

~ New Cuts, Old Wounds ~

by Shea K.

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General warning: eventually there's talk of child abuse and there is some mild violence and lots of extreme language. I'm sure you know there will be a sexual relationship between two women, but if you don't know this is me warning you. There will be a sexual relationship between two women in this story. Get out while you still can!

Special thanks to my betas, RevSrVixena and Ken-zero.

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Contact the lunatic at: starving.lunatic@gmail.com and lemme know what you think of the story. Thanks and enjoy.

1: Rebirth

The spring was back, bringing warmth and promise along with it. For the first time in a long time, Dane Wolfe-or Danny as she was called more often than not now-found that she could feel that vibe. For the first time, she could understand why people enjoyed the spring. It was simply delightful. The renewed energy, as if new breath was breathed into everything. There was a sparkle and shine to the whole world as if everything was touched by a fond, loving hand. Love surged through everything and floated from all things. She could even feel that sparkle flow through her and there was no question to her why that was.

She could hardly believe that it had been a year since she first met Nicole Cardell. Her life had changed so much since then and she would not change anything about it. No, she would not even change her ill-fated decision to leave Nicole a few months ago, despite all of the pain it caused. That decision taught her and Nicole just how much they meant to each other. It made them stronger, individually and as a couple. And, now, spring brought them more enthusiasm and energy.

Today they had decided that they would use that vigor and take a step forward as a couple: Nicole was going to introduce Danny to her mother's side of her family. Dane was nervous, mostly because Nicole's mother, Kate, still detested her. She imagined that the rest of Kate's

family would be the same. After all, they had raised Kate, so she had to get her personality from somewhere.

"Come on, Danny, you can't keep pretending that you forgot something. We need to go now," Nicole ordered, standing by the front door, but looking into the room off to the right. *I just got her out of the living room, searching for nothing and now I have to deal with this.* She shook her head and sighed. *And I thought the fact that I got her downstairs in decent clothes would be the most difficult thing today. Shows how much I know.*

Danny had fled into the den after Nicole had managed to get her out of the living, claiming that she forgot something. That was the same excuse she used when she sneaked into the living room. Nicole could not imagine what might be in the den that her girlfriend needed. Impatient green eyes glanced down at her watch and a foot covered in a stylish golden-rod pump tapped against the floor.

"I really forgot something this time!" Dane insisted.

"Oh, yeah? What did you forget?" Nicole asked skeptically.

Just as the question left her mouth, Danny hobbled out of the room holding her guitar across her back. Nicole arched a perfectly curved auburn eyebrow, not sure why her lover was taking her guitar with her. The only time that Danny left the house with the guitar was to go teach her music lessons.

"Danny...?" Nicole's face said much more than anything else.

"Trust me, it's a good ice breaker. If all else fails, I play a few chords on my guitar and I'm pretty sure your family won't hate me so completely and totally like Kathleen does," Dane answered with a confident smile.

Nicole's agitated expression softened and she reached out a gentle hand to put on Danny's shoulder. "You won't need to do that, Danny. You're the kindest and sweetest woman on the planet. My family will see that," she tried to assure the younger woman, caressing Dane's arm a little to help put her at ease.

Dane glanced down at Nicole with just about the most dubious look her grey eyes could muster. "Have you been missing these last few months? Your mother hates my guts and this is her family. I would like someone with your similar genetic makeup to like me," she replied. Never in her life had others opinions mattered so much to her until she started dating Nicole. It was a little daunting, but she was going to try her best because she was certain it would help their relationship.

"Daddy likes you," Nicole reminded her.

"No, he tolerates me. There's a difference and you know it. Chem, just let me bring the guitar. It'll make me feel better," Dane replied, somewhat pleading. She figured her pet name for Nicole would help put her over the top.

Nicole sighed, but conceded with a slight nod. Dane grinned and took that as a great excuse to embrace her lover. Giggling, Nicole returned the embrace before stepping up a little to give Danny a tender kiss on the lips. Dane took that as an invitation to fondle Nicole, who was wearing a flowing, deep yellow sundress, so it made it easier for Dane to touch her bare skin. Nicole was not surprised when she felt knowing fingers snake underneath the dress and she had to suppress a shiver. She pulled away and shook a scolding finger at Danny.

"We don't have time for this, baby. We need to get moving right now," Nicole stated in a stern tone.

"But, you look so hot!" Danny complained, reaching out and brushing her lover's deep red hair from her shoulder. She loved seeing Nicole in dresses. The cloth always seemed to hug every inch of her luscious form in a way that made Danny close to envious of the fabric. Sleek, toned legs that went on for days made her almost drool whenever she thought about them and whenever she saw them all she wanted to do was touch. Plus, Nicole always wore dresses that seemed to be made just to tease Dane's senses-at least Dane's mind anyway.

"Yes, but I'll look just as hot when we get back home. Right now, we need to leave because my grandmother will not be happy if we're late for Easter dinner," Nicole said, knowing that would get her lover moving because Danny was not trying to displease any of the family even before they met her.

Dane practically flew out of the door, which was quite a feat considering the fact that her right leg was lame and she had a limp. Nicole had to double check to make sure her lover had not gone *through* it. By the time Nicole was sure the front door was all right, Danny was in the car and had the nerve to honk the horn for her. Nicole chuckled as she locked the door and went to the car, sliding into the driver's seat.

"You know, if you only sat on this side, you'd be halfway there by now," the auburn-haired woman teased as she hit the button to start the engine.

Dane stuck her tongue out at her girlfriend. A year ago, such behavior would have been beyond unheard of for her, but Nicole brought it out of her. She did not mind it one bit. It felt freeing. Being with Nicole made her feel so right and at peace with herself. She never wanted to let that feeling go.

"You have been cleared to drive if I recall," Nicole said as she pulled out of the driveway.

"But, I so much enjoy having a chauffeur," Dane remarked with a smile.

Nicole snorted. "Stop smiling at me like that. It makes it so damn hard to mad at you for being a smart ass."

The grin that Dane sported made it even harder to be upset with her. She did not give Nicole much time to be even pretend-angry with her. After turning on some classic jazz, Dane leaned over and took Nicole's right hand into both of hers. She gently caressed Nicole's hand with her own and smiled fondly at the redhead.

"I really want your family to like me," Danny confessed as she held on tightly to her lover's hand. She knew how much family meant to Nicole and was certain that if she could make a good impression on half of Nicole's family, then it would help their relationship somehow. She wanted to minimize any problems that she could cause between Nicole and her family. It was bad enough that she was a source of trouble between Nicole and Kathleen. It bothered Danny because she knew how close the mother and daughter were. She hated the thought being a reason for them to drift apart and she did not want to do that with Nicole and anyone else in her family.

"Danny, I promise, they will like you. My mother's family is not that scary," Nicole assured her.

"How can they not be? They raised your mother!" Dane pointed out with a laugh.

Nicole chuckled too, even though she felt somewhat bad for doing it. Her mother had been extra-hard on Danny since the day they met. Nothing that Dane did was good enough for Kate's little girl-as far as Kate was concerned anyway. Of course, Nicole begged to differ, not that it ever changed her mother's mind. Her mother was just set on making Danny's life difficult and needed little prompting to do so.

"Danny, you know I would never knowingly subject you to anything bad," Nicole said, glancing over at her girlfriend to make sure that Danny believed her.

"What? Every freaking Saturday you do that!" Dane countered, teasing a bit, even though she honestly felt like her Saturday mornings were a form of torture.

Clicking her tongue, the redhead shook her head. "Baby, physical therapy does not count."

Grey eyes narrowed, showing that Dane believed it very much did count. She had been in physical therapy for four months now, working on her injured hand, knee, and leg. It was working wonders for her hand, which meant a lot to Danny since she was musician. Her leg was not coming along as quickly, but Nicole told her to be patient and it would work out, but Danny hated going and swore up and down that her therapist was a sadist. Having sat in on several sessions, Nicole knew that her lover was very much exaggerating.

"Baby, being serious, you do know I would never knowingly subject you to something bad or put you in a bad situation, right?" Nicole asked, worry coloring her emerald eyes.

Dane smiled a little and kissed her lover's knuckles. "Of course I know that, Chem. I'm just nervous and that's why I'm being so difficult. I'm sorry for acting like this."

"I understand why you are, but I promise you, my family is not that bad. In fact, they're pretty normal."

Little did Nicole know, but hearing that they were "pretty normal" did not help Danny in feeling better. For Dane, normal meant against same-sex relationships, like Kate. Normal also meant disliking the fact that Dane was pretty much unemployed, lacked a college education, and still dressed like a teenage bum more often than not. Well, at least they would not see her "bum-gear," as she now thought of her casual wear.

Danny had dressed in her Sunday best, as she jokingly referred to it. Nicole had to help her pick it out, but she was dressed in black slacks, dark blue sweater vest, and a sky blue shirt underneath. She felt a bit preppy, but Nicole liked the outfit and how she looked in it. Nicole liking something was just about the easiest way to get Dane to do something, except go to physical therapy. Added to that, Danny was not completely uncomfortable in the clothing, having dressed in such a way a few times when going out with her lover.

Dane tried to take her mind off of things by staring out of the window. A smile worked its way on her face as she saw the greens of the season arriving, reminding her again that she had known Nicole for a year. Emerald eyes took note of the smile.

"What're you smiling at, Big Dog?" Nicole inquired curiously, playfully taunting Danny with one of her nicknames.

"Just thinking about how it's been a hell of a year," Dane answered.

Nicole nodded in agreement. "It certainly has. I mean, this time last year I was just realizing what a bastard Tyler was and then you drifted into my life. Danny..." It took her a moment to get herself together and she squeezed the hand that was still holding onto hers. "Danny, I want you to know that living with you has been one of the best times of my life. You have improved my life in so many ways. I'm happy you're here."

Grey eyes seemed to brighten thanks to that news. "Me too, angel. Being with you is the best time of my life."

Nicole smiled, loving it when her sweetheart got so mushy. It touched her because she knew that Danny was sincere and that was not something that she was used to from a lover. Her honesty and openness were two of the many things that made Danny special to Nicole. She hoped that Danny remained that way.

The ride was not too long, a little over thirty minutes. Danny was shocked when they pulled into a middle class neighborhood, not too different from their own neighborhood. Danny thought that Kate's parents would live in a gated community like Kate and Raymond did and thought that the house would be massive, but quickly found out that was not the case.

Nicole pointed out the house as she parked across the street from it. Dane stared at it from across the way and she could hardly believe her eyes. The music teacher had to resist the urge to say, "this is it?" She could not believe that Nicole's grandparents lived in a modest sized, middle-class house. There were even toys on the front lawn.

"Chem, are you sure this is the place?" Dane asked, a raven-colored eyebrow arched high in disbelief as she exited the car.

The redhead giggled as she got out. "I think I know how to get to my grandparents' house, baby. Just like most people, my grandparents are regular people and they have a regular house in a regular neighborhood. Just because my mom is rich doesn't mean her parents are."

Dane nodded as if she understood, but she really did not. "Sorry, Chem, but you know where I'm from riches are inherited, so I just assumed..."

Nicole shook her head, her auburn locks swaying a little. Instead of correcting her lover, she wrapped her arm around Dane's and led the confused musician into the front yard. Dane looked around, as if she was suspecting everything to change at any moment. Her expectations were not met as they made it to the front door and everything was still as ordinary as they were before.

"Hello?" Nicole called into the house as she opened the door. Dane was not surprised that the door was not locked, often seeing that people did not lock their doors when they expected a lot of company. It was something that she never noticed until she started going places with Nicole.

"Nikki!" a couple of childish voices called.

Dane was surprised when two little kids charged into the small foyer, hugging Nicole around the waist. Dane correctly guessed that these were Nicole's cousins. Nicole had explained to Dane that on her mother's side she was the oldest of her cousins by a decade. This was because her mother was the oldest of three girls, also by a decade.

Nicole hugged the children back before directing their attention to Dane. "Guys, I would like you to meet my friend, Danny. Danny, these are my cousins I told you about, Sabrina and Eddie," she introduced them.

"Pleased to meet you," Dane said, extending her hand to both children. Thanks to some prep time Dane knew that Sabrina was eight and had dreams of being a dancer. She had the biggest brown eyes, just like Nicole swore. Dane could not believe it, but she thought the little girl was cute as a button and she looked downright adorable in her powder blue dress.

"I'm gonna be ten," Eddie informed Dane, shaking her hand with more force than necessary. She expected that because Nicole told her that Eddie wanted to be like his older cousin, Philip, who was an athlete with a very strong hand shake, among other things.

"That's amazing," Dane said, as if she was really impressed. She was more impressed with his deep dimples and ruffled dark brown hair. He looked very much like a cherub and he was way too cute in his little black suit, which was complete with a vest and dark red tie.

"You're really tall," Sabrina commented with awe in her voice, staring up at Dane.

The musician shrugged and smiled a bit, not too sure what else to do. She ran her hair through her unruly ebony hair and glanced off to the side. Nicole smiled because her lover seemed shy. She could not help wrapping her arms around Dane's arm.

"Excuse me, guys. I want to introduce Danny to Grandma and Papa," Nicole explained to her young cousins.

"Okay," the pair agreed and charged off.

"Just to warn you, they're going to bug you later. I'm surprised they didn't have their little sidekick with them. Wayne is adorable, but he's probably sleeping. He takes a million naps during the day. It drives my aunt Katrina insane," Nicole informed her lover.

Dane nodded for lack of a better thing to do. Mentally, she was matching the names with things that Nicole already told her. Wayne was the youngest of the cousins, coming in at four years old. Nicole suspected that he was a vampire from the way her aunt spoke about his sleeping habits; Dane had laughed long and hard when Nicole told her that because she just pictured a tiny four-year-old with fangs.

Katrina was Nicole's youngest aunt and Kate's baby sister. Dane was not too stunned to find out that Nicole and her aunt were very close in age. Katrina was in her early thirties and the three younger children were hers. She recollected that Nicole said Katrina was in advertising, but she doubted that would come up in a conversation, so she tried to think of some other relevant information. Dane recalled that Katrina was married, but she could not remember the husband's name. Shaking it off, she figured it was not a big deal since she was about to meet him anyway.

It did not even register to Dane's mind that Nicole was leading her deeper into the house. It was a straight run from the front door to where they needed to go. Sounds of conversation floated through the house, but it seemed like garbled noise to Dane. Things only got worse when they got to the kitchen and she spotted an elderly woman sitting at a table in the middle of the room. She knew that was Nicole's grandmother and-worse still-she appeared to be speaking to one of Nicole's aunts.

Dane anxiously tugged at the guitar strapped across her back while her eyes seemed to scan the room as if she was seeking an escape route. Nicole took hold of her arm and continued to lead her. Before Dane could process the level of fear that she was feeling, she standing in front of the two women.

"Hi, Grandma. Hi, Auntie," Nicole said, leaning down to give her grandmother a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She then did the same with her aunt.

"Hey, sweet-pea, glad you could make it," her grandmother said with a smile. Dane had expected an accent for some reason, even though Nicole explained that her grandparents both lacked accents. In fact, her grandparents did not even speak Spanish, despite their Puerto-Rican ancestry. Nicole joked that her grandparents ancestors were probably rolling over in their graves because her grandparents were Puerto-Rican by blood and that was about it.

"You know I wouldn't miss it for the world. Last year was a fluke, I assure you," Nicole replied. Last year was more like turmoil and she just could not bring herself to show up last year with Tyler on her arm. She knew that he would have ruined the gathering and the holiday for everyone.

Her grandmother smiled more and patted Nicole's arm. "I know you were under a lot of stress. Now, who is this young lady with you?" the elderly woman inquired, eyeing Dane.

The guitarist resisted the urge to gulp when twin sets of brown eyes turned to her. She wanted to study her feet or find an interesting tile, but she knew that would not help her. She needed to appear strong and confident, even though she was so nervous that she would not be surprised if her teeth started chattering. Her hand was trembling, aching to go through her hair, but she managed to keep it at her side and ready for when she had to shake hands.

"Grandma, Aunt Kimber, I would like you to meet my girlfriend, Danny Wolfe," Nicole introduced them with a proud smile on her face. "Danny, this is my grandmother, Alicia Torrez and my aunt Kimber Johnson."

"Pleased to meet you. Nick has told me so much about you both," Dane said, shaking both women's hands. She hoped it did not sound like she rehearsed those lines, even though she had done just that. Mentally, she patted herself on the back for not stammering or messing it up, though.

"Nice to meet you too, Danny. We've heard a little about you too," Kimber commented, an amused smirk on her face.

And that made Danny gulp. She had a deep inkling that they heard about her more from Kate than from Nicole. Looking at them, she could almost see Kate looking back at her, looking down on her. In fact, Dane could see the strong resemblance between Kate, her sister, and her mother. The brown eyes, the similar facial structures, and full lips matched up almost perfectly between the three women. Kimber's hair was longer and appeared more of a dark brown than a black like Kate's hair. Alicia might have had black hair, but it was all white now.

Danny hoped that the resemblance was only skin deep. Despite the fact that Nicole had tried to assure her everything would be fine, seeing that everyone looked like Kate just made her feel a sense of dread. Not only did they all look alike, but their names were similar, so in her nervous mind that meant they probably all thought alike. *Great, now one side of her whole family is going to hate my guts.*

"Good things I hope," Dane muttered, sincere in that.

"Some," Alicia replied, glancing at her granddaughter. "Make sure you introduce her to Papa quickly, okay, Nikki?" she instructed Nicole, patting her on the arm again.

"I was going to. I just wanted her to meet you first," Nicole answered.

"Okay, but you know that old man will complain if he thinks you've forgotten him," Alicia commented with an amused smile. She then turned her attention back to Danny, who was looking down and off to the side because she was not sure what else to do. The older woman laughed a little. "You've certainly picked yourself a pretty one, sweet-pea," she remarked, making her granddaughter blush.

"Grandma!" Nicole pretended to huff, glaring at the elderly woman.

Dane was a bit surprised by that. She did not expect Alicia to be so comfortable with Nicole being in a same-sex relationship. Alicia seemed totally fine with everything; she had not even blinked when Nicole said the word "girlfriend." She considered that Kate might have gotten her attitude about same-sex couples from her father then and she was about to find out.

"Come on, you. You don't want to hang around these two old ladies anyway," Nicole said to her lover, taking Dane by the hand and leading her out of the kitchen. They turned around, back in the direction that they came. Going into the living room, where an elderly man was sitting in an armchair and there were three other guys on the couch. They were focused on the television.

Nicole glanced over to see what they were watching. She was not surprised to see an old football game on TV. Her grandfather was a football fanatic and was grateful that two out of his three sons-in-law were the same. Raymond watched football, but not to the same degree as the others.

"Papa, could you pause that for a second?" Nicole requested in a sweet tone.

"What?" the elderly man said and then he turned to see Nicole standing before him. A grin spread across his face. "Nikki! I'm so happy to see you!"

Nicole's grandfather slowly climbed to his feet and wrapped Nicole into a tight embrace. Dane took a moment to examine the old guy. She doubted that he was ever tall, but since he was in his seventies now, he was probably a bit smaller than he was in his heyday. Like his wife, he had a head of white hair, but his was much shorter than hers. His tan skin was darker than his wife's too. His dark brown eyes glanced her way, but Dane did not feel as nervous as she did before.

"Who's this with you, Nikki girl?" her grandfather inquired.

"Papa, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Danny Wolfe," Nicole replied. "Danny, this is my grandfather Benito Torrez."

"Nice to meet you, sir," Dane said, holding out of her hand to shake his. He had a strong grip and hurt her hand a little when he shook it. She suspected that was done on purpose if the glint in his eyes meant anything. *Okay, so maybe Kathleen does get her attitude from him...or he could've just been warning me that he could break my head if I piss him off.*

"And these guys are my uncles," Nicole said, motioning to her aunts husbands. "This is Jarred. He's Kimber's husband," she motioned to a muscular, well-dressed, middle-aged black man. He leaned over and shook Dane's hand. Nicole then motioned to the man next to Jarred. "This is

Eduardo. He's Katrina's husband," she said. The Hispanic male with very messy, short black hair and wearing a midnight blue suit leaned over next to shake Dane's hand. Nicole then turned her attention to the last one. "And this is my cousin, Philip. He's Jarred and Kimber's son," she said, motioning to the teenager.

"Nice to meet you," Dane informed all three men, shaking Philip's hand. He was just as well dressed as the other men, wearing a fine tan suit. Dane guessed that the family took Easter dinner seriously.

"Philip's got an older sister, Jodie, somewhere around here," Nicole added, glancing around in case she spotted the other teenager.

"Probably in the back, trying to get Papa's ancient computer running again," Philip commented, nodding in the direction of their grandfather's office.

Nicole chuckled a bit and pulled Danny away to introduce her to Jodie. The teenage girl did not seem too interested in meeting Nicole's lover and she hardly turned her attention away from the old computer that she was inspecting. Dane did not take it personally as Nicole warned her that Jodie tended to be a bit antisocial, especially compared to the rest of their family.

With all of the introductions made, Nicole left Danny to fend for herself. Dane did not mind, thinking that she might be able ease her way into things and carefully feel the family out without making a complete jackass out of herself. Besides, she would rather Nicole enjoy her family instead of trying to babysit her. She made her way back to the living room, figuring watching television with the guys would be easier than socializing with the women. Football was not really her cup of tea, but she assumed it would be better than gossiping in the kitchen, where they probably wanted to talk about her anyway. Besides, when Kate finally arrived, Dane was sure that the last place the powerful lawyer would be was watching a football game from twenty years ago.

Dane did not socialize with the guys, mostly because she did not know enough about football to chime in the conversation they already had going on. Her saving grace came in the form of Sabrina and Eddie. They trotted over to her, wanting to know what was in the pack that she was carrying. Dane was all too happy to show them her guitar. Once they saw it, of course they wanted to know if she could play it.

"I play a little," Danny answered modestly.

"Play it, play it!" Eddie commanded her with an eager grin.

Danny ran her hand through her hair, not sure if she should. It could be seen as a disruption to game time. Glancing over at the adult men in the room, she could tell that they were a little curious about her playing too. She played a short melody, earning looks of awe from her small audience. After the short concert, Eddie and Sabrina decided that Danny was "cool" and she was going to hang out with them for the day. They took her by the wrist and pulled her off with them. No one stopped them and Danny did not resist.

Nicole laughed some when she noticed that Danny was the "hostage" of her two younger cousins. She did not move to help Danny, especially since the musician did not seem bothered by them. The children dragged Dane out into the backyard, wanting her to see their puppy. They had a small golden retriever puppy, who was overly friendly, but Danny did not mind all of the puppy kisses that she was given.

Laughter from the backyard filtered into the house, so every now and then an adult had to go look outside. What they usually saw were the kids and the dog chasing Danny, who did not seem to be trying hard to get away. Nicole smiled from the sight whenever she glanced in the backyard.

When Kate and Raymond arrived, the couple was scolded by Alicia for being late. They cried work as their defense, but she would hear none of that. When the matriarch was done reprimanding the late couple, the kids were called in, so that they could all do a family tradition. Everyone was expected to paint Easter eggs. They gathered in the kitchen and Dane tried to move close to Nicole, but Eddie and Sabrina were not ready to let go of their new friend.

"Come down here with us!" Eddie ordered while Sabrina yanked Danny down to the end of the table next to their mother.

"Guys, don't pull on Danny like that," Katrina gently scolded her children. There was a warning look in her warm, chocolate eyes. She, like her other sisters, was a short brunette. They all seemed like clones of Alicia.

Dane shot the mother a grateful smile, even though she did not mind the overzealous children. She just wanted to show that she appreciated the effort from Katrina, whom she noticed had been watching her closely all day. She knew it was because she was hanging out with Katrina's children, so she understood. She was thankful that the concerned mother had not said anything to her, silently giving her a chance.

"Okay, guys, I need you to take it easy on me. I've never made Easter eggs before," Dane informed her two, young companions. That news not only shocked the children, but the adults too. Nicole was the only one that was not surprised that her lover had never made Easter eggs. She doubted that Danny had much of a childhood at all.

"You never made 'em before?" Sabrina asked as if she thought that was totally and utterly impossible. Her large, sienna eyes were mixed with disbelief and sorrow.

"No, I never did," Danny answered.

"You ever been on an Easter egg hunt?" Eddie asked.

"I've seen 'em before," Danny replied. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Nicole looking at her. She knew that she was going to have to explain that one later. A hand went through her short sable locks and then she turned her attention back to the children.

"We'll show you how, Danny!" Sabrina promised.

That declaration got a large grin from the musician. "Thank you."

Making Easter eggs proved to be quite an enjoyable experience. Nicole had to help Danny a little because Eddie and Sabrina were not the best of teachers; not to mention they were having trouble with their own eggs. After everyone was done, they went around and showed what they had done to the eggs. Dane was a little surprised that even Kate and Raymond participated and enjoyed the activity. They were even proud to display their creations.

"My Honest Abe egg," Raymond remarked with a laugh, showing his egg that looked like Abraham Lincoln...if you squinted...and had an eye infection...and did not know what the sixteenth president looked like. He would readily admit that after many years of participating in the family egg painting tradition, he never got any better, but it was fine.

"I think Danny's egg looks more like Honest Abe than yours," Jarred remarked, nodding toward Dane's creation. All attention turned to her.

"Dad, are you blind? That's not Lincoln," Philip commented, motioning to the egg in Danny's hands.

"Then who is it?" Kimber inquired, siding with her husband.

"A blind man could tell that's only one of the rock gods-Slash," Philip declared.

Dane shot the young man an impressed look. "It is Slash!" she said with a smile. She guessed that she did pretty good for her first time if at least one person knew who the egg was.

That moment helped Dane get to know Philip because after that, they started talking about rock music. He was very interested in rock music and confessed to her that he was trying to learn the guitar. He had wanted to ask her for advice when she was playing before, but the kids were occupying her time then. Danny walked off to talk to him and Jarred followed, curious as to how much lessons would cost and things like that.

"What do you think of her so far, Grandma?" Nicole asked Alicia once Dane was away from them. She had already checked with her grandmother a couple of times that day on Alicia's opinion of her sweetheart, but she just wanted to make sure everything remained positive.

"She seems very nice. Polite, trying to get along with everyone. It was great that she jumped right in on the egg painting, even though she's never done it before. You clearly like her and she clearly likes you, which is a plus," Alicia commented.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nicole inquired, forehead wrinkled a bit in confusion.

"Your grandmother means that in the past when you've brought partners here, you seemed into them, but they did not seem so into you," Kimber explained.

"Danny does seem very interested in you and in your family, which is also good. She's also happy to mingle with the children. In the past, your partners act like they're too good for the kids. Sometimes, they acted like they were too good for us altogether," Alicia added.

Nicole nodded and smiled. "Danny was surprised that you lived in this type of house, but not in a negative way like others have been. She's not as materialistic as the people I've been with before."

"She even jumped right into our little tradition, which isn't something many of your partners have done in the past, Nikki. I can't believe she's never painted Easter eggs," Katrina commented, shaking her head incredulously.

Nicole sighed a bit. "Danny's had a very difficult life, but she's sweet and kind and understanding."

"We also hear she's the spawn of Satan, who has ruined your life," Kimber said with a light laugh, looking off in the direction that her elder sister walked off not too long ago.

"Mommy's never going to forgive Danny for talking me into going back to school," Nicole said, shaking her head.

"How is school?" her grandmother asked with great interest in her voice. Her two daughters nodded, also interested in the new chapter in Nikki's life.

A spark went through green eyes and a bright, satisfied grin settled onto Nicole's face. "I love it! I have a month to go before I'm finished with my first semester. I love the labs and the classes. The only thing that bothers me is that it takes away from my time with Danny, but she's okay with it. She just keeps pushing me to stay the course and get my degree."

"Sounds like a keeper to me," Alicia stated with a smile.

"Me too, but don't tell Mommy that," Nicole said with a grin.

"Don't tell me what?" Kate asked, coming back into the kitchen after having left to use the bathroom.

"We think Nikki should just marry Danny and call it a day," Kimber proclaimed, teasing her older sister.

Kate frowned. "Nikki will be doing nothing of the sort. Danny is just a passing fancy, isn't she?" she seriously demanded, eyeing her daughter.

"No, ma'am," Nicole replied, continuing to grin. "I told you, Mommy, Danny is the love of my life. You really should get use to her being around."

"Katie, you should let Nikki live her life. Besides, Danny is very different from anyone else Nikki has ever brought over here. She fits in and doesn't act snobbish like most of Nikki's partners. Think about giving Danny a chance," Alicia urged her eldest daughter.

"I'm not giving her a chance, Mom. She's out to ruin Nikki's life and Nikki is all too happy to let her. As her mother, I have to make sure that Nikki does the right thing and lives her life as best she can," Kate argued.

"That's a lot of bull," Kimber chimed in and Katrina nodded.

"You're just trying to control Nikki. You're always trying to do that. You always want things to go your way and if they don't then everyone else on the planet is wrong and you think you're right. Nikki's a grown woman, Kate. Leave her alone and let her make her own decisions. Besides, Danny is by far the best girlfriend or boyfriend we've met from Nikki and we haven't even been around her that long," Katrina stated soundly.

"You three don't know Danny, so don't try to defend her," Kate replied sharply.

"Can we not argue about this? It's been so long since we've all been together. Let's just enjoy each other and save the arguing for when it's been less than a whole year since we've last seen each other," Nicole requested.

The older women all agreed with that, so there was no more discussing Danny...at least while Kate was around. The rest of the day went smoothly and they sat down for a huge family dinner in the evening. Nicole and Dane were not used to eating so early, but that did not stop them from pulling up to the table like everyone else.

"All right, let's say grace and then dig in," Benito declared with a smile.

Dane watched as the family all joined hands. She copied them, taking Nicole's hand in hers and also Sabrina's hand since the child was sitting next to her. Dane was a bit surprised that the family seriously said grace. Nicole never seemed particularly religious and neither did Kate, so this was the first time that she saw a hint of religion from them. It then occurred to her that Nicole's family-at least her mother's side-was Catholic. Now, some of the stories Nicole told her about her childhood made sense, especially stories about her getting in trouble at church.

Dinner was full of conversation with everyone speaking, even the youngest among them-Wayne. The toddler actually tried to dominate the conversation, which everyone seemed to think was cute-Dane included. But, in between Wayne's four-year-old rambling, Danny was able to learn more about the family and the family was able to learn more about Danny. The best thing about it was that Nicole could tell her lover was having a good time and she could also tell that her family genuinely liked Dane.

It was a first for Nicole's whole family to all like someone that she brought to a family function. Usually, only a particular group in her family liked someone she brought-if anyone liked the person at all anyway. Perhaps her uncles would like her partner, then her aunts would like

another partner, and on rare occasions her grandparents might like one. The children never liked her lovers and tended to complain before Nicole and her lover were even gone. But, this time, everyone seemed to find something that they enjoyed about Danny. At the end of the night, her grandmother and grandfather ordered her to keep Danny happy because "that one is a keeper."

"I'm so glad you like her, Grandma and Papa," Nicole said as she was hugging them, trying to leave. It seemed that she was trying to leave by herself because Danny was lost in the backyard with the kids.

"She is a doll, just like you promised," Alicia replied.

"She could stand to learn a bit more about football, but I'll teach her the ropes," Benito remarked with a small smile.

"I'd appreciate that, Papa. My poor baby has had very bad family experiences, so I know she's happy that everyone here accepted her. So, you hold those football lessons for one of the family Sunday dinners because we will be back," Nicole promised.

"You might never leave. I think Eddie and Sabrina have adopted your girlfriend," Alicia joked.

Nicole tried to look out into the backyard, figuring that Danny was out there with the kids and the dog again. She was surprised to find out that she was wrong. Dane came walking down the stairs with Philip and Jarred, explaining how she ended up learning other instruments aside from the guitar.

"Hey, love, I'm sorry to cut your conversation short, but we need to get going," Nicole informed her girlfriend.

"Oh," Danny said, glancing at Nicole and then turning her attention back to the two guys. "Guess I'm being abducted. I hope I can talk to you guys again. If you're serious about the guitar lessons, I can give them to Philip or I can get you in touch with a lot of people that will, so you're not paying for super expensive lessons," she explained to them.

"All right," Jarred agreed. "Me and Philip will talk it over and get back to you. You're staying with Nicole, right?"

"Yup and most days you'll find me at home, no matter what time you call. My lessons schedule isn't really a schedule," Dane explained.

Jarred nodded. "Okay. Well, Danny, it was great to meet you. You make sure you take care of Nicole."

"Don't worry. I've got that all taken care of," Danny replied, shaking his hand. She then turned her attention to Nicole. "Just let me go say bye to Eddie, Sabrina, Wayne, and the puppy, okay?"

Nicole smiled and nodded. Dane shot off as best she could, limping quite a bit because of her lame right leg. The others noticed the limp and wondered if it was polite to ask about it. Well, most of them wondered.

"Hey, Nicole, what happened to Danny's leg? Why does she limp like that?" Philip inquired.

"A couple of years ago, she was involved in a horrible accident," Nicole answered. She figured that would cover things without anyone asking for details.

"Is that why her hand is messed up too?" Philip asked, earning a glare from his father.

"Yes. Did you notice it when she was playing the guitar?" Nicole inquired curiously.

"Yeah, and she said she can't play too long because of her hand. Plus, when she was making her Slash egg, I could see her hand shaking," the teen explained.

"Yes, sir, it was all a part of the same accident," Nicole answered.

She did not have to go into detail as Danny returned and they were able to live after some very long goodbyes. The couple left grinning, very happy with the way the evening had gone. Nicole felt confident and comfortable with keeping Danny around for a very long time, glad it would not cause any friction with her family. Danny was just glad to feel accepted.

"Nick," Dane said.

"Hmm, baby?" Nicole asked, keeping her eyes on the road as she drove.

Danny took her girlfriend's hand. "You were right. I had a great time and I'm glad I went. I like your family a lot and I had a lot of fun with all of them. I just have one question."

"Which is?"

"How the hell is your mom related to them? Is she adopted?" Dane asked with a giant grin. This earned her a laugh from Nicole.

The day went much better than expected for both of them. They hoped that was a good sign of things to come.

2: Two steps forward...

Night blanketed outside and the bedroom of Nicole and Danny was covered in a warm darkness. The couple was lying in bed, snuggled together as they tended to be when reclining. Nicole claimed that she wanted to go to sleep since she had work in the morning, but her fingers were

telling a different story. She was tracing lines around the tattoos of paw prints that were on Dane's torso. Danny was fighting down a giggle because the attention tickled a little.

"Chem, for someone that has work in the morning, you're certainly acting like you don't want to get any sleep at all tonight," Dane commented, slowly dragging her knuckles down Nicole's bare arm and knowingly driving the redhead crazy.

"I rather spend time with you than sleep any day," Nicole replied with a small, delighted smile.

"I like the way you think," Danny said with a laugh.

"I'm serious, baby," the lawyer stated, pushing herself closer to Danny. A deep exhale escaped the musician.

Dane smiled broadly. "You mean you're not sick of me after a whole year?"

"Never that, babe. You drive me crazy sometimes for sure, but more often than not, I enjoy every single moment with you. I love you so much," Nicole declared.

"I love you too, Nick," Dane said.

The proclamations of love led to deep, passionate kissing and heavy petting, but nothing more. Nicole did have work in the morning and Dane was not going to be responsible for taking sleep from her busy lover. The little activity was enough for Nicole and she fell asleep with a smile on her face. Danny stayed awake for a little bit longer, reflecting on the day.

Smiling, she thought about meeting Nicole's family. They were normal, as Nicole promised. She liked them quite a bit. They had even liked her. She hoped that gained her a lot of points in the girlfriend area and helped ensure that she would be the partner that Nicole spent the rest of her life with. It would be great to have nice in-laws and just about the most wonderful woman in the world as her spouse.

Nicole opened her world to Danny and shared it with her wholeheartedly. That was something that touched Dane and blew her mind each time it happened, which was what kept her awake at night after any such events. The first time that Nicole did this was when she had her parents over to meet Danny.

Dane had never met anyone's parents before, not as a girlfriend anyway. She had been very nervous, but lived through the night, even with Kathleen harping on her for no reason other than sheer and intense dislike. After that, Nicole introduced Dane to her best friends, Mina and Clara. They were coworkers as well as friends. They liked her much more than Nicole's mother did, which was not very hard to do. Dane was sure that rabid dogs liked her more than Kathleen did. Mina and Clara often told Nicole to bring Danny with her whenever they were hanging out. Dane enjoyed their company, finding them to be very amicable and fun-loving. They made sure to include her whenever she was around, letting her know that they approved of her being with their friend.

Danny had not expected to like them as much as she did or for them to like her as much as they did. For one, it bothered Dane that Mina used to take advantage of Nicole at work, like some of their other coworkers. But, Mina had cut down on that when it was brought to her attention and she also tried to shield Nicole from people at work that tried to use her. It helped that when Danny met Mina, one of the first things that Mina did was thank her for getting Nicole to stand up for herself. From there, Mina easily offered her friendship and praised Danny whenever she thought the former rocker did something good for Nicole. Danny liked Mina a lot and considered her somewhat of a friend rather than thinking of her strictly as Nicole's friend.

Clara was just as easy to get along with. Danny did not have anything to hold against Clara, who as far as she knew was just a very supportive friend that Nicole had. Danny immediately noted that Clara had a nurturing sort of nature to her, which was fine. Clara liked offering advice and from what Dane could tell it tended to be good advice. Clara liked Dane enough to tease Nicole about showing off her girlfriend.

Nicole seemed to take the teasing to heart because she took Dane with her to a couple of firm parties. Dane recognized that as a large step as far as relationships went. Nicole was showing the world-her world-that Danny was a part of her life and thus a part of her world. Dane started to wonder if she should do the same.

"I don't have much of a world to share. Nick deserves better than coming down to some drug-filled club that I frequent just because it has good fucking music," Dane huffed quietly into the night.

Giving Nicole a gentle squeeze, Dane wondered if there was anything about her life worth sharing with her girlfriend. She did not have much of a life outside of Nicole and she liked it that way. She liked waking up early to get breakfast going, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, and cooking dinner. She liked being domestic. She doubted that anyone from her old life would ever understand that.

Plus, she did not want to subject Nicole to the people that she used to know. Many of them were degenerates or low-lives, just like she used to be. She had no doubt that they would offend her beloved. Still, she figured that she needed to be more open with her lover, to show Nicole that she wanted Nicole to be a part of her world as well.

"I guess I should try it out. See if she likes it or not," Dane decided.

With that in mind, she felt safe to go to sleep. Leaning down, she kissed the top of Nicole's head and then she closed her eyes. Sleep came easily.

The next morning was business as usual for the couple. Dane was up first and breakfast was made by the time Nicole came downstairs in her work clothing. They sat down for breakfast at the table in the kitchen.

"Hey," Dane said out of the blue. For all intents and purposes, she was going to propose that they go out next weekend. Now, usually, she never made such suggestions, but she thought it would be a good time.

"Yes?" Nicole asked, looking at her lover.

Suddenly, Dane felt shy and went with something else. "What do you think about getting a dog?" she inquired. *Fuck, why did I say that?! Why else? You're a chicken!*

Nicole blinked hard. "I haven't thought of it at all. You had that much fun with Puppy?" she asked. Yes, her cousins had named their dog "Puppy." She suspected the name would change when the pup grew a bit more, but she hoped the name was not changed to "Dog."

"I did. I like dogs, if you haven't noticed," Danny remarked with a smile while silently cursing herself for chickening out. She could not believe that she honestly could not ask Nicole out just because it was not something that she generally did. She guessed that she did not want to make the suggestion out of fear that she might be expected to go out more often. Going out was no longer her thing, but she knew that she would not be able to turn Nicole down if the redhead wanted to go out on more dates.

"No, I think I missed that one, *Dane*," Nicole teased. "But, as I said with the dog, I hadn't thought about it at all."

"You never wanted a dog as a kid?" the younger woman inquired, now actually interested in conversation. She supposed that she thought it was weird that her lover never thought about having a dog.

"Well, of course. What child doesn't? My parents never gave in to the desire because they didn't have the time to take care of a dog."

"You could've done that."

Nicole laughed and shook her head to disagree. "I was a child, Danny. I couldn't walk a dog on my own. I wouldn't have been able to feed the dog on my own. What about trips to the vet? I couldn't do that and my parents certainly were too busy to do it. I was lucky that they made so much time for me."

Dane nodded. "I guess I get that."

"Do you want a dog?" Nicole asked curiously.

The musician shrugged. "I'm not sure. I had fun with the puppy and I had always wanted a dog before. I figured I was never responsible enough for one. I was sure after I got out of my parents' house, I would get one, but I quickly realized that I could barely take care of myself, so I damn sure couldn't take care of a dog. I wasn't mature enough and I doubted that I'd care about a dog much anyway."

Nicole nodded to show that she understood, but she did not add to the conversation. She needed to get moving or she would be late and there would be hell to pay. With breakfast done, Dane sent her lover on her way after a passionate goodbye kiss.

"Love you," Nicole said on her way out the door.

"Love you too," Dane replied.

Once the younger woman was alone, she flopped down onto the sofa and sighed. She mentally scolded herself for being a coward. She then reminded herself that she would get nowhere with Nicole by running away. In fact, the last time that she had run away, she had nearly ruined the best thing in her life.

"Okay, no more running away. Tonight I'm going to talk to her about going out on Saturday. We could hit a few of the clubs and then just go home if she doesn't like it. If she does like it, then we can go some other places. There are plenty of places to take her without having to worry about really crazy shit happening and we should just go," Dane ordered herself, speaking aloud as if that was going to make it do.

With that decided, Dane got up to go about her usual day. She did the dishes and then had to go see her only client for the day. After that, she went home and did the laundry. Making her usual noontime phone call to Nicole, they spoke for almost all of Nicole's lunchtime. Once Nicole had to get back to work, Dane bid her farewell and then ended up falling asleep on the couch.

When Dane woke up, her head was in Nicole's lap. Nicole was quietly reading a packet for school. Dane snuggled into Nicole's stomach to show that she was awake.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Big Dog," Nicole remarked, caressing her lover's head.

"Hey, Chem. When did you get in?" Dane inquired, letting loose a low yawn right after the question.

"Not too long ago."

Dane chuckled as she sat up and gave Nicole an adoring kiss. When the show of affection was done, the ebony-haired woman returned to her resting place, sighing as she settled in. Nicole smiled and went back to rubbing Dane's head while reading. They stayed like that until Dane got up to make dinner. Over the evening meal, Dane steeled herself and started the conversation that she meant to have that morning.

"So...I was thinking we could go out on Saturday..." the guitarist commented, throwing it out there as if it was no big deal.

Nicole blinked hard in surprise and turned her attention completely to her girlfriend. "You want to go out?" she asked in disbelief. Sometimes, it took all sorts of begging and promises of sexual favors to get Danny to go out. Most of the time, she was aware that Danny was just teasing, but

sometimes she was certain that Danny just did not want to go out. Danny certainly never submitted plans to go out.

"Yes, I want to go out."

"Where?" Nicole inquired, leaning forward with interest.

Dane waved off the question. "A surprise." Until she figured out which club would be the safest to introduce Nicole to her former life...that she still indulged in every now and then. She just could not stay away from the music. She did not desire to take Nicole somewhere that might imply her few ventures out were deprived or dangerous, even though some of the clubs that she went to were rather wild.

"All right. Just tell me what to wear," the lawyer replied with a small smile.

"Doesn't matter."

Nicole wanted to say something, but she let it go. She decided to just go with the flow and revel in the idea that Danny was actually taking her out on a date. A smile did not leave her face as she realized that Danny was taking her on a date instead of the other way around.

Saturday came all too quickly for Dane. While Nicole went to get ready for their night out, Dane had to talk herself into staying the course. She needed to convince herself that letting Nicole in was not going to frighten Nicole away. *We're both in this for the long haul. She loves me and I love her and I need to do this to show her that she's part of my world like I'm part of hers.*

Despite those thoughts, Dane continued pacing the living room as best she could, not thinking about her leg or knee at all. Her usual chain that hung from her shorts clanged against her thigh as she moved. The slight noise did not hit her ears as she tried to calm down and convince herself that everything was going to be all right. *It's not like I do anything wrong. It's just about the music. It's not about the scene and Nick knows that.*

"Big Dog, you trying to wear a path in the floor?" Nicole asked with an impish smirk from the entrance of the living room.

Dane whipped around and focused on her girlfriend. Grey eyes went wide when they caught sight of Nicole. *Oh, god, she's wearing a dress! Look at those legs. Damn it, everybody's gonna be looking at those legs! And her breasts! They're begging to be looked at and touched! Why does that dress dip so low?!*

"Ready to go?" Nicole asked.

"You sure you wanna wear that?" Dane inquired, as if she did not even hear the question.

Emerald eyes glanced down, taking in the sight of the black dress. Nicole did not see anything wrong with it. In fact, she thought that she looked damn sexy. She wanted to look sexy for Danny.

"Is there something wrong with it?" Nicole asked curiously. Maybe she was overdressed, she thought. Dane was wearing her usual clothing of dark jean shorts and a tee-shirt.

For a second, Danny considered saying that there was something wrong with it. The something was that everyone in the club would be staring at her girlfriend! But, then she noticed the sorrowful expression in emerald eyes. Walking over to Nicole, she embraced her. Nicole's shoes put her at almost the same height as her tall lover.

"No, there's nothing wrong with it. Just got a little worried because I know everyone's going to be checking you out later on," Dane answered honestly.

"Well, they can look all they want, but at the end of the night, guess who gets to take me out of this dress?" Nicole commented with an almost wicked smile that made her lover's knees feel weak.

Dane grinned, going so far as to point to herself. "Me?"

"Yes, you, silly pup. But, you only get to take me out of it if you show me a very good time," Nicole teased.

"That's damn good incentive to show you a good time. Warning, though, this is going to involve lots of music."

A laughing smile danced across her face. "I would expect nothing less of you, Danny. You do know that most of the time I expect you to just break into song for no reason. If you were cut, I'm sure musical notes would pour out."

Dane let loose a monster grin that Nicole was used to seeing now. It was an expression that Dane was unaware she was capable of until she came to live with Nicole. In fact, the expression generally only came out when it was directed at Nicole. The redhead had done so much for her, she silently realized. And because of that, she owed Nicole everything.

The couple went to the car and Nicole drove into the city with Danny giving her directions. Danny figured that they would start off small, so she directed Nicole to a club called Silversmith's. Danny paid the cover and placed an arm around Nicole's waist, leading her into the club.

"I used to play here a lot," Dane explained, scanning the smokey area for a free table. There was one in a corner, which was fine by her.

"So, you really like this place?" Nicole asked curiously as Dane pulled out a chair for her.

"Sure did. Still do. Guys here really know music and they really appreciate good music. It's always about the music here. I actually thought of this place as a little haven for a while," Danny replied.

Green eyes sparkled with interest. "A haven?"

"I came here by myself, not with my band or anything. I used to play by myself. It wasn't about women falling in my lap or people trying to party with me. It was just music. Here, I could feel the music, you know?"

Nicole smiled, mostly because she really did not know. She knew that music was her lover's passion and her escape. Music was everything to Dane and the club that they were in seemed to be a big part of that music. She did not understand the experience that Danny went through when it came to music, but she respected it. She suspected that music for Danny was similar to what chemistry was to her.

"So, do you still come here often?" the redhead asked.

"This is usually the place I end up when I can get away from Crow. She likes busier, louder places with lots of people, among other things," Dane answered.

Nicole nodded, figuring that sounded more like Crow. Crow was Dane's friend, even though it took Dane a while to recognize her as such. Right now in her life, Danny might concede that Crow was her best friend, if she did not count Nicole. Crow was often the one person aside from Nicole who could drag Dane out of the house, but it took a lot of patience, guilt-tripping, and sometimes even blackmail. More often than not, Dane had fun once she made it out of the house, but it just took a lot to get her there. Crow put up with it because she liked being around Dane and she thought that Dane's presence made things much more fun.

"I like this," Nicole said, tapping to the rhythm of the smooth jazz coming from the band on stage.

"Jazz freak," Danny teased with a smile.

"It's your own fault. You should've just left me to think that classical was the only form of music on the planet."

"Can't do that. Wouldn't've been able to bring you here if I did. I like that you like the music." In truth, she loved it whenever anyone enjoyed good music, but it hit her even more so whenever Nicole savored good music. It made her feel all the more closer to her girlfriend.

Nicole chuckled a bit. Dane ordered them a couple of drinks, just soda for both. After all, Nicole had to drive and Dane was done with drinking. They enjoyed the music for over an hour before Danny decided to try another club since Nicole seemed so interested.

"Where are we going now?" Nicole asked, slipping her jacket back on as they came out into the cool night air.

"Another surprise. Just go with the flow, please, baby," Dane requested with a smile.

"How can I say no to a face like that? Besides, I'm enjoying myself so far. But, you'll be in trouble the moment I stop having fun," Nicole teased, putting on a mock angry face and shaking her index finger at her lover.

Dane just let loose a lop-sided grin, smoothly sliding her arm around Nicole's waist. The couple wandered down the street until they came to a long line. Dane eyed the line for a moment, as if taking the length into consideration, and then walked right to the front. Nicole was going to object to skipping the line, but she remembered that she was in Dane's element. She trusted that Danny knew what she was doing.

"Hey, Ares!" Dane greeted the huge man at the door.

"Dane!" the man let loose the most girly squeal that Nicole had ever heard and she almost could not believe her ears. Surely the sound did not come from such a colossus.

"Hey!" Dane put her hand out as the man was about to sweep her up into a crushing hug. "No inappropriate touching tonight, buddy. Got my girlfriend with me and I don't want her to kick our butts," she remarked, motioning to Nicole.

"Girlfriend?" Ares echoed in a puzzled tone with an expression to match. His expression did not clear up when he laid eyes on Nicole. She certainly did not look like Dane's type, he thought. "Uh...nice to meet you," he said in an unsure manner, reaching out to shake her hand.

"Nice to meet you too," Nicole replied with grace as she took a moment to shake his hand. She noticed his bewilderment, but she did not mention it. She already aware that people her lover knew seemed to think that she was some kind of anomaly in Danny's life. Such opinions did not mean anything to her as long as Danny continued to enjoy her company and love her.

"Dane, you certainly are moving up in the world, eh?" Ares teased.

"Shut up, you big queen, and let us in," Dane huffed, even though she knew that she should have expected the taunting.

Ares pouted a little, as if his feelings were hurt. Dane ignored him and led Nicole into club, checking Nicole's jacket at the front. The music was thumping and Nicole understood immediately what her lover liked about the place. The bass from the live rock band assaulted her system and hummed through her body. It unsettled her a bit, but glancing at Danny, she could tell the taller woman was completely immersed in her element.

"Want anything to drink or something?" Dane asked, leaning down to shout in her girlfriend's ear.

Nicole shivered because of how close the musician was to her. For a few seconds, she just got lost in that feeling and then she recalled that Danny asked her a question. Shaking her head, she declined the drink.

"Is it all right to dance?" Nicole asked.

Dane grimaced. "You know how I am with dancing, Chem. I look like a monkey high on acid!"

The redhead giggled from the mental image, even though she knew it was close to the truth. "Please, Danny?" She then hit her lover with sad green eyes.

"That look should be against the law!" Dane complained with a forced frown, running her hand through her messy hair.

Nicole grinned and dragged her lover out to the dance floor. Reluctantly, Dane moved along with Nicole, but nowhere near as lively as the lawyer was. The redhead thought it was strange that someone like Danny, who was so passionate about music, had almost no coordination at all when it came to her own body on the dance floor. But, Dane tried her best to dance. She was never very graceful and that always came through when she tried to dance. Even if she stayed on beat and moved loosely, there was just something about her motions that were off. The thing that she found most strange about it was the fact that if she was alone, like moving on stage or something, she was fine, but when she was with another person, her inadequacies showed. As the curvy graduate student moved against Dane, the taller woman started to consider that she was definitely going to have to take her lover out more. She was also going to learn to move better to keep up with Nicole and take her out more often. Now, all she had to do was figure out who she knew that could and would teach her to dance without wanting something outrageous in return for the lessons.

"Lighten up, Danny," Nicole said, watching as a serious face overcame her girlfriend as they moved together.

"Huh? Trying to keep up," Dane admitted, her voice tense with concentration.

"Here, let me help," Nicole said, taking Danny's hand and placing it on her hip. She swayed close into her lover, who groaned and tried her best to continue moving. Even though, the guitarist really just wanted to sit down and let Nicole dance against her.

"Like this?" Danny actually asked, trying to move just like Nicole.

"Not bad. We might have to practice at home before I'm comfortable with letting you do this in public again," Nicole remarked with a teasing smile.

Dane laughed a bit before concentrating on the supple body pressed against her. They danced for a while without any trouble, but Dane could see complications brewing. Other people on the dance floor were watching them. Well, more was watching her very sexy girlfriend as if she was putting on a show just for them.

In the past, if Dane had been dancing with a girl-something that was extremely rare-and she had an audience, she would have just started feeling the girl up. She would have put on a real show to entertain the masses, but that was in the past with a girl that she would not have cared about. This was her girlfriend, the love of her life, and she really did not want to people checking out her girlfriend like they were watching a porn.

"Sit down?" Dane proposed, sounding out of breath. It was partially due to dancing, but mostly due to the fact that Nicole's body just felt so good against her and it was driving her mad.

"Already? Your leg hurt?" Nicole asked, reaching down to gently stroke her lover's knee.

Grey eyes glanced away. She loathed to admit that her leg did hurt a little. Beyond the fact that she was apparently not built for dancing, but her injury made it hard to just stay on her feet for long periods of time.

"Not that bad," the musician lied.

"Come on, baby. Let's find a table and sit down for a little while," the redhead suggested.

Dane just nodded and searched for a table, but nothing seemed to be open. She took Nicole by the hand and led her to the bar, which did have spots open. Exhaling, Dane settled on the bar stool. Nicole reached over and kneaded Dane's knee, hoping to soothe away any pain.

"Something to drink?" Dane asked, nodding toward the refreshments before them.

"Just some water," Nicole answered.

The taller woman waved at the bartender, who smiled coquettishly at her. Dane rolled her eyes and ordered the water. Nicole noticed the brief exchange, but did not say anything. When the bartender returned, handing Dane the water, her fingers lingered for a little too long in Nicole's opinion. Dane acted like it did not happen.

"Old girlfriend?" Nicole guessed as Danny opened the bottle of water and then handed it to her.

Dane gave her a look. "You know better than that. I never had a girlfriend until I started living with you. Weird, I've had three girlfriends in the past year, but none for the first twenty four years of my life."

"Well, I better be the last one, Big Dog."

"That is my intent," Dane commented with a grin. "But, no, she isn't an old girlfriend. Slept with her a few times, though."

"But, didn't you once say that pretty much made a woman your girlfriend back then?" Nicole asked, smiling a bit to show that she was teasing.

Dane chuckled a bit. "I plead the fifth, your honor."

The redhead laughed too. They quietly enjoyed the company and the music until someone wandered over. A young man openly flirted with Nicole, acting as if Danny was not even there. For a moment, jealousy and anger flared in Dane, but the gentle hand on her knee kept her from losing her temper at such disrespect. After all, Nicole knew who she was with, even if the guy did not.

"Excuse me, sir, but you're interrupting the conversation between myself and my girlfriend," Nicole informed him with a smile. Dane smiled too, loving how easily Nicole called her "girlfriend."

The young man turned and looked at Dane. For a second, it seemed like he was going to just dismiss her, but got the idea that she was somewhat of a big deal when a group of women came out of nowhere and flocked to her back. Their chatter and excitement over Dane's presence perplexed him, but he decided against challenging her.

Danny eyed the young man as he left and did not pay any attention to the women on her back. Nicole watched the women, saw how they tried to talk over each other, trying to get Danny's attention. Dane did not even look at them, even as they yanked on her, trying to get her to move in their direction, and practically hollered in her ear.

"Ladies, do you think you could leave? I'm with my girl," Dane informed them in a semi-annoyed tone, motioning to Nicole, so they knew just who she meant. *Goddamn vultures.*

"Since when do you have a girl, Dane?" one of the women asked with pure skepticism in her voice and in her eyes.

The former rocker pretended to think on it. "About seven months now," she answered.

Nicole watched as their faces all fell into disbelief. They then turned their attention to the lawyer, wanting to size her up. She gathered that they did not like what they saw as frowns conquered all of their faces. She resisted the urge to smirk. *That's right, ladies. Danny is all mine!*

Dane noticed the amused glint her lover's eyes and laughed a bit. With a shrug, she glanced back at her "fan club." As she took in their expressions, she laughed a little more.

"Come on, Dane. You know you can handle more than one woman," one lady said, reaching over to fondle the musician.

Dane shook her head and caught the sneaky hand before it could touch her. "Sorry, chicky. Only got eyes for my baby now. So, you guys are gonna have to go find another willing participant," she informed them.

"Bye." Nicole had the nerve to give them a very friendly smile and wave.

The women glared at her and waited a moment, as if they expected Dane to object. No words came and they stormed off. Dane had to laugh a little more before turning her attention completely to her lover.

"Should I start worrying about the Big Dog when she goes out to play?" Nicole teased.

"Never that. You're always on my mind, angel. I would never stray," Dane promised, taking hold of Nicole's hand as she spoke.

"I know, baby. I can't believe a group of women just flocked to you like that," Nicole said. She had never seen anything like that, but she would see more of it before the night was over.

Over the next hour, women came over to Dane in waves, trying to feel her up or get her to feel them up. They seemed content to share her in any way too, but she would not have any part of it. Danny made it perfectly clear that only she was taken, but she was there with her girlfriend. They all seemed shocked to know that she had a girlfriend, but she never bothered to explain. She just pointed to Nicole and let them see that she was truly spoken for and no longer wanted any part of them.

As boredom set in and Nicole was tired of seeing women hit on her girlfriend, she convinced Dane to dance again for a little while. That time, Dane was not too upset with everyone staring. The whole club either knew or would soon know that Nicole was her girlfriend and that was enough for her.

"Ready to go?" Dane inquired, leaning down to call into Nicole's ear.

"To another club?" Nicole hoped. She was having a good time. It had been such a long time since she had been out clubbing.

"Maybe," Dane answered with a playful smile. There was a spot close by that she would like to take Nicole to. They could easily end the night there.

"Lead the way, pup," Nicole replied.

The ebony-haired musician chuckled and did as she was ordered. Taking Nicole by the hand, she started making the track for the front of the club. She was held up by quite possibly the last person that she ever wanted to see. He ran right into her-literally.

"Hey," Dane grunted.

"You should watch where you're going," the perpetrator had the nerve to respond. Glancing up, he jumped back in shock when he saw whom he had hit. "Dane?" His voice broke from saying the short name. His deep brown eyes held a certain amount of fear, which gave her immense satisfaction.

Grey eyes flashed with anger. "Bryan," she growled.

Ever since she had started going out more often, Dane had been able to avoid her former best friend. She was thankful for that mostly because she was not interested in going to jail for second-degree homicide. But, now that she saw him again and there was not a stage between, only space and opportunity, she found that she did not care. The bitterness and fury of two years ago was gone, left in its wake was a cold indifference to him.

"I heard you've been coming through these places, but I haven't seen you. How you doing?" Bryan asked, able to recover quickly from his fear and act like they were still friends. The look in his eyes told a different story, though. It seemed like he was gloating on the inside, happy to have gotten the better of her.

"I'll be better when I get out of range of the lightning," Dane remarked dryly.

Nicole almost laughed, but kept that in check since she figured it would be rude to do so. She was quite aware that Bryan was the enemy and hoped that he would be smote, as Dane's words implied. He was the reason her baby had such a bad limp and could not play her precious guitar the same anymore. Nicole almost hated this man for Danny.

"Don't be that way, Dane," he commented, flashing a charming smile.

Nicole frowned; she had seen smiles like that before. They ran a dime-a-dozen from her ex and Danny's cousin, Tyler. The expression was enchanting and flattering, making him look dashing, like the harmless boy-next-door. Nicole knew better than to believe it.

"Bryan, I have nothing to say to you," Dane stated, moving to push past him. She was not going to give him the power to ruin any more of her life or even ruin her time out with her beloved.

He scowled, not taking kindly to the disrespect that she was showing him. "You know," he said and she paused for a moment. "I don't know why you ever bother coming down here anymore. It's not like you could keep up with even the most mediocre player," he remarked with a cruel smirk.

Dane did not even bother to turn around. "I don't play to keep up. I play for the music, not the attention. Not that you know anything about it. But, then again, you don't know anything about being good either."

A growl escaped the young man. "I know you're not any good anymore," he said harshly.

She shrugged. "You don't know that," she replied as if it was no big deal. She was pretty sure even with her lame left hand, she could play circles around Bryan.

"I know enough. I haven't heard about you playing or anything, so obviously you gave it up."

Dane waved him off. Nicole was impressed with her lover's control. She squeezed Danny's hand, silently communicating that. Dane glanced at her girlfriend and then proceeded to leave. Bryan was not done yet, though.

"You found your lay of the night? I'm surprised women even give a cripple like you the time of day," Bryan commented.

Those words halted Dane. Her shoulders squared as she turned to face him. He smirked, a haughty look on his face.

"Maybe you should just give her to me. She looks too classy for a punk like you anyway," he continued on.

"Even if she wanted to date a low-life or a coward rat-bastard, she wouldn't start with you. Now, why don't you go find some mobster to be in debt to and get the fuck away from me," Dane riposted.

Bryan had the nerve to look offended by that, but then suddenly his expression turned smug. "You know, if I ever did get into that kind of trouble again, I could always go to my father for help. I might even be able to go to your father. Russell seems to like me a lot nowadays. Like me enough to invite me to his house next weekend for a celebration in regards to his getting the nomination for governor. The whole Wolfe family and close friends should be there. What about you?"

Dane chuckled and shrugged. "Bryan, you and my father can rot in Hell for all I care. I could go home anytime I want, but I don't want to. So, fuck you, fuck him, and fuck the whole Wolfe family," she said. Why be bitter over it? She was the happiest that she had ever been in her life and she did not need any of them to get there. All she needed was the woman in her arms at the moment.

Tired of listening to Bryan and his bullshit, Dane continued on her way, tugging Nicole with her. As soon as they hit the streets, Nicole pressed her body into Dane and smiled at the taller woman. Danny looked a little confused.

"Why are you so happy?" Dane asked.

"I like the way you handled that. You didn't start a fight or anything. You hardly let that bastard bait you into anything. You handled that like an adult, which is rare for anyone," Nicole answered, still smiling.

