hope you don't mind."

"I'm just a little confused."

"Doctor Marshall said it's like a degenerative disease, but nothing they know. It seems to be in remission, but according to him you should have been feeling the effects for a while now."

There is a moment of off-balance silence, and then Jude cocks her head.

"You don't seem surprised, India."

"I always knew something would get me in the end."

"Excuse me?"

Turning her hand upwards so that she can grasp Jude's, India takes as deep a breath as she can manage. "I could feel it. Yes."

"And..." Puzzlement colours Jude's words. "You never said anything."

"No. I had some idea of what was happening."

Suddenly beyond exasperation, Jude shakes the hand in hers roughly. "India! You're killing me here! Can we dispense with the mystery and get to the facts, please?"

"Okay." It's almost a whisper, almost a murmur, and the resignation in it is enough to send chills down Jude's spine. Looking up at her, India closes her eyes. Perhaps she is tired. Perhaps she is hiding. "When I heal people, where do you think the energy comes from, Jude?"

The question unnerves the other woman. Furrowing her brows, she thinks for a moment. "I'm no expert, but aren't we supposed to be surrounded by it? The universe, or whatever you want to call it?"

"The universe." India smiles with amusement but no sting. "That would have been logical and linear, and it would have been nice, but no."

Awareness dawns in Jude's expression like a sunrise. "You..." She steps away, apparently oblivious of their hands pulling apart. "You're ... using yourself?"

"Something like that." Pulling back her abandoned hand India reaches up to scratch her nose, and then thinks better of it when the pain ripples up just under the surface of the morphine. She

wishes she could pull Jude closer. "It's like doing exercise. The more energy you expend, the more fat cells you burn. Except... in my case I'm just burning up cells."

Jude turns wide hurt eyes on her. "You knew about this all along."

"Not exactly. I didn't know what... "

"Don't hide behind words, India." Jude steps back, her eyes still on India, and sits down heavily on the edge of the chair. "You knew you were hurting yourself, and you just kept going. Like slow suicide, right?"

"Jude..." Beseechingly India reaches out a hand. "It didn't matter. Maybe at first I ..."

"You didn't want to do it." The hurt edge has disappeared from Jude's voice, to be replaced by something more disbelieving. "You never wanted to - was this why?" She doesn't give India a change to reply, but simply continues as if she is talking to herself. "That was it. You knew what would happen to you, but we made you do it. **I** made you."

There is such a profound ache in Jude's words that India's eyes involuntarily fill with tears. "Sweetheart, please - don't."

"Don't what?" A bitter little laugh escapes Jude's lips. "All that time I thought I was the virtuous one. I thought I was right - like always - and meanwhile I never stop to consider anyone else."

"Jude. Dearheart. I made my own choices."

"I never stopped pushing you." Pressing against her eyes tiredly with the pads of her thumb and index finger Jude sighs. "I thought I knew what was best for you. I couldn't see past my own agenda."

"Jude... "

"Can you reverse it?"

"No." The journalist opens her mouth and India interrupts her quickly. "Jude. **Stop**. I'm here. I'm still here."

"You're *here*." Looking around her, Jude takes in the sterile white walls, the beeping machines and monitors. "I put you here just as much as anybody else."

"You didn't **know**!"

"No, but you did," Jude smiles humourlessly, "and I made you feel as if you had to ignore that. As if you had to live up to my expectations by sacrificing yourself." Shaking her head at herself she turns around and lifts her jacket from where it is draped over the back of the chair.

Suddenly anxious, India plucks at the seam of the sheet draped over her with clumsy fingers. "Jude? Don't leave me."

Jude's brown eyes fix on her with a fierce concentration, and then the other woman smiles abruptly before she turns and walks away. "I'll be back, honey."

"It's my fault. I never told you."

Pausing at the door, her back stiff against the words, Jude drops her head forward in defeat. "I'm no better than Paul Ashe. I judged him for how he'd behaved, and I'm no better."

"No. Jude..." Worry seeps through India's voice in breathless bursts. "I should have said something."

The journalist looks over her shoulder, her green eyes suddenly fierce. "Yes. You could have. Or maybe I shouldn't have let my own demons blind me. Either way, it's should and could, and I'm not sure what to do with those. I'm not sure what to do." A sigh lifts her narrow back, and then she is looking away. "I need to take a walk."

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~ An Audience with the Sidewalk Saviour ~

by K. Alexander

DISCLAIMER: [See Part 1.](#)

FEEDBACK: Is always welcomed. Even the unfriendly bits. Find me at kalexy@webmail.co.za. Ps. Please don't send corrections. I have friends who will take care of that at their convenience.

13. Take this sinking boat and point it home - we've still got time (*"Falling slowly"* - Glen Hansard)

"Well, it's a few months late, but I promised you Chapala."

From the confines of her wheelchair India marvels at the beautiful blue expanse before her, and then reaches up to caress the hand resting on her shoulder. "It's worth the wait. Much like certain

other things."

Jude's thumb shifts from under her palm to stroke her skin gently before the journalist pulls her hand away and hunkers down at the side of the chair. "What would you like? Wine? Soda? Juice?"

"You." Sighing at the raised eyebrows India shrugs. "Fine. Juice as a distant second."

The months following India's return to consciousness have passed in a blur of physical therapy and media harassment. She has progressed from pain and discomfort to halting stuttering steps, and though the therapist has conceded that with her progress the wheelchair will only be a temporary measure, it is an unspoken reality that she will likely graduate no further than a cane and a limp.

The doctors have given up on investigation into her internal damage, mostly at her insistence. They cannot understand why she does not want to undergo barrages of tests, or poking and prodding by pensive specialists. Noticing that Jude Limas has a certain influence over India Waits, they have even resorted to asking her to pull strings, but Jude has turned them down graciously. She goes as far as to cajole India into drinking her daily calcium supplements, but further than that she will not push.

Jude's rather personal involvement has not gone unnoticed by her peers either. Speculation is rife, and though most of the exploratory articles are not far off the mark, it all remains conjecture without confirmation from any sources. Where before she would have played the publicity game, Jude is now too tired and indifferent to pay much attention. It is India who frequently warns her of being too close, of showing too much concern or too little caution.

Since Jude's loss of composure they have not spoken about those issues again. Knowing that the silence is sure to cover a festering obstruction, India attempts to bring up their conversation occasionally, but Jude will not be baited into a response. Her retort is a standard one: *We can't change what's happened; it's time to move forward with the information we have at hand.* It may be a diversion, but it is also the truth, and so that topic falls away slowly but surely until only the echo of a shadow remains.

The days at Lake Chapala stretch into a combination of pleasure and ache that India is hard-pressed to separate. Her joy at the setting is tempered by her intense frailness; her happiness at the companionship tinged by Jude's extreme caution at that same frailty. Jude touches her with the wary apprehension that one would reserve for something breakable. At first, she laughs it off and teases the other woman, hoping to goad her into the comfortable interaction they had before the accident. Jude, however, will not be provoked. Her fingers flutter over India's hands, her

head, her face, but never alight anywhere properly. Her kisses are chaste, quick and reserved. There is still the flashing shimmer of desire in her green eyes when India is close, but fear seems to override want.

Having lost all patience with her constantly buzzing phone, India has switched it off permanently. Beyond Jonathon Ashe there is no-one who needs to know her movements. Jude is having the same problem - now that India is unreachable, the media has fixed on her as the next likely option.

"Jude Limas... No, thank you. No. Goodbye."

Smacking the phone down on the table with a fair amount of venom, Jude glares at it.

