

~ Flames of a Soul ~

by Larisa

Disclaimer: Yep they resemble and may act a little like the girls, but these ones are all mine. Everything that is in a Xena Ep is in here along with my filthy gutter mouth and sex between the two women. So, if that bothers you or you're not old enough to read it go the hell away. If you are old enough and everything, but it's illegal where you live, why do you live there? Thanks to Lesia and Sherri for reading this as it developed in my wicked mind.

Flames of a Soul

By Larisa

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Jake pulled the shielded helmet off of her head and lowered the flame retardant hood back to let it hang across her wide back. Sweat dripped from her chin to bounce off her heavy jacket. Shaking her head as her Lieutenant came towards her; she knew she was in for an ass chewing for her once again disregards to procedure. She just couldn't help herself, it was in her nature to risk her life and no one was going to change that. She cast steel blue eyes on the short fat man who was rolling towards her. His baldhead glistening from sweat in the colors of the fire engines flashing lights.

"What in the sam hell did you think you were doing! How many times do I have to tell your stupid ass to not go into a burning structure without your buddy and a damn hose?"

His face turning the same color as the flames and the veins on his forehead popping out threatening to burst.

"Do I have to write you up once again and suspend you?"

She lowered her eyes to her heavy boots and shook her head no; glancing from the corner of her eyes, she gave him a slight grin.

"Won't do it again." *Tonight that is, can't guarantee anything beyond that.* She thought to herself.

"Next time you do it and your ass is mine, you hear me?" He got nose to nose with her which was a feat all in it's own since he was six inches shorter to her six foot and two foot further out in the gut department.

"Yes sir, no problem." *You disgusting little troll!* Her little voice that she called Rocky was on a roll, she often wondered about her habit of talking to it but what the hell. Rocky was one way to

get all the right answers to her questions.

"Now get your ass on the truck so we can get back to the station." He rolled away and then tripped and stumbled over a fire hose that the firefighters were just finishing rolling up. "Get that picked up before someone falls!" He yelled at the men who were trying not to laugh as Jake was doing.

She waved at the little boy who was hugging his puppy to his chest; she had heard a whimper coming from one of the windows of the trailer that was engulfed in flames. Paying no attention to what the others were saying or doing, she used her axe, smashed the window out and then crawled through to find the small puppy scratching at the closed bedroom door. Picking him up and putting him inside her coat, she crawled back out the window to drop down in front of her steaming lieutenant. Shrugging her shoulders at him she strutted away to find the owner of the small black fur ball. Tears threatened to come to her eyes when she saw the little boy sobbing against his father's shoulder. She knew right then that there would be a happy little boy that night. She handed the puppy over to the little boy and was instantly engulfed in a leg hug. Green eyes looked up at her and a toothless smile came to his face. That was all the thank you she needed, ruffling his dark hair, she smiled and then walked away with a swelling feeling in her chest.

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Dropping her boots next to her small rack and then her jacket, she dropped down and sagged back against the thin mattress. Closing her eyes, she felt her body start to relax.

"What were you thinking Jake? You want Professor Clump's twin to can your dumb ass?"

Tired blue eyes opened to see one of her friends standing with his hands on his hips glaring down at her.

"You know he's just waiting for you to screw up enough to fire you."

"I know John, I don't care." She looked at her bodybuilding fiend of a friend. "I can go to any fire house and get a job; he's just pissed that he can't crawl through windows."

"He's lucky to make it through a damn door, not to mention a window!" He grinned at her wickedly before he slapped her on the knee and left her in peace.

"Bet if I threw a Twinkie through a window he'd fit."

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Jake had just finished with her late night work out when the alarms went off, the clanging drove her nuts and she often wondered if the damn things weren't designed to drive the firefighters out of the building instead of letting them know there was an emergency. Running for the stairs to the upper level where her clothes were sprawled out on her rack, she passed all the other firefighters on their way down.

"We'll wait for ya Jake, so hurry up!" John yelled over his shoulder on his way down.

"Yeah, yeah I know." She grabbed her clothes and started pulling them on as she went back down the stairs; still carrying her coat, shirt and boots, she ran out and jumped on the back of the ladder truck. "Why didn't ya make me run a little faster?" She mumbled as she hung on and tried to get dressed at the same time. "I know ya just wanted ta see my tits bouncing around ya perverts!" She said loud enough for the guys to hear.

"Got that right, you may on the same side of the fence as us, but we ain't dead!"

"Where we going anyway?" She asked as she pulled her hood over her long dark hair and helmet on.

"Bad crash on Rt. 70E, numerous cars and a fuel tanker right smack dab in the middle. We've got other units there now and more on the way."

"Ohh great, rubber Neckers and the works, any fires yet?"

John gave her an exasperated look. "What is it with you and fire?"

"Pyromania?" She grinned, pulled a rubber hot dog from her pocket, and waved it in front of him. "Did ya bring the buns?"

"You're a sick bitch Jake, put that thing away! Looks like a damn strap-on."

"Jealous Johnnie boy, bigger than yours?" She wiggled her dark brows at him and laughed when he turned bright red. "I know it is, remember I saw ya in the shower!" The whole truck went into an uproar with laughter.

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The sirens wailing, lights flashing they raced down the wrong side of the highway towards the accident. Hundreds of cars were lined up on the other side; people were outside of their vehicles watching from a distance the flames shooting up from the wrecked cars and the fuel truck. Vehicles were being turned down at an emergency turn around and sent back the other way. Jake hoped that they got them all out the area before the flames spread and sent off a chain reaction. She was off the back of the truck before it had stopped, grabbing a hose she started to back up, pulling it from the storage area. John came up, got in front of her and helped her drag it to the nearest vehicle. Turning the spray on, she started washing the leaking fuel away and spraying down the car to cool it. As soon as it was cool to the touch, she checked inside for passengers and then they moved onto the next. She kept her eyes on the other cars and watched as EMT's and Paramedics carried and led injured passengers from the area. Before she could turn the spray on another vehicle, a man came running towards her screaming for help. She looked at John who shrugged his shoulders at her.

"Go on Jake, see what he needs. I'll get one of the others to help me." Before she sprinted away, he yelled to her. "Turn your radio on!"

The man grabbed her by her arm and dragged her over to his car; his wife was in the back seat and was just about to give birth on the spot.

"Please help her!" He begged and grabbed her arm. "It's our first baby."

"Just hold on here a minute, don't move I'll get a paramedic over here."

"Can't you help her?"

"Sir, I'm a fireman. I'll get someone who knows what to do."

"What good are you people?" He ranted. "My wife needs help now!"

She ignored his outburst and headed to one of the many ambulances that were parked in the grassy median strip. She sent an EMT over to the car and was headed back to find John when a large explosion rocked the ground, she was knocked to the ground and stay there until flying debris stopped falling. Screams penetrated the all ready noisy area, getting to her feet she ran towards the tanker and started helping the other firefighters spray foam on it to try and put out the flames. With all the yelling from the firefighter's her sensitive ears still picked up a cry for help. Raising her shield, she looked around but couldn't figure out where the cry had come from. Wiping the sweat from her eyes, she turned around to see nothing but smoke and small fires sprouting up from some of the cars.

Deciding to do her normal thing, she left the scene and walked around to the other side of the flaming truck. Another explosion rocked the ground and a blast of hot air hit her in the back and threw her over the top of a turned over vehicle. Landing on her shoulder, she felt a searing pain shoot down her arm and make her fingers tingle.

"Fuck me!" She cried out and rolled over onto her back, trying to lift her right arm caused so much pain that stars floated in front of her eyes. "This is not good!"

"Please help me!" A low voice yelled close to where she was. Looking around, she noticed movement in the car she was lying next to. Rolling onto her side, she wiped the dirty window and saw that someone was trapped inside the car. Taking in the way the car was smashed she knew that she wouldn't be able to get the door open. The roof was caved in on one side making the person lean to the side. Reaching for her radio all she found was a melted clump of plastic.

"Cheap ass shit!" She threw it on the ground and reached for the small axe she carried on her belt. Once it was free, she tapped on the window and told the person to cover their head if possible. Aiming for the center of the window, she hit it with the pointed end of her axe and watched as the glass crumbled and fell to the ground. Poking her head into the car, she wiggled in as far as she could to where the person was trapped.

"Hi ya, I'm Jake. I'm going to try and get you out of here."

Looking to where the person was leaning over at an odd angle, she could see that the steering wheel was pressed tightly up against their ribcage and holding them sideways in the seat.

"Can you breathe OK?"

A strangled voice came out saying a shaky no. It was a rich voice even in pain and very much a woman's voice.

"OK, I'm going to try and make you a little more comfortable, this may hurt a little bit but when I'm done you should be able to breathe easier."

Crawling as far as she could, she was able to get her good arm under the steering wheel and press upward. All it did was groan a little bit.

"Do you have your seatbelt on?"

"Yes, it's digging into my side and my legs are going numb."

"OK, I'm going to cut the belt and see if I can move you a little bit." She pulled a knife from her coat pocket and opened the blade. "Before I do this, can you feel your arms and legs and is there any pain in your back or neck?"

"Just my legs hurt, the dashboard is on them. Please get me out."

"I will, just hold on."

As she cut the belt another explosion went off from the fuel truck, the car rocked and flames bounced around the outside. Jake could feel the heat burning into the bottoms of her feet and legs. She knew she had to hurry before the car either caught fire or exploded with both of them inside. It was so dark in the car that she couldn't see anything, pulling her helmet off she let it fall from her numb fingers. Feeling with her left hand and fumbling, she found the seat belt and cut it as fast as she could. The woman's body moved a little but not enough to get her out.

"What's your name there little one."

"Artemis Shields."

"OK Arty, I'm going to try and move the steering wheel again and see what happens. Using all the strength she had, she pulled the steering wheel towards her and felt it give. Taking a deep breath and bracing her back against the seat, she pulled again and felt it give and break free in her hand. The woman and she fell over on the seat and another explosion rocked the car, this time the flames landed on Jake's legs.

"Uuhhmm...I'm on fire so after I put the flames out I'll be right back with you." Crawling

backwards from the window she sat down and beat the flames from her legs. "Damn things ain't supposed to do this!" She cursed as the last of it was put out and just smoked. Crawling back in with her small flashlight on, she came to the small woman, brushed the hair back from her sweaty face, and froze. The most beautiful sea green eyes she had ever seen were looking up at her.

"Mercy!"

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John cringed when he heard the LT's voice scream his name, he knew he would want to know where Jake was and he had no idea.

"Where the hell is your partner?" He screamed as he pressed his face shield against John's.

"She went to help some guy over that way." He yelled back and pointed to where Jake was last seen.

"That's it! Her ass is mine; I'll chew on it until she's sitting on bones!"

John watched him roll in the direction of the other trucks, he knew that Jake wouldn't be able to keep her job this time, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Lieutenant Bellowski, I need your men to hit the tanker with foam." Another Lieutenant told him and then motioned for his men to move to the other side of the tanker where the flames were spreading to other cars.

The short round man gave the other firefighter a mean look, and then shrugged it off. "Have you seen that damn trouble maker Jake? She's missing again!"

"Nope, just my guys here. Check the other units." He jogged off to help his men leaving the short man fuming behind his face shield.

"I'll roast her alive! And then I'll feed her to my dog!" He ranted and stomped off towards his own unit.

John gave the hose over to other guys and went in search of his partner, he had to find her before the LT did. Checking with each firefighter, he finally found one that had seen her right before the first explosion.

"Damn her to hell!" He said to himself and then shook his head when he thought of how much she would like it down there.

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"I...ahhh...I'm sorry about that it's just...damn!" She closed her blue eyes and took a deep

breath.

She was held spellbound by the pale blue eyes, and only regained her senses when the woman closed them. Even under the dire situation that she was in, Artemis smiled at the flustered firefighter.

"Let me see if I can get you out of here."

Sweat was pouring off her face, she felt like she was swimming in her clothes from the built up body heat and the fire so close to the car. Wiggling under the dash, she pushed up with her one hand and groaned when it didn't budge. "Hey Arty, I'm going ta feel around your legs and see how much I have to move this before your free." *Gonna get a free feel there hot stuff?* Little Rocky snorted at her. "Ha very funny!"

"Excuse me?" Artemis said and tried to look down at her rescuer.

"Uhhm...wish it was sunny." *You're such an idiot Jake.* "Can you feel my hand?"

"Gods yes and it hurts!" Artemis cried out in pain.

"I'm sorry."

"Jake what the hell are you doing down there?" A deep voice yelled from outside of the car.

"Johnnie boy I need a small jack!" She yelled from where she was and then yelped when the car rocked from another explosion. "Johnnie you OK?"

"Yeah Jake, now get the hell out of there the cars gonna blow soon."

Artemis started to panic, she didn't want to die and if Jake left her that's exactly what would happen. Tears flowed from her eyes at the thought of being burned alive. Reaching down she put her hand on Jakes thigh and squeezed.

"Please don't leave me!" She begged, her throat tightening from the tears and the smoke coming in to the car. She felt a large calloused hand take hers and squeeze back.

"I won't leave you, I promise. Johnnie come on I need it now!"

"I'll be right back, don't do anything stupider than you all ready are!"

She crawled back out from under the dash to lie on the roof facing Artemis, with her pale blue eyes reflecting the flames took Artemis's breath away. Brushing back the short sweaty blonde hair of the smaller woman, she gave her a lopsided grin.

"You know when I get you out of here ya owe me coffee." *And a full body massage!*

"You get me out of here and I'll buy you supper for the rest of your life."

"I'll chew through the dashboard for that, ever eaten food cooked by guys who play with fire?" Green eyes twinkled at her. "Well let me tell ya, if it ain't burnt to a crisp then it's raw."

"Jake, here's the jack now get a move on! The damn trucks gonna blow any minute and the LT is on his way over here to chew on your cute ass!" He handed the jack through the window at her and shined his flashlight so that she could see better. He gasped when he saw the little blonde that was trapped. *"You evil dog Jake!"*

"OK Arty, now when I get this dash moved I'm going to have Johnnie boy pull you out."

She slipped back under the dash and set the jack up close to Artemis's trapped legs, she slipped the handle in place and started to raise the dash. A loud creaking was heard and then she could move the woman's legs a little. Giving the jack a few more pumps, she was able to get her free.

"Do it Johnnie, get her out!" She yelled and moved as out of the way as possible. As soon as Artemis was clear she started backing out when the jack slipped, the handle came loose and smacked her in the face.

"Mother fucking son of a bitch!" She yelled at the tops of her lungs and then felt herself pulled from the wreckage. Holding a hand to her eye, she looked down to where Artemis was leaning up against the car. Dropping down to her knees, she brushed the hair from her eyes.

"Come on Arty, lets get out of here." She put her good arm under her legs and had her wrap her arms around her neck. "Come on Johnnie lets get the hell out of here before it blows." When she stood up a low moan came from Artemis.

"Gods it hurts! My legs are broke." She leaned her head against a strong shoulder and closed her eyes until the pain went away. When she opened them they were nearing an ambulance a short distance from her car. A loud whooshing noise and then an explosion that sent all of them to the ground. Jake covered the small body with her own and stayed that way for long minutes. She pushed herself up with one arm and locked eyes with Artemis, she felt like lightening hit her, her entire body tingled and then went into over drive when a small hand came up and wiped the blood from her eye.

"You're hurt." She mumbled and wiped some more of the blood away so that Jake could see.

"Yeah, nothing new for me. Let's get the hell out of here." She looked over to where Johnnie was getting to his feet. "Johnnie boy, tell LT that I'm going to the hospital."

"Ohh come on Jake, for a little cut above your eyebrow?"

"No, for my broken shoulder." Two sets of eyes swung to her, one unbelieving set that thought she was only doing this so that she could be with a certain blonde and the other set full of emotions that filled her heart as well. Jake scooped Artemis up in her arms and walked to stand

in front of Johnnie. "Here, feel for yourself." He pulled her coat back and shirt open to see the collarbone poking through her flesh.

"For god sakes Jake get the hell in the ambulance you stupid bitch. I'll handle the LT."

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"She what! She left the scene in an ambulance!" LT. Bellowski yelled as he paced in front of the truck. "This had better not be a way of getting out of trouble!"

"It's not sir, I saw the bone sticking out of her skin. She was in that car for a long time getting that woman out and did it with a broken shoulder at that."

The LT narrowed his all ready beady eyes at John and then stomped away.

"You don't know how lucky you are Jake." He whispered to himself.

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"You can't ride back here Jake, you know the rules." The EMT told her and tried to push her to the side.

"Wait, I want her with me. Besides, she's hurt pretty bad." Artemis refused to let go of Jake's hand. She grabbed the EMT's shirtfront with her other and pulled him down to her bared teeth. "You will bend the rules or else!" She threatened the man.

"But?"

"You want to end up working for me for the rest of your life? I guarantee I can pull the strings!"

Jake was confused, it looked like they knew each other.

"It's all right Arty; I'll get Johnnie to bring me over later when we're done here."

"Nope, now get in there now! And you get this stretcher in there before I get up and knock the shit outta you!"

"Yes ma'am! Right away your royal highness."

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Jake was sitting up in her hospital bed when Johnnie came strutting in carrying a carton of chocolate milk. A huge grin on his face told her that her ass wouldn't be chewed off by the LT. He tossed her the chocolate milk and turned her TV on.

"You are one lucky bitch you know that?"

"What do you mean?" Her pale blue eyes narrowed at him.

"Take a look at this." He switched the channel to the news, right there in front of her was Artemis along with a bunch of reporters in her hospital room. A reporters voice was heard asking her questions from out of camera range.

"Dr. Shields, it's rumored that you were rescued just in time by a firefighter that refused to leave you trapped in your car, even though it was close to exploding. Is that true?"

Bright green eyes sparkled for the camera; a bright smile came to the blondes face when she looked right into the lens.

"It's true and I would like to thank Jake for everything she did for me and I hope that we can visit soon. I owe her dinner."

Johnnie flipped the TV off and grinned at her.

"So, she's gonna by you dinner. You would be the one to save a famous doctor who just happens to be the hospital administrators daughter to boot!"

"Thems the breaks Johnnie boy. Is LT still pissed at me?"

"Are you kidding? He's going nuts with all the publicity; he's ranting and raving about you being his best firefighter! He wants to rename the damn station dog after you!" He patted her leg and started for the door. "I'll see you later; my wife is making meatloaf tonight. By the way, Dr. Shields is in room 206 just down the hall from here."

A huge smile came to her face when she thought of what the little doctor had said about her. "Well Rocky what do ya think of that?" *I think you're a pervert and the doc out classes you.* "Whose side are you on anyway?" She said as the medication kicked in and pulled her into a deep sleep.

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Artemis wheeled her chair down the hall past the nurses desk and ignored the older nurse yelling at her. No one was going to tell her anything, she was on a mission. Counting the doors, she came to the one that Jake was in. Swinging the chair so that she could back through the closed door, she gave the wheels a hard spin, grabbed one of them as she cleared the door and spun the chair to stop beside Jake's bed. Pulling the chart off the end of the bed, she read what had been done to repair her shoulder.

"Compound fracture to right collarbone, torn cuff and surrounding tissues. Repaired with screws, plate and sutures." She looked at the chiseled features of her sleeping rescuer, her high cheekbones sloping down to a strong jaw and chin, aquiline nose stopping before full kissable pink lips. "Damn did I just think that?" She said to herself and wondered what had gotten into

her; she had never been attracted to a woman before. Usually she went for the tall dark men; she admitted to herself she had a thing for tall lovers whether they were the dark and dangerous type or the blonde beach bum sort. *"That must be it?"* Her little voice replied. Taking the larger hand in hers, she felt the inside of Jake's wrist and took her pulse, more to make sure that there was no damage to the circulation from the injury she had sustained the night before. She wanted to know how she had gotten hurt so bad and still managed to free her from the wreckage. Rubbing her fingertips over the hard calluses of Jake's palm and up to the tips of her long fingers. She loved the feel of the strong hand and felt light tingles and heat with each touch. Placing the hand against her cheek, she closed her eyes and surprised herself by a deep sigh. *"What are you doing?"* Her little voice asked. "I don't know but it feels so right." She pulled the hand away, placed a soft kiss to the roughed knuckles and then placed the hand across a tight stomach. Leaving her hand linger, she brushed her fingers back and forth across Jake's knuckles. "Sleep well Jake, I'll check on you later."