"Honestly, I don't give a shit what he has to say. He doesn't mean anything to me, so nothing he says matters. He can think he got the better of me all he wants, but he's wrong. In fact, I should probably thank that stupid fuck," Danny said.

Nicole blinked in confusion. "Thank him?"

"His actions eventually led me to your house a year ago. He led me to the best thing to ever happen to me," Dane explained quite seriously. *Life works out in weird ways, after feeling the lowest I ever had in my whole miserable existence, I end up being the happiest I've ever been right after.*

Emerald eyes sparkled. "Okay, we have to get back to the car and get home."

"Why?"

"Because you just said the right thing to earn your reward of taking me out of this dress," Nicole answered. Danny moved as fast as her leg would allow to get them back to the car.

Dane panted heavily as Nicole settled her head on her favorite resting place-Danny's shoulder. While Dane was still trying to catch her breath, the redhead's tongue leisurely wandered closer to Dane's breast. Danny put a hand up to stop her.

"I can't take anymore, Nick. I'm only human," the guitarist sighed.

"Really? I thought I was hanging out with the rock goddess of lesbian sex," Nicole remarked, fingers caressing Danny's soft abdomen.

"I'm getting too old for this shit."

Nicole burst out laughing. "Hey! What're you trying to say about me?" She was three years older than Danny, after all.

"That you're the sexiest old woman I've ever seen," Dane joked.

"And you had been so good tonight. You just had to ruin it. Bad, Danny, bad." She swatted lightly at her lover.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry! Gonna make me tell people how kinky you are in bed if you keep spanking me," the younger woman said.

Nicole laughed and settled down again. Dane wrapped her arm around Nicole's shoulders, pressing her closer. They both sighed from the delightful contact.

"Thank you for the date tonight, Danny. I had a very good time," Nicole said.

"You did?" Dane asked, a little surprised.

"I very much enjoyed it. I hope we can do it again."

A half-smile worked its way onto Danny's face. "We can. There's still a lot of clubs I have to show you."

Nicole yawned a bit. "Good..."

The half-smile grew into a broad smile. The smile would not stay there for long. Nicole was not done and it seemed like she understood the whole significance of the night without Dane even telling her.

"Maybe one day you'll be comfortable enough to take me home, like you were with taking me to your clubs," the lawyer said, her voice low, as sure sign that she was already half-asleep.

"Chem, showing you my clubs means a lot more than you meeting my family," Dane said. The clubs were her havens, her sanctuaries. Her family was nothing more than a headache.

"I know," Nicole replied, yawning again. She was asleep before Dane could respond.

The musician held onto Nicole tightly and sighed. She knew that with Nicole meeting family meant a lot. It meant a lot to her when she meant Nicole's family, but her own family did not mean the same to her. Still, for Nicole to feel the level of acceptance that she felt, she supposed that the next thing that she would have to do was take Nicole home...not that "home" was her real home or had ever been such.

But, for Nicole, she would do just about anything-including going to that Hellhole. On the plus side, she might be able to get on her family's nerves by showing up. It could be a win-win situation. All she had to do was survive the whole thing.

3: It's all relative

Danny sighed for the umpteenth time that morning. Nicole had gone to work and she was all by herself. Well, not all by herself considering the way her brain was acting up. Her thoughts were acting like unwanted guests and plaguing her, not leaving her alone for even a second. Knowing what she had to do eventually disturbed her whole routine.

She was going to have to take Nicole to meet her family. There was no way out of that. Nicole was a family person. She was close to her family, not just her parents, but aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Now, Nicole had not introduced her to Raymond's side of the family, but she was sure that was coming eventually. It was Nicole's way of welcoming Dane into her family. Nicole was bringing her close and she wanted to show Nicole that the feeling was mutual. Unfortunately, the only way to do that was to have her lover meet her family.

"Why couldn't I just be born from a rock or something?" Dane huffed as she threw herself onto the couch.

Family definitely did not mean the same to her as it did to Nicole, but she doubted that she would be able to make her lover understand that. She did not have the energy to try either. Besides, she was willing to endure anything-including her whole family-if it meant that Nicole would know just how much she meant to Dane. Hell, she would endure her family every day if necessary.

Damn it, Chem, I know you've bewitched me! Dane was utterly convinced that love was some form of magic or witchcraft because she would do anything for Nicole. She had never felt that way about anyone in her whole life and sometimes it was a little overwhelming, but she was definitely willing to endure it. *Yeah, Chem, I'd do anything for you, so I guess we're gonna be meeting my family this weekend. Fuck.*

Dane was going to have to mentally prepare for that little trip. Usually, she would not give a damn about her family or how they treated her. She took it and gave it back sometimes. But, this was going to happen in front of her lover. The last thing she wanted was for Nicole to think less of her, which her family would try their best to do, especially when they find out how successful Nicole was and that she used to date Tyler. *Oh, this is just a fuck-fest waiting to happen. They're probably going to do everything that comes to mind to get her away from me and back to that dipshit Tyler.*

Sitting on the sofa for who-knew-how-long, Dane tried to convince herself that meeting her family would not sway Nicole from wanting to be with her. Nicole had seen her through some hard times and stuck with her. Nicole stuck with her even when Kate showed her obvious disdain and listed reasons on top of reasons as to why Nicole should leave Danny. Nicole never listened to her own mother, so chances were slim that she would listen to complete strangers when it came to her girlfriend. *So, why the hell am I so worried about what damage my family might do? She knows they're fuck-heads and she probably wouldn't believe them. But, then again, anything could happen.*

Throwing her head back, she closed her eyes, letting her troubles and thoughts wander in her mind. Her hands positioned themselves on their own, as if she was holding a guitar. She then played her imaginary instrument, hoping that it would help in some manner.

Nicole sighed as she entered the house, taking note of how quiet it was. She was aware that silence meant Danny either was not home or had fallen asleep somewhere. Poking her head into the living room, she saw that it was the latter. She thought it was a bit odd that Danny had fallen asleep sitting up, but she dismissed it for the moment. Danny could fall asleep almost anywhere any way; she knew the habit came from living on the streets and she disliked thinking about her beloved being out on the streets.

After stripping off of her work clothes and putting on a comfortable pair of shorts and a sleeveless tee-shirt, Nicole went to the living room. A devilish smirk spread onto her face as she marched to the sofa and carefully sat down on her lover. Cautiously, she made sure her weight was not resting on Danny's right leg. Once she was settled, she leaned forward and started playing feather-light kisses on Danny's face.

The affection earned a cute whimper from Dane. As sweet lips touched her own, she was returning the kisses before she was even fully awake. Her arms went around Nicole's waist and pulled the redhead closer, taking the time to cup Nicole's behind while she was at it. Nicole squealed in surprise from the unexpected grope. Smoke-colored eyes eased open at the sound.

"I like the wake-up calls in this joint. Do you provide any other services?" Danny quipped with a sleepy smile.

Nicole laughed, her eyes shining. "I could be obliged."

"You're in a good mood," Dane noted, hands wandering up and down her girlfriend's backside.

"Why not? Great girlfriend, doing well in my classes, and not so much crap at work anymore. Hell, I think if work was this nice a few months ago, I wouldn't have longed to go back to school so much," the auburn-haired woman replied.

"I doubt that, Chem. You know chemistry is in your blood. But, I'm glad work is going so much better for you," Danny said.

Work was much easier for Nicole lately because her parents were not bombarding her with cases like they used to. Raymond was especially careful in that and often reminded Kate that they needed to lighten up on Nicole because she had school to worry about. Raymond also made sure others at the firm stopped taking advantage of Nicole and disrupting her own work. She was much more effective and efficient now than she had ever been. She also found herself not loathing to go in anymore, but she was still looking forward to the day that she was a chemist and not a lawyer.

"How was your day?" Nicole inquired.

"Uh..." Dane looked around. "Believe it or not, this is my day," she admitted with a chuckle.

"You couldn't have possibly slept for the whole day. You didn't have a lesson or anything?"

Ebony-hair swayed as Danny shook her head. "Nothing. I was sleeping the whole day."

Nicole's forehead wrinkled a bit as she pulled back, wanting to study her lover for a moment. Dane sighed, remembering why she had not gotten her butt up from the couch all day. Caramel fingers continued caressing Nicole's smooth back while waiting for her to say something.

"What happened?" the redhead asked, voice laced with mild concern.

"I'll tell you over dinner..." The musician trailed off as she realized something. "Damn it, I didn't make dinner yet!" One of her hands abandoned Nicole only to slap herself in the forehead. *Damn it, just thinking about my family is screwing up my life!*

Nicole snickered. "Calm down, baby. You know this is nothing to panic over."

Dane pouted, looking quite like a hurt puppy. Nicole knew why that was. Danny felt it was her duty to have things ready for Nicole whenever she came in from work. She considered it a failure and neglect whenever she did not have things perfect for Nicole. To cheer her up, Nicole leaned down and placed a lingering kiss to her pouting mouth. The kiss was eagerly returned.

"It's okay, baby. I'm in the mood for junk food anyway," Nicole said.

Dane did not seem to totally believe her. "Really?"

"Really. I was going to ask if you wanted pizza, actually. We haven't had pizza in a long time."

"I'll call for a pie." A flat palm on her chest kept the former rocker from getting up.

"You don't move," the older woman commanded.

"Yes, ma'am," Dane replied with a lewd smile. "You know I like when you get all bossy, baby," she remarked, clutching her lover's rear once more.

Nicole only chuckled as she pulled out her cell phone. She ordered a pizza for them and then decided to cuddle into Danny while they waited for their food. Danny did not say anything, enjoying the close feel of her lover's tight body against her. Underneath the heated lust that she always felt for Nicole, Dane recognized the peaceful, calm emotion that filled her whenever Nicole was around.

"I love you," Dane suddenly said.

"I love you too, Danny," Nicole replied. She did not find it odd for Dane to just blurt that out. Often one of them just said the phrase whenever there was a quiet moment.

The declaration brought a smile to the musician's face. The couple remained curled up together, kissing and caressing until the pizza arrived. Nicole went to pay for the pizza while Dane got up to get them something to drink with the food. They decided to eat in the living room, returning to the sofa.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" Nicole proposed, pulling a slice from the box. Pizza, a movie, and cuddling on the sofa would be the perfect end for the day, she thought.

"If you want to," Dane replied, taking her own slice.

"Oh, wait, you wanted to tell me something, correct?" Nicole recalled.

"Right..." The younger woman ran a hand through her short black hair. "Um..." Words suddenly failed her.

Nicole reached over and put a tender hand on her beloved's thigh. "Danny, talk to me. It's just me. Just Nick," she reminded Dane.

"It's just...well...I was wondering...um...do you want to go to that party my parents are hosting this weekend?" Danny inquired. "It's on Saturday and it's in the afternoon, so it's not really messing up the day or anything." She had actually gone as far as to call around to find out minor things about the party for Nicole. *I have to love this woman to go through all of this crap.*

Emerald eyes watched Danny in disbelief. Nicole never thought that Danny would invite her to meet her family, *never*. She secretly hoped that it would happen, but honestly, she thought that she would never even wave hello to someone in Dane's family, except of course the one person that she loathed in Dane's family.

"Are you sure?" Nicole asked in a low voice, eyes shining as if her beloved just fulfilled a deep wish of hers. She knew what Dane thought of her family...a little anyway. In the year that they had lived together and the half-year that they had been a couple, Dane had said very few words on her family outside the fact that they all hated her guts. Through a lot of grit and determination Nicole found out that was not totally true. Through just as much hard work, Nicole was able to find out that Danny actually had a few family members that Danny at the very least could tolerate. She wondered if the Wolfe family was not all bad; it seemed a little outrageous to her to assume they were all bad, especially when her dearest Danny came from them.

"I'm sure," Dane lied. She really wished that they could just drop the whole thing. There were a couple of family members that she would not mind introducing Nicole too, but even that she would have preferred to do down the line. Instead, she found herself jumping into shark-infested water with a suit made of chum. *I need to stop watching the Discovery Channel.*

"Then I would love to meet your family!" Nicole said, unable to control her smile. The emotion that bubbled up inside of her made her practically glow. *She trusts me enough to meet her family!*

Danny smiled, even though she did not feel as good as she looked. Obviously, it was the right decision if the grin on Nicole's face meant anything, but it did not ease the churning feeling that was working its way into her stomach. She tried her best to ignore it, but the trouble that she was experiencing came out in other ways.

"Baby, are you okay?" Nicole asked, out of the blue as far as her lover was concerned.

"Huh?" Dane blinked a couple of times, as if coming back to reality. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?" she countered.

"Well, because you only ate two slices of pizza when you're usually good for at least four..."

Danny shrugged that off. "Wasn't that hungry." And that was the truth now.

"And I've been keeping my friend company for almost a minute and haven't gotten a response yet," Nicole continued on.

Dane glanced down to see what Nicole was talking about and noticed for the first time that her girlfriend was nuzzled in between her breasts. Making matters worse, if the wet spot around her right nipple meant anything, Nicole was doing a lot more than nuzzling her. *SHIT! She's doing that and I didn't even notice? That's sure to make her feel attractive and appreciated!*

"Um...Sorry. Guess I'm distracted," Dane admitted, running a hand through her hair in disbelief and embarrassment.

"Oh..." The redhead was not sure what to say and glanced away.

Again a copper-toned hand went through black hair. Dane felt like such an ass because of the disappointed expression on Nicole's face. Moving, Dane pulled Nicole to her and rested the lawyer against her body. Nicole was slow to react, but her arms eventually went around Dane.

"I'm so sorry, baby. It's got nothing to do with you and if you accompany me upstairs, you'll know you still have quite the affect on me," Dane stated in a low, sensual tone.

A coy smile worked its way onto Nicole's face. "You sure?"

"Positive. If I could trust my leg to not give out halfway to the bedroom, we wouldn't even be talking about it."

"If that's the case, who needs the bedroom?"

Dane's grin was bordering on feral. "I like the way you think, woman!" She then engulfed Nicole in a passionate embrace with a burning hot kiss. Any hurt feelings or conflicting emotions were completely forgotten.

Danny ran her hand through her hair for what had to be the millionth time. The churning in her stomach from a few days ago had returned and she hated to think that the feeling was from fear rather than nervousness as she assumed. *I'm not scared of my family. But, I am scared of the damage the bastards can do.*

Her father had screwed with her mind enough to make her leave Nicole once. It had been a dark moment in their young relationship and she was determined not to repeat that. She had already ordered herself countless times to ignore her father and whatever bullshit he happened to be talking about at the time. Unfortunately, she could not convince Nicole of the same thing.

Truly, she had not tried much in explaining her family to Nicole. The redheaded attorney had already made her father's acquaintance some months ago. Her mother was with him, but as usual, the woman was as silent as the grave. Her father had said more about himself in his actions than his words. Nicole had witnessed him throw Danny to the ground with little concern for her wellbeing, so Danny was sure that nothing her father said would hold baring with her beloved. Her mother might not have any credibility either since she had not defended Danny that day. Besides, she was not too sure her mother would bother to speak with Nicole anyway. Her mother never really paid much mind to the people that Dane brought home, except maybe to try to convince them to leave once they got too rowdy. Too bad her family consisted of much more than her mother and father and almost all of those people hated her just as much as they did.

She had hardly briefed Nicole on her siblings. She figured it would just come out as whining and complaining. The same was true with her uncles, aunts, and cousins. She doubted that Nicole would hold her cousins' words in high esteem since Nicole worked with one of her cousins-

Tyler. Most of her cousins were just like him; hell, some of them were more snobbish than he was.

"Nick's smart. She'll know who's bullshitting her and who's not. She knows how I am too," Dane tried to assure herself, but as soon as those words left her mouth, she realized that could work against her.

Her life before meeting Nicole had been wild and very crazy. Her family enjoyed embellishing on that, just to make her seem even more like the demon child they assumed she was. Nicole was aware of some of her exploits, so she might be inclined to believe the exaggerated antics. Hell, even if she did not believe them, she would probably be curious and want to talk about it later on. Unable to lie to her beloved, she would probably end up telling the truth right out of her only meaningful relationship.

"Damn it," Dane growled, letting her thoughts get the better of her. "Nick, are you coming down?" she called upstairs, wanting her lover to hurry up before she drove herself mad from waiting.

"You can't rush perfection, my love!" Nicole replied.

Dane sighed and folded her arms across her chest. She did not understand why it always took Nicole so long to get ready for anything. Now, she had no complaints about the results and all, but it felt like it took forever and a day to get there.

Minutes later, Nicole stepped downstairs and looked as lovely as Danny expected. Nicole was dressed a little more conservative than Danny thought she would, wearing a dark tan skirt and beige blouse that showed a hint of cleavage with matching heels. A necklace with heart pendent dangled in between showing bit of breasts. The outfit hugged Nicole's body like Dane wanted to, but they did not have time for that.

"How do I look?" the redhead asked with an impish smile.

Dane narrowed her gaze. "You know how you look. Tempting me to push that skirt up," she grumbled, running her hand through her hair.

Nicole laughed a bit and walked over to her lover. Leaning in, she placed a chaste, but wet kiss to Dane's cheek. The musician groaned.

"You are such a fucking tease," Dane complained in a low voice.

"No, just giving you something to look forward to when we come back home. Now, seriously, how do I look? I figured this was appropriate for a gathering with your family," Nicole explained as she stepped back to model her outfit a bit, complete with turning all the way around for burning grey eyes.

Dane shrugged. "It's fine."

Nicole shot her a skeptical look. "Just fine? From the way you're looking at me, I think I look much better than fine," she commented.

"But, you didn't want to know that. You wanted to know if this was appropriate for a gathering with my family. Probably. I don't know who's gonna be there aside for my family, who will all be dressed as pretentious as possible. Everybody's going to be trying to one up each other, after all."

"Except you, right?" Nicole smiled a bit, as she tugged on her lover's vest.

Dane was under the impression that putting on a vest and a shirt with buttons meant that she was dressed formally. Such thinking was evident in her outfit. She had on black shorts with matching long sleeve shirt; Nicole was surprised that she tucked the shirt in without having to be told to do. Her vest was grey with a black outline of a guitar over the breast pocket. On the back of the vest was a much larger image of the same guitar.

"Can we just go?" Dane sighed, her hand traveling through her hair once more. She had not dressed so formally to take her rings out of her eyebrow, but then again, she never did.

Nicole pouted, not expecting that reaction. Moving swiftly, she wrapped her arms around Danny and pressed herself against the moping guitarist. Thanks to her shoes, she was at the same height as Dane and took a moment to place a few soft pecks to Danny's mouth with her moist lips.

"What's wrong, baby? You seem cranky," Nicole pointed out.

"I'm fine," Danny lied. The last thing she wanted was for Nicole to think that she really was just a big baby. "I guess it's going out two Saturdays in a row or something. Doesn't help that I had to see the demon wench today," she said.

"Sweetheart, don't call your physical therapist that," Nicole slightly reprimanded her lover. "Now, come on, tell me the truth. Is it having to deal with your family? Do you think they're going to make a big deal about your showing up with a woman?" she inquired.

"They're going to make a big deal about me showing up in general. There'll be drama, but I don't care about that shit. I just don't want you to end up bothered."

Nicole smiled a bit, hoping it would make her girlfriend feel better. "You don't have to worry about me, Danny. It's sweet that you are. I just want to meet your family, Danny. I'm not going to let them scare me or rile me up."

"Okay," Dane said, not that she understood why Nicole wanted to meet her family. They had already been through that it was not the same thing as meeting Nicole's family. Nick had even agreed with that, but still wanted to meet the rest of the Wolfe clan. *I'll never understand women.*

"Are you all right now?"

"Um..." Dane took a deep breath. "Just do me a favor and take any and everything they say to you with a grain of salt, okay?"

"Danny, you've told me enough about your family and I've seen enough to know that I probably shouldn't believe everything that they say. But, if I do ask you questions about things, you'll be honest and you won't get mad?"

"I won't get mad at you, but probably at the bastard telling you stuff to mess with you. But, of course I'll be honest. I'm almost always honest, right?" Dane asked with a slight smile, looking more like her usual self.

"On most things, yes. I still can't get you to be honest about your hand or your leg, but I can't stop your honest opinion your physical therapist."

"Demon woman!"

Nicole shook her head, anticipating that response. Danny was certain that the woman working with her to get better control over her hand and leg was some diabolical, evil minion to the devil. Nicole constantly had to assure Dane that the physical therapy was worth putting up with a woman that she clearly did not like, especially when she could easily see results in the way Danny used her left hand. The leg seemed much slower to in recovering.

"See?" Nicole remarked with a smile. Wrapping her arms around Danny as a sign of love and acceptance, she pressed herself into the taller woman again. "I know this is hard for you, baby. If you really don't want to go, we don't have to. I just thought that there was no way you disliked your whole family. Surely there's someone there that you might want to see and would not mind introducing me to," the lawyer said.

Dane sighed. She really did not want to confess that there was no one in her family that she missed. And then she suddenly blinked as she realized Nicole was right. There was someone-a couple of someones actually-that she wanted to see and she could be pleased to introduce her girlfriend to those two.

"You're right. There are two people I want to see and what to introduce you to," Dane proclaimed with a smile.

"Then let's go see them," Nicole replied. She had a feeling that she knew who these two people were. She wondered how that was going to go over.

Dane nodded and with that they were off. Nicole drove; one day she was going to figure out the right bribe to get Danny behind the wheel. The musician gave out the directions to get to her childhood home. Not that she really considered it a home as she had come to understand what a real home since she came to live with Nicole.

Nicole's mouth almost hit the floor when they came up to the house, having to drive up a private road to get there. The place made her parents' house look like a dollhouse. It was a large house

that looked much like an English manor house. She was not surprised that there was a valet there for the car when she got up the driveway. The shock was so heavy that she did not realize that she needed to give the valet her keys.

"Hey, angel, you have to hand over the keys if you want the car to get parked," Dane informed her stunned lover.

"Oh, right," Nicole replied and did so.

The couple exited the car and Dane took the lead, knowing where her parents would be holding a huge gathering; they had large parties in the same place all of the time. They wandered around the house to the side where there was a garden and there was the party. The garden was enormous and striking complete with an elaborate fountain and little man-made pond with sculptured animals in it. It looked like a forest scene, shot by Medusa.

"It's not too late to leave," Dane pointed out, thinking that her lover might be a little overwhelmed.

"No, no. I want to meet your family. I was just surprised by all of this," Nicole said. When Dane described her family as "wealthy" she did not think it was like this. She thought that they could not be that rich since Tyler still had to work.

"Most of this is my mother's stuff. She's the really rich one," the ebony-haired woman replied.

"Oh, okay." Nicole nodded. She got the underlying message that the Wolfe family did not have the wealth, so yes, they still had to work. It was the Wolfe family that she was meeting, so there was no reason for her to feel overwhelmed by all of the wealth around her.

The pair made their way into the party and it seemed like they were invisible. Nicole noticed that people looked at them, but then quickly pretended not to see them. Dane did not seem to notice; honestly, she did not give a damn, particularly since that was how she was always treated when she came home. She scanned the party looking for the two people that mattered, but did not spot them.

"Are you going to introduce me to anyone or just wait for them to pull me aside to ask what club I met you at?" Nicole asked, teasing a bit, even though she suspected that might really happen.

Danny shrugged, not really sure what she was going to do and then a person caught her eye. "Oh, I see someone you might like to meet," she said, gently tugging her girlfriend toward someone.

Nicole wondered whom Dane was taking her to. Scanning the crowd, she tried to narrow it down to the several people in their path. After a moment, she figured it out. They were approaching a gentleman with graying hair, but he had a strong resemblance to Tyler. The build was the same, the shape of the face, but the older man had warmer eyes.

"Hey, unc," Danny said as they stood before the man.

"Dane, what're you doing here? How have you been? It's been so long!" he declared, pulling Dane into a very weak, one-armed hug. Nicole had a feeling it was because Dane was not in favor of anyone in her family touching her.

"Been okay, unc. Shocked Tyler hasn't told you about me," she replied, stepping away as quickly as she could without making it seem like she disliked her uncle.

"He has called and complained a few times. He's also whined in person. He claims you stole his fiancée and has gotten the poor girl into drugs," he informed her before looking her over. "But, I have a feeling he was taking things way too far. You look rather well," he commented.

Dane ran her hand through her hair. "Yeah...um...it's cuz of her," she said and presented Nicole to him. "This is Nicole Cardell. My girlfriend," she introduced him.

"Pierce Wolfe." He reached for Nicole's hand and gave her a curious look. "You were dating Tyler, weren't you?" he asked as he shook her hand.

"Yes, sir, I was," she admitted.

"Hmm..." He pondered that for a moment. Nicole almost expected him to ask a question about going through the family or something, but he did not take it there. "I'm sure you had a good reason for picking Dane," he commented, looking almost approving of her decision.

"I don't mean this as any disrespect or offense to you, but there was no contest," Nicole informed him.

"None taken. From what I can see, you did the girl some good. She's talking more than two sentences to me, she's not drunk yet, she doesn't appear high, and she has sleeves. You get her some pants and she might actually pass as human," he remarked with a small smile.

Nicole laughed a bit. "I am working on that. One step at a time, though."

Pierce nodded in agreement. "Then I suppose I shouldn't even breach the subject of her going to school."

"Not gonna happen," Dane muttered, turning her mouth up. "Hey, you seen Adam yet?"

Pierce shook his head. "No, I haven't seen him yet. If I do, I'll let him know you're looking for him."

Dane nodded and they spoke for a few more minutes. Nicole carried the conversation while Dane hardly said two words, which did not surprise her uncle. The small smile on her face was a bit of a surprise; she was glad that Pierce was saying some all right things about her and Nicole seemed to get along with him rather well. Eventually, the couple drifted away from him and Dane did not pull Nicole to meet anyone else face to face. Danny did take her time pointing people out and

broadcasting their business if she knew them particularly well. And she knew quite a few of them rather well.

"See her? That's the mayor's daughter, Angelica. Almost got me killed," Dane said, pointing to the overly made-up woman a distance away.

"How'd she almost get you killed?" Nicole asked curiously, although she was starting to sense a theme with the people that her lover knew. The "knew" was in the biblical sense most of the time.

"Well...her mother sorta found us with my hand up her skirt. They didn't take too kindly to that sort of thing and she swore up and down that it was all my doing. Never mind the fact that I was just looking for beer at the time and she shoved my hand in her crotch," Dane remarked with a snort and she rolled her eyes.

"You little doggy Casanova," Nicole said, not sounding offended, but not sounding amused either. She just was not sure what else to say.

"Oh, that one, I almost got her killed." The guitarist pointed out another woman.

"Hand in her skirt again?"

"Legs on my shoulders. Her husband didn't buy the story that she fell and then I tripped into her waist and we ended up in an awkward position while trying to get up," Dane quipped with a crooked smile.

"Have you slept with every rich woman at this party?"

"Uh...no...I've had a round or two with some of the servants too," Dane confessed, trying her best to make it sound like a joke.

Nicole shook her head. "I think you're being too honest with me now, honey."

"Really? Sorry." A slightly trembling hand went through sable locks. "You know they didn't mean anything to me. Just some fun. Nothing like you. You're my heart and soul."

"Oh, Danny." Nicole melted into Dane's warm body. She could tell her beloved was nervous, but Danny always knew just what to say to make her feel at ease, comforted, and important. "What about her? She looks like she might have tried you," she said, pointing to another woman that walked by.

"Her and another girl at the same time believe it or not. These girls couldn't get enough lesbian experiences. Plus, they love a rebel. I was never hurting for company in a bed, but I might as well have been a dildo to them," Dane replied.

"I get the feeling you didn't mind that the time," Nicole teased.

"I don't know if I would say I minded, but I was vaguely aware that my life was empty as far as personal interactions went. By the time I was bedding all these fake bi-curious chicks, I was already drinking and doing drugs and everything, covering that emptiness up with whatever I could. All I had then was my music to make sure I wasn't actually dead."

"Is that why you haven't introduced me to anyone else?" the lawyer asked curiously, gently rubbing circles around Danny's stomach to remind her that someone was there and someone did care about her.

"No one worth introducing you to. Waiting for Adam to show up, but other than that, I got nothing," Dane answered and then someone caught her eyes. "Oh, you see the bottle blond there?" She pointed ahead of them. There was a tall blond woman ahead of them in an expensive dress with glittering diamonds around her wrist and neck. She was lovely, looking almost like a model. But, there was something more to her that Nicole could not put her finger on at first.

"Uh-huh."

"That's my sister Rachel. She's four years older than me. Hates me a lot. In fact, the second she spots me, she's going to go tell my father I'm here and try to get me thrown out," the musician explained.

Nicole's forehead wrinkled in confusion. She could not figure out how someone, especially a sibling, could hate her very sweet girlfriend. She also could not fathom why the sister would want to get Danny kicked out. It did not make any sense and it did not serve a purpose in her mind. "What? Why does she hate you?"

Danny shrugged and scratched the end of her nose. "Well, I think it's part learned behavior, but she also thinks I that tried to screw her butt-ugly husband, which I haven't and never would. I don't know why she thinks that when I never bothered to hide that I'm a lesbian. In fact, I slept with her best friend in high school. I don't think she knows about that, though."

Sure enough, as soon as Rachel glanced in their direction, she was moving. Only, she was coming closer, but stopped before she made it to them. Danny suspected that her sister just wanted to make sure it was Dane that she was looking at. After that, Rachel was off, undoubtedly going to find their parents.

"Are we about to get thrown out?" Nicole asked curiously.

"No, they might come over and ask us to leave. I'll probably say something clever like, 'fuck off' or 'make me' and then they'll leave us alone," Dane answered with a shrug.

Nicole breathed a sigh of relief. "I've never been thrown out of a family gathering."

"Well, they try with me all the time. It's not a big deal."

Nicole could not understand how that was not a big deal, but she watched how Danny took it with no problem. Eventually, Rachel and Russell approached them. Nicole was once again shocked to see how much Danny looked like the man who refused to claim her as his child. Dane looked like a softer, female, caramel version of Russell Wolfe, but he refused to accept that she was his daughter.

"Dane, what are you doing here?" Russell demanded, yanking on the lapels of his immaculate, silk dark blue suit.

"Minding my business. Pointing out bitches I've fucked," Dane answered casually. Nicole was a bit scandalized by the response and lightly slapped her lover for such a crude statement. Grey eyes glanced at Nicole, but Danny did not say anything in regards to reprimand.

"Well, perhaps you could go down your list with your next bitch somewhere else," Russell commented, sneering at Nicole.

"Please, imply or say that she's a bitch again, so I can have an excuse," Dane threatened her father. The glint in her smoky eyes made him think twice about saying anything.

Russell was actually a bit unnerved by the look in Dane's eyes. She had never eyed him in such away. She had never verbally defended any of her girls before either, not to him anyway. He was able to quickly shake off the shock and continued to press Dane.

"Look, is this about money? If you need money, you're not going to get any," Russell told her.

"Believe it or not, Nicole just wanted to meet my family. Nothing to do with money or even me wanting something. Nick, meet my bastard father, Russell Wolfe and my sister Rachel Lawrence." Danny then motioned to both of her relatives and then motioned to Nicole.

"Hello," Nicole said, holding out her hand for them to shake. Neither father nor sister returned the gesture and Nicole was left to let her hand fall by her side. Now, Russell's rude behavior, she expected. After having seen him deliberately hurt Danny, she knew that he was capable of a lot more than being rude. She thought that Danny's sister might be different, though. Obviously, it was wrong to hope.

"Dane, you really need to leave now. Daddy is throwing this party for a reason," Rachel hissed, blue eyes glaring at her baby sister.

Dane waved her off. "I know, I know. Running for governor. Whatever. Am I doing anything aside from standing here?" she pointed out. She had been there for almost a half-hour and had not offended a single soul. Now, she knew with her track record that did not mean much, but she was not doing anything and had no plans to do anything.

"You're making some of the guests uncomfortable," Rachel growled.

"Am I? Is it because they think I'm going to steal their valuables or fuck their daughters?" the former rocker inquired.

"Dane, just leave," Russell commanded in a hard tone, pointing back toward the front of the house.

"Look, last I checked, this was a Wolfe family gathering and I think my last name is still Wolfe, like it or not. I'm here and I'm not leaving. If you calmed down for a fucking minute, you'd see I'm not even doing anything, except standing here, minding my own damn business. Can I continue to do that?" Dane asked, almost as if she needed permission.

"Why did you even come? You hate these sorts of things," Rachel stated.

"I know. I just told you, *my girlfriend* wants to meet my family. So here we are, meeting family," Dane explained.

"What family? None of us are related to you," the blond Wolfe proclaimed, tone making it seem like she truly believed that.

Dane sighed and ran her hand through her hair. "I think a DNA test has said otherwise a couple of times, but whatever. Why don't you both just leave me be? I'm not bothering anyone. I'm not drinking, so I won't be wandering around seducing any women. Not to mention, my girlfriend is here with me if the urge did come over me to start seducing anybody. I promise you, she'll bust my chops as soon as she thinks I'm doing anything inappropriate," she informed them and then glanced over at Nicole.

"That's not the point. The point is that you have no right to be here," Russell informed her.

Nicole was stunned by his words. Danny's own father was telling her that she did not have a right to be at a *family* gathering. It seemed totally outrageous to her, completely unreal, and she was certain that it could not be the opinion of everyone at the party. It was just too absurd.

Dane rolled her eyes and then suddenly pulled Nicole away, not wanting to bother with her father and sister anymore. Nicole glanced back, wondering if the pair would follow them. Russell and Rachel glared at them as they fled, but did not chase them. Dane found a shady spot for them to people-watch.

"Hey, want something to drink? I'm sure they've got non-alcoholic stuff. I could get you some cold fruit or something too," Dane offered with a warm smile, showing that she was not affected by her father's words or behavior.

"Thank you," Nicole replied. If Danny was gone for a moment, it would give her a chance to process what just happened between Danny, Russell, and Rachel. It seemed so bizarre to her that it bordered on surreal.

Dane smiled again and was off. She needed a moment too, wanting to get herself together after her father and her sister pissed her off. She just hoped it was safe to leave her very attractive girlfriend for that moment. She knew that some people at the party had no shame and would hit on Nicole no matter; forget the fact that she had a girlfriend, was not interested in dating anyone aside from her girlfriend, or if she was much younger than the guy that would most likely hit on her. Anything went with this lot.

Nicole quickly learned that too. She did not have much time to gather her thoughts before a familiar face wandered over to her. Bryan flashed her a smile as he ambled his way over to her, looking to strike up a conversation.

"Hey there, beautiful. What are you doing here?" Bryan inquired, keeping a charming smile on his face, but unable to keep the lust out of his gaze.

"Waiting for Danny to come back with some drinks," Nicole answered.

"Danny?" he echoed in a perplexed tone. He was sure that there was no one called "Danny" at the party.

"Oh, excuse me, you know her better as Dane," Nicole explained. Now that she thought about it, she realized that everyone so far had referred to Danny as Dane. It seemed odd to her that they would all call her such a ridiculous nickname. She wondered why no one addressed Danny by at least her real name of Danielle. It was like they were trying to distance themselves from her, Nicole considered.

"So you're still with her? You do know that she's going to get bored with you soon enough and move onto the next hot chick," Bryan remarked.

Green eyes rolled. "I don't think you know her well enough to make that claim and considering how you're attempting to hit on me-which is pathetic by the way-doesn't give your statements much credibility."

Bryan had the nerve to look offended. "You think pretty highly of yourself, huh? I wouldn't waste my time on Dane's sloppy seconds. I was just trying to be nice and warn you."

"Okay, well, I now consider myself warned. How about you go away now?" she ordered, waving him off. She disliked being in his presence, knowing that he was capable of leaving his best friend to possibly be killed as he had done with Danny made her skin crawl.

Bryan looked down his nose at her before stalking away. Nicole hoped that Danny returned soon before some other lonely gentleman decided that she looked like she needed some company. Her wish was not answered, though.

"Nikki," Tyler called in a purr as he slithered up to her. The look in his deep brown eyes was one that she was used to from him, like a predator out to catch his prey. Well, she would not be falling for that one again.

"Tyler, I have constantly and consistently insisted that you not call me that," Nicole stated dryly.

"But, Nikki, you know you love it," he said, breathing down on her and making it clear that he had been drinking.

"I don't. In fact, I hate it whenever someone not related to me does it. I have told you that a number of times. Why do you insist on not listening?" she inquired with some bite in her tone.

Tyler frowned. "I'm sick of this game, *Nicole*. Whatever point you were trying to make by going out with Dane, fine, you've made it. Now, make the sensible decision of coming back to me. You know your mother wants you to. I doubt anyone in your family would accept Dane anyway."

"As a matter of fact, my family rather likes Danny. I'm sure given enough time, they'll love her and my mother will just have to deal with it, as will you. Now, get the hell away from me," Nicole ordered with disgust in her voice.

"Now, you listen here, Nikki," Tyler started, but he was cut off.

"This guy bothering you, Nick?" Dane inquired as she returned with a beverage and snack for her girlfriend.

"Very much so," Nicole answered.

"You going to do something about it, Dane?" Tyler challenged his cousin, turning around to look her in the eye.

Dane shrugged. "Nothing much. Just remember if we fight, people are going look at you as much they do me. Now, I don't care, but you, Mister Big-dreams-of-riding-Uncle-Russell's-coat-tails-to-the-big-leagues, might have a bit of a problem there. Do you really think they'll let you even hold a pen in his campaign if you get into a fist fight at the nomination celebration party?"

Tyler actually had to think on it for a second, but ultimately made the correct decision. He walked away while Dane rolled her eyes. Nicole frowned as she watched him slink away in defeat. Her attention was quickly taken from Tyler as Dane handed her a small plate with fruits on it.

"Oh, they have pineapples?" Nicole asked in some shock as she inspected the assorted fruits. She was more surprised that Danny remembered that she enjoyed pineapples. It was not something that they often had for Danny to see how much she enjoyed it, but obviously Dane listened enough to know the fruit was a favorite of hers.

"Yeah," Dane answered the obvious. Her focus stayed on her fleeing cousin for a moment longer. "He hasn't been bothering you at work, has he?" she asked curiously. Nicole had not say anything about Tyler in months, so she assumed that he was finally over Nicole, but seeing him sniffing at her now made Danny wonder.

"He's been on his best behavior at work because he knows one more slip-up would mean his job. My father caught him a couple of times making inappropriate advances toward female staff members. Now, the firm doesn't have a policy against coworkers dating, of course, but there is a sexual harassment policy in place. Tyler has been seen hitting on a couple of women who clearly were not happy for the attention. One more time and my father informed him that he will be dismissed."

Dane nodded. "That had to be a blow to the old Wolfe ego."

"Yeah, a Wolfe not God's gift to women, imagine that," Nicole teased, bumping her beloved with her hip.

"I'll have you know, I can get several sworn affidavits from people at this party to let you know that's not true. I just happened to retire from the job after meeting the one woman I do want to be a gift to," Dane remarked with a lop-sided smile.

"You just think you're too smooth, don't you?"

"I do try."

Nicole giggled a bit before taking a bite of her food. She shared with Danny, of course. They returned to people-watching and Dane continued to regale her girlfriend with tales that Nicole would rather not hear. Nicole could not believe the sheer number of women her lover had bedded, especially the number of straight women. Still, she let Danny talk because it seemed to be keeping her sweetheart calm.

"Oh, see him?" Dane pointed a few feet ahead of them. There was a tall, statuesque brunette male shaking hands with several well-to-do gentlemen. The brunette had a familiar look to him.

"Yes," Nicole confirmed.

"That is my big brother Michael. The forgotten son, who tries his best to be recognized. He's a lawyer, just like my dad. He sort of competes with Tyler for attention with my dad since they're both lawyers. I've been led to believe my brother's actually a pretty good lawyer. But, he doesn't handle crime cases, so I'll never know. In order to make himself useful to my dad, he became a tax attorney and he handles taxes for everybody, except me of course."

"Have you ever even paid taxes?" Nicole inquired, even though she could guess.

"Uh...no. Seriously, up until a couple of years ago, I didn't even know what taxes were," Dane admitted. There were some aspects of the world that she was rather innocent about.

"We'll work on that and make sure the government won't be coming after you in a few years. Now, are you going to introduce me to Michael?" Nicole asked.

Danny knew that was a request. Sighing, she took Nicole by the hand and led her over to Michael. He sneered as soon as he noticed Dane and then proceeded to ignore her.

"Michael, I want you to meet my girlfriend, Nicole," Dane said, speaking to her brother's back. Michael glanced over his shoulder, snidely looking Nicole up and down.

"Reduced to hiring call girls now, Dane?" he commented glibly.

A growl escaped Danny and put her hand on the back of her brother's neck. She applied a little pressure, giving him enough incentive to turn around. Familiar grey eyes greeted Nicole staring at her from behind brown locks and creamy skin. Aside for their complexion, Nicole could easily tell that Danny and Michael were closely related. Apparently, Russell Wolfe had strong genes.

"I think you owe my girlfriend an apology," Dane informed her brother, tightening her grip a little for him to understand.

Michael growled, more in pain than anger. "I am quite sorry, Nicole," he said through gritted teeth. As soon as the words left his mouth, his sister released him.

"Now was that so hard? I was just telling Nicole that you're a tax attorney," Dane commented, as if trying to start a conversation. Nicole took that to mean that Michael was not as bad as he seemed since Danny was trying to begin a conversation. In reality, Danny was just trying to get her brother on a topic that she would never come up in since she knew that Nicole was going to talk to him anyway.

"Yeah, so?" Michael replied, rolling his shoulders and trying to fix his suit jacket.

"She's a corporate lawyer. She works at Tyler's firm," Dane added in.

And oddly enough, a discussion began between Nicole and Michael. Dane was bored about three sentences in and drifted out of the talk. Every now and then, she glanced over to make sure Nicole was still by her side. She hated to find that Nicole was still conversing and seemingly enjoying it after a few minutes. Mentally groaning, she wondered if that meant that Nicole actually liked Michael. *But, he's such an asshole! But, then again, Nick gives everyone a chance. One of the things I love about her.*

Watching, she did not think that Nicole was actually enjoying Michael's presence. It was more like she was enjoying the talk. Dane decided to check back in attention-wise for just a moment and found out that they were debating with each other over social issues. Nicole was rather liberal in her views while Michael was very conservative and they were currently driving each other mad by making decent arguments with each other.

Eventually, Michael stormed away and Dane sighed, glad to see him go. Turning her attention back to her lover, she noticed Nicole frowning at her brother's back. Dane shrugged.

"Ready to go yet?" Dane inquired since Nicole seemed to be getting along with the Wolfe family almost as well as she did.

"No. I still want to meet people in your family. Besides, you haven't seen the two people you want to see," Nicole pointed out.

"Oh, right. How could I forget that?" Dane muttered, rubbing her head.

"Don't worry, baby. You get like this when you want to get back to that couch you love so much," the redhead teased.

Danny gave her girlfriend a sheepish look. She supposed that until she spotted the two people that she wanted to see, she could continue to introduce Nicole to people. While they made the rounds, people all stared and whispered about the couple. They ignored it all.

4: Family ties

Clouds drifted through the clear blue sky, being tracked and envied by grey eyes. Dane wished that she was going away-away from her family. The whispers and looks were bothering her. Not because they were directed at her, but because they were directed toward Nicole. She was certain it would not take much to set her off and have her beat the crap out of someone if they said the wrong thing to Nicole.

Nicole did not mind what they were saying about her, but she was a bit troubled by all of the remarks that she was hearing about Danny. Since Danny did not say anything or even seem to care, Nicole let it go. She was just trying to hold out until someone else roamed into Dane's vision that she wanted to introduce Nicole to. She also wanted to hold onto the hope that someone would recognize what a good person Danny was and accept the guitarist.

"Danny, isn't that your mother?" Nicole asked curiously, pointing at a woman watching them from across the lawn. The woman was a blond of average height wearing just as much jewelry as Rachel had been. Her brown eyes seemed to be clocking the couple in a manner that Nicole could not put her finger on. It did not seem hostile, but it did not seem friendly either.

"Yeah," Dane answered, sparing her mother a bored glance.

Nicole waited for a moment. "Well, are you going to introduce me?"

"Why? Not like she'll say anything back. You'd have better luck introducing yourself than having me do it," the ebony-haired woman commented.

Although Nicole had heard the stories of how Danny's mother ignored her, it seemed that she forgot all about them. She might have even thought that Danny was exaggerating because she took Dane by the hand and proceeded to lead her toward the older woman. Danny sighed, but she

did not put up a struggle. Whatever Nicole wanted, Nicole got. Really, she wanted Nicole to leave the family gathering feeling similar to how Danny felt when she left Nicole's family gathering, even though she knew that would be impossible. She had felt joy and acceptance with Nicole's family. That would never happen for Nicole with the Wolfe family because she was with Dane-the outsider, the unwanted one. She just could not get Nicole to comprehend that their families were two different animals.

Dane watched her feet as they moved, but was able to stop when Nicole halted. The strong-willed redhead wasted no time introducing herself to Dane's mother-Christine Wolfe. The older woman was so stunned by the bold action that she was not too sure how to react. She actually shook Nicole's hand when it was offered.

"Pleasure to meet you, Missus Wolfe. I have heard some about you," Nicole commented. *It does me no good to point out that most of it was bad, but sources outside of Danny have told me that she at least contributes a lot to charity, so she can't be all bad.*

"And I you, but they have rarely been in connection to anyone other than Tyler and your well-known parents," Christine replied politely. Her tone and posture held a certain grace to it. She did not seem like the type to just abandon a child based on skin color, Nicole thought, but alas it seemed to be true.

The green-eyed attorney feigned being shocked. "My well-known parents?"

"You may not know it, but my husband faced your mother in court several times many years ago. They had many fierce debates and I know they consider each other to be their arch nemesis. Surely you were too young to remember," Christine said.

"Indeed. My parents' careers were not very important to me during those years. They did not see any reason to include me in such business either." Although, they did feel the need to inform her about Russell once she got into law. Her mother had a particular hatred for the man since she had gone up against him in court so many times; Nicole suspected Kate's intense dislike of him influenced her opinion on Danny. It was odd since Kate did not hold Russell against Tyler, she thought, but then again Russell did not raise Tyler. Not that he raised Danny either, but Kate did not know that.

"Yet you are a lawyer yourself," Christine remarked, a small, almost pleasant smile playing on her lips.

Nicole shrugged. "But I am no longer a child."

Christine nodded. "As liberal as your parents are, I'm shocked to see you here."

"As you can see, I came with your daughter," Nicole pointed out, motioning to the silent guitarist.

Christine did not even glance Dane's way. "Enjoy yourself," the blond woman said to Nicole before walking away.

Nicole was not sure what to make of that behavior. She turned to Danny, thinking that she might get an explanation. Dane was not paying attention to the whole exchange, not really caring about it. Nicole was about to come right out and ask, but Dane beat her to speaking.

"Oh, there's Adam," Dane said and grabbed for her lover's hand. Before Nicole could react, she was being pulled toward Adam.

Nicole turned her attention to taking in the man that they were nearing. He looked older than she imagined he would. Adam was a brunette like Michael and like Russell. There were strands of blond hair in his hair, like Danny's hair. He had deep brown eyes, like Christine's eyes. Like all of the Wolfe children, Adam was tall and seemed to possess a power within him like a predatory animal that poured out just from the way that he stood.

"Hey, Adam," Dane called, causing the man to turn.

"Dane," he greeted her with a small smile. It would seem that someone in the family was happy to see the youngest, Nicole thought.

"Hey, Adam. I want you to meet my girlfriend, Nicole Cardell," Dane introduced the pair, motioning to her lover. "Nick, this is my eldest brother, Adam." She waved her hand in the direction of the well-dressed man before them.

"Pleasure to meet you," Adam said, putting his hand out to shake Nicole's hand.

"The feeling is mutual," Nicole replied. She wished that she could say that Danny had told her so much about him, but that would be a lie. Danny had not said much about her oldest brother.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Dane," Adam commented, shock evident in his eyes.

"Well, not everyday when your dad runs for governor, is it?" Dane replied, as if that made any sense. She did not give a good goddamn about her father and his life and everyone knew that.

"No, it's not, but still, you usually don't come to these things, especially lately. It's been a while since anyone's saw you aside from Tyler. I have heard some things about that situation too," Adam stated, glancing over at Nicole.

Dane waved it off. "Like I once said in a song, rumors don't do the truth justice. Besides, Tyler likes to spend his time talking out of his ass."

"Makes sense since his head spends much of its time up there," Adam remarked with a chuckle. "But, I can guess there's not much truth to the rumor about you stealing a girl named Nicole from Tyler if you're introducing this pretty lady as your girlfriend. I have to admit, from the way the rumor was told to me, I am surprised that you both appear to be amazingly healthy for drug

addicts." He sounded serious about that, Nicole noted. She wondered what other horrible rumors were going around about her and Danny.

"You know as well as I do that drugs are bad for you. Besides, even if I still used, Nicole would've cracked her whip and broke me of that habit really fast, which I guess is something else you could relate to," Danny quipped, not caring if her remark crossed the line.

Adam chuckled and nodded, but decided not to comment on the tail end of her statement. "I don't think I've ever met a girlfriend of yours and don't take this the wrong way, but she isn't what I expected from you."

"There haven't been many and this one is definitely the last. I was lucky to find her and I plan to keep her," Dane said with certainty. Nicole smiled from that.

"Planning the wedding already? That's good. Make sure you invite Thomas and Luke. You know they're very upset with you," Adam reported.

"I'll bet. I've got to be the worst aunt in the history of aunts," Dane sighed, running her hand through her hair. *Not that they know that.* "Did you bring them by any chance?" There was hope in her voice for the first time during the party.

"No, I didn't bring them. This seemed like it would be too adult-orientated for them. Could you imagine them here? They would be crying to leave ten minutes in," Adam replied with a light laugh.

Nicole gave her lover a look. "That sounds like someone else I know."

Adam smiled. "I can imagine. Dane, it would be better to see you under less populated circumstances. I doubt Dad told you, but we are having a family dinner Friday to celebrate this together. Do you think you could make it? Thomas and Luke will be there and you could bring Nicole," he enticed her.

"I dunno..." Dane muttered, scratching the end of her nose in contemplation. She really would prefer not seeing her family again, but she would love to see her brother's two boys.

"We'd love to attend," Nicole chimed in, earning a lingering look from her sweetheart.

"That's great. Everyone should be there for something like this. How often does one's father run for governor, after all?" Adam remarked, smiling proudly. He failed to notice his sister roll her eyes, even though she had just uttered the same phrase not too long ago. The difference was that Adam was serious about it.

"You're right. That is something special. Thank you for inviting us," Nicole said graciously.

"Thank you for taking care of my little sister. She can be such a handful," Adam chuckled and he reached out, like he was going to ruffle Dane's hair. Grey eyes shot his hand a look and that

stopped him. His hand fell to his side and he chuckled a bit again, sounding slightly uncomfortable.

"A handful, right," Dane grumbled. *Like you'd fucking know anything beyond the stories you hear.*

"Well, I have to get back to my wife before she realizes I slipped away when she was speaking to her gardening friends," Adam said. "Nicole, it was a pleasure. Dane, it was good to see you."

"Yeah," Dane grunted.

"It was a pleasure," Nicole said with a smile, shaking Adam's hand again.

Danny wanted to leave now, but she doubted that mentioning that to Nicole would have been a good idea. While she had no doubt Nicole would have agreed with her, she did not want to ruin the day for her beloved, who was very social. Nicole pretty much took the reins and introduced herself to people, letting them know that she was there with "Danny." Dane only stood back while Nicole chatted many people up, getting into debates with some, and seemingly making friends with others.

Hours that seemed like an eternity to Dane passed before Nicole was tugging her back to the front of the house, so that they could get in the car and go home. Dane sighed in relief when she hit the plush leather passenger seat. She was going to just curl up in her seat and go to sleep, but Nicole was still buzzing and apparently wished to compare notes about the day.

"That was quite entertaining and delightful. I didn't expect your family to have so many people there that I would actually get along with," Nicole said.

"Yeah," Dane sniffed.

Nicole glanced at her lover and figured out that Danny was not in the mood to talk about the party overall. "Um...so, it's kind of cute that you and your siblings are all named after people in the Bible," she commented. She did think it was cute and it seemed like something to say that did not involve the party.

"Cute? I think it's creepy and maybe even a little blasphemous," the musician remarked. *Virtuous we are not.*

"Who was the religious one, your mother or your father?" Nicole asked. She knew that Danny was far from religious. Danny did not even seem to have much of a philosophy when it came to like, aside from "don't die" anyway. Of course, Nicole thought that was adorable.

Dane chuckled. "My mother, of course. Do you really think my father has even looked at a holy book?"

"Possibly by accident," the lawyer joked.

"Yeah, it probably burned his retinas."

Nicole laughed a little. "So, your mother? Is she still religious?"

"Nah. Used to be Lutheran or something like that. I imagine that she gave up after realizing who she was married to, but I don't think that's it."

"Then what do you think it is?"

Dane glanced over at Nicole and then turned her attention back to the window. "Me."

"You?"

"Yeah, me. Michael told me that we stopped going to church a lot after I was born. Rachel said Mom lost faith a few years after she had me. Apparently, she was praying for God to turn me white or some bullshit and it didn't happen. They do say God answers all prayers, but most of the time the answer is no."

Nicole looked skeptical. "Danny, they were probably just being mean-spirited children. You know how kids can be. I've been told that sometimes the older kids pick on the younger ones too. Hell, sometimes Philip picks on Sabrina and Eddie because he's bored. Perhaps your brother and sister were doing that."

"Doubt it," Dane replied. There was always a chance that they were just being mean, as they had that tendency. Unfortunately, she felt like evidence in her life told her that they were being truthful in that regard. She was the reason her mother lost her faith. "But, I don't remember us ever going to church, not together anyway. I know a couple of times, they got all dressed up, but I didn't go for whatever reason."

"Danny..." Nicole sighed, not too sure what else to say. "It was a long time ago. They weren't so terrible today."

"No, my father and sister only tried to throw us out, my mother ignored my presence, and my brother called you a whore. Nothing terrible about that," the younger woman grumbled. *Why the hell does Nick want to make my family something they're not? They're fucking assholes.*

"Danny, it was not that terrible. Your father and sister didn't throw us out. Your mother, yes, ignored you, but she didn't say anything horrible. I thought that Michael was only joking, but I guess you would know him better than I do. He and I had a decent conversation after that. Adam invited us to that dinner. Maybe if you spend time with your family and show them how you've changed, they'll change too. You've said it yourself that you've matured. Perhaps they'll recognize that and open up to you."

"They don't see me, Nick. They have a picture of me and to them I am that picture. Nothing changes that," Dane stated.

"I don't think so. They're all intelligent people and they seem somewhat reasonable. I'm sure things can change."

Dane only looked at her lover, not too sure how to argue that one. She supposed anything was possible, but in all honesty, she did not think that anything would change between her and her family anytime soon. Not to mention, she really did not give a damn. She had gotten along for twenty-five years without them and was sure that she could continue on without them.

"I wish your nephews were there. I'm sure they're adorable," Nicole said.

A small smile worked its way onto Danny's mouth. "They are. I haven't seen them in over a year, though. Haven't talk to them either. They probably won't remember me."

"Isn't that reason enough to go to the dinner then?"

Dane reached over, taking Nicole's hand in her own. "You're right about that, Nick. Thanks for setting me straight there."

"I don't want to set you too straight," the redhead joked.

Danny could not help laughing. "You are so corny."

Nicole smiled. "You like me corny." That was a point that could not be argued.

Nicole stretched as she pushed away from her desk. She was sitting in her office and now preparing to go to lunch. She was much more agreeable about going to lunch with her friends lately. They suspected it had to do with the fact that her workload was not as heavy as it was in the past. They enjoyed having her out, seeing how lively she was now.

Grabbing her jacket, she headed out to the lobby to wait for her two friends. Out of the corner of her eye while walking the hall, she noticed Tyler watching her. He did not approach her, not needing the trouble in his life right now. She had noticed him watching her Saturday when she was at the party, after Danny basically shooed him away. She recalled the anger in his eyes and the envy on his face when he saw her with Danny.

Right now, she supposed he had some anger and sorrow in his gaze. She did not stop to contemplate the look. She did not care.

"Since when do you beat me down here?" Nicole's best and oldest friend called to her. A bright smile lit up Mina's chocolate face as she approached the chemistry student.

"I thought I would surprise you. Where's Clara?" Nicole asked curiously.

"She's coming. She's got a client on the phone that seems to think the more he bugs her, the better things will go for his trial. The way she tells it, he's enough to drive her to become a prosecutor," Mina joked, laughing a bit.

Nicole laughed. They only had to wait half-a-minute before the last person of their trio showed up. Clara looked a little worse for wear with lines under her eyes. They knew it was because of her latest client. Clara typically enjoyed being a defense attorney, feeling like she was defending the wronged "little guy" most of the time. But, there were a few cases that she got that rubbed her the wrong way, like when her client was a pest and liked to play lawyer.

"God, I needed this break," Clara groaned as she fell into her seat at their favorite café.

"You sound like this one used to," Mina commented, nodding toward Nicole.

"I never said that," Nicole argued. "Unless you can cite evidence on occasions those words have left my mouth, I would thank you not to say it again," she added as a joke.

"Nicole, you know I'm not Danny. I will argue you into the ground over this issue and bring several items to the table, even if my statement is false," Mina remarked with a smile.

"Speaking of Danny, how is she? You said you guys were going to visit her family this Saturday and you didn't think she really wanted to go," Clara pointed out. She and Mina smiled broadly as they recalled how excited their friend was last week when she told them that Danny was going to introduce her to the Wolfe family. They both thought if she was that excited just to meet the family-that they all knew Danny disliked to a degree-then they could not imagine how happy she was going to be if Danny ever got up the nerve to propose.

"Danny's fine. We did go to her parents' house on Saturday. They had a huge gathering for her father, who's running for governor. I doubt I'll be voting for him, but I met most of her family. They weren't very kind to her, but they weren't completely evil toward her either. We were invited to dinner by her oldest brother, Adam. He seemed to like her and she seemed to like him. I think the rest of her family might warm up to her if they get to know her and I think she might like them too. Everyone deserves a family," Nicole replied.

Mina nodded. "Be careful with that, Nicole. I haven't spent a lot of time with Danny, but I get the feeling that she'll do just about anything for you, even if it gets on her nerves. You might be pushing her into something that she doesn't want."

"Why would she not want her family?" Nicole asked curiously, forehead wrinkling in confusion. *How could someone not want a family, their family?*

"She just might not. Has she expressed any desire to see or be with her family?" Mina inquired. She knew that Nicole had a close relationship to her own family, so she probably could not grasp someone not wanting to be with her own. It was not a concept that she understood completely either since she got along fairly well with her family, but she was open to the possibility. She

doubted that Nicole could even fathom the possibility that someone would not want to be with her family.

"No, but I'm sure if she spent some time around them, they would see just how amazing she is and she can get some of the attention that she should've gotten as a child," Nicole replied.

"That's a dangerous assumption. Tyler doesn't seem to like her much and I've gotten the idea that he's a better representation of the family than she is. Couldn't you be setting her up for something bad?" Clara asked.

"I don't think so. They weren't that bad Saturday, really. I'm sure they'll get better with time. Danny needs contact. She's very closed off and you guys know that. You've seen her. She huddles into herself in crowds and at gatherings," Nicole pointed out. "Besides, if you saw her with my family, you'd know how much she'd like to have a family. She was so good with my little cousins and everything."

"Well, then again, you might be right," Mina conceded. "I just hope you're letting her decide these things and not just jumping on it because you want to do it. You know Danny's not going to disagree with you."

Nicole thought on it for a second. "Well, I sort of jumped on dinner. But, she agreed after I explained why I did it. Her nephews are going to be at the dinner and she loves the little guys. She has their baby pictures in her wallet. They're rumbled from where she's pulled them out and just held them in her hand. She wants to see them, but she wasn't going to speak up about it to her brother."

"Sounds like you did the right thing then," Clara agreed.

"I hope so. She hasn't seen her nephews in a while. I'm guessing more than a year. Plus, she seemed like she didn't mind her eldest brother," Nicole said.

"How much older is he?" Mina asked curiously.

"I think Danny said he's about eight or nine years older than she is. She doesn't talk much about any of her siblings. But, like I said, I get the feeling she doesn't mind the eldest. He might be the one to get close to her," Nicole explained.

"That's good. So, how did Tyler take seeing you on Danny's arm, mingling with the blue-bloods and working the crowd?" Mina wore a teasing smile as she asked the question.

"He was jealous, yes. Danny threatened to start a fight with him because he wouldn't leave me alone. She knew he wouldn't since it was such an important party. Tyler has hopes of working the campaign for his uncle, you know? So getting into a fight wouldn't have helped in that," the chemistry student replied, chuckling a bit at the memory.

"That was smart of her. Does she know he wants to work on the campaign?" Mina asked.

"She knows a lot more about him than he knows about her," Nicole answered.

"How's school going?" Clara inquired, more curious about that than whatever new problem Tyler was trying to work himself into.

"Going good. I can't believe I'm about to be done with my first semester. It just amazes me and it feels so great." The redhead flashed a brilliant smile.

"That's good. It shows," Clara pointed out, as she always did. Not matter what, she would always thank Danny for pretty much forcing Nicole to go back to school. It seemed to be the best thing- outside of dating Danny-that Nicole had done in a long time.

Nicole smiled, knowing that it did show. She felt different ever since she started going to school. She felt better, as if she was becoming whole and enjoying life. She felt like Danny gave that to her, gave her the chance to really live. She hoped that she could do the same for her beloved, and one of the ways to do that seemed to be trying to patch things up with Danny's family.

Dane sat on the couch, staring down at a well-worn photo in her hand. It was a tiny, wallet-sized picture. Grey eyes focused on the cherubic, smiling faces of two very young boys. Luke and Thomas were her nephews; the only ones that she had as far as she knew. She had met them pretty late in their lives. Thomas was five now as far as she knew and she had met him when he was three. Luke was eight and she had met him when he was six. Something inside of her instantly clicked with them, though. Looking into their eyes had touched something inside of her that none of her family members had ever tried to encounter. It was something that she never knew was there, until those two wonderful boys.

"They're worth going," Dane told herself. Her nephews were worth putting up with any and everything her family could throw at her. *It'll be worth it...unless of course they hate my fucking guts now too.*

She considered the very highly possibility that her nephews forgot her or hated her by now. As scary as that seemed to her, she would rather know than speculate. So, she was now very much in favor of going to dinner with her family. All she had to do was figure out the outfit for it before Nicole came home from work.