"You're going to break it, sweetheart."

"I don't care." Jude shakes her head in irritation, sending her thick dark hair into lazy bounces. "They're like sharks that have smelled blood. I honestly hope that no-one ever felt that way about me."

"Hey, I doubt it." With a light pat to her hand India tries to pacify her. "You're not the same. Besides, you're too beautiful to be annoying."

"Oh shush," Jude grumbles, but nevertheless picks up India's hand and kisses the palm gently, closing her eyes for a moment as India's fingers stroke softly against her cheek.

"I'm sorry, Jude."

Frowning, the journalist sits back. "About what?"

"All of this. You probably shouldn't have come to the hospital."

"Are you serious?" Jumping up, Jude glares down at India and folds her arms commandingly. "How could I not be there? How could you even think for a moment that I'd stay away?" She shakes her head decisively. "To avoid this? Oh no. Not a chance, and don't you even *think* to say that again."

"You're beautiful when you're angry?"

Jude's glare softens a little as she raises an eyebrow. "I see. That's the way you want to play it. Sweet clichés and big innocent eyes. Well, miss, I'm not falling for any of it."

"But I've fallen for you..." India's lips twitch as Jude sighs exaggeratedly, "... and I can't get up."

Snorting with laughter Jude uncrosses her arms and falls back into her chair, shaking her head. "Honey, at least life with you will never be boring. You know..." she shoots an impish glance in India's direction, "you had me at *fuck off*."

India mimes shock, clutching at her chest carefully. "Jude Limas, I *never* said that."

"But it was what you meant." Leaning over, Jude plants a light kiss on India's mouth before she gently untangles the hand that has slipped into the hair at the nape of her neck and steps back.

"Jude..." Biting her bottom lip, India stares at her. Jude Limas argues, she pushes, she pleads and she lectures. She doesn't run. "Don't be scared."

"I'm not..." but the truth is sitting squarely between them. Wiping over her face distractedly with her hand Jude looks out over the lake. "India, you almost died. *Again*. You're in no state for anything other than recuperation."

"Kissing *is* recuperation," India tries to joke, but it falls flat. She wishes that she weren't in this chair, that she could get up and wrap her arms around the woman standing so close, but seemingly a million miles away. "I'm not asking for rampant sex on every surface in the house, Jude, but I'd like it if you didn't keep backing away from me. A kiss isn't going to hurt."

"Perhaps not, but it never stays with a kiss where we're concerned."

A chuckle forces its way out of India's throat. "Then this is a great time to work on our willpower, isn't it?" When Jude doesn't respond, she sighs. "Sweetheart. I'm not going to break."

Silently Jude takes in the small form, and then she gives a half-hearted smile. "You're tougher than I give you credit for, I know. I just want you to take it easy for a while, please? Indulge me."

"That's unfair. You know I can't say no."

"Which is where the problem starts." Hunkering down, Jude props her forearms on India's knees. "India, I don't..."

The suddenly ringing phone receives the foulest look the journalist can manage to conjure up. She considers talking through the intrusive noise, but finally gives up and gets rid of the person on the other end of the line with a clipped voice.

When she eyes the phone balefully and then turns her gaze towards the lake, India leans forward and grasps her wrist lightly. "Don't throw it. I can't fetch."

"I don't even know how these people get my number." Switching off the phone Jude tosses it back onto the table and then hunkers back down in front of India. "Honey, this begs a question." Her fingers drum nervously against India's knees, though her expression is carefully neutral. "Will you be going back to healing at any stage?"

India studies Jude's face. "Do you think I should?"

"Hell no." The sharpness of it startles them both, and when Jude starts to chortle India isn't far behind. The journalist shakes her head, as if at herself. "I didn't mean to be quite so unequivocal, but that's the way I feel. If you went back to this, it would kill you, India, and then it would kill me." Her thumb rubs lazy circles on the linen under her hand as she looks up, her gaze honest. "But I don't get to make this decision for you, India. You have to do what you think is right."

There's a touch of sadness in India's smile. "I'm not so good at knowing what the right thing is. You know that."

"Hey. Your decisions were never wrong. Without all the facts we just never understood them."

"People won't understand this one either."

Rising, Jude presses her palm to India's cheek tenderly. "Honey, it's not about anyone else. It doesn't matter. What do *you* want?"

India covers Jude's hand with her own, her dark eyes fixed on the face of the woman she loves. "I want you, Jude. I want to make you happy."

"That's still not what I asked you, India, but let me tell you what *wouldn't* make me happy." Slipping her thumb over the soft bottom lip, Jude traces its outline faintly. "To go back to the hospital wouldn't make me happy. To see you wired up to a ton of machines again won't make me happy. To wonder if you're going to make it this time will not make me happy." Her thumb slips from the bottom to the top lip, dipping into the Cupid's bow. "I wanted you to share yourself with the world, but that's when I didn't know you only had so much to share."

Under Jude's touch India's lips curve into a small smile. "That's enough for me. I'm done."

"Don't let what I want be the deciding factor for this, India."

"How can it not be, Jude? You're the one thing I'd want to live for. Besides - and I didn't want to say this because it's only added ammunition for you..." The smaller woman looks away, "but I'm tired. I really am."

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it?" Shifting her hand up Jude ran her fingers through wayward dark curls. "I think if you make it public, the furore will die down sooner."

"Apart from the people who'll be slating me for only thinking about myself, of course."

"Yes. Apart from them." Jude gives the hair under her hand a small affectionate tug before she sits down on the chair behind her. "India, it doesn't matter. It really doesn't. Ever since you've appeared on the radar, there have been people who loved you, and people who've thought you were a fraud. That's the way it's always going to be. You'll kill yourself trying to please them all."

India sighs. "You're so annoying sometimes."

"Because I'm right."

"Logic isn't attractive in a girl, Jude."

"Lucky for me that I'm a woman, then."

India's eyes track the length of Jude's body, lingering on the expanse of caramel skin exposed by the casually buttoned cotton shirt. "Mmm. I can't argue there. So what do you suggest I do?"

Flushing under the longing gaze Jude starts at the question. "What?"

She's biting her bottom lip unconsciously and the action sends a flutter deep into India's stomach. Resolute to ignore it, India repeats herself. "What do you suggest I do, Jude? About making my decision public?"

"Oh." Taking a breath Jude collects herself. "Wasn't your first interview with Paige Carter?"

"Yes."

"Then it would probably be fitting to have your last one with her, don't you think? I'm sure that she'd jump at the chance for an exclusive."

India nods. "I still have her assistant's number. Should I call her now?"

"The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned."

"I've forgotten how much I hate this."

Crouched in front of the armchair, Jude fusses with an errant flick of India's hair. "It's the last one. Don't let her scare you."

"Doesn't she scare *you*?" India smiles at the serious frown on the journalist's face as she fights with the wayward hair. "I suppose not. There's not much you're scared of."

"I've seen worse, but she's no walk in the park."

"You'd better get out of the dressing room. Last thing you need is getting caught in here kissing me."

Jude shakes her head. "But I'm not kissing you."

"Yes, you are." In a deft move India has her fingers wrapped in Jude's long hair, and is pulling her gently closer. When Jude resists slightly India pouts. "You can't send me out there without a kiss. You know how I feel about this."

"Blackmail." The word is barely a breath as Jude's lips cover India's. Their kiss is gentle and exploratory, and as soon as that first flash of desire sparks low in India's body Jude sits back on her heels with a low exhalation.