Jake could swear that someone was touching her but she couldn't pull out of the drug-induced sleep she was in. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest, she tried to open her eyes but they felt like they were glued closed. Sending messages down to her fingers, she felt them twitch where they lay on her stomach. Gaining more control, she turned her hand over to lace her long fingers with the shorter ones.

"Long nuff." She mumbled and surrendered to be pulled back to her unconscious state.

"Long enough?" Artemis wondered; looking down at their joined hands a bright smile came to her face. "What ever." She sat there until the head nurse came in with a stern look on her face. Artemis raised a dark eyebrow at her.

"Dr. Shields, what are you doing down here? You are not supposed to be out of bed, you should know this so I shouldn't have to remind you." She looked at the way the two women's hands were joined. "And bothering another patient at that!"

"She's the firefighter that saved my life; I wanted to see how she was doing."

The older woman stepped further into the room, pushing her white hair back into the tight bun that it had come loose from she sighed. "That one is nothing but mischief, I found her trying to hide a Penthouse magazine under her pillow this morning and someone keeps sneaking in chocolate milk for her. What ever happened to the rules around here?" She kept mumbling to herself as she made her way out the door and down the hallway.

Artemis slipped her hand under Jake's pillow and pulled out two magazines, her eyebrows shot to her hairline when she saw what they were.

"Bare Beavers and Biker Sluts? Please let this one be bald little bucky toothed animals." She opened the magazine and turned a bright red, closing it quickly she went to put it back under Jake's pillow. Instead, she placed it between her back and the wheel chair. Pulling their hands to her lips, she placed a soft kiss on the larger hand then gently un-laced their fingers.

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She was lying in her bed looking at the confiscated magazine when she heard someone clear their throat. Fumbling with the magazine, she juggled it in the air and then quickly shoved it under her pillow.

"Hi Snoogums, how do you feel?" A tall man came into the room, his blonde hair hanging over one brown eye. "What were you reading?"

Her face a bright red, she stumbled over her words. "Oohh uhhmm...one of those...sappy romance magazines." Her eyes narrowed at her boyfriend. "So tell me Brent, where have you been? I called your apartment five times today."

"Ohhh, it was great! Me and the guys took the boat out and did some water skiing. I just got here in time for rounds." He took a seat on the bed next to her and ran his fingers across the full-length casts. "Tell me you saved my wetsuit that was in your car."

Sea green eyes looked like a tsunami was forming in them she couldn't believe his gall. Here she was in the hospital after almost dying and all he could think of was his goddamn wetsuit.

"Do you see what's on my legs?"

"Yeah, his brown eyes looked up at her and were blank of any kind of worry or compassion.

"Do you realize that I was almost killed last night, my car was upside down, I was trapped and no sooner had I been rescued than it blew the fuck up! And all you're worried about is your wet suit!" Her hands were clenching the blankets so tight that her knuckles were white.

"I'm sorry bunny, you now I'm not good with the bedside manner part." He gave her a puppy dog look and smiled when she closed her eyes and sighed. "How long do your casts have to stay on?"

"For Gods sake Brent, you're a sports doctor." She was quickly reaching her boiling point, one more asinine excuse or question and she was going to blow her top.

"Does that mean we can't have sex?"

That was it; her top hit the ceiling with a low throaty yell of.

"GET OUT BEFORE I KILL YOU!" Her face a bright red, the vein at her temple was throbbing; if he didn't leave she was sure she would either kill him or stroke out, which ever came first.

"I'm sorry bedbug." He leaned forward and gave her a chaste kiss on her cheek then left the room whistling.

"You..." What came out of her mouth even she didn't understand what she had said. All she knew was that he had better get real good at ass kissing and very soon. She was just about to

throw the water glass out the door when her father stepped into the room.

"Morning baby girl, how do you feel this morning?" The older version of her sat on the edge of the bed, leaned forward and gave her a kiss on her forehead. "I saw what's his name in the hallway and by the looks of your bright red face I can tell he was his charming ignorant self as usual." He chuckled at the exasperated look on her face. "I still don't know what you see in him?"

"Neither do I Daddy; if I wasn't in traction I know I would have kicked his ass!"

"Come on baby girl, we don't need a proctologist to have to remove your foot from his ass. Then again the other staff members will pay to see you do that."

She couldn't help but laugh, her father always managed to bring her out of her bad moods.

"Thanks Daddy, I needed to laugh." She gripped his large soft hands in hers and gave them a small squeeze. "When's Mom coming by?"

"Right after she's done doing her palm readings at the book store, they're having that Psychic fair today." He groaned and tilted his head back. "You are so lucky you don't still live at home, she had the whole house full of smoke last night. Those damn sage sticks of hers burning in every room."

To this day she just couldn't figure out her parents, they had met in college in the late 60's. Fell in love married within a month, her sister came shortly after that and then a year later her brother. Her mother quit college to raise the kids; her father continued with his medical studies and then went on to his residency. Her mother read Tarot cards and palms, worked in a hotel as the desk clerk to put food on the table and in her spare time held séances in the kitchen. They were complete opposites in every way you could think of; her mother was full Hungarian gypsy and her father the good Irish catholic boy. After 34 years they still acted like newlyweds. She could only hope for the same thing, but time was running out for her. At 32 she'd had numerous relationships that went nowhere, a boyfriend that had the attention span of four quarters of a football game and thought that when they had sex it was supposed to be like the WWF.

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The other firefighter's came by to see Jake later that night; they snuck in junk food, chocolate milk and skin magazines. She was glad for something to read; she had already read cycle sluts and wondered what had happened to her other magazine. What amazed her was that the guys had switched the covers and now it looked like she was reading Cosmo and better homes and gardens. After they had all left, she sat on the edge of her bed for a few moments before she decided to sneak down the hallway to see Artemis. Her insides warmed at the thought of the sea green eyes of the little blonde, having only seen her briefly in the light she wanted to see if her eyes really were as expressive as she remembered. When she stood up she felt a cool draft hit her in her ass and travel up her back, reaching behind her she grabbed the material and pulled it closed.

"Cheap place let ya run around with your ass hanging out." Grumbling the whole way down the hall, she stopped outside of Artemis's door and peeked around the corner. Looking both ways down the hall before she stepped in. The little blonde was sound asleep, a light snore whispered past her lips when she wasn't mumbling in her sleep. Jake pulled a chair closer to the side of the bed, sitting down she picked up the small delicate hand in hers and rubbed her fingers over the soft knuckles.

"You sure are a tiny little thing Arty." Jake softly said as she looked at the relaxed face of the doctor. Reaching a hand up, she brushed her short blonde bangs from her forehead and let her fingers trail down a soft cheek. Her face blushed when she realized what she had just done.

"Excuse me, but who are you." Brent asked from the doorway where he had been watching the tall firefighter.

Her left brow raised over an ice blue eye, one side of her lip rose to show a canine. "Who are you?" She growled low in her chest before standing to her full six-foot frame that towered over him by a good four inches.

"I'm Dr. Brent Coakes, Dr. Shields boyfriend."

Jake wasn't shocked by the knowledge; she knew that the little blonde wasn't part of the family. But she felt protective of the little blonde for some reason unknown to her. She felt a warmth envelope her hand, turning her head she saw sleepy green eyes looking up at her and a small hand grasping her fingers.

"Jake?" Her voice soft and gravelly.

"Yeah Arty it's me. Your boyfriends here so I'll see you later." She went to leave but felt a small hand hold tight.

"No sit down, Brent will be leaving in a minute." She shot a fiery look to her boyfriend. "What do you want?"

He strutted in with his chest puffed out and tossing the hair out of his eye with a whip of his head.

"I came to see how you were and to tell you that me and the guys are going to the basketball game tonight, so I won't be home until late." He stepped around Jake and chastely kiss Artemis on her cheek. "Later." Was all he said before he jogged out of the room.

Artemis saw the glaring look Jake was giving his back, she was surprised that he didn't explode in flames before he got in the hall.

"I know what you're going to say." Artemis whispered under her breath hoping that Jake didn't hear her.

Her left brow rose as she swung her head to look into curtained green eyes. "How do you know that?"

"Because I hear the same thing from everyone, what are you doing with him? He's such an asinine juvenile."

"Nope, I was thinking more of an egotistical, chauvinistic little bastard prick." She couldn't help but return the smile that formed on Artemis's face. "Am I right?"

"You just scored a 100%. He even falls under the blonde bimbo category."

A loud growl interrupted them, Jake looked around the room and then down into a blushing face. "What have you got hidden under your bed?"

"Actually that was my stomach, I'm starving but they bring those tiny little meals that a bird would starve eating."

"Like junk food? I got lots of it."

"Twinkies and Zingers?" Artemis asked with a child like expression on her face.

Jake leaned in close and whispered close to her ear. "Chocolate milk to. I'll go get it."

"Take me with you and then we can go down to the doctors lounge and eat in peace. That old battle axe head nurse will throw a bitch fit if she catches us eating non-dietary food."

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With the junk food and chocolate milk gone, they sat in the small lounge watching the TV that was tuned to a talk show, neither one of them was watching anything but the insides of their eyelids. SnORES drowned out the speaker and disrupted the doctors who were trying to do their paper work before going home. Numerous times one of them flew an airplane over to bounce off the little blondes head. They were relieved when an older woman dressed in a flowing black gypsy skirt and pirate shirt walked through the doorway. She cast them a bright smile showing off her even white teeth and flashing golden eyes.

"I could hear her outside in the parking lot. Horrible noise for such a small person." Mrs. Shields remarked to the grinning doctors. "What have we here? A tall dark and very beautiful Greek." She took in the tall figure of the snoring Jake, her naturally dark skin calmed in sleep. "Wonder if you have piercing eyes that can see to the very soul." She whispered to her self. Leaning over Artemis, she grabbed her nose and pinched it closed. It took a few seconds before Artemis's green eyes opened and she gasped for air.

"Mama! I hate when you do that." She rubbed her nose and tried to hide the wide grin behind her hand.

"Works every time on both you and your Dad, who's the tall beautiful one?"

"Mama hush." Her face turned a light pink. "That's Jake...she's the one who rescued me."

"Well, why don't you rescue her and wake her up." She pointed to all the airplanes lying around them. "You two have been used for target practice. And from the looks of all the junk food wrappers, I'd say you have enough sugar in you two to stay awake for the next week."

"They don't give me enough food." She held her hands up in a prayer fashion. "Please Mama, bring me some food. Like stuffed cabbage or peppers." She gave her mother her puppy dog look and stuck her bottom lip out to add to it.

"You're in luck, I just happen to have both up in your room. I brought enough for your friend here to. So you better wake her up before it gets too cold to eat."

Artemis touched Jake on her shoulder and gave her a small shake.

"Jake."

"Whopper, large fries and a large chocolate shake."

Two sets of eyes looked to each other and then to where a pair of pale blue eyes were fluttering open. Mrs. Shields smiled brightly when she saw Jake's eyes open and look right at her.

"Apoghehema." She pointed to her chest and then to Artemis. "Artemis's mitera."

Jake nodded her head, looking at her small blonde friend, she smiled and then spoke in her native tongue to Mrs. Shields. Artemis looked back and forth between the two and became frustrated. She had no idea what they were talking about, she crossed her arms over her chest, narrowed her eyes.

"My baby girl doesn't speak Greek or Hungarian, so she gets a little perturbed at me."

"Probably because she knows that you're talking about her."

Green eyes widened at what was said. "What? Mama!" She grabbed Jake's shoulder in a tight grip. "What did you two say?"

"Oohh nooo! You're not getting me in trouble." Jake grinned at her. "Ask your Mama later, it'll give me a chance to hide."

Artemis gave her mother the evil eye. "Playing match maker again."

"Me?" Mrs. Shields had the most innocent look on her face. "Would I do that to my baby?"

"YES!"

"Well if I was doing that and I'm not saying that I was, then I would do a whole lot better than pick tall, blonde and bimboish." She gave Jake a wink. "Right Jake?"

Jake's face turned a deep red; she gave Artemis a sideways glance. "Right Natasha."

"Great, now I'm being ganged up on." She took Jake and her mothers hands and pulled on them. "Come on you two trouble makers, I'm hungry."

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Artemis rolled her head to the side to look at her mother; she ran a hand over her stomach and groaned.

"Thanks Mama, that was so good, I'm stuffed now."

"You're welcome baby, you two could put an all you can eat buffet out of business!" She looked at the empty gallon sized bowls. "Let me see your hand Jake."

Artemis rolled her eyes, a loud sigh bursting past her lips. "Mama!"

"Hush baby, I want to see something."

"My Mama's a gypsy, so she has to look at everyone's hands."

"I'm looking for a missing puzzle piece; you've known that for years."

"Told you I fed it to the dog."

"Haa! Quiet you little twerp." She ran her fingers across the lines and creases of Jake's palm for a few seconds before looking up into her pale curious eyes. "The fire you seek is not in the flame but in the heart and soul, stop taking stupid chances and look around at what is close to you for the answer."

Jake raised an eyebrow at her, shrugging her shoulders she gave the older woman a grin. "Can't hide from you can I?"

"Nope, but you do a good job hiding from yourself and the past."

Jake's eyes darkened, she knew what Natasha was speaking of. It made her feel emotionally naked.

"It's plain as day, all firefighters have the same secret. You can't save everybody Jake, that's just how life is."

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After Natasha left to go home, Jake lifted Artemis from her chair and placed her in her bed. When she leaned into her pillow, she heard crinkling paper. Pulling the pillow away, she saw her missing magazine.

"I thought you were in my room while I was sleeping." Pulling the magazine out she waved it in front of startled green eyes and grinned when a light blush worked its way up her face.

"I was curious...and the head nurse..."

"Say no more, she took my new Penthouse." A wide smirk covered her face. "That's OK, 'cuz the guys brought me more." She brushed the backs of her knuckles across a smooth cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, night baby girl." She gave her a soft chuckle when an eyebrow cocked at her.

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Checking the hallway in both directions, Jake ran down to Artemis's room and slid in the door on her sock covered feet. Grabbing the door jam to stop her movement, she spun herself around and checked the hallway. Without looking over her shoulder, she knew Artemis was looking at her.

"Like my bare ass?" She could feel the draft of cold air where the gown had come open in the back. Looking over her shoulder into a red face, she smirked and wiggled her dark brows. "Do they make us wear these hoping we won't run around and flash the other patients?"

"Ahhh..." Artemis's green eyes were huge, her mouth hanging open and drool starting to build up. "Underwear would help." She finally was able to force out of her mouth after she wiped the drool from her chin.

"Don't wear none." She placed a shopping bag on the bed, turned her back and gave Artemis another view of her tight ass. "Untie these things for me." Without wondering why or what Jake was doing Artemis untied her gown. Jake turned back to face her slipped the gown off her one arm and struggled until Artemis helped her get the opening in the front. The whole time her eyes were taking in the muscular body of her tall friend. She felt her heart pick-up and heat rush through her veins. She was very confused with the effect Jake had on her, she had seen numerous men with nothing on, and they had no effect on her what's so ever. Just seeing this woman made her blood boil and settle in a Southern region.

"Jake, why did you do that?"

"So I can flash the head nurse when she threatens to take my skin mags. She tried again this morning; all she found were Cosmo and Good housekeeping and a few sports mags."

Pulling the wheel chair close to the bed, Jake slipped her good arm under Artemis's legs and lifted her in to the chair. Placing the shopping bag on her lap, she pushed her from the room.

"Where we going?" She asked as she tilted her head back to see a mischievous grin working its way onto Jake's face, her pale blue eyes twinkled with glee.

"It's a secret; you'll see when we get there."

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As soon as they got in the elevator and Jake pressed the top floor button, Artemis knew where they were going. She shook her head and grinned at her tall firefighter.

"The roof, are you going to throw me off?"

"Nope, but if any body comes up there I might throw them off."

She pushed the wheel chair over to a small table that had one chair sitting under it. A picnic basket was under it along with a shiny bucket with the top of a wine bottle clearly showing from the top. With a lopsided grin plastered all over her face, she bowed to Artemis and waved a hand at the table.

"Chow awaits, my lady."

Artemis was floored, no one had ever done anything remotely romantic for her in her entire life and here was this firefighter doing exactly that. She felt her heart thud and her stomach flutter around. If she does this for friends what does she do for her lovers, she wondered.

"Jake, what's the occasion? I mean...I've never..."

"I get sprung from this place tomorrow and I wanted to thank you in some way for hanging out with a low life firefighter."

Artemis grabbed her by her arm, pointed a finger at her chest and enunciated each word with a tap to her chest. "You are not a low life anything, you save people every time you go out to a call, so just stop with that way of thinking. You risked your own life to save a total stranger, me!"

"Well, you're special." She gave her a crooked grin that went all the way to her eyes.

"Why am I special?"

Jake flushed with embarrassment, looking to her feet; she scuffed her boot-clad foot on the rubber-coated rooftop. "It's hard to describe, something inside, you know, like a bond."

Artemis had felt something deep inside the first time she looked into pale blue eyes. She knew exactly what Jake was talking about.

"Besides Johnnie boy, you're the only friend I have." She played with the opening of her gown

and watched green eyes travel up her body. A blush ran up her neck and her ears caught fire from the lingering look.

Artemis realized that she was taking in every inch of exposed skin with hungry eyes; she tried to not look into questioning blue orbs but failed. Their eyes locked for long moments before Artemis looked to the basket that Jake had set on the table. Clearing her throat, quickly glanced into smiling blue eyes.

"What are we having for supper?"

"No idea, Johnnie boy brought it over for me. He said his wife cooked it so it's got to be good."

After eating the meal of baked chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and corn bread. Jake opened the bag she had brought with her and pulled out two huge slices of New York Cheese cake with fresh strawberry's on top.

"This looks very familiar to me; Jake did my Mama make this?"

"Uuhh huh, she said it was your favorite." Holding up her wine glass, she waited until Artemis did the same. "To new friends and new beginnings."

They drank their toast and tucked into the rich desert, Artemis snorted when Jake moaned with every mouthful. It was quite erotic and she almost fell out of her chair when Jake licked her fork clean.

"Think your Mama would notice if I hid in her kitchen? It's been years since I had cheesecake this good."

"Probably not if you hide with my brother, he lurks around the pantry and waits until she's done, then sneaks out and sits down at the table. It wouldn't be so bad but he doesn't live there."

"What does your Mama say?"

"Ohh she threatens to tell his wife that he's eating two suppers a night. By the way, I never asked you how you broke your collarbone. It wasn't helping me was it?"

"Nope, the first explosion threw me over your car; if it wasn't for that I don't think I would have found you in time. Guess the fates took care of us. Thanks for getting that Paramedic to let me ride with you; it would have been hours before I got to the hospital."

Artemis laughed, wiping tears from her eyes she looked at the confused firefighter. "He had no choice unless he wanted to change diapers for the next week."

"You have a baby?" Her heart sank at the thought of Arty having a baby.

"Last time I checked I had ten."

Jakes face paled, she took a shuddering breath and let it seep between her lips. "Ten!"

"I'm an OBGYN; I have lots of baby's in the neo natal ward. And my sweet brother the Paramedic would have been stuck there changing all their diapers."

"That explains a lot, I thought you were friends or something."

"We're real close, funny thing is, he and dirty diapers don't go together. He pukes every time he has to change one of his kids."

"I'd be right there with him, me and babies don't get along."

"Why do you say that?" Artemis was curious how a caring person like Jake couldn't get along with a baby.

"One threw up on me and I did the same to him. So now I run the other direction when one of the guys brings his kids to the station." She looked up to the sky and saw that the sun was starting to set. "Do you want to go back down or watch the sunset with me?"

They sat in comfortable silence next to each other and watched the sky change colors as the sun set, Artemis couldn't remember the last time she had just relaxed and watched Mother Nature work her magic. She would be sorry when Jake was released the next day; she would be lonely with out the tall firefighter coming to visit her or vice versa. She had to do something to keep their friendship going, so she made a decision right then.