Shorts was the easiest choice. Nicole never bothered her about the shorts as long as they were below her knee, accepting it as part of her style even for formal events. Of course, she did not wear shorts everywhere. Much of the time on her own she could figure out what was "pants" formal and what was "shorts" formal.

After the shorts, she had to pick out a sweater vest. The more she wore the vests, the more she liked them; the type of vest did not really matter. She was pretty sure that soon enough they would work their way into her everyday casual wear. She was sure Nicole would like that; it would mean not having to be seen with her in any more ratty tee-shirts.

The vest that she chose was purple with an argyle pattern. She picked a lavender colored short-sleeve shirt to go underneath it. Dressing quickly, she went to the mirror and ran her hand through her hair a couple of times; she considered that action just as good-if not better-than actually combing her unruly inky mop of hair. Of course, when Nicole came in, if it did not pass inspection, she was going to come under fire.

Doing the best she could without supervision, Dane left the bedroom and made her way to the living room. She listened to music until Nicole came in. The lawyer sat down next to her lover and sighed as Dane wrapped her in a warm embrace. They were silent for a long moment, cuddled up together and enjoying the closeness.

"You're kind of eager to go to this dinner, huh? You're all dressed and ready to go," Nicole noted.

"You know this way I get to huff at you for taking so long," Dane remarked with a smile.

"You're not getting off that easily, silly pup," Nicole commented, running one hand through her sweetheart's soft hair. "We have to do something about this, first and foremost. Can I style it?" she requested, a little eagerness peppering her tone.

Danny smiled a bit. "You know you can do whatever you want to do it and any other part of me," she commented with a sly twinkle in her slate-colored eyes.

"I know that's true. So, let's go make you presentable and then I can get myself ready. Hopefully, we'll get there fashionably late," the auburn-haired woman said.

It was a rare day where Nicole was allowed to play in Dane's hair aside from running her fingers through it. Most of the time, it did not occur to her to do it. She liked the wild look that her lover tended to sport. Danny tended to only let her do her hair when they were going some place where she did not want to embarrass Nicole, like an office party. Other than that, Dane let her hair fall how it may.

Thankfully, as far as time concerns went, there was no need to wash Dane's untamed mane. Ever since she started living with Nicole, she had been taking very good care of herself and her personal hygiene; she had come along way from when she first showed up at the house smelling like a cross between a sewage plant and sulfur. Her transformation from something that would choke a skunk to something slightly sweet and fresh was immediate. Now, Nicole loved the way that Dane smelled, very subtle and comforting. The redhead could not get enough of Danny's smell. To her, Dane's scent equaled security and warmth.

Danny purred as Nicole worked her hands through her thick, soft hair. Gentle combing and brushing along with oil for her scalp made silver eyes flutter shut. Danny thought that she could get used to the treatment. *I might have to let her play with my hair whenever she wants to. I forgot it feels this good.*

"One day, we're going to get you into a salon and then get them to draw out your highlights, which I so love," Nicole cooed into her girlfriend's ear. She thought the light blond highlights that ran through Danny's hair was sexy.

"Never," Dane answered in a whisper.

"But, I love your natural highlights," she persisted.

Dane shook her head. She had never been to a salon and she was never going to. Nicole was the only person that was going to touch her head aside from herself. Nicole chuckled lightly at her lover's stubbornness. She quickly finished her task and smiled at her good work.

"Not one to pat myself on the back, I feel like I did a very good job here," Nicole said.

Opening her eyes, Dane looked in the mirror. Looking back at her was a woman with shining ebony locks that were swept to the side with a few strands falling into her face. It was nothing fancy, which was just like her. She smiled, enjoying just how well her lover knew her and knew what to do with her.

"Like it?" Nicole asked.

Dane nodded, turning and giving Nicole a kiss on the cheek. The action got a smile from the lawyer. Nicole put her hands on Danny's cheeks and tenderly dragged her fingers down to Dane's chin.

"A little makeup?" Nicole proposed, teasing of course.

"Get on!" Dane barked with a laugh, lightly swatting her lover on the butt.

The redhead chuckled and went on her way, going to get ready. Danny returned to mentally prepping herself for the dinner while Nicole took a shower and got dressed in an alluring, teal dress that fell to her knees. When she marched into the living room, her heels sounding against the floor made her presence known and drew Dane's attention to her.

"Do you own a dress that doesn't make me want to rip you out of it?" Dane inquired curiously, eyes glued to the torso-hugging material.

Nicole giggled. "I hope it stays that way. I love that hungry look you get in your eyes when you see me. It lets me know you still want me."

"I'll always want you, angel," Dane declared, getting up from her seat and walking over to Nicole for a closer look. Running her hands up and down the soft material drew a groan from the redhead, who once again stood at Dane's height thanks to her shoes. She leaned in for a kiss because of the attention.

"You're so sweet, honey. Now, let's get going, so I can meet your nephews," Nicole commented with a grin.

Dane shrugged and dragged her feet out the door. She really did want to see her nephews, but she would prefer it without the headache that came along with it. Who knew what her family might say to Nicole while they were there. She tried not to even think about it.

The drive was spent in comfortable silence. They arrived at the house and did not have a problem getting in. The servants did look quite surprised with Dane's appearance. They received lingering looks, but no one said anything.

"Where's everyone?" Dane asked in a disinterested tone.

The servants pointed her in the right direction and she walked off with Nicole at her side. Nicole was awestruck by the inside of the mansion. Everything looked too expensive to ever touch. Rich paintings, vases, and even statues lined the walls. Dane did not even seem to see that as she walked deeper into the house. The smell of cigar smoke reached her nose as they approached a room, which Dane walked into.

The sight of Russell sharing cigars with his two sons and his son-in-law greeted the two women. Dane did not seem fazed by it and turned to leave the room. She just wanted to see that Adam was there, so she would know if her nephews were there or not. Unfortunately, she would not be able to make a swift getaway like she desired.

"Dane," Russell and Michael sort of growled the name.

Rachel's husband, an average-sized, good looking blond male named Duncan sneered in Dane's direction. His ice blue eyes tried to cut into her, but she ignored it altogether. She always thought he was such a follower, trying his best to fit in with the Wolfe men, wanting to leech off of them like so many others. Oddly enough, she thought that was rather Wolfe-like behavior, wanting to take advantage of others and use them. She did not even waste time introducing him to Nicole, not now and not when they were at the party before.

"Hello," Nicole greeted them, trying her best to ignore the hostile tone. She was certain that if they gave Danny enough time, then they would warm up to her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Michael demanded to know, taking a step toward his sister. Dane pointed to Adam as her answer.

"I invited her," Adam admitted with a light shrug. "Nothing wrong with her being here. Plus, she wants to see Luke and Thomas."

"You're actually going to let her around your children? You insane?" Michael inquired, turning to face Adam.

The eldest shrugged again. "They like her. And she's good with them. Besides, she's never done anything wrong with them before," he explained. He then turned his attention back to Dane. "They're with the women folk in the sitting room," he informed her.

Dane nodded and took her leave, holding onto Nicole's hand as she did so to tow Nicole along. The lawyer lingered for a moment, just in time to hear Russell and Michael barking on Adam for inviting Dane. If Dane heard the noise, she ignored it, continuing on her journey to the room that held her nephews. Danny had a lot of practice ignoring things from her family, so it was easier for her to do it.

Coming to the room opening, Dane leaned against the wall, hearing a small male voice speaking. Grey eyes fell to the back a young boy and an even smaller boy standing next to him. The boy was reciting a poem and the smaller one seemed to be acting it out. A smile spread on Dane's face and pride shined in her eyes, enough to put a smile on Nicole's face.

"Thomas is such a ham," Dane muttered, shaking her head. Suddenly, she started clapping, calling attention to herself.

All eyes went to the applauding musician. Dane did not even bother looking at the three adult women in the room, focusing on the two boys. They were adorable little blonds with chubby cheeks. The older one-Luke-was wearing a blue suit with a silky red tie. Thomas was dressed similar to Dane, wearing a red sweater vest, white long-sleeve shirt, and black pants.

"DANE!" the boys squealed with joy and charged the former rocker. They latched onto her legs and hugged her tight. A grin spread across her face, overjoyed that they had not forgotten her after all.

"Hey, how are my band mates doing?" Dane asked, reaching down to pat them both on the back.

"Where have you been? You missed my birthday!" Luke complained in just about the cutest voice.

"So sorry, little man," Dane said sincerely. The thing that made it worse was that she and Luke almost had the same birthday. When he found that out, he thought it was the greatest thing ever and looked forward to celebrating with her. She had let him down.

"S'okay. Cool that you're here. You gonna sing with us?" Luke requested with a bright, angelic grin and Thomas nodded.

Dane blinked in disbelief. *How can they even remember that I sing? That was so long ago. Why do they remember me?*

"I could sing with you guys later," Dane answered. "I want you guys to meet a friend of mine," she informed them and then turned her attention to Nicole. She put her arm around the redhead. "Luke, Thomas, this is my best friend, Nicole Cardell. Nicole, these are two of the most amazing kids I have ever met, Luke and Thomas," she said, pointing to the boys as she said their names.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Nicole said, reaching down to shake their hands.

"Dane, your friend is really pretty," Luke commented, giving a handshake and nod while he was at it.

"I know she is," Dane concurred with a smile.

"Thank you very much," Nicole said to the little boy. She then turned her attention to Thomas. "You don't talk much, do you, sir?" she asked.

"I talk just fine," he proclaimed in a proud tone. She had to laugh a bit because of that.

"Thomas could probably do the State of the Union address at this point," Rachel chimed in, obviously bragging about the child while being snippy toward the redhead while she was at it.

"I didn't mean anything by it," Nicole defended her statement.

"Don't pay her any mind, Nick," Dane said. She turned her attention to her mother, sister, and sister-in-law for a moment. "Nick, you know Christine and Rachel already. The other lady is Sharon Wolfe, Adam's wife."

Sharon was a blond woman with her tresses curled at the end. Her face was long, but she looked graceful. Her blue eyes appeared cold, though. Nicole wondered if her stiff and frosty demeanor was directed at Dane or if that was just how she was. She would quickly find out that it was because of Danny. Sharon was fine with Rachel and Christine, but acted like Danny was the devil incarnate.

Dane ignored her sister-in-law, along with the other members of her family. Her attention focused solely on her nephews, who were easily awed by her. Sharon seemed to have a problem with it and continuously tried to get the boys away from their aunt, but somehow they always made it back next to her. Even at dinner, the boys somehow shifted from their seats next to their mother down the table where Dane was purposely being isolated.

Nicole made conversation with the Wolfe family. It was not that difficult, especially since Adam was trying to engage her. Most of the family seemed quite shocked that she was as intelligent and articulate as she was. Every now and then, they would say something biting, but Nicole did not let that bother her. She never snapped back, but said something to glance over it or use it as route to another topic of conversation. Eventually, they just spoke to her like they would any other person.

Dane was silent the entire time and walked away from the table as soon as she finished eating. It was not surprising that her nephews followed her, even when their mother scolded them for leaving the table without permission. The reprimands did not stop the boys from going, though.

"Let them go, Sharon. You know they weren't going to be able to sit there much longer anyway," Adam pointed out.

Sharon reluctantly admitted that her husband made a point. Dinner did not last too much longer and Sharon went in search for her sons. Nicole went along, figuring that the day went well enough for she and Dane to leave before they wore out their welcome...which she liked to believe they did have since the Wolfe family was speaking with her. She considered that she might be able to help them start talking with Danny.

Nicole could not help smiling when they found Dane singing with the boys, doing the air-guitar too. It was clear that the boys loved every second of it from just the sheer delight on their flushed faces. It seemed that being in even a make-believe band was energy consuming and a workout.

"I hate to break up your concert, but Danny, we should get going," Nicole said, drawing attention to herself and the other adults standing behind her.

"Go? No, Dane, you can't go yet!" Thomas objected. He had been having so much fun playing the air-drums.

"You still have to do the rap for us!" Luke pointed out.

"Guys, you heard Nicole, Dane has to leave now," Sharon said, thankful for the out, so her children's anger would not be directed at her.

"Yeah, you guys heard Nicole. She drove us here, so I have to go," Dane explained to the young boys.

"You'll come around again, right?" Luke implored her while Thomas just looked up at her with big, watery grey eyes.

"Um..." Not sure how to answer that, a hand went through Dane's hair.

"Of course she'll come around again," Adam chimed in, walking into the room to comfort the boys. "Maybe even next weekend she would be willing to come and play with you guys in the garden," he added, directing that bit toward his baby sister.

Again, Dane's hand went through her hair. Nicole answered for her, saying that Dane would love it, which she would, but could not say it out loud. Dane was enjoying her time with her nephews, but she knew if she came next week, she would have a supervised visit with Sharon breathing down her neck to make sure she did not eat the boys or something. Still, she did not object.

Goodbyes were said, most of them coming from Nicole, but Dane did bid her nephews and eldest brother farewell. Luke and Thomas walked the couple out, wanting as much time with Dane as possible. The couple drove off to the chubby waves of Dane's nephews.

"Those boys are too adorable!" Nicole declared on the ride home.

"They are that," Dane agreed.

"And you're good with them."

"Only because they like music. Luke really likes poetry, so he actually prefers to hear me rap. I taught him how to freestyle the last time I saw him," Dane said proudly.

Green eyes widened a bit from being impressed. "Wow, I wish you would have told him to freestyle. Hell, I would like to hear you freestyle."

"Some other time, angel. I do wanna thank you for agreeing not just to next week, but to this week too. It was great seeing Luke and Thomas again," the younger woman stated.

"I told you," Nicole replied with a happy smile. She was sure that after a few more visits, Dane would warm up to the adults in her family and her family would warm up to her. It would be fantastic. She was sure of that; everyone deserved to have a loving family, after all.

Next time: Dane's time with her nephews at her parents' go as expected.

**Shea K's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ New Cuts, Old Wounds ~

by Shea K.

Disclaimer: Welcome to another original story by this lunatic. This is the sequel to Scarred for Life. The story and the characters are mine. Do not use them without my permission. Also, any and all characters, events, and situations found in these stories are fictional. If there are any similarities between these things and real people, events, and situations, it is purely a coincidence.

General warning: eventually there's talk of child abuse and there is some mild violence and lots of extreme language. I'm sure you know there will be a sexual relationship between two women, but if you don't know this is me warning you. There will be a sexual relationship between two women in this story. Get out while you still can!

Special thanks to my betas, RevSrVixena and Ken-zero.

Find yourself wanting to see more from this lunatic? Probably not, I know. But, if you are, then you can find more of my insanity here for fanfics: <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/932292/> and for more original work here: <http://www.fictionpress.com/u/576301/>

Contact the lunatic at: starving.lunatic@gmail.com and lemme know what you think of the story. Thanks and enjoy.

5: What familiarity breeds

Nicole was sitting at the table, reading the paper while Danny worked on breakfast. The older woman had tried to help, but Danny insisted on doing everything that morning. She said she wanted to make up for her bad attitude about Nicole accepting the invitation to dinner because she genuinely enjoyed seeing her nephews.

"Danny, you know, you're very good with kids," Nicole commented as her girlfriend sat down their breakfast plates.

"Nah, just Luke and Thomas. And they're easy because they like music," Dane replied nonchalantly.

"Untrue. You were good with my cousins too," the redhead pointed out.

Dane thought on it and then shrugged. "They liked music too. Just like the couple of kid students I have. I'm not that great with kids."

"How often do you encounter children to make that statement?"

"Uh..." Danny opened her mouth and then closed it as she realized what she was about to answer. "Doesn't matter," she replied. The last thing she wanted to do was unintentionally prove Nicole's point.

"It does matter and you know it. You're very good with children. Have you ever thought about having one of your own?"

Dane eyed her girlfriend very carefully, trying to gauge what the conversation was truly about. Nicole took a sip of her juice, not appearing too serious about the matter, so Danny felt it was safe to assume that the discussion was not a lead into them having children. So, she figured that it was all right to be honest, but she had to make sure she was not brutal. There was no telling when the conversation would shift and she would be unaware of the change because of a few misplaced words.

"It never occurred to me to have kids. I always thought one of the great things about me being gay was that I wouldn't have to worry about any accidental pregnancies. I mean, remember I told you I wasn't responsible enough to take care of a dog? I knew I wasn't responsible enough to take care of a kid," Dane explained.

Nicole nodded; that was an acceptable answer. "Well, as I said, you are good with them."

"I don't think so. I don't think I've got what it takes to have a kid. I had a very screwed up childhood and I think I would just screw my kid up."

The redhead smiled a little, but shook her head. "I disagree. I think you are a decent human being and you would take your negative experiences and turn them into something positive for your

child. You know what hurts, so you would go out of your way to make sure that did not happen to your child."

Dane nodded. "But, that doesn't mean I know the limits. I could always go in the total opposite direction of what happened to me, which would be just as bad. I could end up spoiling the child or smothering the kid with too much attention. It works out best for me if at the end of the night, I don't have to take the kid home."

"I guess you make a point. Do you think that maybe you'll grow and be capable of knowing when you're doing too much or smothering the child?"

The question caused the copper-toned brow to wrinkle. "Nick, are you going somewhere with this? Do you want to have a baby? If so, I don't think I'm ready for that," the guitarist stated honestly, putting her hand through her hair.

A chuckle escaped the lawyer. "No, Danny, that's not what I'm trying to say at all. I think it's much too early in our relationship to discuss having a child," she assured the younger woman.

Dane breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, okay...Um...do you want kids?"

"Eventually, I would love one or two. But, like I said, it's too early in our relationship to discuss a child. We can revisit the topic in a year or two. How's that?"

A small smile worked its way on to Dane's face. "Okay, but I can't make you any promises that I'll be better in a year or two."

"Danny, you're good now, but you just don't have the faith in yourself. Besides, you wouldn't be doing it alone. I would be there with you every step of the way. This would be our child and I would like to think as a team we would do rather well together," the redhead commented with a smile of her own.

"You maybe, but I'd probably mess up all your good work."

"Danny! I don't want you thinking like that. I can't believe the Great Dane is sitting here with such low self-esteem!" Nicole declared, green eyes wide with disbelief.

"Nick, I told you what kind of parent I think I'd be..."

"I disagree. Listen to me, sweetheart, you might not recognize it, but you are more than capable of caring for another life. Look at how well you take care of me. Now, I know I'm far from a child, but think of all of the things that you do for me. You always make sure I get enough attention, a hearty meal, and most importantly you make sure I am loved and that I know it. I am more than certain you would do the same for a child. But, please, don't think about it for now. We're not in the best shape for a child."

Grey eyes glanced away. "You think there are problems with us?" The question was asked in a low, almost scared tone.

"No, baby!" Nicole swiftly reached across the table and took her beloved's hand in her own. "I think we're doing just fine. More than fine, but at the moment, I'm in school and trying to get another degree while you're still picking up clients and trying to establish a schedule of some type with your music lessons. Once we settle down, then we can start thinking about children."

Dane nodded. "I get it. I get it. Okay, that makes sense to me. But, I'm not sure if I'll ever be ready for it."

"I told you, Danny, it's not going to happen tomorrow. You don't know how you might feel a year from now. After all, a year ago, you didn't think you'd be living with your girlfriend who you are madly in love with and teaching people music, did you?" A smart-aleck smirk appeared on Nicole's face.

The younger woman laughed and put her hands up in defeat. "Okay, okay, you're right. If you have faith in me, I guess I could try. I'll take time to wrap my mind around it too."

Nicole smiled and they ate the rest of their breakfast in peace. Before Dane could get up to clear the table, Nicole came over to her side and eased into her lap. All attention went right to the redhead that was making herself comfortable.

"Honey, I want you to know that you are very responsible. I'm not sure what I would have to do to prove it to you, but you have grown so much from the person you used to be," Nicole said.

Dane sighed, wrapping her hand around her lover's waist. "There's nothing for you to prove. I do understand I'm not the same person, but I'm not sure if I'm ready for something like that. Most of the time, I still feel like a big kid. Maybe that's why I get along with kids so much."

"We all have our childish qualities about us, baby. You are responsible and I'm going to make you see that one day."

Dane arched an eyebrow. "You're being so forceful with me lately," she noted. Her tone was light, but the observation was true.

Nicole blinked hard in surprise. "Am I? Is it bothering you?"

"No, I guess not. I mean, I didn't like going to that party really. I was happy that you were happy, though."

The olive-toned forehead wrinkled and green eyes searched Dane's face for more. "Is the party it?"

"I guess. And even that sorta worked out since we found out about the dinner and I got to see Thomas and Luke. I was so surprised that they remembered me."

A light laugh escaped the attorney. "You're hardly forgettable, baby. Where is all this low self-esteem coming from?"

"Dunno." Danny ran a hand through her hair. "I guess just seeing them silently judge me starts bothering me. Sure, nobody came right out and said I was a fuck-up, but I felt like their eyes were saying it. It was like I could read their minds as they watched me. And...it bothers me..." she admitted in a low, somewhat frustrated tone. "It bothers me that they don't like me and I have to see it. I mean, not seeing, I'm fine, but seeing it seems to fuck my head up."

"Hmm..." Nicole leaned in for a brief kiss. "Well, I don't like that one bit. I honestly feel like if you give them some time and give them a chance to see the real you, then they'll start to change. They'll know what a great person you are, Big Dog," she declared confidently.

The ebony-haired woman decided not to argue that point. Nicole was such an optimist and she did not want to take that from her. So, instead of continuing the conversation, she kissed the redhead, deeply and passionately. Pulling away, they rested their foreheads against each other.

"Cuddling on the couch today?" Danny requested.

"I do love cuddling, especially with my pudgy puppy," Nicole teased, poking around her lover's soft abdomen. Dane actually giggled; she would never live it down.

Dane was sitting on the front porch of the house, eating out a carton of takeout Chinese food. Crow, her only friend, was sitting with her, also eating her own Chinese food. They were watching cars go by, not really saying anything. Time spent like this manner was slowly coming normal for them.

"I finally figured out why I always think this place seems familiar the couple of times I've been out here," Crow said out of the blue. The pale, Goth woman had trouble with silence, especially around Dane, so she always made it a point to start a conversation after a couple of minutes of silence. She found that she was slowly learning more about Dane as their young friendship continued on and she enjoyed that. Dane did too, but she never said anything.

"Why?" the guitarist asked, finding herself a bit surprised that she cared. Ever since she admitted to herself that Crow was at the least trying to be her friend, she found herself actually caring about someone other than Nicole. It was weird, but she found that she liked Crow. She hoped their friendship continued to flourish, but she knew for that to happen, then she was going to have to be more open with the Gothic woman.

"I grew up in a neighborhood just like this," Crow answered, waving her hand a bit. Dane shot her a skeptical look that caused the rock fan to chuckle. "Hey, don't look at me like that Miss Inheritance!"

Dane's mouth curled up. "For that to happen, I would actually need to inherit something, which we both know I'm not."

"If you say so. But, no, I grew up in a regular middle-class family. They live in the next state over, though. I try to drive out there every couple of months and see how everybody's doing. They're pretty nice people. My style still freaks my mother out some, but they all accept me and we're all happy with each other," Crow reported with a small nod.

Dane nodded. "Cool. I just saw my family the past couple of weekends."

"Yeah? How did that work out?" Crow inquired curiously. It was very rare that Dane talked about her family.

"As expected. I was talked about as if I rode in on a black steed, both of breathing fire, and planned to kill everybody. They didn't seem totally hate Nick, though."

"Oh, you took the princess?" Crow remarked with an amused smile. "I bet she fit right in."

A shrug. "She knows how to work a party. She engaged people and talked to them with no real problem. So, the people at the party seemed to like her well enough. My family was a little harder to gauge. I didn't really care, as long as they didn't try to lie to her about me."

"Yeah. Well, that's good. Everybody should have a family, even a lone wolf like you," Crow joked.

Dane shook her head and snorted. "Doing fine on my own."

Crow rolled her eyes, but she did not argue things. They fell back into the silence of before. Sometimes, these silences made Crow anxious because she did not know what to do. She had known Dane for years and most of their interactions then had been at clubs or concerts. Dane was always aloof, but there were distractions that kept her from dwelling on it. They also kept her from getting to know the musician she considered a friend. The last few months, she learned how wrong she was in considering herself Dane's friend before.

Looking beyond the rock goddess, Crow saw there was a world that she did not know about Dane. It was only when sitting alone with the former rock star, some place where there were virtually no distractions, she was able to see the layers. Only now was she able to really get Dane to peel back the layers, even though it took a lot of time. She supposed by the time she died, she would know about half of the layers, but she hoped that eventually Dane would trust her and they could be truly close.

One of the things that she was learning about was Dane's trouble with her family. Of course, she did not know much beyond Dane came from a wealthy lot that did not care for her and Dane did not care for in return. There were hints of child abuse that she was picking up on, but nothing was confirmed. She dared not ask about it, not now anyway. Eventually, she figured. Her thoughts were disturbed by her friend speaking, though.

"Crow, if a girl starts talking about children and shit, what do you think that means anything?" Dane asked out of the blue. Her conversation with Nicole was still kind of bothering her as much as it kept popping up in her mind. She kept thinking that she missed something in that discussion, even though it did not seem like she did.

"Huh?" Crow blinked, caught off-guard because Dane almost never started conversations. "What do you mean, just randomly out of nowhere?" she asked as the question finally reached her brain.

"Naw, like after spending time with some little kids."

Crow nodded and took a moment to eat some shrimp. "I guess it would make sense, especially if the kids were cute. The princess talking about babies with you already?" she inquired with a teasing grin.

A hand with through short, black hair. "Not really, but she left me with something to think about. I mean, eventually, she probably will want one or two or maybe even more. Trying to figure out if I should panic," the musician commented with an uncomfortable half-smile.

"Don't panic, especially if she's not talking about having one now. I doubt you'd be a terrible parent."

Dane gave her friend a sidelong glance. "Thank you, that's very encouraging. You're better at this pep talk crap when you try to get me to pick up my guitar."

"I don't know what else to say. I could see you with a little one. A little you or even a little princess," the Gothic woman said, nodding to herself.

Slate eyes blinked in shock. "Really?"

Crow nodded vigorously. "I totally see it. Now, the old you, I couldn't see it, but the Dane I know now, I can see it."

"How?" Dane inquired, sounding beyond bewildered. She could not picture herself taking care of a houseplant, let alone a child. Never mind the fact that she sort of took care of houseplants already since Nicole had several of them in the house. Sometimes, she took care of them, but most of the time Nicole liked to care for the plants because it gave the redhead a sense of peace.

"Well, you're a lot calmer now. I mean, you were always laidback everything, but you used to be pretty selfish. If it wasn't about you or your band, you could give a fuck back then. Hell, sometimes, it didn't even seem like you gave a shit about the band. You're definitely not that anymore. You just do stuff now that I see moms do, like going grocery shopping and making dinner and junk. You like kids too, you know?"

Dane shot her friend a curious look. "I do?" she asked. *News to me!*

"Yeah, you do. You watch 'em when we sit together like this or in the park. It kinda surprised me when I noticed, but you didn't think anything of it, so I didn't mention it."

The taller woman nodded to show that she understood, but she was not too sure if she agreed just yet. Searching her memory, she quickly realized that Crow was correct. Whenever she went to the park, she watched the children. Much of the time, she thought it was out of envy, thinking about the happiness that she rarely experienced as a child and maybe a little of trying to live vicariously through them. But, now that she really took the time to look at things, she knew that was not the case.

"They're cute, like puppies," Dane said. She liked the way that children did things. Most of the time they went in wholeheartedly and with innocent curiosity or a tame mischievousness. She loved how everything seemed so new to them and how they seemed like they were trying to understand the world, but not really. They found joy in simple pleasures while wishing for the moon and thinking they could achieve it.

Crow burst out laughing. "Only you would compare kids to puppies."

"No, no, think about it. They both have all this energy and if they're taken care of they both have this love of life. Happiness with them both is so pure and it shines in their eyes. Even when they do something bad, it's not for the sake of being hurtful or trying to hurt someone. It's like a prank, but they don't totally understand it as bad and they don't mean it to be malicious. They have all this heart to love with and be loved in return. They feel love unconditionally, return it in the same light, and trust wholeheartedly if they're properly cared for. I can't even imagine what that must feel like," Dane explained.

Crow smiled. "You do still have a way with words, but you're such a romantic now!" she teased.

The musician smiled a little, her eyes making it clear that she was amused. The silence returned and they finished off their meals. Dane felt a bit better about herself now.

The day had arrived when Dane would see her nephews again. She found herself looking forward to it, making sure to get out her guitar and think of some clever rhymes that she could tell them. By noon, she was dressed in her usual shorts and a tee-shirt that was covered with a full island at sunset scene; a gift from her girlfriend.

"Nick, you ready to go yet?" Dane asked almost cheerfully, marching into the library.

Nicole was sitting at the desk, reading a book and looking over her notebook. She was clearly studying and still dressed in her pajamas. Dane blinked in confusion.

"Hey, angel, did you forget we're going to see Thomas and Luke today?" Dane inquired, even though she doubted that. It was all the younger woman could talk about that morning, but then

again, she had not spoken much. She did not want to appear overeager to see the children. After all, she was known for being laidback.

"I haven't forgotten. I merely have finals to study for. I got caught up in your moment and completely forgot until I checked my schedule," Nicole admitted, looking a bit sheepish at her own absentmindedness. She had been so pleased that Danny was happy and possibly going to reconnect with her family that she forgot her semester was ending and there were exams that she needed to prepare for.

"Oh..." The younger woman glanced away and ran her hand through her hair. "Not going then?" she asked curiously, unaware that she was pouting.

Nicole turned her attention to her sweetheart, smiling a bit when she noticed the slightly sulking expression. Pushing away from the desk, she got up and approached the taller woman. Dane did not move as Nicole pulled her into an embrace, which she returned as soon as Nicole was pressed against her. She thought it was an apology hug.

"Didn't really want to go anyway," Dane lied, mumbling as she spoke.

"Baby, since when do you tell such stories to me?" Nicole inquired, sounding a little melodramatic.

"Well, I mean...if you don't want to go..."

"I need to study for my finals, but you can still go. I'll drive you there, even pop in for a moment to say hello to whoever's there, but I think I would study best while you're there."

"What do you mean? I wouldn't bother you when we got back home, so you could study," Danny pointed out.

Nicole smiled a bit, but looked saddened. "Oh, honey, it's not about you bothering me. I'm going to be tempted with you, like I always am. Sitting in here, knowing you're right out there in the living room, listening to music, watching TV, or even sleeping beckons me to be close to you. So, I would work better if that temptation, i.e. you, were out having fun while I study for my final Monday," she explained.

The pout persisted. "But, I thought you would come along..." She felt safer with Nicole around, even if there was a chance that her family put a bug in Nick's ear.

"Danny, you don't need me along to supervise you with your own nephews!" the lawyer chided her. She had not done anything when they saw the boys before, after all. It was Danny's show then, so she did not see the problem with it being Danny's show now.

"Yeah, I do! I don't know what to do with them except for pretending to play in a band!" the younger woman argued.

Nicole laughed, even though she could tell her lover was serious distressed. "You'll be fine, sweetheart. They're children. They're not too hard to entertain."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I do have small cousins. If you spend more time with them, you'll be just as comfortable with your nephews and you'll be more sure of yourself," Nicole stated, but noticed that Danny still appeared skeptical. "Baby, if you want to get to know your nephews better, you have to be able to get along with them without a buffer around," she added.

The younger woman nodded. That did make sense. *But, then again, how does something Nick says not make sense?*

"I guess you're right," Danny conceded.

"Of course I'm right. You just need to get your confidence up around your nephews and you'll see that there's nothing to be nervous about. Now, let me go get dressed since you're ready and I'll drive you there. How long do you think you'll stay?" the redhead asked, starting toward the door.

Dane shrugged and followed her beloved. "I don't know. Like an hour?" she guessed. That seemed like a bit much to her, but she wanted to see the boys pretty badly.

Nicole whipped around, staring hard at her lover. "An hour? Danny how much playing do you think you'll get done in an hour? If you're not serious about this, then don't go and tease those boys with your presence," she scolded Dane.

Dane scratched the end of her nose. "More than an hour?"

"Yes, more than an hour. They're going to want to run, jump, talk, and play. They're going to want to be around you and an hour is going to seem like nothing to them."

"See, Chem, this is why I need you to come! I don't think of this stuff!" the musician argued. She had no clue how children really worked as far as how they spent their time and things like that.

"I can see that, but you have to try. Look, baby, do you really want a relationship with those boys?" Nicole inquired and Danny nodded without hesitation. That action caused Nicole to smile. "Good. If you do, then you're going to need to open yourself up and things will come to you. It's like when you opened up to me. Once you did that, you took an interest in me. Then my interests became your interests and we were able to connect. Correct?"

Dane nodded. "I guess," she answered, not sounding as sure as she thought she should.

"It started with a little step. One small step."

"I thought it started because Tyler's a dipshit."

Nicole laughed. "Well, yes, there was that. But, the small step was trusting me enough to stay at my house. Just like my small step was inviting you to stay in the first place. A year later, look at us." She motioned between the two of us. "We didn't imagine this that first day, but this is where we ended up. If you take a small step toward your nephews, imagine the possibilities."

Dane nodded. "Okay. I'll try for an afternoon, but I can't make any promises if my father's going to be around. He goes out of his way for me sometimes and it never turns into a good thing."

"Try to ignore him if necessary, sweetheart. Don't let him take this gift from you."

The guitarist nodded again. Was she going to let the specter of her father ruin her time with her nephews? She honestly and sincerely enjoyed being around them and she would like to do it as much as possible. So, hell no, she was not going to let her father get the better of her yet again. He had run and ruined her life enough.

"So, you gonna get dressed or what?" Dane asked with a lopsided grin.

Nicole chuckled and dashed off to get dressed. They were off less than ten minutes later. Dane was not sure how long she was going to stay, but she was determined to stay as long as she wanted to and not leave just because her father ran her off.

They arrived at the house; Dane told the valet to leave the car out front since Nicole was not planning on staying. The young man nodded and the couple moved to the backyard without bothering to go into the mansion. Childish laughter quickly caught their ears and the source rapidly came into view.

Thomas and Luke were running around chasing bubbles. The thing that caught Nicole off-guard was the fact that they were doing it in what appeared to be their Sunday best. They were both in dark slacks and oxford shirts. Hell, they were even wearing fancy shoes. Luke had on a tie! Nicole had never seen anything like it and it honestly looked wrong. She wondered if the boys did not have play clothes.

Glancing over, the attorney saw that Adam was blowing bubbles and he was dressed just as formally as they were. He was actually wearing a suit and tie to stand in the backyard and blow bubbles with his children. Nicole felt like she had seen it all.

"Dane!" the boys cheered as soon as they noticed their aunt. Their attention went from the bubbles to the limping woman in less than a second. Charging her, they hugged her tightly around the legs. To her credit, Dane did not look uncomfortable with their actions. Also, she did not grimace when they hit her bad leg.

Adam turned, seeing his sons wrap Dane in their tiny arms. While his baby sister did not look uncomfortable, she did appear to be perplexed by the attack. But, since she did not ask for saving, he let them be.

"Dane, glad you made it. And you brought the lovely Nicole," Adam noted with a smile, approaching the couple. He shook Nicole's hand, but did not bother with Dane. He had noticed sometime ago that she shunned physical contact and he remembered that fact most of the time.

"Nice to see you again, Adam," Nicole said civilly. "Unfortunately, I cannot stay. I have so much work to get done. I was only dropping this one off," she informed them, patting Danny on the shoulder.

"Oh, that's too bad. Maybe next time?" Adam offered.

"I'm sure of it," Nicole answered. Of course she would want to get to know Dane's nephews, especially if they were going to be a part of Dane's life. If they were a part of Danny's life, then that would make them a part of her life too.

Nicole took a few minutes to engage in conversation with the boys, mostly about schoolwork. It was something that they had in common, which amazed the boys. This was their first time hearing about an adult going to school. But, after just a few minutes, Nicole could feel the clock ticking and wanted to get back home to study. Danny walked her girlfriend back to her car since there were no other family members around for the redhead to address.

"Call me when you want me to come back for you, okay?" Nicole informed her lover.

"I will," Danny promised.

The couple exchanged a brief kiss before Nicole drove off. Dane went back to the backyard, hoping things would go as well as Nicole seemed to think. When she re-entered the yard, she could see the boys were chasing bubbles again.

Dane was somewhat amazed that her nephews found such an asinine task fun, but then again, she had witnessed children in the park enjoy the game too. Sometimes, she thought that kids just liked destroying things because they always seemed so happy when they popped bubbles, her nephews included. She doubted that she would ever know since she had never done such a thing.

"Hey, you want to do this for a while? My lips feel like they're going to fall off," Adam said, looking to pass the bubble bottle and wand to his little sister.

"Uh..." She had never blown bubbles in her life either. "What do I do?"

Adam arched a perfect eyebrow, baffled by the question. "You blow, what else?"

Dane snorted, but took the bottle. She decided against cursing her brother out for trying to make it seem like she was an idiot. It was not her fault that she had never touched bubbles in her life.

Blowing the bubbles proved to be a simple task and Dane shocked herself by enjoying it thoroughly. Before long, she was blowing them to the left and then quickly to the right to

overwhelm her nephews' senses. The boys giggled wildly as they chased their soapy prey. Danny probably would have giggled too if her brother was not standing a few feet from her.

"So, how are things going, Dane?" Adam asked to make conversation.

Dane glanced at her brother before turning her attention back to the bubbles. "Fine."

Adam waited for an elaboration that did not come. "So, I'm guessing you settled down with Nicole. No one's talked about seeing you for a long time now. You sure you're okay?"

"Better than ever."

Adam nodded, already guessing the conversation was going to be like pulling teeth. It was always like that with Dane. He had been told that she was just difficult all the time for no reason, but most of the time, he just felt she was like that toward him because they did not really know each other. He was almost ten years older than she was, after all. By the time she growing into a person with a personality and all, he had already had a life of his own and like most teens did not have time for a younger-very younger-sibling. Sometimes, the guilt of not knowing her, not even trying ate at him and now he was trying to move forward with her. Unfortunately for him, she made it damned hard to get to know her.

"So, do you live with Nicole?" Adam pressed on.

"Yeah," Dane answered.

"Do you like it?"

Grey eyes glanced over, briefly questioning his sanity. "Yeah."

"Are you going to give me more than one word answers at any point in time?"

"Dunno."

Adam sighed and gave up, as Dane expected. She often wondered why he bothered feigning interest in her. It was annoying. She already knew where she stood with him. He made that loud and clear when they were younger.

Eventually, the boys got tired with the bubbles and wanted to know what Dane had attached to her back. She had brought her guitar with her and all they wanted to do was touch. She allowed it; her students touched it all the time, so she doubted the boys could hurt it. The brothers took turns plucking the strings and strumming it. They laughed as they tried to produce something that sounded vaguely like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." Luke came close, but even that meant that all he did was brush his fingers across the strings to that rhythm.

"Play it, Dane, please," Luke requested, handing the instrument back to his aunt.

"Yeah, play it, please!" Thomas chirped in too.

Dane smiled; that was something that she was very happy to do. Her left hand plagued her as always, but she could play for over a minute before that started to bother her; less than six months ago, she would have been lucky to get over thirty seconds out of her hand. If she really forced herself to, she could play through a whole song, especially if she placed clever pauses in the song, singing unaccompanied by the guitar for a few seconds. Her nephews did not notice her hand as she began to play and her brother did not say anything. Adam was aware that her hand had been injured in that horrible incident that put her in the hospital for weeks.

Adam did not know many details about the accident. He had not seen Dane while she was in the hospital. His father had just informed him that Dane had gotten herself into trouble, like always. Shrugging, he had accepted that without asking any questions.

"Okay, free style now, Dane. Please!" Luke said, clasping his hand together as if begging her.

Dane smiled and nodded, happy for a moment to put her guitar down. She loved playing, of course, but her fingers needed a break. She started off simple, doing her own versions of nursery rhymes. Adam chuckled a bit at her antics, but noticed that his sons were completely engaged. He decided to slip away for a moment, wanting some time to himself and a snack.

"Lemme try, lemme try!" Luke implored her with delight shining in his eyes.

"Okay, no problem. Let me give you a beat," Dane replied. She then started doing a beat-box for him, making noise with her mouth as if it was an instrument. She found it a bit funny that this "talent" of hers was something that only her nephews knew about. She had never even told Nicole that she dabbled in making her own hip-hop music.

"Hi, my name is Luke, people treat me like a duke..." he started and Dane just wanted to laugh. She knew that he liked rapping and he was good at it, as good as one could expect of an eight-year-old.

The session did not last long. From inside, the trio could hear Sharon barking at Adam. They could not hear the whole argument, but it sounded something like "How dare you leave our sons out there with that damned hooligan!" and "Go get our boys before she does something to them!" Dane actually laughed a little before her eldest brother returned to the backyard.

"Here, guys, your mom wants you for a moment. She has goodies for you," Adam informed the boys, waving them into the house.

"But, Dad!" the boys whined.

"Go on inside and use that tone with her. It might actually work," Adam remarked, giving his sons a teasing smile. They growled and stomped into the house. Adam turned his attention to his sister. "We'll be right back. Sharon just wanted to give the kids some candy or something," he lied.

Adam disappeared back into the house before Dane could respond, not that she was going to bother with that. Shaking her head, not caring if he saw, she frowned. She hated being lied to and it was a constant with Adam whenever they interacted. He did not have the guts to just tell her that Sharon disliked her and did not trust her-with anything. It was not like Sharon made it a secret.

"So, you are here," Russell commented as he stepped out onto the veranda. Dane did not even bother to look at her father. He looked around. "You didn't bring Nicole with you?" he asked curiously.

"She had business," Dane stated coldly. Part of her wondered if her father actually liked Nicole. That bothered her because it meant that he might try to break them up, thinking he was doing Nicole a favor.

"Business?" he echoed and nodded. "I could believe that. I hear her parents keep her very busy. As much as her parents annoy me, especially that mother of hers, I am surprised that they would allow her to date a scoundrel like you."

"Her parents no more control her than you do me," Dane said.

Russell laughed; it was a hearty sound straight from his gut. He even put his hand on his stomach for a second as he chuckled. "Dane, Dane, Dane, you and I both know who is in charge between the two of us."

She rolled her eyes; eyes so similar to his. "You want something?"

"I'm just curious as to how you feel about stealing Tyler's fiancée? Could you be any more immoral and disgusting?" he inquired with his lip curled in complete disgust.

"It's inherited," she remarked.

Russell glanced over at her. "You think you're so clever and so intelligent. So intelligent that you landed yourself a nice rich girl."

"It always comes back to money with you. You stay with your wife for the money?"

He frowned and cuffed her upside the head. Ebony hair flew as her head jerked to the side from the blow. She straightened up pretty quickly. Seconds later, it did not even seem like she had been slapped at all.

"You stand here and try to act so cool, but we both know how worthless you are, Dane. There never has been a bigger waste of oxygen and space than you. You might say it always comes back to money with me, but we both know that's merely another one of your shortcomings. You hemorrhage money," he pointed out. "A rich girlfriend is just what you need to keep all of your foolishness up."

"My foolishness?" she echoed and then decided to dismiss her father's ramblings before she let him in her head.

"Of course. You need someone to bank roll your habits and get you out of trouble, just as you have used me and Christine," Russell informed her.

"Used who?" Dane inquired in disbelief. *The fuck kind of bullshit does this man get on?!*

"Used us. You have done nothing but take from us, been a burden, especially when you went into the hospital. For your entire life, all you have ever been is a burden to whoever has the misfortune to be around you, but me and Christine especially. Do you know how much that cost and you haven't even attempted to pay any of that back," he huffed, seriousness and anger seeping into his tone.

"You want me to pay you back...?" Dane asked in a tense tone. She could not believe what she was hearing. He wanted her to give him money for a hospital stay? She knew most other parents would never say such a thing, especially not from the way that she had been beaten, not from the way that she looked when she was in that hospital. No, most parents would never ask for that money back. Most parents would have just been happy that their daughter lived, but she had been blessed with such atypical parents that sometimes it hurt her brain just to think about it.

"Yes. Do you think money grows on trees? You think you can just leech off of everyone and never owe them anything?" he demanded, growling down at her.

Trembling, Dane tried to hold in all of the raw, negative emotions that she was feeling. This was the one drawback to finding her soul-mate. Nicole brought feeling back into her body and just as she experienced pleasure from Nicole and her nephews, she experienced pain from her brother and now her father. How could this man—her own father—stand there and make it seem like her being beaten and left for dead a burden? Why not just tell her he wished that she died back in that warehouse?

She bit her lip before speaking. "You're serious, aren't you? While I was lying in that hospital bed, all you were thinking about was how much it cost. When I lived here, I'm sure all you did was calculate how much it cost to house, clothe, and feed me. You're a heartless fucking bastard, you know that?" she stated, not surprised at all when he smacked her again, harder than before. A ring on his hand scratched the side of her face. She did not move, did not even wince.

"You watch your mouth. You're only still alive because I paid for it. Now, do the decent thing and pay the money back, you wretch," he growled.

Slowly nodding, she swallowed. "You want your fucking money? Send me a fucking bill. I'll give you back everything I owe you. Everything."

"How? By begging your whore for money?" he asked.

Growling, Dane turned and snapped back at her father for the first time in her life. She put her palm on his cheek with ease, almost knocking him to the ground. Grey eyes glared down at the sorry excuse for a man as he crouched over in agony.

"You don't fucking talk about her like that. Now, I'll get your damn money and then you can consider my debt paid in full. After that, we don't have any business left to ever discuss."

Dane marched away after that, shouldering her guitar as she left. She doubted that her father would call the police on her, which he would have done in the past. She showed signs of his assault, after all. Plus, she could get some pretty good lawyers to defend her if he wanted to play that way.

Marching off of the property, she regretted not telling her nephews goodbye, but she needed to get away from there before Russell hurt her any more. The feeling of being unwanted and despised devoured her insides like rabid, ravenous wolves. No one in the family wanted her, so why even bother?!

She walked on, exiting the posh neighborhood and surprised to find that she was still emotionally wounded by the fact that her father was an asshole. Finding a bench, she sat down and tried her best to compose herself. After several long minutes, she felt under control enough to call Nicole, needing a ride if she wanted to get home sometime that week.

"Hello?" Nicole answered the phone sounding slightly puzzled. She did not recognize the number on the caller ID.

"Hey, angel," Dane said, leaning against a nearby wall.

"Hey, baby!" the redhead's voice perked up considerably. "You must have had a good time. You made it almost the whole afternoon. But, where are you calling from? This isn't the number you left with me."

"I know. Chem, I'm at a corner store close to the mall. Come get me, please," the musician requested in a tired tone.

"Honey..."

"Please, Nick, just come get me."

"Okay, okay," Nicole said, understanding now was not the time to badger her girlfriend. After getting directions, she was off to pick Danny up. When the younger woman got in the car, Nicole could see that it was still not the time to ask questions, even though she was burning with them. It was just the tense, distraught look on Danny's face told her not to ask anything just yet.

Grey eyes looked out of the window, but focused on nothing. There was something off about Danny's aura, but Nicole was not sure what. Everything around Danny just seemed hot, and not in a good way. It was as if Danny was radiating furious heat. Not bothering to ask, even though

her girlfriend was sporting a scratch on her face, Nicole just drove on, wanting to get her beloved home and offer whatever comfort she could.

6: A new lease on life

Dane went through the motions of her usual tasks once they got home. Nicole watched for a while, thinking it might be best to leave Dane alone and let her deal with whatever was weighing down on her mind. But, when it was clear that Dane was not as much dealing it as she was allowing it to fester and darken her smoke-colored eyes, Nicole decided that it was time to step in.

"Sweetheart, come sit with me, please," Nicole requested, on the sofa with a book in her hands.

"Nah, you're studying. I'm not going to bother you now," Dane replied.

"I'm not studying anymore. This is a leisure book," the lawyer stated, holding the tome up a little as if showing her lover.

"You sure?"

"I am."

Dane sighed and marched over to the couch. Her limp was much more pronounced, which Nicole noticed and it troubled her. Emerald eyes made it a point to wander to avoid staring at the scarred leg and injured knee.

The ebony-haired woman slowly lowered herself to the sofa. As soon as she was down, Nicole moved closer and pulled caramel-toned legs into her lap. Dane did not object. In fact, a smile worked its way onto her face as Nicole massaged her calf. Before long, she was purring and her leg was starting to feel better.

"How do you feel?" Nicole asked in soft, tender tone, just like her delightful touch.

"...You want to know why I was at convenient store at the mall instead of at my parents' house?" Dane inquired, knowing that her girlfriend was bursting with questions. She was not sure how much she wanted to talk about now.

"I do, but I understand if you're not ready to talk about it. I can see you're troubled, but I don't want to push you," Nicole said. She recalled that Dane commented on her being forceful lately, so she was going to try to calm that down. She knew if she was too pushy, she would scare Dane off.

Dane nodded. "Just had a little round with my father. Nothing to worry about. Just how things are."

"Oh, okay. Are you all right from this little round?" the redhead asked, even though she knew the answer to that. Molten steel eyes told her that Danny was far from fine, but again, Nicole was not going to push. Even though, the scratch on Dane's cheek made her want to push and have answers, but still, she held off. Danny would tell her when the time felt right to Danny, she silently assured herself.

"Yeah. He doesn't faze me none."

A beat of silence passed between them before Nicole tackled the other elephant in the room. "He did that one time..." she noted, referring to the time that Danny left her with no explanation and utter heartache for almost a month.

"I'm still so sorry about that, Nick. This is why I can't let him bother me now. I refuse to do something that stupid again," Danny proclaimed. She then shifted, so she could look her beloved in the eye. "Listen to me, angel, I'm not going anywhere. I don't care what he says or what he does. I'm not going to let him affect me. You are the greatest thing to happen to me. The GREATEST. I won't let him come between us again," she stated with a heavy intensity that touched inside Nicole and crept through her like a liquid leisurely warming her soul.

"Danny..." Not sure what else to do, Nicole leaned over, careful of her lover's leg, and gave a gentle kiss to very willing lips.

The kiss got a small smile out of Danny. She reached out and caressed Nicole's cheek. The lawyer blushed; she actually liked that her girlfriend still had such an affect on her. Dane liked seeing Nicole blush.

"I know you're worried about me walking away from the house and everything, but it got to a point with my father that I needed to leave or it was going to go really bad really quickly. I did have a lot of fun with my nephews, though."

Nicole grinned. "I had a feeling you would. Did you panic when you were alone with them?"

"Adam stayed out there the whole time, so I wasn't really alone with them," Dane answered, her voice a bit disappointed and a quick frown graced her features for a moment. She did not want to get into the issue of Sharon not wanting her alone with the children and Adam bowing to those wishes. *What-the-hell-ever*. "But, after a while, I didn't notice that he was there and I don't think they did either," she informed Nicole.

"So, you didn't panic? That's good," the redhead said.

"I didn't and it was fun. We blew bubbles for a while. I had never blown bubbles before. It was so much fun," Danny reported with a bright smile.

For a moment, sorrow rushed through the redhead. Her baby had never blown bubbles before? That reminded her that Danny had never painted or hunted Easter eggs either. It was so tragic. What else had her lover missed out on? She shook that away since Danny was happy to have

finally done such thing. The attorney considered that Danny might be able to catch up on childhood things by spending time with her nephews and maybe even spending more time with Nicole's younger cousins.

"See, sweetheart, I knew you had it in you. Did you make another play-date?" Nicole asked, a teasing smile dancing across her lips.

Dane chuckled, but shook her head. "No, the moment me and my father had our round, I left. The boys weren't out there at the time, so I didn't even get to say bye to them. I'll glad they weren't out there to see that crappy moment, though."

Nicole nodded. "Do you have a phone number to reach your brother? I know you want to keep up with your nephews."

"I don't, but I do," the musician answered. She figured that short response would make sense to Nicole, who was used to how she tended to speak in clip sentences.

The lawyer's eyes widened a bit, looking curious and confused at the same time. "You seem like you and Adam are close and you don't have a phone number?" she asked incredulously.

Dane's brow furrowed from her girlfriend's tone. "Close? What gave you that impression?" she inquired rather baffled.

Nicole opened her mouth, thinking that she had an answer, but quickly realized that she did not. She had assumed that Danny was close to Adam because she was looking for him at the party and Danny did willingly introduce her to Adam. He and Danny did not seem to have the same tension as her other siblings.

"I guess I thought you were close because there did not seem to be any visible animosity. You guys even conversed politely with each other," Nicole pointed out.

"Nick, we talk like two people who see each other on the bus every now and then. You didn't notice that?" Dane countered, forehead wrinkled from her confusion. She and Adam were far from friends and she was certain that they came across as such.

Pausing for a moment, Nicole thought about it. "I just thought..." Trailing off, she put her hand over her face, feeling like an idiot.

"Hey, it's okay, Chem," Danny cooed. She did not want Nicole to feel badly just for assuming that she was close to her brother. It was not like it was something horrible.

"I'm sorry. I figured since you know, you like his sons so much that you probably spent enough time around him to like him too and you didn't seem put off talking to him like you did with your other siblings."

Dane shrugged. "Adam isn't so bad, but he's also nine years older than I am, Chem. By the time I had a personality and shit like that, he had a life and was about to get ready to be out of the house. He never paid me any mind and then he was gone."

Nicole nodded. "I guess I get that a little. I just figure with my little cousins, I'm always involved and have always been like that. I love being around them, but you've seen that."

"I know, but you've got a huge heart and you understand the world extents beyond you. Adam wasn't like that. Like everybody else in the Wolfe family, he used to think the world revolved around him. In fact, I don't think he realized that wasn't true until Sharon had Luke. So, no, we've not close."

"Do you think you could become close?" Nicole asked curiously.

Dane shrugged again. "Who's to say? You're the one that likes to imply I don't know what the future holds. I will concede Adam isn't a complete and total fuck-head, but right now, we're not that close. I just happen to get along well with his kids."

Nicole nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry again that I assumed you were close to Adam."

"Don't worry about it. Because you thought that, you got me some time in with Luke and Thomas. You're just looking out for me," Dane said and they left it at that. She was thankful for that. She was starting to realize that she would do a lot of things and put up with a lot of crap if she could spend time with her nephews. Now, she had to figure out how to raise a bunch of money as rapidly as possible without doing anything illegal or totally embarrassing. A couple of things came to mind immediately.

Going to the park after doing most of her chores, Dane found a location that was frequented by joggers, dog-walkers, and young children. Tossing her worn, heavy guitar case on the ground, she leaned down to open it. It was empty; her guitar was in the vinyl case on her back. With the heavy case open, she then took out her guitar and started playing.

"Is this legal?" Crow asked curiously as she made herself comfortable under a shady tree.

Dane shrugged. "Fuck if I know. I see people do it often enough to figure it can't be that illegal if it is," she answered. She brought Crow along for another set of eyes in case someone considered robbing her, not that she expected that to happen in the rather safe neighborhood. But, better safe than sorry, she figured. She needed every nickel that she could earn.

"Why don't you just work a club if you need money?" the gothic woman inquired curiously. Having seen Dane practice enough, she thought that Dane was ready to get back into what she considered Dane's real element-playing clubs. Yes, she was aware that Dane's left hand acted up, but she had also seen Dane cover for it in different ways.

"Don't worry about that. I already made a couple of calls. Now, the problem is telling Nick that I actually have a show on Thursday."

Crow's face fell. "A fucking Thursday? They booked you, the Great Dane, on a Thursday?" she asked in sheer disbelief. Blasphemy! Dane should be playing on Fridays and Saturdays at night, rocking throngs of people, making them intoxicated with her music.

Grey eyes rolled at Crow's outrage. Right now, she would play any and everywhere she could whatever time she could. "Look, I'll take what I can get. I need to get my fucking father off my back. Bitching at me about money that's not even his."

"You mean your mom paid for your hospital stay?" Crow asked with a bewildered expression. The details of why Dane was in the hospital a few years ago were still quite hazy. Dane was not willing to share what happened and Crow did not try to speculate on what it was because she could not begin to imagine why Dane was beaten so terribly. What she did know was Dane had not been able to afford a hospital stay and Bryan made it seem like Dane's parents had footed the bill. But, then again, now she was not too sure what she could believe from Bryan since it was clear that he and Dane were not the best of friends as they had been years ago.

"Don't know, honestly," the musician admitted. She never cared or thought about it before. Usually, she just assumed that expensive things came out of her mother's pocket, even though her father was rich in his own right. If she ever stopped and thought about it, she did not understand why either of them would pay for anything in regards to her. Her father made no bones about his hatred for her and she assumed that her mother felt the same as her father did.

"Does it matter?"

"Hell, no. He's going to get his money and I don't want to hear a fucking thing from him or about him again. I learned the other day that listening to his bullshit now might force me to an edge that I don't want to fall over," Dane replied. Ever since she had hit a former fuck-buddy, Dane had found that violence left a bad taste in her mouth. She was not proud of hitting her father, even if he was asking for it. She feared that if she could hit him without thinking now, things might get worse, especially since he had diarrhea of the mouth. For her, it was best to sever all ties to the man to save herself from trouble that might be lurking in the future.

Crow shrugged, not too sure what Dane meant there. She let it go as Dane began playing. She wondered how much money Dane could make playing in the park. She made no bones that she thought this was beneath Dane, who even now was popular, even though she did not play in a band anymore. Hell, even though she did not play anymore! People still talked about the Great Dane and longed for her unique, passionate, fiery, and fierce style of music. Dane touched people through her songs, her lyrics, her voice, and of course her guitar. To Crow, even with the changes to Dane's personality, the musician would always be a rock-n-roll goddess.

Listening to her playing now, Crow was sure that Dane could still control a crowd with her music alone. Even though she was not playing anything to head-bang to, Crow found herself swaying with the tune. As always, she felt like Dane's music became a part of her, touching her

somewhere deep inside and loving her through the song. She was certain that other people felt that way about Dane's music. Soon, Dane was singing softly and passersby were dropping money in the case on the floor.

She's still got it. I hope she figures it out. She could still be a star, Crow thought.

While watching the "show," Crow did notice something that she never bothered to think about Dane. The mellow woman could really sing! Dane had a very soothing, smooth, and rich voice. It seemed that others agreed with her too because quite a few people stopped to listen. Crow could hear compliments and awe in some of the whispers among them. Crow thought it was funny that she never thought about Dane really singing until now; she preferred listening to Dane's rock still, though. Nothing topped Dane screaming like some heavy metal star.

Crow stuck around for a couple of hours, but eventually had to get back to the city for her job. It surprised Dane when she first found out that Crow had a job. It never occurred to her that anyone that used to hang out with her might work for a living. They never seemed like the type. But, Crow worked rather hard at a local bookstore in the city. Dane had promised to go check it out one day; it could prove to be a good place to buy books for Nicole. She considered there might even be a book or two in there for herself.

Eventually, Dane had to pack up and go because she had a lesson to get to. When she had a spare moment, she counted how much she made that day and considered that earning money might be a bit harder than she anticipated. But, that did not matter because she was going to keep on earning. She was going to pay her parents back and get that man off of her back.

"I am going to have to explain some of this to Nick," Dane muttered as she worked on dinner. She was not sure what she wanted to say to the lawyer, but she did not want it to seem like she was doing anything out of the ordinary. She did not want Nicole to know that she was up her eyeballs in debt...and to her father no less. She was disgusted with herself and she did not want Nick to end up being disappointed in her. *Not like I can help that Russell is an asshole or that I was hospitalized, though. Nick knows that. Still, this might be too much.*

Dane was not in the mood to shake Nicole's faith in people either. Her lover was happy to give people the benefit of the doubt when it came to believing in them, even though that mindset had come to bite her back in the ass numerous times. She liked that about Nicole, though. The world needed people like her, so Dane did not want to add one more thing to rattle Nicole's whole mindset.

Not to mention, she was very aware that Nicole had her big belief that family should be close, like Nicole's family. She could see how Nicole reached that point; her family was very nice and together. They were downright wonderful. Dane did not want to shake that belief either. If Nicole knew that she had it in her to hit her father, Nicole might think that she was not so family-oriented and that could cause trouble in their relationship.

"He deserved that shit, though. Not going to let him talk shit about Nick," Dane growled, anger igniting again as she recalled the disrespectful words her father used in regards to her precious

Nicole. Okay, she knew that hitting Russell was not going to solve anything and like she told Crow, it scared her a bit that she raised her hand to him, even though he hit her first. She definitely did not want to get into the practice of hitting people, no matter what the circumstances.

Willing herself to forget about the whole thing, she finished making dinner and flopped down on the sofa, waiting for Nicole. It was a late day for Nicole, who had her final today. Dane had planned to go into the city and surprise her lover, wanting to take her out to dinner, but she figured that would be better to do on Wednesday when Nicole had her other and last final.

"Maybe I'll call Mina and Clara and invite them to celebrate too. Nick would probably love to have them there," she figured. And she decided to make the call while she was still alone.

Mina and Clara loved the idea, so that made Dane happy and she felt like she was doing something good. By the time the phone calls were up, Nicole was walking through the door. She staggered into the living room and collapsed on Danny, being careful of her leg of course. Dane smiled as her lips were peppered with short, but sweet kisses.

"I take it your final went well," Danny commented.

"Well, first off, I am just glad to be home with you. The day is so long when I have school and I miss you so much," Nicole replied, putting her arms around her girlfriend's neck. She snuggled closely to Dane's body.

"I missed you too," Danny stated quite sincerely. "Now, tell me how the final went," she requested with a smile.

"It was fair. I think I did very well. I am very certain that this is the start of a very good school career," Nicole said, coming in for another kiss. As she pulled away, she noticed a delightful smell in the air. "Baby, dinner smells wonderful!"

"I aim to please. I hope it tastes as good as it smells," Dane remarked with a cheesy grin.

"I'm sure it will. Let's go eat, please. I hadn't had anything to eat since lunch."

Dane nodded; Nicole had lunch at around noon and it was past eight now. Nicole eased off of the musician and walked over to the bathroom, wanting to wash her hands. Dane went to go setup the finishing touches to dinner and then waited for Nicole to return. They went into the kitchen, seeing what type of feast lay on the table.

"Oh, Danny," Nicole muttered in shock. Dane had set up a candle-lit meal with a small bouquet of flowers waiting too.

"Congratulations on this huge step toward your goal, love," Danny whispered, leaning down to kiss her girlfriend's cheek.