Taking a deep breath India grins slightly idiotically. "Thank you."

With fingers that are trembling, though barely noticeably, Jude wipes off the faint trace of lipstick now clinging to her lips. "Ready for Paige Carter?"

India shrugs blankly. "Who's Paige Carter?"

There's the customary swell of the evocative instrumental intro, and then the warm applause of the audience, and then the voice of Paige Carter herself.

She is introducing India again, and telling her viewers what an honour it is to have this exclusive, but India is not listening. She is not even bothering to watch the backstage monitor - she wants for this to be over, to be at home (Chapala - when did this turn into home?), to be wrapped in Jude's arms and held as if she is not fragile and brittle and weak as a kitten.

Right now, Jude is sitting somewhere in a private room watching the stage, and she thinks that once she is out there and is able to feel that steadfast gaze focusing on her, she will survive.

A hand alights on her shoulder. Jody Hudson is not, and has never been, a very tactile person, but today she is as fussy as a mother hen.

"Everything okay, India? Anything you need?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Jody." India shoots up a genuine smile at this tough edgy woman that she likes so much for no reason at all. "No funny stuff today, right?"

"Babe. You look like death warmed up," she holds up one hand conciliatorily, "no offence intended, of course..."

"Of course," India repeats drily.

"... so we're steering clear from anything that could turn into a media disaster. Not even Paige Carter's ratings will endure her killing you on live television."

Reaching up, India pats Jody's hand mockingly. "You're a comfort."

"I've been told that."

It's just a flash, a picture that slides into and out of sharp focus in the seconds it takes for India's fingers to brush Jody's hand.

Large pulsating crimson, a small road that snakes off to the left... squarely in the middle, a swollen balloon, its edges creeping outwards slowly but surely.

Aneurysm.

"India?"

Looking up into the calm grey eyes India tries to stop herself, tries to hold back, and then finally gives in. She feels her energy pull back like an elastic band, snap forward, and snake down into Jody's veins.

With a start the other woman pulls her now faintly glowing hand away. She looks down at it, and then back at India with a question in her eyes.

India tries to swallow down the sudden taste of copper in the back of her throat. "You smoke?"

"Yes." There's a cautious untrusting tone to it that doesn't belong with someone like her.

"Don't."

Jody is staring at her with an expression somewhere between incredulity and dread when a tinny voice suddenly filters out through the headset. As quickly as that, as quickly as deciding that someone's life is worth saving, Jody slips back into the moment.

"Time to go on. You ready?"

Swallowing again, India nods, and then she's handed her cane and she limps slowly out into the bright lights amidst the thunderous roar of the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome India Waits!"

There's a new young guy with the same old 'applause' board and presumably the same old headset, but this time it seems to be that the audience are standing of their own volition.

When India shuffles onto stage in that breathless painful gait there are a few gasps that won't quite be masked by the volume of appreciation. The last time she was here she was a wisp of a

woman with scared eyes and unsure hands; now, she is a pale stuttering fragment of a memory, her haunting eyes like bruises in the snow.

Paige Carter is a quick learner. She wouldn't have survived - or flourished, rather - if she wasn't. Today she will not be making the same mistake as she did the first time; her hair has been coaxed out of its normally perfect chignon into gentle loose curls, and her flowing embroidered dress flatters and softens her slightly square figure. Short of crawling to the approaching figure it cannot be helped that she still towers over her guest, but even Paige Carter will not stoop that low.

Instead, she waits patiently until India gratefully sinks into the chair, and then settles for a warm affectionate handshake (she has worked hard to perfect this) and a welcoming smile.

"India, I'm so very pleased to have this opportunity."

For a moment India is drawn into a fantasy of being a friend to this kind creature. That's the power of Paige Carter. Luckily for India she has been here many times before; if not on this exact stage, then in this exact situation. Knowing that her hand must feel like a cold little bird in Paige Carter's grip, she gives as firm a handshake as she dares.

"Thank you, Paige. How nice to be back."

No longer that tremulous little girl, ready for the picking. Or sniping. Inside, she is still much the same, India thinks, but it is what people can see that counts.

With an indulgent smile Paige sits down in her favoured red armchair, just close enough so that she can lean over and pat India's knee, should she want to. She'll want to.

"It's been a long and busy - and complicated - road for you since our last meeting, has it not?"

The smile that slips onto India's face is melancholy, amused and pensive all at the same time, and somewhere in the audience someone will smile along unwittingly. "Yes, that's a good way to put it."

"You've been in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in South Africa, in Angola... How many people have you healed, India?"

"Oh." It's not something India has ever wondered. "I have no idea, I'm afraid. I haven't kept count."

"And who would expect you to?" Paige Carter laughs easily, making sure that nobody thinks *she* does, and then leans closer. *Intimate chat to follow*, her body language whispers. "I was sorry to hear that you had been very ill recently."

Copper tang in her mouth. "Thank you."

The amused smile carefully reaches all the way to Paige Carter's eyes. "Still as succinct as ever. According to news reports you collapsed and fell into a coma after rushing to the scene of a terrible bus accident - is that right?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell us a little more about this?"

India doesn't hear the words - she sees them formed on Paige Carter's lips, drowned out by the rushing of blood in her ears. She blinks once, and then again, scowling slightly as Paige Carter stops talking and frowns. Then, suddenly, a soft popping sound somewhere behind her eyes, and everything rushes back.

"... you all right? Jody, can we get a doctor up here?"

Dazedly, India looks around her. "What?"

Paige Carter's eyes drop to her top lip, and when India reaches up with a perfectly steady hand to brush at it her fingertips come away covered in blood.

There is a commotion to the left, offstage, and India is still shaking her head as unobtrusively and pointedly as possible when Jude Limas bursts onto stage, breaking free of the stagehand's hesitant grip. Confusedly the audience stands and begins to applaud, and it takes Paige Carter only a second to sum up the situation and deal with it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Miss Jude Limas." Rising, she applauds with a small smile.

Jude ignores the audience. Rushing to India's side she drops down and pulls a handkerchief from her pocket. "What happened?"

"It's just a nosebleed. I'm fine." She frowns against the unwelcome pressure as Jude presses the cloth gently against her nostrils, and then realizes how much the other woman's hand is shaking. Reaching up she takes the handkerchief out of Jude's hand and presses it to her nose, trying to reassure the journalist with her eyes. "I'm okay."

Jude's mouth is pressed into a tight line. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Suddenly noting the silence around them, India tries to indicate that Jude leave the stage with a minimal cock of her head. "Thanks for the handkerchief."

Rising, Jude turns towards the audience and offers a slightly self-conscious smile. "Hi."

New applause breaks out - the crowd is unsure of her role here, but cannot resist her easy manner and casual charm. With an expression that says she'd planned her programme just this way, Paige Carter steps forward to shake Jude's hand and then indicates the extra chair that has efficiently

appeared next to India's.

"Please do join us."

Sinking down into the armchair Jude grins at Paige Carter, an expression that India knows has more to do with dealing with unavoidable situations than it does with genuine amusement.

"Please accept my apologies for inviting myself so rudely, Paige."

"Not at all." Even if it were a problem, Paige Carter is not about to complain about the possibility of managing the most newsworthy interview of the year. "India, are you all right? Do we need a doctor?"

"No, thank you." India's voice is muffled under the handkerchief, and she is still staring at Jude, willing her off the stage for her own good. "It's just a nosebleed. It'll pass."

"You had us worried there for a moment." Smiling at Jude around India's stiff frame, Paige Carter cocks her head. "Jude, what is your relation to India, if I may ask?"