"Will you come and visit me? I don't get my casts changed for another week so I'll be stuck here until then."

"Yep, I'll come over at lunch time if that's OK?"

"That would be nice, thank you."

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Jake walked into Artemis's room to find her boyfriend standing beside her bed, his hand on her shoulder, looking down at her with an exaggerated pout on his face.

"Artemis, it's the last game of the season."

She looked at the door and smiled when she saw Jake, pushing Brent's hand from her shoulder she glared up at him. "Go! I don't give a damn; just go do what ever the hell you want." He smiled and jogged from the room without a word. Jake knew right then that he was a clueless idiot, if she had been spoken to in that manner she wouldn't be smiling one little bit. It made her ecstatic that he was so stupid; maybe she would be able to spend more time with her new friend.

"Are you leaving now?" Artemis said softly with a bit of sadness in her voice.

"Yeah, I have to get back to the station; the LT has a job for me to do when I get back. I'm afraid that I'll be stuck in the kitchen peeling potatoes or something." Sitting on the edge of the bed she gave Artemis a small smile, taking her small hand in hers, she caressed the soft skin and sighed. "I'll miss just running down the hall to see you."

Tears formed in green eyes, she wiped at them and smiled. "I'll miss you to; besides my parents you're the only one who has come to see me."

"What about the Bimbo boy? He's been here a few times."

"He's a pain in my ass, he comes to brag about all the stuff he's been doing since I've been in here. I really don't know what I see in the idiot, I must have been insane when I started dating him."

"One of the reasons I don't date, bimbos come in female form to and I think I've dated all of them. One woman thought that I worked with Smoky the bear."

"Maybe we can set her and Brent up on a date!" Artemis said then broke into gales of laughter. "They could sit and babble all night!"

"He babbles? He's a doctor, doesn't that give you other doc's a bad rep?"

"He's a sports doctor; Daddy is rich so his degree came from having too much money and nothing better to do with it."

Jake hesitated for a brief second before she pulled the small doctor in to a tight hug. She held back tears as she buried her face in the fragrant blonde hair, even though she was the instigator of the hug, she felt comforted by it. Pulling back, she placed a soft kiss on a smooth forehead then blushed from her actions. Her blue eyes bright with unshed tears she gave Artemis a small smile.

"I'll come by tomorrow at lunch time." Dropping her voice to a whisper, she gazed into a startled face. "I'll bring you Chinese food for lunch."

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Artemis ran her fingertips over the place on her forehead where Jake had kissed her, a huge smile split her face and tears flowed from her sad green eyes. "What are you doing to me Jake?" Wiping the tears from her face, she slipped down into her bed and sighed. Her eyes fluttered closed as a restless sleep claimed her.

Jake walked into the LT's office and dropped down into the chair across from his cluttered desk, raising an eyebrow when she saw him quickly shove a toy fire engine into the top drawer.

"You wanted to see me LT." Adjusting the sling that kept her arm tight across her stomach before, she leaned back in the chair and gave him a smirk.

The small man sweat continuously even in the middle of winter, right now in the air-conditioned room that had to be 50 degrees, he had sweat running down from his temples. Wiping it with a red hankie, he stuffed it back in the top pocket of his sweat-dampened shirt and looked at her over the top of his reading glasses.

"You know Jake; if that woman hadn't been a doctor and daughter of the hospital administrator you would be out looking for a new job."

"I know sir; I was just doing what I've been trained for."

"No, you were doing what you always do. What is it with you and disobeying orders?"

"I don't disobey; I just see a way of doing things differently."

The small man removed his glasses and wiped his forehead again; rubbing the bridge of his nose, he shook his head before he continued.

"Either way Papaligious, you endanger yourself and that's why as of right now you are suspended until I decide you can come back. Pack your gear and head out."

Blue eyes turned icy, her teeth ground with the stress of keeping her mouth closed against an outburst. Hands clenched so tight that her arms shook and knuckles whitened under the stress. A deep growl rumbled in her chest as she stood up and stalked from the office. Her expression alone without the stomping of booted feet sent the other firefighters jumping from her path. Yanking the sling off her arm, she flung it across the large lounge to hit a wall and slid to the floor. Taking the stairs two at a time, she went to where a speed bag hung from the wall. Drawing her left arm back, she put every ounce of anger behind the punch. The leather bag hit the circular wood board where it was suspended and burst. She moved over to the heavy bag and threw a combination round house kick and a double jab punch. She repeatedly kicked and punched the bag until her hair was soaked and sweat dripped from her chin. She fell to her knees, dropping her forehead to the floor; she took gulps of air to calm her and to help fight back the sobs that threatened to burst from her lips. She had nothing now, no place to go since she lived at the firehouse and no family. A throbbing pain echoed in her shoulder, she felt a warm dampness flowing down her chest and knew it wasn't sweat. Pulling her shirt back, she saw the deep red blood flowing from where she had torn her sutures.

"Fuck me." She mumbled to herself then got to her feet to go and pack her few belongings.

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Artemis sat in her room reading a Cosmo magazine; she looked up when her mother stepped into the room with a swish of her long skirts.

"Baby girl, I brought you some double chocolate chip cookies."

A huge smile crossed Artemis's face at the large tray her mother sat on her lap.

"Thanks Mama, you don't know how I miss your cookies."

"Face it Artemis, you miss my cooking plain and simple. When you get sprung from this place why don't you bring Jake over for supper."

"Mama what are you trying to pull here?" A brow raised above a twinkling left eye. "You and your match making are not going to work with me and Jake for the simple fact that I'm not gay."

"Baby girl, love is love. It doesn't matter who the person is." Natasha ran her fingers down her daughter's cheek. "I see some much happiness in your eyes when she's around. I'm not saying to become intimate with her, she's a very lonely woman and she needs a friend as much as you do."

Artemis took a deep breath and nodded her head, she knew her mother was right. She didn't have any friends and Jake had told her that she was her only friend besides Johnnie.

"OK Mama, I'll bring her for supper."

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Jake pulled into the parking lot of the hospital and climbed from her truck with a loud groan. Her shoulder was killing her and her hands were not much better, they were bloody and swollen from her fight with the heavy bag. It had taken years to control her bad temper, but sometimes it got to be so much stronger than her will power and she had to let her hold go and become a slave to it. Taking the side door to the hospital, she took the stairs to the floor where Artemis was. Looking down the hall, she saw Natasha leaving the room; she tried to duck back through the door but was caught by golden eyes.

"Come to see my baby girl have you?"

Jake looked down at the floor and scuffed a toe across the tiles, looking up through her dark bangs; she blushed at the older woman.

"Yes Ma'am, I brought her lunch."

Natasha took her hand, the older woman looked at the bloody and swollen knuckles and clucked her tongue.

"Your temper got the better of you didn't it? Come with me and let my baby take care of you, she's real good at stuff like this you know."

Jake looked at Natasha in shock, the woman somehow was able to look right into her and see things that she tried to hide.

"How did you..."

"I'm a mother, we know things."

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Natasha pushed Jake into the chair beside Artemis's bed, she pointed a finger at her and told her not to move unless she wanted her ass kicked. Pale blue eyes grew wide at the threat, she looked at Artemis who was stifling a laugh.

"Think that's funny huh?" She grinned. "Wouldn't be the first time I got my ass kicked."

"Won't be the last either!" Natasha tossed over her shoulder. "Show my baby what you did to yourself."

Green eyes became worried, Artemis pinned Jake where she sat.

"What did you do?"

"Well, I kinda beat the shit outta the heavy bag at the fire house." She held her hands up and showed her friend, and then went on to explain what had happened.

"That ignorant asshole, sorry but that's how I feel about him." She saw the blood covering Jake's shirt and motioned her closer. Looking into misty eyes, she placed a hand on her cheek and smiled. "It'll be OK, I promise." Pulling the collar of her shirt to the side, she saw the torn sutures. "Let me call one of the doctors and have them suture your shoulder."

"Can you fix it? I don't want them hauling me back in here again."

When Natasha returned, she carried a surgical tray, bandages and antiseptic wash.

"I knew you would need this stuff Artemis, this one here is stubborn as hell and I knew she wouldn't let anyone touch her but you."

Jake looked up into smiling brown eyes. "You're scary, you know that?"

"She's great at scaring little kids and old people."

"No more than you when you get your dander up." She smiled back at her daughter. "Better fix hot stuff here before she bolts from an old lady. I have to run, I have a palm reading session to do."

With her sutures replaced and hands bandaged, Jake sat on the edge of the bed with her eyes down cast.

"Thank you Arty."

"You're welcome." She gripped a strong forearm and felt tingles cross between them. "What are you going to do now that you're suspended?"

"Get a motel room and wait it out."

Green eyes narrowed at her. "Motel room? Why that?"

"I lived 24/7 at the firehouse, I've never lived anywhere else in years."

Reaching over to the small table by the bed, Artemis pulled her keys from the drawer and held them out to Jake.

"I want you to stay at my house." She placed two fingers over Jake's lips. "Don't argue with me, you need a place to stay and I need someone I can depend on to take care of Zeus."

"Who's Zeus?"

"My ahh...cat, he's temperamental and I don't trust Brent to feed him."

Her eyes darkened, dark brows dropped over her straight nose. "Brent lives there?" She didn't know if she could handle being in the same place with him, she would love to use him as a punching bag but knew that Arty wouldn't like that one bit.

"Gods no, but he is supposed to be taking care of Zeus." She took Jake's hand, pressed the keys into her palm and closed her fingers over them. "Please Jake."

"OK, I'll do this for you. What if he shows up?" *You beat the shit out of him!* Her little voice yelled and jumped up and down in glee.

"Tell him to go to hell?" She smirked. "Just tell him to come and see me, I'll tell him to go to hell." If possible, she would have jumped up and down. Then realized that she would still be here and Jake would be...sleeping in her bed. A wicked grin covered her face and got her a raised dark eyebrow.

Jake's eyebrow buried its self in her hairline; she was confused at the wicked gleam in green eyes. "What?"

"Nothing, I'm just being...I don't know what? Anyway, my bedroom is the last one on the left. The other room is just my office/library, Zeus's food is in the pantry and I'm sure he will tell you where it is and when he wants it. Beware he bites." Writing her address on a piece of paper, she pressed it into a large hand. "Here's the address."

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Dr. Shields stepped into his daughter's room and smiled at the way she was sleeping. As was usual for her, she had her mouth hanging open and a horrible snoring was vibrating the magazine that was lying across her chest. He picked up the ragged looking magazine and looked at the present page, a dark blush ran from his neck to set his ears on fire with embarrassment. The centerfold was a woman shaving her private parts, her foot placed up on top of a sink counter while a razor was shaving a lathered nether lip.

"Ohh baby girl! What are you doing reading something like this?" He felt the pull at his groin as he tilted the magazine sideways. He heard Artemis take a deep breath signaling that she was waking up, placing the magazine back where he had found it, he jumped backwards towards the door just as blurry green eyes opened.

"Hi baby girl, sleeping again?" He hoped that she didn't notice the redness of his face.

"Hi Daddy, nothing much else to do around here." She saw the sweat forming on his upper lip and the fading red of his face. "Are you OK, you look a little funny?"

"Oohh...I ahh...ran up the stairs, you know at my age every little bit of exercise helps." *That was lame!*

"You. Exercise? Mama's cooking getting to you?" She then noticed the magazine lying on her chest, moving it slowly off to the side she slipped it under her blanket. "Uhhmm...Daddy, where's that blonde idiot at?"

"You mean the very reason that the gene pool should have been closed? Last I heard he was on his way to roller blade."

"Maybe he'll pick a curvy road that runs along some cliffs, fat change since we don't have any in Martinsburg."

"Do I see some revenge for the way he treats you popping up in green eyes?"

"Would I do something like that? HELL YES!" An evil grin split her face, fire danced in green eyes as she let out a crazed laugh. "Wait until he goes over to feed Zeus." She saw her father's blonde brows gather over his nose and knew she would have to tell him. "Jake is staying at my house to take care of my cat." She went through Jake's little tale and was surprised when her father's temper hit the roof. Only one thing could happen now and that was that someone was going to pay dearly for being an ignorant ass.

"I'll take care of that fat little troll Lieutenant, I'll go over his head and have his ass handed to him on a flatbed truck!" He placed a quick kiss on his daughter's cheek and ran from her room to start his mission of slaying the fat bastard.

"Go Daddy!" Artemis yelled at her fathers retreating back.

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Jake opened the door to the ranch style house that was her friends, she wrinkled her nose at the smell of stale beer and marijuana smoke. Stepping over a bag of trash that was inside the door, she dodged dirty clothes, empty beer cans, wine bottles and sports equipment. Picking up one article of clothing with the toe of her boot she grimaced.

"I know damn well that this is not yours Arty." She kicked the dirty jock strap towards the garbage bag. "Seems that your bimbo has used your place for a jock party." Going down the hallway to Artemis's bedroom, she pushed the door open. "Gods have mercy, what a fucking pigsty!" Use her toe again she picked up a bra. "Ohhh Arty, you are not going to like this one bit!" The bra was large enough to hold bowling balls in the cups and she knew damn well that Arty was nowhere near a 42DD. A wicked grin crossed her face, it was one way for Arty to get rid of the creep if she knew he was cheating on her while she was in the hospital. "She I call her?" She weighed the pros and cons. "I hope they have good insurance for when little Arty blows the roof off the hospital."

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Arty rolled over and grabbed the phone, she spoke with a deep gravely voice hoping it would be Brent and he would think he got the wrong number.

"Burger King, can I take your order."

"Whopper, fries and a chocolate shake."

"Is that you Jake?" She asked with a bright smile forming on her face, she didn't expect to hear from her so soon. She didn't know how much she missed the tall firefighter until this very second.

"Yep, I hope you're lying down 'cuz I got some bad news for ya."

Artemis's hand gripped the phone so hard that she swore she heard the plastic crack. She was on the verge of a panic attack and it showed in the way her voice cracked as she spoke.

"Is there...something wrong...with Zeus? Please tell me he's OK."

"I haven't found him yet and I don't blame him for one minute for hiding. You're house looks like the aftermath of a frat party."

Fire formed in green eyes, Artemis sat up in her bed and yelled at the top of her lungs. "FRAT PARTY? How bad is it really, should I send in a cleaning crew and hire a hit man?"

"Easy baby girl, it's bad, I can take care of it and as far as the hit man part I give you the honor of killing the pig." She paused to think of a way to tell Arty about the bra. "I found a bra lying on your bedroom floor."

"It's probably mine."

"Only if your tits shrunk during your car accident, it's a 42DD."

"I will kill that son of a bitch! Cut his nuts off and roast them over a fire! Wait a minute here...now's my chance to get rid of that asshole!" She punched a hand in the air and yelled. "YES! Thank you Jake."

"For what?" She was happy as hell and wanted to dance around the room but thought better of it, with her luck she'd trip and fall and break a leg or something. She settled for grinning like an idiot.

"If you wouldn't have agreed to stay there, he would have had the place cleaned before I got home and I would have never known about anything. Not only do I owe you supper but I'm throwing lunch in with it." Both women thought breakfast would also be a nice thing to have together, one smirked while the other turned a beat red and coughed to cover up a low moan. "If you need anything Jake, just call me and I'll have Mama take care of it, OK?"

"No problem, I should have the place cleaned up in no time. I'll let you get some rest, sweet dreams baby girl."

Artemis blushed, a smile gracing her lips at what Jake had called her.

"You to Jake, I'll see you tomorrow for lunch."

She hung up the phone and collapsed back against her pillow, she wrapped her arms around herself.

"Ohh boy am I in trouble."

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"Here kitty kitty, Zeus where you hiding?" She looked in every conceivable place that she thought a cat would hide and found nothing. "You wanna eat, I'll feed you anything you want." Giving up for the moment, she searched the kitchen for garbage bags or something to throw all the trash in. With her hands full of trash, she jumped when she heard loud laughter and a feminine voice giggling.

"You are mine now asshole." She whispered as she set the stuff down and crept towards the bedroom where they had gone. Placing her ear to the door, she listened to the voices and couldn't help but chuckle. They were playing Warlord and slave boy. "Just perfect for what he's about to do." Pushing the door open, she jumped in and gave a war cry that had both people come four foot off the floor.

"Sorry to break up your little party, but I'm taking your slave boy." She pointed her finger at the

bleach blonde bimbo and yelled. "Out before I go Xena on your ass and kick it!" Stalking Brent like she was a panther, she cornered him against the wall. "You are in deep shit, not only are you going to clean up this pigsty house but you're going to do the windows!"

Clad in only his red jockey shorts, Brent scrubbed, vacuumed, did laundry, dishes and washed every single glass surface in the house and after he finished Jake tossed him out the door without his clothes. Ignoring his pounding on the door, she sat back on the couch and watched Zeus crawl from inside the door under the coffee table.

"Well little king what do ya think of the place?"

Zeus rubbed against her legs and purred before he took off towards the kitchen and scratched at the door to the pantry.

"OK, I get the hint." After she fed him, she laid down on the couch and flipped through the channels on the TV. A few minutes later, he jumped up and made his bed on her chest. "You can lay there but don't you dare pump on my tits." She fell asleep to the sound of purring and kneading feet."

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"Hey Baby girl, I talked to the head honcho of the fire department." Dr. Shields sat down next to his blurry-eyed daughter. "He's going to look into the Jake situation and get back with me."

"Good Daddy, I think there's some problem with her LT not liking a woman doing a man's job." She gripped her fathers hand in hers and gave it a slight squeeze. "Will it ever change? I mean if a woman can do the same job, why give her such a hassle?"

"Not all men are like her LT, look here at the hospital. I hire the most knowledgeable doctors I can...with the exception of that bimbo Brent, he wasn't my doing."

The sound of running feet and a sliding noise brought their heads to the doorway; her brother Billy came sliding into the room out of breath.

"Brent...on way...pissed!" He bent over at the waist and rested his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

Two sets of brows drew down over green eyes; Artemis looked to her father and shrugged her shoulders. Her green eyes shot wide, mouth dropped open and then she tried to stop the burst of laughter that came from her chest.

"What is so funny baby girl?"

"Well, Brent must have shown up at my house and Jake got him." She snapped her mouth closed when the devil himself walked in.

"Can I speak to you alone?" He said as he tossed the hair from his enraged eyes. The small group looked at the too small pants and the Hawaiian shirt he had on.

Artemis crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a force ten glare. "What ever it is that you want to say can be said in front of my family."

"Have it your way, if you want them to know that you have a dyke in your house."

"Ooohh you stop right there you ignorant asshole!" She yelled and pointed a finger at him. "Don't you dare even think of calling my friend that! It's none of your damn business what her preference is and none of your business who's in my house!" Her temper rose to the breaking point, moving forward in the bed to get closer to the idiot, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, reached out and grabbed him by his shirt. "Where's my spare key?"

"What?" His eyes grew wide at the thought of her wanting her keys back. "Why do you want them back?"

"For one thing, I never gave you a key to my house, two you are to stay away from me, Jake and my house. ITS OVER! NOW GIVE ME MY DAMN KEY!"

He struggled to get his hand into the front pocket, a tearing sound brought a smirk to every ones face when his pants ripped down the outside of his leg. Handing her the key, dropped to his knees.

"Please boo boo bear, you can't do this. I love you."

"Bullshit! Go tell that to the bitch you were playing with in my house!"

"I wasn't...how do...ohh shit!" He jumped to his feet and grabbed her hands. "It didn't mean anything...honest. And it was only one time, I swear!"

Green fiery eyes drilled into his, one side of her lip curled into an evil grin.

"BULLSHIT!" She brought up one leg and kicked him in what was once his family jewels. "Billy drag that piece of shit out of my room, throw him down the steps if you want."

"My pleasure Sis, come on dumb shit." He grabbed one arm and dragged Brent across the floor and down the hall.

"Baby girl, I'm so proud of you." Her father gave her a big hug and kissed her forehead. "How did you know about the other woman?"

"Jake found a bra lying on my floor and it wasn't mine. So that could only mean it belonged to some one he took over there. Plus she said my house looked like the aftermath of a frat party."