The couple sat down and green eyes scanned the hearty meal, already set up on her plate for her. Seasoned chicken-breast with rice and beans, broccoli with melted cheese (a favorite of hers), and even a salad on the side. A glass of what Nicole suspected was sparkling cider flanked the plates. There were hot biscuits in a basket between the pair and the dim lighting of the two candles. It was like being in a restaurant made for two.

Dinner was eaten in silence, but a lot of smoldering glances were exchanged between those candles. When the food was gone, Nicole blew the candles out and Danny walked their empty dishes to the sink. As she was about to start washing them, Nicole pressed up against her back. A sharp inhale from Dane echoed through the house as she felt lush, full breasts against her and loving arms wrap around her waist, playing with the hem of her shirt.

"I need to go wash up and get ready for bed. Do you think you could help me?" Nicole asked in a seductive whisper.

Danny nodded. "I think I could manage that," she muttered.

"Good girl." Nicole pulled Danny away. The musician smiled all the way up to the bathroom.

The next day, Danny decided to tell Nicole about her show on Thursday since everything had gone so well yesterday. As they sat down for breakfast, she actually had to go over what she was going to say because she felt a little nervous. Nicole had never seen her play in front of an audience and she had never played with a girlfriend watching, as she knew Nicole would want to do. Added to that, she was not too sure if her hand would be able to hold together. Yes, she knew a few tricks to get through a show, but she was not sure if she would be able to remember them due to nervousness if Nicole was sitting in the audience.

"Hey, Nick," Danny said, running her hand through her hair.

"Yes?" Nicole inquired, looking curious. She doubted that they had ever had a conversation over breakfast that started in such a way and she did not like that Danny was putting her hand through her hair so early in the morning either. They had not been up long enough for Danny to have a problem yet, she thought.

"What do you think about me playing my guitar in front of an audience? And you know, singing and stuff, too?"

"I think it would be an amazing thing, especially since your hand is stronger now." She was unaware that Danny's hand was strong enough for her to play for a long time, but she figured if Danny was ready to play in front of people again, then it was wonderful.

Dane nodded, a small smile working its way onto her face. "So, you would think its a good thing if I took a gig?"

A perfect auburn eyebrow arched. "Why, Danny, have you?"

Dane outright smiled now. "Maybe."

"So, if you may have taken a gig, what day might it be on?"

"Thursday. About eight at night."

"Good. I might be there, if you do happen to play a gig," Nicole replied.

The answer got a huge grin out of Dane. "Good! You can bring Mina and Clara if you want. I wouldn't mind a little cheering section in case something goes horribly wrong," she joked. *Like I forget all the words to my songs because I haven't done this in so long!*

"You'll be fine, honey. It will be so good to see you on stage, playing your heart out. Thank you for saying I could bring Mina and Clara too. They haven't heard you play and they think I am making things up when I tell them how good you are."

Dane just smiled, pleased that her girlfriend was so proud of her and confident in her. Breakfast after that was the usual routine, which they both enjoyed. Dane sent Nicole on her way to work with a passionate goodbye kiss. When she was alone, Dane went to wash up the dishes from last night and that morning.

The phone ringing took her from her task. Checking the caller ID, she did not recognize the number, but answered anyway. Sometimes, Nicole's family or friends called her and Dane took messages because Nicole would leave her home voicemail unchecked for days at a time. The curse of being busy.

"Hello," Dane greeted the caller.

"Dane," the cold tone of her father spoke back.

She was tempted to demand how he got the house number, but she knew that he had resources. It probably took him less effort to order lunch than it did to find her. Although, she was certain that he detested wasting his talent and resources on locating her, not that she gave a damn.

"Yes? What do you want?" she asked, even though she knew the answer.

The conversation was brief. Russell informed Dane just how much money she owed thanks to not only her hospital stay, but every little thing that she used growing up. Making matters worse, he sounded very business-like when he told her that he expected it at the close of the business week. When the call was over, Dane had to resist the urge to bash the phone against the wall. Swallowing hard, she found herself holding back tears.

"Stupid motherfucker. What kind of man makes his child pay back the money it cost to keep her alive and keep child services from being on his ass? Fine, you want your fucking money? I'll

give you your precious money and then I don't have to worry about dealing with you ever again!" Dane hollered.

She would get her father every single penny that he asked for as long as it meant never having to see him again. But, that did pose a problem. She did not have close to the amount of money that he was asking for. She definitely would not be able to collect it by the close of the business week either.

A hand went through short black hair as she tried to figure out what her next move was. Really, there was only one thing that she could do and she hated to do it. But, she would rather be in debt to Nicole for the rest of her life than to her parents.

"Damn it. How pathetic am I? Begging Nick for money. So fucking worthless," she growled. And then she caught herself, shaking that off. "No, that's what that bastard wants me to think and the last time I listened to him I fucked my life up! I will not let him get in my head again. I'll get that money and then put all of this shit behind me. I'll work my ass off to pay Nick back as soon as possible. If she loans me the money anyway."

Danny was pretty sure that the money was not going to be a problem. Between her salary and investments, Nicole had plenty of money as far as Dane knew. What would be a problem was Nicole would want to know what she needed it for. She imagined saying, "Oh, just need to pay back my father for being born and having the nerve to stay alive all these years" would lead to an intense discussion that she did not want to have. Not to mention, it might take a little of the twinkle that she adored out of those emerald eyes because it would lead Nicole to realize not all fathers were warm and caring like her own was. She would be damned if she was going to let that happen!

No, she needed time to think of way to explain the money without harming Nicole. She supposed that would have to wait. First, she needed to get the money or she knew that her father would be on her back until she did. She was in no mood to deal with him anymore.

"Move on with my life, my life with the greatest woman on Earth," Dane said, nodding in agreement with herself.

Going about her day as usual, she came home and waited for Nicole. They cuddled on the sofa, watching a game show. They were having one of their trivia contest, but it was clear that Danny was not as into it as she usually was. Eventually, Nicole turned it the television off because she felt like she was playing by herself.

"Hey, why'd you do that? Mad that I was kicking your butt?" Dane forced out a teasing smile.

"You would have to be playing to be kicking my butt. You weren't playing. You're a million miles away tonight, baby. What's wrong?" Nicole asked, her voice laced with concern. She did not like these moments when Dane seemed so distracted. Doubt crept into her mind and heart and she wondered if Danny was getting bored with her. "Have I done something?" she added in a quiet voice.

"You? What? No!" Danny wrapped her arms around the attorney and held her tightly. "No, no, angel, you haven't done anything wrong. I love you."

Nicole smiled at that response. "Just because you love me doesn't keep me from doing something wrong."

"No, it has nothing to do with you."

"Are you nervous about your show?" The redhead supposed that was possible since it had been years since Danny had been on stage.

"Nah, that isn't bothering me. Doing a show is like riding a bike for me."

"Then what is it?"

Dane sighed and her hand went through her hair. "Nick, I need to ask a huge favor of you and I need you to know it's not something bad. I can't explain it very well right now, but I promise you it's nothing bad."

"Okay..." Nicole said, not liking where this was going already. The pensive look that Danny was sporting did not help matters.

"Nick, I need to borrow some money from you," Dane announced, hoping she did not sound as awkward as she felt.

Nicole breathed a sigh of relief. "Is that all? I thought it was something bad!" she chuckled.

"Uh, babe, you have to let me finish. It's not small change. It's a lot of money," Dane said. She hated that she even knew that Nicole had enough money to loan her, but she had access to Nicole's accounts because that was what Nicole wanted. The redhead felt secure knowing that Danny had access to money in case of emergencies and also for every day things. No one on Earth had such trust in her.

"Danny, my money is your money. Take what you need."

"Can I at least tell you how much I need?" Dane felt like she would feel better if Nicole was aware of just how much the lawyer was giving.

Nicole nodded and Dane took a deep breath. She needed to fix her mouth and wrap her mind around the amount that she was about to say. When she finally got it out, it came out as a whisper that sounded like an eruption to Nicole when it reached her ears.

"Oh, my god, Danny, why do you need that much money?!" Nicole gasped, fear causing her mouth to tremble and eyes to go wide.

"Angel, calm down!" Danny implored her lover as she held onto Nicole tightly. "I promise you, it's nothing bad. It is nothing bad."

"Then what? Why?" Nicole begged to know. Needing that much money could not be for something good!

"It's nothing bad. I'm not in trouble, angel. I'm not in danger and neither are you. No one is going to come after me. I won't end up in the hospital again or anything like that. I promise," Dane vowed as deeply as she could.

Nicole was very aware that Danny's long-lasting injuries to her hand and leg were because of money. Dane had vouched for the wrong person, who was in debt to some gangsters. The snake-in-the-grass Bryan had left Danny alone on the day they were supposed to pay those gangsters off, left her without his half of the money, even though she only got involved and collected the money to help him. She had been beaten severely by the hoodlums and then Bryan poured salt in her wounds by not caring what happened. Danny suspected that he set her up, not just to take the fall, but to buy him time and also to make sure that her music career was all but over.

"Are you sure?" Nicole asked with a whimper.

"I'm sure. No one is going to hurt us. It's not bad, angel. I would never get caught up in something that bad again. Please, don't worry," Dane replied, nuzzling her girlfriend with the hope that would ease her concern.

"You promise?"

"I promise, Chem."

"Are you going to tell me what it's for?"

"Eventually. It's not going to make much sense right now," Dane replied. Hell, it only made sense to her because she knew that her father could be one hell of a bastard.

"Okay, but I am holding you to that," Nicole said in a stern tone, teasing a little, but mostly very serious.

Danny chuckled a bit, even though she knew for a fact that she had to come up with a story soon. She had spent too much time lately keeping things from Nicole or asking Nicole not to ask questions. She was almost certain that was no way to continue a relationship.

"Nick, I am sorry I cause you so much trouble," Dane whispered.

"Nonsense, baby. I am happy to help you and I want to keep you safe. If this is what it takes, then so be it," Nicole answered.

"I will pay you back." It might take a few lifetimes, but she was determined to pay her lover back.

Nicole smiled a bit. "I wish you would stop thinking like that. I can make it back. I just want you to be safe and sound, okay?"

Dane nodded, even though she knew that Nicole was trying to make her feel better. Those savings were Nicole's hard earned money and she had saved quite a bit. The money came from being good at her job and making good investments and Dane felt like such a deadbeat for asking for it. She was not sure how or when, but she was going to pay Nicole back.

"You ready to play now?" Nicole asked, picking up the remote. Dane forced out a smile that looked almost genuine and turned her attention back to the television.

The game was back on. By the end of it, Dane was declaring herself the winner, even though they did not keep track of such a thing; they never kept up with who won. Everything seemed quite normal between them and as they were settling in to go to bed, Dane felt better about herself. Not by much, but enough to sleep easy that night, dreaming about a freedom that she was very much ready for.

In the morning, the couple decided to hook up when Nicole was free, so they could get the money that Dane needed. Danny would feel better about moving the money with Nicole there. She also thought it would give Nicole a chance to see just how much money she was parting with and give her a chance to change her mind. That did not happen.

Dane had her father's account number in order to transfer the money, even though she was tempted to just take the money out and deliver it to him, letting him think about strolling around with that much money on him. But, she did not want to take that chance. It would be her luck that in trying to be vindictive, she would get robbed on the way to him or something just as horrible, she thought. Besides, it was better to be the adult in the matter; it made things easier on her by getting him out of her life expeditiously.

Nicole did not know whose account the money was being transferred too, but she felt better knowing that things were going to a bank, especially one in the country, which Dane assured her was what happened. Things felt less sketchy that way. No criminal would want a large lump sum of money transferred to an account so obvious as they were doing.

The whole process took more time than they expected, but Dane was so happy to get it out of the way. She went with Nicole back to the firm, even though Nicole tried to insist on driving Dane back home. Dane waved the offer off, saying that she had other things to take care of and would make it back home on her own.

"Okay, baby, be good," Nicole said and then she shamelessly planted a kiss to Dane's lips in the middle of the lobby.

Dane was left in a shocked daze, still needing to get used to Nicole ease with showing affection in public. With a dopey grin on her face, the ebony-haired guitarist staggered out of the building. High on love from her girlfriend and the joy of new found freedom, she marched to the nearest payphone, which was hard to find in the city nowadays. Chuckling to herself, she dialed her father's cell number, going so far as to call collect. She did not expect him to accept and only said "we're done" when she was supposed to say her name. They were done. He was out of her life.

Smiling to herself, she called Crow, requesting a ride home. Crow was very happy to oblige. They made small talk for the trip. Crow dropped Dane off and had to go right back to the city to go to work. Dane took care of a lesson and then went to get ready for dinner.

She wanted to dress nicely, something to make Nicole think about peeling her out of the clothes later. Starting off, she actually put on pants. Nicole was the only person she wore pants for and generally that was upon request because they were going some place formal.

"She likes when I wear light colors," Dane muttered to herself, going through her half of the closet. Well, more like her quarter of the closet because she did not have that many clothes.

A pair of cream-colored slacks caught her eyes and she yanked those out. There was a matching vest with it, which was the staple to all of Dane's dress clothes. Lastly, she pulled out a black shirt and thought that she did pretty good at picking out her outfit without any help.

After a hot shower, she brushed her hair a bit and massaged some oil into her scalp and her hair. It ended up as wild as always, but it did shine and it smelled nice. She threw on her clothes after that and picked up her shoes. Checking herself out in a body-length mirror, she smiled to herself, thinking that she had done a very good job. Confirmation on that came as soon as she left the house to meet up with her ride to the city.

"Oh, my, oh my, Danny girl, you are looking too fine," Mina called out, going so far as to whistle when the younger woman climbed into her car.

Grey eyes rolled. "Please, don't ogle me. My girlfriend's the jealous type," she remarked with an amused smile.

"I know she is!" Mina laughed as she shifted gears and pulled away from the block. Dane was jerked back and Mina laughed again. "Do you forget I live for speed?" she teased the younger woman.

Dane quickly reached for her seat belt. "This is why I never ride with you. Why didn't Clara come get me?"

"She had to get her son from soccer practice. He's getting pretty good and she wants us at his games. And, yes, you are included in the 'us,' so don't even ask that," the lawyer commented.

"How am I included in the 'us' but I know your husband isn't?"

"Because he's good at figuring out how to get out of these things. Typically, he points out that he's a guy and doesn't want to be around a bunch of women that don't want him. Besides, anything that involves Clara's son, I wiggle him out of that one. The man sees the boy and then I have to hear how we need a son for weeks on end," Mina griped, but she was still smiling as she did so.

"You don't want kids?" Dane asked curiously.

"I wouldn't mind them at all. I just love teasing him."

Dane chuckled because of the devilish smile on Mina's face. Danny liked Mina, especially since she stopped taking advantage of Nicole once she realized that she was doing it. Mina tended to look out for Nicole as best as could and Mina was all for Nicole dating Dane.

"Now, you want me to drop you off at her school?" Mina asked to be sure, wanting to get the plan correctly.

"Yeah. I'll find her and then bring her to the restaurant. Okay?"

"I know you will, Danny. I am so happy you thought about this and celebrating her first term. She made it! I wish you knew her in college because chemistry was her favorite subject hands down. I love that you talked her into going back."

Dane smiled. "I just want her to be happy."

"Me too. Oh, I want to thank you for the invitation to your show tomorrow. I can't wait to hear you play."

"I'll try to make it worth it to you."

"I'm sure you will."

They pulled up to the parking lot of Nicole's college. Dane glanced around the campus. It was not huge campus, but it extended a few square blocks. Dane figured that one day she would explore it, but right now, she needed to find Nicole's car. Having radar for many of Nicole's things, Dane easily spotted the sedan and opened the trunk with her key. She had to move a couple of things, but found what she was looking for. A single red rose that she stored in the trunk.

After that, she started figuring out poses against the car. She knew that she did not have that much time because Nicole would be out about two hours after the test started. Well, Dane arrived at about that two hour mark too. Snickering behind her let her know that she used up too much time trying to find the perfect pose.

"Baby, what are you doing up here?" Nicole asked as Dane spun around.

"Waiting for you," Dane answered, holding out the rose in presentation to her beloved.

Nicole accept the flower with a smile. "And what is this for, smooth operator?"

"You'll see. Now, I know this is going to kill the romance just a little, but I need you to follow my directions instead of going home."

"I'll follow you anywhere looking like that. I mean, you even wore pants for me!" the redhead squealed. Dane just hoped that there was no one in the parking lot to hear that.

They quickly entered the car and Dane gave Nicole directions to a nice little Greek restaurant. Nicole was all smiles when they walked in and were told their table was ready. The graduate student was ready to burst from excitement when she saw her friends waiting for them at the table.

"Danny..." Nicole breathed, clutching her sweetheart's arm.

"Come on, we want to celebrate your first term of graduate school," Dane replied. She pulled out Nicole's chair for her and then sat down.

"Nicole, you have one smart girlfriend. You better watch out before I add her to my harem," Mina quipped.

"Harem?" Dane echoed, forehead wrinkling in confusion. Although, she was starting to believe that she should not be surprised by anything Mina uttered anymore.

"I collect people to help my husband along. He's not great in the romance area, so that would be your job," Mina said with a playful smile.

"To hell with that. My slipshod romantic gestures are all for Nick," Dane proclaimed with a wide grin. This earned her a hug and a kiss from her lover.

"You two disgust me so much," Clara commented, pretending to be offended by their open affection.

Nicole shot her friend a mock sneer. They then ordered some champagne to toast Nicole's first term of graduate school; Dane used water. The dinner was lively with plenty of smiling and laughing. Through it all, Nicole shot Dane some glances that made her feel overheated and she wished that they were alone. She hoped that Nicole planned to do something about that later.

After a couple of hours, everyone decided it was time to get home. They were quite pleased with everything, especially the food. Clara wanted to know how Danny knew about the restaurant and Dane smiled.

"I know how to eat, Clara," the musician remarked. She then glanced at Nicole, who easily got the message there.

"She'll give you a list of places later, Clara. Goodbye and see you tomorrow," Nicole said to her friends. She gave them quick hugs and Dane offered them a wave before they hustled over to the car.

"That was subtle," Dane remarked sarcastically, but was shut up by a simple smothering look from her lover.

The ride home was full of heated looks and brief, teasing caresses. Dane thought it was cute until they crossed the threshold of the house and Nicole was on her like never before. Small hands were tugging at Dane's vest and hot lips were attacking her own while Nicole kicked the front door shut.

"Do you have any idea how good you look right now?" Nicole hissed, hands working the buttons on the vest. She took a juicy nip at Dane's bottom lip, preventing her from answering for a moment.

"Can't be too good. You're tearing me out of my clothes," Danny quipped, somehow managing a teasing smile.

"Damn right I am because you look so good."

"Should dress up more often," the younger woman said before her words were swallowed by her lover's hungry mouth.

Dane moaned as Nicole's tongue pretty much took control over her whole mouth, devouring her and she loved it. The redhead finished the vest buttons quickly and yanked the cloth from Danny's body. Her hands then worked the shirt buttons just as swiftly and pulled the shirt off almost violently. When Dane started reaching for Nicole's shirt that brought a halt to things for a moment.

Nicole pulled away. "Uh-huh, baby. You keep your hands to yourself tonight," she ordered.

"But, I thought we were celebrating. Shouldn't I be the one doing things to you?" Dane inquired with a very naughty smile.

"No, my celebration, so we do it my way. Tonight, I want you to keep those talented, heavenly hands to yourself. I have plans for you. Will you comply?" she asked in a seductive whisper.

Dane had to nod because of that tone and the intense, molten look in her dark jade eyes. Nicole backed her lover into the stairs and Danny actually stumbled. Nicole smirked like a happy cat, deciding to gently shove Danny down on the stairs. She then leaned over Dane, coming in for another smoking hot kiss to keep Dane from asking what she thought she was doing.

Nicole pulled away a bit, just to let Dane catch her breath. As the musician continued panting, Nicole moved on, placing open mouth kisses to Danny's now exposed torso. When she got to the

swell of Dane's right breast, she caressed the heaving mount through the plain, black bra Danny was wearing.

"Oh, it seems my friend is paying attention to me today," Nicole commented in a light tone as the center of Dane's bra started puckering up. Nicole leaned in and ran her tongue along the cloth-covered gem.

"Nick," Dane hissed, arching her back for more contact.

"Hey, Big Dog, this my show tonight," Nicole pointed out.

Before Danny could say another word, Nicole pushed the troublesome material out of her way and took ownership of chocolate-colored jewel. Dane moved her arms, wrapped them around Nicole, wanting to pull her infinitely closer. Nicole responded by taking as much of Dane in her mouth as she could and caressing the other globe, teasing the other gem into a rock-hard stone. Dane was now holding on dear life, clutching Nicole as if trying to pull the smaller woman into her body.

Small mewling noises filled the ear and Danny was vaguely aware that it was her making those sounds. It felt like she was going to spontaneously combust as her beloved worked wonders with her skillful tongue. A nip to her sensitive flesh got a louder moan from her and she knew that Nicole was reveling in the noises that she was making. She was quite correct and Nicole wanted to hear so much more, to feel so much more.

Nicole eventually switched sides, making sure to pay the opposite pearl the same attention. Her lips and tongue worked the sensitive flesh as if it was a piece of candy. Her hands tenderly kneaded both of Dane's breasts, massaging and caressing both soft hills. Her vigorous efforts earned more pleased sounds from her lover.

Eventually, her mouth had to leave twin jewels, seeking more delicious skin. Soon, Nicole was back to covering Dane's body in steamy, wet kisses. Her fingers danced around Dane's navel and traced one of her many tattoos before resting against the fly of Dane's slacks. The younger woman let out of a long whine and bucked her hips against the teasing touch. Nicole continued her exploration with kisses while her fingers lightly brushed up against Danny again and again. After a while, she thought that she could feel Danny's wetness seeping through the material of her pants.

"Nick, please, now," Dane begged, dying for the intimate attention. She was pretty sure that she was leaving a mark on the stairs thanks to the redhead's vicious, toe-curling assault.

"Now? Here on the stairs?" Nicole pretended to be scandalized.

Dane ignored that, not wanting to point out that she had done it in some pretty foul places before. But, that had been about fucking. This was different. It was always different with Nicole. She made love with Nicole and that was something to be respected. But, she was pretty sure it was still respected if they did it on the stairs.

"Here, the bedroom, anywhere with you, anywhere you want," Dane answered in a breath.

Nicole smiled, feeling touched by that for some reason. Moving a bit, Nicole rested her knees on the stairs and worked her way out of her shirt in an agonizing slow manner, as far as her girlfriend was concerned anyway. Daring not to look away, smoke-colored eyes locked onto the olive-toned flesh as it was slowly revealed to her. Danny whimpered when Nicole's torso was revealed to her.

Dane's hands reached out, having a mind and desire of their own, wanting to touch every inch of her love. Nicole playfully slapped them away before getting rid of her shirt. When the hands came out a second time, they were once again knocked away. Nicole reached behind her back, unclasping her bra. When the caramel hands returned a third time, they were allotted their wishes to touch all they wanted.

"You feel so good," Dane said in awe while Nicole growled from the pleasure. The growls got deeper when Dane's hands started squeezing the responding flesh, causing sheer ecstasy to shoot through the redhead. When Dane's lips were thrown into the mix, Nicole collapsed against the taller woman, pushing herself further into Danny's mouth, making the guitarist one happy woman. A long, drawn out moan escaped Nicole's throat as Danny's tongue and lips pulled at her nipple.

Since she seemed to have the upper hand, Dane tried to more control of the situation. Shifting her body as best she could without sliding down the stairs or throwing Nicole off of her, she moved her left leg in between Nicole's thighs. She then brought her leg up to Nicole's center, almost causing the attorney to moan loudly and then collapse.

Catching herself on one hand, Nicole clutched Dane's shoulder with the other. She managed to push herself away enough to give Danny a glare. Dane shot back an innocent smile; well, as innocent as she could muster anyway with raw lust coloring her flushed features.

"Bad, Danny. You're supposed to keep your hands to yourself," Nicole scolded her lover as best she could while fighting down another moan.

The redhead managed to move Dane's hands and pinned them over Danny's head. Danny allowed it because she was enjoying this uncharacteristic session with her rather conservative girlfriend. Dane had been under the impression that Nicole thought sex happened in the bedroom or the shower or on very rare occasions in the living room, not that Danny was complaining. She always enjoyed making love with Nicole, and now was no different.

With Danny's hand secured, the older woman decided to move forward and realized the position that she was in. Nicole moved herself Danny's thigh before she undid Dane's pants and then unzipped the fly-with her teeth. Dane cried out from the sight alone and all thoughts besides the erotic scene before her flew from her mind. A light slap to her side, which sent even more pleasure through her senses, told Dane to lift her hips. She did so all too merrily and Nicole removed Dane's trousers. While she was down there, she pulled off the shoes and socks of her lover too.

Danny did not even have time to realize that she was nude before Nicole's enthusiastic mouth was on her. When that eager, loving tongue hit her, Dane could only holler Nicole's name, not caring if the heavens heard it. Forgetting the commands to keep her hands to herself, Danny's hands wandered into Nicole's hair. Suddenly, all of the sweet attention ended.

"No, Chem, no!" Dane objected, looking down at Nicole as if she had done the worst thing ever!

"Hands," Nicole reminded the younger woman.

Quickly Dane's hands retreated and the attention was back. Not sure what to do with her hands, Dane clutched the stairs as her hips rocked on their own, moving in time with Nicole's mouth. Dane was sure that she had never felt anything as incredible as being loved by Nicole. Her hips started moving faster as she actually started thinking about other things that Nicole had done to her.

Nicole noticed Dane had increased her pace and upped the ante by introducing her fingers. Dane's head snapped to the side and she snarled as she felt the very welcomed intrusion of the two visitors. Her hands held onto the stairs even tighter as Nicole worked her inside and out, turning her around and making her world converge into one key point. Delicious tension built and Dane's chest started to heave as she was certain that heaven was coursing through her body. And then, it all exploded so hard that Dane bit her lip to keep from screaming and actually broke the skin while her body convulsed.

Nicole knew that was enough for Danny at the moment and waited for the trembling subsided. Once Danny calmed down, Nicole kissed her way up Dane body, settling her weight on Danny's chest. When she and her lover were face to face, she kissed Danny's bleeding lip.

"How was that?" Nicole asked with a teasing smile.

"Can I subscribe to your newsletter if that's the type of service you give?" Dane joked, still catching her breath.

Nicole laughed while Danny pulled her close, enjoying the way their skin felt against each other. Nicole snuggled into Dane's body. The younger woman sighed, feeling very good. Eventually, they worked their way upstairs to start another session. Dane felt good through out the night, though. Yes, she was in debt once again, but it was to Nicole, someone she was more than determined to pay back. And her father was off her back. Her whole life was ahead of her, a life with Nicole. Life was good.

7: Skip a beat

Dane was in a good mood as she practiced for her show later that night. She easily planned out how she was going to make it through an hour, even though her left hand was still a problem. She could play for a few minutes without the hand acting up now, thanks to that damned demon

physical therapist Nicole insisted that she see. It was nice to know all of the torment and torture was not for naught. She figured for the most part, she would sing unaccompanied for a while to rest her hand.

The musician was reclining in what used to be the den, but was gradually turning into Danny's music room. There was not much in there to show that it was going to be a music room, except for her guitar being stored in there. There was also her pad that had new song lyrics that she had written. A few magazines that she had picked up over the last few months were also in there, resting on the floor because she and Nicole tossed out the broken coffee table that had been in the room. The light had also been fixed, but there still was no door.

The couch had been replaced, so the one that Danny was sitting on had no chance of attacking her with dust like the old one. She liked the sofa, especially since she could fit on it if she decided to lie on it. It was not the best piece of furniture on the planet, but it was one that she bought with her earnings, so it had sentimental value to her. Thinking about that, her mind went down a dirty road.

Maybe one day Nick will want to christen this thing like we did the stairs last night. A lecherous smile crept onto her face. She doubted that something like that would happen anytime soon. She was still surprised that Nicole took her on the stairs last night. *That was crazy! A great crazy, but still crazy for Chem. Although when we finally made it to the bed, she didn't slow down any.*

Dane then shook those thoughts off, trying to concentrate on practicing her guitar. She worked out what songs she wanted to sing, reminding herself of the lyrics and the notes in each song since it had been a while. She also had to think about her song list. Then there was calculating what songs she could do in between playing the guitar since she would need breaks for her hand. Plus, she really wanted to show off to Nicole and her friends.

Deep down, Dane was quite the showman. She loved to impress and she loved to hear praise, even if it was from people that she did not know. Even without ever looking up the word psychology, Dane knew her desire for attention went back to her screwed up childhood. But, then again, she was sure that most parts of her psyche and personality could be chalked up to not getting enough attention at home or the abuse that she suffered back then.

Don't think about that anymore. Done with those people, so I don't need to think about that anymore. I just need to keep my focus on today and tomorrow and forget that there ever was a past. I have a future and that's the important thing. A future with Nick, my angel. That line of thought put a smile on her face.

Spending the day in the den, Dane worked out exactly how she wanted to spend her hour on stage. She could not believe that *she* was only getting an hour, especially at a club that knew her well. Despite everything that she told Crow, she felt a little insulted, even though an hour was probably all she could handle with her hand right now. But, the club managers did not know that and they did know her. She was the Great Dane and they should have offered her more, she thought for a moment. But, in a new life, she figured that she had to build a new reputation. Even

with the tiny slight against her, she felt like this was a good opportunity. It was a great chance to start building her new life.

"I should've bought that man out of my life a long time ago," Dane said to herself, referring to her father as she packed up her guitar. Honestly, she felt like a whole new person, knowing now if he popped up in her life, it had nothing to do with her.

By the time she was done, Nicole was coming into the house. She met Nicole at the door and before any words were spoken, their mouths met in a short kiss. A small "smack" noise escaped their mouths, which made Nicole laugh.

"That was you," Danny blamed her girlfriend, not wanting to believe that she would ever make such a weird sound.

"I think that was you, but you just want to keep thinking you're the tough girl," the redhead teased.

"I am way tough," Dane grinned, flexing her bicep. She had a pretty good muscle on her arm, especially compared to when she first arrived at the house a year ago, looking like a skeleton.

"I will say you have more muscle there, than you do here." Nicole poked her lover in the belly.

"Hey! I thought you liked my soft, chocolaty center!"

Nicole shot Danny a look that made the younger woman's knees wobble. "It's the other soft, chocolaty center that I like," the attorney purred.

"Nick..." Danny whimpered.

"I think I have figured out your weakness, my dear Danny. You like it when I talk dirty and when I take control," the redhead declared.

Dane grinned because she could not dispute that. In fact, she hoped her silence was taken as an admission and Nicole did it more often. Nicole shook her head and laughed a bit.

"You are so bad, Big Dog. Are you ready for your big show?" the lawyer asked as she started toward the stairs. She paused for a moment, just as she had done that morning and thought about last night. She was not sure if she would ever be able to use the stairs again without thinking about how she had taken Danny on them or how she wanted to do it again.

"I am. Driving me?" Dane countered, following right behind her lover. She teased Nicole a little by pressing up against Nicole's back. Nicole hissed in pleasure and sensual memories flooded her. Her knees shook for a moment, threatening to buckle, but she kept standing.

"Of course. I need to change. Maybe have a shower."

"Do you think you'll need help in the shower or maybe before the shower?" the musician proposed, a lascivious smile curling onto her face.

The older woman had to let out a long breath, trying to stay in control. "Unfortunately, no. We don't have time for that if we want to get you there on time," she pointed out, wishing that was not the case.

Dane let loose a loud, pretend huff, forcing out an exaggerated pout. Nicole ignored the noise as well as the expression and went about her night to get ready. She decided on having the shower just because she felt better about going out after having a shower. By the time she was ready to go, Dane was asleep on the couch. Nicole chuckled a bit.

"Baby, I think you need to wake up if you really want to make it to your gig," the attorney pointed out, rubbing the top of Dane's head, massaging her scalp.

Smoke-colored eyes fluttered open thanks to the divine touch. As soon as her vision cleared, Dane's mouth dropped open and she sat up straight. Her arms then went out wanting to grab a hold of Nicole, who was wearing another sexy dress. Nicole stepped out of reach very swiftly, leaving her sweetheart to take hold of air.

"Damn it, Chem, why do you always do this to me? We need time for me to get you out of this damn thing and put you back in it later on," Dane said.

Nicole only smirked at Danny and hurried her out of the door, so they could get to the small club on time. Dane did not even notice that they got in the car, let alone into the city. Her eyes stayed pinned to the form-fitting, body-hugging black dress Nicole was wearing. For a brief moment, her hand even went out, ready to keep Nicole's breasts company, but thankfully her mind caught her and pulled her hand back. She doubted that Nicole would be happy to be groped while focusing on her driving.

Instead of focusing on how the dress showed off Nicole's body, Dane turned her attention to her lover's face. The redhead was wearing subtle makeup, bringing out her eyes even more than usual. Realizing the vision before her was all for her, Dane was ready to melt into a puddle for the goddess across from her.

Luckily, Dane regained control over herself by the time they got to the club. She went to set up while Nicole kept a lookout for Mina and Clara. When they showed up, Dane was already on stage and into her second song.

"She's not playing the guitar?" Mina asked curiously as she and Clara said down. They looked around, noticing the club had a nice sized crowd on hand and they all seemed to be focusing on the stage.

"She'll either start playing it soon or into the next song. She needs to give her left hand a break every few minutes," Nicole answered in a whisper.

The late pair ordered drinks and then turned their attention to Danny. Mina's eyes went wide as she listened to the younger woman sing. It was crystal clear that she did not expect that voice to come out of Dane's mouth. Clara was just as surprised, but she managed to hide it a little better...even though her mouth was parted just a little bit. Who would have guessed that the punk rocker had a powerful smooth voice that probably belonged in a church choir?

"This song is beautiful," Mina muttered with awe in her voice as she listened to the lyrics as well the tone.

"It really is. Did she write this herself?" Clara asked the redhead.

"Everything that she does is original," Nicole informed her friends, her pride shining through and causing her eyes to twinkle.

The friends turned their attention back to Dane, who was strumming her guitar now. She started a new song, accompanying herself with the guitar. Mina rested her chin in her hand and leaned forward somewhat, as if that was going to help her hear it more. Clara's eyes glazed over, showing that the music was touching her emotionally. Nicole glanced around and noticed most of the audience was just like her friends.

My baby has such talent, Nicole thought. The music moved her and she could feel Danny's emotions as she played and sang. And she knew it was not just her that felt it. The melody was reaching everyone there.

"Nicole, is this song about you?" Clara inquired as she listened carefully to the lyrics.

The redhead shrugged. "I don't ask Danny if I inspire her music. Sometimes, she shares and other times she doesn't. It could always just be a regular love song. It doesn't have to be about me."

"Come on, Nick, cut the crap. You know she writes for you," Mina stated with a smile. "That girl is a keeper. Writing beautiful music in your honor, cooking and cleaning, making you go back to school, and best of all, not getting in a twist when you hang out with us. I suggest you propose and put a leash on her before I take her."

Nicole smiled and chuckled somewhat. It was tempting, what Mina said, but she was sure that she and Danny needed more time before she entertained the thought of proposing. Proposing was something for down the line when she was done with school and Danny was perfectly happy with where she was in life. Right now, they were both still growing as individuals and she did not think that was the time to put pressure on Danny for marriage.

The music continued on for an hour. Most of the songs did seem to be directed toward Nicole, sending pulses through her body because of the sensual, loving lyrics. The song that finished the show practically left Nicole feeling like her insides were made of warm goo as Danny made it clear that she was singing and playing to Nicole, openly professing her love in each bit of the song. Dane locked eyes with Nicole through out the whole song too, letting her know it was for her. By the end of the song, she was standing in front of Nicole and placed a small kiss to

glistening lips. The audience erupted from the show of affection and then the lights were turned down, so Dane could make a quick escape.

"Whoa..." Nicole whispered, suddenly her whole body felt more like it was on fire than anything else.

Mina laughed. "That girl knows how to close a show too!"

"That she does," Nicole agreed, licking her lips, wanting to taste Danny, but tasting her lip-gloss more than anything else.

"Well, what should we do now? Take Danny out to dinner to celebrate?" Mina suggested, even though she could tell that was not going to happen. Nicole's face was too flushed and her eyes were looking positively wanton.

"I actually have to get Richie from his father's house, so I will have to pass on that," Clara said, referring to her son.

"He didn't give you any problems about watching Richie two nights in a row, did he?" Nicole asked, showing concern for her friend, even though she was ready to grab Danny and run home. Her concern was genuine as always, though.

"No, believe it or not, as soon as Richie learned how to go to the bathroom on his own, Pedro turned into his best friend. I guess it wasn't so much that he didn't want a child, but he didn't think he would be able to take care of Richie. He has no problem with watching Richie now and they have loads of fun together," Clara informed her friends.

"That's good. He used to be such a butthead, especially about Richie," Mina commented.

Clara nodded in agreement since it was quite true. She then said farewell to her friends and took her leave. Mina considered sticking around for a little longer, wanting to tease Nicole about being such a groupie, but she actually decided against it. With that performance, Danny deserved her work to remain in tact and untouched by any commentary. She would taunt Nicole about it tomorrow at work during lunchtime.

"I'll see you later, girly. I have a husband that probably wants to see me sometime this week," Mina remarked, giving Nicole a quick hug.

Nicole barely noticed Mina leave as she waited for Danny. She felt the musician behind her before she saw her. Dane wrapped her arms around Nicole and placed a soft kiss to her neck. Nicole purred from the attention.

"What do you say we go home for an encore?" the grey-eyed woman whispered before kissing the back of Nicole's ear.

"Sounds wonderful. You're clear to leave?" Nicole asked just to be sure.

"Indeed I am. So, let's get home."

The couple got into the car and Dane seemed to be trying to cause an accident because she was stroking Nicole's thigh, teasing and tempting the lawyer. Nicole swallowed hard she felt her dress slowly creep up her leg and Danny's fingers began touching skin. Honestly, Nicole did not know how they made it home in one piece, but she was quite pleased that they had.

Nicole rushed to the door, opening it in record time. Dane was more leisurely about it, walking at a pace so slow that Nicole glared at her for taking so long. Danny pretended to not notice.

"Danny," Nicole whined. "Will you get in here?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she replied with a smirk. She hoped that Nicole took that line and ran with it.

"No, you will be when you get in here, though."

Danny chuckled, very pleased that Nicole had indeed took it there. Still, she took her time getting inside of the house and she turned to close the door, so that Nicole was looking at her back for a moment. As soon as she turned around, Nicole was on her and giving her a blazing hot kiss. A moan echoed through the house as Nicole turned to turn up the heat, but Dane was looking to slow things down. It was her turn tonight.

"That show was phenomenal..." Nicole whispered against her lover's lips.

"It was all to you, Nick. Every song, every note, everything was for you," Dane replied, wrapping her arms around Nicole. Her embrace went beyond a usual hug, like she was holding Nicole for all eternity and beyond, like she was holding Nicole for the older woman to feel everything inside of her and understand that love did not begin to cover the depth of her emotions for Nicole.

"Danny..." the name was whispered in a low breath, like a wish.

"Chem, I was so glad that you came tonight. I was so glad you saw me and liked the show."

"You're talented, baby. So very talented. Can you do me a favor?"

"Anything," the taller woman vowed.

"Sing to me as you take me upstairs."

Dane grinned and nodded. Clearing her throat and taking Nicole's hand, she made her way to the stairs while starting her song. She made sure to keep her voice low, giving her an excuse to sing into Nicole's ear. The redhead shivered as Dane's hands lightly wandered her body and sweet lyrics caressed her ears.

The bedroom seemed like it was a million miles away, but Dane refused to pick up speed. As much as she liked last night's spontaneous lovemaking session, she wanted Nicole to know that she also enjoyed when they took their time. By the time they go to the bedroom, Nicole's skin was flushed from the tender stroking and divine singing.

"Sit down, babe," Danny said, turning Nicole to the bed.

Nicole did not say anything, merely obeyed the order. She could tell that Dane wanted control just like she had last night. She had no problem with letting go, just like Danny had no problem with it. Besides, it might prove just as fun as being in control.

Danny leaned down, running her index fingers over both of Nicole's cheeks. The redhead trembled from the gentle touch and then Danny captured her lips into a kiss that felt almost sacred. As they lost themselves in the taste of their mouths, Danny's hands rubbed Nicole's bare shoulders, unable to get enough of the feel of her sultry flesh. Pulling away for a moment of air, Danny also unzipped the dress at a very leisurely pace.

Silver eyes met emerald, showing a devilish spark before Danny gently moved the dress down to Nicole's waist. A heady exhale escaped Dane when she saw that Nicole was not wearing a bra. Before Nicole could fathom that there was a pause in their activities, Dane's mouth was on hers again and their tongues were dancing together once more while questing hands fondly explored Nicole's torso.

Nicole moaned and that seemed to be a signal to Danny that it was time to pull away again. They caught their breath before another burning, amorous kiss was begun and Dane's hands were getting a little more personal. Danny was almost sorry that she did not have larger hands as she took Nicole's breasts into her palms, earning a deep, passionate hiss from the redhead. Nicole then cried out into Dane's mouth as her hands got even more personal, rolling and lightly pinching Nicole's nipples.

The attorney could not take it anymore. She needed more contact and grabbed at the back of Dane's shirt. She pulled it up in bunches and Danny had to step away in order to get out of it. Nicole whined at the loss of all contact as Danny yanked her shirt off over her head and tossed it behind her.

As Danny stepped back, she tapped Nicole on the thigh, silently telling Nicole to open her legs. The redhead obeyed the unspoken command and Danny settled herself in between the lovely limbs. Leaning down again, further than before, she placed hot, wet kisses to Nicole's neck as her hands went back to the area that they so coveted before. Surprising Nicole, she moved her mouth and nipped Nicole's earlobe. Adding to that surprise, she began singing.

"Hold on tightly," she instructed Nicole in her low, mellow tone, dragging out the last word. Nicole obeyed, clutching onto Danny's broad shoulders. "And I will take you back to Heaven, angel."

Oh, god, she's singing to me again! The sound of Danny's voice, singing to her made it feel like Nicole was going to burst into flames. It made her desire increase exponentially, and she had not thought that was possible. She was not sure how long she would last if Danny was going to sing to her while loving her.

"Please..." Nicole hissed, pressing herself deeper into Danny's hands.

Danny continued to take it slow and she continued to sing. "You know I won't let you fall, but take you to the highest high..."

The older woman nodded, liking that idea. She began placing adoring kisses to whatever part of Danny that she could reach as she felt Danny's hands moving further down to her waist. Danny also took a step forward, letting Nicole know that it was time for her to move back. The redhead did so, easing back onto the bed. As she moved, Danny held onto the dress, so that it was peeled away the more Nicole moved away. Eventually, Nicole was at the middle of the bed and the dress was on the floor. It did not register to her mind that Danny had left her heels on her.

The musician crawled back onto the bed, but halted at Nicole's feet. She placed a sweet kiss to Nicole's left ankle before running her tongue along the toned calf. Nicole squirmed from the attention, eager for more, but willing to let Danny continue on without begging. She liked it when things were done leisurely like now and, even though it was pure, sweet torture, she wanted Danny to stay at the speed she was going now.

Danny placed a tender kiss to Nicole's knee before dragging her tongue up to Nicole's thigh. There was another kiss placed to the inner thigh and her hands moved up Nicole's form, going back to play with bouncy breasts. Loud kisses were showered down onto Nicole's tense abdomen, rivaled only by Nicole's moans. Wanting more, Nicole's hips moved on their own, but did little for her increasing desire.

Subtly, Dane's fingers moved from kneading and pinching creamy mounds, edging their way back down. First things first, she placed her hands on those rocking hips and stopped their movement. The redhead let loose a disappointed mew, which turned into a moan as Dane caressed her thighs for a few seconds. Danny's amorous hands eventually moved on. Her thumbs hooked onto the inside of Nicole's black, lacy thong and began nonchalantly moving the piece down Nicole's legs. Once those were gone, Dane turned her attention to Nicole's right ankle and gave it a soft kiss. From there, she made her way back up the limb with her lips and tongue. The redhead's hips started up again and Dane halted her journey in order to stop the grinding.

"Please, Danny, please," Nicole implored her sweetheart as Dane hovered right where she wanted her the most, but the musician just stared at her.

"Angel, even when you fall, I will make you fly," Dane sang to calm her girlfriend down, right before vigorously kissing her lover's core with fond eagerness.

"Oh, yes, baby!" Nicole moaned loudly as a hungry mouth devoured her.

Soon, all words escaped the usually articulate lawyer as her hands lost themselves in Dane's inky mane. Her hips rocked forward, trying to take in more and more of Danny. Soon, the slow, almost methodical passes of Dane's tongue were driving Nicole to the brink of madness. Her hips surged with greater purpose, wanting to go over the edge. Danny refused her with each caress becoming lighter the more demanding her hips became. Understanding that the more she pursued her end, the more likely she would go insane, she did her best to calm herself. As soon as she ceased moving, Dane gave her exactly what she wanted.

"Oh, god! Danny!" Nicole gasped as she arched up off of the bed. She then collapsed back on the mattress, wanting rest. Her lover had other plans.

Suddenly, Dane left the redhead, but she did not have time to gripe about it or inquire what was going on. Dane moved up Nicole's body, pressing their nude forms together. Nicole purred from the delightful contact and forgot that she wanted to rest for a moment. Soon, they were face to face and Nicole smiled, knowing that the night was far from over.

"Sorry. I wanted to be up here tonight for the rest of this," Danny explained.

"No problem. I don't think you'll ever know how much I like feeling your body against mine," Nicole honestly replied. "This is actually one of my favorite positions," she admitted. It was rare because Danny could not support herself on her leg for long and then she would start to favor her left leg, merely tiring it out too.

Danny nodded, storing that information away for later, more frequent use. Leaning down, careful of putting her whole weight on Nicole, she started a prolonged, soul-stirring kiss. The unhurried pace was sweet and Nicole savored it, tasting herself all over Dane's mouth. She let out a long moan into Danny's mouth when she felt long, blessed fingers parting her and caressing her core. Slowly, she moved her hips in time with the strokes. Another moan was swallowed by Danny as her fingers sunk into Nicole's soul. The redhead ended up breaking the kiss, whining as she did so.

"Yes, baby, just like that," Nicole groaned, clutching onto Danny and trying to pull her closer while her body tried to take the musician deeper.

Danny did not respond, just starting a fresh kiss. The next time Nicole let loose a loud moan, breaking their kiss again, Dane just started kissing her throat. Nicole whined and tilted her head, giving Dane better access. In her pleasure-fueled haze, Nicole realized that she could be touching Danny too.

One hand had to stay on Danny's shoulder or Nicole was sure that she would fly off the bed. Her other hand slithered in between their bodies, first playing with Danny's swaying breasts. But, as she was drawn higher and higher, she realized that she would need to work fast or she was going to be too far-gone to do anything. Her hand reached its destination, feeling hot, sleek heaven as far as she was concerned.

With no preamble, Nicole pushed into Dane, earning a seemingly endless moan from the guitarist. Her pace was faster than Danny, wanting to get Danny to the same point as she was as soon as she could before she fell over the edge again. Danny moved her head close to Nicole's ear.

"Go slow. It's okay," she promised the lawyer.

Nicole followed those instructions and they were soon moving together at the same pace. The room then filled with their cries of pleasure and the sounds of their bodies meeting. Dane then curled her fingers and as if pressing a button inside of her lover, Nicole screamed and dug her nails into Danny's back. A groan escaped Danny and she could feel her reality shifting while trying to maintain her hold on Nicole. In the end, it was too much for both of them and they slid out of each other as Dane collapsed onto Nicole. It took her over a minute to figure out that she might be crushing her girlfriend.

"Sorry," Dane said, pushing herself up.

"Don't you dare apologize and don't you dare go anywhere, you love machine," Nicole declared, wrapping her exhausted arms around her lover to keep her in place.

"Not hurting you, am I?" Danny asked to be sure.

"No. You really have no idea how much like feeling you against me, especially like this. I love this solid weight," Nicole said, somewhat massaging Danny's shoulders.

Dane smiled a bit. "I aim to please."

"Then you always achieve your goal."

Eventually, Dane rolled off of Nicole, knowing her weight was getting too much. It was then that Nicole realized that she was still wearing her shoes. She gave Danny a curious look, but decided not to bring up the shoes for the moment. She kicked off her shoes while Danny pulled back the comforter. They crawled until the covers; vague thoughts of changing the covers in the morning and washing them went through both of their minds. Curling up close, Nicole practically used Danny's left side as a mattress. Dane wrapped her left arm around Nicole to keep the redhead in place. They were sleep right after that.

The shrill ringing of the house phone cut through the sated silence of the night and disturbed the peaceful slumber of the couple. Nicole whimpered, keeping her eyes close in the hope of staying asleep. Grey eyes fluttered open, first glancing over at the body clutching onto her own.

"Shh, I've got it," Dane whispered to Nicole, kissing the top of wild auburn locks to help relax the redhead.

Nicole settled down while Danny grabbed the bothersome phone. Wanting to hurry up and cease the ringing, she did not bother to check the number to see who was calling. She just answered.

"Yeah?" Danny greeted whomever it was that was calling at...2:30 in the morning according to the clock. *Damn, who the hell is calling here at fucking two in the morning?* In another time, another place, in another life, she would not have thought anything of it, but she knew in a normal life most people did not get phone calls at two in the morning. Well, she was about to learn the circumstances that people did get such phone calls.

"Dane...?" a quiet, almost familiar voice questioned her.

"Yeah. Who is it and whaddaya want?" the musician grunted, frowning as she spoke. She wanted to go back to sleep before she woke up Nicole.

"Dane...I need your help... It's your father..."

"What about the bastard? And once again, who the fuck is this?" Dane inquired. *Damn it, just when I thought I was free of this bastard, he manages to interrupt my new life two days into living it!*

"Oh...it's Christine..."

"Mom? What the hell? Why are you calling me and what the hell do you need my help with?" Dane demanded, forgetting that Nicole was curled against her and trying-unsuccessfully-to get some sleep.

"Russell..." Christine sniffled. "...He got up to get water...and when he didn't come back to bed...I got worried...I looked for him..."

"Mom, can you tell this story just a little faster?" Dane inquired with impatience overflowing from her voice. It earned her a pinch to the side from her girlfriend. She glared down at Nicole, who wiggled a reprimanding finger at Danny.

"He's lying on the floor and he's bleeding so much!"

Oh, goddamn it! "Well, did you call the fucking police? Or a goddamn ambulance?! Do you know if someone's in the house?!"

"I didn't...I couldn't..." Christine sounded so lost and confused that Dane almost felt sympathy for her mother.

"Oh, fuck. Hold on, Mom," Dane sighed and she clicked over, dialing the police. She explained the situation as best she could and then clicked back over to her mother. "Mom, an ambulance is on the way. The police too. Just cool out. Don't make a bunch of noise in case someone is in the house. You don't want to attract attention to yourself. The police should be there in a couple of minutes."

"Are you sure? I don't know what to do and I didn't know who to call!"

Obviously, which explains why the hell you're on the phone with me. "Just be easy. They're on their way. All you have to do is stand there and be quiet."

"Rachel is on vacation and Michael is away at a business conference! I couldn't call Adam or that would've frightened the children!" Christine continued to rant, apparently missing Dane's order of being quiet in case someone was in the house.

Oh, yeah, so call me in the middle of the night when there are no other options left. Fuck you so hard. Fuck you in the ass! Despite those thoughts, Dane found herself unable to say the words to her mother. She was not sure why. If it was her father on the phone, she would have been able to curse him out six ways to Sunday, but not with her mother. She guessed it was because of the type of relationship that she had with her father. She did not have any relationship with her mother.

"Mom, you don't have to explain this shit to me. Help is coming, so you can hang up now," Dane stated. Really, she could have and probably should have hung up herself, she knew that. But, for whatever reason, she did not. She did not dwell on why that was.

"What do I do when they get here? What if he's dead?!"

"Oh, god. And what if someone's in the house that did this to him and can hear you screaming like that? You need to calm down. Is he lying on his back?"

"Yes."

"Is his chest rising and falling?"

"I...I can't tell!"

"Damn it, Mom, are you really this fucking helpless?" Dane roared, hating that it took something like this for her mother to have the nerve to talk to her and now talking to her like she was supposed to give a damn. She had been treated like shit by these two people her whole life and now she was supposed to play the concerned daughter? *To hell with that!*

"Danny, give me the phone," Nicole ordered. She did not have to say it twice. "Hello, Mrs. Wolfe, this is Nicole, Danny's girlfriend," she reintroduced herself just in case the hysterical woman did not recall her.

Danny watched as Nicole patiently spoke to her mother in a soft tone, obviously soothing the frantic female. Honestly, Danny could care less. She settled down to try to go back to sleep, which did not work because Nicole was talking too loud for her. After a few minutes, the call was ended. Nicole put the phone on the stand closest to her and then moved to get out of the bed.

"Where are you going?" Dane asked curiously.

"Come on, get up and get dressed," Nicole replied.

"What? Why? It's two in the morning!" Dane pointed out, as if her lover could not read the time.

"Danny, your mother just called because your father was hurt and she was scared. She was so panicked, so we're going to meet her at the hospital."

Dane arched an eyebrow. "What the hell for?"

"Because they need you. That's why she called you."

"She called because she didn't have any other options! Everybody else is out of town or have kids that she didn't want to freak out! Hell, she probably isn't even in her right mind and that's why she called here!"

"That's even more of a reason. She needs your support."

"So the fuck what?" Dane said. "Where the fuck was this woman when I needed support?! Now, she snaps her finger and I'm supposed to jump? Fuck that!"

"Danny!" Nicole screamed, half in horror and half as an order.

"What!" Dane shouted back in a voice that she almost certain could not have been hers. The anger that she hollered with could not have been directed toward her precious Nicole, but she knew it was her voice and those were her emotions. It scared her so much that she could raise her voice to Nicole that she did not need to hear anything else from her lover. Of course, Nicole did not know that.

"How can you be so cold-hearted? These are your parents!" Nicole huffed, eyes blazing from fury and disbelief that her sweetheart could be callous and hold such a grudge.

Dane did not respond to that, stomping out of bed. She quietly got dressed, putting on her usual gear of tee-shirt with a sleeveless shirt on over it. Next came her favorite pair of shorts, black cargoes with a torn pocket on the side and on the back. Nicole was tempted to tell her to change, but they did not have time for that. They needed to get to the hospital.

"You want to wash your face or anything?" Nicole asked her subdued lover. She was in the bathroom, cleaning up as best she could in a short amount of time.

Shaking her head, Dane moved toward the door. She did not give a damn how she looked and she would not care if anyone smelled Nicole's essence all over her. Nicole shrugged, grabbing the keys. They were off with Dane guessing that Nicole knew what hospital they were going to.

When they pulled into the parking lot, Dane blinked and then shuddered. She remembered the lot, the building, the smell, the way her stomach turned as she listened to them set her broken bones, the way she vomited from the pain, and how she shed tears when they told her that her left hand was close to unsalvageable.

"Danny, come on. Why are you just standing there? We should get to your mother and find out what happened to your father," Nicole pointed out.

A snarl tugged at Dane's lip, but she did not say anything. She followed behind Nicole like a lost puppy. Nicole found out that Russell was in surgery and went to the waiting room. Christine was sitting there, still in her pajamas and robe, her head bowed and her hands clasped as if she was praying. Nicole went and sat down next to her while Dane went and stood behind a chair, as if needing a barrier from the whole scene.

"How are you holding up, Mrs. Wolfe?" Nicole asked.

Christine glanced over at the lawyer with tired eyes. "You're Nicole, right?"

"Yes, I am. Are you all right? You sounded all out of sorts earlier," Nicole pointed out in a gentle tone. She then gave her lover a glance as if scolding her for her actions when her mother was in need.

Dane rolled her eyes, having conflicted emotions ripping through her at the moment. One, she was pissed that Nicole would judge her for how she treated a woman that pretended she never existed until, of course, the fucking woman needed her help. But, she was also touched that Nicole could feel compassion for a woman that she barely knew. And then there was also the fact that deep down in a pit that she hated existed, she felt sorry for her mother. In that same place, she had been concerned about her mother's safety, thinking that someone could have broken into the house, attacked Russell, and might have harmed Christine too. That was why she had continuously ordered her mother to be quiet over the phone, but Christine was too far gone to heed that simple advice. Or maybe Christine just thought she was not worth paying attention to when it came to advice, Dane considered. She was starting to long for those days where she was numb, the day that she walked out of this very hospital, not caring what happened to her or the rest of the world.

Underneath it all, Dane hated that she could somewhat understand why Nicole was upset with her, but she actually did not care. Nicole was siding with her mother as far as she was concerned. So, what her mother was in pain and sick with worry? She knew that Nicole felt like she should put the past aside because Christine was her mother. Well, fuck that. Christine was not Kate. Sure, they both hated her guts, but Kate was a decent mother that gave a damn about her daughter. Christine, sure she gave a damn about her daughter, just not the one that she called.

"Do you want me to call anyone for you? Your other children maybe?" Nicole offered, her tone gentle and kind.

"Thank you...but..." Christine wanted to object, say her children were all busy, but she really wanted them there...just in case.

"It's fine. They should all be made aware that their father is in the hospital," the redhead said, easing any guilt that Christine might feel from disturbing them.

Christine nodded in agreement and handed Nicole her cell phone, so that she could make the calls. Nicole scrolled through the phone, seeing Adam was first. He was the easiest to speak with, needing only the barest of information before declaring that he was on his way. She smiled a bit, wishing that Danny's response had been like that.

"Adam says he'll be here in less than ten minutes," Nicole reported.

"I hope he doesn't hurt himself. Did he tell the boys anything?" Christine asked.

"No, they were asleep. I'm sure he explained to Sharon what was going on, but you can get the details from him soon enough," Nicole replied.

"Thank you."

Nicole then went back to the contacts in the phone to make the next call. Scrolling through the names, she found Dane's name there. She smiled a bit before continuing on her way and coming to Michael's name. He was grumpy about being woken up so early in the morning and cursed a bit, but was on the move too when he found out what was happening. He said that he would try to be there in an hour; he was actually in a city that was a two-hour drive away, but that did not matter to him.

Rachel was the hardest one to talk to. She whined endlessly while trying to figure out how she could get home as soon as possible. Nicole had no answer for that, but she was glad when the woman finally hung up. With that out of the way, she handed the phone back to Christine.

"Any word on Mr. Wolfe?" Nicole asked.

"They said he had a stroke, but that was about all. The reason for all of the blood was because he hit his head on the corner of his desk and knocked himself unconscious. He had a huge gash on the side of his head and there was so much blood..." Christine shuddered as she recalled the scene.

"It's okay. He'll be okay," Nicole assured her, putting her arm around the distressed woman. Green eyes glanced at Dane as if beckoning her over. Dane turned her head, wanting no part of that disgusting scene.

It seemed like an eternity that they were there, but Dane was happy when the cavalry arrived- Adam. She thought with the entrance of the first son, she and Nicole would be allowed to be on their way. But, when Nicole did not move, she knew that was not going to be the case. Instead, Nicole remained where she was, comforting Christine, who sat there praying the entire time.

Dane was starting to seethe and she could not figure out why. It was just the more she watched her lover with her mother, the more she wanted to put her foot through a wall. Not usually one to analyze herself too deeply, she figured it was jealousy that her mother would pay attention to yet again someone who was not her and some anger that Nicole would side with this bitch of a woman that hated her. She just wanted to forget the moment, but it only got worse.

Michael showed up in less than an hour, explaining that he had actually caught a flight to get home. He had obviously been in a rush, his clothing wrinkled and his hair wild, but his appearance did not seem to matter to him or anyone else for that matter. He noticed Dane in the corner and glared at her. She did not pay him any mind. He was going to question what the hell Dane was doing there, but then he saw that Nicole was comforting his mother.

"You know, you can go home now and get some sleep. I'm sure you have work in a few hours," Michael said, speaking to Nicole. His voice was not harsh and his eyes were not hard, but still, he might as well have said "get the hell out."

The redhead was very aware that she was being dismissed and she was not entirely sure how to respond to it. "Mrs. Wolfe, are you going to be all right? Your sons are here and Danny is standing over there. They're here for you," Nicole informed the distressed woman in a hushed, sensitive tone.

"Actually, you should take *Danny* with you," Michael chimed in before his mother had a chance to answer. "Don't want her to do anything to upset Mom, after all," he added in, sneering a bit at the musician.

"Michael, you can't force Nicole or Dane to leave. She has as much of a right to be here as we do," Adam pointed out.

"Why would she even want to be here? No one cares," Michael declared.

Dane nodded with that. She was very aware that no one cared, yet there she was and there she stayed since Nicole refused to leave. Once again, it seemed like an eternity passed and then Rachel rushed in with her husband. They had chartered a plane to get back. Dane rolled her eyes because her sister announced it like it was an accomplishment. Duncan backed his wife up by looking smug when she made the announcement.

"Is Daddy all right?" Rachel begged to know, turning back and forth from her brothers. Her mother's sullen expression was not helping her anxiety.

"He's still in surgery. The doctor came out to give us an update a few minutes ago. Apparently, he had a bunch of mini-strokes or something like that," Adam informed her. "The doctor says everything is going fine and they should be done with him in a little while."

Rachel nodded to show that she understood, even though she did not fully comprehend what he meant. The important thing was that their father was still alive and everything was going to be fine. She glanced over to where Dane was. "What the hell is she doing here?" she demanded, pointing at Dane as if she was a foul creature.

"He's her father too, believe it or not," Nicole stated.

"If you think so, why don't you tell him that?" Rachel snapped.

Dane wanted to tell Nicole to stop trying to defend her. She did not care if the man was her father or not. She did not care what they thought, but she was not in the mood to talk to Nicole right now. She was not in the mood to deal with anything at the moment. God, she really wished that she could just walk away right now and never look back. Unfortunately, she just could not leave Nicole, no matter how upset she was at the moment.

An argument was halted when the doctor returned. He was smiling slightly, so the family took that as a good sign. Dane moved, waiting to grab Nicole as soon as she could, so they could go home.

"The surgery was a success. He's still unconscious right now. Now, there is one problem that we would like to address," the doctor informed them.

"Oh, god, what?" Christine asked.

"His blood pressure is very low. He lost a lot of blood and it could cause complications. We'd like to do a blood transfusion, but he had a very uncommon blood type. We were wondering if any of his children are a match. For him and possibly to donate blood to the hospital."

Everyone was silent. All eyes turned to Christine. They figured she would know if they were matches because none of them knew what their father's blood type was. Christine looked up at the doctor and then glanced over to the side.