You may not. Once again, India tries to will Jude with her gaze to leave, but when the journalist catches her eye and seems to be looking at her longer than is prudent, she knows that something is about to change.

Tearing her gaze from India's anxious brown eyes, Jude studies Paige Carter contemplatively. "I'm the one who loves her."

The audience breaks into a spontaneous mixture of whispers, applause and murmurs, and even Paige Carter is speechless for a moment. In the midst of it all Jude reaches out, grasps India's limp hand, and presses it with a small secret smile.

Composing herself, the hostess of *'The Carter Hour'* leans closer - *intimations coming* - and addresses both Jude and India. "A friend?"

"That too." The dimples that appear in Jude's cheeks are courtesy of genuine amusement.

Sitting back silently India watches as Jude Limas effortlessly twists Paige Carter and the audience (and most likely the viewers) around her little finger. India watches the smile that appears on Paige Carter's face as she spars good-naturedly with Jude, but more so India watches the twinkle in those green eyes when Jude grins coyly. When all the personal queries have been answered, rather more with evasion than words, and when Jude has intercepted all questions meant for India with deceptive effortlessness, Paige Carter decides that India Waits is perhaps an easier target, and focuses in on her with the sleight-of-hand deftness of an expert.

"Are you feeling better?"

Indeed she is. The bleeding has stopped, and she has slipped the gory handkerchief into her pocket. She probably won't offer it back to Jude. "Yes, I am. Thank you."

Paige Carter nods and shifts in her seat. "So... where were we?"

"Well, that wasn't too bad."

Leaning back in the chair India looks up at Jude, who is lolling back against the mahogany desk in the dressing room. With her dark locks tumbling around her shoulders, and her long jean-clad legs and elegant leather boots she looks like a glossy advertisement for healthy living.

"I had a nosebleed, you casually outed yourself on national television, and Paige Carter called me selfish and self-possessed. It wasn't too good, either."

There's a slight smile curving around Jude's lips, but when she looks up and meets India's gaze her eyes are serious. "Did you mind it?"

India shrugs. "I told you that's what she'd say. It doesn't make me feel better, but as you said, I can't please everyone."

A moment of silence as Jude watches her. The green eyes soften. "I'm glad you were listening. But that's not the part I was asking about."

Cocking her head to the side India raises her eyebrows slightly. "I'm assuming you're not talking about the nosebleed either." The journalist shakes her head. "Jude, I appreciated the fact that you came to my rescue, but you didn't need to. It was a bloody nose."

Jude looks away, dropping her gaze. "I didn't want to take the chance. I did what I thought was right."

"Oh, sweetheart." Realizing that her words have been interpreted differently than she has intended them, India moves forward and reaches out, grasping the hand twitching nervously on Jude's thigh. "I'm not saying you were wrong. I just can't help thinking of what this is going to do to your career. Even *you* aren't impervious to these things, Jude."

Lightly Jude's fingertips skim the palm of India's hand in a sweet caress. "Maybe I don't care, India."

"You'll get bored. You'll need something to keep you busy. And when I'm gone you'll ..."

"Don't say that!" Jude surprises them both with her fierce outburst. Snapping her hand from India's grip she drops down to her haunches, her face level with India's, and shakes her head urgently. "Don't. Don't think like that."

"But it's the truth." The palm of India's hand fits into the curve of Jude's cheek as if they had

been made as a set. "You're going to outlive me, sweetheart. We both know that."

Turning her head into the touch Jude closes her eyes, a touch of grief about the gesture. "But not just yet, India. Not for a long time, do you hear me? You and I will live a life as normal as we can have, for as long as we can have, and nobody will take that away from us." Reaching up, she covers India's hand with her own. "And if my telling
Paige Carter - and by definition the world - about you will do that, will kill the secrecy and excitement and put the hearsay to bed, then that's how it has to be."

"Always the romantic," India teases, but when Jude opens her eyes she's met by a gaze brimming with adoration. "You're a blessing, Jude Limas."

"You're not allowed to steal my words. I'm the one who gets to say that." Rising, Jude leans in and presses her lips to India's in a sweetly tender kiss. "I'm the one who loves you, remember?"

14. Have you ever thrown a fistful of glitter in the air?

("Glitter in the air" - Pink)

"Jude." In frustration India watches as the other woman moves just beyond her reach, bustling about in her bedroom.

"Hm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Just cleaning up a few things."

Shifting up against the pillow India sighs. "You've been avoiding me ever since we came back to Chapala."

"That's not true." Though Jude hovers at the edge of the bed.

"Come over here."

"I..." Hesitantly Jude moves closer. "I have to..."

"I don't care. I want you. It can wait."

"India, I..."

In frustration India reaches for the hem of her shirt and pulls it over her head. When Jude's gaze falls to her exposed torso she looks down herself and winces at the patchwork of faint scars dotting the pale skin. Noting her expression Jude is suddenly there, two long strides that India does not even see her take, and then the small woman is wrapped up in a warm gentle embrace

that feels like she's just come home.

"I'm a topographical map," she murmurs against Jude's collarbone, enjoying the scratch of the other woman's stiffly ironed collar against her chin.

Jude's warm hands run over her back cautiously, tracing her still-protruding shoulder blades and spine in turn. "Where will it take me, this map?"

"Right into the heart of me." Turning her head, India rests her cheek against the strong shoulder wearily. "Why won't you touch me, Jude?"

The fleeting caress of the journalist's hands cease. "I'm touching you now."

With a sigh India pushes back, out of Jude's embrace, until she can see those guarded green eyes. "Don't hide behind word games."

Jude stares past her unflinchingly, assertive; the tactic of a hunter cornered by something that it doesn't wish to show fear to. "You're still healing."

"I'm fine."

"You're *fragile*!"

"I don't want to be." Once again staring down at the scars she has collected, India frowns and shifts closer to Jude. "And I don't want you to make me feel like I am. I want you to hold me and I want you to love me and I want you to remind me what it's like to be alive."

Biting the inside of her lip, Jude shakes her head and moves away slightly. "I'll hurt you."

India shifts forward again, presses herself against Jude, grasps the stubborn chin and turns it towards her. "I've seen how gentle you can be. I've *felt* how gentle you can be, Jude. It's not that."

Shifting her face from India's grip Jude turns her head away again. "I don't think you're ready, India."

"But I am." Inching closer India leans in, so close that her lips are barely brushing the caramel jaw. "Anyone in my position would have to wonder whether that first rush of lust wasn't just physical; whether your hunger has been sated and whether this accident has suddenly brought home the ugly reality."

Jude frowns, moves her head, begins to speak, but she's cut off by India's fingertips pressing lightly on her lips as the other woman continues.

"Anyone else would be wondering, Jude, but the thing I love about you - one of the things I love about you - is how you're completely unable to hide your reaction to me. Like when I do this..."

Shifting her head from Jude's jaw to her ear India runs her tongue around the warm shell, a satisfied smile curling around her lips as she feels Jude shudder.

"Or when I do this..."

She runs her fingers lightly over the buttons on Jude's chest before slipping them through one of the openings to caress the rise of a lace-covered breast.

Exhaling raggedly Jude reached down and extracts the intrusive digits, wrapping them in her own hand. "India..."

"Or this." Reaching down between them India takes advantage of their positions to pull Jude's shirt from her waistband and slip her hand over the warm ribcage. "It feels so good to touch you."

Jude's only answer is an uncomfortable exhalation and a stiffening of her spine when India's thumb casually brushes over the side of her breast.