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Artemis was watching the *Jenny Jones show*, she cringed every time one of the guests came on stage. The topic was "*Are you a mother that parties with your daughter?*" She couldn't believe the hags that came on to the stage, some of them had to be in their 50's. "EWW! Put some clothes on!"

"I have clothes on."

Artemis turned her head to see a smiling Jake standing in the doorway with Styrofoam containers in her hands. Her face turned a deep pink because she wished that Jake were half-naked like the ones on TV.

"Is that lunch?" She smelled the air and gave out a deep sigh. "Gyros?"

"Yep, with breaded eggplant and I brought Baklava."

"You are my savior, in more ways than one. Gimme gimme." She held out her hands and wiggled her fingers. She moaned with each bite and grinned at her blushing friend, picking up a napkin she wiped the sauce from Jakes chin. "Why are you blushing?"

"Uhhmm..." She picked up her coke and took a long pull from the straw. *Gods she's trying to kill me here.* "Did I tell you that I caught Brent at your house last night?" *That was a smooth one Jake.*

"He came by here last night and I gave him the riot act." She gave in detail what had transpired the night before.

"I had him clean your entire house, even had him wash the windows...and then I threw him out the door in his...little red jockey shorts."

Artemis busted out laughing, tears flowed down her cheeks when she pictured Brent standing outside in his underwear. Now she knew why he had shown up at the hospital looking like a misfit.

Wrapping her fingers around Jake's bicep, she fell over and rested against her shoulder while trying to regain her composure. That lasted all of two seconds when she thought of it again. "I wish I had a picture of that!"

"Better yet, I threw his bitch out in her underwear to and used her whip on him when he slowed down at his cleaning."

"A whip? What the hell were they doing?" She asked in between chuckles.

"Warlord and slave boy."

Artemis sobered; a wicked grin came across her face as an eyebrow rose over a twinkling green eye. She would love to play warlord and slave girl with a certain tall dark firefighter.

Her voice a deep purr. "Really, sounds interesting."

Ohh mercy! She purrs like that again and I'll do anything, including wear a pink tutu! "Uuhh huh." She gulped at the hungry look in green eyes. *I am in soo much trouble!*

"You still have the whip?" She wiggled her eyebrows and licked her lips. *I can't believe I'm flirting with her!*

"You going to beat someone with it?"

"Never can tell, anyway." Using every bit of her internal strength she dragged her mind out of the gutter "Did you find Zeus?"

"Yep, slept with me last night and kneaded the hell out of my tits. Your cats a pervert."

No, he's a lucky little bastard! He likes you, he usually bites the hell out of people he doesn't like. I won't name the main one though, because I know you can figure that one out."

It was past three o'clock when Jake eased off the side of the bed and covered up a snoring Artemis. Leaning over her, she placed a soft kiss on her forehead and trailed her fingers down her cheek.

"Sweet dreams baby girl." Leaving the room on silent feet, she made her way to the elevator, before the doors closed she saw Brent and gave him a tiny wave and stuck her tongue out at his scowling face.

"Bastard!" She said to her self when the elevator started down. "Wait until you find all your shit thrown on the front lawn of the hospital!"

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John and his wife Melinda walked into Artemis's room to find her doing a crossword puzzle, she was searching through the back of the book for an answer to one of the questions, seeing that she had company, she blushed and closed the book quickly.

"Hi, John right?" She held out her hand to him and gave his wife a friendly smile.

"Yep, this is my wife Melinda. Just thought we'd stop by and see how you were doing and if you've seen my trouble-making partner. You know the tall pervert."

"Jake a pervert?" She snorted and rolled her eyes. More like a mischievous toddler, she comes by for lunch everyday."

"I've been on vacation and I heard through the grapevine that she was suspended, we don't know where she's even staying and I'm a little worried about her."

"Worried about Jake, why?" She hadn't seen anything to worry about and was now curious.

John pulled a chair over and motioned for his wife to sit down, then placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Jake doesn't have any family and she's always lived at the fire house. So when she packed her stuff and left without a trace, I got worried."

Melinda gripped her husband's hands.

"She's always stayed with us when she's gotten into trouble before, so when she didn't come by..."

"She's been in trouble before? What has she done?" Green eyes looked between the two of them.

"I really shouldn't be telling you this but since you're her friend." He rubbed a hand over his tired face. "Jake has a death wish of some sorts; she goes into dangerous situations without thinking. She has been lucky so far and has only gotten minimal injuries. But I worry about the next time."

Artemis's heart fluttered in her chest, she didn't know what to say. "Is there a reason for this, I mean I know your job is dangerous."

John sighed; he looked down at the floor and spoke in a low voice. "I can't tell you, you'll have to ask Jake. I'm sorry." His eyes showed the pain of his knowledge.

"OK I understand; she's staying at my house until her suspension is over with." She gave them her address and told them that they could drop by if they wanted. After they left, she tried to come up with a way of bringing up the subject of Jake's reckless behavior. "What's your secret Jake, why do you want to die?" Leaning back on her pillow, she wiped an errant tear from her cheek. Pulling her wheel chair over to the edge of the bed, she swung her legs to the floor then used the strength in her arms to get into the seat. Backing out of the room she headed towards the elevator, once inside she hit the first floor button and cursed under her breath when it went up instead of down. She didn't know whether to be relieved or completely pissed when her Mom and Dad got in to the elevator with her.

"Baby girl were you coming to see us?"

She blushed and tried to come up with something to not hurt their feelings. She watched her mother grip her husband's forearm before she stepped into her line of vision.

"From the look on your face, I'd say you were going in search of someone?"

Green eyes showed her amazement as they did every time her mother pulled one of her freaky mind reading things.

"I was on my way to the cast room." She looked down at the full-length casts covering her legs. "I want these things off, I have..."

"To go home and take care of a certain person?" Her eyes flashed with understanding. "You know she has to face this on her own?"

"But I want to help..."

"Come on William, wheel our baby to her room and be a hero and go find someone to put her in those new contraptions you just got in." She chuckled when her husband mumbled under his breath when he left his wife and daughter in her room to talk. Natasha saw the worried look behind the tears in her daughter's eyes.

"Artemis, Jake has a lot she keeps behind stone walls and it's there to protect her and every one that's around her." She brushed a tear from her pale cheek and drove forward. "You can't go in there like a steam roller and force her into spilling her guts as much as you want to. I know you think that you can save her from what she does but you can't. The only thing you can do is stand by her and be a loving friend."

"Mama, she has a death wish, John told me a little while ago about what she does out there."

"I know she does, you can't protect her or change what she is. Only Jake can do that and it won't happen over night no matter what you do."

"How do you know all of this Mama?" She asked with her voice cracking and tears flowing down her face.

"Baby, I see more than what others see and I can feel her pain. But I also see how she is around you." Her eyes crinkled at the corners, a light laugh erupted from her chest. "Did you know that she took all of Brent's clothes and tossed them on the hospital's front lawn? Between the two of you, this hospital will be tipped on its roof!"

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Jake was sitting on the floor, her back against the couch with Zeus lying over her shoulder from behind her. A half gallon of butter pecan ice cream in her hand, and a small furry face licking her spoon.

"You don't share very well you know that?"

Pale blue eyes connected with hers, long whiskers twitched when he meowed at her impatience.

"It's my turn you little pig." She moved the spoon from his rough tongue and dipped it into the ice cream.

A deep purring voice came from behind her. "That is really gross Jake."

Jake turned her head and smiled around the spoon still in her mouth.

"Arrry!" She pulled the spoon from her mouth, put the ice cream on the floor and jumped to her feet to pull her friend into a bone-crushing hug. "They let you out early!" She kissed a flushed cheek and hugged her closer to her body. Artemis melted into the strong body, inhaling the soft scent of dyer sheets and spicy cologne. She pulled back to lock eyes with Jake.

"And not a moment to soon, you've been spoiling my baby Zeus haven't you?" Pushing a strand of dark hair behind a blushing Jake's ear, she placed a finger under a lowered chin and raised her face up to look at her. "He likes marshmallow crème to, but it gets stuck in his whiskers."

Jake looked down at the long braces on Artemis's legs, numerous straps and metal bars stabilized her legs and looked very painful. Bending down she swept her up into her arms and carried her to the couch. Gently putting her down, she grabbed pillows, placed them on the coffee table and then put Artemis's legs on top of them.

"Are you hungry, I can cook something? How about some coffee?" Jake was a nervous wreck now that Artemis was there, she didn't know what to do with herself. "Are you in pain, can I get you some aspirins or something?"

"Jake stop all ready and take a seat before you get me dizzy from your tailspins."

Running her hands through her messy hair, Jake sat down at the other end of the couch and dropped her head so that her chin was resting on her chest. Looking up slowly with nervous pale blue eyes, a small lop sided grin split her face. "Sorry." She whispered and was ready to jump up again until a leg dropped down across her thighs trapping her in place.

"Calm down, you're worse than a new father." Leaning over towards her friend, she picked up the large hand that was tapping a mile a minute on the couch. "How much junk food have you and Zeus have today?" At that second her cat went charging through the house and all she could hear were his nails trying to gain purchase on the tiled floor of the kitchen. "I guess that answers my question, no more sugar for you two!"

Jake lowered her voice and hoped it didn't crack. "He likes Twinkies and cupcakes."

"Gods have mercy, junk food addicts. You like Chinese food?"

"I'll eat anything I don't have to cook. You ordering take out, I can run and get it?"

Artemis chuckled at the way Jake's feet were tapping on the floor.

"I think in your sugar induced condition that you could run to China and back! Nope I'm cooking it, which is if all the stuff I need is still in the refrigerator." She frowned when she looked down at her legs. "Maybe I should just order out, I can't really stand to long."

"Wait right there!" Jake placed Artemis's leg back on the coffee table, jumped up and ran through the house with Zeus right behind her. A minute later she came back with Zeus sitting in the office chair from Artemis's office. "How about this? You can raise it up so that you can reach the stove and table."

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Artemis had to keep slapping Jake's hands away from the vegetables that she had sliced. She threatened to give her a tranquilizer if she didn't calm down.

"Can't help it." She stuck her bottom lip out and pouted. Artemis wanted to kiss her so bad that she found her body leaning towards her, catching herself at the last second; she tapped the pouting lip with her finger.

"Get the plates down and we'll eat."

They had finished eating and were watching TV, at least that's what Jake remembered last before she fell asleep. Rolling her head to loosen the stiffness, she looked down at the tousled blonde head that was resting in her lap. One small hand fisted under her chin, the other clenching Jake's T-shirt, while both legs were up on the arm of the couch. Jake didn't know how Artemis was going to sleep in bed with the heavy braces on her legs; they would have to figure something out.

"Arty, come on lets get you to bed." All she heard was a mumbling and then a soft snoring. *"Baby girl, my legs are numb and you're driving me crazy."* With each movement of her head, she hit a very tender area of Jake's lower region. If she didn't move Artemis soon, she would make a complete ass of herself by thrusting her hips upward. Slipping from under her, she gently picked her up and carried her to her bedroom. After putting her down, she then noticed that the braces were on over a pair of sweat pants.

"Solves that problem."

"What does?" Green eyes fluttered open to lock with blue.

"Uuhmm...your braces, I was wondering how you were going to sleep with them on."

Her voice gravelly, she pleaded for help. "Take them off for me please. My hips are sore from walking funny and it hurts to move too much."

Jake unfastened all the Velcro straps and dropped each brace to the floor; she could feel the indentations in Artemis's legs from the straps. "You want these off." She motioned to the thick sweat pants. Artemis pushed the waistband down as far as she could before a low groan came to her lips.

"I feel worse now than when you pulled me out of my car." She jumped a little when she felt Jake's hands encounter her skin.

"Sorry, did I hurt you?"

"No...I'm OK." She wasn't about to tell her that she enjoyed the feel of her hands on her and that her body did that out of arousal and not pain.

Jake took in a shuddering breath at the site of the discolored legs before her. She could see now how bad Artemis's legs had been broke in the accident.

"Baby I'm sorry this happened to you." Tears formed in her eyes as she ran her fingers across the indentations from the straps.

"Jake you saved me; I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for you." She sat up on the bed and wiped the tears from Jake's face. "The bruises will fade in time and so will the pain." She could see the torment and pain in the tear filled blue eyes. "Come up here." She took a large hand in hers and pulled Jake closer to her. "Lay down with me, you look exhausted. Have you been sleeping?" She ran a finger across the dark circles under Jake's blue eyes.

"A few hours a night. Are you sure about this?" Blue eyes searched green.

"Yes now lay down, I don't want to be alone." What she had said was partly true, she didn't want to be alone but she also didn't want Jake to be alone. Something deep inside of her told her that Jake needed her next to her. Turning on her side, she spooned herself up against Jake's back, wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed her cheek into the center of a muscular back. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed and felt Jake do the same. A few minutes went by and they both drifted off into a deep sleep.

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A week went by with them getting to know each other, many hours were spent just sitting and watching TV or the sunset at night. They took turns cooking, Artemis kept the fire extinguisher close by to tease Jake with. So far it was only used once when Artemis set the oven mitt on fire by leaving it too close to one of the burners. They had planed to go to the movies that afternoon when a phone call from Jake's lieutenant changed everything. Jake was scared but didn't want Artemis to know it, she didn't know if she was being called back to work or if she was getting her walking papers. Either way she would go alone, if it was bad news, she didn't want Artemis to be around if and when she lost her control. She had dressed in her uniform that Artemis had insisted on pressing for her. Shined her boots and belt buckle and packed her bag just in case.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?" Artemis said from where she stood leaning against the wall near the front door.

"I'm sure baby girl, I don't know what's going to happen." She cast her eyes down to the floor. "If I'm back in an hour or so, that means I'm fired."

Artemis stepped closer to her and lifted her chin with a finger. "Have faith Jake, you may be surprised."

Her eyes became moist with unshed tears. "I don't know how to have that."

"Don't worry, I have faith in you." She wrapped her arms around Jake's waist and gave her a tight hug. "Everything will be all right, you'll see." She had never told Jake of her Dads involvement in getting Jake's suspension overturned and cleared from her record. She figured it would be best not to let Jake know that her family had called in some favors. "Call me and let me know what's going on."

"I will, as soon as I can." She was about to walk out the door when she felt a hand on her arm. Artemis laced her fingers behind her neck and pulled her down far enough to place a soft kiss on her cheek.

"Good luck Jake, and remember I believe in you."

Jake left with a small smile on her lips and her heart fluttering in her chest. Artemis dropped down on to the couch, leaning forward she dropped her face into her hands and sighed. She felt lost the second Jake walked out the door, she never felt that way when Brent left and she was confused as to why she felt that way now.

"Gods Jake, what have you done to me?"

Putting her legs up on to the coffee table, she flipped on the TV and scanned the channels. Dropping her head back on the couch, she stared at the ceiling and pictured smiling blue eyes and a lopsided grin.

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Jake walked into the firehouse and noticed right off that something had changed. The guys that she had lived with, joked around with and considered her brothers all turned their backs to her when she walked into the lounge area. Some even went as far as getting up and leaving the room. Her eyes turned dark and narrowed at them, straightening her back, she went through the room and down the hall to where the Lieutenants office was located. She pounded on the closed door and waited to be called in, after a couple minutes she pounded again.

"What the hell?" She mumbled under her breath, turning to go back and search for the LT, she stopped when she saw Johnnie coming towards her. She started to smile, then changed her mind when she saw the closed off look on his usually friendly face. Standing still, she waited until he came up to her and then followed him in to the LT's office after; he motioned to her to follow. She watched as he dropped down into the leather chair and pointed to the visitors chair across from him. She didn't say a word, just sat at attention and watched her friend fight with himself.

"Damn it Papalogious, I hate this shit." He looked up at her for a brief second then back down at the desktop.

"Just tell me, do I still have a job. If not I'll leave right now."

"Yes, you still have a job." He leaned back in the chair and locked eyes with her. "The thing is, you will no longer share the living quarters with us."

"Excuse me?" She leaned forward towards the desk, her face showed amusement at the statement. "Then where do I stay, in my truck?"

"The LT had the guys make you a room at the back of the workout area, the bathroom that was everyone's use up there is now strictly yours. For meals, you can eat in the kitchen but afterwards you are to make yourself scarce."

Anger filled the silvery blue eyes, her teeth ground together making an awful noise that sent shivers up Johnnie's back.

"What the FUCK is going on around here? I have just as much right to the entire firehouse as everyone else, why am I being banished and where the hell is that fat son of a bitch, is he afraid I'll kill his fat fucking ass?"

Johnnie ran his fingers across his face, he knew that what was happening to Jake was not right, in fact it was against the law but there was nothing he could do about it. The LT and the head over the fire department had come to some kind of agreement.

"Jake the LT wanted to fire you, but the big boss said no. So the LT is hoping that you'll get so pissed that you'll quit." He slammed his palm down on the desk, stood up and paced behind the desk. "This isn't all that has been changed. The guys have been threatened that if they talk to you, they'll lose their jobs. And when we go out on calls, you're on your own."

Her voice nothing more than a growl, she looked Johnnie dead in the eyes with piercing silver.

"Fine! If that's what he wants he's got it!" She stood up so fast that the chair crashed to the floor. She leaned over the desk, raised her hand and brought down her fist so hard that the top of the wood desk split under her hand. "I have never quit anything in my life and I'm not starting now! He can do what ever the hell he wants but I will win in the end!" She stormed from the office leaving a grinning Johnnie behind.

"I knew you would say that." He pumped a hand in the air in triumph.

Jake stomped up the stairs to the top floor where the gym was, she saw the new wall at the very back and noticed that it took up the entire back wall. Pushing the door open she walked in and hit the wall before she was even into the room. It may take up the entire wall but it was only four foot wide. A rack was at one end with a wall locker and at the other was the small bathroom that had a sink, toilet and a small shower.

"Just fucking great, I feel like I'm in solitary confinement." Dropping her back on the floor she turned around and looked for a wall socket and light switch. "Even better, I have no electricity or a way of turning the lights off." She noticed a cardboard box sitting on the rack, walking the

short distance over to it she found an envelope on top with her name typed across it. Reading the short letter she read down the list of the things she was to have done before her days off. "He has got to be insane!" She looked in the box to find cans of polish that was to be used to wax all the fire trucks and a can of Brasso to do all the brass in the fire house. "He's a dead man!" She growled before throwing the letter to the hardwood floor.

Stomping down the steps she went out the door and down the street to the nearest pay phone. So she could call Artemis and let her know that she still had a job. She wouldn't tell her all the bullshit that was going on because Jake didn't want to unload her burden on her friend. She had wide shoulders and could carry it herself even if it killed her.

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Artemis hung up the phone and smiled, she was happy that everything had worked out but saddened that she wouldn't see Jake for four or five days depending on her rotation and if she wanted to come by and visit on her days off. Tears fell from her eyes at the thought of being all by herself. "I'll survive, it's not like I've not been living alone all these years." Jumping at the chirping of her cell phone, she searched the couch and found it behind one of the throw pillows.

"Hello?"

"Baby girl, is Jake there?"

"No Daddy, she left a while ago to head back to work. Thank you for helping her."

"I don't know if what I did helped her." She heard how his voice lowered to almost a whisper. *"If she's at work then it can't be too bad."*

"What's wrong Daddy?" She didn't like when her father became quiet, it always meant that things were not good. "I know that voice, now tell me or I'm going to the firehouse and find out for myself." She stood in front of the couch and tried to pace with her leg braces keeping her legs straight and bulky. "Daddy?"

"She'll be OK, just wait for her to tell you. I have to go, call your Mama."

"That's it, I need a car. I can't handle being stuck here and not able to go anywhere." She dropped onto the couch and yelped when her legs came up smacking her toes under the coffee table. "Maybe Jake will take me on her days off to get a new car."

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The alarms went off; firefighters ran for their gear and the trucks that were rumbling to life. Jake grabbed her gear, half ran and jumped the stairs as she made her way to where the trucks had pulled from inside to sit waiting in the wide driveway. Being the last one out the door because she had the longest distance to clear, she ran to the waiting truck and was shocked when one of the guys shook his head at her and let the truck leave without her.