"Dane is a match," Christine informed them, pointing over to the guitarist.

All eyes went to Dane, watching her expectantly. She rolled her eyes. *This is such bullshit!*

8: Lovers' quarrel

Dane shook her head when she saw all eyes on her. Everyone was looking at her as if she was supposed to jump up and offer her arm to the doctor right away. *To hell with that!*

"Are you sure that Dane is a match?" Rachel asked her mother, disbelief echoing in her voice. She had always grown up believing that Dane was not related to their father at all, just as he wanted everyone to think. What were the odds of that being true if Dane had a matching, rare blood type?

"I am quite sure. We ran into a similar problem when Dane was in the hospital," Christine answered. "Several times when Dane was in the hospital actually," she added, as if in jest. No one laughed.

Dane had gotten active during her adolescence and spent more than her fair share of time in the hospital. Usually, it was this very hospital. None of the memories were fond. When she was ten, she had been brought in for drinking bleach; Michael had dared her to do. At eleven, she had

broken her arm after falling down the stairs; she had only herself to blame for that one. When she was fourteen, she had OD'ed on her first taste of cocaine and they just barely saved her life. Having no learning curve apparently, she did cocaine all the way up until her next visit to this very hospital where after sustaining a horrible beating, she had almost every bone in her body broken or bruised. Even there, there was talk that she might die, but they had saved her life again. At the moment, she really wished that they had not done so.

"Dad gave blood to Dane?" Adam asked, sounding so incredulous that it crushed Dane's chest. Everyone knew how he felt about her and they all knew that he would have let her die rather than give something of himself to save her.

"No," Christine answered in a quiet, somber tone, shaking her head. Nicole watched and thought that the woman looked pained from that admission, but she did not have time to dwell on that.

"Well, that doesn't matter. The point is that Dane and Dad are a match. Dane, give blood for Dad," Michael ordered, pointing at her as if that would make her suddenly give a damn about what he said.

"Excuse me?" Dane asked, offended by the size her brother's balls to give her such a command.

"Dane, now is not the time to act like a bitch. Daddy needs you, so give blood," Rachel chimed in.

"Come on, Dane, you're not just going to leave your father to sit there and possible die, are you? The man needs blood," Adam said, even putting some force in his tone. Honestly, he could not believe that they were even discussing the issue. This was their father, for crying out loud!

"Yeah, well, if you guys are all concerned, why don't you give your fucking blood?" Dane snapped, glaring furiously at them all.

"Danny," Nicole chimed in softly. Dane growled, taking it as a reprimand and she ignored her lover for once. Nicole did not get a chance to say anything else because Danny's sister decided that she was not done yet.

"We would if we matched, but we don't! You do, so stop being the mega bitch we know you are and help Daddy!" Rachel huffed.

"Oh, you mean all of a sudden Dane should jump when you all snap your fingers for me? Not even five minutes ago, you were glaring over here for me to fucking leave! Well, you know what? That's what I wanted to do for the last three hours! I don't need the bullshit from you! All of a sudden we're such a close and concerned family and Dane should be the good little girl when barely a week ago this same man would sooner spit on me than save my fucking life?! Fuck all of you for everything! Eat me!" Dane declared before rushing off, unable to run because of her injured leg.

No one moved to chase after Dane, even though everyone seemed shocked by her outburst. Eyes tracked her movements and Christine's begging gaze went to Nicole. The redhead walked over to the doctor.

"I'll bring her back. When do you need the blood?" Nicole inquired.

"As soon as possible. His body is weak and this would help boost his strength," the doctor answered.

Nicole nodded and she went off to track down her girlfriend. She tried to quell her anger while searching for the musician. She could not believe that Danny would say such things and then run off rather than helping her father. Granted he would never win father of the year when it came to Danny, but he was still her father. The only one that she had and she had condemned him to illness or worse. Beyond that, he was a human being, a human being that needed Danny's help.

"Such selfishness," Nicole hissed in a fury that was rising within her for every second that she did not find her wayward lover.

Dane growled as she wandered into the cold, pre-dawn morning. Her feelings were boiling out of control and all she wanted to do was repeatedly put her foot through something. The range of emotions that she experienced were so bad that as her stomach twisted, she was not even sure what she was furious with. The world seemed like an adequate target.

Only in a screwed up world like the one she occupied would she be ordered to give blood to help save a man who had taken great pleasure in making her feel three-inches tall her entire life. Only in a world like this one could she be called up to recognize Russell as her father because they had the same blood type and the hospital did not have enough to spare for that bastard. God, she did not even really consider him her father! She only called him that because she knew that he despised it!

He was not her father because there was no way that a father would have treated her the way that he did. No real father would have abused her like he did. No real father would deny her just because of the color of her skin!

Her guts twisted as she realized that she had just walked away from helping someone in need. Forget the fact that it was Russell. He was a human being that needed help. He actually needed her to survive and she had been able to run off. She did not think that she would do that for anyone else. Hell, if that had been Kate in there, she would have offered her arm with no problem and Kate openly hated her just like Russell! Had that been a stranger that she did not know from the next faceless person on the street, she would have given, but not him. *How is that even possible?* She growled to herself.

She knew why it was possible. She was poison, she reminded herself. He had made her poison. He was toxic and he had seeped so far into her that she could do something so heinous as to

leave when a person needed her to live. *Is that why he hates me? Because I am him? Poison just like him?* The thought hit her like a punch to the stomach and she hunched over, leaning against the building wall to support herself.

"This is bullshit. It's all bullshit," Dane snarled in a low tone.

"Danny!" The name was called with some distress.

Dane growled again when she heard her name being shouted. She had no desire to see Nicole at the moment and she did not want to hear anything from her either. Unfortunately, she could not flee fast enough and she knew that Nicole would be on her in mere seconds. So, she took a deep breath and silently assured herself that she was not going to do anything that she did not want to do. She also tried to get control of her emotions, so she did not say something that she would later regret.

"Danny," Nicole's voice was closer now.

Dane pushed herself off the wall, trying her best to stand on her own. She was only partially successful. Cramping in her stomach kept her hunched over and she really wanted to vomit. Nothing was coming up, though, just a burning sensation stuck in her throat.

"Danny, baby, how could you just run off like that?" Nicole inquired, her voice soft, but her tone was bordering on scolding and judgmental.

"It was easier than you think," Dane replied as she shifted her body, falling against the wall again. Grey eyes searched the dark sky for a sign of any kind. None came. *It was too easy. It was easy to leave when he needed me. Just like he does to me.*

"Danny, sweetheart, I know how you feel about your father-" Nicole started, but was cut off by a loud scoff.

"No, I don't think you do if you're really about to stand here and lecture me on giving blood to the man. You really need to just back away from the whole situation," Dane advised her girlfriend, trying very hard to avoid speaking through gritted teeth. She knew if they had to talk about what happened, she was going to say something that she probably would not be able to take back.

"Baby, you really need to be the bigger person right now-"

"I don't want to be the bigger person! I want to be a fucking dickhead right now! I want to be spiteful and vengeful and hate him so much that he could fucking die and I wouldn't even want to know the details of the funeral!" Dane roared, eyes wide with so many emotions blazing inside of her that they hurt her chest.

"Danny..." Nicole whispered, not sure what else to say.

"I want to...I want to forget that I ever knew that man...and that he ever bothered me..." Dane said, her voice much lower now. "I want to just be able to let him die..." *So, why the hell am I not walking away? Why the hell am I just standing here? It was so easy to run before!*

"But, you can't, can you?" Nicole asked tenderly, reaching out and caressing her lover's shoulder.

"I want to..." Tears welled in Dane's eyes.

"But, you can't, baby, because you're not like that. You might not do this for him, but you would do this because you're a good person. You could do this because deep down you know it's the right thing to do. You would do this because you know you shouldn't let someone die if you can do anything to help them," Nicole cooed, pulling Danny to her. The musician burst into gut-wrenching sobs immediately.

"I feel so horrible, Nick! I just want to throw up! I hate that they did this to me! That he did this to me!"

"What did they do, honey? What did he do?" Nicole asked, holding onto Danny tightly and rubbing her back in the hopes that it would comfort her.

"They made me like this... They made me someone who is capable of walking away, even if it means my father might die...even if it means a person might die! I know I shouldn't be like this..." Dane paused to hiccup and then went right back to crying, burying her head in Nicole's shoulder as if that would make everything better.

"You're not like this, baby. All you have to do is go back in there-"

"No, I don't! Aren't you listening?!" Dane hollered, reeling back, moving away from her lover.

"Sweetheart, please, calm down and just talk to me," Nicole requested, putting her hands out as if that would lower her girlfriend's mood.

"Don't you get it?! I'm disgusted that my first reaction to this was to run! I'm disgusted that I can stand here and seriously consider not going back in there! What kind of monster am I?! I'm actually capable of standing out here to spite him and let him die if he has to! I can stand here and let a man die!" Pointing to herself, Dane hit herself hard in the chest. The pain did not register to her mind.

"Danny, you are far from a monster. You say I'm not listening, but I think you're the one not listening. If you were this monster that you think you are, you would be gone right now. You're not. Baby, you don't have to do this for them. You don't even have to do this for Russell. You need to do this for you," Nicole stated, and she thought that was obvious. While it was horrible to her that Danny had run off, it was clear that if Russell did die, it would tear Danny apart to know that she just stood there while he needed her. After all, Danny was already having an attack of conscience and she was barely out of the hospital.

"Me?" Dane croaked, wiping her face with the back of her hand, knowing that she looked quite the terrible sight.

"Danny, look at yourself. Do you think you'd really be able to deal with anything if your father got seriously ill or even died because you didn't want to give him blood? You're practically ripping your hair out just because you feel bad for running out just to gather your thoughts!" the redhead pointed out, motioning to her poor, distressed girlfriend.

Coughing from such heavy bawling, Dane went back to gazing at the sky, searching it for any kind of answers. How would she react if Russell ended up worse off than he was and she would have been able to help him? She liked to think that she would dance a jig on his grave, or maybe throw a party to celebrate. He had put her through so much and made her so fed up with herself, with him, and with the family.

Part of her asked, "Why help him?" No answer other than the obvious "he's your father" and "he's a human being" came to mind. She could go down a long list of why that meant nothing to her. But, once she got down that list, she started to think a little more clearly.

Her brain told her that it was not about him. It was about her for the reasons that Nicole stated. She could be the bigger person. Besides, she really would not be able to live with herself if something happened to him that she could have prevented. For some reason that she did not think about, she could not admit those things to Nicole yet.

Inhaling and taking in as much air as she could, Dane tried to calm herself down. It took all of her willpower to force herself to stop crying. It caused a huge hiccup and then she coughed some, but the sobbing was done and over. Rubbing her face, she let loose a long exhale. She knew that she more than likely still looked awful, but did not care as she marched back toward the entrance. Nicole trailed behind her.

Dane did not even bother to make eye contact with anyone in her family. She made a beeline for the doctor, who was still standing there. Her eyes were on the floor for a moment as she took a deep breath. With that out of the way, she put her head up and offered a weak smile to the medical professional.

"Take what you need, doc. Just leave me enough to make it back home," Dane remarked, tapping the inside of her elbow.

The doctor laughed and clapped Dane on the back. He led her away, but before she was totally out of earshot, she heard Michael make a comment about testing her blood for drugs first. Snorting angrily, she turned to the doctor to assure him that she was clean.

"They were telling me about your drug history," the doctor said.

"I'm clean. I promise. I would never do this if I was still on drugs. Hell, I wouldn't have been here if I was still on drugs. They wouldn't have known where to find me and my dumb mother would still be crying in the study about how Russell fell and hit his head," Dane huffed.

The doctor nodded. "You do seem to have quite the family."

"Wait until the guy in charge wakes up."

The doctor was not looking forward to that thanks to the family drama that he had already witnessed. He suspected that security was going to end up having to escort at least one of the Wolfes out. He was happy that he would be able to get some blood before that happened.

"Hey, doc, do you guys give money to people that donate blood?" Dane asked curiously.

He nodded. "Not much."

"I figured. I just need every little bit I can get. Tutoring people in music doesn't pay well."

The doctor nodded. Dane was not planning to ask for money now, but she figured that she could come back later and donate blood. Every cent counted for her to pay Nicole back as soon as she possibly could.

The hospital floor had the same sickening smell that Dane remembered. Standing outside of her father's room, she could almost see herself in there, lying in bed, bandaged, and broken. She could feel the isolation and despair that coated that room over two years ago. And in the back of her mind, she could hear Bryan laughing at her misery and Russell asking how much longer he had to be there because he had a golf game he wanted to get to. She could even vaguely recall Russell telling Christine, "Dane is not more important than my meeting." His meeting had been a haircut, but at least "meeting" had sounded official.

Shaking her head, ridding herself of the thoughts, Dane stepped into the room. Inside, her mother, brothers, and sister were crowded around the bed. Her father was lying there, IV in his arm, bandage on his head, looking drawn, piqued, and weak. And for a second-a second longer than she liked-she saw herself in that bed. The very idea caused her stomach to flip.

Suddenly, Nicole was at her side. "How do you feel?" she asked in a low voice.

"A few pints short, but otherwise fine," Dane quipped, rubbing the band-aid on her arm.

Nicole glanced down to check the wound and noticed the bandage. "Nice choice," she said with a smile. The band-aid had puppies on it.

"Thought you'd like it."

Nicole sighed in relief, pleased that Danny seemed to be somewhat normal. At least Danny was not screaming at her anymore. She did not like that one bit and prayed that it never happened again.

"Come, sit," Nicole urged her lover, guiding Danny to one of the chairs in the room. It was close to the bed.

Dane eased away from Nicole, going to a chair on the other side of the small room. The redhead sighed again, shaking her head tiredly now. Throwing her head back, Dane ignored the words of encouragement from her family to her father get well, wake up, and all other kinds of things.

"Danny, don't you want to say a few words to him?" Nicole asked, nodding toward the unconscious Russell.

"Other than 'fuck you in the ass,' no," Dane answered. In all honesty, she just wanted to go home, but it was clear that Nicole was not in the mood to make that happen. No, Nicole wanted to keep her trapped there with people who had never bothered to thank her for her blood or the fact that she had been the one to call for help in regards to Russell. Her mother had not even said a word to her in person.

"Danny," the redhead hissed.

Dane ignored the reprimand and closed her eyes. She was thankful to fall asleep within seconds. Nicole noticed and was tempted to wake her lover up, but decided against it. She feared that it would only cause a fight between them.

It troubled Nicole greatly that she could feel she and Danny were on their way to their first real fight. Danny's attitude was rubbing her the wrong way and it seemed that everything that came out of her mouth suddenly irritated her girlfriend. She could not believe that Danny could be so callous. Yes, she knew that the Wolfe family had not been particularly kind to Danny in the past, but they seemed to be making steps toward her, inviting her into the family home, for family gatherings and to play with her nephews. Danny did not want to recognize the effort, it seemed. She also did not seem to recognize that now was not the time to be pity when her own father was seriously ill.

Nicole did think it was a bit odd that Danny's family had not said a word to her aside for the snide comments when she did not readily give blood to help Russell, but she could understand that. They were all concerned about Russell right now and they were on edge with concern and raw emotions. If it was her father in that bed, she knew that she would have little words for anyone. In the back of her mind, she was aware that it was unfair to compare her father to Russell, but right now, all she could think was that he was Danny's *father* and Danny did not care that he was ill.

Nicole could not fathom the harsh indifference of her lover toward the fact that her father almost died. And she could not piece together that it might be something due to Russell and Danny's relationship, partly due to stress, but mostly because she was not able to separate Dane and Russell from any daughter and father. Right now, it was all the same to her. All her mind could think about was a daughter should care about her father. It was just natural. That was how families were.

The redhead was left to her thoughts since the Wolfe family did not pay her much mind. She could understand that. Occasionally, she glanced at Danny and tried to will her to wake up and join them. Danny remained asleep for several hours, awaking only when her stomach started grumbling.

"Breakfast..." Danny mumbled, pushing herself out of her chair and wandering off without glancing at anyone.

Nicole was not too sure what to make of her girlfriend's bizarre actions. Minutes later, Danny returned with two cups of tea. She handed one to Nicole. The generous action took Nicole by surprise.

"Thank you..." Nicole muttered.

Dane shrugged in response before flopping back into her chair. She did not even cast her family a look. Sipping her tea, she pulled out a granola bar from her pocket and handed it to Nicole. Once again Nicole expressed thanks, which was acknowledged with another shrug. Going into her pocket, Dane pulled out another bar and pretty much swallowed it. Nicole was not surprised by that; she practically did the same thing.

The day was quiet for a while. Danny was tempted to ask Nicole if she called in, letting her job know that she would not be in today, but was not in the mood to talk to the attorney just yet. Nicole was responsible and anal to a certain degree, so she was sure Nicole handled her business properly. If anything, she should worry about herself and wondered if she should cancel her afternoon lessons. She did not want to since she really needed the fifty dollars the two lessons would generate, but if Nicole was not ready to leave by then, she was out of luck.

She was very tempted to request to go, but she had a feeling that Nicole was not going to be ready until there was some response from Russell. She hoped he woke up soon just so she could get out of there. Of course, she got her wish.

Russell groaned, sounding groggy and sedate. His wife and three acknowledged children pepped up, going as far as to grin; yes, they all grinned, including Rachel's husband, Duncan. He groaned again as his eyes fluttered open. Christine quickly took hold of his hand with both of hers, letting him know that she was there. Turning his attention to her, he smiled a bit, knowing who she was even though his eyes had not focused completely yet.

"You had me so scared, Russ," Christine muttered, leaning down to kiss his knuckles.

Weakly, he reached over and patted her hands. Glancing around the room, he got a pretty good idea of his predicament despite the medication that was sort of slowing his cognitive functions. He then turned his attention to the others by his bedside and smiled a little more. And then his eyes spotted the couple on the other end of the room. A fire ignited his gaze that Dane could have spotted from down the street. Rolling her eyes, she sighed, knowing what was coming.

"Get out!" Russell's voice thundered, but also sounded like his tongue was swollen and too big for his mouth. He pointed at his youngest as if he was condemning her.

"Russell," Christine said, patting his hand again. "You really shouldn't get so worked up," she cautioned him.

"Get her out!" he hollered. His voice still sounded thick, almost like he did not know how to talk, but the message was loud and clear.

"Dane, just leave," Rachel said. "He shouldn't get worked up and he obviously doesn't want you here anyway."

Figures. Fuck you all so hard, Dane's eyes said. Out loud, she said nothing. Shrugging, she shoved her hands in her pockets and started for the door. Nicole stared between her and her family, not believing what she was seeing. Everything was so wrong, she thought. She could not believe that no one was standing up for Danny or explaining what happened, but she did not voice that yet. Instead, she chased after her girlfriend.

Catching Danny was no problem, figuring out what to say to her was another matter entirely. Nicole was not too sure what to make of anything, so she decided not to say anything. It was a wise decision since Danny had no desire to talk to her right now.

The ride home was spent in silence. When they got home, Danny went straight for the shower. She fell into the bed right after getting clean and was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Nicole made herself some tea and sat alone for a while. Before letting her thoughts wander, she called into work, just to make sure her message was received that she would not be in; she had called earlier, but no one was in the office yet. With that out of the way, she was trying to figure out everything that happened that morning, but she was much too exhausted to come up with anything that she could make sense of. Eventually, she gave up trying to make heads or tails of things. She took a shower and curled up into the bed too. She pressed herself into Danny's back, wanting to feel some closeness to the musician since she knew that there was some distance between them now.

Danny was not surprised that she woke up first. Nicole had been up all morning, after all. Carefully, she eased away from the redhead, making sure not to wake her up. She was not too sure what to do with her life after that, but figured making something to eat would be a good start. Undoubtedly Nicole would be hungry when she woke up.

Not sure when Nicole would be up, Danny made simple tuna sandwiches, knowing how much her girlfriend loved them. Afterwards, she sat at the table, feeling like she had the weight of the world pressing down on her shoulders. Eyes focused on her sandwich, she did not eat and was not sure how long she sat there.

Nicole seemed to appear before Danny. The younger woman was just so dazed that she had not noticed Nicole enter the kitchen. The redhead eyed the sandwich that seemed to be waiting for

her; Dane forgot to put it in the refrigerator. Her stomach growled, begging her to eat it. She was tempted to leave it be, but she was more hungry than anything else. As she ate, Dane took the hint and did the same.

The meal was eaten in silence. Nicole was finished first for once. Glancing over at Danny, she saw that her lover had only eaten half her sandwich. By now, usually the younger woman would have inhaled two sandwiches and stolen bites of Nicole's food too.

"Baby..." Nicole said. Grey eyes remained unfocused, pointed at the table, but more than likely not seeing it.

Nicole sighed, knowing that she needed to do something. Moving quickly and without much thought, she got up and then made herself comfortable on Dane's lap. She had lots of practice in doing that, so she easily adjusted her body to avoid putting any serious weight on her lover's leg. Thanks to the move, Danny turned and looked at Nicole. Blinking several times, Danny seemed surprised that Nicole was sitting on her.

"Baby, are we fighting?" Nicole asked curiously.

"Fighting?" Danny echoed, her hands going automatically around Nicole's waist, but she was not holding the older woman as tightly as she usually would.

"Yes, fighting. And if we are, please, explain to me why we're fighting. I don't like this at all," Nicole admitted, hugging Danny close to her, wanting to feel close, but it still felt like they were a million miles apart.

"I don't think we're fighting. We're just taking a cooling down moment."

"And why do we need to cool down?"

Dane gave her lover a rather incredulous, wide-eyed look. "You haven't been paying very good attention and that's a feat for you. Details are usually your bread-and-butter."

Green eyes widened from shock and pain. "Danny! That's just hurtful!"

"Angel, you asked and I answered. This has been a long fucking day and you and I haven't seen eye to eye on it much. I'm having a bit of a crisis here and all of I've gotten from you were a scolding and judgmental looks from the moment this bullshit began. You practically condemned me as the devil when I was on the phone with that annoying, screaming woman. Do you realize I was seriously tempted not to give blood? To tell them all to go to Hell? Do you realize that?" Dane inquired. She hated what type of person she thought that made her. She was willing to let her father suffer-maybe even worse-just to get back at him for being a heartless bastard. *How does that make me any better than he is?*

"You did the right thing in the end, though. You didn't condemn him or punish him. You stepped up and did the right thing."

"But, I didn't want to. I didn't want to bother with any of this crap. Do you know how that feels? Wanting to just walk away when you know someone's counting on you?"

"Danny, you did the right thing in the end. You didn't just walk away. Yes, you thought about it and you realized how it made you feel, so you did the right thing in the end," Nicole stated, sounding as firm as she could with the hope that she was getting through to her lover. Maybe they were not fighting, but Danny was having a crisis and Nicole realized that she had not helped much.

"But, I didn't want to do the right thing!" Danny roared, lightly slapping Nicole on the rear as a signal for her to get up.

The lawyer swallowed down some sorrow, but did as was silently requested. For some reason, being made to get up felt like a rejection to Nicole. Trying her best to keep the hurt out of her eyes, she stood in front of her sweetheart, hoping to mend whatever rift was coming between them and whatever trouble was eating away at Danny.

"You did, baby. You're a good person. You were the bigger person, you did the right thing. You wanted to do it, even if you don't think so. I know you did. It's in your nature. I understand that the man put you through torment when you were younger, but he is still your father and you recognized that," Nicole insisted, thinking that she was saying the right thing.

"It's not in my nature! I didn't recognize a damn thing!" Dane hollered, standing up and starting to pace. "Didn't and still don't give a damn actually!"

"Danny, he's your father!"

Molten steel eyes glared down at Nicole as Danny's voice roared through the house. "No, he's not! Sure, we have that blood relation and he provided fifty percent of my DNA, but outside of that, he's done nothing for me! Not a-fucking-thing! From the moment I took my first breath, he saw me as a blight on his fucking life. I don't give a shit about him and I don't care for him. So, don't tell me I did this for him or recognized that he's my father."

"Danny, he is your father," Nicole repeated, as if it made sense that time around.

"No, you know who's a father? Raymond is a father and had that been him, I would have happily given blood. No one would have had to ask or order. The doctor would've said, he needed blood and my arm would've been out. Same had it been Kate because despite her feelings toward me, she's a damn good mother to you. But, it wasn't them. It was Russell and he's not the same goddamn person, so stop acting like he is!"

"He's your father..." Nicole's voice was tense and heavy. *Who the hell is this and what has she done with Danny?!*

"And you're still not listening. Russell is a monster and he turned me into one, but you just want to put him on this fucking pedestal because he happened to accidentally get Christine pregnant

twenty-five years ago. Being a father doesn't wipe away your sins. If anything, it enhances them considering what that fucking animal did to me. So, stop fucking screaming at me that he's my father. He's a jackass." With that stated, Dane turned and headed out of the kitchen, not caring to hear Nicole's voice anymore.

Nicole fell back into her chair, not sure what to make what just happened. Instead of thinking on the matter, she cried. It hurt her so much that Danny had spoken to her like that, with such venom and near-malice. The look in those beautiful grey eyes had been furious, fury directed at her. She did not know how to even begin solving the problem.

Eventually, she pulled herself away from the table, thinking that maybe she and Danny could try talking again. That dream was dashed when she found Danny in the den, ears covered with her huge headphones and head-banging to whatever was playing loudly in her ears; this would be Dane's retreat until she had to go teach her lessons in a couple of hours. Not even bothering to disturb Danny, Nicole turned around and retreated to her own space-the library.

The redhead tried her best to read a book, but that did not ease her mind. She gave up and tossed the book at the wall as if it offended her. Crying again, she grabbed the phone and dialed the one person that she thought could help.

"What's up, Nicole?" Mina asked as she answered her phone.

"Danny and I are fighting," Nicole answered automatically. Usually, it would not occur to her to just blurt such a thing out without first going through polite conversation, but she was all out of sorts thanks to her current predicament.

"Fighting?" Mina echoed as if she did not know what such a thing was. She did not think the couple was capable of doing such a thing. She knew early on in their relationship something had happened, but she doubted either of them likened it to a fight. "Is it bad?" she asked for lack of a better question.

"I...I think so...I guess. She sort of screamed at me and then ran off."

Mina was quiet for a moment. "Danny actually screamed?" She could not even picture that. Her images of Danny were of someone so mellow and laidback, sometimes to the point that she thought that Danny was asleep.

"Several times..." Nicole's lip trembled as she remembered Danny raising her voice.

"Oh, sweetie, you don't sound good at all," Mina noted. She could imagine how hurt Nicole had to be. The redhead thought the world of Danny and for her to have less than polite words were probably crushing her dear friend.

"I don't feel good..." Nicole admitted miserably. In fact, she felt sick to her stomach with emotional turmoil.

"Get out of the house for a while. Meet me somewhere."

"I've just had lunch and you're at work. I shouldn't have even called you," Nicole just realized, sounding horrified that she had done something so unprofessional.

"Nonsense! My best friend is in pain and needs help! How about I meet you at the park? You like walking through there, right?"

Nicole muttered a "yes." She liked walking through there with Danny, though. She shook that away and agreed to meet Mina at the park in about an hour. Now, she would just need to figure out what to do for an hour without upsetting Danny further.

She went and took a long, hot shower, which did help relax her. Taking time to dress and then she checked in on Danny. The ebony-haired woman was still listening to music and playing the air-guitar to whatever was banging in her ears. Nicole decided to just leave her a note. With that done, she left the house and walked down to the park.

The fresh air helped calm Nicole down and by the time that she made it to the park, she at least knew that she would not cry again. Finding a quiet spot by the field that people usually played with their dogs in, Nicole sat down on a park bench. She watched some of the dogs and owners run around. A smile worked its way onto her face. *They're cute.*

She watched them until suddenly Mina was sitting next to her. Mina was more interested in watching Nicole than watching the pets. Nicole sighed, knowing that Mina was waiting for her to start talking.

"I'm sorry I called you at work," Nicole said first and foremost. She felt somewhat bad about that, but she really needed someone to talk to right now.

"I'm not. It lets me know just how serious this is. If you're this distressed, you should be able to come to your best friend," Mina replied.

Nicole nodded. "Thank you for being here. I don't know what to do."

"Okay, so explain to me what the problem is."

"This morning we got a call from Christine Wolfe, Danny's mother. She found Russell Wolfe, Danny's father, on the floor. Danny called the ambulance, but she was so rude to her distressed mother. Who had a very good reason to be distressed since she found her husband bleeding and unconscious. Turns out he had a stroke...or mini-strokes. Something like that. The point is, he had to have surgery and he needed blood afterward. He has a rare blood type, but Danny was the perfect match. They asked her to give blood. Instead of just doing it, she ran out of the hospital. Can you believe that? Ran right out of the hospital. She claims she didn't want to give blood, but I think she was more upset that she knew she would give, but still didn't want to. I don't understand how she wouldn't want to. This was her father, after all. I talked to her about it, told

her she should do this for her father, and eventually she went back in. I couldn't believe it took talking to her to get her to do that. I mean, this was her father."

Mina nodded. "The same father you've seen physical abuse her with your own eyes?" she asked curiously.

"He's still her father. She couldn't just leave him lying there ill and in need."

Mina arched a very skeptical eyebrow. "So says you. So, this led to the argument?"

"Danny accused me of scolding her for the whole time and being judgmental toward her. She was acting childish, though. She was being rude to her mother and this was her father we're talking about. Her father needed her and she acted like that meant nothing to her."

"You say father like that's a privilege or something. Just because you have a child doesn't make you a father. What type of father is he? I mean, I imagine he won't be winning any father of the year awards if he has abused Danny."

"Probably not, but he is still her father. I mean, if it was my father-" Nicole said, but she was cut off.

"But, it wasn't your father. They are two different men. Has your father ever raised a hand to you in anger?"

"Of course not!"

Mina nodded, knowing that was the case. "Doesn't sound like Danny's father follows those same guidelines. And if he hit her in front of people, imagine what he might have done behind closed doors. Imagine the things that you don't know about. It sounds like you were being a little judgmental."

"Hey!"

"Nicole, I think you're being very unfair to Danny if you're upset with her over this. This wasn't your father needing something from her. This was a man that she has a long history with that you probably know very little about. But, I think I know why you're upset with it."

Nicole gave her friend a curious sidelong glance. "Why?"

"Whenever you talk about Danny it's in very glowing terms. You almost always say she's the kindest, gentlest, sweetest person you've ever dated."

"She is! ...Or at least I thought so," Nicole muttered. That idea was shaken by what was going on now.

"Now, most people you date start off with moderate expectations, which you lower as time goes by because they always turn into jackasses," Mina explained. "Danny has not offered you such a problem, so your expectations went up. You have high standards for Danny. And you, little Miss Perfect, have decided that Danny needs to be just as immaculate as you are."

Nicole's eyes went wide. "What! No!"

"Yeah, you have. You would have given your father blood without a problem and you're perfect. Well, you think that Danny's perfect too, so she should have given her father blood with no problem," the chocolate-eyed woman reasoned.

Nicole blinked and thought about it. "Shouldn't she have just done it because he is her father? How could she hesitate like that?"

"Maybe because he's an ass. You don't know what type of parent he was to her, Nicole. You don't know what was going through her mind. You don't know what that man might have put her through."

"You know, she was screaming when I caught her. Not really screaming at me, but screaming because of her frustration. She said he was a monster and he turned her into a monster."

"Nicole, I think you might want to step away from this. It's something she needs to sort out with him and you coming in, chiming in on whatever isn't going to help. This is her issue and probably something she wants to carry alone," Mina said.

Green eyes gave another sidelong glance. "But, we're partners. We should be in this together and work things out together."

"Sadly, some things you need to work out alone. You pulling her around, trying to get her to accept this man, this family, isn't helping any, obviously."

Nicole sighed and whimpered. "But...she deserves a family."

Mina nodded and took Nicole's hand, holding it tightly. "I think she deserves one that doesn't make her think she's a monster. This is beyond you, Nicole. Step away from it."

Nicole nodded, just to show that she heard. She squeezed Mina's hand, acknowledging the comfort and friendship. Emerald eyes went back out to the pet owners and dogs. There was not much activity, but enough to keep her attention.

"I don't understand how they could treat her like that..." Nicole muttered, sounding so lost and bewildered.

"Nick...May I call you Nick?" Mina asked with a smile, obviously teasing since only Danny used that nickname. She was doing her best to lighten the mood, not wanting to leave her friend feeling reprimanded and demoralized. She continued on without an answer. "Some people are

just assholes. You should know this by now. Look at who the hell we work with, after all. Danny seems to have a family full of them, her father especially. It's not your family, so don't push. She gets along with your family, so be thankful for that. Obviously, it's them, not her. Do you really want your first fight to be about Danny not getting along with her own family? It's really not your business is it."

Nicole sighed, ducking her head for a moment. "No, I suppose not. I just wanted her to have a family. I mean, she seemed to get along so well with my family. She deserves that with her own family."

"That's not your decision, Nicole. It's hers and she doesn't seem to agree with you. Let it go. It'll save you both some stress from what I can tell."

The redhead nodded. She supposed Mina had a point. She had to step away from things if it was going to cause so much stress in their relationship. Losing Danny was not worth all of that crap.

"Thanks, Mina. You know the right thing to say most of the time," Nicole remarked, smiling a bit.

"Aw, why'd you have to add that last bit? I was feeling really good for a second," Mina replied, chuckling.

Nicole smiled more. "Seriously, thank you. You're a great friend."

"Hey, considering all the times you've saved my ass and talked me down from the ledge, I need to return the favor once and a while," Mina commented, smiling too now. Nicole was always there for her and it felt good to be able to do the same for Nicole once and a while. "Now, before I head back to work and make up a lie as to why I left, I do want you to know that as far as your relationship goes, you should continue to hold Danny to high standards. You deserve the best. But, as far as her very personal life goes, that's where you should back away." The last thing that she wanted was for Nicole to start holding Danny to the acceptable level of former lovers. Danny was above that and she needed to stay above that.

"Understood."

The pair of friends hugged as a farewell and Nicole made her way back to the house. Swallowing hard, she considered that Danny might not even be home anymore. Her heart beat increased as she shut the door and then peered into the den before anything else. There was no sign of Danny.

Next, she checked in the living room. Danny had relocated there, taking a nap on the couch. Nicole did as she would always do in such a situation, sitting down on the sofa and putting Danny's head in her lap. She caressed Danny's head, getting soft mews of delight from her lover.

"Nick..." Dane purred.

"Baby, I don't want to fight anymore," Nicole whispered before playing a gentle kiss to Dane lips. Warmth raced through her when the smile was returned.

"Not fighting. Just disagreeing," Danny muttered before going in for another kiss. It was difficult to stay upset with such sweet kisses being showered on her lips. She hoped this meant the whole thing was behind them and Nicole would be done with pushing her family on her. She did not need them and they did not want her. She just wanted to move forward in life, forward with Nicole.

"I love you. Please, don't doubt that," Nicole said.

"Love you too and I don't doubt it. Don't doubt my love for you," Danny replied. "You mean everything to me. You are everything to me and I don't need anyone else," she stated, wanting for Nicole to understand that she did not require that mess of a family. She was happy with what she had. Nicole smiled and kissed Danny again.

Everything seemed normal again.

Next time: the Wolfe family comes back.

**Shea K's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ New Cuts, Old Wounds ~

by Shea K.

Disclaimer: Welcome to another original story by this lunatic. This is the sequel to Scarred for Life. The story and the characters are mine. Do not use them without my permission. Also, any and all characters, events, and situations found in these stories are fictional. If there are any similarities between these things and real people, events, and situations, it is purely a coincidence.

General warning: eventually there's talk of child abuse and there is some mild violence and lots of extreme language. I'm sure you know there will be a sexual relationship between two women, but if you don't know this is me warning you. There will be a sexual relationship between two women in this story. Get out while you still can!

Special thanks to my betas, RevSrVixena and Ken-zero.

Find yourself wanting to see more from this lunatic? Probably not, I know. But, if you are, then you can find more of my insanity here for fanfics: <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/932292/> and for more original work here: <http://www.fictionpress.com/u/576301/>

Contact the lunatic at: starving.lunatic@gmail.com and lemme know what you think of the story. Thanks and enjoy.

9: Family feud

Life seemed to be back to normal for Nicole and Dane. Well, almost normal. There was a bit of tension between them. They were trying to work their way through it, but there seemed to be an elephant in the room with them. Unfortunately, neither of them could figure out exactly what that elephant was. So, for the moment, they let it be. Dane often joked to herself that they were probably unknowingly feeding the damn thing peanuts too since they were not addressing it.

"When does your summer class start up?" Dane asked curiously, speaking to Nicole. They were in the kitchen for breakfast. Nicole was already seated while Danny was getting the food together on their plates.

"At the beginning of June," Nicole answered. She had signed up for a summer course when she registered for her fall classes. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now she was starting to think it might have been a mistake. She seriously figured that right now she needed to focus on spending time with Danny and getting their relationship back to the way it used to be. "I was thinking about dropping the class..." she decided to add.

Dane tilted her head curiously. "Why?" she asked as she brought the food to the table. She put Nicole's plate down in front of her.

"I would like to spend sometime with my girlfriend, I'll have you know!" Nicole teased, going so far as to show mock-outrage.

The antics got the desired laugh out of Danny. "Yes, but I hear she's very high maintenance and such a bore."

"That's the love of my life you're insulting, woman. She is the most wonderful woman ever and that's why I think I should spent sometime this summer with her."

Danny smiled a bit. "That's nice, but you don't have to. Your class is only for a month."

"Yes, but in that month, I could take vacation time and we could go on a trip."

An onyx-colored eyebrow went into the air. "And just how are we going to take a vacation after I bankrupted you?" she inquired, bitterness directed toward herself seeping out into her words.

"Hey, baby, you didn't bankrupt me," Nicole cooed, reaching over and caressing her lover's hand. "You know you didn't."

"Damn near."

"But, you didn't and I can make more money. That's not hard." Of course, it would be a little hard to built it back up, but she did not mind. She wished that Danny would stop making such a big deal out of it.

"No, you shouldn't be the only one making money, though!" Danny argued. Now, this battle was something that they were both familiar with. It drove Danny nuts that she made so little now and Nicole was bringing in so much money.

"Baby," Nicole said, patting her girlfriend's hand again. "We have two totally different lines of work. You do bring in money. No, it's not as much as I do, but we're not about money. Are we?"

Dane was about to argue, but she suddenly recalled why she needed to borrow the money from Nicole. Her father wanted his money back. It was always about money with him. Whenever they crossed paths, her father assumed that she required money and would taunt her with it, even though she almost never needed or wanted his money. She had no choice when growing up or when in the hospital, but other than that, she never accepted money from him.

"I'm sorry I make such a big deal about this. You're right, we're not about money," Dane agreed with a smile. There was no way that she was going to let something like money-something her father worshipped-get between her and Nicole. So, it was time to let it go, she decided.

Nicole smiled; that was easy for the first time. "I hope you mean that," she said.

"I completely agree with it. I will pull my weight, but I'm not going to argue with you about money anymore. You make more than I do. You always will. It's that simple and I accept it," Dane stated, still smiling.

"Baby, you don't know if I will always be making more money than you. You are a musical genius. You might get back to your clubs and everything. Before you know it, everyone might think I'm your groupie," Nicole remarked, giggling a bit at the thought.

"Nah, groupies are boring. No one would ever mistake you for a groupie. You could be a roadie. You're strong and in good shape," the musician quipped.

Nicole laughed again. The banter back and forth felt really good. It seemed like they had not done that in forever, but really it had only been a few days. She and Dane had been fine-by her count-up and until Christine's call Friday morning.

"But, seriously, do you think I should keep the summer class?" the redhead inquired.

"Yes, I think you should. It'll be fine. You know I want you to get your degree and whatever else you might want beyond that," Danny commented, hinting that she thought Nicole would go for the doctorate.

"You're so understanding and supporting, Danny. What did I ever do to deserve you?" Nicole's fingers gently massaged the back of her sweetheart's hand.

"Threaten me repeatedly while throwing in some sexual favors to keep me off balance," Dane joked, grinning widely.

"It's the only way to get you to do anything!"

Danny threw her lover another giant grin and Nicole was able to go to work feeling fine. The day went pretty normal. Danny taught a couple of lessons and then went back home to get dinner together. When Nicole got home, food was ready and they ate together. Cuddling on the couch, they watched a movie together and then retired to bed.

"Danny, you know I mean it whenever I say you're understanding and supportive, right?" Nicole asked, snuggling against the taller woman's body as they settled in for sleep. She doubted that they would be intimate for a few more days, not until things were absolutely normal.

"Never doubt you, Nick," Dane answered, yawning a little. She always believed Nicole and knew that no matter what the lawyer said or did, Nicole was trying to do the best for her. Too bad things did not always work out how Nicole planned them.

"Good."

The redhead sighed and put her arms tightly around Danny. The guitarist did the same, caressing Nicole's shoulder. Within minutes, they were both sleeping soundly.

Danny was washing the dishes from dinner when she heard the phone ringing. She did not think anything of it since Nicole was in the living room. The redhead put down her book and answered the phone.

"Hello?" Nicole answered the phone pleasantly.

"Um...hello, this is Christine Wolfe," the caller replied.

Nicole gulped and glanced over to the doorway that led to the kitchen. She was glad that she did not see Danny there. Hearing the sink still running, she figured that it was safe to assume that Danny was still clearing up their dinner. She wondered how Danny was going to react to the call.

"Danny's busy for the moment," Nicole said, thinking that it would be better to get Christine off the phone. "I could get her to call you back in a few minutes," she added. That option gave Danny a chance to get in contact with her mother if she truly desired to.

"I think it would be best if I spoke to you."

"I'm sure you have business with your daughter and if you have something to say to her, then you should say it to her," Nicole insisted. She hoped whatever it was included an apology for allowing Danny to be thrown out of the hospital room after all Danny had done for Russell.

"I know I should, but I doubt that she'd listen. I'm sure if you delivered the message, she would be more inclined to listen and maybe even accept a bit of a truce," Christine explained.

Nicole thought on it and was silent for a moment. "I think it would be best if you just spoke to Danny," she said. She should not get in the middle of the Wolfe family, so she could avoid fighting with Danny anymore.

"I don't want to be hung up on before I can say that Russell is home and recovering. He has limited mobility and his speech isn't very clear. He'll need some therapy, but the doctors believe he should almost completely recover. He did drop out of the governor's race, which has lowered his spirits a bit. Anyway, to celebrate his homecoming, we're going to have a family dinner on Friday. It's just immediate family, our children and grandchildren. It would be excellent if Danny could come."

Nicole's mouth dropped open. "You're inviting Danny?" she asked incredulously. That was a huge step for a woman who had never spoken to Danny until recently. She dared to think that Christine and the Wolfe family might be looking to turn a corner and accept Danny into their flock.

"Yes, Dane is invited. Of course, you are too," Christine answered.

"I'm not sure Danny is going to accept." *In fact, I'm pretty sure she'll say something about 'fuck them up the ass' again or something along those lines.*

"I understand that, but she is invited."

"I'll discuss that with her," Nicole said, not making any commitments, even though she wanted to just jump on that invitation. It would be a chance for Danny to get closer to her family and get the attention that Danny deserved. Thankfully, her mind pointed out that it was that sort of thinking that got her into trouble in the first place.

There was a moment of silence and Nicole was about to hang up when Christine chimed in with something else. "How is she?"

"Who? Danny? Fine," Nicole answered, now looking to get off of the phone because the aforementioned musician was standing in the doorway, watching her.

"That's good."

"Yes, she's good. Listen, I have to go, so I will discuss matters with her. Goodbye," Nicole said and she disconnected the call after Christine bid her farewell.

"Who was that?" Dane asked curiously. Nicole had gotten off of the phone rather quickly and she found that odd.

"Your mother," the redhead answered honestly.

Dane's jaw tensed. "My mother, huh? What did she want now? Did she fall down and break her hip and not know who to call?"

"What would you say if I told you that she was calling to see how you were?" Nicole asked curiously.

Dane shrugged because she actually was not sure what she would say, or if she would say anything at all. Her reactions to her mother were not easy to pinpoint since she had roughly no relationship with her mother. It was easier to figure out how she would react to her father, Michael, and Rachel. She would be hostile to them no matter what. With Adam, she would treat him like the familiar stranger she believed he was or she would be rude to him. With Christine, she did not even know where to begin or if she should begin.

"She did ask how you were," Nicole said.

Dane shrugged. "And?"

The redhead had hoped for more of a positive reaction, but decided to just continue on instead of voicing that wish. "Your father is out of the hospital. She said he has problems with his movement, but she didn't explain what that meant. There also seems to be trouble with his speech, which she also didn't explain much. The doctors said with enough therapy, he should be fine. He had to drop out of the race for governor."

"Aw, and I was so looking forward to voting against him!" Dane joked.

Nicole shook her head. "You're not even registered, my little juvenile delinquent," she pointed out. She then waved Danny over to her, thinking that the next bit of news would be better received with physical contact.

Danny smiled as she made her way over to the couch. She sat down, but knew that she would be on her way to lying down as soon as Nicole reached out for her. Nicole cupped Dane's face with gentle hands, putting Danny's head in her lap. A lazy smile spread across Dane's face before the relaxing head rub even started, but once the scalp massage was underway, she was purring.

"There's more, isn't there?" Dane asked, sensing that she had only gotten part of her mother's call.

"Your mother...she invited you to a family dinner. She called it a truce."

Grey eyes rolled. "To hell with them."

"Only your immediate family will be there," Nicole added.

"So the hell what? I'm not bothering with them anymore."

"All right," Nicole said pensively.

Dane was instantly suspicious. "Why'd you say it like that?" *Ah, I'm so sick of this family bullshit!*

"What do you mean? I was just agreeing with your decision."

"Yeah, but you were agreeing as if you thought I should've made a different decision. What's on your mind, Chem?" Danny inquired, even though she could guess. *Has she not seen me in enough fucked up situations with these people?!*

"I just thought things might be different since your mother invited you. Obviously, she wants you there and she said it was a truce. Luke and Thomas will probably be there. Maybe your father will be different too. Understanding and facing his mortality might have changed him."

Dane was so very tempted to ask her lover what the hell Nicole smoked and where Nicole bought it, so they both could have crazy fantasies together. But, that died on her tongue when she recalled the shattered, almost crippled look Nicole that appeared in emerald eyes whenever she said something intentionally hurtful. She was not interested in seeing that wounded expression at the moment...or ever if it was at all possible. So, she knew that she had to keep her jackass behavior in check.

"Nothing is going to change my father. He's a bastard today, he was one yesterday, and he'll be one tomorrow," Dane stated soundly.

"And your mother inviting you? What do you make of that?" Nicole inquired.

"Hell if I know and I don't really care."

Nicole snorted, but made sure to control her facial features, not wanting to look upset. She would hate for Christine to be reaching out and Danny throwing that away. Christine might be ready to be a mother and Nicole knew that Danny craved that. Hell, Christine was the reason that Danny got into her passion in life-music.

"Danny, your mother invited you. That should mean something. I mean, the woman hasn't spoken to you before recently and now she's inviting you to dinner. This could be an olive branch," Nicole reasoned.

"Or it could be more Wolfe family bullshit. I'm not interested in it," Dane answered.

"Danny, I find it interesting that Christine would go out of her way to invite you. She could've just left it alone."

"Yes, so interesting that she didn't want to talk to me again."

"She was afraid you'd hang up on her," Nicole explained.

"Damn right! I don't want hear from her anymore. Never been so disappointed in my whole life," Dane grumbled, folding her arms across her chest and looking like an angry child.

Nicole tilted her head curiously and scratched Danny's scalp a bit since the taller woman's head was still in her lap. "Disappointed? Do you mean to tell me that you might have some emotions toward your mother after all?"

"No. I think it's fair to feel disappointed when the woman that gave birth to you makes it her business to ignore you for twenty-five years and then calls you in the middle of the night out of the blue because she's too fucking stupid to realize she should've dialed 911 instead," the former rocker huffed.

"Danny, you're carrying a lot of baggage. Maybe this could be a chance to drop it. She's reaching out to you."

"She let me go a long time ago, Nick," Danny sighed, putting her hand through her hair, only for her fingers to run against Nicole's hand, which refused to give way. Dane sighed again and let her hand drop to her side. "I told you about the piano when I was little, right?" she asked, out of the blue it seemed.

"Your mother's piano?"

"That's the one. To this day, it's the most beautiful piano I have ever seen. It had excellent sound and she played it like she was possessed. She doesn't know it, but I used to watch her all the time. Adored the sound. One day, she caught me watching. I think I was six. Caught me and stopped playing immediately. She never played when she thought I was around again."

Nicole swallowed a lump in her throat. *Why were they so cruel to my baby? I don't understand! She's so loving and caring. They should see that and they have to be trying to see it. That's why Christine invited her. That has to be why.*

"I still caught peeks of her. That's when I had my first brilliant idea," Dane remarked, chuckling a bit, but it was a sorrowful, hollow sound.

"You would play the piano for her," Nicole chimed in. She knew this tale, but wished that she could forget it. It just did not seem real. None of Danny's childhood seemed real, especially after seeing Russell and Christine interact with their other children. They seemed like good parents, loving their other children and providing for them. She just could not fathom Danny's treatment, no matter how much she heard about it.

"Sat down and played. I remember it felt natural to play it, but I doubt it sounded as good as I thought it did. Eventually, he came. I turned, proud because I knew it was good. My first time touching it and I knew it was fucking sweet. He closed the lid, nearly broke my fingers. The piano was worth more than I was and I was to never touch it again, he warned me."

"But, you touched it again."

"She heard that time. I smiled when I realized she was standing there. I told her that I was gonna be just like her. With no expression on her face, except utter disgust in her eyes, she turned and walked away. Now, ask me which one of those hurt more? My father's scolding and almost taking my fingers off or her blindness and deafness toward me..."

Nicole sniffled and rubbed Danny's head to keep herself calm. "Baby, maybe she sees you now and hears you now. She called and asked for you," the lawyer said in a whisper. She had hope that Christine was reaching out for Danny and attempting to heal the many wounds inflicted on the musician at a young age.

"And maybe she wants to walk away from me again."

"Do you really think she would call you to do that?"

Dane shook her head. The phone call and invitation were against her mother's usual MO. No, her mother never went out of the way of getting her hopes up only to shatter them. Her mother was constantly and consistently ignorant of her existence. The level of indifference itself was what stung, not any teasing or taunting on her mother's part.

"Why now?" Dane's voice cracked as she asked the question.

"You helped save her husband's life. Perhaps that was the breaking point," Nicole answered.

"And you're sure Luke and Thomas are going to be there?"

"They are her only grandchildren, correct?"

"Yeah."

"She said her grandchildren would be there. I can only assume she means Luke and Thomas. Unless there are others you don't know about."

Dane sighed. "Anything is possible with that crew. At least I could get to see them again." The idea of seeing her nephews again gave her a spark, but it did not serve to put out the fire and burning sensation in her stomach.

Nicole smiled, letting Danny know that the lawyer thought she made the right decision. Underneath it all, she knew that she was setting herself up. A lifetime of hate and indifference did not disappear in a course of a couple of weeks, no matter how generous her act was seen. But, there was hope. Always hope.

Dressing for dinner had not been the event it had been the last time the couple went to the Wolfe home. They both threw on what they considered casual clothing. Of course, for Dane that meant

a tee-shirt with a sleeveless shirt over it and some shorts. Her ever-present chain hung from her hip, connecting her empty wallet with her pants.

Nicole was dressed in burgundy slacks with a cream-colored sweater. Her shoes matched her pants. There was no effort in the outfit. It was something that she would have grabbed out of the closet if she needed to run an errand. She was following Dane's lead, trying her best not to make a big deal out of the dinner.

The ride to the mansion was made in silence with soft music playing to keep the quiet from driving them both mad. Nicole was quiet because she was not sure what to say. She did not want to do anything that might make Danny change her mind and turn back. She also did not want to give away how much she thought the meeting was a good idea because she was certain that the family was reaching out to Danny.

Dane was much more subdued and definitely more suspicious. She tried her best not to let her negative thoughts fill her mind. No matter what, she would be able to see Luke and Thomas. The boys managed to light up her day, no matter how crappy the day might be. She was not sure why, but she utterly adored them, so they would make the trip worth it. No matter what happened.
They are worth this.

When Nicole pulled into the driveway of the house, the sun was setting. A valet took the keys from her and parked the car for her; she was surprised that the valet service was the norm there. A maid opened the door for the couple and they entered the house, waiting for directions to the rest of the family.

The Wolfe family, minus the alpha male, was in the sitting room. Luke and Thomas were performing again. Danny and Nicole stood in the doorway and watched the show. Luke was reciting a poem again while Thomas "dancing" to it. The adults were watching as if it was the most fascinating thing that they had ever seen. It was all fine and well until Michael noticed his baby sister.

"Did someone forget to take out the trash?" Michael remarked, sneering in Dane's direction.

Dane rolled her eyes. "Oh, yes, that's terribly clever." *So much for a truce.*

"DANE!" the young boys yelled with joy and charged over to the taller woman.

The musician chuckled as the boys hugged her around the legs. She patted them on their backs, knowing that if she bent down to return the hug, it would take her a while to get back up thanks to her bum leg. She did not want her family to know that her leg was in a bad way. Maybe it was paranoia or maybe it was just survival instinct, not wanting predators to know that she was injured.

"Are you going to freestyle today?" Luke immediately inquired. It was just about his favorite thing of all time and he decided that Dane was the coolest person on the planet when she first did it.

"Maybe later," Dane replied.

"Play band?" Thomas asked with more interest than his brother. He loved banging on imaginary drums. He hoped that one day to own an actual set, but his parents were not ready for the noise.

"Later on. I'm not too good with an audience," Dane answered, glancing over at her family.

The boys nodded, showing that they understood that. They noticed that Dane never did play when there were other people around, except maybe their father. They considered that she might be shy, as were many girls they met; of course, those girls tended to be their age.

Dane and Nicole took seats away from the family. Luke and Thomas went back to their performance. No one spoke over the show, but there were some words exchanged among the Wolfe family. None of those words were directed at Dane or Nicole. Nicole was a little stunned that Christine did not make some move to speak with Danny or at least interact with the musician, but then again, the night was young.

Honestly, Dane considered the night to be good so far. No one said anything to her, except for Michael's opening remark. Everyone kept their opinions about her and Nicole to themselves. There were the occasional glares from Michael, Rachel, and Sharon, but nothing that Dane could not handle. Nicole did not even seem to notice because her attention stayed on Luke and Thomas. Despite the forced civility, Dane refused to believe that anyone was really trying to mend any bridges.

The show did not go on for much longer as they were informed by a servant that dinner was ready. They marched into the dining room, situating themselves at the long table. Nicole noticed that Dane sat at the end furthest from her family. She frowned at that.

"Danny, if this is an attempt to get close to you, you should meet them halfway, which means sitting closer and trying to start a conversation," Nicole said in a low tone.

"You seriously think they want to get close to me? Yeah, that's why they just spent the last ten minutes looking at me like something smelled bad," Dane snapped, wondering if she and Nicole existed in two different realities. No one wanted to be close to her, save her nephews. If the boys were not there, she would have walked back home to get away from her family.

"Baby," Nicole said in a soothing tone, hoping to avoid fighting about the things, especially since she truly believed that the Wolfe family was trying.

Luke and Thomas charged down the table. They stood before Dane, smiling up at her. She arched an eyebrow when she noticed them, but she smiled back all the same.

"Dane, may we sit with you?" Luke requested with a cherubic grin.

"Luke, Thomas, you have to sit down here," Sharon ordered, trying her best to make it sound gentle. She did not want to upset the children much, but she did want them away from the former rocker.

Luke glanced over at his mother. He could see how serious she was. Pouting for a moment, he turned back to Dane.

Luke then changed his request. "Dane, will you join us?" He went as far as to bow to her.

Nicole chuckled a bit, already seeing Luke developing the Wolfe charm that she was sure everyone in the family had when they put their minds to it. Dane, on the other hand, looked up the table rather than watching her nephew. Sharon did not seem very pleased with the request, but she would not be sitting next to Sharon if she did sit down there with her nephews.

"Please, Dane!" Thomas added in, throwing in some big, begging eyes.

Danny sighed. How was she supposed to say no to those eyes? Glancing over at her lover, she could see that Nicole was tickled by the whole situation. Shaking her head, she sighed again.

"I would be delighted to sit with you," Dane informed the boys. It was the truth.

Sharon growled and glared at Dane as she stepped over with the children. Luke and Thomas sat in between their mother and Dane, unknowingly acting as a buffer. Dane was not too sure if it was going to work well, but she was willing to try. Nicole sat down by Danny.

Thankfully, Danny found that she was not sitting across from anyone since she was in the fifth seat on the right side. There were only four people on the other side; Christine, Michael, Rachel, and then Rachel's husband. On Dane's side, the line started with Adam, Sharon, the two boys, Dane, and Nicole. Apparently, the head of the table would be left for their father, whenever he showed up.

Moments later, Russell was brought into the dining room in a wheelchair. His grey gaze was not as sharp as it once was and flared out over the table as soon as he was in his proper place. Immediately, he noticed Dane and glared hot daggers at her. She puffed out her chest a little, like a proud soldier awaiting her execution.

"What..." Russell started and had to pause, gritting his teeth as he did so. "She doing here?" he growled, eyeing Dane. His speech, so forced, made her arch an eyebrow.

"Russell, Dane is here to celebrate your recovery with us," Christine said, putting her hand on his and caressing his fingers with her own to help keep him calm.

"Celebrate my recovery?" he echoed, gritting his teeth again. It seemed that he was trying to control his speech by using as little of his mouth as possible. He jerked his head a bit before continuing. "More like celebrating my disability," he growled.

"Russ, I invited her," Christine insisted. Everyone knew that she had invited Dane, yet their eyes widened as if it was a shock.

"And she probably came running," he said, pausing again. He jerked his head to the side again before continuing. "Smelled money and sniffed at it like a horny dog," he snarled.

Dane snorted and rolled her eyes, but decided not to say anything. She was sick of arguing with the man. No reason to argue with someone that was not listening. Besides, ever since she paid him his money, she counted him out of her life. He was persona-non-grata to her, she told herself.

"Sounds just like Dane," Michael chimed in.

"Oh yeah? What the fuck do you know about me?" Dane inquired, quickly forgetting her stance on arguing with people who did not listen. She was just tired of the slander from people who did not know a damn thing about her.

"Hey, can you watch your language? There are children present," Sharon huffed, frowning at Dane.

"Dane comes back, sniffing for inheritance money. You think the old man is going to die? Is that why you suddenly jumped up to help Mom that night and tricked her into inviting you here? You thought you could ooze your way back into his will?" Michael demanded.

"That's just vile! So very much like you, Dane," Rachel added her two cents, looking at Dane as if she was the worst thing on Earth.

"Yes, because you all know me so well," Dane huffed. "I don't need this shit. I just came here to see Thomas and Luke."

"And you're ruining them just like you ruin everything else," Sharon declared, holding her sons to her body, so they would not hear anymore swearing.

"Can we please just eat dinner?" Christine sighed, sounding tired and sorrowful while shaking her head.

Dinner was brought out and the meal was eaten with much tension aimed at Dane. Glares came her way and snide remarks muttered under their breath. Dane pretended not to notice, eating her food as quickly as possible. She never tasted a bit of what she suspected was a rich, delicious meal. Pushing away from the table, Dane left without saying anything.

"May we be excused too?" Luke requested, leaving the table before he even got an answer. Thomas followed his brother, who chased after Dane. Nicole silently followed behind the trio, not wanting to stay at the table.

As soon as they were away from the table, the insults came a little louder than they had been before. The accusations that Dane was after money flowed like water. Even the declarations that she was just waiting for Russell to die came as if they were the stone-cold truth. Dane had heard them all before and she also heard the silent agreement that came with them before.

Despite the fact that her mother had called her for help, everyone had ordered her to give blood, and her mother had invited her to the dinner, Dane was not surprised that the woman was silent. Christine said nothing on Dane's behalf after her initial protest that she had invited Dane. Adam was also quiet, which Dane expected. Her eldest brother did not know her and most of the time, she figured he believed whatever the rest of their family said. She knew that was the case with Sharon too.

Dane tried to ignore all of the fuss and instead hung out with her nephews. Finding out that all of the loud rock music had not made her deaf, she could actually hear some of the insults and terrible accusations from the dining room. She drowned it out, pretending to be in a rock band with her nephews. She was on the air-guitar and Thomas was on the air-drums while Luke was the lead singer.

Nicole stood back and focused solely on them. *They are so adorable!* No matter what happened with the Wolfe family, Nicole would take away how great her lover was with children and how much Danny clearly loved her nephews.

Dane could hear things getting even more heated in the dining room. Sharon was raising her voice. A few minutes later, Adam inched into the room and called for the boys. Dane could guess why he was there and calling them. Sometimes, she wondered what Sharon thought she was going to do to the boys, but she was actually scared to ever find out. Sharon had a very low opinion of her and she would hate to find out what depravities her sister-in-law thought she was capable of.

"Boys, come, your mother wants you for dessert," Adam said, unable to even look at Dane as he spoke.

"We don't need dessert," Luke answered and Thomas nodded in agreement.

Adam sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, at a loss as to what he should do now. He did not want to bark at the boys, knowing that would only upset them. He also did not want to tell them the truth that their mother just wanted them away from their aunt because that would lead to too many questions. Also, he was hoping to spare Dane's feelings in finding out that Sharon did not trust her.

"Come, you'll like the dessert," Adam tried to assure the boys.

"We don't want any dessert, unless Dane is going to have some too," Luke declared, taking Dane by the hand.

"Dessert?" Dane echoed and glanced back at Nicole. The lawyer shrugged, not sure what to make of anything going on right now.

Dane shrugged and turned to Adam, wondering if she should make his life easier. Thomas rushed over and took Dane's free hand, which answered the scenario for her. She could tell the boys wanted the treat, but they were also worried about her leaving while they were having it. She had run out on them often enough.

When they got back to the dining room, Sharon looked like she was able to have a heart attack. Shooting up from her seat, she snatched her boys hands out of Dane's and pulled them to her. Dane was starting to understand what Sharon feared she might do to the boys if touching them was a problem. Turning to Adam, he looked away and marched back to his seat, saying nothing to Dane. Always saying nothing.

"Dane, don't you have some place to go?" Rachel inquired. "Drugs to buy or something," she remarked.

Dane chuckled and smiled. "You know, I had been planning to shoot up later on tonight, but I thought I'd put that on hold for dinner with my wonderful family," she replied, easing back into her seat. Sharon pulled Luke and Thomas away from Dane as soon as those words left her mouth. Nicole sighed as she sat down with Danny.