With a smile India leans in and licks the juncture of jaw and neck, and then bites down gently. She is rewarded by a throaty groan. Sliding her hand upwards she lightly brushes over a stiff nipple, causing Jude to buck ever so slightly under her touch before she reaches up to draw India's hand away.

"India..."

"I want you, Jude, and I know that you want me. Let go." The warmth of her breath on Jude's neck is raising goosebumps on the copper skin.

"You're right. I can't lie to you. I do want you..." the journalist has to stop to catch her rushing breath, "but this is what's killing you. I can't do it."

A slight frown flashes over India's forehead. "What? I don't think I ... "

Jude lifts her hand, bringing India's to eye level. "*This*, India. This."

It's faint, not so much yet a shine as a shimmer, sticking to the tips of India's fingers like glitter. Kissing her palm sweetly Jude watches the glow flare up ever so slightly.

"When I touch you, when you touch me... it sets you off, honey. We both know you can't control it." Letting go of India's hand she sighs. "I definitely won't ask you to stop working because of this thing and then kill you myself just because I can't control my libido."

India watches the tips of her fingers silently, studies the glittery glow, rubs the pad of her thumb over that of her index and middle finger contemplatively, and then her gaze shifts to the beautiful woman watching her intently.

"No."

The green eyes narrow in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. No." Stretching her hand as if to shake off the glitter, she straightens her shoulders and stares into Jude's eyes defiantly. "This *gift* has caused enough heartache and damage in my life. I won't let it in here. Not here. I will **not** let it keep me from you."

Jude shakes her head despondently. "India. Honey. This isn't some small thing that you can ignore. This is your life you're gambling with. These are the facts."

"Okay," reaching out, India grasps Jude's hands urgently, "let's look at the facts. Since I've opened the office I must have had over a thousand sessions. Before that, who knows. Hundreds? Thousands more?" She looks into Jude's eyes searchingly. "It took a lot of work to get me where I am. It didn't happen overnight, sweetheart. This... thing that happens when I'm with you - it's only a fragment of what I did when I was healing. A kiss, a touch is not going to kill me. I need to *feel*, baby."

Jumping up, Jude puts her hands on her hips in exasperation. "We can enjoy each other. We can spend time together. It's not only about sex!"

"No, it's not only about sex. It's about **love**!"

"Oh." As quickly as she jumped up Jude sinks back onto the bed, her expression unexpectedly defenceless. Seeing those green eyes touch on her face tentatively India frowns and shifts forward, reaching out to grasp Jude's hands in hers.

"Don't you know that, Jude?"

"I..." Jude's fingers curl around hers convulsively and then loosen tensely. "I knew that you... When I inadvertently said that to Paige Carter, and you were so annoyed with me, I thought that..."

"Oh, sweetheart." Shifting closer, India wraps her arms around the other woman. "You're such a wonderfully open book that I don't realise you can't see right to the heart of me as well. I don't know how I can't love you. But I should have told you sooner." She drops a tender kiss against Jude's temple. "I love you, Jude Limas. Utterly."

"Oh." Again, just that one amazed simple exhalation that says so much. Dipping her head to Jude's India seeks out her lips, sharing a kiss that she tries to infuse with all of the sentiment welling in her. Jude sighs against her mouth, runs warm hands up her back, pulls her closer, slips fond fingers into the hair at the nape of India's neck.

Then, just when India is fairly melting into Jude, when she is barely breathing anymore, suffused with emotion, Jude pulls back and presses trembling fingers against her searching mouth.

"But how do I not think about it, India? About you and ..."

Kissing the fingertips India moves her head away from their pressure and lays a hand on Jude's jaw, slipping it down to the smooth neck where she can feel her lover's pulse fluttering wildly.

"Jude. Shh. Aren't you the one who taught me that it doesn't matter what you do with this...", India indicates her body, "... but only what you do with this?" Running her hand down Jude's neck she brings it to rest on the other woman's chest, over her thundering heart. "Matter doesn't matter, baby. One day, when I die..."

Jude opens her mouth to protest but India muffles her with a fierce kiss before she continues.

"Everybody dies sometime, Jude. And one day when it's my turn, I don't want to look back and know that I gained five more years by playing it safe. I want to know that every moment I spent with you was never less than it could be. I want to know that I loved, and was loved by you, for as long and powerfully as it could last. And to me that's worth whatever time I have to give up for it."

Gently, she wipes away the tears spilling from Jude's eyes.

"From my slightly dented body to my fortified little brain to my iffy crappy lungs, and everything in between, I'm completely yours, if you would have me."

Whatever Jude says - India thinks that she is whispering "Oh God", but it's so soft and so quick that she'll never be sure - is muffled between them as she presses her lips to India's in a kiss weighted with the words she cannot articulate.

Folding the small body into her arms Jude lays them down, her fingers unsteady when she reverently unbuttons India's pants and pushes them down her legs. She stops to lay a delicate kiss on the hip that she knows aches sometimes, and then shifts up to cover India's body carefully with her own.

This time, when India reaches up to unbutton her shirt, she does not resist. She shifts her shoulders to shrug the material off them and then arches into the caress of hot hands, her breath a shudder as the sensation threatens to drown her. Smiling at the rapture so clearly visible in her lover's face India explores every stretch of skin, every hollow and valley and line. Though the heat is rising in her like wildfire she pushes it down to just below the surface, holding on to the slow desire and devotion that she wishes to bestow on the woman above her.

It's when she reaches down to unbutton Jude's jeans that the other woman snaps out of her haze. Reaching down, she traps India's hand against her body, but even as India is preparing to protest she lifts their entwined hands above their heads and leans in to brush feather light kisses over India's parted lips.

The moment that Jude lets go of her hands she reaches down again, only to be intercepted by

Jude's firm grip pushing her arms up again.

"Let me."

The whisper sets her skin on fire, and she can only nod as Jude shifts down, her long dark hair fanning over India's chest. The first touch of lips to the rise of her breast is so slight that she arches up into it, and then it is submerged in the following touch, and the touch after that, until she is powerless to do anything but mutter one name over and over.

Jude's fingers slide over her hips, down her thighs, over her knees and back up, knuckles barely grazing her groin, down again and closer this time, until the strokes against her centre are rhythmic and slow. Lifting a knee she tilts her hips, tries to get closer, shivers as she hears the low laughter slipping from the back of Jude's throat. In the moment that Jude shifts up and kisses her urgently, fingers slip up into her and she gasps against the unrelenting mouth. Slow thrusts rock her gently, and though she wants to hold onto this moment forever she can feel herself unravelling, can feel the flare of energy rocketing through her directly to the point where she is joined to her lover.

When India's body arches up Jude shifts to run her lips over the stretched neck presented to her, mimicking the strokes and thrusts with her tongue against the silky skin until, finally, India slumps breathlessly back to the mattress. Gently, Jude eases her fingers from their inviting berth and runs them up and through drenched warmth, coaxing one last surge and cry from India before the healer gasps her name desperately.

Shifting up Jude wraps her arms around the other woman, turning them gently so that India lays snug in the curve of her arm and side. She smiles when a delayed wave of pleasure shudders through the small body pressed against her.

"I'm yours."

Neither of them knows which one it is that whispers the words, but it doesn't matter anymore.

"Do you need some help with that?"

"I can carry a tray by myself, India. Stay where you are."

"I've been where I am for the better part of the day, Jude."

"You need to rest."

"Is *that* what we've been doing? Resting?"