'MOTHER FUCKERS!!!!!!' She ran to where her truck was in the parking lot, jumped in and took off after the fire trucks. The entire way she sent curses to her LT. If they worked, he would drop dead where ever he was from clogged arteries. Sliding her truck to a stop behind the other trucks, she jumped out and pulled her coat and helmet on. Looking up to the two-story house that was on fire, she could see that it needed to be vented. Pulling an ax from a compartment in the truck, she ran to the lower windows and started breaking them. The heat that burst from the windows was hot enough to singe the hair on her fingers, which wouldn't have been happening if she had gloves. If she found the person who took them, she promised herself that he would never need them again after she cut his hands off. Running around the back of the structure, she continued to break out the windows. Taking a quick look into each room, she looked for any one who might still be inside. Fine mists of water fell over her from where the firefighters were trying to wet the other houses that were close by, the snapping of fire heated wood and sizzling smothered her hearing so that she could barely hear the yell for help from above. A falling piece of furniture brought her head spinning up to a window where a woman and small child were trying to get some ones attention.

"Don't move! We'll get you down!" She yelled up to them and then ran to get the guys with a ladder.

"In the back, a woman and child, upper window!" She told one of the others and was shocked when he didn't pay any attention to her. "Did you hear what I said?" The firefighter shoved her in the chest and walked towards where the others were spraying the roof of the house. "ASSHOLES!" Running to the tanker, she grabbed the oxygen tank that had her *Xena Warrior Princess* stickers on the tank. Pulling it over her shoulders, she grunted at the pain in the still healing shoulder. Slipping the mask over her face, she pulled her hood over her head, helmet back on, and ran inside the burning house. Taking the stairs to the second floor, she ran with her bare hand against the wall feeling for heat. Stopping at the door that she thought led to the room where the people were, she put her hand on the door and felt a burning under her palm. She knew that if she opened the door, a back draft would most likely fry her where she stood; she needed the guys up there with the hoses to cool the door down and douse the flames from inside. From the way they acted outside, she knew she was going to have to do this on her own. Checking the door next to it, she found it cool to her touch. Opening it while taking cover by the side, she waited a few seconds before going in. The smoke wasn't as thick in this room so she closed the door and found a place on the wall and started hacking away with her ax until she had a good-sized hole. Using her feet, she kicked the remaining drywall away until she could get into the other room. What she found didn't look good. Flames ate at the walls and floor and ran across the ceiling towards where the windows were open. Dropping to a crouch, she ran across the room dodging the flames that jumped at her legs. The woman and child were hanging half way out the window screaming for help.

"HEY! COME WITH ME!" She yelled over the noise. Grabbing their arms, she pulled them from the window and pushed them towards the hole in the wall. Once they were in the other room, she pulled her tank from her back, put it on the young woman and showed her how to use it.

"Share with your baby." She nodded her head when the woman placed the mask over her coughing child's face. "Come on lets get out of here." Checking the door before she opened it, she then pulled them out behind her. She heard the firefighters below and then saw two of them coming up the stairs with a hose spraying a fine mist over the area. Pulling the woman in behind her, she took them down the stairs and out the front door to where paramedics were waiting.

"Wait! Where's my son!" The woman screamed and grabbed on to Jake's arm. "Jimmy was in the basement!"

After taking back her tank, Jake wiped the sweat and grime from her face with an equally dirty hand. "OK, I'll go get him." Her blue eyes burning from the smoke were blurry at best; she looked for Johnnie and prayed that he would help her. She found him unrolling a hose from one of the trucks compartments.

She came face to face with her friend, with pleading eyes she looked to him. "I need some help, there's a kid in the basement."

He cast a glance over his shoulder and saw the LT watching him. Trying to show how sorry he was with his eyes alone, he shook his head no.

"I hope you burn in hell!" She growled at him right before she shoved him in his chest and took off to find a way into the basement. Charging back into the house, she pushed past other firefighters searching for the door to the basement. Finding one at the back of the house, she touched the door and yanked her hand back from the burning heat. "Fuck it." She stepped back and kicked the door in-ward; a blast of heated air hit her square in the chest and made her step back a bit. Seeing one of the guys coming towards her with a hose, she yanked it out of his hands and sprayed down the steps to the basement. Turning the water off she plunged into the darkness with only her flashlight to guide her way.

"Jimmy! Hey buddy where are you?" She shined the flashlight across the floor of what was a family room. Checking the closet on the one wall she came up empty, she decided that if he were down there, he would be hiding in a cubbyhole somewhere. Flipping the couch over and then the chair, she came to what was a bar of some kind. Shinning her flashlight towards the back corner, she saw a blonde head peek up and green eyes look at her. Flipping her shield up so as not scare him, she gave him a smile. "Hey Jimmy, my names Jake. What do you say we get you to your mom?"

Picking him up in her arms, she ran for the stairs and took them two at a time. She was halfway up when flames shot up from where her foot had broke through the weakened steps. Throwing herself to the side to protect Jimmy, she bounced off the wall behind her. Pulling her foot free, she kept close to the wall and waited until the pain in her ankle ebbed away.

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"Please my sons in there! You have to save him!" The frantic woman screamed at the lieutenant. Grabbing his arm, she tried to drag him back to the house.

"Listen lady, if my men haven't found him yet then there's no hope. Now back away before you get hurt." He shoved her none to gently, then strode off to where the press were standing around watching the house go up in flames. He ran his mouth like he was the world's greatest fire chief on the planet, using jargon that made it appear that he was intelligent and cared about his job. All bought it except for one lone photographer that had heard what he told the woman. The tall blonde haired woman continued to snap shots of the firefighter's right up until the last hose was rolled up and put away. Moving to a different position, she started taking pictures of the mother holding her daughter close to her chest and sobbing with grief over the loss of her son. Paying attention to the trucks pulling away, she moved to where Jake's truck sat against the curb and catching the woman at an angle. She dropped the camera from her eye when she heard a god awful wail come from the woman.

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Taking the mask off, she pulled it over the little boys face and left it there for him to breathe the clean oxygen. Taking a deep breath, she went the rest of the way up the stairs and staggered to the light ahead of her. A creaking came to her ears just at the threshold, pushing the boy from her arms; she raised an arm over her head and caught the blunt force of the ceiling that fell in on her. Stepping to the side, she fell backwards from the rubble and out the door. Wet heavy debris fell across her legs pinning her where she lay. Police officers who heard the woman scream came running and helped Jake out of the doorway. They half carried her to a safe distance from the house, they asked her if she wanted a paramedic and left at the shake of her head.

The photographer snapped picture after picture, capturing the entire episode on film. A huge smile came to her face when a sooty hand pulled the helmet off and pushed back a hood to reveal long dark sweat soaked hair.

"The hero appears once again." She walked away from the scene with a smirk on her face. "You will always be a huge surprise at the end Jake."

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Johnnie searched the parking lot for Jake's truck; they had gotten back to the station an hour ago and still no Jake. He was beyond worry and went to ask the other guys if they had seen her leave the fire scene. What he found out made his chest ache and his stomach burn. The last person to see her said that she had gone into the basement.

"Damn it Jake, where the hell are you?" He ran a hand across his face trying to decide if he should go back and look for her when her truck pulled into the lot. Taking a step towards her, he stopped when he saw the look of absolute hate on her face. Chills ran up his spine when ice-cold eyes met his; he stepped back and gave her a wide berth. He could see the second-degree burns on her hands and the soot covering her face making her eyes stand out even more.

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Shedding her filthy sweat soaked clothes; she stepped into the shower and swore in Greek. There was no hot water, only a luke warm stream came from the showerhead and that was with the cold turned all the way off. The warm water lasted just long enough for her to get the soap out of her hair before it turned cold. Throwing the curtain back, she stepped out of the shower madder than she was when she went in. She would make sure that the LT would pay for everything he ever done to her.

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It was 7pm when Artemis hung the phone up with a disappointed look on her face; she had called the firehouse and wanted to talk to Jake. Who ever the guy was said that she was busy and couldn't come to the phone, she then asked for Johnnie and got the same answer.

"That's weird, I thought they just sat around all day and watched TV." Lying down on the couch, she flipped through the stations, found nothing of interest and decided to read instead. She fell asleep before she had even finished a chapter of the murder mystery she had been reading.

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Walking slowly into the kitchen, Jake found it empty and devoid of any food on the stove or table. That was never the case in a firehouse; they always had food cooking because of the strange times that they got to eat. Opening the huge refrigerator, she found the makings for a sandwich but only the heels of bread.

"Must not have gone shopping yet." She mumbled to the empty mayonnaise jar. It was when she went to the trash can that sat next to another refrigerator and the huge pantry that she noticed the new padlock that had been put on both of them. "So we're going to play childish games huh you fat fucker." Putting the single piece of cheese and bologna on the ends of the bread, she grabbed what she hoped was a untainted bottle of water and went back to what she called her holding cell.

While lying on her thin rack, she thought of numerous things that she could do to the other firefighters and get away with it.

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Artemis woke the next morning with such terrible pain that she cried out. Her legs were swollen and sore from sleeping with the braces on them, she tried to swing her legs to the edge of the couch but the sharp pains kept her where she was. Taking deep breaths, she eased them to the point where she was only a few inches from having them over the edge.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" She unfastened the straps and dropped the braces to the floor, rubbing the indentations from her legs brought tears to her eyes. She wished that Jake were still there; she would have carried her to bed and not let her sleep on the couch all night. "Get over it Arty, you're on your own, besides you're a damn doctor and should know better!" After 25 minutes, she was able to relax somewhat from the pains. As soon as her medication kicked in the swelling

would go down. Using the crutches she kept near the couch, she made her way slowly to the bathroom and then to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. Memories of her and Jake sharing breakfast each morning haunted her in a way she never thought possible, she felt an emptiness in her home. She wondered if the other woman who had firefighters in their lives suffered the same. "What are you thinking Arty; she's a friend nothing more." She looked at the calendar that hung on the wall and counted the days until Jake would have her first day off. "Will you come here to see me?" Picking up the phone she called the firehouse and waited until it was picked up.

"Hello this is Dr. Shields, can I please speak with Jake Papalogious."

"Sorry Doctor, she's busy right now."

"Can I..." The phone was slammed down in her ear. "Can you be any more rude?" Pulling a chair out she sat down and propped her chin in her hand. "Something is wrong here." Dialing the phone again, she waited until it was picked up.

"Hey baby brother can you do me a huge favor?"

Billy sighed at his sister's request, she always wanted him to do gross and disgusting things.

"No I'm not getting you Tampons, let Jake get them."

"Ha ha, I wanted to know if you could stop by sometime today and ask Jake to call me. Please Billy?"

"Why don't you call her?"

"I have, but they keep saying she's busy. Come on Billy."

"If I get in that area I'll stop and see her for you, OK?"

"Thanks Billy, I appreciate it very much. Bye."

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It was 6pm when Jake wiped the last of the wax off of the rear panel of the tanker, her arms were tired and her hands were so swollen and sore that she could hardly move her fingers. The burns were not bad but the blisters had broke when she was cleaning the truck and now they seeped fluid and looked pretty bad. Her ankle was twice it's size, she tried to get her boot on that morning and almost passed out from the pain. She was counting the days until she had off, she wondered if Arty would let her sleep on her couch until she could find an apartment.

She was in the kitchen washing her hands when the LT came in and stood right behind her.

"Papalogious, what are you doing in here?"

Jake wanted so bad to turn around and give him explicit details of what he could do with his tiny dick but she knew that would get her in deeper trouble. Instead, she grabbed a paper towel and wiped her hands dry before turning to glare at the fat little bastard.

"I'm washing my hands before I start cooking supper."

"You are not cooking anything. He stepped so that his rank breath assaulted her senses. "You have brass to polish, now go do it before I suspend your sorry ass again."

"Do it and I'll have you in court before you can even think." She shoved past him and headed for her room. If there had been paint on the walls, it would have peeled off from the curses she mumbled under her breath. Earlier that day when the LT was away from the station, she had searched for the valves for the up stairs water supply. She had found the shut off valve for the hot water pipe that went to her shower turned almost off, after turning it back on, she took both knobs off the valves so that no one could turn it back off without getting a new knob. She'd be damned if they thought she was going to continue to take cold showers while they took hot ones. So while she was at it, she turned the hot water to their showers off and turned the hot water heater off to that section of the firehouse. Let their fat ass bodies suffer for a few days.

She was lucky for the next day and a half, nothing happened in the city or surrounding areas, she had everything done on the list that the LT had left for her and now she sat on her rack reading a paper back book she had found lying in the trash the day before. She was counting the hours before she could escape the hell in which she had lived in for the past three and a half days. Closing the book and rubbing tired eyes, she dropped back on her rack and stared at the ceiling.

"Please Gods, let Arty let me sleep on her couch." Her back ached along with every muscle in her tired body. She slept every night with a pillow over her head to keep the lights that she couldn't turn off out of her eyes. Just drifting off to sleep, she was jerked awake by the alarms going off. Grabbing her coat and shoving her boots on, she took off down the steps limping. She already knew that she wouldn't be able to get on the truck, so she went out to her truck and followed the tanker to the emergency.

The house and garage were well under way of being a three-alarm blaze, they were the only ones on site and worked quickly to try and stop the blaze from spreading. The garage doors were open and a small car was inside. Checking the structure for fire over her head, Jake opened the door and put the car in neutral. Giving it a good shove, she pushed it from the garage and out into the street. Too many fires became worse with the explosion of a gas tank in a vehicle. The other firefighters started spraying the flames down from the roof, she went to vent the house by breaking windows with her ax and checking for anyone who was inside. When she came around the back of the house, an explosion knocked her back and through the sliding glass doors of the blazing house. Feeling the extreme heat on her back and pain from where she landed on her tank, she rolled over and crawled from the house. Falling on her side, she gasped for air and watched as firefighters came around and started spraying the flames back. They ignored her lying there and continued to fight the fire, none of them saw the photographer a ways off snapping pictures of them working. With the determination of a warrior, Jake got to her feet, grabbed a hose that had been left lying unattended and helped put the flames out. It was then that she found the

reason for the explosion was a propane tank from a gas grill that was close to the back of the house. She knew she was lucky to have been at a distance instead of being right next to it. It would have possible killed her and she felt that someone had protected her from what she wanted. Eternal peace.

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Artemis had just gotten out of the shower, she had only a towel on when she heard a faint knocking on her front door. Not knowing who it could be, she grabbed a baseball bat and peeked through the peephole. All she saw was the dark night, she stepped away and heard the faint knock again.

"What the hell?" Putting the chain on the door, she opened it and looked out.

"Arty can I crash on your couch?"

"For the love of Gods Jake, get in here."

Jake crawled across the floor in her filthy clothes and collapsed in the middle of the living room floor. Rolling over on her back, she lay spread eagle. "So tired and hungry." She mumbled.

Artemis took one look at her and her heart slammed in her chest. Jake was covered in soot and blood. Her light blue uniform shirt was stained with sweat, pants torn and singed at her ankles. It was then that she noticed that Jake's one boot was unlaced, she could see her filthy sock stretched tightly across her lower leg. Kneeling down next to her side on sore legs, Artemis ran her hand across a sweat-covered brow.

"Come on Jake, lets get you in the shower. You'll feel better afterwards and then I'll make you something to eat." Cloudy blue eyes rolled sideways to catch green, a small grin came to Jake's face at the mention of food.

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Artemis watched as Jake stumbled into the shower, tears fell from her eyes at site of the bruised and battered body of her friend. *"What are you trying to do to yourself Jake?"* Moving closer to the shower, she watched as Jake fumbled with the shampoo bottle. Using her teeth, she got the lid off but her fingers were so swollen and burnt that she couldn't do anything with them. Leaning her head against the wall in defeat, she was surprised to feel soft hands taking the bottle from her hands.

"Relax Jake, let me do this for you." Artemis said from behind her.

Jake kneeled in front of her with her back pressing against her hips' Her hands shaking from nerves, Artemis lathered long dark hair. She didn't know what had gotten into her, she had never showered with anyone. The bathroom was a place she always deemed as personal space, until now. Tears flowed and mixed with the water from the shower, as she lathered Jake's hair, it

turned a pink shade in her hands. Jake had a laceration somewhere on her scalp that she would need to look at along with all the other injuries on the tall firefighter's body. What worried her the most were the deep bruises on her lower back and her burnt hands.

Jake relaxed back against the small body, she had never had anyone wash her hair before and now knew she would always want Artemis to do it for her. The feel of strong fingers massaging her scalp relaxed her to the point where she was ready to fall asleep. It was over far too soon for her and she whimpered when the strong fingers left her hair.

Artemis whispered close to her ear. "Stand up so that I can wash your back." It sent shivers down her spine to hear the low timber of her friend's voice. If she wasn't so sore and tired, she knew that it would have aroused her.

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Jake sat at the table waiting for Artemis to finish dressing her hands, her eyes kept traveling to intense green. What she felt with the soft touch of caring hands calmed her.

"When did this happen?" Green connected with bloodshot blue for a brief second before returning to the work before her.

"Couple days ago."

"Jake, why didn't you have them treated then?" Tipping the face up with her fingers, Artemis searched the tired blue eyes.

"I...well...let me explain."

Jake told her of the fire and how she had rescued the three people and how she was being treated at the firehouse. She flinched at the fire growing in green eyes, taking small hands in hers she tried to calm down her small friend.

"It's OK Arty, I can handle it."

"That's not the point, what he's doing is against the law." Artemis was getting very close to going and beating the shit out of the Lieutenant.

"Arty, it will be over soon and then it'll be back to normal."

Her voice rose making Jake shrink back in her chair. "What by you being killed out there because they won't help you?" She stood up and went over to stare out the kitchen window, her shoulders shook with rage and then soft sobs. All that was happening to Jake was her fault, if she had never said anything to her Dad, Jake would still be there with her and not being treated so badly by the other firefighters. Leaning back into the warm robe covered body that wrapped around her from behind, she let the tears flow freely down her cheeks. Jake turned her in her arms and held her close as she sobbed into her shoulder. Jake couldn't figure out why it bothered

Artemis so much.

"This is all my fault." Artemis sobbed harder. She went on to tell Jake what she had her Dad try and do.

"Baby girl, there's no way you or your Dad could have known that this would happen. He could have called me back without your Dads help and done the same damn thing. So don't blame your self." Leaning back a ways, she wiped the tears from Artemis's face. Giving her a toothy grin, she kissed her forehead. "What are ya gonna make me for supper?"

Artemis gave her a small smile. "You're incorrigible you know that?"

"Yeah and hungry."

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Artemis had to threaten to shove a crutch someplace very uncomfortable before Jake would share her bed with her. Jake kept arguing that the couch was just fine with her and that it was way more comfortable than the rack she slept in at the firehouse. Now she lay on her side with a warm body pressed up against her, soft snores lulled her to sleep.

She couldn't breath, smoke rose before her stealing her breath away. Flames shot up around her and licked at her hands as she tried to beat them back, screams echoed in the darkness around her but she couldn't decipher from which direction they were coming from. Her throat closed over the scream she tried to get out, all she could do was open her mouth to silence. A great wall of flame came at her and devoured her where she stood. Then all was peaceful and she floated in a darkness so calm that she never wanted to leave it. Until a sweet voice beckoned her, a soft glow came from a distance, growing brighter by the second until it enveloped her in a warmth that invaded her very soul.

Artemis was pulled from a deep sleep by Jake's tossing and turning, a low keening wail sent shivers up her spine before her eyes were all the way open. "Jake, come on wake up." Running her hand across a sweat covered brow, she kept trying to wake the tall firefighter.

Jake smiled when green eyes looked down on her where she lay, the bright light around the small blonde made her look like an angel. Her fingertips felt cool to Jake's fevered brow when soft fingers touched her. The soft timber of her voice soothed Jake and pulled her up to stand before her. Strong arms wrapped around her to fill her very essence with calmness.

"Come on Jake, it's time."

Artemis was getting worried, she felt how slow Jake's pulse was. She couldn't remember if that was normal for her friend or not. Her heart caught in her throat when pale blue eyes fluttered open and gazed into hers. She felt like a bolt of lightning had pierced her very soul.

"You scared me, are you all right?"