"That's why you're here, isn't it? You need money for drugs," Michael accused her.

"I don't believe I ever needed money for drugs," Dane answered smugly. "Just like I never needed money for girls either, unlike some people," she countered, smiling as she one-upped her brother.

"No, you just prefer to overpower them and take what you want, right?" Michael stated.

Dane growled for just a second. "If that's what you want to think since I had your fiancée," she said with a wicked smirk.

"I don't think this is an appropriate conversation to have with children present," Adam informed his siblings, cutting off the argument.

"No, but Dane wouldn't care about that. Not like she had morals or values," Rachel pointed out. "Stealing women left and right from family members, beating them up, ruining their reputations," she continued on, glancing over at Nicole.

"Not my fault Wolfe men don't know how to care for their women," Dane replied.

"No, not their fault for letting you lie to anyone and everyone who would listen. You're worthless," Rachel spat.

Dane smiled. "I see you're taking after your father quite nicely. Now, if you could only have a stroke like him and lose your ability to speak and walk that would be great," she stated. When Nicole gasped, she knew that she had crossed the line, but honestly, she did not care. *Fuck the line and fuck them.*

"Danny, I think it's time for us to go," Nicole said sharply.

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea," Christine finally said something.

"Of course," Dane sighed, climbing to her feet. She turned her attention to her nephews. "Hopefully, I'll see you guys around. High-fives?" she requested, leaning down and getting high-fives from both boys.

Dane walked off with Nicole by her side. They were silent as they returned to the car. Danny was very aware that Nicole wanted to scold her for her behavior, but she really did not care. Halfway through the car ride, Nicole could not hold it in any longer.

"How could you say such things, Danny? The man just had a stroke and you mock him and your sister by saying she should have one too?" Nicole inquired.

"Oh, so you just missed all of the shit they said to me, huh?" Dane riposted.

"No, I heard all of that, but you didn't have to rise to the occasion and try to beat them. Why didn't you try reaching out to your mother? Like I said, she invited you and she might have appreciated hearing from you."

"Fuck her! This is the same bitch that sat there quietly while they accused me of being after Russell's money when she was the one that called me! I'm supposed to go crawling to her now? Fuck her!"

"Danny..." Nicole sighed, shaking her head. "She wants to know you."

"Fuck her," Dane repeated in a hard, cold tone.

Nicole was tempted to tell Dane that she needed to let go of the past and try with her mother, but she could see it would be met with hostility. Danny was not in the mood to talk about her family. Nicole was not in the mood for an argument, but she was upset with Danny's actions. To her, Danny handled the whole situation incorrectly, which really surprised her. Usually, Danny was great with acting mature and like an adult, but she had really lowered herself at the dinner table.

The rest of the trip was done in silence. When they got home, Danny disappeared into the dark den. She remained there for the rest of the night without any disturbances from Nicole. When she was ready for sleep, she did go up to the bedroom, but she barely whispered a "good night" to her lover. Nicole's response was just as curt. There was tension in their bed for the first time in their relationship and they left it at that. Apparently, that elephant in the room was now sleeping in their bed too.

10: Out of tune

Nicole had never been so happy to go to work in all of her life. The tension that she and Dane brought back from dinner with the Wolfe family had stayed with them for the entire weekend. It was crushing and she had no idea how to mend it. She hoped that Mina or Clara had an answer for her.

Sitting at her desk, she found it difficult to focus on her work for the first time in a very long time. None of the words on her computer or in her files made sense to her because all her mind could settle on was Danny and the weekend. The horrible, horrible weekend.

"She barely spoke to me..." Nicole pouted, lip trembling with sorrow.

Ever since the dinner, Danny had barely said ten words to her. It was daunting because it had never happened to them before. In fact, Danny had barely looked her way, even when she had come into the bedroom last night fresh from a shower. All she had been wearing was a towel and Danny had not spared her a glance. It was hard to accept that since Danny usually went wild if all she did was show a little bit of leg.

"It seems like forever since we've made love and now she doesn't even want to touch me," Nicole muttered in sorrow.

They had not been intimate since the night Christine called about Russell. At least after that she had been able to cuddle into Dane's body when they slept. She dared not try that over the weekend. Dane had slept with her back to Nicole, as if putting up a wall between them in the bed. She supposed it could have been worse. Dane could have always slept in the den, which Nicole had feared would happen since Danny had spent much of her weekend tucked away in the little room. It was like she was hiding in there, shutting Nicole out of her life.

"What should I do? I don't think I was wrong in scolding Danny for her behavior toward her mother. Christine was trying to connect with her and Danny just shut her out. I'm sure if Danny just gave it a chance, they might be able to form some kind of bond. Why doesn't Danny see it?" Nicole sighed, shaking her head.

She was so sure that Danny wanted Christine's love, wanted the love of a mother, but seemed to shun any chance of it with Christine. She had a prime opportunity at dinner, but instead chose to get into petty arguments with her siblings and even wished ill on her sister. That had actually been the most shocking part for her.

Nicole never thought that she would hear her sweet, gentle Danny wish ill on someone, especially her own sister. And then to make it worse, Danny had gone so far as to mock her father's misfortune. That was not the mark of a good person, she thought. It was rather heinous actually.

"Have I been mistaken about Danny all of this time?" Nicole mused aloud, fear racing through her.

Is Danny just like everyone else? Abrasive and abusive to those that disagree with her? Shaking her head, she quickly put that thought out of her mind. There was no way that Danny was anything like her previous lovers, she silently tried to assure herself. She put it out of her head and attempted to get back to work. She figured that she would really need to talk things over with Mina and Clara. They would help, she was sure of that.

Never before had Nicole been so happy that lunch had arrived. She rushed off, nearly running to Mina's office. People in the hallway stared at her, but did not say anything as she went by, bursting into her friend's office. Mina was at her desk, still working. She was a bit surprised when Nicole entered her office after knocking.

"Someone is eager to have lunch with me," Mina remarked with an arched eyebrow. She chuckled a bit at her own comment, but did not get a smile out of the redhead.

"I need your help," Nicole said bluntly.

"I figured as much if you're beating me out of the office. Let me finish this sentence, we can get Clara, and you can tell us both why you look like you're about to go out of your mind," Mina replied.

Nicole sighed, wishing that she were not so transparent. Mina smiled a bit before climbing to her feet and grabbing her jacket. They were off, collecting the final member of their trio before going off to their favorite café. They went through all of the usual pleasantries before Mina thought that was enough nonsense.

"What's wrong now, Nicole?" Mina inquired bluntly.

"Danny and I are fighting again," Nicole sighed miserably, covering her face for a moment.

"Again?" Clara echoed in confusion. She had not been privy to the first time.

"I hope the cause isn't the same," Mina said while glancing at Clara, quietly assuring the honey-toned woman that she would explain it all later. Clara nodded to that.

"I think that Danny might be a little less...than I thought," Nicole said, not quite sure how to fill in the part that she trailed off.

"A little less what?" Clara asked, looking rather puzzled.

Mina sighed, sounding almost exhausted. "Does this have something to do with her family again?"

"She openly told her sister to go have a stroke like their father just had!" Nicole growled in anger. "Her mother invited her to a family dinner, probably wanting to get closer to Danny and she spent the time arguing with her idiotic siblings rather than taking the attention from her mother that she has been craving her whole life! What is wrong with her?" she huffed, throwing her hands out in frustration.

"More family stuff. I told you to step away from this crap. Danny's family is Danny's business," Mina stated, shaking her head.

"It's not her family that concerns me. It was her behavior toward them. I mean, what kind of person wishes that their sister has a stroke right after their father had a stroke?" Nicole inquired in disbelief.

"Maybe a person with a shitty father and an equally shitty sister," Mina pointed out.

"Wait, wait, wait, what is going on?" Clara inquired, wanting to be caught up on the situation, so that she could add in.

"Nicole is having trouble minding her own business. Danny seems to have issues with her family and Nicole is taking it upon herself to try to unite parties that seem to have no desire in getting along," Mina informed her.

"Issues? Wishing ill on your own sister isn't an issue. It's cruel, especially if your father just had a stroke," Nicole argued.

Clara leaned for a little, appearing thoughtful. "I will say it is a harsh thing to let slip from your mouth, especially when you've seen it happen, but what did her father and sister say to her to bring her to that point?"

"That's not the point!" Nicole hissed.

"How is that not the point? I know I've only been around Danny a handful of times, but she doesn't strike me as the type that let's words fly for no reason at all," Clara commented.

"The point is that she wished serious illness on her sister and she meant it," the redhead declared in a heated tone.

"And this is something that the great, all-mighty Nicole would never do," Mina remarked, sounding tired and bored now. "I told you not to try holding Danny up to your standards. Her family is not your family," she riposted, tapping the table to emphasis her point.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that Danny mocked someone that was seriously hurt and wished the same thing on another human being. Making it worse was that she was serious. How does a decent human being wish harm on another?" Nicole asked, sorrow coating her voice. Her eyes drifted down to the table and she had to take a moment to gather herself before looking up again.

"I do it all the time," Mina admitted. "In fact, I used to do it almost daily when those lazy bastards at the firm used to take advantage of you. Sure, I never went so far as wishing one of them had a stroke, but I guess I make up for the severity with the quantity of how often I used to do it," she informed them.

"Did you say it to their faces?" Nicole inquired.

Mina shrugged. "At first, but I've found telling our coworkers that I hope they fall down a flight of stairs doesn't faze them much and it only served to frustrate me when I finally noticed I wasn't getting to them. I'm sure Danny just needed to vent to her father and sister. If it came true, she would probably feel bad about her words, but since it probably won't come true, she was just letting her sister know how she felt about her at the moment. Is this seriously what the fight is about?" the chocolate-eyed attorney asked incredulously.

"It's part of it and it disturbs me a bit that she could say such a thing to her sister, especially when her father just had a stroke," Nicole informed them.

"I don't think it's that serious," Mina said.

Clara nodded and motioned to Mina for a second. "I have to agree with her. This doesn't sound like something you'd want to fight with your lover about," she concurred.

"Especially when it's none of your business," Mina added.

Nicole sighed. "It doesn't matter. I didn't like it and I told her I didn't. She got all huffy and has been avoiding me ever since. She hasn't spoken to me since Friday. She spent the whole weekend in the den, listening to music from her headphones and strumming her guitar. She wouldn't even touch me this weekend. I don't even mean in a sexual way, just in general."

"She might be a little pissed with your holier-than-thou attitude," Mina remarked, trying to keep her voice light to avoid hurting Nicole's feelings.

"I'm not being holier-than-thou. You cannot sit there and tell me that it's fine for someone to wish ill on their own sister!" Nicole huffed.

"While it's not a good thing to say, it seems like a silly thing to fight over. Danny is a peach and you shouldn't be ready to throw your relationship away with her just because she doesn't get along with her family," Clara reasoned. It seemed like a rather crazy reason to ruin the best thing that had ever happened to Nicole personally speaking. Clara could not believe they were actually discussing the matter. It should not even be an issue.

"Her treatment of her family... It's so harsh. How can I be with someone like that with her family?" Nicole wondered aloud.

"Are you fucking serious? Nicole, I will personally kick your ass if you let this thing ruin your relationship. You have never in your life for as long as I've known you been with someone that

makes you light up, someone that encourages you every step of the way, someone that so clearly loves you that it makes me sick to my stomach sometimes to see you together," Mina proclaimed, ticking off each point on her finger. She then tapped her finger on the table as she began a new message. "Now, you listen to me, how Danny gets on with her family is none of your goddamn business. You've already said that her father abused her, so it's safe to assume that she has some grudge against him and perhaps the rest of her family for allowing the abuse to go on. Her family is not your family, so stop acting like they are. Her family has no bearing on you or how she treats you. Hell, it doesn't even have a bearing on how she treats your family. So, you step away from this shit and stop acting like this is the make-or-break moment in your relationship. If you think Danny deserves a loving family, stop trying to push her toward a family that doesn't seem to care of her and that she doesn't seem to care for," she commanded her friend.

Mina dared to consider that Nicole was now trying to sabotage the best relationship that she ever had. She was not sure why Nicole would engage in such self-destructive behavior, especially since she was very much in love with Danny, but she had a few suspicions. Nicole did not know how to have a loving relationship, considering all of her past relationships. She was probably scared to find herself in a loving relationship and was now looking for a way out. Or Nicole thought that her dream relationship would come to an end anyway, so she might as well speed up the process, so it would hurt less eventually. Either way, it was madness to Mina and she was not going to stand for it.

"You know," Clara started with a thoughtful expression on her face, her hand on her chin.

Nicole sighed, feeling a bit overwhelmed and double-teamed. But then again, she was aware that she brought it on herself. She had just hoped that they would either tell her how to fix her problem or at least side with her. Instead, she felt like Mina was just attacking her.

"If you think that Danny deserves a family so much, why can't that be you?" Clara asked, feeling like she was offering a grand solution.

"Me?" Nicole echoed, pointing to herself and scrunching up her face in confusion.

"You. Danny obviously cares for you very deeply, much more than it sounds like she cares for her family. You are her life. Why not be the family you want her to have? The support that you thinks she needs? I know you do that anyway, so just accept being her family and end it there," Clara explained.

Nicole sighed again. "It's not the same thing. I can't be her mother or her sister or anything like that. Danny should have that, but she's throwing it all away with her horrible behavior. I never knew she was even capable of many of the things that she's been saying to them."

Mina sighed impatiently, rubbing her face with her hands. "Nicole, not everyone wants the same things you want. Why are you trying to punish Danny for not wanting something that you want for her? You can't force these things on her. If you just left her alone, I am willing to bet that everything would smooth over," she stated.

"So, it's all my fault? Nothing Danny did was wrong?" Nicole inquired in disbelief.

"Nicole, she got upset, she said something. She didn't say it to you, so why does it matter? You're just going to keep pushing her until she does say something to you and then hurt both of you?" Mina countered with a huff.

"Nicole, Mina is right. Not everyone is going to get along with their family. I can vouch for that. My relationship with my mother is awful and I prefer not to see her than be in the same room as her because I know we're going to have a fight," Clara informed her friends.

That new information turned all attention to Clara. "You don't get along with your mother?" Nicole asked.

"Not in the slightest. She's a miserable woman, who only wants to make others miserable. She was always jealous of how close I was with my father and she treated me like a redheaded step-child," Clara remarked, ruffling Nicole's hair a bit.

"Well, what if she had a change of heart and decided that she wanted to get to know you?" Nicole asked.

"I probably wouldn't trust her. I've had too many problems with her to think that she can suddenly change. I don't think she's the type of person I would want to know. Now, maybe it's like that for Danny's whole family. This isn't something you can understand because your family is close and even though Kate is overbearing, she's not spiteful toward you. Your parents treasure you and in turn you treasure them. The same with your extended family. Not everyone is like that and not everyone can be like that," Clara explained patiently.

Nicole sighed for what felt like the billionth time and stared at the table. She did not understand and she did not like that one bit. For Nicole, family came first because they were always there and would always be there. Family was loving, kind, affectionate, and supportive. Yes, there were disagreements, but that deep, familial love overcame everything. Danny deserved to have that, but was fighting against it and making a mess while she did it. Sure, Danny's family was not perfect, but her mother seemed to be reaching out for her and Adam did not seem to be too bad.

"...Why?" the redhead muttered.

"Nicole, do you really want to lose Danny because she doesn't get along with her family? It's not even your family. It's *her* family," Mina pointed out.

"I don't want to lose her at all. I just didn't know she could be so harsh and fight against her family like that," Nicole said.

"It's her family, Nicole. Not yours. In fact, I remember you ready to pick Danny over your own parents if they stood in the way of your happiness with her. Now, you're going to lose her over her family. And it's not even like her family is pushing for her to break up with you or something like that. No, you're going to lose her because she doesn't get along with her family and you

think she should. What the fuck?" Mina inquired, her face contorted because of her disbelief. She had never heard of anything like this.

"I know, I know. I don't even know what I'm so worked up over anymore. Was it because she rejected her family? Because she was so rude to them? Was it because they won't accept her? I don't know now," Nicole admitted, shaking her head. Her brain felt like it was swimming.

"Nicole, I love you and I really don't want to see you ruin the best relationship you have ever had. I like Danny and I think you're both good for each other. Please, don't let this come between you," Mina implored her friend, reaching over the table to caress Nicole's hand.

"I concur with Mina. Danny is very good for you, Nicole. She takes very good care of you and she loves you. Don't let the fact she doesn't like her family bother you so much. You said she got along with your family, so obviously it's not that she doesn't like families at all. It's just her family and she probably has a very good reason to not like them. Let her deal with them the best way that she can. Don't let her behavior toward them effect your relationship with her," Clara added in, hoping to get through to their friend.

Nicole nodded to show that she was listening, but she was still troubled by Danny's behavior. It was not just the way that she had treated her family. There was also the way that Danny was now treating her. It hurt. A lot.

"She's avoiding me," Nicole muttered, glancing away with worried eyes.

"Maybe because she doesn't want you to judge her anymore," Mina reasoned. She knew if she had to put up with sharing a space with someone that thought she was wrong for something that did not seem like a big deal, she would try to avoid them too. Well, she would probably scream first, but if screaming did not work, avoidance would be her next choice.

"I'm not judging her," Nicole argued, lightly hitting the table to make her point. The gesture caused Clara to look at Mina, as if imploring her to not push too much. Mina ignored the look and the hit.

"You are. You think that there's something wrong with her because she's pushing her family away. Her family sucks. You should just leave it at that. I'm sure if you go to her and talk it out, then everything will smooth over," Mina stated. Danny was very reasonable, after all, especially when it came to Nicole.

The redhead nodded again to show that she understood. Sighing, she wondered if things could go back to the way they were, but she was willing to try. She hated fighting with Danny, especially if the way Danny was going to fight involved the silent treatment. She would rather they scream at each other until they were both spent and everything got out in the open. An argument was something that she could handle... It was also something that she could win. She could not do anything with the silent treatment, though, except agonize over it. The silent treatment was like a punishment more than anything else.

"Nicole, do the right thing," Mina said, clapping her friend on the back.

Nicole nodded again; she was starting to feel like one of those bobble-head dolls. When they went back to work, Nicole thought about what her friends advised her on. Did they have a point? She was judging Danny by her relationship or lack thereof with the Wolfe family, even though she knew that the Wolfe family was nothing to write home about. She had heard enough stories and dealt with Tyler enough times to know that the Wolfe family was not that great. She had even seen behaviors that proved they were sub par.

Still, they were Danny's family. She thought that it would heal Danny a little if she could make peace with her family and Danny did deserve a family. Sure, it was not the best of families, but it was still Danny's family. And they were not all bad. Danny loved being with her nephews. Adam seemed perfectly normal and Christine seemed like she was trying to reach out. Nicole could not understand why Danny was turning her back on that. Family was special and wonderful and Danny deserved to have that.

Not thinking, Nicole grabbed the phone and dialed the house. It rang for a while and she worried that Danny was not picking up because she saw it was Nicole calling. Her heart clenched tightly in her chest at that thought.

"Maybe she's just out, teaching a lesson," the lawyer muttered, trying to sooth her wounded heart.

"Hello?" Danny answered the phone.

"Danny?" Nicole yelled in surprise.

"Yeah, you were expecting someone else?" the former rocker asked, sounding a bit bemused.

"No, no, no. It's just that...well, we haven't been talking much lately, so I thought you might not answer when you saw it was me calling."

Dane sighed deeply. "Chem," she said the nickname with such disappointment that it hurt Nicole's chest.

"I know, I know, I'm being silly. I just thought that since we haven't spoken much in the past couple of days that you wouldn't want to talk to me. It's nice to hear your voice again," Nicole said, smiling as she spoke.

Dane made a noise, something related to a grunt. "How you doing? Don't sound too good."

Nicole bit her lip before deciding to just admit her problem. "We're fighting again and I don't like it," she confessed, sniffing as she felt tears trying to gather in her eyes. Shaking her head, she hoped to get rid of tears before she ended up weeping.

"We're not fighting," Danny insisted.

"Yes, we are! Why are you even denying that? You've hardly looked my way since Friday night and you actually want me to believe that we're not fighting? What do you call it then?" Nicole huffed. She could envision Danny running her hand through her hair, which was what the musician was doing. Nicole was beginning to suspect that her girlfriend did not know what it meant when a couple was fighting, but then again, Danny had not been in a real relationship to know such a thing.

"It's just a difference of opinion. We'll sort it out eventually," Dane answered, sounding a bit unsure about that. The uncertainty in her voice made Nicole gulp.

"Danny, how is this a difference of opinion? You're not even talking to me for us to sort anything out."

"We will. I have to go. Lesson in ten minutes. Love you."

"I love you too," Nicole said, but was hurt to find out that Danny was gone before she even finished that phrase. "This is just one big mess and I don't even know where to begin fixing. Hell, should I even fix it? If Danny can't even get along with her family and can say some of the most awful things to them, how do I know she won't eventually do it to me?"

Nicole shook that thought away. Danny had been nothing but good to her until the thing with her family started. Danny was a good woman. They just needed to work through this because she did not want to lose Danny, no matter what insignificant doubts popped up in her head because of their fight.

"I've been without her before. I will not do it again," Nicole vowed. She already knew the complete and crippling agony that being without Danny meant. No matter what thoughts plagued her, she was not going to let Danny get away.

Deciding to bite the bullet because she was losing sight of what she was actually upset about, Nicole made a stop on her way home. She brought Danny a small bouquet of flowers, knowing that despite her lover's tough rocker image, the taller woman actually appreciated such gifts. She also picked up a small chocolate cake, hoping that they would share it and make up.

"Danny, are you home?" Nicole called, stepping into the house. Everything was quiet, which was not unusual. Danny could be asleep on the couch or in the bedroom. Or she could have beaten Danny home. Green eyes glanced toward the den. *Or she could be...*

Going toward the den, the lawyer sighed when she saw Danny sitting on the floor with her guitar in her hands and her headphones covering her ears. She was bobbing her head slightly while playing her favorite instrument.

Instead of trying to shout over the music, Nicole went in for the start of her apology. Walking over, she leaned down and kissed Dane as soon as the caramel-skinned woman noticed her. Dane returned the kiss and Nicole noted that nothing felt different about the show of affection. It was

just as sweet, loving, and passionate as any other kiss that they shared in the past. *Maybe everything will be all right between us.*

"Just got in?" Dane asked as they pulled away for air. She took her headphones off of her head and stopped her MP3 player.

"Yes, my classes started today," Nicole answered, explaining why she was in so late.

"I wasn't sure when you were coming in, so I didn't start dinner yet."

"It's fine. I got these for you," Nicole said, presenting her lover with the flowers.

"Oh." Dane moved her guitar out of the way and accepted the flowers. It was only the second time that she had ever got such a present and she smiled in gratitude. "Thank you. They're beautiful," she said and then locked eyes with Nicole. "Just like the woman that gave them to me."

Nicole blushed and chuckled a bit. "Flatterer."

Dane smiled. "Can't be flattery if it's the truth."

"It's part of my apology. As I said, I don't want to fight anymore, Danny."

"Then can we just bury this crap with my family? I mean, I don't think we're fighting, but I do think the tension that's with us is because we have different opinions about my family. Can we just leave it alone and move on?" Danny requested.

"If that's what it takes to end this, then yes," Nicole said.

Danny nodded and accepted that response, even though she felt like she had heard it before. It was not that long ago either. But, she let it go for now because it was quite a silly thing. For her, the last thing she wanted was something that she did not care about-her family and their opinions-to wreck her shot with the woman that she so desperately loved.

"What's this other thing you got here?" Dane asked curiously, glancing at the box that her lover was holding.

"Chocolate cake. I was hoping we could share some of it after dinner," Nicole answered.

"Sounds good. As soon as we figure out what dinner is."

"Something simple and quick. How about spaghetti?"

Dane nodded and got up to make pasta. Nicole was going to offer to make it, but she knew that would start a real problem between them since Danny felt like it was her job to do the household

chores. Nicole went to take a shower and wash away the grim and trouble of the day while Danny made dinner.

"She didn't even say what she was apologizing for," Dane replied as she put her flowers in some water. "She just wants to stop fighting. Stopping just because she's tired isn't going to solve anything," she grumbled. But, then again, she supposed that her way of not talking about things at all was not helping much either.

They had to do something about their lack of communication. She had completely shut down because she did not want to say anything hurtful while Nicole was just apologizing for the sake of apologizing. That was no way to build a healthy relationship and they both knew that.

"But, if this thing with my family goes away, maybe it won't matter," Dane figured as she started on dinner. "No, but something else might come up and we treat it just like we've done with this, we're as good as finished. We really need to talk this over and get everything out in the open. I can't lose Nick, not like this and certainly not to this. After dinner, we'll sit down and really talk this over."

She liked the sound of that plan. Finishing dinner, she only had to wait a few minutes before Nicole joined her at the table. They had a marvelous dinner and then Nicole cut them a slice of cake. They were going to eat in the living room and attempt to find a movie to watch afterward, but the routine was put on hold when the phone rang. Danny answered it since Nicole was busy with the cake.

"Hello," Dane said, wondering if the caller ID was right or if her nephews had miraculously found her phone number. She was hoping like hell that it was the latter.

"Hello, may I please speak with Dane?" Adam asked, showing that the caller ID was very accurate.

"Speaking," she grunted.

"Hey, Dane, it's Adam."

"I know," she stated. Unlike him, she could remember a voice.

"I was wondering if I could come over and maybe talk with you. Apologize for everything that has happened lately."

"You just did and I'm not interested. Goodbye," Dane said, hanging up the phone and flopping down on the couch.

"Baby, who was that?" Nicole asked curiously as she entered the living room with their cake. It was one big slice and one fork. She thought it might help them recover if they took turns feeding each other. That certainly appealed to her.

"Nobody," Dane grunted, trying not to let her brother sour her mood. She and Nicole were trying to make things right and they were about to share cake. That was a good start, she thought. Then, they could have their serious discussion and hopefully move forward.

"All right," Nicole decided to accept that, not desiring to start anything.

The redhead cut the first bit of cake and went to feed it to Danny, but the phone ringing distracted her. She was closer to the phone now, so she decided to get it. She grabbed the phone and checked the display.

"It's your brother, Adam," Nicole informed her girlfriend.

"Don't answer," Dane dismissed him.

"Why not? It could be important," Nicole pointed out. Something might be up with her nephews, after all.

"He just called. It's nothing important. He's probably pissed that I hung up on him."

"Hung up on him? Why would you do that?"

"Because he said what he had to say and what I had to hear. No reason to drag it out."

Nicole opened her mouth, about to put her foot in it for sure. Quickly, she closed her mouth and decided to just listen for once when it came to Danny and her family. She put the phone back in the cradle and then fed Danny the cake on the end of the fork. Danny then took the fork and did the same. They barely made it through half of the cake before there was a knock at the door.

"I got it," Dane said.

"You sure?" Nicole asked.

"Just don't eat the rest of the cake while I'm gone and I don't mean just that slice either," Danny teased.

Nicole released a coy smile and Dane went to get the door. Checking to see who it was, she was tempted to return to the couch, but the knocking persisted. She opened the door and was face to face with Adam.

"Forgot you live like fifteen minutes from here," Dane grumbled.

"Dane, I really want to talk to you. Hanging up doesn't help," Adam pointed out.

"It helps me not have to listen to you," Dane countered quite honestly.

"I guess I deserve that. Can I come in and we talk?" he requested.

Grey eyes peeked into the house, going in the direction of the living room. No matter what Nicole was going to eventually find out that Adam was at the door. She was either going to end up investigating, which would lead to a scolding for Danny, or Danny could just invite him in, avoiding the reprimand.

"Come on in," Dane sighed, motioning into the house.

"Thanks," Adam said, walking into the house. Dane pointed him in the direction of the living room. He followed her hand and made his way into the living room.

"Adam," Nicole said in surprise as she climbed to her feet. "Nice to see you." She reached out a hand for him to shake, which he did.

"Nice to see you too, Nicole. Sorry for just popping up on you like this," Adam replied warmly.

"No problem. Here to speak to your sister?" Nicole guessed.

"More like grovel at her feet and apologize for being an ass," he answered honestly.

"Then I'll leave you two alone," Nicole said, retreating into the kitchen. It took all of her self-control to avoid grinning like a fool. She sincerely hoped that this was the turning point that Danny needed to gain at least part of her family.

Dane watched Nicole leave the room and could guess what her lover was thinking. Shaking her head, she wondered what it would take for Nicole to give up this desire for her to be close to her jackass family. Letting that go for now, she turned her attention to Adam.

"So, you wanted to apologize?" Dane prompted him.

"Not just for me, but for Mom too," Adam started.

"Oh, she's got you acting as her messenger. Funny how she can talk to me when there are no other options, but now she's strangely silent," Dane commented.

He balked, as if that was the most outrageous thing he had ever heard. "Her? You're the one that won't talk to her. You're hanging up on people trying to talk to you."

"Oh, yes, it's all Dane's fault. Brilliant apology," she snorted.

Adam huffed and ran his hand through his hair. "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that Mom can't talk to you because you won't talk to her."

"Yeah, just like Dad never starts with me until I fuck up, right? Just like Sharon didn't worry about the boys being around me until I molested them, right?" Dane asked in a baffled tone, throwing her hands out. "Why the fuck does anyone ever bother if it's always me?" she demanded.

"Damn it, Dane, you're putting words in my mouth. I wanted to apologize for not standing up for you at the hospital. You did a good thing and Dad kicked you out without knowing everything you did for him. I didn't know you knew about the thing with Sharon, though," he muttered sheepishly, running his hand through his hair.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Ah, yes, and because I don't know that makes it all right. Look, I'm tired of the family drama that comes along with being near the Wolfe family. I'm not going to do it anymore. So, you don't need to apologize because it doesn't mean anything to me."

"You can't do that! The boys would be crushed if they never saw you again!" he pointed out, throwing his arms out as he spoke.

"Like Sharon is going to let me see them much anymore. It doesn't matter. When she barks, you move. She tells you to take the boys from me, you take them. Russell labels me worthless, I must be worthless. Christine cries that I'm not talk to her then it must be so. I can't deal with this shit anymore. Like you once told me, I've got my own life to live, kid. Deal with it."

"Dane, I was an immature kid when I said that! I didn't mean it. Don't close yourself off to all of us because I was a jackass fifteen years ago," he implored her.

"No, it's because you *all* continue to be jackasses. Don't need the stress and bullshit," Dane stated soundly, waving him off.

"Dane, I understand that you want to distance yourself from us. We haven't been the best people to you. I finally realized that after Sharon and I had a fight over you being around the boys. She would love nothing more than for you to stop seeing them, but I know you're good for them. You get them in a way that we can't because we don't get the poetry and music and all that stuff that they think is cool. I can't take that from them. And I can't punish you for something that never happened. I know you would never do anything to hurt them. I know you're not the horrible person they all make you out to be and I'm sorry for never speaking up for you. After all the crap we put you through, you still came through and we let you down after that. What you did for Dad was incredible and I know you would do even more for the boys, so I can't take you from their lives. Please," Adam begged.

Over the weekend, he and his wife had had a lot of debates about Dane and it got him to thinking about his little sister. Everything that his wife said about her, everything that he used to hold true about Dane seemed to be gone. He knew that even before he saw her at the celebration for their father running for governor. He knew that because when she got out of the hospital after her accident, she had stayed with him. He saw glimpses of a person that he never heard about in all of the stories—a good person. Yes, underneath all the apathy and despair had been a good woman, coming out on occasion to interact with and entertain his sons.

"Dane, I know you're not the person you once were. You're not even the person you were when you first met the boys. You're someone better. You're a good person and I know you love the boys. I can't just let you walk out on them and I can't go on pretending that the way everyone treats you is all right," Adam continued on.

Danny sighed and her hand went through her hair. "Now all of sudden you give a shit? Spare me and spare me the bullshit that Christine cares too. I know she wouldn't apologize. What is this, some new ploy to get me to that house, so you guys can have another round at Dane? Fuck you," she stated. She could not trust him.

"Dane," he pleaded with her.

"Fuck you," she said slower since he did not seem to comprehend it the first time. "I'm not interested in what you have to say. You should be familiar with that. Now, get the hell out."

Adam frowned. "I had hoped you would have grown up some by now," he growled.

"I had hoped you would be walking through the fucking door by now. You don't go twenty-five some odd years not caring about what happens to someone and then suddenly give two fucks about them because they helped your father and get along with your sons. I'm not interested. So, get out."

"Look, Dane, I'm trying to be upfront with you."

"And I don't buy it. Now, get out before I throw you out. I might be a cripple fuck, but I can still kick ass when necessary," she stated.

Adam sighed. "Okay, I don't want to upset you or fight about this. I'll give you a little time to cool off. I understand you not believing me. I just don't want you to punish the boys because of me."

Dane did not say anything and Adam marched back to the door. She shut the door as soon as he was over the threshold. As she walked back to the living room, she saw green eyes watching her from the kitchen entrance. She and Nicole stared at each other.

"Why didn't you hear him out? Why didn't you-" Nicole stopped talking when Dane turned around and went right to the den. "Damn it," the lawyer growled. There went her hard work, she knew. She just hoped they could recover again.

11: Bridge

Dane put her headphones on and cranked up the metal that she was listening to. Just in case Nicole came in and wanted to talk, she wanted to make sure that she did not hear. She was not in the mood for any more judgmental damnation about how she should give her family a chance since they were trying for her. They were not trying, like Nicole believed anyway. She did not want to give them a chance. She wanted them to go away before they did any more damage to what she was trying to build with Nicole.

Yes, she understood how crazy that seemed since she was now avoiding Nicole-again. But, she was sure that she and Nicole would eventually get things worked out. That would not happen if her family kept popping up at inappropriate moments and doing things that made her seem like some sort of ogre to her beloved. No, it was best to just sever all ties with her damnable family and call it a day. *Not like they ever done anything good for me.*

Yes, she had stayed with Adam after she had gotten out of the hospital after being beaten to a pulp by those gangsters, but he had not been incredibly warm with his welcome and she had been desperate. He had not even inquired about her condition when she limped into his house. He had given her the same couple of days as anyone else in their family had given her. Those days had not been extended when he saw how much Luke and Thomas got along with her. In fact, when he had put her out, he had not even let her bid the boys farewell. She had stayed with him again a couple of months after that and even though the boys seemed more attached to her, her brother continued to treat her like the familiar stranger she was. He would not even tell the boys that she was his sister or that she was their aunt. She did not see why she should believe he suddenly changed.

Having faith in Adam had gotten her nowhere in life, except for heartache at a young age when he let her know just where she stood with him. Yes, he might have matured as the years went by, but he showed no signs of caring about her as one would care about a sister. Hell, it was only recent that he seemed to notice she was even a human being. She refused to believe that suddenly just because she called an ambulance for his father and gave a little bit of blood that he gave a damn about her. And she did not want to hear Nicole try to say something contrary to that.

Nicole did not know what she had been through. Nicole did not know what her family had put her through. Nicole did not know anything and she wished that the redhead would just accept that, so they could move on.

She understood that Nicole thought that family was important and she could understand where Nicole would get that idea. Nicole had come from a good family and if she had come from a similar situation, she supposed that she would act like Nicole. If her family was anything like Nicole's, she would probably try to hold onto them with both hands, firm and tight. But, she had not come from a family like that and she resented that Nicole did not seem to comprehend that. Instead, Nicole was burdening her with people that did not want her, that she did not want in return, and straining her with a guilt that she knew she should not feel just because she could not get along with those bastards.

She figured that she would just hide out in the music room until she cooled down. Right now, she was all too aware that if she and Nicole discussed anything, she would say things in a tone that would not be appreciated and in a manner that would be hurtful. She might throw in a few insults just for the hell of it too. That would be counterproductive since she was not trying to destroy her relationship with the redhead. So, she needed to calm down before anything else.

Unfortunately, as time ticked by, she felt the fury continue to fester, tearing at her. Thinking that it might just be the music feeding into her emotions, she changed from the metal to some smooth

R&B. Tapping her good foot to the beat, she sang each song under her breath, but not really feeling much better.

In fact, it felt like her heart was breaking as she listened to the love songs and the breakup songs. She wondered if she would ever write another love song again considering what she and Nicole were going through. She dreaded thinking that she had a lifetime of breakup songs ahead of her, knowing that if Nicole left her, her muse would forever be her despair of losing her angel.

"I can't..." Dane whispered, wiping her eyes of unshed tears. She could not lose Nicole. There would be no reason to go on without Nicole. She would become numb again, she would become a phantom again, and she would be without pride or dignity again. Nothing would matter. The world would be gone as far as she was concerned. So, no, she could not lose Nicole.

She was just going to wait until she felt comfortable talking to Nicole, she reminded herself. Once she calmed down and the anger finally settled down, she would talk to Nicole and they would start moving forward, instead of stagnating as they had been. It did not happen that night because Dane stayed parked on that floor, waiting for her emotions to calm. She fell asleep with trouble churning in her belly and her music blaring in her ears. Nicole found her in there, leaned up against the wall.

"All she needs is a sign 'will hold guitar for money' and a cup," Nicole murmured to herself in regards to Danny's position. She could not believe that Danny actually fell asleep in the den with her guitar in her hands.

Nicole had wandered downstairs when Danny did not come to bed. It tore at her insides to see Danny sleeping on the floor in the den. Things seemed to have gotten so bad that Danny preferred the floor to their bed. Things were not looking good.

"Well, if this is where she wants to be. I should respect that," Nicole said, speaking aloud as if the words would make the hurting cease. They did not.

Going to the closet, she retrieved a blanket and used it to cover her lover from the cool night air. She also removed Danny's guitar from her lap and took her headphones off. After a gentle kiss to Danny's forehead, Nicole left her girlfriend there and returned to the bedroom.

How did things come to this point? Nicole wondered and she had no answer for herself. All she knew was that she and Danny were drifting apart so quickly that it felt like she was literally being torn in half.

Nicole tried not to think too much on it. She just knew that she was going to try best not to say anything else to Danny in regards to her family. It was not worth losing her lover, even if Danny said things that she thought was wrong or made decisions that she did not agree with. She was going to keep all of that to herself, no matter what.

It's her family. I have to let her deal with them as she sees fit. It's like Mina said, it's none of my business, especially if I want to keep Danny and I damn sure do. So, I am not going to say anything else about her family.

Dane groaned as she started to regain consciousness. Her lower back had a dull ache in it and she thought that she might have slept on top of something. She was not too sure about why she had a crick in her neck, though. Opening her eyes, she saw it was not so much that she slept on top of something as it was that she slept against something-against the den's back wall. *That explains the pain.*

"Can't believe I fell asleep here," she muttered, throwing out her arms to stretch. A long yawn escaped her throat.

About to get up, Dane noticed the blanket draped over her. For a moment, she smiled, thinking that her angel was taking care of her, but that thinking quickly changed. If her angel was really taking care of her, then Nicole would have woken her up and took her to bed, she reasoned. No, putting a blanket over her when she fell asleep on the floor was telling her to keep her sorry ass in the den.

"Damn it," she growled. Just when she thought that she might be able to talk things out, she was outraged again and knew that speaking with Nicole would do nothing more than dive bomb into an argument, complete with petty insults.

Climbing to her feet, she tried to put things out of her mind. Humming to herself to keep herself calm, she folded the blanket and returned it to the linen closet. She did consider that she might need it again, but left it where it belonged. After that, she decided on a nice, hot shower, thinking that might it be what she needed to face her lover. If nothing else, it might help ease the tension out of her neck and back.

Ascending the stairs, she went to the bedroom and did her best to ignore the sleeping body in the comfortable bed. She made sure to tiptoe, making less noise than a cat on a carpet. Grabbing fresh clothing, she swiftly left the room, not glancing at Nicole again. She used the bathroom at the end of the hall for her morning routine. Thankfully, she had a toothbrush in there.

Despite the terrible feeling coursing through her, Dane went about her typical chores. Doing her routine kept her from thinking, so she started on breakfast while listening for signs that Nicole was awake. By the time the lawyer came down, Dane had waffles and scrambled eggs made.

Their morning was as silent as a grave. Nicole hoped that they would not be burying their relationship in that grave. She knew that she needed to say something, but she was not sure how to begin. She was not sure what to say. She was not even totally sure what she had done that was so wrong. She had not gotten out ten words the day before and Danny walked away from her as if she was the vilest creature in existence.

"Baby..." Nicole started out, but a caramel hand halted her words.

"Please, can we not do this right now? I don't trust myself just yet," Dane informed her girlfriend, her tone fatigued, almost trembling.

Emerald eyes glanced down at the table. "Oh...Okay..." she agreed, not even sure what Danny meant by her comment. She just knew that Danny was not ready to talk and she was not going to push. Pushing was one of the things that got her into this mess, she realized.

The pout on Nicole's face tugged at Dane's heart a little. She did not want Nicole to leave thinking that they were going to be beaten by their current troubles. She grabbed Nicole into a tight hug, cradling Nicole's head to her shoulder. The redhead practically sobbed into Dane's shoulder. The sound rippled through Danny's body and made her hold on tighter.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Nicole muttered, not too sure what she was apologizing for.

"It's okay," Dane whispered, kissing soft, auburn locks. She was not too sure what Nicole was apologizing for either, but she was almost sure that Nicole was overwhelmed and unaware that she was even talking.

"I hate this," Nicole admitted.

"I do too."

"Will we work through it?" the voice that asked the question was so tiny and frightened.

"Of course we will, angel. Told you plenty of times, I'm not going anywhere unless you want me to. We'll work through it," the taller woman promised.

Nicole sniffled a bit. "When?"

"Soon. We could talk about it, but you have work."

"And you're not ready."

"Right."

"You'll be ready soon?" Nicole wished out loud.

"Should be. Later tonight maybe."

"Good."

Dane sent Nicole on her way feeling a little better about herself. Of course, Dane did not feel much better. She could only wonder, if Nicole was having such a hard time with everything, why

had the redhead left her sleeping on the floor? *Well, she could be punishing me for hurting her.* It was plausible, but she doubted that was the case. Nicole was not like that, after all.

"Maybe she thought I wanted to sleep there. Not like I haven't slept in the den before," Dane considered, running her hand through her hair. She was not sure what to make of last night. "Just let it go. Talk about it tonight and move the fuck on. Like Nick said, I hate this. It really fucking sucks."

Sighing, Danny moved to go wash the breakfast dishes. With that out of the way, she collected laundry to work her way through that. After that, she sat down to make a shopping list. She made sure to put chocolate-chip cookies on the list as that would be a perfect peace offering to her distraught lover. The phone ringing distracted her. She picked it up without bothering to check the caller ID.

"Yeah?" she answered the phone. Some of the manners that she showed when Nicole was around went right out the window when her girlfriend left the area.

"Dane?"

"Damn it, Adam, what the fuck do you want from my life now?" Dane huffed. She was sick of her brother.

"Dane, I'm trying once again to apologize," the eldest Wolfe sibling replied. His aggravation was so clear that she would not have been surprised if it slapped her through the phone.

"Didn't we go through this already?" she retorted with a snort.

"I know we did, but you're being unfair! I don't want the boys to lose a good friend because I've been an ass to you!"

Dane sighed. "A good friend?" she echoed. He could not even call her their aunt. She frowned in disgust, close to hanging up already.

"Dane..." he sighed now, sensing that he had done something wrong.

"So, what you want me to do is to stick around, so you can be more of an ass to me and for your wife to be an ass to me? Not to mention, for me to occasionally see the rest of my so-called family, so they can be asses to me also?" she inquired incredulously. No one in her right mind would stick around for that sort of abuse!

"Dane, I'm trying to no longer be an ass toward you. Yes, Sharon doesn't want the boys around you for a lot of stupid reasons, but I am willing to put my foot down because I think they need someone like you in their lives. They adore you and I can tell that you'd never hurt them."

"Oh, thanks for that vote of confidence," she scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Dane, are you going to stay so bitter? Are you going to punish Luke and Thomas for my actions?"

"It's not a punishment and you're still being an ass for using them to try to sway me. I know if I try to let them in, it's going to be the same bullshit as always. I'll get some time with them before Sharon starts barking about whatever-the-hell she thinks I'm going to do to those kids and then you'll be dragging them away from me like the hen-pecked bastard you are."

"Dane, I think that's uncalled for."

"No, you know what's uncalled for? It's uncalled for to drag the boys away from me every time we're alone for three seconds. It's uncalled for to lie to them and to me about why you're doing it. It's uncalled for that every time Sharon has one of these little paranoid fantasies you back it up because you take the kids from me like whatever she thinks is true. So, don't talk to me about uncalled for. You say you want me in the boys lives? For how long, about five minutes every other week? What good could that do? So, once again, this is bullshit and you, sir, are full of shit," Dane proclaimed.

Adam blow out a breath. "Okay, I guess you have a point...several actually," he reluctantly admitted.

"I know I do," she replied smugly. She had been going through all of the crap for too long not to make a point.

"Okay, so how about I concede that I can't make up for what I did or didn't do for you, but I do want you to be there for the boys. Like I said, they adore you. Thomas runs around here all the time talking about how he wants to play the drums because you played them for him one time. I don't even know how he remembers it since I know it was years ago. Luke wants to grow up and be a singer all because of you. You have a strong influence on them and I can tell you want it to be a positive one."

Dane was quiet for a moment. "I'd like to be in their lives and if they want to play or sing, I would love to teach them," she confessed. Music was her passion, coming behind her love of Nicole, and she would like to share that with her nephews. She did not want to punish them because the Wolfe family treated her like she had several contagious diseases.

"They would really like that, Dane."

"But, I can't do that if you're not going to trust me around them."

"I do trust you. I'll try to work it out with Sharon, but I'm not going to let you fall out of their lives. They were asking about you since the dinner. They heard everybody saying some negative things about you. Well, everyone except Mom. Dane, you really should talk to Mom," he informed her, bracing himself for what he thought would be an explosion.

"She has the number. It's a proven fact," the musician countered, sounding tired. She was sick of hearing about her mother.

A long sigh echoed through the phone. "Dane, you really should-" he was cut off.

"Adam, I will not travel down this road with you. That woman has my number. If she wants to talk, she can call. She's done it before. Now, let's get back to the matter at hand before I hang up," Dane told him quite seriously.

"All right, all right. I'll let Mom fight her own battles. So, are you willing to be around for the boys?"

"The boys, yes."

"And do you think there's a chance for me and you to one day be okay?" he asked curiously. He was a decent man-he liked to believe anyway. He knew that he could not make that claim honestly, though, if he could not make things right with his baby sister. He had done her wrong in life and he was all too aware that. If he could not make things right, he figured he would walk through life with a heavy weight of guilt and shame on his shoulders.

"I don't know about that, Adam. Right now, I don't mind how things are with you. Sharon gets on my nerves, but I don't mind you," she told him. Being familiar strangers was better than any other relationship that she had with a family member. Hell, the only adult family member she had a better relationship with was their Uncle Pierce and that was only because Pierce tried to get to know her.

"You don't mind? Dane, we're like two people who take the same bus everyday!"

"Better than two people that want to take a knife to each other."

Adam sighed again. "Can't argue that. Do you think that it'll get better?"

"Don't know, but it can if you don't feed Sharon's paranoia," she conceded. If she was going to be around her nephews, she figured there was a chance that she and her brother might be more than what they were. It all depended on how he acted.

"That makes sense. Look, I'm going to take the boys out today. They want to go to the park. Think you could meet us there?"

"Don't they have school today?"

Adam laughed. "They're not in school all day, Dane. They have to get out eventually. After school, I'm going to take them to the park. I think you know which one."

Dane nodded, figuring out that her brother meant the one closest to her. "I'll think about it."

"Oh," Adam could not hide the disappointment in his voice. He thought he had her. "Okay, well, if it helps, we'll be there at about 2:30, okay? Sharon won't be there. She works until five."

"Okay." And with that, Dane hung up. Not bothering with a farewell of any kind because she did not care.

Dane ran her hand through her hair as she started thinking about if she wanted to go or not. It would be pleasant to see her nephews. She loved the little guys. She did not understand them, but they were cute and they liked being around her. If she could be in their lives and watch them grow up, she thought that would be wonderful.

"Does this mean I'm going to go then?" Dane asked herself. She thought that it did.

She considered the cons of going. She supposed that it could be a trick of some kind from her brother, but Adam was never that sort of person. He had always preferred to ignore Dane than anything else, something like their mother, but not to the severe length as Christine. So, it probably was not a trick. She hoped that he was telling the truth that Sharon was not going to be there.

Sharon was really the problem between her and Adam right now. Adam did not mind her being with the boys and she knew that from his behavior in the past. As long as Sharon was not there, she knew that she would be able to have a good time with them. Grabbing the phone, Dane dialed a familiar number.

"Hey, baby," Nicole said, smiling brightly since Danny was taking the time to call her. She thought that had to be a good thing. Maybe they had finally gotten over the hump and things were going to get better.

"Hey, Nick," Dane greeted her.

"It's nice to hear from you, love," Nicole purred and smiled. It was great to be on speaking terms.

Dane chuckled a little, enjoying the way her lover's voice washed over her. "Glad I could make your day. How are you feeling so far?"

"I'm fine. Work is work, you know. To what do I owe the honor of the call?"

"Oh, I wanted you to know that I'm going to be at the park in the afternoon and then I have a couple of lessons, so if you call the house and I'm not there, it's because I'm out," Dane explained. She knew that Nicole panicked and worried easily when it came to her and her whereabouts. She liked to keep Nicole posted to make sure the redhead did not stress herself out over nothing.

"The park? How long are you going to be in the park?" Nicole asked. She wished that Danny would wait for her and they could take a nice stroll, maybe even have that discussion that they needed to have while doing it.

"Don't know. I'm hanging out with Luke and Thomas. Adam's going to bring them over there."

"Adam? I thought you two just had an argument," Nicole pointed out.

"We did, but he still wants me to see the boys and he wants them to see I'm all right. Apparently, they've been worried about me since the dinner. So, I'm going to hang out with them and do stuff. Maybe I should bring bread. They might want to feed the ducks!" Danny chirped.

Nicole laughed a bit, knowing that Danny loved to feed the ducks. The laughter ended when she recalled why it was Danny enjoyed feeding the ducks now. No one had ever bothered to let her do it when she was a child. Danny's family had left her to her own devices as a child. But, Nicole thought, Danny seemed to be making steps and at least Adam seemed to be trying too. Maybe the pair could emerge from things looking more like brother and sister than uneasy acquaintances.

"Okay, have a good time with them," Nicole said.

"I will. I'll be home by the time you're out of class, okay?"

"Good. Do you think that maybe if it's still warm, you'd like to go back to the park? We could walk around a little and talk?"

Dane grinned. "I'd like that. It's about time we talk, huh?"

"Yes, please."

"Then we'll do that. Sounds good."

Nicole smiled broadly and merrily. "Good. So, when did you speak with your brother?" she asked curiously.

"Few minutes ago. I'm gonna let you go now, Nick, so you can finish up your work. Make sure you eat lunch and the snack I packed for you, okay?"

"You know I will. If not, your attack dog Mina will badger me for you."

"I like Mina so much," Danny remarked with a laugh. She was able to get Mina to check on Nicole for her often, making sure her lover did not overwork herself, allow people to take advantage of her, and make sure that she ate properly.

"Careful, she has been talking about adding you to her harem."

"She'd have to take you too to get me."

Nicole chuckled. They bid each other farewell and Nicole felt pretty good about herself. She went back to work, breezing through it. She was not surprised when Mina entered her office.

"Ready for lunch? Danny already called me and told me it was my job to make sure you ate today," Mina announced. She remembered the first time she got a call like that a couple of months ago. She already held Danny in high esteem, but the level that Danny went to look at for Nicole, going so far as to call Nicole's best friend to make sure Nicole took care of herself, made Danny sky-rocket to the top of Mina's favorite people.

"I had a feeling she would."

"She didn't pack you lunch?" Mina asked curiously. It was known to happen; it was one of the things that led to Danny calling her that first time a couple of months ago.

"No, she packed me a snack, but no lunch."

Mina smirked. "You distracted her again?" she asked. She was very aware that the leading cause for Nicole not getting a homemade lunch had to do with her and Danny going at it like bunnies most of the time.

"I wish," Nicole muttered. It felt like eons since she and Danny made love. She missed having that long body pressed against her.

"Oh?" Mina arched an eyebrow. "Oh, god, are you two still fighting?" she asked incredulously.

"Um...sort of," Nicole answered. She was not totally sure what they were doing anymore. "Last night, we had a little problem. I'm not entirely sure what it was, but Danny was talking to her brother and she had an argument with him. He was trying to apologize from what I could tell and Danny spoke very rudely to him. I was about to say something to her, but she just walked away and ended up sleeping in the den."

"God, Nicole, you have got to stop this! You're pushing her away by butting in on how she deals with her family."

"Maybe before, but I was right this time. She spoke to him again today and apparently she's meeting up with him and his sons at the park," Nicole boasted.

"His sons?"

"His adorable little boys. Danny's nephews. She loves them," Nicole explained.

"So, maybe she's going to the park for them and not for her brother. Nicole, you really need to stop this, seriously. I know you mean well and I'm sure Danny knows you mean well, but that

doesn't mean you're not screwing this up anyway. You know what they say about the road to Hell," Mina declared.

Nicole sighed and nodded to show that she understood. If she was honest with herself, even though she thought that she was right since Danny was meeting up with Adam, it was not a very sweet victory. Being able to tell Danny "I told you so" seemed very meaningless, especially if she lost Danny to this whole mess.

"You're right, Mina. I just...I just..." Nicole tucked her head down and rubbed her face a little.

"I know," Mina cooed and she went over to her best friend, cradling Nicole's head against her.

"I know they would love her if they gave her a chance. She's such a wonderful person. I know they would be able to see it," Nicole muttered.

"They might not want to see it. You're only hurting Danny by pushing this. You're hurting yourself too. You're a mess over this. Just let it go, please," Mina begged.

"I just want her to have that support and that love that I know she deserves."

"I don't think they're going to give it to her. This is where you have to step in, Nicole. It's like Clara said, you should be Danny's family. And, if she gets along with your family like you said she did, share that with her. Stop trying to push her own family on her or her on them. It's not working."

"But, she's meeting with her brother..."

"Then leave it at that. Let them build from there, but you need to step away and stay far away from it. Okay?"

Nicole fought down the urge to argue and just took in her friend's words. She knew that Mina and Clara had been right all along. She was just blinded by her desires for Danny. She wanted so much for Danny to know the love of family, but her wants were apparently clouding her judgment and she was just done with it. She just wanted things to go back to how they were before.

"It would be nice to be that support for Danny," Nicole whispered.

"You were already that. You just didn't recognize it. Now that you do, all you have to do is step up and do the right thing," Mina replied.

"When did you get so wise?" Nicole teased, trying to get herself together.

"I minored in wisdom in college," the chocolate-eyed attorney joked.

"Yet you never used it back then."

"I never used those philosophy courses back then either and that was my damn major, so I don't think usage is a good judge of things."

Nicole giggled and straightened herself out. They left the office after that, going to lunch. The redhead had a renewed sense of duty and was determined to set things right with her beloved.

Dane stood at the edge of the park. She could see Adam was there already with Luke and Thomas, running around in the playground. She scanned the area, making sure Sharon was nowhere in sight. It would seem that Adam was on the level, so she approached the trio.

"Dane!" Luke spotted her first and practically tackled her before she even set foot in the playground. Thomas was right behind him and he hit her at about the same force.

"You guys should play football," she remarked, trying to catch her breath, which had been knocked out of her. She suspected that she would be icing her knee when she got back home after spending sometime with her nephews.

"Hey, are you going to play with us? Are you going to stay?" Luke inquired with excitement.

"And not leave?" Thomas added in, just in case their aunt did not know what it meant to "stay."

"I am going to stay and play with you guys," Dane confirmed. That got her a loud cheer from the boys.

Luke and Thomas yanked the musician toward the playground. She noticed a few moms and babysitters watched her carefully as she entered the sacred, children's area. They all seemed at ease since she was being pulled around by the two boys. Luke and Thomas had to direct Dane on what to do, which other children started doing too. They made a game of it, seeing how much they could get Dane to do. Dane did her best to keep up with the requests, enjoying the smiles and laughter she was bringing to the children's faces. Thankfully, none of the children were malicious and did not ask anything truly dangerous, but the activities started adding up.

After a while, Danny had to escape because her leg just was not up to all of the activity. The children protested when Dane informed them that she had to go, but that did not keep her in the playground any longer. She bid all of the children farewell and they did the same. Hobbling away from the playground, Luke and Thomas followed her like two faithful sidekicks. Adam trailed behind, not wanting to disturb their moment.

They ended up by the pond, where the boys did want to feed the ducks. Dane grinned because this was one of her favorite things to do. They had to go buy something to feed the ducks, though. There was a hot dog stand close by, so Dane went over and brought three hot dogs. She and the boys ate the hot dogs, but saved the buns for the ducks. Adam watched the whole thing and smiled.

Adam stood back while the group slowly picked their buns apart and tossed the bits of bread to the ducks. As soon as they were out of bread, Thomas took notice of the dogs running around not too far from the pond.

"Oh, puppies!" the younger boy shouted with joy as he took off toward the dogs. Dane was on the case, grabbing him up before he charged into a potentially dangerous situation.

"Hold on there, dog whisperer. You can't just run into a field of dogs," Dane cautioned him and Luke as they calmly walked toward the meadow.

"Why not?" Thomas asked curiously, tugging on Dane's hand a bit, trying to get her to speed up. He wanted to get to the dogs quickly.

"Dogs can get scared easily. If you scare 'em, they might attack you. You don't want a dog to bite you. Even if you don't scare them, you might surprise them and that could get you bit too. So, you have to be careful," Dane patiently explained.

The boys nodded, showing that they understood. Danny scanned the area, searching for people that looked familiar. She did not have any friends, per se, but there were people that she recognized and that recognized her as someone who frequented the park. It was not difficult to spot someone with a friendly dog, so Dane took her nephews over there.

"Hey, do you mind if my two twisters pet your dog?" Dane asked, pointing to her nephews.

The familiar young woman smiled and nodded. It started out with the boys petting her very affable and energetic husky. Before long, the boys were running and tumbling with the canine. Dane smiled a bit and only joined in when the boys and dog ran over to her. She then petted the dog and laughed with the boys before they ran off again.

"They're going to want a dog after this," Adam sighed, shaking his head, reminding his little sister that he was still there.

"Ah well. Dogs are cool," Dane replied.

"It's like having another kid. You have to feed it, bathe it, train it, take it to the doctor, and all of the stuff," he argued.

Dane shrugged. "I think it would be nice."

"You say that because you don't have one."

Giving her brother a sidelong glance, she snorted. "I think I could handle it. Nick would be there too. We could handle it," she stated. Part of her wondered if she meant that they could handle having a dog or a child, but then again, if Adam was saying one was like the other then she guessed that she meant both. And she was surprised to find that she truly believed that.

Adam appeared skeptical, but Dane did not address it. She was used to the condescending attitude from her family. She was not surprised by it since Adam was under the impression that he knew her fairly well, even though he would readily admit that they were mere acquaintances.

"Sharon is going to be pissed over this, isn't she?" Dane stated.

"She's already pissed. I can't do anything about that. We argued about you spending time with the kids already. It's just something we're going to disagree on."

"And you're going to go behind her back on," she pointed out.

"Until her fears prove founded, then yes. It's not like something like this is going to break us up or something. We'll argue, say some things, and then cool off. After a while, it'll turn into one of those things we don't even argue about anymore. She'll just get pissed whenever you see them, but she'll accept it."

"Are you sure?"

Adam nodded. "It was like that when you stayed with us a couple of times. First, she was pissed and we argued a lot. The second time, yeah, we argued again, but not as long and she accepted it. The third time, she didn't even argue."

"It was the last time."

"She didn't know that, though. It was just something that she knew we wouldn't see eye to eye on. It's happened a few times with us. You have to pick your battles. I mean, there are things that she does that gets on my nerves that we used to argue about, but don't anymore. I still get annoyed by them, but I don't cause fights over them. That's marriage and that's raising kids. You fight, you argue, you compromise, and sometimes you just bite the bullet."

Dane nodded and hated to admit that she had just learned something from her brother. "Are you sure?"

"Sometimes, the fighting is worse depending on the issue. This thing with you around the boys is a bit tough. She takes the fight all around the world there. She says some hurtful things, but I know it's because she's worried about the boys. The last argument we had over the weekend was so bad, I had to go out to a bar for a couple of hours and cool my head. Her heart is in the right place, but her mouth makes it hard to understand."

Dane nodded again. "Never figured married life could be so complicated."

"Yeah, well, you don't know anything about it, so I guess that makes sense."

The musician rolled her eyes; once again, her brother was being condescending. Letting that go, she turned her attention back to the boys. The day was calm for the most part. She did not try to

talk to Adam much. At one point in time, she glanced behind them and noticed a figure in the distance.

For a moment, Dane thought Sharon had found them, but the figure did not approach. Glancing again, she figured out that was Christine Wolfe. Since her mother kept her distance, Dane decided to pretend that she was not there. She did not even look at her mother when she passed within ten feet of the woman on her way back home. Christine had reached out, but pulled her hand back. She opened her mouth, but did not say a word. Dane just kept on walking.

All in all, it was a good day. The boys enjoyed themselves, begged to see Dane again, and she felt good about herself. She hoped that she would be able to stay in their lives. They were worth having to be around her brother and possibly interacting with him. They were worth quite a bit. And, she figured, she might even learn a thing or two about deep relationships if she listened to her brother.

The one thing that she did not think about was her mother's appearance. She guessed Adam called their mother, but she was not sure why. It could be that he was trying once again to push her toward her mother or he could have just invited Christine to be around the boys, like he had done with her. She did not care why Christine was there and decided to brush off as just a concerned grandmother, who probably assumed that she would hurt the boys too. Nothing to get worked up about and nothing to ruin her day.

Smiling to herself, Dane figured now it was time to set things right with Nicole. If she could do that, then the day would be perfect. Her smile broadened. Things were going to be perfect.

12: Explosive

Nicole entered the house and was feeling pretty optimistic about things...again. She hoped it was not another false start. She reminded herself what she needed to say and how she needed to act. It was time for her to stop acting like she knew what was best for Danny, even if she only had Danny's best intentions in mind. Her intentions did not excuse her behavior, she reminded herself. Besides, it was like Mina told her, the road to Hell was paved with good intentions.