"Don't make me feel guilty, honey, or I'll summarily stop the fun so you can get some sleep."

"I didn't say anything."

"That's what I thought. Here, take your tea."

"I wanted coffee."

"Your heart wants tea."

"My heart wants you. My body wants coffee. No... wait... my body wants you too."

"Don't butter me up, India. Drink your tea."

"Butter you up? Hmmm."

"Don't look at me like that. Please. Let's just get through breakfast."

"Breakfast? It's after five pm, isn't it? Or am I losing my mind?"

"Yes, you are. And yes, it's after five. I happen to like breakfast. Time is relative."

"Fair enough."

"Here - have some yoghurt, honey. It's good for your bones."

"No thanks."

"C'mon."

"Nope. Every time I turn around you're there with a spoonful of yoghurt, Jude. I've had enough."

"Please?"

"No. Wild horses couldn't drag me."

"Okay. Well. I can't make you ... oh dear. I seem to have spilled some of it on me."

"Jude... "

"Don't worry, I'll just wipe it off. Slowly."

"You're such a tease."

"Not at all. I'm conscientious. And thorough. Hmm. Nothing like a good wipe down."

"Jude. Move your hands."

"Oh? *Oh*."

"I suppose there's always space for yoghurt."

The balcony doors have been thrown open - sunshine streams in, throwing a horizontal line over their bare feet. They are intertwined in a way that only the very tranquil can find peaceful... not so much comfortable as the simple inability to move.

Running the arch of a warm foot up against Jude's smooth calf, India inattentively caresses the curve of the glowing hip under her hand. Immediately a low happy murmur rises from the chest pressed to her ear, and she cannot help a slightly silly grin from spreading on her face.

Jude scratches at the nape of India's neck lazily. "Honey?"

Involuntarily India's grip tightens. Too many bad things have started this way. "Mm?"

"What do you want to do?"

Smiling again in sheer relief at the innocuous nature of the question, India lightly slaps a thigh, eliciting a growl from her lover. "Don't tell me you want me to get up *now*, please."

"No, not now." Craning her neck Jude drops a kiss on the disordered head pressed to her shoulder. "Later. You don't have to go back to work, I don't have to go back to work..."

"Yet."

"Be that as it may, I don't have to go back to work." Jude's hand drops from India's neck to her back, where she idly draws light patterns with her nails against the silky skin. "And as much as I want to spend the rest of our... forever in this bed with you, naked and shiny, making the neighbours jealous, I also want to do other things with you. Make plans." Her hand stills in what India thinks may be momentary embarrassment. "I want a new start with you."

Twisting around, careful not to jar her hip, India stretches up and bestows a long heartfelt kiss unto her lover before she pulls back and looks into the sparkling green eyes affectionately.

"Ditto, Limas. What were you thinking about?"

"Travel." Jude trails a finger over the sharp cheekbone, the hollow cheek, the sharp little chin. "I know you've been to a few places, and so have I, but this time it will be different. No miracles, no microphones, no misery. No audience. Just you and me."

"Anywhere with you is good, Jude." India closes her eyes for a moment as the finger trails down

her neck, over her collarbones and down her arm, before she works to compose herself. "But people will recognise you, sweetheart. Everybody does."

"I'm not letting that stop me." Jude's light touch meanders over India's hip and back up her narrow ribcage. "I'll go blonde if I have to."

Studying the glossy black hair spread on the pillow India leans down until she is nose to nose with Jude, glaring at her threateningly. "Don't you **dare**."

Jude, however, seems about as intimidated as a tiger. "It would be like having an affair with Marilyn Monroe, honey. Just think of the ... "

"No." To shut that traitorous mouth India takes the only practical action, and for a while there is silence.

"Where do you want to go, Jude?"

The journalist's hot shoulder shrugs slightly under India's head. "Everybody says Cambodia is beautiful - and Vietnam. Maybe we could start there and work our way back. Would you like to do that?"

Turning, India interlaces her hands over Jude's chest and rests her chin on top of them. "Sweetheart, at the risk of sounding like a puppy, I'd be very happy to be anywhere if you were there."

Jude watches her with sharp eyes. "Yes, but that's not what I'm asking you, India. I still worry about your health, and if you aren't 100% sure, I most assuredly will not do this."

Slightly exasperated, India intones "I'm fiiiine" like a teenager before she continues. "I just hadn't thought about it, but it *would* be nice. An adventure. With you." Nodding, she grins up at her lover happily. "Okay. Let's go."

"Well, not just yet, you know. There are a few things to plan." Jude's voice is light and when she reaches out to pull India closer her hands are gentle.

15. Give these clay feet wings to fly, to touch the face of the stars (*"Dante's Prayer"* - Loreena McKennitt)

On their way up the grandiose stairs of Wat Phnom towards the pagoda, they are stopped by a small boy, who waves a pamphlet of some kind and a pen at Jude. Shooting a cautious look at

India, the journalist approaches him guardedly, and when he asks her for an autograph she complies with a hidden sigh and a sweet smile. Turning around to his sister, who is standing petulantly in the shade of a large palm tree, he waves the page gleefully.

"I got an autograph from Adriana Lima!"

Behind Jude India bursts into a fit of silent laughter, which is not halted by the sharp look that her lover shoots her.

With a bored expression the girl approaches her brother and peers at the page, then past him at Jude.

"That's **not** Adriana Lima, you moron."

"Is too!"

"Is NOT!"

Using the temporary distraction Jude grabs a shaking India by the wrist and walks up a few steps as fast as India's gait will allow them, yanking her behind a shrub halfway. Glaring at the small woman she props her hands on her hips.

"You think it's funny, do you?"

Helplessly, her eyes filled with tears, India can only nod her head. Jude raises her eyebrows.

"Fine. I'm going back down there to tell them you're Lily Allen."

Pressing her fists to her mouth India tries to control her giggles. "You wouldn't."

"Oh." With a nod and a very evil smile Jude moves backwards. "But I will."

"Please don't," India implores Jude, wiping her eyes, "I'm asking you nicely, Adriana."

On Con Son Island they stand on an observation deck, watching the green sea turtles drift by languidly.

"They're beautiful." India leans so far forward over the railing that Jude feels she has to caution her. "Look how elegant they are."

"Yes, they're lovely;" Jude answers, not even looking at the turtles, "India, please watch yourself. I'm not jumping in there to get you if you fall."

"You're a fair weather lover, sweetheart."

Dryly Jude shakes her head. "There's love, and then there's water with giant turtles in it. Never the twain shall meet."

With a smile India returns her attention to the wonderful scene below her. "It's amazing. On land they drag and limp, and in the water they're... this. I should swim more often."

She is so engrossed; her expression so completely charmed and engaged, that Jude turns the camera from the turtles onto her, trying to capture the uncomplicated bliss. She has taken at least a dozen when India turns to her, dark eyes sparkling.

"Stop it, will you? Why are you pointing that thing at me anyway when the scenery is so amazing?"

Lowering the camera Jude smiles. "But look how beautiful you are."

They're standing at the bar of a little restaurant in Khon Kaen that a friend of Jude's had recommended, waiting for their drinks, when a female voice rises up loudly from the front.

"Oh my God! Isn't that Jude Limas?"

Clasping India's hand Jude quickly steps around the bar and through the kitchen door, greeting the bewildered chef cheerily before she charges past him to the back door.

The two women skulk across the street and rush through the first open door they find, which turns out to be that of a dilapidated hotel. Ignoring the pointed stare of the stern man behind the desk they hurry into the sitting room and huddle in a corner, keeping a close eye on the doorway.