Jake reached up with one hand and traced the side of Artemis's cheek with her fingertips.

"So beautiful." She murmured from a dry throat. "My Guardian Angel." She pulled Artemis down on her chest, wrapped her arms around her and went back to sleep.

Artemis didn't know what to say to the words Jake had said, she was even more shocked when she was pulled down upon Jake's chest. Resting her head on a strong shoulder, she sighed. "What am I going to do with you?" Were the last words before she fell asleep to the sound of a strong heartbeat beneath her ear.

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"Jake?" Artemis struggled from the deathlike grip Jake had on her. "I really need to get up!" She grabbed Jake's nose, holding on until blue eyes opened. "I really really need to get up!" Her green eyes filled with such urgency that Jake sprung from the bed in a split second.

"Is there a fire?" She swung her head around searching for signs.

"No, more like flood warnings." She crawled from the bed and headed for the bathroom off her bedroom. Jake rubbed her face in confusion; she was still half-asleep and couldn't wrap her foggy mind around flood warnings until the sigh of relief and the flush of the toilet clued her in.

"Ohhh flood warning gotcha, why didn't you just get up." Jake said to the empty room.

"Because someone had me in a headlock." She slapped Jake in her stomach as she went past. "Come on I'm hungry."

"Head lock? I didn't have you in a headlock, body lock maybe."

She followed Artemis in to the kitchen and watched as she stiffly made her way around to collect stuff for breakfast. Soft groans and moans escaped her lips with every movement, the thin T-shirt she had pulled on showed erotic shadows when backlit from the refrigerator light. Jake felt her mouth go dry at the site of hard nipples pressing out against the thin cotton. Her mouth had fallen open and her eyes deepened with something close to lust. She jumped when amused green eyes trapped her.

"Jake, what do you want to eat?"

"If you only knew!" "Uuhmm..." She gulped and shook her dark head. "Eggs?"

Artemis walked slowly up to Jake, planting her hands on her hips; she tilted her head to the side and gazed into the darkened blue eyes. She had a feeling that she was the reason for the look on her friend's face. Using one finger, she pushed up on Jake's chin and closed her mouth.

"Scrambled, poached, with shells in them, sunny side up, raw?"

"Naked."

Artemis gave her a lopsided smile, the sides of her nose wrinkled giving her an adorable look. "Naked huh, doesn't really tell me how you want them cooked." Taking a larger hand in hers, she led Jake to a chair and pushed her down into it. Running her fingers across Jake's cheek, she smiled. "I'll make you a western omelet how's that sound?" Turning her back, she felt eyes burning into her ass, giving Jake something to look at; she raised the back of her shirt and rubbed her lower back. She knew damn well that the skimpy silk panties she wore left nothing to the imagination and loved every bit of the effect it was having on a tall firefighter. *"You are so easy to tease Jake."*

Jake felt her breath hitch at the site of small black silk panties, she had to drag her eyes away in fear of getting caught with drool dripping down her chin. Every nerve ending in her body went on red alert, this was a first for her. She had dated many women but none of them had ever set her pulse to beat so frantically in her neck or set flames through her veins to swirl around her center. *"Jake you dawg, she's straight!"* Her little voice screamed at her. "I know I know!"

"What do you know?" Artemis looked over her shoulder at her with a curious gleam in her eyes.

"Ohh shit, I said that out loud!" "I ahhh...know that I..."

"Need mental help?"

Artemis laughed when Jake nodded her head.

"And a shower." She jumped from the chair and strode on wobbly legs to the doorway. Mumbling under her breathe she said. "Cold, very long ice cold shower."

"Cold shower huh? Poor Jake, all hot and bothered and I haven't even touched her. What the hell am I talking about?" She examined her feelings for her friend and found that she wanted more than a friendship with the tall firefighter. *"Hell it's just lust on her part, she's a beautiful woman who could have any one she wants falling at her feet. She wouldn't want me for anything, I'm not beautiful, just cute. At least that's what I've been told so many times. Is it the same on my part...lust for her strong hands to run across my body. Her warm body pressed up against mine, with her breath moist and hot breathing in my ear?"* She had her head tilted back, images ran behind her eyes of their bodies moving against each other, her breath came panting from her lips as flames tore through her body to settle in nether regions.

"Arty I think the eggs are beyond done." Jake whispered close to her ear and grinned when Artemis jumped and started trying to put the flaming eggs out. "Let me do that Arty, I am a firefighter after all." Grabbing the frying pan, she put it in the sink and put a lid over it to snuff out the flames. Looking at her small friend from the corner of her eye, she tried to hide the smirk that came to her lips. "I think we should go out to eat?" Turning her head, she saw that Artemis's face was a deep red, her breathing still ragged and it wasn't from being scared, her eyes spoke so clearly, of what she was feeling at that very moment.

"Shower..." Running her hands through her short hair Artemis staggered towards her bedroom.
"Hope you left me some cold water."

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The older woman brought their plates to the table, filled their coffee cups and returned to the kitchen. Artemis had been quiet the entire ride to the small diner and hadn't said anything since she had ordered two breakfasts. She kept her eyes downcast except for sneak peeks in to twinkling blue eyes.

A huge grin came to Jake's face, she just couldn't help the mischievous side that Arty brought out in her. "How was your cold shower?"

"It was...huh?" Artemis's jaw dropped, eyes widened and all air left her lungs.

"I couldn't pass up a chance for a nice long hot shower." She hid a smirk behind her coffee cup.
"After a couple days of cold ones, I actually feel clean now."

Artemis recovered from her shock, she knew that Jake was full of shit about the hot shower but she would let that pass.

"You'll pay for that one hot stuff, one day I'll get you back."

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Jake would you take me to look for a new car? I really need one; I'm starting to get cabin fever being stuck at home all the time. Plus I start therapy in a few days."

"We can go after we eat. What kind ya want, new, used, automatic, stick or other?"

Green eyes narrowed at the "Other" part. "Excuse me, other?"

Blue eyes sparkled then dropped to the food left on her plate, pushing her eggs around she continued. "You have your I'm a big dyke truck and then you have your four door or mini van Mommy vehicle."

Artemis started out chuckling then it turned into all out snorting laughter, tears flowed from her eyes to drip off her jaw. Each time she thought she had it under control, just one look at Jake and the way she had said Mommy vehicle sent her back over the edge.

"Ohh Gods Jake." She cleared her throat and wiped the tears from her face. "Do I look like a person that would drive a mommy car?"

"Well...you are a." She leaned in close to Arty's small ear and whispered. "Pussy Doctor." She pulled back and watched as Artemis covered her mouth to keep from spewing the coffee that was

in her mouth all over the table. "I just figured that you wanted kids."

She raised an eyebrow at her friend. "Jake does every one think of me as a pussy doctor?"

Two dark brows wiggled over silvery blue eyes, a lopsided grin slowly formed on Jake's lips. "Well...you do spend a good amount of time down there don't you?"

Artemis was at a loss for words. "How did we go from mommy cars to pussies?"

"Don't know, wanna talk some more about them? "Cuz I find them very stimulating."

Artemis slapped her in the shoulder and then waved a finger in front of her. "After you've seen a couple hundred of them, they no longer become stimulating."

"Hey I was talking about cars, where was your mind."

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"Arty are you sure about this, I mean I never figured you for this kinda vehicle. It's...huge!"

Green eyes sparkled; she ran a fingertip across the gleaming black vehicle and grinned at her flustered friend.

"Come on Hot stuff, if I would have had one of these the night I had my wreck, maybe I wouldn't have had two broken legs."

"But Arty, we would have never met."

Artemis wrapped her arms around a trim waist and gave her a tight squeeze.

"Yes we would have, I was right behind that tanker when he flipped." She gazed up into hurt blue eyes. "Believe me, we would have met." She turned when she heard the salesman coming up to them, he handed her the keys, shook her hand and practically jumped for joy. "One tiny little problem though."

A dark brow rose over a pale eye. "What tiny little problem?" Curious as to what problem there could be since Arty just bought a very expensive vehicle.

A light blush covered Artemis's face; she dropped her chin down onto her chest and looked up from below her brows. "I can't drive stick, can you?"

"Oohh I get it now, the big bad dyke gets to teach you how to drive stick." She dropped her lips close to Arty's ear and whispered. "It's the only stick I've ever played with."

"Pervert. Will you teach me?"

"Yeah, I'll teach you." *Like to teach you a lot of things but that will be later. Maybe!*

"But first we have to get it home. You take my baby and I'll take your truck since its automatic." She handed Jake her keys and slapped her on her ass as she walked past. Jake looked over her shoulder at her small friend limping towards her truck, then down at the keys in her hand. A huge smile came to her face as she looked at the black and silver Humvee.

"Wait a minute here, she slapped my ass." Running her hand down the said area, she grinned and then crawled behind the wheel of the Humvee.

"Did I really slap her on her ass?" Arty asked herself. "I did! I slapped her on her ass and I enjoyed every single minuscule second of it!" An evil grin crossed her face and she gave out a short laugh. "What else will she let me get away with? I can't believe I'm even thinking of doing more intimate things with her, can I switch sides of the fence and become her lover?" Arty beat the thoughts around in her mind and came to the conclusion that yes, she could become quite intimate with the tall firefighter. But didn't know if Jake felt the same way about her.

That night they spoke of many things as they lay in front of the TV on a stack of pillows. But none of them were around the feelings that they had for each other. Neither one of them wanted to broach the subject and scare the other off, if the feelings were not mutual. Early the next morning Jake woke to a stiff back and neck, without opening her eyes, she knew the heavy weight across her torso was a small blond. Looking through a slit eye, she saw a tousled blonde head resting on her chest, with a small hand tucked under her chin Arty snored softly.

Her voice rough with sleep, Jake murmured, "You're so adorable when you sleep." She received a soft snort for her compliment.

"You need glasses Hot stuff." Rubbing a sleepy green eye with her fist, Arty looked up into pale blue eyes. "I look like shit, my eyes are puffy, hair looks like a nesting area for small animals, I have shirt wrinkles on my face and I hate mornings."

Jake pulled her closer and placed a gentle kiss on the shirt wrinkle that creased her soft cheek. "Just like I said, you're adorable."

"OK, what do you want?" She asked with a raised brow.

"Huh? Nothin why?"

"Cuz when people compliment me early in the morning, they usually want something."

Jake looked deeply into dark green eyes and then shook her head. "Nope, it's you all right." Tilting a small chin up with one finger she moved closer and placed a hesitant kiss on moist lips. "I'm gonna make breakfast." She then slipped from under a shocked blonde and went into the kitchen.

"What the hell?" Arty mumbled to herself as she ran a finger across her tingling lips. Rolling to

her feet she groaned when a sharp pain shot through her lower back. Staggering hunched over into the kitchen, she tapped Jake on her shoulder. "What was that supposed to mean?"

"What part?"

"The, it's you all right part."

"Body snatchers might have got ya during the night. Scrambled eggs OK?"

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Artemis was giving her therapist a scowl, her legs ached and she was dead tired from the therapy circuit that she had just completed. She knew that she was out of shape but she never realized how much until now. Wiping the sweat from her face, she growled when her therapist slapped her on the back and cheerfully jogged from the small gym. Taking small painful steps to the door, she moaned and groaned all the way to Jake's truck.

"I should have had Mama drop me off and pick me up, how am I supposed to climb up onto the seat?" But the thought of taking Jake some lunch at the firehouse gave her added strength to accomplish the feat of climbing into the raised truck. She knew that Jake was getting left overs and would appreciate some food, not to mention her stomach sounded like a pride of lions at the moment.

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Jake had worked out in the gym for two hours, with all the flirting that she and Arty had done before she left the house, her sexual frustration was enough to power an entire city. It diminished some with her workout but her raging libido was still knocking. Striping in her small room, she turned the shower on and stepped under the cool water. Letting it run down her back brought goose bumps out across her body. Shivering slightly from the cold and knowing it was stupid to take a cold shower after an intense workout would be trouble, she gave up and turned the hot water up. Soaping her body with a washcloth, she let it slip between her legs; a low groan escaped her parted lips when her center throbbed.

"Gods Jake, you have to do something."

Leaning up against the shower wall, she closed her eyes and let her hand slip between her legs. The slickness of her arousal surprised her, running her fingers across her hardened clit, her hips jerked forward. Spreading the wetness across her swollen nether lips caused her to thrust her hips faster, slipping a finger deep inside of her inner walls she felt the telltale signs of her impending release. Biting her lower lip to stifle a cry, she climaxed silently. Without finishing her shower, she turned off the water, walked on shaky legs to her rack and collapsed into sleep.

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Parking Jake's truck next to her Humvee, Arty grabbed the bags of take out and went towards the

open bay doors of the firehouse. She looked for a familiar face and found John sitting in a lawn chair at the back of the bay. She knew that John had been avoiding Jake for fear of losing his job and didn't hold it against the man. He had a family to support and had to do what he could. Giving him a small smile, she asked in a low voice where Jake was. After giving her directions, he thanked her for understanding and clasped her hand gently between his own. She could see the moisture building up in his eyes, so she nodded and gave him a smile. Climbing the stairs to the gym area, she saw the door against the wall and was shocked. It was like solitary confinement and she didn't know how Jake could stand to live like this. She tapped lightly on the door and waited, after a few minutes she put her ear to the door and heard heavy snoring. A grin crossed her face at the thought of being able to tease her tall friend about it. Opening the door she almost ran into the other wall when she walked in.

"Ohh Jake, this isn't right." She mumbled under her breath. Turning her head to where the snoring was coming from, her jaw dropped open at the site of Jake sprawled on her back across the small rack. Her legs hung over the end of it and looked very uncomfortable. Her face burned when eyes traveled the naked body before her, green eyes darkened when they came to rest on glistening nether lips below the neatly trimmed patch of dark curls. Fighting with herself as whether to leave the food for her friend and save her the embarrassment or close her eyes and wake her. Her decision was taken from her hands when blue eyes opened and caught her staring.

"Thought after a few hundred of them you didn't get stimulated anymore?" Jake remarked with a low raspy voice.

"Ahhh..." Arty just stood there clutching the bags to her heaving chest.

Jake swung her legs over the rack, grabbed a pair of boxers off the floor and slipped them on while keeping eye contact with Arty. A slow grin came to her lips when green eyes followed her every movement. Being an evil person, she approached the frozen blond bare chested.

"Is that lunch you have there?" Reaching out she closed Arty's mouth by pushing up on her chin. Peeling tight fingers from the bags, she placed them on the rack and pulled Arty over and pushed her down to sit on the edge. Waving her hand in front of glossy eyes she asked. "Baby girl do I have to perform CPR or something?"

"Huh?" She blinked a few times and took a deep breath. "Nah ahh...OK...now."

"Good lets eat I'm starved."

Arty shook her head and rubbed her heated face with trembling fingers. *"How can she be so calm and act like I wasn't just drooling over her?"*

"So what do ya think of my humble living area?"

"Uhhmm...it's really small." She stuttered and looked down at the Styrofoam tray that Jake had put on her lap.

"Arty look at me." She waited until bashful green eyes turned to look at her. "It doesn't bother me that you were staring at me while I was sleeping."

"But you were..."

"Naked? It's not like you've never seen me that way before." She knew damn well why it was bothering her friend but she was trying to give her an easy way out of the situation. Bending forward, she lifted Arty's chin up and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "Don't worry about it OK?" She pulled back only to find a small hand tangle in the hair behind her neck and pull her forward to meet soft lips. Arty kissed her with a hunger she had never experienced before with any one. The trays of food were put to the side and a small blonde pounced on her knocking her backwards onto the rack. When a wet tongue forced its way past her lips and teeth Jake moaned deeply and gave all control to Arty. Long minutes past with their teeth and lips gnashing in a bruising kiss before the need for air brought them apart. Gulping for air Jake looked into dark green eyes flecked with gold, running a fingertip across bruised lips, she dragged a ragged breath between clenched teeth when her finger was pulled into a warm mouth and sucked.

"Arty do you know what you're getting yourself into?"

Releasing Jake's finger, Arty dropped her head to take a nipple between her lips. Jake arched her back and moaned, running her hands down Arty's back she worked her hands under the damp T-shirt and pulled it up to her shoulders.

"Off now!" Within seconds their clothes hit the floor and Arty was rolled beneath Jake's larger body. "You just tell me to stop and I will."

"I want you." Was all Arty said before she pulled Jake down for a heart-stopping kiss. Pressing their bodies close together, Jake moaned at the feel of their breasts pressed against each other. Breaking the kiss, She placed soft kisses over every inch of her soon to be lovers face. Moving her lips next to a small ear she whispered and felt Arty shiver. "You don't know how long I've dreamed of being with you." Slipping her tongue into the small ear she flicked her tongue inside until Arty whimpered. Slowly she kissed and licked her way down to small firm breasts and circled taut nipples. Loving each breast equally with licks, kisses and finally small nips until Arty was thrashing on the rack. Their combined arousal wafted up to Jake's nose, she felt her mouth water with want of tasting the sweetness for the first time. Licking a trail down a heaving chest, she stopped to plunge her tongue into her navel a few times until Arty pushed on the top of her head for her to go lower.

"Please Jake."

"What do you want baby?" Blue eyes caught and held green.

"Lick me." Was all she could say as her head fell back on to the pillow with the first touch of a warm tongue. Never before had anyone done what Jake was doing to her, she had tried to get her other lovers to please her in this fashion but they were more worried about their own pleasure than hers. She dug her heels into the thin mattress and thrust her hips against a fluttering tongue,

she could feel her body tensing and muscles clutching at the tongue that was slipping into her center.

"Come for me baby." Jake growled against her lover's center before she sucked her ridged clit between her lips. Pushing two fingers into her center she growled when muscles clamped down and held them as Arty's climax ripped through her body. Arty cried out and whimpered with each tremor that coursed through her body until she collapsed into the damp sheets. Jake licked the juices flowing from between her nether lips and then pulled each lip into her mouth to suck gently on them. Hips thrust against her as her lover was pushed back up towards the pinnacle of another orgasm. With the tip of her tongue, she licked the area between Arty's center and anal opening. Bringing her eyes up to lock with fevered green, she pushed her tongue into the tight opening and pumped it in and out while slipping two fingers into a sopping center. Watching as her lover sat up and then braced herself on the palms of her hands and raised her hips as she went over the edge with a scream. Licking the juices from her lover, she placed a gentle kiss on her mound before crawling up to pull Arty into her arms. Holding her close, she felt her sob against her chest. She was afraid that she had done something wrong and that Arty was sobbing because she now felt that they had made a mistake.

"I'm sorry Arty, we shouldn't have done this."

She looked down when Arty pulled a tear streaked face away from her chest. Wiping the tears from Arty's face, she felt her own trail down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't want to make you cry."

"Jake, I'm crying because I'm happy." She kissed the fingers that had wiped the tears from her face. "No one has ever made love to me like you did." She pressed her face against a sweat-dampened breast, wrapped her arms around a wide back and sighed in contentment.

"They didn't love you." Jake whispered lowly. Wrapping her body around her lover, she breathed in her soft scent and closed her eyes to sleep.

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Two bodies stiffened against each other with the clamoring of the alarm bell. Jake rolled over to the edge of the rack and searched for her bunker pants and turnout coat. Pulling her bunker pants on she grabbed a T-shirt, slipped it over her head, adjusted her suspenders and then pulled her turnout coat on. The entire time she was dressing Arty was watching with amusement.

"What?" Jake asked in a low voice.

"Going native?"

Her answer was a wiggle of dark brows over flashing blue eyes. Picking up her own cloths, she dressed in a hurry and waited while Jake grabbed her helmet and tool belt. Running down the steps, they went out the side door to the parking lot. Arty tossed Jake her keys and crawled into

the passenger side of the truck. She grinned when Jake figured out that she was going with her.

"Arty this maybe be a big one and I don't know how long I'll be there."

"I don't care; I want to be there for you."

Jake gave up, jumped into her truck and took off at break neck speed after the tanker. They drove down Rt. 9 towards a trailer park on the outskirts of Martinsburg and the edge of Kearneysville. The park contained approximately 25 trailers and numerous metal sheds along with the large house that also contained the rental office. It was that building that was on fire and in danger of setting the entire place up in flames. Jake could see the plume of black smoke rising to the sky and the flames dancing above. She hoped that other station houses answered the call and that they wouldn't be the only ones there. A quick glance to Arty showed green eyes watering and a slight trembling of clasped hands. Reaching over she wiped the tears from her soft cheek.