The house was silent. She was not surprised by that fact, but she did wonder if her girlfriend was home or not. The first place that she checked was the den. Anxiety seized her heart and caused it to beat heavy, knowing it would not be a good sign if Danny was in the den. Thankfully, the room was empty.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Nicole checked in on the living room. Dane was lying face down on the couch, arm and leg dangling over the side. Nicole smiled a bit herself and left Dane on the sofa while she went to take her shower. When she came back down, Dane was up and making dinner.

"You started dinner already?" Nicole asked, even though it was quite obvious. She was not sure what to make of the action because she thought they were supposed to be going to the park to walk and talk.

"Figured I'd get it out of the way and then we can go for our walk. We can eat when we come back. Cool?" Dane proposed. This way, they could take all the time they needed, not having to worry about any chores back at home.

"Sounds good. What are we having tonight?" Nicole asked, just wanting to keep her lover talking. She missed the sound of Dane's voice. The serious talk could wait for the stroll that they had planned, though.

"Beef stew with rice, black beans, and whatever vegetable you'd like to go with it," the taller woman answered.

"Yum!" Nicole smiled. "Can you just put carrots in the stew? I like when you do that."

"Carrots in the stew, no problem. Potatoes too?"

There was an eager nod. "You know me too well, sweetheart."

Dane smiled a bit; her day was still going quite well. Her mind was dancing at the thought of taking a nice walk with Nicole, clearing the air around them, and then having a very good dinner. She was already imagining cuddling up to Nicole, missing that immensely. And even more so, she missed when things were good between them. When they enjoyed being with each other instead of having disagreements over practically everything. She missed when it did not seem like they were perpetually annoyed with each other.

So, she imagined how great it was going to be when everything was back to normal. She would be able to hold Nicole and just delight in the feel of the redhead pressed against her. They would be able to do things again. They would be able to make love again. That would be wonderful.

And then the phone rang, interrupting her daydream. Dane growled, not liking the device of late. Nicole chuckled before going to answer the phone herself. Seeing Adam's name and number coming up, she thought it was safe to answer since Dane seemed to have made some kind of peace with her eldest brother. Well, she assumed that Dane made peace with him since she went out with him and his sons earlier.

"Hello?" Nicole answered the phone.

"Damn it, Dane, you son of a bitch!" a female voice screeched.

Nicole yelped and yanked the phone away from her ear because of the terrible noise. "Excuse me?" she snapped, insulted that someone would call her home with such rudeness.

"Dane, I swear-" Nicole did not hear the rest of the message because Danny took the phone out of her hand. Green eyes turned questionably to her lover.

"Heard her screaming. I don't think it's for you," Dane commented, going so far as to smile. She then put the phone to her ear, interrupting whomever was hollering. "Hello, sunshine," she said in a mockingly cheerful voice.

"Goddamn it, Dane, you listen to me!" a booming voice that Dane recognized as Sharon screamed loudly into the phone. She guessed her afternoon with the boys had not stayed a secret meeting for very long.

"I'm listening," Dane sighed, rolling her eyes.

"You stay the fuck away from my children and you tell your cowardly fuck of a brother to get his ass back here right now!" Sharon commanded in a shriek.

Dane's face scrunched up in bemusement and scratched the end of her nose. "What the hell are you going on about? You act like I stalked Luke and Thomas and suddenly showed up."

"I know that stupid idiot Adam brought them to you, now you tell him to bring his ass home and own up to his fucking mistakes before I change the goddamn locks!"

"What?" Dane said again, confused. She was tempted to just hang up, but glancing at Nicole, she resisted that urge. She recalled the last look she got when she hung up a phone in Nicole's presence.

"Adam! I know you're hiding him! He's not answering his fucking cell phone, but you two seem to be peas-in-a-goddamn-pod lately! So, I know you know where the hell he is! Tell me where the hell he is and then tell him to stop being a coward and answer for his actions!"

"Sharon, I don't know what the hell you're talking about and I didn't know about Adam being gone until ten seconds ago when you told me. Adam is a grown-ass man. He can take care of himself," Dane reasoned.

"He's never done anything like this before. He would at least answer his phone. He's been acting different since being around you. Now, tell me where the hell he is!" she roared, voice loud enough to make Dane wince.

"Don't know, don't care. Stop screaming at me," the guitarist calmly ordered, not sure if her ears would survive much more abuse.

"I know you know!"

Dane rolled her eyes. "Don't know, don't care. I'm hanging up now," she informed the hysterical woman. She silently decided that she was sick of panicky females.

"Dane, don't you dare!" And the call was disconnected.

Danny put the phone down and carefully watched Nicole. The lawyer was quiet, but her teeth were firmly locked together, grinding against each other. Smoke-colored eyes dared Nicole to say something.

"Um...what was that about?" Nicole asked, wringing her hands together, trying her best to sound unconcerned.

"Sharon is looking for Adam. I suspect they had a fight and he ran out. She's worried because he's not answering his phone," Dane answered in a measured tone, still daring her lover to say something.

"Do you think everything's all right? Does he usually do things like this?" Nicole asked, concern easily coming out of her voice and clouding her eyes.

"Relax, Chem. Adam's a big boy." Besides, she had no clue what her fucking brother did "usually." She did not keep up with him or his habits. Hell, she barely spoke to the guy before recently.

"Well, that's true. But, she sounded terribly worried. I mean, maybe this isn't something that he usually does. If it's something out of the ordinary, then I can see why she would be so concerned," Nicole stated.

Dane shrugged. "She sounded more pissed than worried. Adam said the last time they had a fight, he went to a bar for a while. That probably just happened again. Nothing to get bent out of shape about," she replied, sounding rather disinterested in the whole matter. Even if her sister-in-law was "terribly worried," she would not care enough to listen to the woman screaming.

"Are you sure? I mean, it could be serious if she called here. I know she just yelled at you and everything, but that could be worry setting in," Nicole figured.

"Babe, stop trying to stress yourself out. My brother is a grown man."

"I know, but his wife is worried. I would think it's with good cause. I know if you vanished and I couldn't get in touch with you, I wouldn't think 'oh, she's grown.' I would be scared that something happened to you," Nicole explained, a tremble in her voice. The idea of Danny going missing simply made her nervous, so she could feel for someone whose spouse might actually be missing.

Dane shrugged. "Okay," she said, not sure what her girlfriend's point was.

"Maybe we can do something for her. Call around and try to find him," Nicole suggested.

"No, and hell no," Dane replied sharply. "We're going to sit down, eat dinner, and mind our own damn business. They're fighting over their own problems and getting involved just means trouble."

"This isn't about fighting. This about Adam missing."

Grey eyes rolled. "You're being a little dramatic, Chem. It's not that serious."

"It could be, though."

"Nick, really, you're being way too dramatic. Now, can we just forget about it and do our day as planned?" the musician requested.

"But-"

Grey sighed, cutting her lover off. "Look, they probably just argued, he ran off to blow off some steam. Do you always assume something bad happened because you can't reach an adult for an hour?" she huffed.

Nicole decided to give up there, believing that Danny made a good argument. They were about to get back on track with their night when the phone rang again. Dane glanced at the phone and assumed that her sister-in-law was calling back for round two. She ignored it, but Nicole answered.

"It could be important. Something could have happened," the redhead explained.

"Between the last minute and now? I doubt it," Dane stated with a frown.

"Hello?" Nicole answered the phone.

"Damn it, how dare you hang up on me!" Sharon hollered at the top of her lungs.

"How dare you call in such a manner," Nicole countered. "Now, I understand that you're upset-"

"This isn't upset! This is livid! Now, where the hell is Adam?!" Sharon demanded, voice still booming through the phone.

"Screaming isn't going to help. Has he ever done anything like this before?"

"Don't play games-" The order was cut off when Dane reached over and hit the "end" button.

"Danny!" Nicole huffed.

"What? I'm not going to let some bitch scream at you over the phone, especially if you're trying to help her. Fuck Sharon. I can see why Adam took off if he has to put up with that bullshit just because they're fighting."

Nicole snorted. "At least they're talking."

The musician knew that crack was aimed at her. Instead of responding to the snap, she turned her attention back to dinner. The phone ringing kept Nicole off of her back, even though she was annoyed that her girlfriend answered the phone again. When the hollering reached her ears once more, she reached over and disconnected the call again. She ignored the glare from green eyes that was cast her way.

"It could be important," Nicole stated with a growl.

"Or it could be bullshit. Considering who's calling, I'll go with the second choice. You do know that she's just going to keep calling and screaming, despite the fact that we have no fucking clue where Adam is, right?" Dane pointed out. It gave her a headache just thinking about it, but it would irritate her if Nicole kept playing into Sharon's hands by answering the phone.

"One of the calls might be something important. What if something happened to your brother?" the lawyer said. "It's possible that something serious could have happened, especially if this was not normal behavior for Adam. That could be why Sharon was so out of sorts."

Dane ran her hand through her hair. "What does it matter? What does it have to do with you?" she asked, even though she knew what it mattered. Nicole's bleeding heart was basically spilling out on the kitchen floor.

"Your brother could be in trouble! Imagine if you ignored the call when your mother called about your father!" Nicole pointed out. Yes, there was a chance that the calls would just be Sharon screaming, but there was also a chance that one of the calls could hold news about where Adam was and if he was all right.

"My life would be much better," Dane muttered and wanted to bite her tongue completely off after the words left her mouth. The look in those emerald eyes told her that was certainly the wrong thing to say.

Nicole looked aghast and offended. "How can you say that! Your father could have died!"

For a moment, the musician was silent. Her hand went through her hair as she considered what she should say next, if she should say anything. She decided "fuck it." They were going to argue. They needed to just get it out of the way. They needed to get everything said, so they could find some middle ground and move on with their lives. She was just too sick of the tug of war, so she shrugged as the answer to her father dying.

"So what?" the guitarist said in a cavalier manner.

Nicole gagged, almost as if she was choking. She certainly had not expected such indifference to human life from her gentle lover. She also could not understand how someone could be so nonchalant about her father possibly dying.

"How can you say that! This is your father we're talking about! I know he wasn't the greatest father ever, but he's still a person! So, how can you be so uncaring about his life?" Nicole demanded, stomping her foot and making tight fists with her hands to avoid pulling her own hair out.

Another casual shrug. "It's not that I'm uncaring about his life. Actually, no, I am," she admitted. She did not care if her father lived or died. Neither meant anything to her life since he did nothing for her.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Danny! This is your father we're talking about!" Emerald eyes flashed with indignation and fury. *How the hell can my Danny be so blasé like this?*

Dane snorted and pointed to herself. "Yeah, my father! The man who hasn't claimed me since I was born! Do you know the space where it says 'father' on the birth certificate? Mine is empty! He's not a father! Not to me! There's not one picture of us together, not one good memory between us, and definitely no love! So, stop trying to make me feel something for him because I frankly don't give two shits about the man!" she bellowed, raising her voice much louder than her lover had ever heard.

"Danny..." Nicole whimpered, reeling back a little and regarding her lover as if she did not know her.

"What! Oh, now, you're upset! You wanna know what's upsetting?!" Dane continued to explode, throwing her hands out to her sides. In the background, the phone rang again, but no one moved to answer it that time. "The fact that you keep hitting me with this bullshit about my stupid fucking family, especially my father! Just because the man can reproduce does not give him some certain sacred place in my fucking heart! What the hell do I have to do to make you understand that he's nothing more than a fucking heartless bastard?!"

"He's still your-" The attorney yelped as she was cut off by a fierce noise.

Dane snarled like a wild beast to the point that it made her lover flinch. "Having a child doesn't make you a father! Loving the child and caring for it does! He doesn't love me! He's told me to my face that I mean nothing to him! I am nothing to him! Do you think those little taps you witnessed when he was here was anything?! Oh, yeah, he grabbed me and pulled me to the ground. That shit was nothing! Let me tell what that man has done to me!" Dane moved her hands, so she could start ticking things off of her list. "Let's start young, he always batted me away like a bad puppy if I was anywhere near him. A nice swat to the head got Dane out of his way. He used to throw bottles at me and chuckled when they landed. He's strangled me to the point of blacking out a number of times. God forbid I was in his fucking way after he lost a case or a client didn't do what he said or a fly just flew in the house because then he'd really kick my ass!

"He's punched me in the face, kicked me while I was down, thrown books at me, and took great pleasure in repeatedly beating me with a belt buckle or a shoe or whatever the fuck was close by. My first few trips to that fucking hospital that saved his wretched life were thanks to him! And

you know, my last trip to the hospital, he actually made me pay him the money back for that! He said I owed him and he wanted that money back! Money that he knew I didn't have and I had to borrow from you because I'd rather owe you my life than owe him a single cent! He actually went so far as to want money back for keeping me for the first fifteen years of my life! That's what I needed all that fucking money for, to pay him back for having the nerve to be a-fucking-live. The man is scum, pure scum!" Her face was turning bright scarlet thanks to the rare shouting fest.

"Baby, I'm sorry you went through that..." Nicole said in a low, tearful voice. She was not too sure what else to say. It really did not matter because her lover was not done yet.

Another snarl. "I didn't tell you that for your fucking pity! I'm telling you, so you can get this stupid fucking idea out of your head that just because someone is your father or just because someone is your family, you need to feel something for them! I don't! Those people aren't my fucking family! Russell is not my fucking father! Christine is not my goddamn mother! I don't need to care about these people because they don't care about me! Why don't you ask me to care about all the strangers of the fucking world while you're at it?! And why don't you ask me to care about the gangsters that broke my legs when Bryan ran out on me?! Hell, why don't you ask me to care about Bryan while I'm at?!"

"Baby-"

"No, you don't get to talk anymore! You get to fucking listen!" Dane hollered, marching over to her girlfriend, backing Nicole up into a wall.

Nicole gulped from the blazing look in stormy steel eyes. Dane growled at the sound, so fed up with her lover to the point that she could care less that Nicole was anxious or even scared. Both their hearts raced as Dane snorted through her nose, breath actually hitting Nicole in the face, and then she continued on in a dangerously low voice.

"Let me tell you about this precious fucking family you're so eager to make me take on. This fucking family that you want me to fucking love and care about. Let's started with the guy you're so fucking concerned about-Adam. One day, Adam saw his father beating the living shit out of me and when I say beating, I mean fucking beating. I was on the floor bleeding and crying, reaching out for him. And do you know what he did? He turned and walked away. I always saw his back! He told me I didn't matter, he had his own life, and he didn't care what happened to me because I wasn't his problem. He ignored me almost as well as his mother did because he didn't have time for me. He could walk away with the best of 'em. Proud gait, head held high, baby sister bleeding and crying in his wake. He was good at that, real fucking good," Dane growled, her lip curling up like an annoyed tiger.

"Babe-"

"NO! I'm still talking!" Dane roared, putting her finger in Nicole's face and dragging it down her cheek for a moment in a somewhat taunting manner. "Now, back to your dear Adam. Wonder why Luke and Thomas call me 'Dane'? Because they don't know I'm their aunt. Sharon didn't

want them to know and Adam rolled over like the fucking dog he is and went with it. They think I'm just their dad's weird friend and he's okay with that. Sure, he let me see them a few times, but until he let me stay with him before, I had never spoken to them before. I barely knew what their names were. Is that what family does?! Is it? You purposely exclude people and lie by omission to children?!" she demanded, eyes begging for answers that she already knew.

"Danny, baby..." Nicole reached out for her obviously overwrought lover, only to have her hands pushed away. She whimpered as her hands were forced to her sides.

"No, stop it! I'm not finished yet! Do you know that for most of her life Rachel didn't even know I was her sister?! She thought I was just some random kid living at the house because Russell didn't acknowledge me as his child and made it a point to let everyone know he only had three children! A story Christine backed up with silence. Sometimes, Rachel would look at me and fucking tell me go home. You have no idea how many times she tried to send me off with one of the servants, first thinking I really belonged to one of them and then later on she'd do it just to be cruel and be rid of me because she thought I was the reason that her precious father was upset! She's even hit me sometimes because she thought it would make her fucking father happy or just because she felt like it! Is this the family you want for me?! You think family is so fucking important that I should bite the bullet and put up with them!"

"Baby, I didn't know..." Tears gathered and quickly fell down Nicole's olive-toned cheeks.

"Damn right you didn't know, yet you still wanted me to be with them! Pushing your values because you think they're right! Well, here's some more news for you! Your little buddy Michael, he's the worst of them all! Fucker actually tried to kill me! I was so starved for attention from these fucking people that one day when that fucking monster started talking to me I just ate it up! He smiled at me, gave me some goddamn candy, and then dared me to drink bleach! I was ten! I didn't know what the fuck it did, but he was sixteen! And he stood there and watched me, his ten-year-old sister drink bleach!"

Oh, god, Nicole thought, almost bawling now. She almost vomited to hear about such evil, but she managed to keep it down. She could not even fathom the things her lover was telling her. Yes, she knew child abuse existed and she was even aware that sometimes offspring got involved in it for various reasons, but she had never been this close to it before. She did not know what to do, what to say.

"What did you think? It was just a few slaps around and they never remembered my birthday? So, they left me with the cook much of the time just because we were both black. That's no big deal, right?" Dane inquired, mocking her lover now. "Even if it was just that shit, I shouldn't be made to endure those fuckers if I don't want to. Just because your family is fucking wonderful doesn't make your opinion more valid than mine when it comes to my fucked up family, okay?"

"I know..." Nicole said quietly.

Dane snarled and moved to the side sharply in an almost feline-like manner. "You know shit," she hissed and she grabbed Nicole by the jaw, forcing the crying woman to look her dead in the eye. "You don't know a goddamn thing," she growled, still clutching onto the lawyer's face.

A whimper escaped Nicole and the sound seemed to knock Dane out of her huff. Grey eyes focused on the hand on Nicole's jaw and then suddenly widened with terror. Quickly, Dane let go of Nicole and then she turned around. Dane ran out of the kitchen as if it was on fire.

"Danny, wait!" Nicole screamed, knowing that her girlfriend was bolting out of fear that Dane had actually hurt her. No, that whimper had not been one for physical pain, but empathy and sorrow over her lover's childhood.

The lawyer chased after her lover, thinking that she would easily be able to catch Danny; after all, Danny only had one good leg, even after months of physical therapy. Still, Danny made it to the porch first and she was able to get on her bike, riding off into the setting sun on the rusted, squeaky cycle. Tears pouring from her eyes as she did so.

"Danny, please, you didn't hurt me!" Nicole tried to tell her as she ran down the porch steps, but Dane just kept riding.

For a second, the redhead stood there-at a loss. And then she remembered that she had a car and it was certainly faster than Dane's bike. Running back into the house, she grabbed her car keys and ran back outside. Hopping into her car, she peeled out of the driveway, figuring that Danny could not have gotten far. She quickly learned that even if Danny had not gotten far, the former rocker knew how to disappear.

"Damn it!" Nicole screamed at the top of her lungs, banging on the steering wheel.

Not ready to give up yet, Nicole drove around blindly for a while; she was not sure how long. There was no sign of Danny. It was like she vanished into thin air. Nicole was not surprised by that; she was willing to bet that Danny learned how to disappear from when she was living on the streets. She doubted that she would be able to find Danny if the younger woman did not want to be found. So, she returned home, the phone shrilling loudly as she opened the door.

A snarl torn out of Nicole's mouth as she went to the phone, knowing it would not be Dane calling her. Unfortunately, her lover still did not have a cell phone, so she would not call until she was good, ready, and there was a phone nearby. No, the caller ID told her that it was the same person that had been calling for the last half-hour.

"AH!" Nicole grabbed the phone and yanked it-along with the cradle-out of the wall. She flung it across the living room before throwing herself on the couch, bawling her eyes out. "I ruined everything!"

Nicole was certain that Danny had just ridden her bike out of her life. She could not believe that things had really come to the point where she doubted that she would ever see Dane again. Sure, the musician had left her stuff behind, but she knew that Dane did not need much to move on.

"Why couldn't I just leave it alone? I knew her family was horrible. I knew they didn't really want her, so why did I push? Why couldn't I just accept that they're assholes and they'd never accept Danny, no matter how great she is?!" Nicole cried, screaming into the sofa cushions.

Looking back on it, everything that she did seemed so utterly stupid. Yes, she wanted Danny to know what it was like to have a loving family, but she could not believe that she really thought the Wolfe family would be it. Okay, Dane got the company of her nephews out of the deal, but by the first visit, she should have given up on everyone else, Nicole figured. No one else seemed to care for Danny. She had witnessed Russell's abuse for crying out loud! *Why the hell would I want Danny to get along with someone like that?! What the hell made me think that Danny would want to get along with him?!*

She knew that she was blinded by what she wanted for her lover and she could not see beyond that, even when her friends were telling her to back off. Plus, she thought that she was making progress when Danny showed signs of enjoying her nephews' company and Adam invited her out. She also thought it was progress when Christine invited them to dinner, but obviously, Danny did not care about any progress. Dane did not want those people-her family-to want her because she did not want them.

She should have known better, Nicole mentally scolded herself. She had already known that her family and Danny's family were two different things. She just did not want to accept that before because she thought that they might not be as bad as she heard and as Danny said they were. Well, she accepted it now.

"Why couldn't they just be kind and decent people? Danny really does deserve a good family and they'll never be able to give her that. They don't want to and she doesn't want them," Nicole moaned wretchedly.

Now, she had allowed her stubbornness on the matter to drive Danny away. First, she had made Danny madder than she had ever seen the mellow guitarist. It upset her to know that she drove Danny to the point of screaming. Of all the people on the world, *she* had caused Danny enough pain and suffering that Danny snapped at her. To the point where Danny had scared herself.

"I made Danny think that she hurt me when really I hurt her-more than I thought possible if that look in her eyes meant anything," the lawyer sniffled before going back to bawling.

She was aware that the thing that made everything worse was the fact that she loved Danny-possibly more than anyone else on Earth-and she had pushed such an uncomfortable and undesired thing onto Danny. She was supposed to support and protect her lover. She felt like she betrayed Danny.

"Danny probably feels the same way and that's why she left. She's probably gone for good too!" Nicole hollered, clutching her stomach as she felt agony rip through her at the thought that Danny left her. The love her life had left her.

For the first time in her life, Nicole was distressed that her partner was gone. Usually, she had lovers that were so annoying and obnoxious that she was all too happy to see them leave when she finally tired of them using her. But, of course, Danny was nothing like that she and already knew that she wished to spend her life with Danny.

"So, why did I have to ruin this whole thing? Did I do this on purpose? Subconsciously sabotage this relationship because I don't know how to be in a healthy, loving, caring relationship?" Nicole wondered aloud. "No! I would never purposely push Danny away! I love her and I want to be with her! I just wanted a family for her so badly that I ignored all the good advice and the signs from Danny that she didn't the same thing. How could I be so stupid?! God, everyone thinks I'm so freaking intelligent, but I'm obviously an idiot for doing this!"

Nicole flailed around on the couch, not knowing how else to vent her frustration beyond crying, beating the couch, and screaming her head off. She could not do much else, especially since she did not know where Danny was in order to talk things over with her. She promised herself if everything ended in some favorable manner, she would never push things onto Danny again. She would never act like she knew better than the musician about what Danny wanted and deserved in life. She would never act in a condescending manner toward Danny either. She would just step away, like Mina told her to do.

She realized that her friends had given her very good advise and she should have listened to them. They knew about being in healthy relationships better than she did. Hell, Mina had been married for almost half the time that they had known each other and the marriage seemed be going strong, so she definitely should have heeded Mina's advice. And then there was Clara's advice.

Clara told her to be the family that Danny needed. She had not even considered that advice when it was given to her. She kind of thought it was silly. She could not be a mother, father, brother, and sister to Danny. That was ridiculous. But, now, she was starting to think about it seriously, which she knew she should have done when Clara first said it.

"I should be her family. I want to be her family," Nicole declared, her voice sounding strong for the first time that evening. "I want to be Danny's family!" It was the truth. She wanted to be all of those things that she felt Danny deserved. She just needed to let Danny know that. "I need her to come back..." she whimpered, tears cascading down her face again.

The scenery whipped by Danny as she pushed herself as far from the house as possibly could-as far away from Nicole as she could...and as far away from that monster in her skin as she could. Growling to herself, she mentally tore into herself for touching Nicole in a less than loving manner.

"Fucking monster! Fucking worthless monster! I can't even live with the woman I fucking love without hurting her! I can see why my fucking family never wanted me! I am just worthless! And Nick knows that now too!" Dane snarled into the air cutting past her face.

Taking the bike through a small patch of grass, she jumped it down some stairs while trying her best to not think about how she grabbed Nicole. Her mind was against her, though, replaying the scene over and over again in her head. She was certain that her tough grip had left a bruise marring her lover's perfect skin. She doubted that she would be able to live with herself, knowing full well that she had physically harmed and bruised her beloved.

Then, her mind flashed to almost ten years ago when she punched a girl that she slept with in the face. They had been arguing and the girl called her a "monkey." Having been called a monkey all her life by family members, she snapped when the girl said it and her hand was in the air before she realized what happened. She had never forgiven herself for such a disgusting display, knowing the girl had not meant it the way she took it and having hurt someone who meant her no physical harm. She actually considered if domestic violence-even though the girl had not been her girlfriend or even living with her. And she had always feared that it might happen again.

Soon, her mind was superimposing Nicole for the girl and she could see herself punching Nicole. The vision made her feel sick to her stomach, causing her to dry-heave, but that did not stop her brain from showing her the illusion again. Her entire body shook and the front wheel wobbled thanks to the disturbing images assaulting her mind. Because of the momentary loss of control, she nearly slammed into a thick tree. Catching herself just in time, she dodged the tree and paused for a second to try to gather herself.

Breathing hard, she righted herself on the bike and peddled off. Well, the near collision at least got the haunting image of hitting Nicole out of her head. Instead, her thoughts wandered to her family. Seeing them lately reminded her that they were actually a good family unit to each other. It was just her they could not stand.

Her father provided for all of his children-the ones that he acknowledged. He even spoiled Rachel, who was Daddy's little girl if memory served her correctly. In contrast, he treated Dane worse than one would treat an unwanted animal. He made it no secret that he disliked her and sometimes Danny knew it was not even about the color of her skin. No, it was that she was different, which was shown first in the color of her skin. But, it grew as she grew. Whatever it was, it made him hate her. Seriously hate her from the moment that she was born.

"Is there something so wrong with me?" Danny asked herself, but of course she did not have the answer. At that point, she had no doubt that there was something wrong with her, but she doubted that there was something wrong with her when she was born. Of course, she had no way of knowing since there were no baby pictures of her.

She was not surprised that Rachel adopted Russell's attitude toward her. Russell was Rachel's daddy. Michael was also no surprise since he admired Russell. So, Dane dealt with abuse from them. She used to wonder why they did not like her, but now she kind of understood. Of course, she did not excuse it, but she could understand. When she was a child, it made no sense to her.

Often as a child, she would try to get Rachel or Michael to notice her and to spend time with her. And as she told Nicole, that desperation had led Danny to actually drink bleach on a dare. It had led to other stupid decisions, but nothing more severe than when she ingested bleach. Everything

was such a blur after that and she did not even remember who cared enough to take her to the hospital. She did remember Michael laughing, up until the point that she swallowed. It seemed he realized that his "little" prank had gone too far then.

Rachel had never gone close to that extreme, but she was cruel in her own way. Often, she hit her little sister for no reason. Maybe she was angry or bored or had just seen their father do it. Whatever the reason, she had bruised Dane and blackened her eyes a few times too. Danny used to wonder why, but now did not think about the reasons.

"A whipping girl. That's all I was. I was the little chick with the black spot. The baby bird touched by a human," Dane muttered. These were creatures abandoned by their families, just like she was. "And I let that bullshit ruin what I had with Nicole because I let it seep into me like the fucking poison I know it is."

That was what was wrong with her, Dane figured. She let the poison corrupt her and let it make her who she was, not just as a child, but as an adolescent, as a teen, and even now as an adult. It affected her relationships or lack there of with people through out her life. It was why she could not get close to people before Nicole and now it was why Nicole would never want her again, she thought.

"I've taken the worst parts of everything they taught me and kept them close to me like a good poker hand," Dane snarled. She held onto all of the wrong things, she realized.

She held onto the anger and fury that her father, Michael, and Rachel had instilled in her. She brandished those as her weapons, but worse than that was what she clutched to her body as a shield. She had taken her mother's indifference and Adam's disinterest with her and used that to stay away from people. It led her to think the worst in people, that no one cared about her or what she did, and for her to not care about them in the slightest. It led her to use people and to let them use her. It made her discard people like objects and made them invisible to her, made their emotions invisible to her. It made her view all people-including herself-as mere things.

"I let them turn me in this monster, into this thing and I walked around so proud of it for so long. Too stupid to realize they won," Dane growled, furious with herself for being such an ignorant asshole for so long. She had never felt more disgusted and outraged with herself.

The urge to vomit rose hot and heavy in her throat as the thoughts rolled around her mind over and over again. She was just some monster that Russell and Christine managed to create and her siblings helped cultivate the evil inside of her. She was such a filthy creature that she managed to hurt and harm the one person that cared about her. She had let her family win, let them turn her into what they thought, and then she merrily went along to ruin her own life. She felt so unworthy of being on the planet for agonizing her angel, the kindest person that she had ever met.

"I should just-" Dane's disgusted words were cut off as she rode off a curb. A horn blared. Tires screeched. The sound of metal impacting and twisting around other metal echoed through the air.

Dane remembered the sound of glass breaking and feeling a searing pain before everything went black.

Next time: find out if Dane just died.

**Shea K's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ New Cuts, Old Wounds ~

by Shea K.

Disclaimer: Welcome to another original story by this lunatic. This is the sequel to Scarred for Life. The story and the characters are mine. Do not use them without my permission. Also, any and all characters, events, and situations found in these stories are fictional. If there are any similarities between these things and real people, events, and situations, it is purely a coincidence.

General warning: eventually there's talk of child abuse and there is some mild violence and lots of extreme language. I'm sure you know there will be a sexual relationship between two women, but if you don't know this is me warning you. There will be a sexual relationship between two women in this story. Get out while you still can!

Special thanks to my betas, RevSrVixena and Ken-zero.

Find yourself wanting to see more from this lunatic? Probably not, I know. But, if you are, then you can find more of my insanity here for fanfics: <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/932292/> and for more original work here: <http://www.fictionpress.com/u/576301/>

Contact the lunatic at: starving.lunatic@gmail.com and lemme know what you think of the story. Thanks and enjoy.

13: Crash

Ow. There was an intense ache throbbing through her body and that was Dane's first conscious thought. Everything hurt, including her eyelashes. She was sure that even her hair was in agony. She wondered what happened to cause her such extreme and unending ache, but thinking proved painful.

"What happened?" a voice Dane barely recognized as her own asked. She sounded so low and dazed. Her throat was dry, making her voice sound much more coarse than she thought possible. She was certain that she had split her lip just from talking, but since she did not taste blood, she supposed it was not so bad.

"Oh, thank god you're awake! I'm so sorry I hit you! I didn't see you until too late! You just came out of nowhere!" a female voice reported in a panic.

The voice did not sound familiar and it definitely was not Nicole, the musician noted. She was not sure what the voice was talking about either. Really, she did not care. All she could think about was the torment coursing through her body.

"Shhh..." Dane begged, feeling each tiny sound smash against her brain like a flung brick to her forehead. "Headache..." she explained weakly. Her head was killing her, along with every other nerve-ending in her body.

"Oh, sorry. That's my fault too," the voice explained, speaking much lower this time.

Grey eyes fluttered open, making her head pound more so than before. Her eyesight was blurred, so she could not tell where she was. But, she could feel the light and it was like a thousand needles in her eyes, making her head pound more so than before. Underneath the headache, she was able to smell the area just a bit and she could tell what that antiseptic scent was. All hospitals held that odor. *Just what I need, another hospital bill.*

She took a moment to try to remember what happened that would land her in the hospital. Nothing was coming to mind. All she could recall was blackness engulfing her and searing pain. She figured that she might need to get herself together before she could tax her brain, especially since it was still throbbing in her skull.

"Water?" Dane requested, voice cracking as she asked. She tried to turn her head, hoping to locate the water on her own, but she could not even manage that small movement. She hoped that the water provided just a little relief to her dry mouth.

"Oh, yes, of course!" the female voice squeaked.

Vision still blurred, Dane could barely make out the person standing over her, but she could feel the straw at her lip. Once she captured it, she took a seemingly endless gulp from the cup. She did not pull away from the straw until there was no liquid flowing into her mouth. As soon as she pulled away, the cup was put back down.

"Why am I in the hospital?" Dane asked weakly. Her throat felt better now that she had some water, but her voice still sounded foreign to her own ears. She hoped it was not something permanent. Her final connection to music was the fact that she could still sing rather well.

"Um...like I said...that was my fault. I hit you with my car. You just came out of nowhere on that bike! I'm sorry! I tried to stop, I really did, but you were just too close and I couldn't stop in time," the woman explained, sounding much more calm than before, but there was still a bit of nervousness underneath her tone. She also made sure to keep her voice low.

Dane groaned. "Damn."

"How are you feeling?" she asked shyly.

"Pretty much like I just got hit with a car," the musician answered bluntly.

There was a yelp. "Stupid question, I guess. I'm sorry."

"Got that the first time, but it's not your fault," Dane informed the mystery woman. Bits and pieces of what happened slowly came back to her. She could not remember the accident, but a little of what she was doing before the accident filtered into her head. She knew that she had been riding her bike with her brain in the clouds. She recalled almost crashing into a tree; she guessed that happened before she stepped up her game and crashed into a car.

"Of course it's my fault. I hit you."

"I wasn't paying attention. Lot on my mind," Dane replied with a groan. She certainly had made a mess of things, she thought.

"Okay, how about we just agree that it's both our faults and move on?" the woman proposed, sounding a little happy with that arrangement.

Dane forced out a laugh, making her whole head throb. "Sounds like a good idea."

"I called the ambulance for you and followed you here after I spoke with the police. I wanted to make sure you were all right. The doctors said I broke your leg when I hit you."

Danny was silent for a moment, chuckling on the inside. Her poor legs, she thought. One day, she would wake up to find that the limbs had left in rebellion to the harsh treatment they were receiving in such a short lifetime.

"Why does my shoulder hurt then?" Dane wondered aloud. "And my side..." Really, everything hurt, but those things hurt much more than everything else.

"You landed on the wind shield. Busted it up pretty good," the woman let out a dry, emotionless laugh. "Bruised yourself up pretty good. You dislocated your shoulder and cracked two ribs."

"They sure are disclosing a lot of my medical problems to you."

There was a nervous laugh. "I told them I knew you, so they wouldn't throw me out and you'd have someone with you when you woke up. No one knew who to call for you because your wallet only had a driver's license and a picture of two kids in it. The address on the license was contacted, but whoever answered hung up."

Dane snorted. The Wolfe family address was on her license. "My family. They don't care. Had you told them I was dead they might've stayed on the line a little longer." Her voice was groggy and weak, sounding like she was taxing herself by talking so much.

"Is there anyone I should call? The father of those two boys maybe?" The hazy figure sounded concerned and eager to help.

"Nah, those aren't my kids. My nephews. Cute little buggers, huh?" Dane inquired, smiling proudly, wanting to stall for time. Who was there to call? She was cut off from everybody. Her family did not care and she recollected quite vividly how she manhandled her lover. She considered that she could just have her benefactor call Crow for her. Crow would come and get her.

"They are cute," the woman agreed. "Um...so...who should I call? The doctors are going to want a lot of information on you I don't know and your wallet certain isn't offering."

Yeah, like money, Dane thought. She guessed that she had no choice, she was going to have to get in touch with Nicole. She hoped that Nicole ignored her. It would serve her right and she would be left to fix her own mess. Not that she knew how she would get out of this mess without Nicole.

"So, who should I call?" the woman pressed.

Dane sighed. "Nicole Cardell." She ran off the number for the woman and tried not to think the different ways that call could go.

"All right. I'll be right back."

The tall woman sighed and decided to dwell on the agony tearing through her body to keep her from thinking about Nicole. Briefly, she wondered if her bike made it. She doubted it since it felt like she had been run over by a truck. Well, the bike had led a full life, she thought with an amused smile. Better to have died than get pawned as she knew she would have eventually had to do considering the mounting debt that she was in. *I might have to fake my own death to get out of this. Although with my luck, I'd end up dead trying to fake it. But, then again, I don't have life insurance anyway.*

For the moment, she decided to just be happy that she was alive...not that being alive was much of an accomplishment, she thought. She had made a beautiful mess of her life, after all. Shaking those thoughts off, she tried to not go down that path, vaguely recollecting that she had been meandering down that road when she shot out into the street and threw herself in front of a car apparently.

"I made the call," the now familiar voice reported as the woman approached Dane.

Danny was now able to get a good look at the woman that mowed her over and then called an ambulance. She was a tall woman with blond hair that was cut very short and stylish brushed to the side; Dane suspected that they had almost the same hair length. The woman was thick, but looked powerful. She was wearing a plain black tee-shirt and well-worn jeans. Kind and concerned sky-blue eyes stared down on her, making Dane feel almost guilty for getting hit.

"I wish you would've said she was your girlfriend. I would've tried to phrase things more gently. Not that I'm too good with that," the woman admitted with a sheepish expression. Her bright blue eyes showed her embarrassment more so than any of her other features.

"I didn't know if she still was my girlfriend," Dane replied, sounding subdued and a little bewildered, even though she felt clearer now than when she first woke up.

"And it would've helped to know she calls you Danny," the blond continued, still looking quite sheepish. It was obvious that she had a tough time with the phone call, but Dane appreciated it.

"And it would've helped if I was watching where I was going," Dane chimed in with an amused smile; she had to force the expression out and it hurt to do. "But, I think you can gather I'm not the best at managing things correctly."

The woman chuckled, at ease since Dane seemed to have a sense of humor about everything that happened. "I'm Terri, by the way."

"Danny. I'd shake your hand, but moving right now doesn't seem like the best idea and I'd like to think I've wasted all my bonehead moves for today," the musician quipped.

Terri smiled. "Do you mind if I stay and wait until Nicole shows up? I don't want to leave you alone. Between you and me, I don't trust hospitals too much," she confessed, whispering that last bit.

Dane nodded just a little. "Appreciate it. I know how you feel. In one of my many hospital stays, an overeager doctor tried taking out my tonsils when I was just there for a tetanus shot."

Terri snorted. "Damn hacks."

"Yeah. So, how did Nicole sound? Really mad?" Dane inquired curiously. She hoped that Nicole did not sound too fed up with her.

Terri shook her head. "No, she sounded really concerned. I hope she doesn't get into an accident rushing over here. I had to assure her that you're not dead and that you're up and talking. Still, she promised that she'll be up here as quick as she can. I'm sure she'll be happy to know I didn't knock your sense of humor loose and your face should heal okay," she teased a bit.

"Oh, yeah, because she's definitely with me for my good looks," the injured woman remarked sarcastically. She doubted that Nicole was even still with her.

"She has to be since your biking skills suck."

Dane laughed at that one and Terri smiled again. Terri was pretty helpful, Dane noted. She was great, especially considering she was talking to a person that she had just hit with a car. Hell, Dane was pretty sure it was her fault and from the way Terri sounded when she first woke up,

she thought that she might have traumatized the blond. So, Terri was beyond great helping her out and trying to comfort her.

They started a conversation, surprised to find how easily they got along. Apparently, they had similar senses of humor, making fun of each other and themselves for their current predicament. It helped take the edge off for Dane, forgetting about the pain that she was in and the fact that Nicole would be there any minute and she would have to own up to the fact that she had hurt Nicole. It was nice to laugh before she had to go through that.

The time came to be face to face with Nicole sooner than Dane thought. She and Terri were sharing a laugh when the blond woman suddenly looked up. Dane turned her head to see what had Terri's attention and she noticed it was Nicole, standing right on the opposite end of her bed.

"That's your girlfriend?" Terri asked in a whisper. Danny could only nod and the blond smiled. "You lucky devil."

Nicole stood still for a moment, taking in the sight of her lover laid up in a bed in the emergency room. She knew that Danny would be moved soon to a proper room in the hospital. She wanted to burst into tears of joy to see that Danny was alive and apparently well enough to laugh with some strange woman. Nicole felt odd, like a tremble went through her chest and stomach thanks to the sight.

"Danny, baby," Nicole said, walking over to the bed. Tears gathered in her eyes as they scanned her sweetheart's prostrate form.

"I'm okay," Dane said to ease whatever discomfort Nicole might be feeling. She knew that she did not accomplish her goal because how weak her voice was and the distress was almost tangible in those glistening green eyes.

"I've seen you okay. This isn't okay," the redhead argued, voice edging on quiet panic. "What happened?" she begged, struggling to keep the tears at bay. *Crying isn't going to do either of us any good.*

"I hit her car with my bike," Dane said, pointing to Terri as best she could. "Damn cocky bike thought it could take on the car. Man, did that car show it," she remarked, trying her best to sound normal and amused. The jokes did not seem to be working on the lawyer, if her face meant anything, though.

Nicole blinked in confusion before turning her attention to the blond. "You hit her?" She could not help wondering why the person that hit Danny was now standing at her bed and sharing laughs with the guitarist.

"Yeah, she and my car had a disagreement," Terri answered, an embarrassed and ashamed blush colored her creamy cheeks. She rubbed the back of her neck. "She came out of nowhere and I didn't have time to stop. I broke her up pretty good and I think I knocked her brain out of her

skull," she teased her new friend, even though her voice showed her anxiety over the accident. A sigh escaped her throat as soon as she stopped speaking while she glanced away for a second.

Dane scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Stop acting like you almost killed me. It was my fault. And I'll have you know my brain's been knocked around a lot harder than that and hasn't oozed out of my ear yet," she boasted, trying her best to sound all right. The last thing she wanted to do was worry Nicole and she did not think that Terri should be bothered when her carelessness had been the cause of the accident. The humor worked on Terri since the blond did not know her, but Nicole was not buying it.

The redhead blinked hard again, utterly perplexed by the camaraderie between victim and perpetrator. She knew that she had to tread carefully, not wanting to offend Danny's new friend, but she was understandably enraged that someone had hit her girlfriend with a car. She was relieved that Danny was all right enough to joke around and smile, but still, she was lying in a hospital bed with several broken bones. Little did Nicole know, Danny was doing the smiling and joking for her and Terri's benefit because it was causing her a lot of pain to try to reassure them.

"So, Nick, are you springing me from this joint?" Dane asked with a hopeful smile.

"Sorry, baby. You're going to be moved to a room and you're here for a few days," Nicole reported, reaching out to brush Danny's hair out of her face to help offer her some comfort.

"Damn," Dane pouted and then turned, giving Terri a mock-glare. "This is all your fault."

"Weren't you just swearing up and down this wasn't my fault?" the blond inquired, somewhat serious and somewhat joking.

"That was before I found out I was trapped here for a few days. Now, it's all your fault," the guitarist declared, forcing out a smile because she could tell that Terri was a bit put off by the idea that Danny blamed her.

"Turncoat," Terri playfully huffed, turning her nose up at the bedridden woman. Internally, she let loose a sigh of relief, so happy that she had not killed this young woman. Silently, she decided that she was going to keep up with Danny and make sure that she did not do any long-lasting damage, just in case. Besides, Danny seemed like a fun person to know; unless, of course, that was the painkillers joking around with her.

Nicole swallowed, pushing down a burning sensation in her chest. To keep herself from dwelling on the strange friendship, she sprang into action to make sure that Danny got the best treatment possible. By the time Danny was moved to room, Terri had to leave, but was comfortable enough with Danny to say that she would be back tomorrow. Danny had not been awake when the statement was made and Nicole did not feel right telling the woman no. After all, she seemed to be a friend of Danny's and Nicole did not think that she had a right to keep Danny from having friends.

The redhead pulled up a chair to Danny's bed, which was by the window in the room. A curtain split the room in half and the other bed was by the door. Nicole took Danny's hand and squeezed. The action earned a smile from the musician, who Nicole actually believed to be asleep.

"Baby, I am so sorry for everything," Nicole said, leaning down to kiss caramel knuckles.

"You don't need to apologize," the younger woman said in a low tone. She had been sleeping thanks to some powerful painkillers that she had been given before being moved to the room. "I blew a fuse and totally lost it. I don't remember everything that happened, but I know I hurt you. I didn't..." Dane took a deep, nervous swallow. Her voice quivered as she continued. "I didn't hit you, did I?" she inquired.

"NO!" Nicole quickly and vehemently replied. "Why would you even think that?" she demanded, eyes shocked and heated. She clutched Dane's hand a little tighter, as if that would help convey the truth.

"I remember grabbing you or something, but my mind is kinda jumbled. It's making me think that I hit you, but I don't really remember. Are you sure I didn't hit you?" she begged to know. Opening her eyes as best she could, which was half-mast, she focused on Nicole, needing to see her to know what really happened.

"Baby, I promise you that you didn't hit me. You screamed a lot. Yes, you were angry with me and you grabbed me by the chin, but you didn't hurt me. I know you would never do anything like that," the redhead insisted, reaching across Dane with her free hand and lightly stroking the young woman's abdomen.

Dane's brow furrowed and she swallowed hard, trying to gather her thoughts and make sense out of what was going on in her mind. "Why does it seem like I hit you then? I remember feeling like I was going to throw up and there was such pain in my heart..." she groaned a little, head lulling to the side.

"You just suffered a traumatic event, Danny. You have various injuries, which includes a concussion. So, excuse your memory for a moment, okay?" The lawyer patted Dane's hand, which got the dazed musician to turn back to her.

Dane nodded. "Okay, I didn't hit you. I screamed at you, though. Sorry about that."

Nicole shook her head. "No need to be sorry. You needed to scream at me and I needed to be screamed at. I haven't been being fair to you at all these past few weeks. I just wanted so badly for your family to see you and accept you and for you to have that sort of family bond that I have," she explained.

"I know you were trying to do what you thought was best for me."

"Not anymore, though. I'm not going to push this family issue anymore, especially not after what you told me. I see how this all gets on your nerves and I don't want to go through that ever again.

I don't want to lose you over something like this either," the redhead stated, holding her lover's hand a little tighter.

"You weren't going to lose me over this. Hell, I thought you were going to leave me because I hurt you."

"I told you, you didn't hurt me, sweetheart. You got my attention, which you needed to do. I'm not going to hold that against you."

"Good..." Dane let out a long sigh.

"Still sleepy?" Nicole asked with a small smile on her face. She caressed Dane's knuckles again, bringing some comfort to her girlfriend.

"Yeah. Did the doctors say anything while I was out? How long I'd be here and crap like that?" Dane asked.

"At least three days. You're really banged up. Oh, and they wanted to talk to you about your leg."

Dane nodded, figuring that the doctors would tell her that she would never be able to use the right leg again, which she was not prepared for. She could not believe that she had broken her right leg for the second time in two years.

"Do you know why?" Danny asked curiously.

"Something to do with the way your leg healed the first time around," Nicole answered.

Dane nodded again. She drifted back off to sleep while Nicole settled back into her seat without releasing the musician's hand. When she was certain that Danny was out for the night, she went and took care of a few things, which included going home to get Danny some clothes, eating something, and taking a shower. She then returned to the hospital, not wanting to leave her lover alone for too long in case she did wake up. She did not want Danny to think that she abandoned her in her time of need.

Her sleep was difficult, but she expected that from sleeping in a chair. When she woke up, she yawned and stretched. Suddenly, she took in a familiar face in the doorway. Christine was standing at the threshold, looking as if she did not know if she should come in or not.

"Good morning, Christine," Nicole said cordially. The sound of her voice seemed to snap Christine out of her conflicted reverie.

"Oh, good morning, Nicole," Christine replied, eyes focusing on the redhead.

"Are you here to see Danny?" Nicole asked and then she realized that in all of her worry, she had not called anyone last night to tell them that Danny was in the hospital. She also had not made a

call that she would not be in to work that day. She made a mental note to start those things as soon as possible.

"I am," the older woman confirmed. It surprised Nicole how easily that was admitted and, despite the fact that she knew how to hide her emotions in certain situations, the shock was written all over her face now. Christine chuckled as she took in the expression. "I know you must think I am the worst mother on Earth as far as Dane's upbringing went and you're probably right," she said.

Nicole then realized that she was showing exactly what she thought, so she schooled her features into a more neutral expression. "My opinion on the matter doesn't matter one way or the other," she replied diplomatically. Inwardly, she smiled, finding it easy to take her first step away from Danny and the Wolfe family.

"Hmm..." Christine nodded before glancing over at the unconscious Dane. "Would you believe me if I said I've always been at her bedside when she was in the hospital?"

"Doesn't matter what I believe either. How did you know about this, though? It didn't even occur to me to call anybody last night," Nicole stated.

"One of the doctors here recognized her and let me know she was here again. She's graced the halls of these hospitals a few times," Christine explained.

"How many of those times were caused by your husband beating the shit out of her?" the lawyer growled.

Christine turned away, shame slicing into her gaze. "More times than I care to admit." Her eyes then went to Dane. "How is she?"

"Broken leg, cracked ribs, bruised shoulder, but she'll live," the redhead answered.

There was a nod and a brief smile. "This child if nothing else, she is resilient."

There was a moment of silence before Nicole decided to speak up again. "You know, she probably won't be happy to wake up and see you here."

"No, I don't suppose she would," Christine agreed, but she did not make any moves to leave the room. "The last time she was in the hospital she wasn't too happy to see me when she regained consciousness."

"Can you blame her? You've ignored her for her entire life and you only show up when something bad happens. I doubt you ever say anything to help her get through the bad times either. Don't you think it would be a bit easier if you just apologized for being a spineless bitch and then told her that you cared?" Nicole inquired. She gathered that Christine cared a bit for Danny. Maybe it was not motherly love, but Danny's family had to get the idea from somewhere that Christine would appreciate it when family members had taken in Danny for that time that

she was homeless. There had to be something there too if Christine showed up when Danny was injured.

Christine sighed. "I suppose you make a point, but things are complicated."

"How? How are they complicated?" Nicole demanded to know. "She's your daughter. All she ever wanted from you was a sign that you knew she was there," she pointed out. It took all of her self-control to not yell at the older woman.

"You wouldn't understand."

"I should hope not. I would never want to be able to comprehend how a person could ignore her own daughter just because of the way she looks. Okay, Danny's black, but then again, so are you."

"Is that what Dane thinks?" Christine let out a hollow chuckle. "I suppose once upon a time I had disliked how dark she came out. I'm sure that was initially what bothered Russell so much also."

"And things just progressed from there, huh?" Nicole snorted and rolled her eyes.

"I suppose they did. It became a habit to not see her." Her tone was oddly remorseful and something in it told Nicole that she was not telling the entire truth.

"Or maybe it was easier to pretend that you had the habit of not seeing her," Nicole figured.

Christine ducked her head. "You're perceptive, I'll give you that. Honestly, I didn't know what to do with her. I still don't know what to do with her."

"I guess loving her and helping her would've been too easy," Nicole spat venomously. Now that she could let go of her foolish wants for Danny and accept Danny's feelings, she could see how disgusting Danny's family truly was, how much they hurt her lover physically, mentally, emotionally, hell, even spiritually.

"Your opinion has certainly changed since last we saw each other," Christine noted.

"I was blinded before. I thought you and your family would finally see how wonderful Danny was and accept her and love her, but I realize no matter what, she isn't going to be embraced as one of you. Why? Why do you hate her so?" the redhead asked, sounding infuriated and perplexed.

Christine glanced at Danny and she had her own epiphany. "I can't explain what happened. I honestly don't know the reason. Maybe it's just that she's different. It started with her coloring, but it's far beyond that now. I never knew how to deal with her, how to approach her, or what to do. Acting like she wasn't there seemed like the best thing to do."

"For you. It helped save your marriage, didn't it? Russell wouldn't have liked it much if you actually cared for the girl that he's so sure isn't his daughter, despite what two paternity tests say."

"She certainly keeps you informed," Christine said bitterly, yet still bordering on enviously. "Despite the monster she would lead you to think I am, I was the one that got her all of her precious music lessons. I purchased her first guitar for her."

"And do you know why she wanted music lessons? Because she wanted to connect with you. She saw you playing the piano and she thought you played beautifully. She wanted to be like you," Nicole growled.

Again, Christine's eyes sought refuge anywhere around the room. Her eyes fell back to the resting form of Dane. She could hardly believe that, but in the back of her mind, she recalled a tiny child, sitting at a piano, smiling at her before she walked away. Her memories went far enough back to recollect the heavenly music that drew her to the piano in the first place. It was in that moment that she realized Dane was probably a musical prodigy and decided to get the girl lessons. Unfortunately, that was all she had done.

"I bet you never even went to a recital," Nicole continued. It was a bet that she would win.

"What do you want me to say? Yes, I admit that I was a horrible mother to Dane, if I can even be called that. You know, I didn't want her. The pregnancy was an accident. I thought I could easily cast her out of my heart. I spent much of my life trying and every time I thought I could succeed in that something happened that reminded me I still cared for this child. She would end up in the hospital and I would worry myself sick until she was released. When I first found out that she was on drugs and she nearly overdosed on cocaine, I cried, thinking that she was going to die. I wept when she was beaten and left for dead. When she left the house for good, I worried everyday, wondering when some police officer was going to call the house to let me know that she was dead. Yet, none of this moved me to stop what was happening to her or to try to pull her closer to me. I don't know why I didn't do this. I don't," Christine stated with frustration, letting out a long and heavy breath.

"Do you want things to always be this way? You can only be there for her when she doesn't know it? Do you enjoy that?"

"Of course I don't!" the older woman huffed, raising her voice a little. A glare from Nicole reminded her that Danny was sleeping not even five feet away from them. A contrite expression quickly coated Christine's face. "What else am I suppose to do at this point?"

Nicole sighed. "I don't have any advice for you. At this point, I doubt Danny cares much about how you feel one way or the other. Neglect isn't easily forgiven."

Christine wanted to say something biting, just something to make it seem like she was not so horrid, even though she knew that was not true. But, she was too aware that no matter how many

music lessons she paid for or instruments that she bought, nothing would make up for what she did, was still doing, and would probably continue to do to her youngest child.

"Regret is tough to live with," Christine whispered. "I feel hollow knowing that nothing I do will ever make up for what I never did. But, I still must do for her when she absolutely needs it."

"What do you mean?" Nicole inquired.

"Well, the hospital stay for one. While Dane has changed much while living with you, I know she still doesn't have health coverage. I can pay for it."

"Why? So you can stick Danny with another monstrous bill that you know she'll never be able to pay back?" the lawyer sneered.

Christine stared in startling confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Danny was forced to pay back Russell the money for her last hospital stay as well as the cost of housing her for the first fifteen years of her life," Nicole replied in disgust.

"He...made her pay him back...?" Christine inquired, completely baffled. Her voice almost sounded as if she did not comprehend the language that she was speaking.

"Yeah."

"Oh, god. That will never do. Listen, Russell has no say over that money as it is my own. I will give Danny back every cent."

Nicole wanted to argue and tell her to stuff the money up her ass, but manners prevented that. Also, it would be nice to have that money back and she could tell that Christine was sincere. Spending time with Christine made her feel sorry for her. Not because she had squandered a chance to get to know her daughter, but because she was foolish enough to continue to do so. It was so pathetic.

"I don't have to tell you that Danny probably isn't going to want the money since I'm sure you know that. I can tell you that you don't have to worry about medical costs this time around. Danny is covered," Nicole informed the older woman.

"Oh," Christine yelped, gathering what the redhead was telling her. She was not sure what to say after that. Suddenly, she felt unnecessary and entirely superfluous to her youngest child. It was feeling that she did not enjoy, especially since she knew why it was. Nicole could now take care of the things that she once handled. Now, any and all excuses she had to be close to Dane dried up in an instant.

Silence reigned over the room after that. They both turned their attention to Dane. As soon as it seemed like she was waking up, Christine made an excuse to leave. Danny was not even aware

that her mother was there and for the time being Nicole saw no reason to upset her with the news.

"Morning..." Dane greeted her with a small smile.

"Afternoon, actually," Nicole corrected her with a smile of her own.

"Either way, it's nice. For a moment there yesterday, I thought I screwed everything up."

"It wasn't your fault, Danny. It was mine. I was the one pushing, but can we not dwell on that for now? Let's focus on getting you out of here and then getting you healthy," Nicole said.

Dane smiled and nodded. Nicole went to get a nurse, wanting to get Danny some breakfast. After she ate, her doctor showed up, wanting to ask her a few questions.

"Good afternoon, Danny," the doctor said, showing that he had spoken with Nicole before by using Nicole's name for her.

"Good afternoon. So, come to tell me I can leave as long as I take care of myself and blah, blah, blah?" the musician inquired.

"Actually, I have some questions for you that Nicole was unable to answer," he informed her, motioning to the redhead.

"Oh," Dane pouted. "What would you like to know?"

"Your leg. Going through your medical records, I know you've broken it before. I also know your knee was injured at the time and had surgery. You should have recovered. Nicole tells me you walk with a limp, even though it should have healed well. She also tells me that the leg and the knee are very weak, even after months of physical therapy."

"Yeah..." Dane answered, glancing over at Nicole, wondering where he was going with that list.

"I wanted to know if you might have started walking on it before you should have and didn't let it heal properly."

"Uh..." Dane looked down. "I might have done that, yeah."

"I thought as much. You have nerve damage in your leg and in your knee. Surgery would be able to correct some of it. I'm afraid you might always have the limp now, but it would strengthen your leg."

"Surgery?" she echoed. "Sorry, can't afford it right now," she admitted. She could not afford much right now.

"Baby, you're covered, so you wouldn't have to pay for all of it," Nicole chimed in.

"Covered? Since when am I covered?" the younger woman asked curiously. She knew she was not covered through her job since she was self-employed and she had never filled out any paperwork to be insured through anything else.

"Ever since you showed up lying on my front lawn looking half dead. You wouldn't let me take you to the hospital because you weren't covered and that worried me. As soon as I went to work, I put in paperwork to include you in my plan," Nicole explained.

"You could do that?"

"My firm covers domestic partners. All we had to do was live together for six months and I could include you. So, you're covered."

Dane smiled and turned her attention back to the doctor. "She takes such good care of me, except when I wander out of her sight," she remarked.

"I'm guessing this is one of those times you wandered out of her sight. You don't have to have the surgery today. It's just something to think about. I also wanted to make sure that with this broken leg, you take it seriously and let it heal properly," the doctor stated.

"I'll be seeing to that this time," Nicole informed them both.

Dane chuckled. "Guess I'll be letting it heal properly this time."

"All right. You're going to be here for at least a couple of days for observation. We would like to make sure the healing process begins correctly. Make sure you don't do anything to make matters worse, even though I am sure those busted ribs will trouble you enough to stay in bed," the doctor commented.

Dane only nodded to that one. Every inhale and exhale reminded her of how she almost killed herself by not paying attention. Each inhale and exhale also reminded her of how she screamed at Nicole and treated her rather poorly. Sad grey eyes turned to Nicole, begging to talk once they were alone. Nicole noticed and nodded.

"I'll be back to check on you as soon as I can," the doctor informed the patient and he left the room. Nicole and Danny turned their attention to each other.

"Thanks for all of this, Chem," Danny said.

"No need to thank me, baby. We are partners. We take care of each other," Nicole replied with a smile, moving to take Danny's hand in hers.

"I haven't been doing a very good job of that."

"Honey, it wasn't your fault. I was the one pushing you to be around your family. I know you didn't want to, but I acted like I knew better than you, so it was my fault," Nicole argued.

"No, I should have told you. I just kept taking what you were giving, even though I didn't want it. I should've spoken to you about it. I'm learning about being in a relationship as we go, so I'm going to make a few mistakes. Do you think you can bear with me while I make 'em or am I asking too much?"

"I know you're going to make mistakes, sweetheart. It happens. We're humans. I made mistakes too. I'm new to this too. You have to remember, before you, all my relationships were with people who didn't respect me or didn't even care about me. People I eventually stopped caring for. You're not like that. For a while, I thought subconsciously I ruined us on purpose. I was scared because I am just so in love with you, Danny." She kissed Dane's hand to drive home her point.

The musician smiled a little. "That's why I let you pull me through all that with my family. I love you and I was scared to lose you by saying anything about it."

"Danny, relationships are about compromise and communication. If we want to stay together, we have to talk. You can't just follow me because you think saying something will cause a problem. Not saying something causes a problem too because you're silently suffering. You could end up resenting me too, which I really don't want. So, please, tell me if I ever get like this again."

Dane nodded. "Understood. I will do my best."

"And I will do mine. I want us to make it, Danny. I want us to look back on this ten, twenty, thirty, hell, fifty years from now," Nicole declared.

"I would love that too," Dane concurred with a grin. "I would very much love that."

"Then we have to be willing to work at it. Okay?"

"Okay."

Dane smiled and that got a smile out of Nicole. The air seemed to clear and the sun that shone through the window seemed a little brighter. Nicole kissed Dane's knuckles again, feeling like the weight of the world had been lifted off of her shoulders. Dane settled into her bed, even though she was stuck in the hospital, she felt at peace for the first time in a long time.

14: Reset

Dane was resting in her hospital bed with her eyes closed. She could feel someone watching her. She would have assumed it was Nicole, but her lover had just left, running home with the desire to take a shower and promising to bring back some goodies for both of them. As she felt the person come closer, she decided to look and see who it was. A frown cut across her face when her mother sat down at her bed side.

Grey eyes focused on the ceiling. She was a little surprised to see her mother there. Not because her mother never came when she was hospitalized, but because her mother had not come to see her this time around-as far as she knew anyway. Nicole had not told her about Christine's visit when she was first placed in the room.

For some reason that Dane could never figure out, Christine always came to see her when she ended up in the hospital. She did not know why and did not care why. She wished the woman never did it, though. Her presence always felt like salt on Dane's wounds. Sometimes, she wondered if Christine was coming to check and see if she had died. *I won't be giving her the satisfaction any time soon.*

Christine licked her lips and opened her mouth, but she quickly shut it. She was not sure how to start a conversation with Dane and she knew that if she messed it up, it would only make things harder for her.

"I'm glad to see that you're awake," Christine commented, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat to make sure that the next thing that she said did not sound like it was being said by a boy going through puberty.

Dane blinked and turned, stunned that her mother spoke. She looked around the room, thinking that they probably were not alone. There was no one there. She then considered her mother just might be talking aloud to no one in particular.

"Are you all right? You look confused," Christine said, even though she knew why that was. Dane had no clue that Christine was talking to her. "Dane, just to be clear, I am speaking to you."

Dane snorted. "Since when and so what?" Grey eyes rolled.