When it appears that nobody is coming after them, India turns to Jude.

"Oh my God, aren't you Jude Limas?"

"I should hope so, otherwise I couldn't do this." Lowering her head, Jude captures India's lips passionately. Wrapping her arms around Jude's waist, India pulls her close and smiles into the kiss. It quickly turns into a groan as Jude's hands slip under her shirt, caressing the small of her back.

"Jude..."

The stern man's expression doesn't alter when they appear, rumped, and hurriedly book a room.

Upstairs, one of the windowpanes is broken, the cardboard in front of it already peeling loose on

one side. The air conditioning unit is a dirty cream colour and makes a ticking sound. The once opulent carpet is now threadbare and pulling out of the sideboards in places.

Neither India nor Jude notices.

In Moscow they lose one of their bags at the airport. After a great deal of arguing it's finally found by a surly customs officer, who then insists on emptying and searching it at length.

The hotel has lost their booking by some means, and India has to put her hand on Jude's arm when she feels the other woman tense as the situation is slowly resolved.

Then, somehow the taxi driver misunderstands them and gets them lost on the way to the Kremlin. Instead, he drops them off at a museum in the middle of nowhere. They are too wrapped up in conversation to notice, and when they notice where they are he is already driving off.

"Hey!" Jude tries to get his attention, but it is hopeless. Throwing her hands up in frustration she watches the taillights disappear into the distance, and just as she turns around big fat plops of rain start to come down enthusiastically.

Shaking her head Jude turns around and sighs.

"Can things really get any worse today?"

Sitting on the stairs, grinning, India wipes wet hair out of her eyes. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

In Pamplona exhaustion takes its toll on India, and against her protestations Jude barricades them in the opulent room at the Gran Hotel La Perla. They end up watching the running of the bulls from their balcony as the spectacle passes by below them. When one of the runners has a particularly nasty fall and is promptly run over by a herd of angry bulls, Jude shakes her head.

"Such a barbaric custom. Though, when another culture has traditions that we simply don't understand, aren't we so very quick to label it primitive?"

Lightly bumping shoulders with the journalist India indicates the scene with a nod of her head. "Well, he's up, and he seems okay. It's amazing that more people don't die this way."

"I agree." Jude peers at India. "If I'd let you, would you have gone down to help?"

Dark eyebrows arch. "If you'd **let** me? Do you want to rephrase that?"

"Oh, you know what I mean."

"Hmm." It's only a fake grudging grumble. "No, I wouldn't have. There are accidents, and then there's self-inflicted stupidity."

A chuckle bubbles up from Jude's throat. "Honey, but tell me how you *really* feel." They bump shoulders again, and then Jude shakes her head. "Poor animals. I should do a special on this."

She can almost feel the brown eyes on her.

"... but not for a while yet."

"You can," India leans over the railing casually, "when I let you."

They're in high spirits as they loll on the terrace at the Jurys Cork Hotel, reading the Corkman newspaper.

Jude has been calling India "Lily" for the last few minutes, and in retaliation India refers to her as frequently as possible as "Adriana" with a terrible English accent. They have a conversation filled with helpless laughter, sniggering through their morning scones until a gentleman at the next table slaps down his own paper and glares at them sternly.

"Would the two of you mind awfully keeping it down? I am trying to have a peaceful morning!" His is indeed a fancy English accent.

Apologising, thick with laughter, they gather their paper and rush into the foyer towards the elevator. Pressing the call button India shakes her head with a grin, not daring to look at Jude in case her lover's expression sets her off.

"Some people are so tetchy."

"Mmm." It's a mouthy sound, designed to keep the laughter in control. They're silent until they're in the elevator, and then Jude clears her throat suspiciously. "The accent was rather sexy, though."

Shooting Jude a quick sharp look India shakes her head. "He's a joyless asshole."

Jude guffaws. "Not his, you twit, *yours*."

A silent giggle jerks India's shoulders. "Are you serious?"

Green eyes fix her with a gaze so electric that she can almost feel the current stuttering down her spine. "Oh yes, I'm serious." The words roll around Jude's lips with slow intent.

India is sure that she's blushing when the elevator doors suddenly ping open, and the rush of cool air is welcome. Peering back at her smirking lover she raises an eyebrow.

"Well, then, *old chap*, I'll race you to our lodgings."

It's not much of a race with one contestant sporting a cane, but then, the nominated penalty for the loser turns out not to be that bad.

"Have you got the entertainment section?"

Passing over the requested item, Jude shakes her head at India. "Heathen. You should pay more attention to what's happening in the world."

"As long as it's not happening to me, I'm quite happy to read about who wore what on which carpet. And on that topic, may I say," India casts a look at Jude from under her lashes, "I'm glad that there aren't any cameras about today."

Gasping theatrically Jude glares at the small woman. "Excuse me? Are you insulting my fashion sense?"

"Um. The line between insult and ridicule is so very narrow."

"Hey!"

After a close call at Dublin Airport, where a woman recognised Jude and almost started a stampede, they have had to be more careful. Thus, the woman who sits across from India at the bistro today is hidden beneath a honey blonde wig and a massive round pair of glasses. The purple fedora serves as much to distract casual passers-by from Jude's actual features as it does to hold down the ill-fitting wig.

Patting at the static blonde strands Jude winces. "This thing smells like a guinea pig."

"Maybe that's what they made it from?"

"A blonde guinea pig?"

"They must exist somewhere, I'm sure." Lowering the paper, India shoots Jude a dubious look. "By the by, how can you be so totally sure that it smells like a guinea pig? That's a bizarre connection to make."

"I had a guinea pig. Like most kids."

Ignoring the dryness of the tone India cocks an eyebrow. "Yes, sweetheart, I had a guinea pig too, but I didn't go around sniffing it."

Jude shrugs. "We didn't have money for glue."

With a snort India chokes on her coffee. Waving away the pat to her back she coughs a little and wipes her nose. "Don't do that. I'm not ready for irreverent blonde Jude."

It's strange, how certain human reactions are so small and unique, and yet so universal. There is an involuntary breathless pause in times of trauma, like when a woman is raped and afterwards spends valuable time looking for her shirt, as if she will be able to restore her ravaged dignity with the simple act of covering up. Or when, many minutes after witnessing an accident, you begin to shake and have to pull over, all the while berating yourself because, after all, it has no personal importance to you.

Or perhaps when you're sitting at a bistro overlooking St Stephen's Green, reading your newspaper, and suddenly a bomb explodes in a shop two doors down.

It's only a hundredth of a second late, the moment when you throw yourself sideways, but by that time you're already torn to shreds.

"Fuck!" It's less a word than a gasp and a sob. Ignoring the pain where she's hit her head on the cobblestones, India frantically pulls her legs from under the chair where they have tangled so that she can twist around.

The blonde wig is close to her, absurdly looking like a discarded mop, and just beyond it lays Jude. There is a crimson smear across her forehead.

"Jude? Jude??" She crawls forward, cursing her one slow stiff leg as it threatens to give in under her. "Jude..."

Or like when you're lying on the ground, bleeding, and you should be running for safety, worrying about gas or fire or terrorists... and instead you can't even hear the sounds because you're praying for the person next to you.

The dust is drifting down around them like fairy dust, and the noise is deafening. Screams, car alarms, the cracking of something that might be fire.

Then it all fades away as a pair of green eyes shoots open and search for India. Reaching out a hand Jude grasps India's, intertwining their fingers tightly, and when she begins to sit up she winces slightly.