"Don't worry, we'll save the day."

That's exactly what Arty was worried about and at what cost Jake was willing to give for the innocents. She sat on the tailgate of Jake's truck and watched as her tall lover grabbed her tank, strapped across her broad back and ran towards one of the trailers that was close to the burning house. Pulling her ax, she started breaking out the small roll out windows and then pulled the door open to yell inside. Arty's heart leapt in her chest when Jake rushed into the now burning trailer and pushed a coughing older woman outside and then returned to stay out of site for a few moments that felt like an eternity to Arty. She was about to do something very stupid like run in to the trailer after her lover, when she saw her come back out carrying a small white fur ball in her arms. Handing the squirming cat to the old lady, she went to the next trailer and copied the same movements. Arty's heart stayed in her throat the entire time she watched as other firefighters hosed down the house to keep the flames at bay. Seeing an ambulance pull in to the trailer park, she watched as her brother jumped from the passenger side and started to check on some of the inhabitants of the park. Making up her mind, she jumped down from the tailgate and ran over to her brother's side.

"Billy give me your jacket." She said from his side.

Startled eyes caught hers and then a bright smile lit up his face.

"Hey Arty, what are you...never mind I know why you're here." He pulled off his coat and handed it over to his sister. Looking deep into her sparkling eyes, he knew all too well what he saw there. "Where's your girlfriend?"

Arty's mouth fell open, a small cough came from her throat at what her brother was insinuating. "She's...Gods Billy!" She zipped up the coat and headed to ambulance to grab some first aid equipment.

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One eye peeked from behind the lens of a camera, a pink lip curled at the outer edge promising a small smile. "Damn little twit, you're going to get yourself in trouble out here." The tall blonde mumbled as she shot frame after frame of Artemis. Swinging the telephoto lens to the burning house, she aimed at the roof where firefighters were busting through the roof to try and douse the flames that were between the attic and the shingled roof. She panned the area until she came across a tall figure that she recognized as Jake. "There you are tall dark and extremely fearless." Moving to a different position, she shot frames of Jake ripping shingles up with her hands and tossing them over the side of the house. A rumbling noise started out low and then a whooshing noise erupted in a blaze of flames where Jake had been kneeling. The photographer lowered the camera and then jerked it back up to continue shooting the scene developing before her. Firefighters raised the ladder from the truck to the roof and started pulling the others from the blazing area. She searched for Jake but saw only shorter forms running for the ladder. "Mother fucking assholes, she's still up there!" She yelled when the ladder started to lower. Running to where Arty was helping a firefighter, she pulled the smaller blonde to the side and yelled down at her.

"Arty she's still on the roof!"

Wide green eyes looked at the tall blonde and then to where the roof was engulfed in flames. Panic rushed through her body when it all came together. Her lover was trapped with no way to get down. Arty looked in to green eyes that mirrored her own.

"Justine?"

"Yeah not get your ass in gear if you want to save her!"

Arty ran to where the fire chief was standing near the ladder truck, she came right up in front of the short fat bastard and grabbed him by the front of his turnout coat.

"Jake is still up there! Get the ladder back up NOW!"

His empty brown eyes looked down into her fiery green, he hit her in her chest causing her to let go of his turnout coat and watched as she stumbled back into the side of the truck.

"I don't know who you are, but that useless piece of shit ain't worth me risking my men to save her. Now get out of my way!" He came close to her with a jutting jaw, and a rolling gate. Arty tapped him on his shoulder and waited for him to turn towards her.

"I am your worst nightmare!" She pulled her right arm back and smacked him square in the face. The chief grabbed his gushing nose, looked at the blood on his hands and fell backwards on to the hard ground. "Fucking asshole!" She took off to the side of the truck to figure out how to raise the ladder.

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Jake was lying on her back, flames shot up around her and a creaking sound came to her ears.

Rolling to her side away from the heat that was licking at her arm, she tried to see through the billowing black smoke around her. Crawling across the roof, she reached out with her hands trying to find the edge of the roof, with the noise around her; she couldn't hear the shouts from below. Tears poured from her bloodshot blue eyes, she tried to yell for someone but the smoke burned her lungs and darkness came around her vision. Reaching back for her aspirator all she found was a melted mass of plastic hanging from the end of the hose. Taking a chance, she hung over the edge of the roof and searched for a way down. Eyes caught sight of the ladder truck below and a small blonde screaming silently at another firefighter.

"Baby girl." Echoed through her mind right before darkness claimed her for its own.

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"Either you take this ladder up or so help me I will tear you apart with my bare hands!" Artemis grabbed the firefighter by the front of his turnout coat and shook him with all the power that was raging through her body. Tears of anger and frustration poured down her pale cheeks. Shoving him aside, she started hitting buttons and levers until the ladder raised up from the supports. She turned when she felt a large hand come down on her shoulder and fingers start to swing the ladder around and upward. Grateful eyes looked to John briefly before Arty climbed up the side of the truck and then to the ladder as it rose towards the burning roof.

"Are you crazy John?" The other firefighter screamed at him. "You want to lose your job?"

"Shut the fuck up! Jake would give her life for any one of us and that small Doctor will give hers for Jake!"

The firefighter leaned up against the side of the truck in defeat, he knew what John had said was true. Many times, he turned to find Jake in the midst of saving someone's life without regards to her own life. Pulling his helmet on he went up the side of the truck and to the ladder, climbing up behind Artemis, he steadied her by holding on to the backs of her legs.

Justin and Billy watched Artemis going up the ladder; they both hung on to each other's hands, hoping that Artemis would get to Jake before it was too late. Billy knew how many firefighters lost their lives from smoke inhalation or worse. If Jake died, then a part of Artemis would go with her.

The ladder had come within a couple of feet of the roof before Artemis climbed the rest of the way up and scurried on to the unstable roof. Covering her nose and mouth with her hand, she searched with tear-filled eyes for her lover. Stumbling around the broken areas and flames shooting up around her unprotected legs she kept to the edge with the other firefighter right behind her. She tripped and fell over something, putting her hands out to catch her fall, one hand went through the roof the other came down on something soft. Opening her eyes wider to see brought a low keening sound to her ears. She lay across Jake's body that was halfway over the edge of the roof. Grabbing the collar of her turnout coat, she pulled her lover's face close to her own and cried out.

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Justin snapped frame after frame of Artemis pulling Jake into her arms and the other firefighter trying to help her get her off the roof. John swung the ladder to the area and ran up after them. Soon other firefighters joined in the rescue attempt while the press and onlookers below watched. Billy grabbed a gurney, oxygen tank and a large emergency box and headed to the side of the ladder truck. With John and the other firefighter lifting Jake up and over the side of the roof, Arty followed them down. The ladder tilted to where others could take Jake and place her lifeless body on the gurney. Arty pushed them aside, crawled onto her lover's body and straddled her hips to start CPR. Placing an oxygen mask over Jake's face, Billy pushed the gurney along with John to the ambulance. Justin recorded the scene on film right up until the doors closed and the ambulance left with a roaring siren and lights.

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"Come on Jake you can't die on me now!" Arty screamed as she did chest compressions. Billy ripped the turnout coat open and started an IV line in her arm, the whole time praying for Jake's life. When the ambulance pulled up to the doors of the ER, Arty refused to leave Jake, gurney and all was rushed to a room that contained an oxygen decompression tank. With the help of hospital personnel, they stripped Jake of her singed clothes, cleaned her wounds and then placed her into the chamber. An exhausted and burned Artemis sat in a chair beside it; she refused to leave even when her father came into the room followed by her mother, Justin and Billy.

"Baby girl, at least go take a shower and let your Dad take care of your burned hand." Her mother pleaded with her.

"I'm not leaving her." She said as tears flowed down her soot-covered cheeks. "She wouldn't leave if it was me in here." Sobs tore through her small body making her double over at the waist. Natasha collected her in her arms and rocked her until she calmed down enough to hear her.

"Justin and Billy will stay with her; I'm taking you to get cleaned up."

Billy pulled his Dad into the hallway with Justin following close behind, rubbing a hand across his face he looked into his Dad's worried green eyes.

"They were going to leave Jake on the roof. Not one of the other firefighters was going to help until Arty busted the chief in his face." Between Billy and Justin, Dr. Shields learned the entire story of what happened at the fire scene. When he left them, he was livid. The temper that Artemis had was nothing compared to her fathers. Billy and Justin stood in the hallway and watched hospital personnel jump out of his way.

"Well Billy boy, looks like the old man will be raising the roof. I'll come back later and check on small fry."

Billy watched as the enigma strode off down the hall, at times he looked up to Justin and others

he could smack the shit out of her. Today he was thankful that she had come out of hiding.

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Artemis stepped out of the shower; And Natasha held out a towel and wrapped her daughter in it. As soon as she touched her daughter, the floodgates opened and Artemis sunk into the warmth of her mother's arms.

"I can't...lose her Mama."

"You won't, she's not going anywhere." She rocked her the same way she did when she was younger. "You love her don't you?"

"More than anything." She sobbed. "We were sleeping when the call came in; I bullied her into letting me go with her." She looked into her mother's golden eyes. "What if I hadn't been there?" She asked.

"Let's not think about that right now, get dressed so that you can get back to your lover."

Green eyes widened at the word lover, Artemis's face turned a deep red and she dropped her eyes to the floor.

"Am I that transparent?"

"Only to me Baby girl, plus you have a huge hickey on your neck." She chuckled when Artemis tried to cover the spot up.

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Artemis and her mother walked back towards the room that Jake was in to be met halfway by a police officer. Artemis knew that something like this would happen but thought she would at least have a few hours with Jake.

"Shit! I should have known it."

"What Artemis, what's the cop doing here?"

Artemis turned to her mother and took her hand in hers. Looking at the floor, she mumbled what she had done.

"You think you broke his nose?" She started laughing so hard that tears fell from her eyes. "Don't worry Arty, me and you Dad will take care of this. Go see what the cop wants and I'll check on Jake."

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With her back turned to the officer, she felt the coldness of the handcuffs enclose her wrists. She flinched when the one touched the burns on her wrist and hand and heard him mumble an apology.

"Can I tell my Mama where you're taking me?"

When she walked into the room, they had taken Jake from the chamber and had her on a gurney ready to move her to another room. She stepped in between the nurses and looked down at her lover's pale face. Leaning forward she placed a soft kiss on her lips and then turned with tear filled eyes to her mother.

"Mama that assholes pressing charges against me. Can you call my lawyer and stay with Jake...Please."

"Don't worry Arty; we'll take care of everything." She glared at the arresting officer and watched as he flinched and looked to the floor. "Don't you hurt my baby." She growled at the fidgeting officer.

"No ma'am, I won't hurt her."

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Pale blue eyes opened to see a stark white ceiling and bright lights, a dim noise came from afar and confused her. Just moving her head, the slightest caused a terrible pounding.

"I'm not dead, too much pain for that." She mumbled from a dry throat.

"Nope, you're not dead. But you scared the life out of Arty." Natasha leaned forward with a cup of water in her hand. "Here take some small sips."

"Where's Arty?" Clouded blue eyes locked with golden. "Is she all right, I want to see her." Jake tried to get out of the bed, but strong hands held her in place.

"Not so fast Jake, She's all right...in jail but all right."

"Jail! What the hell is she doing in jail?" She tried once again to get up but Natasha waived a finger in her face.

"Don't you move, I'll tell you as soon as you settle down. You know you're not too big for me to turn over my knee." She chuckled at the sight of wide blue eyes. "Your former Chief had her arrested and pressed charges for assault, car jacking and endangerment."

"What the hell did the little twit do?" She groaned and let her head fall back on the pillow. "What did I let her do?"

"Don't blame yourself, Arty is a stubborn child and famous for getting into stuff that no one else

would even think of doing. You know she saved your life?"

Jake turned tear-filled eyes to Natasha, she silently pleaded with the older woman to continue, afraid that her voice would fail her.

"Lets see...first, she punched out your former chief, roughed up a couple of firefighters, took control of the ladder truck, went onto a burning roof, found you and had two of the guys haul you down the ladder to Billy who brought you here."

A low groan came from Jake, then small chuckles that burst forth in to all out laughter. She continued to laugh even with it hurting her lungs.

"Natasha why do you keep saying my former chief, did they finally fire him?"

"Ahh...nope, they fired you instead."

"SHIT! What did I do to the fates to deserve all this?"

"I don't think they had anything to do with this, I think you can thank the ignorant men in politics. Anyway, Arty should be released in the next day or so that is if her lawyer can get the charges dropped. You can call me Mama from now on hot stuff." She patted Jake's arm and left the room chuckling at the expression on the tall woman's face.

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Artemis was at the front counter waiting for her personal items to be released to her. It had been two days with her lawyer fighting with ever one to get her released in her own recognizance. She found it hard to believe that they would turn a mass murderer loose but kept her locked up. She had spoken with her mother about Jake's condition and couldn't wait to get to the hospital to see her lover.

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Natasha walked into Jake's room to find an empty bed and her gown thrown across it. Sighing with frustration, she turned on her heel and went in search of her husband. Not only did they have Arty to worry over, their new daughter was just as bad if not worse.

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Justine was waiting next to her car for Arty to come out, she had been wrangled into coming to the police station, and she knew that no matter what she couldn't get out of it. Unless she wanted to face the wraith of three very bad tempers. Now an hour later she watched as a blonde blur came rushing down the steps and flew into her arms.

"I missed you, where have you been?" She placed a soft kiss on the taller blonde's lips and hugged her tighter.

Jake grabbed her chest, she stood stock-still watching as her lover kissed the tall blonde. Pain turned to anger as Arty hugged the woman, Jake did the only thing she knew how to do, she ran.

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Artemis met her mother and father at the front doors of the hospital, they each gave her a look then looked at each other. Natasha shook her head sideways and grumbled.

"Why is it always the mama that has to break the bad news, make me the bad guy again."

"What's wrong...is it Jake...where is she?" Artemis rushed out while trying to get past them into the hospital.

"Hold on little twit, she escaped the hospital, we thought she was heading to the police station but since you're here with Justin?" She held her arms out to the side.

"She's gone...HOW?" She screeched at the top of her lungs. Planting her hands on her hips, she paced in front of her parents and Justine. "I have to find her, she shouldn't be out of bed yet."

"If you had it your way she'd never be out of bed." Justin said while backing away from a pissed off blonde. "Sorry small fry, I couldn't pass it up."

"What the hell is she talking about Natasha?" Dr. Shields asked.

"Nothing dear, just ignore the children and come with me."

"No more kids Mama, I know that look in your eye." Artemis pointed a finger at her mother.

"Like your Dad can get anything up at his age, please!"

"Hey! I can't believe you said that!" Dr. Shields said as he jogged after his wife. "I can get Viagra ya know."

"Yeah, yeah, promises promises." Natasha remarked.

"They'll never grow up will they?" Justin asked Artemis.

"Nope, will you take me to look for Jake?"

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One month later Artemis was sitting in Justin's small flat in Washington DC. She was staring at something on the TV but had no idea what or how long she had been watching the program. Besides working more hours than ever before, she did nothing but cry at the most inopportune moments. If she wasn't so young she could use the excuse of menopause for her mood swings.

The very sight of a tall woman with raven colored hair set her heart to pounding then to crash and burn when the woman didn't turn out to be Jake. She prayed for the chance just to speak with her lover, if only for a moment to put things to rest in her mind so she could move on with her life. Which she knew she couldn't do, her heart was lost to the tall firefighter along with a part of her that she never knew was missing until Jake disappeared causing her to ache deep inside.

"Small fry, either you eat or I hold you down and force the food in, take your pick?"

"Justin, I don't feel like eating, don't feel like doing anything including walking around DC."

"You need to do something, you look like shit, you don't sleep but a few hours a day and you work like a maniac. So I'm taking you out and wearing your skinny little ass off. So get up and move it!"

"You just want me to go with so I can hold all your camera lenses and act like a gopher."

"Damn, ya got me all figured out don't cha?"

"After all these years, your damn right I do. So where we going first and will you buy me one of those cheesy T-shirts with the monuments on the front?"

"I'll even get you a baseball cap that says Wash DC on it."

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Jake sat outside of the fire station reading the Washington Post, she didn't normally read the newspaper but had nothing better to do. She didn't socialize with her fellow firefighters nor anyone else. Her heart just wasn't in to human kindness, she had learned her lesson a month ago and had completely closed herself off to everything around her. After leaving West Virginia, she had come to DC looking for a job and found one within the first week. She was now second in command of the firehouse and didn't have to answer anyone else except for the big boss who pretty much left her alone. She was the most decorated firefighter they had at the station house and had the respect of all the others. After so many years of living in the place that she worked, she had finally gotten a small apartment close by for when she had her days off. She had only an hour before she would be able to go to her apartment for the next four days, not like she was looking forward to it. All she did was lay around and watch TV or the ceiling.

"Hey Jakequelin, you can head out now if you want." The chief said as he walked past her.

"OK, if you need me just call, I'll be at my apartment."

"Gotcha, later boss lady." The older man slapped her on the shoulder and went into the firehouse.

"What else do I have to do?" She grumbled under her breath and started walking the three blocks to her apartment. She stopped at a small café on the way, she was glad that the place opened early and she was able to get a cup of coffee and Danish before going home.

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"Why are we in the most boring place in DC? I mean the Pentagon parking lot is really nice but why are we here and why are we so far from the building?" Green eyes were narrowed and drilling into almost identical green.

"Because small fry, I need pictures of the Pentagon for an article, so where else would we park that monstrosity of a vehicle you drive?"

"Don't knock my Humvee, I like it." Pain filled her eyes at the memory of finding some of Jake's CD's on the seat when she went to collect it from the fire station.

"Sorry Arty, I didn't mean anything by it." She wrapped an arm around the smaller blonde and placed a kiss on top of her head. "You miss her don't you?"

"More than you can imagine. I just wish I knew why she left, she didn't even take her stuff with her." Tears filled her eyes and trailed down her cheeks. "I never told her that I loved her."

Justin wiped the tears from Arty's face, giving her a sad smile, she comforted her as best she could. "I wish I knew, I tried to find her but she just disappeared of the planet." She spun around taking Arty with her when the sound of a large plane vibrated the ground around them. "Ohh shit!" They screamed as the plane dropped from the sky and crashed into the Pentagon, Justin started snapping pictures as flames and debris flew into the air. Artemis stood frozen to the spot in shock, as to what was happening around her. Within minutes of the explosion, sirens pierced the air and firefighters, police, military personnel and others were swarming the area. Justin grabbed her hand and took her back to the Humvee, grabbing her bag along with the one that Artemis kept in the back filled with emergency medical supplies, they took off to try and help the survivors.

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Jake was brought off the couch by the phone ringing and the chief's voice yelling over the answering machine. Picking it up she felt her face pale as he told her about the Pentagon. Hanging up the phone, she grabbed her turnout coat and ran for the door. Getting into her truck, she tore past the fire station and headed directly to the Pentagon. She knew she would get there before her crew did and that would give her a chance to see where they were needed the most. A few minutes later, she pulled in to the parking lot and was nowhere prepared for the sight before her. Black smoke billowed from the carnage of the building, people staggering around injured as medical personnel tried to gather them in an area that was a safe distance away. Pulling her helmet on with the station emblem and her rank on the front, she ran to the nearest fire truck and spoke to the chief.

"My guys are on the way, where do you need us?" She asked while trying to catch her breath. After following his finger to an area, she nodded her head, pulled her cell phone from her pocket and called the switchboard to be transferred to the radio frequency in the truck. After a couple of

minutes speaking to the other chief, she hung up and ran towards the wreckage. Helping some of the injured out of the collapsed building, she handed them off to other helpers before going back in to find more.

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"Justin call Dad and see if he can pull some strings with the hospitals, we need more ambulances and help."

"Gotcha, you be careful and stay away from the building!" She grabbed the front of Arty's stained T-shirt, narrowed her eyes at her and refused to let go until she had a promise.

"OK, I...will...not...go...near...the...building." She dragged out and smiled. *Until you turn your back.*

Justin finished her phone call and turned around to find no sign of Artemis. Raising her camera up to her eye, she scanned the area looking for the small blond that was sure to give her grey hair. She almost dropped the camera when she came upon a tall figure pulling survivors out of the wreckage.

"Can't be." Getting closer and zooming in, she waited until the tall figure turned her way. A huge smile came to her face when the person removed the helmet and long dark hair flowed from underneath it. "I'll be god damned, the hero appears from the wreckage once again." Turning around she looked for Artemis but still couldn't find her.

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Hours went by, huge lights had been put up around the area, trucks still sprayed the Pentagon to keep flames from starting up again and Jake was amongst the rubble searching with a flashlight. She was tired, sore and starving. She had been none-stop since a little after nine that morning and it was now close to midnight. Crawling from the inside of the building she made her way over to where helpers had set up a rest station, all she really wanted was a cup of coffee to warm her self up with and maybe a few minutes to rest her weary body. Dropping to the ground, she removed her helmet and shook out her sweat soaked hair, closing her tired and burning eyes, she opened them when a hand came to rest on her shoulder. Tilting her head to the side, she looked up into weary green orbs and gulped at the sight of her lover.

"Arty?" She rasped from her dry throat.

"It is you." Arty dropped to her knees and enveloped Jake in her arms, tears poured from her eyes, sobs of relief quickly followed. "I've missed you so much."

Jake pushed her out of her arms and looked at her with cold eyes, she never thought she would hate someone like she did her former lover. Just looking at her caused pain to explode where her heart used to be. She never wanted to see Artemis again as long as she lived.

"I have to go." She quickly stood up and walked away from a sobbing Artemis.

"Go ahead run away again you fucking bitch!" Artemis screamed after her. "I hate you Jake!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Justin said from behind her. "How could you say that to her?"

"She just got up and left me!" Sobs were replaced with extreme anger, fire danced behind green eyes and before Justin could do anything, Artemis was running after Jake and tackling her to the ground.

"You little twit! She'll kill you!" She yelled after her and then ran to break up the wrestling match.

Artemis had Jake pinned to the ground, her fiery green eyes blazed into silvery blue, with her teeth gritted together she growled out her anger.

"You left me with not a word, no note, no phone call, nothing! Not even go fuck yourself, jump off a bridge or we made a mistake! I searched for you and when I finally find you all you can do is throw me to the side! Well fuck you Jake!"

Silvery blue eyes narrowed, a deep growl came from her chest as she flipped Arty over on to the ground.

"I saw you outside the police station. I was just your baby dyke trainer! In three days you left me for another woman, so don't get all high and mighty with me! I was in love with you and you ripped my heart out!"

"What woman? Jake for gods sake, there wasn't any other woman only you!"

"Excuse me but I don't think you two should be doing that here." Justin said from behind Jake. Jake turned her head and saw the woman who ruined her life, with a roar she leapt from Artemis and took Justin down, she was about to pummel the unsuspecting blonde when Arty jumped on her back. Sinking her teeth into Jake's ear, she kept her from hitting Justin.

"Let go Arty! By the Gods you're gonna rip my ear off!"

Justin watched from her trapped position as Arty fought for her. A huge grin came over her face and she couldn't help but start to chuckle. Arty let go of Jake's ear when she tasted blood in her mouth. Yelling into the wounded ear, she brought Jake to a stand still.

"Don't you hurt my sister!"

"What?"

"Hi I'm Justin Shields the black sheep of the family. By the way you're a gorgeous woman and you had better do right by small fry or I'll let her kick your ass."

Jake flipped Arty onto her back to lie next to Justin, she looked between the two woman and groaned when she saw the resemblance. Falling back on her rear, she buried her face in her hands.

"Son of a bitch I am so god damn stupid." She mumbled into her hands. "I never gave her a chance to explain."

"No you didn't." Arty whispered close to her bleeding ear, wrapping her arms around Jake's neck, she kissed her temple and let fresh tears flow from her eyes.

"I'm sorry Baby girl, so sorry." She wrapped her arms around Arty and sobbed into her chest. "Please forgive me."

Justin got up off the ground and placed a hand on her sister's shoulder.

"I'll see you later." Giving her a wink, she wandered off into the night.

"I'll forgive you Jake but you have to let me take care of your ear. You need sutures."

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Jake sat under the tent with other firefighters and personnel there to help. She was flinching each time Arty put a suture in her ear. At the call of her name, she looked up and smiled.

"I'm heading out Chief and you do the same." A tall rough looking woman said to her. "And if that's who I think it is you had better not screw up again or I'll kick your ass!"

Arty watched the woman walk away, jealousy filled her green eyes when she saw the swagger of the other firefighter.

"Who is that Jake?"

"A fellow firefighter, why?"

"Just curious, now hold still or I'll sew your ear to the side of your head. May do it any way if you don't stop staring at that woman."

"Do I hear some green eyed monster in your voice?"

"Yes now stop moving." Arty felt a large calloused hand take hers, she paused in her work to look down into pale blue eyes.

"I still love you Arty, I never stopped."

Green locked with blue, Artemis let all the walls she had erected over the last month fall to show her soul. "Take me home."

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"Uuhhmmm...Jake, furniture would really be a good idea." She waved her arms around the barren room and pointed to a folding lawn chair that sat in front of a very tiny TV set. "Monks have more in their rooms than what you have right here."

Jake's face blushed a deep red, she found the tips of her dirty boots an interesting contrast to the pale hard wood floor. Looking from below her dark bangs she offered a small smile.

"I kinda have a bed...OK so it's a mattress on the floor, but it has clean sheets and everything."

Arty walked to within two inches of her lover, gripping her turnout coat with both hands she pulled Jake down so that they were eye to eye.

"Admit it's hot stuff, you hate anything that has to do with going to a store and your hopeless when it comes to anything domestic." Giving her a little shake, she drilled fiery green eyes into wide blue. "I'm still pissed at you." With the sweep of her leg, she dropped Jake on to her back and pinned her to the floor. "Do you realize that for the last month I have cried my eyes out over you leaving me. My sister was ready to have me admitted into a nut ward, Mama tried to suffocate me by burning sage sticks in my house and Daddy bought a gun to shoot you with." Crawling up on to the tall firefighter, she straddled her hips, placed her hands on her shoulders and came nose to nose with her. "I went so far as to put up a dart board with your picture on it! I want an explanation and don't tell me it was just because you saw me with another woman."

Jake feared for her life, the thought of Artemis's father having a gun didn't scare her as much as a hotheaded little blonde did at that very moment. The fire in her eyes alone was enough to make a grown man piss himself and run screaming like a girl in to the night. Jake didn't know if she could tell Artemis all her fears and deep secrets, she had never told anyone about her past, not even John knew everything about her. She was afraid if her lover knew the real person, she would leave her in less than a heartbeat. Frantic blue eyes searched green and then looked to the ceiling hoping for it to open up and suck her out of the room.

"Jake?"

"Did your Daddy really buy a gun to shoot me?"

"Don't you change the subject; I want to know why you ran without even confronting me. I felt like I was just a fling that you could have your way with and then toss me aside."

Tears filled both women's eyes for different reasons; Jake took a deep breath and tried to will the tears away. She dredged up every bit of strength she had and started her story.

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"Jakequelin I forbid you to leave this house, now go to your room and I don't want to hear another word from you!" A tall dark man yelled at his eldest daughter. Stephen Papalogious was an intimidating man when sober; drunk he was down right scary. His hotheaded daughter at the age of seventeen was identical to him. They stood toe to toe and glared at each other, the smell of whiskey poured off their bodies and shot their eyes with red cobwebs. Jake had been caught stealing another bottle of whiskey from where her father had it hidden in the small cabinet in the living room. He could care less that she was drunk, it was the fact that it was his last bottle. As far as his two children came, he didn't care what happened to them and often wondered why he stuck around. Their mother had died years ago, she had been having an affair with another man and they been killed in a car accident leaving him with two kids that he never wanted in the first place. That night he had come home from the bar that he went to after work everyday, screamed and yelled at his young son and then burst into Jake's bedroom to find her smoking pot and drinking his whiskey. After smashing the bottle against the wall over her bed, he then bounced her off a wall and let her slide to the floor where he kicked her unmercifully in the ribs. That had been the last straw, Jake got up with a roar and tackled him, they punched and kicked each other until her much larger and stronger father punched her so hard that she flew backwards and lay on the floor bleeding from a broken nose.

"Fuck you asshole, I'll do what ever the hell I want!" She shoved him away from her and stormed out of the small apartment that had been her home for the last seventeen years. Running down the sidewalk she headed for the only place that she felt safe and at peace with everything around her, the small wooded area a half mile away. She often sat and watched the trickle of water in the creek bed move leaves and twigs past her unblinking eyes and dreamed of a place where no human existed except for herself. Now with the dark of night, she trudged her way down the embankment to the rock where she always sat. Time stopped while she was here and it wasn't until an eerie glow came to the sky that she realized how long she had been gone. On nights like this one, she usually waited an hour or so and then snuck back home knowing her father would have passed out already on the couch and she and her brother would be safe until the next night.

She loved her little brother more than anything and wished that she could just take him and leave. She knew that wasn't possible, they had no relatives and at her age she couldn't get a job paying enough for them to live somewhere. She looked back to the orange glow with curiosity and then realized what it was when sirens floated on the air. The loud honking noise of a fire truck caused her heart to stop for a second then beat a staccato in her chest. Running up the embankment at full speed, she sprinted the half mile to find the apartment building in flames. Firefighters ran around the trucks pulling hoses and raising the ladder to the roof of the three-story structure. Pushing past police officers and firefighters, she tried to get into the burning building. She had to get her brother out, punching a firefighter in the face she rushed into the flames. She screamed her brother's name as she took the stairs two at a time only to be turned back when the stairs in front of her fell away. Strong arms grabbed her from behind and wrestled with her as she was pulled from where she stood. It took three firefighters to get her outside and another one to get her into the back of a police car where she was locked in to prevent her return to the building.

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"That was the last time I ever saw my little brother, they found his remains right inside my bedroom door."

Artemis pulled the sobbing woman into her arms, tears fell from her own eyes with her lover's pain.

"It was my fault, Lucas was in my room playing with my lighter. The investigator said that he caught the bedspread on fire and it spread to the rest of my bedroom because of the whiskey."

"Ohh Gods Jake, you can't blame yourself."

"Yes I can, if I had been there the apartment building wouldn't have caught on fire and I wouldn't have lost Lucas. He depended on me and I let him down, everyone I have ever loved has left me."

It became clear for Artemis at that point what had gone through Jake's mind when she saw her with Justin. She thought she was being left again and the only thing she could do was run. Tilting Jake's face up to see her puffy eyes brought more tears to Artemis's.

"I would never leave you Jake. I never told you, but I love you more than life it's self. I take full blame for the pain you felt, I'm sorry." Leaning down she placed a soft kiss on trembling lips. "I should have told you that night we spent together how I felt but I was a chicken shit."

"You're not a chicken shit; you're the strongest person I know. I'm the chicken shit for not fighting for you; I should have knocked the hell out of Justin." Her eyes grew wide at the snarling sound coming from her lover. "On second thought I should have...crawled on my hands and knees and begged?"

"Hands and knees sounds really good, but I'd be the one begging." A huge smirk covered her lips. "That can wait until later, tonight I just want to hold you."

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Artemis did her best not to growl with hunger as she nuzzled her face into Jake's short crisp curls. She had woken before her lover and just couldn't help herself to Jake's tall muscular body. She had a month of making up to do and she was starting right now whether Jake knew it or not.

Jake was having the most vivid wet dream of her life; she could swear that she felt a warm wet tongue slipping between her nether lips. A low groan worked its way up from the bottom of her lungs to rumble at her throat almost sounding like a purr. Spreading her legs further apart, she slipped a hand downward to help ease the throbbing that was building at her center. When her hand was slapped away, she opened an eye and looked down at the hump under the blanket.

"What the hell?" She mumbled then threw her head back when a hot tongue pushed into her

center. "Oohh my Gods Arty!" Covering her eyes with her trembling hands, she moaned and whimpered with each lick of her lovers tongue. Her body felt like it was being struck with a bared extension cord; nerve endings fired off of each other and pushed her higher towards combustion. Every muscle in her body was taught as a bowstring, her back arched and a cry tore from her chest, lights danced behind her eyelids and a flame ripped through her body throwing her into darkness. Artemis felt her body shudder then quiet down, moving from under the blanket she crawled her way up to lay on top of her lover. Green eyes took in the slack expression on Jake's face, running her fingers across a sweat-dampened brow all the way to parted lips. She felt warm breath tickling her fingers, going nose to nose with Jake, she searched her face and became worried when blue eyes didn't open and she said not a word. Lifting one eyelid showed only white.

"I'll be damned." She whispered to no one and then her face broke out in a wicked grin. "Hot stuff is out for the count." Nuzzling her neck, she bit down and sucked the soft flesh between her lips. Releasing the flesh, she was happy to see a large dark bruise forming from her administrations. Continuing with her new favorite past time, she left a hickey necklace on her lover before blue eyes fluttered open and caught her leaving a mark on her upper breast.

Jake's voice rough from her scream she asked. "What happened and what are you doing to me?"

"I'm inspecting your body."

"Do I get one of those little inspector stickers when you're done?"

Twinkling green eyes lifted to see amused blue. "Ohh believe me hot stuff, I've left quite a few of them. Did you have a nice little nap?"

"Huh what...ohh shit! I passed out didn't I?" Her hands covered her face but couldn't cover the redness that crept from her chest upwards. "That has never happened before, hell what you did to me has never happened." She peeked from between her fingers. "Is the top of my head still here?"

"Is it supposed to be missing? Hey wait a minute here, what's never happened to you before?" A green eye narrowed as a brow rose skyward. "You can't mean?"

"Ohh I most definitely do mean." Jake wrapped her arms around Artemis and pulled her close to her. "You know how much I love you?"

"I hope a lot."

Jake captured her lips and poured every emotion she was feeling into that one kiss, when they parted Artemis shook her head to clear the pretty colors that were floating before her eyes.

"More than a lot baby girl."

"Gods I love you Jake, do that again and I'll build a shrine to you and sacrifice zingers in your

name daily."

The rest of the morning and afternoon were spent rolling around under the blankets and sacrificing junk food until the phone interrupted their attempt at a gold medal for the Olympic gymnastics floor routine.

"This had better be a life or death call!" Jake yelled over the phone.

"Depends on whether you have my baby girl with you."

"Hi Mama...she's ahhh...OWWW Arty that hurts...let go my tit! Ohh shit!" She handed the phone to her lover and buried her head under her pillow.

"Mama, how'd you know where I was? Ohh wait Justine narked on me didn't she?"

"Of course she did and now I'm going to let you go so you can punish tall dark and in pain some more. Before I go, you and Jake are to be here for supper tomorrow night. Have you two tried a 69 yet?"

"Mama! Geez!" She was about to say more when she heard hysterical laughter and then a click. "My Mama's a pervert, she asked if we've done a 69 yet?"

"That was next on my list of things to do."

Jake yelped when small fingers jabbed her in her ribs.

"I'm hungry and if I don't eat some real food like soon, you won't see any number for a month!"

Jake flew from the bed, stumbled out of the bedroom and started tearing the kitchen apart looking for real food to make for her lover. She wasn't about to go without ever again. Even if it meant running down the street to the nearest restaurant naked. Artemis chuckled at all the noise that was coming from the other room.

"Pussy whipped." She mumbled from where she lay hugging her lover's pillow to her chest.

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Sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee and eating stale donuts and zingers, Jake read the newspaper while Artemis did the crossword puzzle and was pissed that she couldn't cheat like she did with the numerous crossword books she had at home. Looking at her lover who was squinting at the paper, she pulled it away and saw what she was looking at.

"Houses, why are you looking at houses?"

"I'm tired of paying rent and having nothing to show for it. Plus I want to live closer to you."

Artemis lowered her eyes to the table, taking a deep breath she looked back up into questioning blue eyes.

"Would you consider moving back to Martinsburg and living with me." She held up a hand to delay Jake from commenting. "There's a job opening at the new firehouse near my house, I think you could get it without a problem. In fact, there's two job openings, one in your old firehouse. They need a chief in both places."

"What happened to professor Clump, and how did my record get so clean. I know that I had all kinds of bad stuff in it and when I applied here, I almost fell over when I saw all the commendations in it?"

Artemis's face turned a light pink; she cleared her throat before replying.

"Justin had been following you for quite some time and taking pictures of you for an article she was doing about professional woman. You know the saying a picture tells a thousand words? Well, she caught you doing the most heroic things that a firefighter could do. She took all her pictures to the big man and showed them to him. He cleaned up your record and fired your old Chief." She took the larger hands in hers and ran her fingertips across calluses. "He said if you could be found he would give you any job that you wanted along with what ever you wanted."

"What do you want?"

Green connected with blue for long moments of intense study, Artemis wanted only one thing, the tall firefighter who captured her heart the first time she saw blue eyes looking at her. She would give up her job at the hospital and follow her wherever she went.

"To be by your side for the rest of our lives and into eternity."

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Artemis sat next to her Mama at the kitchen table; they were going over the list that she had made up for the things they would need to pack for her and Jake's vacation. She heard the rumble of the Humvee pull into the garage and then cussing coming from just beyond the garage door. A grin crossed her face when she saw her Mama's eyebrow rose towards her hairline.

"What is she doing out there?" Natasha asked as she looked towards the door to the garage.

"You'll see, we have new rules here and she knows if she doesn't obey them, then I cut her off. No more of her filthy smoky clothes in the house."

"Sex as a leverage tool, I knew I taught you well." She smiled at her youngest one. "Has she been cut off yet?"

"Nope, I house broke her in five minutes."

Just then the door opened and breathless Jake stepped into the kitchen stark naked.

"Gods have mercy!" Natasha covered her eyes and elbowed Artemis when she chuckled at her mama's actions. "You could have warned me you little twit!"

"And miss all the fun, hell no!" She looked to her lover who was standing by the door with her hands planted on her hips.

"I better get half of the money you keep collecting for the tickets. I swear everyone this side of the Mason Dixon line has seen me naked!"

"Not on your life, how do you think we're paying for a trip to Greece, and not everyone has seen you naked, only the straight women I know."

"Uuhh huh and what about your sister?"

"Well, she's different." She cast wide green eyes to her Mama.

"Baby girl, I know all about Justin. Remember I'm a mama, we know everything. Just keep an eye on her when you guys go to the nude beaches, I don't want a phone call from Greece telling me that you're all in jail because she was taking liberties with her zoom lens...again."

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Justin lay on her stomach on a cliff over looking the beach, her camera fitted with a special lens; she aimed it at the two figures wrapped around each other lying where the water washed over their naked bodies. A huge grin came to her face when she heard her sister's voice cry out in release.

"Go ahead Arty, scare all the fish and beach the whales why don't ya." Using the last of the roll, she rolled to her feet and was on her way back to the small cottage that was behind the house that Jake and Artemis had rented for their 6-month stay in Greece. She would have some wonderful blackmail pictures as well as a complete photo journal of the Grecian islands and other parts of Europe for when they returned to the states. If she played her cards right, maybe her new Greek lover would go with her. Turning around when she heard a deep voice behind her, she dropped her head in defeat.

"You had better not show those to Mama or I'll let Arty kick your ass."

She looked over her shoulder to see both her sister and sister in-law with folder arms across their bare chests glaring at her.

"Uuhmm...I think I hear Mama calling me." She cupped an ear and grinned. "Yep she sure is!"

She high tailed it to her cottage and locked the door behind her.

Arty wrapped her arms around Jake's waist and leaned into her.

"Did you send Mama the pictures?"

"Sure did, just wait until Justin gets home. Mama will never let her live down the fact that she got shit faced, danced naked at beach party and ended up passed out spread eagle across a table with a bunch of old men sitting around her drinking wine."

"Come on hot stuff; let's see if I can get you passed out across a table."

The end

Flames of a Soul

By Larisa

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