"Ouch. What the hell?"

"Jude?"

"I'm fine, honey - you okay?"

"Yeah." Peering over her shoulder India stares at the scene of carnage. Pieces of material, unidentifiable, floating in the air; flames licking at the edges of what remains, a woman on her knees screaming at the top of her lungs. The shops to the sides of the main target are a mess. Debris everywhere.

Pulling herself up against the upturned table Jude cracks her neck uncomfortably as she surveys the destruction. "Who would do this?!"

Shrugging, India pulls at her hand. "We have to get back, sweetheart. We have to get back."

"Yeah. Yeah." Wiping at her forehead, a motion that leaves a wide red swathe on her forehead like a scarlet letter, Jude looks back, tries to find out where help will be coming from.

There's a woman crumpled on the cobbles not far away. She's howling like an animal, her accent so strong with terror that it is impossible to understand her, and then, "... me boy's in there..."

When Jude looks back she catches India's gaze alighting on the shop the woman is extending her arms to. Like the shop next to it, it's still standing, though smoke drifts through it and the structure has collapsed in parts.

There is a calm silence in India's eyes that sends icy chills straight to Jude's heart.

"India." Grasping her chin, the journalist turns the small woman's face towards her urgently. "No."

India's eyes are massive beneath the smudges. "I have to. "

"You don't have to. You don't."

"Yeah." India allows Jude to lead her away, but she only takes three steps before she halts, almost yanking the journalist off her feet in the process. "Jude. I can't walk away."

"India, if you go in there, one way or another... "

"...I probably won't walk out again." Cupping Jude's face, India gazes up at her searchingly. "Jude, sweetheart, this is as close to destiny as it gets."

"No!" Covering India's hand with her own Jude pleads. "Please. It isn't worth it."

"It's always worth it when you're leading with your heart. You taught me that, Jude."

"You shouldn't have listened!" Jude sobs back at her. "There'll be ambulances soon. Please."

"Not soon enough. You know that. For every second we waste here someone could die." Taking Jude's hand, India kisses the palm reverently. "I love you."

"Oh god." Wrapping her fingers in India's collar, mindless of her tight grip, Jude pulls her close.

"Jude." India's fingers stroke the backs of Jude's hands gently, and a flush of heat suddenly suffuses Jude's body; a vein of energy that starts in her arms and caresses slowly through her. "Baby, don't cry."

16. Love is a temple. Love is a higher law.

("One" - U2)

Let's say you are having your standard morning coffee at a little bistro just off St Stephen's Green. You're waiting for your sister, who is probably late because she can't walk past a shop without wanting to take a quick look inside, and because you have all the time in the world you're indulging in your favourite pastime: people watching.

Of particular interest to you is the blonde woman sitting a few tables away from you. Her hair is awful, her hat is garish (something inside you shouts "tourists!" with sneering glee) and her sunglasses are so oversized that what is a current hot trend could be single-handedly screwed up by her efforts. But beyond all of that, there is something about her that piques your curiosity. She carries herself as if she is *someone*.

You do not pay much attention to the girl with her - from this angle all you can see is a woefully disorganised head, and you are no fan of the bedhead craze. Instead you watch lazily - the sun is as out as it's going to get, and though the breeze is chilly it's not an unpleasant day - as the blonde pages through the paper and passes one of the sections to the other woman with what appears to be a joke. She keeps what you are (admittedly) surprised to see is the business section, and reads through it with careful intent.

You're still wondering why she seems so familiar when your phone rings - it's your sister. She's

been delayed (you can almost hear the quotation marks) and is still about ten minutes away. Sighing, you slip your phone back into your handbag, and it's in that moment that the world explodes around you.

The blast rocks you sideways from your chair, flinging you into the cobblestones, and a brief sharp sensation over your cheek flashes by between the suddenly overwhelming silence and the cloud of rising dust.

You have no idea what's just happened. You think more time may have passed than you noticed. You think the world may just have ended, and you've been left behind.

Lying there on the stone (it's cold on the skin, your mind complains, but you're too shocked to verbalise that thought) you blink dazedly, look about you, take in very little until the screaming starts to seep in slowly. Only then do your brain and your eyes connect again, and you see her, on her knees (they must hurt, that same distant part of your mind commiserates, but you have no words) wailing to the sky, hands held out towards one of the shops caught in the blast.

Slowly scrambling to your feet you shuffle in the direction of St Stephen's Green, not wanting to be near the devastation (who knows if there aren't further dangers here?), but still wanting to stay close enough to see what happens. Intrinsically human. You're no different, even if you think you are.

When you turn back to look at the wailing woman again something else catches your gaze, and for a moment there you think a piece of flying debris may have damaged your eyes. Is it shock that makes you think that woman used to be blonde? Yet there she is, not far from the wailer, clasping the smaller girl's chin in her hand with a stark look on her face. When she's dark like that you realise that she makes you think of that woman on CNN. But you must be wrong. She wouldn't be reading the Business section of the local newspaper on St Stephen's Green.

Now she's pulling the short one away, towards you and the others, but it's only a few steps before the girl falters, stops, and pulls back. You'd like to think you wouldn't be watching them this openly had it not been for the situation, but your every action seems cloaked in a veil of fuzziness to you right now. You don't have the power or the will or the inclination to look away, and so you don't.

When the girl lifts her hand and cups the dark woman's cheek you absently lift your own hand to mirror the motion, and find yourself wincing as you scrape your palm over the small pieces of gravel embedded in your flesh. And NOW it hurts, but still that disembodied sort of pain that doesn't quite affect you as it should.

The small girl kisses the woman's palm.

"I love you."

Those are the easiest words to lip-read, even if you're not very good at it. The shape of the mouth is unmistakable, and when, as in this case, the sentiment shines from the eyes... well, it would be

ridiculous to miss.

It's not like you're spying. They're right there, in the open.

But then, when they've gone silent and are staring at one another with some sort of intent that you can't tell, you startle and lift your hand to your cheek again. You must be hurt worse than you thought, because the hallucinations have come. On the dark woman's cheek, right where the smaller girl had put her hand, there's a glowing handprint. It glows like faintly reflecting glitter, and there's no sun anywhere, and the dust makes everything else dull, and there's no way this can be anything but shock.

I love you.

Then the dark woman lets go of the short one's lapels, and the short one looks at the tall one, and you shudder for the love that you can see even from here - she's got such enormous sad eyes - and then the girl limps.

Not towards you, but back towards the wailing woman and the burning shop.

You think you should warn her, shouldn't someone warn her? but your throat is too dry from the dust and the shock.

The dark woman doesn't say anything either. When the small woman disappears through a dangerous-looking collapsed doorway she turns around - the tear-tracks have formed grooves in the dirt covering her face - and staggers back towards her table, overturning what's still standing, searching for something.

When she straightens up you see the camera in her sooty hands. Can it still work after a fall? But she seems to think so. She lifts it, and points it, and waits.

If you look closely you can see a tear form a drop near her chin, hang there for a moment and then drop heavily onto her shirt. And then another. And another. But her hands are perfectly steady.

She clicks the shutter just as the first man appears in the doorway, his clothes and his skin and his hair and his large hands bloody, and the light streaming off him like he's been dipped in the rays of the sun.

And you aren't entirely sure what's happening, but suddenly you're weeping, because somehow you know that this is something miraculous you'll never ever see again.

Epilogue

All in all, if you could measure these sorts of things by something as conventional as beginning and middle and end...

But you never really can.