The blond took a deep breath. "I want to try..." she started, but trailed off because she was not sure what she wanted to try and she was not sure how to put anything that she was feeling into words. "I just want to try," she sighed, running her hand through her hair.

"In all honesty, I don't," Dane stated bluntly. She was sick and tired of everyone with the last name Wolfe, unless they were under the age of ten.

"Please, just hear me out," Christine begged, going so far as to pressing her hands together. Her plea did not move the bed-ridden musician.

"No."

"Dane, please," the older woman implored her. "I'm begging you here. Begging you to hear me out."

"No, I won't hear you out. I don't want to hear a damn thing and I don't care what you have to say. I think it's cowardly of you to come here, knowing I can't leave and try to talk to me. I don't care what you have to say. Everything is not going to be done on your terms or when you want to

do it," Dane stated. As much as she always longed for her mother to at least acknowledge that she existed, a large part of her resented that her mother would come to her now, would dare speak to her now. She suspected that part would always exist and even if her mother wanted to try, she would never want to. It was a bit depressing, she thought, because she would never connect to her mother if that was case, no matter how much Christine might want to.

Christine sat quietly, eyes focused on the floor. She knew that she should have expected that reaction. Twenty-five years of neglect was not going to go away with one conversation. Now, she had to decide if Dane was worth the trouble that she was going to have to go through if she did want to make up a little for what she had done. In the past, that decision had always been easy to make; Dane was never worth the trouble. It was always easier to ignore her and turn a blind eye to whatever evils were being cast upon her. Most of the time, she considered herself wonderful for just making sure Dane did not die, but that was all a delusion. A horrible, horrible delusion and speaking with Nicole the other day helped her realize that.

She had done absolutely nothing for Dane, except condemn both of them. She had never considered herself a saint, but only when she stopped and thought about how she had treated her own daughter did she start to consider just how low she had fallen. Yes, she had started it because she had worried about her marriage. Despite everything, she loved Russell and never wanted to lose him. Since he had a problem with Dane, she had a problem with Dane, but that did not last.

While she doubted that she felt a motherly love toward Dane like she did with her other children, there was still some connection there. Unfortunately, she had never pursued that connection beyond a very few minor things. Even when Dane was baby and she spent time with the child, she did her best to keep her distance, but that connection somehow remained. Now, years later, the connection was still there and chained her down with regret and grief.

She could only wonder if Dane felt the connection anymore. Maybe there was no reason to try because Dane had severed whatever she might have felt, Christine considered. Even if Dane had not severed it, the connection could have just withered away on her end. It was not like Dane had any reason to try to keep the connection alive.

Sighing, Christine finally spoke, opening with the only thing she could think of that did not sound extra pathetic. "I understand that your father took a large sum of money from you that he had no business taking. The money is in a bank account under your name. I will give you the numbers and you can decide what to do with it," she stated. She figured the only way for Dane to get that money back would be to force it on her by putting in the bank for her already.

Dane growled and the words "shove it up your ass" were on the tip of her tongue, but those were words for her father. "Keep your money. I don't want it," she replied. She was done with her parents and would never be in debt to them ever again.

Christine kept her composure, even though she was a bit annoyed that Dane was ready to shove away so much money. It was amazing that Dane resented her so much to turn away so much

money. "Then give it away. I will not take it back because it's not mine. It's not your fathers either. It certainly was not his to demand from you," she pointed out.

"Oh, so now all of sudden you give a shit about what that bastard does to me?" Dane let loose a mocking laugh. "What a fucking joke. Really, *Christine*, what the fuck do you care about me? I'm supposed to be grateful now? Do you know what I would be grateful for? You getting the hell out," she stated, nodding toward the door.

Christine opened her mouth, ready to argue, but she decided against it. She had laid the groundwork...kind of. She did not want to really grate on Dane's nerves. Especially if she was not sure if she wanted to go through the trouble of trying to fix a connection that might not even be there anymore.

So, the blond rose elegantly to her feet and bid the injured woman farewell. Dane did not say anything. She sucked her teeth when she was sure that she was alone.

"Fuck her," Dane proclaimed, even though a part of her dared to ache that her mother had left her yet again. The confusion that ate at her just pissed her off more because she suspected things were always going to be like that if her mother reached out to her again.

Deciding to just let it all go, she waited for Nicole and news for when she could leave. She hoped this was her last day in the hospital. At least at home, she knew that she would not be getting any surprise visits from her mother and even if she did, she would not have to let her mother in.

"I just want to go home," she groaned.

Nicole set the living room up as Danny's temporary space since she had a cast on her leg. The redhead figured it would be best if Danny had to do as little as possible, including climb the stairs. It was a lot of work since she had to move the coffee table, which was fairly heavy, and find new places for her plants to get them out of Danny's way. She went so far as to put a cooler there for Danny to have snacks close by for when she was at work. With that out of the way, she trotted back to the car and back to the hospital to pick up her lover.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?" Nicole asked as she entered Dane's room. The musician's face lit up when her lover came in.

"Fine and very ready to go home," Dane answered with a grin. She weighed her options on telling Nicole about Christine's visit and figured it would be best to talk about that on the way home. That way, her day would not really be brought down because she would be happy as soon as they got home.

"Then I shall take you home," Nicole replied with a small smile. She already had everything that she needed to know in caring for Danny, so she just needed to get the younger woman down to her car.

Dane grinned quite merrily, going so far as to thrust her fist in the air. Nicole giggled a bit at the celebration. A nurse helped out with moving Dane. She assisted in getting Danny in a wheelchair while Nicole took charge of the crutches that Danny would need for almost two months. Nicole had to wheel her car around. Danny was cautiously placed in the backseat, making her to put her leg up.

"I'm going to drive slow, so you don't have to worry about your arm or your ribs too, okay?" the redhead said, turning to look at her lover.

"I don't care, Nick. I'm just so happy to be out of that place! I am never going to get hit by a car again," Danny declared.

"I certainly hope so. I don't think I could take getting another phone call like that."

"Sorry. Terri said she's not good with that sort of thing and wasn't entirely sure how to put it. She thought it was just enough for you to know I was alive."

"That was enough," Nicole assured her. She could not blame Terri; she knew there was no positive way to deliver such news. It was better than getting a phone call from a police officer, she supposed.

"Well, make sure you tell her. That's all she does is apologize. It's kinda annoying for her to come up everyday just to apologize over and over again. I finally got her to stop saying sorry she hit me. We already agreed it wasn't her fault, but she kept going and going," Dane complained. Terri had come to visit her every day while she was in the hospital. Yesterday was her last visit since she had work today, but they had exchanged phone numbers. She suspected that Terri wanted to make sure she healed properly to keep away anymore guilt. Dane did not mind; she did not want her moment of carelessness to haunt someone who seemed to be quite cool. Unless something went wrong, she figured that she and Terri might make good friends if Terri kept in touch.

Nicole nodded. "I do hope you learned to pay attention when you ride your bike again."

Dane snorted; what bike? Terri had assured her that her bike was pretty much just a weird piece of modern art now. Danny could believe that since it was a piece of junk before it was hit by Terri's car. Of course, Terri said her car did not fair much better, but that had a lot more to do with Danny landing her "fat ass" on the windshield than anything else.

"Baby, we'll get you a new bike," Nicole added on since she could tell that was what the snort was all about.

"No need to rush. Not like I'll be going anywhere, right?" Danny pointed out, nodding toward her leg.

"Danny," the lawyer sighed.

Dane flashed her girlfriend a smile to settle her. "I'm not bitter or anything. It's a little upsetting that I have to put my life on hold for this. I mean, no lessons or anything. I was going to try to get some more shows and everything, but now I can't do that until I get this cast off."

"You can still do the lessons. Your arm won't be in a sling for long, just until your shoulder is better. You can have your students come to the house," Nicole proposed.

Dane smiled a bit. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Not really. I mean, I'm always at work or class when you do lessons."

"Oh, speaking of class, I noticed you haven't been there...since you've been with me..." the musician commented, not to sure where she was going with that beyond it being an observation.

"Don't worry about it, baby. I spoke with the professor. As long as I do well on my tests, I'm fine. And if not that, he's willing to let me make up a grade if necessary. He was very nice and flexible about things when I explained the situation to him."

"That's good." Danny let a beat of silence pass before she started a new topic. "My mother came to see me this morning."

Green eyes blinked in shock. "Did she now?"

"Yeah. I'm not totally sure why she did, but she spoke to me and everything. I was kinda rude to her," Dane admitted.

"It's understandable that you would be," Nicole said. She wondered how Danny would take her new stance on the family issue.

Dane smiled a little because she had not been reprimanded for being rude. "I didn't hear her out to find out what she wanted to talk about. She did say she put the money I gave Russell into a bank account and won't take it back. Do you think I should keep it?"

"It's your money, baby."

"Technically, it's your money. Do you want it? If not, maybe I can withdraw it and then just leave it on their doorstep," the younger woman said.

Nicole laughed, even though she knew that her sweetheart was serious. "How about we leave it there for the moment? It's not going anywhere, after all. We have other things to worry about. How did having Christine speak to you feel?" she asked curiously.

"Mostly pissed. How dare this bitch talk to me now, and crap like that. But, underneath the pissed, I felt sad. Why did it take her so long? Why does she have to wait until I actually don't give a damn now? Where was she twenty years ago? Ten years ago? One year ago? Why now?" Dane answered honestly, pouting a bit as she spoke.

"I wish I knew, sweetheart. But, I don't understand her at all to answer those questions. Hell, I can't even form a theory really because your mother is just a strange sort, I realize. What do you think you're going to do?" Nicole inquired.

Dane glanced at her leg. "Nothing for right now. It might have been a fluke. If not, I'll deal with it later. I doubt it means anything anyway. I will tell you one thing that woman has taught me in life, Nick. Never get your hopes up when someone has already dropped you a bunch of times in the past."

Nicole nodded, mostly because she did not know what to say. She felt that was awful, but she knew it was not Danny's fault. Christine had neglected Danny for too long. She wondered if Danny ever would be able to accept her mother, if Christine tried anyway. Nicole now considered it was entirely possible that Christine would not try or she might just get Danny's hopes up. All she knew was that she would not get in the middle of it unless Danny asked her to.

The couple was silent for the rest of the short ride. When they got to the house, Nicole parked in the driveway and quickly moved to help Danny out of the car. She was grateful that Danny did not put up a struggle, wanting to do things herself. Nicole grabbed the crutches first and then assisted her girlfriend out of the car. They had a little trouble getting the crutches underneath Danny, but they managed without hurting the younger woman.

"I've got you, baby," Nicole assured her girlfriend, as she supported the side with Dane's injured shoulder.

"I know," Dane replied with a smile.

As they entered the house, Danny's eyes went to the stairs. She groaned, thinking that she was going to have to climb them. Nicole chuckled at the look of dismay on her love's face.

"Honey, you know I would never be so cruel as to make you climb those stairs. I've got the living room made up for you. If you don't like it there, I'll fix up the den for you," Nicole proposed.

"I'm sure the living room will be fine." Living anywhere in the house would be fine, but the first floor was preferred for the moment.

Nicole helped Danny into the living room. The taller woman was a bit shocked to see how the living room was arranged, just for her. Leaning down, she placed a quick peck to her lover's lips.

"What was that for?" Nicole asked with a small smile.

"You being so good to me," Dane answered.

The redhead smiled wider. She hoped that she could continue that. She had a lot to make up for in her opinion and she knew that even though she and Danny claimed that they were all right that could easily change. Over the past few weeks, they had fought and made up, only to fight again.

She wanted things to go back to the peaceful state they were in before she started pushing Danny toward her family.

Easing down onto the sofa, Danny sighed and placed her crutches off to the side. She rolled her shoulders, wanting to work the stiffness out of her joints. The rotation hurt her injured shoulder, but that was no big deal to her. She was tempted to ask for a massage, but doubted that she would get the one that she really wanted, so she decided not to tease herself.

"Can I get you anything?" Nicole asked.

"Some water and then some company," Dane replied with a smile.

The redhead nodded, finding that to be a simple request. Fetching the water, she then curled up on Danny's left side-her uninjured side. They were quiet for a while, just reveling in the other's presence.

"You know, if I keep on like this, my whole body'll be able to tell when it's going to rain," Danny remarked in a low tone, her fingers brushing over Nicole's hips.

"I don't think that's very funny, love," Nicole replied, her own hands minding their manners. She did not want to get Danny worked up since they were not going to be doing anything.

"I want you to be comfortable, Chem. I'm no worse for wear."

"Says the woman in a cast, sling, and crutches by her side."

"All right, all right. I'll stop talking about it, okay?"

Nicole nodded. "I would appreciate that greatly."

Their time together only lasted for a few more minutes before a knock at the door caught their attention. Nicole moved to answer while Dane shifted on the couch, trying her best to see who was at the door without having to stand up. Nicole opened the door and let out a surprise gasp.

"Adam, what are you going here?" Nicole asked, even though if she was not surprised she would have figured out instantly.

"I have it on good authority that you brought Dane home today," Adam answered.

"I did, but we've only been here for like a half-hour. How did you know we'd be here by now?" Nicole inquired. It was almost creepy at how quickly he turned up.

"My mother. Her friend at the hospital called her the second you left. She passed it along, thinking her grandsons would like to see Dane," Adam explained.

"I'm sure she would be very happy to see them," Nicole stated with a smile and then she turned her attention to the two children. They were dressed almost formally, which Nicole had come to expect from them. Luke was holding a bouquet of flowers and Thomas had a white teddy bear dressed like a doctor and holding a sign that said "get well."

"Hello, Miss Nicole," the boys chorused together, sounding very much like it had been rehearsed.

"Hello, boys. Are you here to help cheer up Danny?" Nicole asked with a grin.

"We're here to see Dane," Luke answered, looking a bit perplexed.

"I'll take you to her then," Nicole replied. She hoped that this little visit meant that the boys would be coming by and spending time with their aunt. She knew that would mean the world to her lover.

The three males entered the house and Nicole shut the door behind them. She then stepped into the living room with the trio right behind her. The boys immediately noticed Dane and rushed over to her.

"Whoa!" Dane put her good hand-funny enough, her left hand-up to get the boys to stop. "I'm in no shape for you guys to cling to," she informed them.

"What happened to you?" Luke inquired as he and Thomas took in the broken form of their aunt.

"I sort of fell out of the sky onto someone's car," Dane answered, hoping that would keep them from getting hysterical. She did not want to worry the boys, especially since she was all right.

"Why'd you do that?" Thomas asked curiously. It sounded like a silly thing to do in his opinion.

"I was being silly and not looking where I was going," she informed him.

"That is silly. Daddy said you should always look where you're going," Thomas said, almost as if he was chastising her, complete with shaking his index finger at her.

Dane could not help laughing. The brothers then presented her with their gifts, which she thanked them for. They then went on to tell her how they spent their day and what they planned on doing for the summer. Adam inched in and took a seat in one of the armchairs. Nicole, ever the dutiful hostess, went to the kitchen to get some refreshments for the unexpected guests.

"You don't have to do all of this," Adam protested as Nicole brought out a tray that had cookies and nacho chips on it along with some juice boxes that she had purchased; she planned to put the juice boxes in the cooler in the living room for Danny to use when she was away. It would keep Danny from having to move around on her leg.

"I don't mind. I want them to be comfortable since they have her full attention," Nicole said. She also wanted the boys to have a good impression of the house, so that they would want to come back and visit Danny.

Danny certainly did seem to be enjoying the boys' visit. Nicole sat down after the kids noticed the treats. After a few minutes, she figured that she could give Adam a tour of the house, so that Danny did not have to feel like she was being watched by her older brother.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" Nicole offered.

"That would be great," Adam replied.

The tour was quiet and tense. Adam noticed and he also noticed that the tension was new. Nicole was not the same as when he first met her. By the time they got to the upstairs of the house-the second half of the tour-he decided to say something.

"You know, I'm not the dick I used to be," Adam said, randomly as far as Nicole was concerned.

"I haven't said anything," she replied, putting on her diplomatic tone.

"No, but you're not as receptive and friendly as you were before. I figure Dane finally filled you in how we used to be. Look, I'm not proud of the way I treated her, but I'm trying to mend that," he stated, pointing to himself.

Nicole sighed. "You sound very much like your mother. Two people so ashamed of themselves that they never change. Don't you think trying to mend what you did would mean letting your sons know that Danny is their aunt and not some random woman who used to sleep on your floor? Don't you think mending it would involve you standing up to your father after he kicks her out when she's the reason he's still alive? I'm not receptive and friendly toward you because we are not friends. I was never trying to be your friend. I was hoping to give you a chance to get to know your sister, but as much as you claim to want to mend how you treat her, you're not treating her much better," she calmly pointed out.

Adam nodded and ran a hand over his cropped hair. He knew that she had a point, but that did not change anything. He could only get as close to Dane as she could let him, but then again, he probably was not trying as hard as he claimed. After all, his sons did not know that Dane was even their aunt. Yeah, Nicole definitely had a very good point.

"What's so bad about her? I understand you were practically grown by the time she could do anything beyond sleep and cry, but what pushed you to the point where your sons don't even know that's your sister?" Nicole inquired. She could not fathom such a thing and she could not think of an excuse for it either.

"She's not my sister. That's the point you don't get. Up until two years ago, I didn't even know her. Admittedly, I didn't want to know her, but we're at least acquaintances now."

Nicole nodded. "That's your business," she stated. Danny's family was very strange, she thought. And it was a good thing that she was backing away from it because she did not understand it at all.

"I suppose you're right about that. I don't have anything against her, which is why I don't mind her seeing the boys. They love her. One day, I'll let them know just who she is and it'll be up to them to decide if they want to call her 'aunt,' but I know it won't change how they feel about her. They love her."

"She loves them too."

"I know. That's the other reason I don't mind her seeing them."

The pair finished off the tour; the tension did vanish after that talk, even though Nicole still did not comprehend him or his relationship with Danny. When they returned to the injured woman and two boys, they found the boys performing for Danny. Adam and Nicole watched, but could not figure out what the boys were doing. Dane seemed quite aware and clapped when they were done.

After the show, Adam told the boys that it was time to go; after all, he had to get home and get yelled at by Sharon for taking the boys to see Dane. He promised to bring them back in a couple of days, after Dane was settled in. Luke and Thomas hugged Dane before Adam ushered them out of the door and the house was silent again.

"Wow, that was fun. I'm glad they came over!" Danny confessed with a grin.

"I could tell," Nicole commented as she started cleaning up what was left of the snacks. Pretty much everything was gone, except some crumbs and the tray.

"I hope Adam does bring them back. But, then again, I guess it's a good chance since he brought them today. He even told them to be careful around me because of what happened," Dane explained with a smile. She was not used to such courteous behavior from her brother.

"That is good. Very considerate."

"Yeah. I wonder how he knew."

"He said Christine told him."

Dane grunted, but she did not say anything further. Nicole let the subject drop. Returning to the sofa, she curled up with Danny. They turned the television on, ready to relax for a little while, but a knock at the door stopped that.

"Popular today, eh?" Dane said, forcing out a half-smile.

"You are," Nicole stated, having a good feeling that the next visitor was for Danny too. Getting up, she went to the door and was shocked once more to see who was there. "Hey, Daddy, Mommy," she greeted them as she opened the door.

"Hey, is the invincible one in yet?" Raymond asked with an amused smile. He was holding candy; he thought it would be a more practical gift for the recovering musician.

"She's on the couch. Looking a lot better than she looked when you saw her in the hospital," Nicole replied.

"Hell, her being conscious would make that happen," he remarked. He and Kate had gone to see Danny in the hospital the day after the accident. Danny had not been awake for the visit, which Raymond was glad for because he did not have the best of reactions when he saw her. First, he winced in pain just from the sight and then he vowed to sue "the bastard that hit her." He had no idea that she was friends with "the bastard" until Nicole told him after his little rant. Of course, that did not mean he was not going to pursue the insurance company to compensate Danny.

"Well, then I guess you're all set," Nicole quipped.

Raymond went into the living room. "Nikki was right, you almost don't look like shit," he teased. Danny had grown on him somewhat since he could tell that she really made his little girl happy. He really could not ask for more; Kate took care of that.

Danny laughed. "At least I have an excuse, I was hit by a car. What about you?"

He practically guffawed at that. "I brought you some chocolate since I know you like it almost as much as Nikki does. Don't let her eat the whole thing," he said, handing the box over.

"Daddy!" Nicole feigned shock. She knew that she probably would eat the whole box, but then again, Danny would probably feed it to her. If she was lucky anyway.

Raymond chuckled a bit and flopped down next to Dane. He took charge of the television and Danny was forced to watch baseball. She was used to it now since Nicole watched it too, but that did not mean that she had learned to appreciate the sport. Kate did not say anything to her, but Danny and Nicole thought that they might have noticed relief in her usually hard eyes.

Things really took off when Mina and Clara showed up out of the blue...or so it seemed. Raymond had actually given them a call to let them know that Danny was home. They showed up with pizza. At that point, it looked like a party, so Dane called Crow to let her know that she was fine and invited her over. Crow was all too happy to show up, especially since it meant that she could see with her own eyes that Dane was better than when she saw the guitarist in the hospital a couple of days ago. By the time everyone left, Danny was ready to pass out and Nicole was right there with her.

"I am ready to sleep for the rest of the week," Dane declared, laughing a bit. She never thought there would be a time when she was partied out, but she was definitely done for the night.

"Well, my dear, your bed awaits," Nicole said as she finished making a very comfortable bed on the floor for Danny. She had gone out and gotten an air mattress for her lover. It was now full and set up with everything that Danny would need to be comfortable.

"Um...are you going to sleep down here too?" Danny asked curiously.

Nicole blinked, stunned by the question. It seemed like a no-brainer until she realized they had not shared a bed before Danny was in the hospital. "Do you want me to?" she countered in an unsure tone. It would be a boost to her confidence if Danny wanted that.

"Of course I want you to. Things are really fine, Chem," she tried to assure the lawyer.

Nicole nodded, even though she was suddenly reminded of how badly she had wreaked havoc on their relationship. She started wondering if things were as good as they seemed. Was Danny really going to talk things over with her if they started having problems? Or was Danny just being quiet like before and enduring her presence? Needless to say, Nicole did not get much sleep that night.

While Danny slept soundly, exhausted from the day and the fact that her pain pills knocked her out, Nicole was left to her worries. She thought about all that she put Danny through and the more that she thought about it, the more she found it hard to believe that everything was fine just like that. Things had been too screwed up lately for everything to so easily be fine, especially after Danny had her meet-and-greet with a car.

"I need to trust that this is going to work. Danny and I will keep going. We're fine. We're going to be fine," the redhead promised herself. Still, her heartbeat never settled as she rested against Danny's left side.

In the morning, Nicole made breakfast for the first time in a year. It was nice, especially when she got to serve Danny for once. She made waffles; Danny loved them. Pure delight lit up Danny's face when she saw breakfast.

"I need to get hit by-" Dane started to say, but remembered that Nicole did not like to hear jokes about her accident. "Thanks for the waffles, angel."

"Think nothing of it." Nicole smiled proudly. "Now, you make sure you stay here and keep off that leg."

"Don't worry. I will," Dane promised. She did not want to say that she did not have much of a choice because she could not really balance herself on a crutch with her right arm in a sling. She needed Nicole to help her get up and move about.

"Good." Nicole leaned down, going in for a kiss. She was about to kiss Dane's lips, but changed her mind at the last moment, not sure if things were all right enough between them for her to kiss Danny on the lips. The kiss landed on her cheek.

Danny pouted, but fixed her face, figuring that Nicole just did not want to get her worked up since it was not like they could do anything when her entire right side was out of commission. Teasing would not be good for her right now, she supposed. Still, she would have liked a better goodbye kiss. She guessed that would have to wait for later since she was not going to call Nicole on her way to work complaining about the kiss.

After a couple of hours, Dane got bored. She wanted to call Nicole and just talk, but she knew that would be bad form. Nicole made exceptions to her rule of having only business at the office when she took calls from Danny. So, she could not call Nicole because deep ennui had set in and the only friend that she had was Crow, who she knew was also working.

"Damn it," she groaned. And suddenly the phone rang and it was her salvation from boredom. It was Terri. "Hey," she answered the phone with some hope in her voice.

"Hi, I'm looking for Danny," Terri said.

"That's me."

"Hey, how you doing?" Terri inquired.

"Better every day. I am bored out of my mind."

"Want company? I was actually calling because I was bored." Well, that, and she had some spare time, so she wanted to check on Danny to make sure that her recovery was going well. She never admitted that aloud and she was growing fond of Danny each time they spent time together.

"Shit, come on over and save me before I start figuring out how to play tunes on the damn carpet."

"Okay. Do you play video games?"

"Yeah, but you'll have to bring your system. I don't have one over here."

"No problem. I will need an address, though."

Terri was over pretty quickly with her video game system. It took a lot of work for Dane to get up and answer the door when she showed up, but the chance of having fun company was motivation for the injured woman. Terri grinned when the door swung open.

"Wow, you do look a lot better. Or maybe it's just the lighting," the blond teased. Internally, she breathed a sigh of relief, seeing Danny move around and everything. She was thankful that Danny looked much better now than she did then when she was in the hospital.

Dane snorted and motioned for her new friend to come in. She nodded in the direction of the living room where Terri went and set up the gaming system. Ten minutes later, they were no

longer bored. Danny was thankful that she could hold the controller in her right hand despite the sling.

Nicole came into the house to the sound of the pair grunting and growling. Furrowing her brow, she marched into the living room and was surprised to see Terri on the couch with Danny. They were intensely focused on the television. Nicole turned to see what was so fascinating only to find out they were playing some fighting video game.

"Hey, Chem. How was your day?" Dane asked, leaning over a little, offering her cheek to Nicole. She was rewarded with a sweet peck on the cheek.

"It was normal," Nicole answered before swallowing hard. It bothered her that Danny had offered her cheek to her. She guessed that she did the right thing by kissing Danny on the cheek that morning.

"Cool," Dane said and then suddenly she yelped. "Oh, damn it, you're a cheater, Terri!" she accused the blond.

"No, you're just not paying attention. And you got your ass kicked," Terri teased, smiling proudly. She then turned her attention to Nicole. "Hey, Nicole, I've been keeping this clown company. I hope you don't mind," she said. She had actually forgot that her main reason for coming over was to just check on Danny.

"No, if you keep her out of trouble, I don't mind at all," Nicole lied. She was just a little disturbed to find Terri in the house, sitting so close to her lover, but she knew that she would sound out of her mind if she brought that up.

"I'll keep her out of trouble by kicking her butt!" Terri declared with a chuckle and then suddenly yelled as she realized a new round had started. Dane was beating the crap out of her. "Hey, you're cheating!"

"No, you're just not paying attention," Dane said smugly.

Nicole, having no interest in video games really, decided to leave the duo alone. She went to handle some schoolwork in the library. After a couple of hours, she could still hear the pair, barking and taunting each other over the game. By the time it was dinnertime, Nicole was a bit annoyed that Terri was still there. *Doesn't this woman have a home of her own?*

"Terri, will you be staying for dinner?" Nicole inquired, managing to sound civil.

"Dinner?" Terri glanced at the time. "Holy shit! I didn't realize it was that late. I'll check you later, Danny," the blond said, getting up for the sofa to pack her things up.

"All right. Get home safe," Danny said, quite understanding. She actually had no idea it was so late either. She was surprised that she and Terri had hung out for so long. She had not spent that much time with someone who was not Nicole for a while, not counting Crow anyway.

Nicole saw Terri to the door and then went to make dinner. Danny yawned and stretched as best she could. Nicole returned to the living room once everything was on the stove cooking. Danny quickly put her arm around Nicole and pulled the redhead to her. Comfortable sighs escaped both women.

"I missed you today," Dane said.

"Really?" Nicole asked, sounding a little unbelieving. If she was so missed, she wondered why Danny did not call. Of course, she now knew why Danny had not called her that day; Danny had been having so much fun with Terri.

"Yeah, I was going to call you a bunch of times, but I knew I'd just sound like a whining."

That's a decent explanation and she didn't even know I was thinking that. "Is that why you called Terri instead?" Nicole asked, pleased with herself for not sounding pathetic or snappish.

"I actually didn't call Terri. She called here. It was her day off and she was bored. We decided to be bored together."

"You guys are getting close," Nicole noted, hoping that she did sound as unsure as she felt.

"Terri is cool. I know most of the time, she pops up to make sure she didn't really kill me or permanently injure me, but she's still cool. I didn't know she was cool enough to hang out with for hours like that, but it flew by thanks to the video games. It's been a long time since I felt all right being around a person that long. I think you deserve the credit for that," Dane stated with a smile.

The attorney blinked. "What do you mean?"

"It's because of you I know everyone isn't an asshole and I don't have to be suspicious of every single person I meet. I mean, had Terri hit me a couple of years ago, I would've been screaming my head off at her before kicking her the hell out of my life. But, thanks to you, I was able to see that she was sorry for hitting me and she's really worried about me. I know everyone isn't an asshole thanks to you. I got to know her and found out that she's kinda cool. You made that possible, Chem."

"Yay me," the redhead grumbled under her breath. "So, you two are getting along all right, huh?"

"We get along all right, yeah. Her sense of humor really gets to me. And it's nice to have someone I can see eye to eye with," Dane remarked. Terri was actually a couple of inches shorter than she was.

Nicole nodded, missing the joke. Nicole shifted the conversation, not wanting to hear anymore about Terri, before Dane could continue on. Nicole just hoped that the fact that she decided to back away from the family issue would be enough to save their relationship. She hoped that Danny honestly still wanted her and wanted them to make it. If that was the case, she would know that she was just being idiotic about Terri.

Eventually, the couple had dinner and finally got to watch a movie together. Afterward, Nicole helped Danny to the bathroom and assisted her in bathing. Danny went to bed then, wearing basketball shorts and a plain sleeveless tee-shirt. Nicole then took her own shower and prepared for bed. Crawling into bed, she cuddled into Danny, who wrapped her healthy arm around the redhead. Danny kissed the top of Nicole's soft auburn locks.

The next day saw pretty much the same thing as yesterday. Terri came over, wanting to check on Danny and cutting into Danny's tedium. When Nicole came in, she was greeted by the sounds of the friends playing video games again. Not too sure what to do, Nicole retreated to her library after making sure Danny had everything that she needed and semi-playing hostess to Terri by asking if she needed anything. Terri requested something to drink, which she got and then Nicole was gone.

"Nicole is cool," Terri said, making sure to keep a good grip on her controller and maintain concentration on the game.

"Damn right she is. That's my angel," Danny declared proudly.

"Lucky ass," Terri replied.

Danny smiled, still looking quite proud. She did notice something odd about her angel, though. She noted that her lover stayed in her library-her sanctuary-for quite a while. It was not like Nicole to hide away and be antisocial. Unfortunately, she could not check on Nicole thanks to her injuries. She was going to have to wait.

"Terri, are you staying for dinner?" Nicole asked as she made her way out of the library to go into the kitchen.

"Nah, I should get a move on," Terri replied.

"Later, dude," Danny said, reaching out her good hand.

"If I can, I'll come back tomorrow for a little while and keep you company," the blond proposed. She noticed that Danny seemed very upbeat when she came over and she figured that would help the healing process. Besides, she liked hanging around the guitarist.

"Sounds good. I'll whip your ass at some more games. Can't do much else yet," Danny chuckled. She was thankful for Terri. Nicole and Crow could not keep her company through the day since they were at work and she got so bored being immobile, so Terri was really a godsend to her.

Unfortunately, Terri worked tomorrow, so she was not sure what she would do if the blond could not make it over.

Terri nodded. "See later, Nicole. Thanks for offering food."

"No problem," Nicole replied.

Terri was gone quickly. Nicole walked her to the door and was very polite. She then went to make dinner. Joining Danny in the living room for the meal, Danny moved closely to Nicole.

"Chem, do you have a problem with Terri by any chance?" Danny asked curiously.

The question caught Nicole by surprise. "What? No. Why do you ask?" she countered, doing her best to sound sincere.

"Because you don't stick around when she's here. You're not usually like that. You tend to be very friendly and a great hostess. When Terri is here, you hide out in the library and you don't really do all the little hostess things with her," Danny explained.

"I just want to give you space with your friend."

"Really?" Danny was skeptical and it showed on her face. "Are you sure you're not still blaming her for my accident? It was really my fault. I came out of nowhere on that bike and she was really freaked out by it."

"I know, I know." She was very aware that Terri was scared by the accident, but that did not explain why she was spending so much time with Danny now. Danny was fine and did not need someone checking on her everyday, unless that someone was Nicole anyway. "It might just take me some time to get used to Terri," she said, feeling like she was being honest, but she was not too sure. She wanted to get used to Danny's friendship, but it felt threatening to her.

"Okay. She likes you, you know," Danny said, thinking that would help Nicole warm up to Terri.

Nicole nodded, not too sure what else to do. The night went on and then turned to day again. The couple started working up a routine. They both noticed that the routine lacked serious physical affection. Nicole always kissed Danny on the cheek when she left for work and they only shared a peck on the lips at night before going to sleep. For a while, Danny chalked it up to Nicole not wanting to work her up, but after several days of it, she was getting frustrated by it.

"Terri, if I was your girlfriend do you think you would kiss me passionately?" Danny asked, leaning back on the couch. They were taking a break from kicking each other's butts at video games and just relaxing.

Terri gave her a sidelong glance. "I dunno. You're not really my type," the blond remarked with a teasing grin. "Now, Nicole..." she added, clicking her tongue and wiggling her eyebrows.

"You keep your hands to yourself and stop eyeballing my angel. I'll break my cast over your forehead."

"Don't worry, not like Nicole is giving me a second thought. As for you, there's not much she can do with you. You're like half a person, even without the sling. Your ribs are still busted and your leg is too. What do you want from the girl?" Terri pointed out.

Danny shrugged. "I guess you're right," she sighed.

"Of course I'm right! Look, you couldn't even fend me off and you want your girl to possibly break you," Terri teased and then she attacked her friend, tickling her. She was not sure where the urge came from, but she just went with it since she was trying to make a point.

Danny screamed like a girl as Terri assaulted her. The blond was very careful, but she did not let up, especially as Danny screamed more. They made so much noise that they did not hear the door open. Nicole walked in on the scene and her mouth practically hit the floor. Emerald eyes locked with slate ones and there Danny saw it. In an instant, the musician knew what the problem was.

"Hey, Nicole," Terri said. "I was just teaching your ingrate of a girlfriend to appreciate you," the blond commented.

"Yes, I'm sure," Nicole muttered, having trouble hiding the fact that her voice wanted to break. "Um...can I get either of you anything?" she offered, wanting to just run and hide in the library.

"No, we're good," Danny answered. "In fact, Terri has to go. She needs to be somewhere," the guitarist lied.

"I do?" Terri looked surprised.

"Yeah, you do. See you later," Danny said, trying to rush her friend out of the house, so she and Nicole could have a long talk.

"Uh...okay," Terri replied. "Later, Nicole," she added in. "I can see myself out." Terri then rushed to the door before Nicole could walk her out.

"Chem, please, sit down," Danny implored her lover.

"Danny, you didn't need to do that," Nicole said, motioning to the door.

"Do what?"

"Run Terri off."

"Yes, I did have to do it. Now, please, sit down," Danny said.

Nicole sighed, knowing the time had come. She eased down on the sofa and Dane moved next to her. Reaching over, Danny took Nicole in her arms; she was able to freely move her right arm since she had gotten the sling off yesterday. Nicole whimpered and started to cry.

"Baby, what's wrong?" Dane asked, even though she knew now.

"I'm sorry. I thought things were going to be normal between us after I backed off from your family, but I know it hasn't and I know I blew it," Nicole answered, weeping into her lover's good shoulder.

"Nick, what the hell are you talking about? How did you blow anything?" Danny inquired, sounding more than a little bemused.

"I didn't back off soon enough. I know you're still upset. You're going to leave me for Terri, aren't you?"

"Uh...hell, no," Dane answered strongly. "I would never do something that stupid! Contrary to what Terri says, she didn't really knock my brain out of my head when we had that accident." She then gently took Nicole by the chin and lifted her head, so they were looking eye to eye. "Nick, baby, you are now and will always be my angel. I don't want anybody else and I never will. Now, we agreed that we were going to talk about things, but you're walking around here silently suffering and afraid that something's going to happen. What happened to talking?"

"I'm sorry. I got so scared that I really blew it," Nicole sniffled.

"You didn't, but it's like you said, we have to have communication. This isn't going to work if we say we're going to do one thing and then do something else. So, no more running away for us and no more just taking it on the chin. If there is a problem, we talk it out, starting right now, okay?" Danny said.

"Okay," the redhead agreed before sniffing again.

Tender fingers wiped away the tears. "No, this one has to be serious. It can't be like last time. We have to mean it," Dane stated.

"I do mean it, Danny. I never want to lose you. You mean so much to me. I promise that I will talk things out with you," Nicole vowed, her voice strong and her eyes sincere.

"And I promise to talk things out with you, starting with right now. I like Terri as a friend. She's just like Crow, just a friend. And it's because of you that I'm able to make friends. Before you, I never would've trusted someone enough to be their friend. You gave me that strength," Danny stated soundly.

Nicole nodded. "You give me strength too, Danny. It's because of you that I can go to school everyday and I can finally put up with work. I love you so much and this has just been driving me crazy. Plus, I'm just so worried about you getting better. I can't spend the same amount of time with you as Terri can and when you're with her you're always playing games, which I have no interest in."

Danny chuckled a bit. "Terri can spend so much time over here because she doesn't have a real job. Well, it is a real job, but she can get everything done early and apparently just vanish for a while. Now, I doubt you want to suddenly become a delivery person just to spend time with me, so don't think anything of it. I don't hold it against you. She's just keeping me from going stir crazy. But, like I said, she's just a friend. You are my lover, my partner. I want it to stay like that," she proclaimed, taking Nicole's hand in her own and holding it tightly.

"I want it to stay like that too," Nicole said, giving Dane's hand a firm squeeze.

"So, we're agreed that we're stuck with each other?" the younger woman inquired with a smile.

Nicole smiled too and nodded. "Agreed."

"Then kiss me like you mean it, woman!"

The redhead grinned and complied. Danny moaned as soon as her lips were touched by Nicole's sweet mouth. And in the first time in what felt like forever for them, they exchanged a passionate, beautiful show of their deep affection. The kiss held their promise and asserted their love for each other. When they pulled away, they felt like they were in heaven.

"I missed that so much," Dane whispered.

"I did too. I never want to be without that," Nicole replied.

"Love you so much."

"I love you too, Danny."

And those words felt very real to both of them. They were both assured that they had finally made it through their first serious rough patch as a couple and if they could make it through that, then they could make it through anything. As long as they stayed together and remembered how to communicate. And as long as they remembered they truly loved each other and wanted to be together for the rest of their lives.

Epilogue: Celebrate good times

Nicole grinned to herself as she made the final arrangements for tomorrow. Closing her cell phone, she wanted to click her heels. Entering the house, she called for Danny. Going into the

living room, she saw her lover was knocked out on the couch with her leg up to elevate her broken limb. She was still in the cast and it would be there for at least another two weeks. Her ribs were healing nicely, but those too would probably not be completely healed for another couple of weeks.

She could not wait for those two weeks to be up, so she could stop being reminded of how Danny was almost taken from her. She hated remembering that she had come so close to losing Danny, not just their relationship, but Danny could have died. Making matters worse, their last moments together would have been an argument and over something that Nicole now understood was ridiculous. Of course, something good came out of it after so much pain and sorrow.

She and Danny had learned to better communicate with each other. Their relationship was stronger than ever. She was glad for that, but she wished it had not taken Danny almost dying for things to come to that. Shaking her head, she stopped thinking about those things.

Nicole leaned down and placed a chaste, sweet kiss to Dane's slightly parted lips. After that, she had to place a large box in the refrigerator and then went to get comfortable before she woke Danny up. Dane was taken from sleep in one of her favorite ways, feeling Nicole's fingers caressing her scalp. Smiling, Dane purred before opening her eyes.

"Hello, baby," Nicole greeted her lover.

"A better hello is said right here," Dane remarked, pointing to her lips.

Nicole chuckled and leaned down to give Danny the kiss that she wanted. Dane started to rise up, wanting to make the kiss deeper. A moan escaped Nicole as Dane's tongue stroked her own. She began pulling away, needing air and not wanting Danny to get carried away, as she had a habit of trying now.

"Baby, calm down," Nicole said in a breath, managing to escape her amorous lover.

"Why? No pressure on my ribs or leg, so why calm down?" Danny teased. She and Nicole had not really been intimate, now mostly because of her injuries. Nicole did not want to risk damaging her body in any way, which she thought was sweet, even if it was forcing celibacy on her, which she thought was cruel and unusual punishment. She could not wait for a clean bill of health and she promised herself that she was going to be very careful from now on.

"Don't try to reason your way into my pants, young lady. Now, tomorrow is someone's special day. Is there anything that she wants? Aside from me naked anyway," Nicole inquired, going back to stroking Dane's scalp.

"You don't have to be naked. I'll take a bow," Dane quipped, wiggling her eyebrows.

Emerald eyes rolled. "You can have that present when the cast comes off and the doctor clears you for such activities."

"What?!" Dane huffed, even though she knew that was coming. They had had that talk several times.

"So, what else do you want?"

Dane scratched the end of her nose. "Nothing really. I'll be happy with just a nice night with you."

Nicole did not seem to believe that. "You don't want to go out for dinner or anything?"

"Nah. Can we watch some movies and just cool out?" Dane requested, glancing down at her leg. For a very brief moment, she frowned at the cast.

"We always do that. Honey, I know this cast has you hung up and everything, but you don't have to live on the couch," Nicole pointed out. Since Danny seemed content to just laze around because of her leg, Nicole had actually taken steps to get her to move around the house at least since she was not totally immobile anymore. She had put the air mattress away, so now Danny had to sleep upstairs, which Danny was actually thankful for. Nothing beat the bed for sleeping.

"I don't really know what to do. We can't go to any of my clubs with my leg like this," Dane stated, motioning to her leg. She would have liked to celebrate her birthday like they did last year, but she had the stupid cast on. They could not do much thanks to it.

"You're right about that," Nicole agreed. She knew what she was going to do for Danny the second she got her cast off.

"I really don't know what I want to do. I liked it last year when you surprised me. I never really thought about my birthday much before that. So, I don't know what to do," Danny explained with a shrug.

Nicole nodded. "All right. I can accept that," she said.

The musician smiled, happy to just be cuddled on the sofa with her lover and for everything to be all right. Her birthday was the next day, but she really did not want anything beyond Nicole's company, which she got. Nicole took the day off and made Danny breakfast in bed. They stayed in the bed for most of the day, kissing and cuddling, before Nicole suddenly got dressed.

"Chem, you going somewhere?" Dane inquired as she watched her girlfriend slip into one of her many sundresses.

"Just downstairs and so are you. Get dressed, darling," Nicole gently insisted, fixing her dress.

Dane was a little distracted; Nicole was wearing one of her favorite dresses. Because of that, Danny had not really heard what her girlfriend said. The attorney did not say anything, but pulled out some clothing for her lover. She helped Danny into a pair of her favorite black shorts, a short-sleeve blue shirt, and a black vest. Danny looked down at the clothing as she put it on.

"You sure we're not going somewhere?" the younger woman asked, sounding a little confused. She felt a little formal for just going downstairs.

"I am very sure we're not. I just want you to look nice for our lunch date," the redhead answered.

Dane blinked a couple of times. "We have a lunch date?" This was the first she heard of it.

Nicole giggled a little and smiled. "We do now. In the kitchen. Will you accompany me?"

"You don't have to ask me twice!"

The couple made their way downstairs and Nicole made them some tuna sandwiches. Everything seemed pretty normal, but the doorbell interrupted their light lunch. Nicole went to answer it and returned with a large bouquet of flowers.

"Happy birthday, baby," Nicole said, presenting Dane with the lovely floral decoration.

"Thank you, Nick," Dane replied, accepting the flowers with a happy grin. She had gotten bouquets of flowers a few times since her accident, but Nicole had been the first person to ever give her flowers on her birthday last year. She wondered if Nicole was working her way into making it a tradition.

Nicole smiled and leaned down for a kiss, which Danny was eager for. The kiss did not last as long as either of them would have liked because the doorbell interrupted them again. Nicole left to answer it, pulling away rather suddenly and leaving Danny in a daze. The daze was short lived as she was attacked out of the blue by her favorite boys.

"Happy birthday, Dane!" Luke and Thomas chimed in together, hugging her, even though she was sitting down.

"Hey, guys," she grinned, leaning down to return the embraces. The boys pulled away suddenly and stood proud before her.

"We brought you a gift," Luke announced, presenting her with a wrapped box.

"And a card," Thomas added, holding up his bounty of an envelope.

Danny did not get to make any inquires because right after the boys, Crow showed up. Minutes later, Mina and Clara showed up; Clara brought her son along since she knew Luke and Thomas would be there. Raymond and Kate entered the house right after that. Even Terri showed up within a half-hour of everyone else and Danny realized that she was having her first ever birthday party.

They did everything that Dane suspected happened at a normal birthday party. They played games. Most of the games, Danny had never heard of, but had a lot of fun playing. They all

talked and had food. They even got Danny to sing a bit for them, which everyone agreed was wonderful. Adam actually looked like he was about to cry.

"Dane, I didn't know..." Adam trailed off, not too sure what he wanted to say.

"You didn't know this girl could blow?" Mina asked in disbelief, pointing her thumb at Danny. She knew Danny did not keep her talent a secret.

Adam's sienna eyes looked away in shame. "I didn't know she was so talented," he admitted.

"There are many things you don't know about me, Adam. Try to remember that," Danny informed him, maintaining a civil tone, but he picked up on the bite underneath that.

Adam opened his mouth, ready to hit her with a smart remark, but he thought better of it. He knew that he did not know Danny, but he wanted to know her. He wanted to know this woman who sung with a voice that was smooth like silk and sweet as honey and who had friends that would come to an almost childish birthday party for her. And he was very aware for that to happen, he had to open himself up to her and he had to stop acting like he knew everything about her. Plus, he had to take another step toward her.

"Hey, Dane," Adam approached her when she was relatively alone, getting herself something to drink in the kitchen.

"What?" Danny replied, leaning on her crutch to keep her balance as she poured some lemonade.

"You sing beautifully. I never knew."

"Hard to know if you never cared to find out," she pointed out. He did not even know she played an instrument until she showed his sons a couple of years ago.

He had to nod to that one. "This is quite true. I'm glad I know now. You know some good people too. They're all very nice."

Dane sighed. "Adam, is there a point in here? I'm not good with small talk." In fact, she had never been good at small talk.

He blew out a breath. "Obviously. Fine, I'll take the hint and stop trying to get you to open up through pointless conversation. How about I start with an invite? Come to my house on Saturday. We're going to have a little birthday party for Luke. You know he would love that."

"And Sharon?"

"Will have to take it. The boys love you and you are their aunt. She has to deal with that. I have to put up with people in her life that I don't like. She can learn to do the same," he stated with conviction.

Dane chuckled at the blunt way her brother put that. "You say I'm their aunt. When do you think you're going to tell them that?"

"Dane, whenever you want to," he promised. "Look, Dane, I know you're angry. You have a right to be. But, at what point are you going to let it go? We're going to be seeing each other a lot because of Luke and Thomas. It would be best if we could at least get along."

Dane shrugged. "You make a point. It's just going to take a while. You ignoring me my whole life...my feelings on it won't disappear in a day just because you're trying. I don't know why you expect it all to go away just because you say it should. That's just arrogant," she said, which was very much like her eldest brother.

Adam nodded and then he regarded her with perhaps the most remorseful expression she had ever seen on someone in her family. He took a deep breath before speaking again. "Sorry. I understand what you mean. We both need to get used to each other. I would like to apologize again, Dane. I was a horrible brother. I don't know if we'll ever get to the point where you accept me as a brother, but I would like us to at least be friends." He went so far as to hold his hand out for her.

Dane glanced down at his hand and then shook her head. "It'll take time," she informed him. "More time than a couple of birthday parties."

"I'm willing to try," he vowed, putting his hand in his pocket since she was not going to shake it.

"Then only time will tell."

He nodded again and their conversation was cut short as the boys charged into the kitchen, begging for juice to help cool them down. Adam took care of filling cups for them and then they ran off, going back to the backyard. Dane and Adam then rejoined the party in the living room.

Dane's favorite part of the day was when the birthday cake was brought out. It was a huge cake that was beautifully decorated. The message on the cake was simple: Happy Birthday, Love. Two candles sat atop the cake; they were shaped in the forms of the numbers two and six. She actually cried when they sang "happy birthday" to her and she blew out the candles, making the wish that things remained as they were. No one questioned her tears; most knew about her never having a proper birthday party and those that had no clue-Adam and Terri- did not want to ruin the moment by asking anything.

"Okay, now it's time for the best part!" Mina announced, shoving her gift into Dane's lap.

Dane did not contradict the attorney, even though she disagreed. "There are children around. Is this something appropriate?" she asked to tease Mina.

"Don't worry, I figure the inappropriate things should go to Nicole for her birthday," Mina quipped.

"Well, if you're shopping, I really like how satin feels on her," Dane said, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Danny!" Nicole gasped, glaring at her lover for saying such a thing with her parents present.

The birthday girl just gave an innocent smile before opening her gift. Mina had given her some perfume, which was not really something she wore, but it would come in handy. Nicole liked the aroma and she could wear it to formal affairs.

As the gifts rolled in, Danny noticed a theme. Opening one of the gifts from Raymond and Kate, she received the video game Guitar Hero. Terri's gift ended up being the guitar controller used to play Guitar Hero. And lastly, one of Nicole's gifts was the game system for Danny to play the games on. Once the kids saw that, they wanted to play immediately. Giving them cake placated the children for the moment.

Danny was able to get through her other gifts without the children bugging anyone. She was surprised that Raymond had gotten her more than one gift. The second present was a keyboard. Crow had been kind enough to get her two tickets to a music festival and showing that she knew Danny was not only about rock music, it was a jazz festival. Clara had gotten Danny a new MP3 player, which she very much needed.

"You guys are the best!" Danny declared with a happy grin. She doubted that there were words that could express her happiness, so she just hoped her expression did her emotions justice. From the way the party-goers regarded her, she believed that they understood what she could not say.

Everyone then had cake while Danny thanked them all over and over again for the presents. After having cake, they all decided that it was about time for them to start leaving. They claimed it was getting late, but really they wanted to give the couple time alone.

"Dane, don't forget about Saturday," Adam reminded her as he grabbed Luke and Thomas to head out.

"I won't," she promised.

Nicole saw everyone out while Danny hobbled into the living room. The couple met on the couch. Nicole then pulled Danny to her and the musician snuggled into the redhead for once.

"Chem, you are the sweetest person on Earth to throw all of this together for little me!" Danny declared with quite the content purr.

"Birthdays are a time for family to get together. I realized that this is the making of your family, baby. These are the people that love you," Nicole stated.

"I hope you didn't tell Kathleen that," Dane joked.

"I'll break the news gently to Mommy when she's already figured it out. But, you can't tell me Daddy isn't your family now," Nicole commented, grinning.

"Are you kidding me? That was about the greatest keyboard I have ever seen! I can't believe he spent so much money on me," the younger woman proclaimed. Raymond had given her an expensive and grand keyboard, knowing that she played the piano, but did not have an instrument to play. He did inform her that he expected a concert on it when she was completely healthy.

"I think he upset Clara because she thought that she had the perfect gift until that point," Nicole said.

"She did! I needed a new MP3 player. I can't believe she spent so much money on me," Dane replied.

"She likes you. They all like you," the redhead assured the birthday girl, caressing Dane's arm as she spoke.

Dane nodded and nuzzled her lover's neck. "You gave me extended family, angel. You are the greatest gift I could ever receive," she whispered before placing a gentle kiss behind Nicole's ear.

Nicole's breath hitched. "I want to give you so much more than that, though, Danny. Do you think you could wait here for a moment while I go get my other gift?"

"You got me something else? More than the fact that you bought me an expensive game system, just threw me my first birthday party, offered me an extended family, and can speak to my brother enough to get him to let the boys come over? Oh, speaking of the boys, Luke's having a birthday party Saturday and I said I'd go, but I want you to come too, okay?"

Nicole smiled and nodded. "I have so much more and, yes, I will go with you on Saturday. Wait here, okay?"

"Can't go many places with my leg still done up like this." Dane motioned to her cast. It was shorter than it was when she had the accident, but she still was not very mobile in it.

Nicole only smiled and got up, walking toward the door that led to the basement. That caused Dane to arch an eyebrow because during the party she had noticed Nicole go down there several times. The stairs were too steep for her to follow with her leg in the cast, so she suspected it was a great place to hide her present.

A strange sound caught her ear as she waited. She quickly found out what that sound was. A little ball of nearly white fluff padded into the living room followed by Nicole. Dane's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"A puppy!" Dane hollered with joy. She reached for her crutches, wanting to get up and scoop up the dog.

"Danny, wait there. Don't get up and hurt yourself," Nicole said, picking up the canine and carrying him over to Danny. As soon as she was within distance, she passed the pup to Dane, who hugged him tightly.

"Oh, my god, Nick. Oh, my god!" Dane just held the dog underneath her chin and grinned like never before.

"I take it you like the gift," Nicole said dryly. Internally, she felt immense pride at being able to put such an expression on her girlfriend's face.

"I do, I do, I do! He's so adorable!"

The redhead nodded and smiled. "That's what I thought when I saw him."

"Where did you get him? When did you get him?" Dane inquired, unable to keep her enthusiasm down.

"One of my more friendly coworkers' dog had puppies. A lot of puppies. He certainly couldn't afford them, he said. As soon as they were old enough to part with their mother, he was telling any and everyone that he had puppies for sale. He actually gave me first pick."

Dane looked down at the puppy in her hands, trying to figure out what made Nicole pick him. He appeared to be rather small and happy. He licked the end of her nose while she studied him and she giggled-yes, Danny giggled like a schoolgirl.

"If you want to know, I waited until all the puppies were gone. He was the last one and it seemed like no one wanted him," Nicole explained.

"Of course you would do that, Nick. I think he's perfect, though," Dane declared.

"Yeah. That's what I thought when I saw him and I couldn't figure out why no one wanted him. My coworker said the little guy wasn't friendly to anyone else, which I thought was weird. He certainly seemed friendly to me. And to you too, apparently," Nicole quipped as the pup cuddled underneath Dane's chin.

"How did you hide a whole dog from me?" Dane asked in amazement.

"Mina brought him over here for me today. She held onto him for a few days, so he wouldn't end up being an early birthday gift for you. I think she might end up getting a dog from the way she was with him. She took the time to explain to me that he's not really just a gift for you," Nicole said.

"No?" Dane tilted her head curiously and turned her attention completely to Nicole, not wanting to miss this explanation.

"No." Nicole shook her head and put her hands on Danny's. She then looked her lover directly in the eye. "He's my promise to you that I'm going to be here for you, to help you care for him, and to be your family, Danny. We're a family. I'm here to support you in every way possible. I am committed to you," she vowed.

Dane was speechless; Nicole was the only person that could rob her of words. A kiss seemed to be the only way for her to express her approval and elation. Nicole accepted the kiss and returned it. She had to stop it once Danny pressed for more, even though Dane knew that she was not in any position to do more.

"Now, what should we name our proud son?" Nicole remarked, laughing as she rubbed the pup's head.

"Hmm...we should name him something that reflects both of us. Something that we both have in common."

Nicole nodded and it seemed easy enough. They liked music and since that was really Dane's passion, she thought that they should name the pup something to do with music. It took a while, but they named him Haydn.

Before the couple could get any further with the newest member of their household, the phone rang. Nicole was closest, so she grabbed it. Checking the caller ID, she saw it was a private number. Shrugging, she answered.

"Hello?" Nicole said, watching Dane continue to hug Haydn close.

"Hello, may I please speak to Dane?" the caller requested.

Nicole recognized the voice. "Hold on," she replied, covering the mouthpiece. "Danny, sweetie, it's your mother on the phone," she informed the infatuated musician.

"So?" Dane replied, confused as to why she should care.

"Baby, she wants to talk to you. Do you want to talk to her or not?" Nicole asked.

"Not really. It probably has to do with that stupid account or something," Dane figured. She and Nicole still had not touched the money that Christine put in the bank for Dane. They were not sure if they ever would touch it.

"Should I take a message?"

Dane thought on it for a moment and then shook her head. She put her hand out and Nicole handed her the phone. "What?" she asked, sounding a little frustrated. Her mother was taking away time that she could be using to play with their new puppy.

"Dane, I was just calling to wish you a happy birthday," Christine said, trying her best to sound normal.

"Why? You never have before. I'm surprised you know what day I born," Dane pointed out.

"Dane, I am trying," Christine sighed, sounding exhausted already.

"Yeah, well, good luck with that." The call was then ended and Danny passed the phone back to Nicole.

"You okay?" the lawyer asked as she placed the phone back on the cradle.

"Called to wish me a happy birthday. She's got nerve. So much nerve," Dane snorted.

"Are you okay?" Nicole repeated, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend.

Grey eyes glanced down at Nicole and a smile lit up Danny's face. "Of course, I'm okay. I'm sitting here with my family. Why wouldn't I be okay?" she countered, sincerity in her gaze.

With that answered, the couple turned their attention back to Haydn. He was a tiny white shepherd and did little aside from sniff the two women for the rest of the night. He seemed quite content to be cuddled and petted by Danny and Nicole. Nicole was not sure if she would be able to part the pair, especially when Danny carried him up to their bedroom.

"He is not sleeping in the bed," Nicole stated firmly. Yes, he was adorable and everything, but he was an adorable ball of fur that would get all over the bedspread. The idea was not very appealing to her.

"But, why? He'll be lonely on the floor!" Dane argued, clutching the pup to her chest.

"He'll be fine, honey. He has to get used to it and we need to train him as early as possible, not just with the sleeping arrangements, but with everything. Sleeping arrangements especially, though. I mean it, he's not sleeping in the bed with us," Nicole said in her strongest voice.

"But, he's our son!" Dane replied, grinning now. Never in her life did she think that she would utter such words, especially about a dog. But, then again, she never expected to have a dog. It was a great feeling. Only now did she realize how much she had always wanted a dog.

"He's on the floor, babe. I'm not changing that. I'll get him a pet bed tomorrow if it makes you feel any better, but he's not sleeping in the bed with us. We have to be firm with him and like I said we have to start training immediately without pampering him too much."

Danny pouted, but for once it did not get her anywhere. Nicole was kind enough to make Haydn a bed with a blanket. It seemed to be enough for the dog because he curled up in the fabric as soon as Nicole put him down.

Once the puppy was asleep, the couple went about their usual nighttime rituals. Dane needed some help because of the cast, but having to live with it for so long, she could do most things on her own. As they settled down into bed, Danny pulled Nicole as close to her as possible.

"Thank you for a wonderful birthday, angel," Dane whispered before placing a gentle kiss to Nicole's forehead.

"Get used to those, Big Dog."

"Then you get used to these." Dane leaned down, giving her lover a heated kiss. Nicole pulled away when she started getting overzealous.

"Sweetheart, you know we're not going there until the cast comes off and you're completely healed, so don't tease yourself. Besides, didn't you just point out our son is in the room?" the redhead teased.

Danny laughed, but she backed off. She cast their "son" a glance and grinned. She felt giddy just looking at Haydn. She held Nicole close to her and continued looking at Haydn. Nicole smiled, knowing that Danny truly appreciated that gift. It felt like the right thing and Haydn turned out to be the right pup for them.

He was very affectionate and bonded with both women quickly, loving to curl up with them whenever he could. They both enjoyed holding him and cuddling him. He liked nuzzling them and giving them "puppy kisses."

Nicole had to take him for walks and everything at first, but Danny was itching to get her cast off, so she could do the same. The guitarist wanted to take care of the pup too, which was why the redhead held off on buying many things for Haydn until Danny could go along with her. Danny did often play games with Haydn in the house, mostly fetch and tug-of-war. When they started training Haydn, Danny made sure to do her share, not even thinking about the cast. She just wanted to be there with Nicole for Haydn every step of the way and she wanted to know how to properly care for him just as much as Nicole wanted to know. They quickly became proud and caring parents toward their little puppy.

Haydn was quite the content and satisfied pup, having a very good life with his two owners. Later on, people would assure Nicole and Dane that they spoiled the pup. He did help bring his owners closer together, though. Somehow, he helped them see the world in a whole new light and gave them a different perspective on many things. It felt like his presence had taken their relationship to a new level and they were very pleased with that.

Danny grinned widely to herself as she moved about the house, working as quickly as she could. She was moving about with ease, so glad to have her cast off. Her ribs were healed and her leg was healed. All the bones had mended perfectly too; she was inclined to give Nicole credit for that since the redhead had been a dutiful nurse. Dane was the picture of health now. She had

even agreed to get the surgery to fix her knee and leg as best it could. That appointment was a couple of months away, though, and far from her thoughts. Right now, she only had one thing on her mind-preparing the bedroom.

She had to be done by the time Nicole came in. The only thing that proved problematic was Haydn. She needed to get him out of the house, but with no car and no bike anymore, she was at a bit of a loss. But, Crow came through as usual and saved her ass on that. Sometimes, she wondered what she would do without Crow, but the Gothic woman always waved that off. Apparently, it was not something that she had to worry about.

So, now that she did not have to worry about Haydn, she was able to finish up her labor of love. By the time Nicole came home from work, Dane was there to greet her at the door. Leaning down, she welcomed Nicole home with a deep kiss. For once, Dane pulled away first.

"Happy anniversary," Dane whispered against Nicole's soft lips.

"It certainly is. If you'd step outside, I'd like to show your gift," Nicole replied in a low tone of her own.

Dane grinned; she certainly liked getting presents. Nicole tugged her lover outside and in the front yard Danny saw her anniversary gift-a brand new bike. Her mouth was pretty much on the floor.

"You got me a bike?" Dane asked in disbelief, eyes going from Nicole to the bicycle to Nicole and back to the bicycle.

"You need the exercise, baby. As much as I like this," she paused to grab Dane's slightly pudgy sides. "I don't want it to get too out of control. And your leg needs the workout too. I know how much you love biking." The redhead smiled.

Dane nodded eagerly. "Yes, I'm going to ride this tomorrow when I take Haydn for a walk. See if his little short legs can keep up with me," she declared.

"You better not overwork our precious pup," Nicole pretended to scold her.

Dane smiled innocently before going over to the bike. It was sitting pretty in the driveway and she circled a few times. Nicole would not have been surprised if Danny did a dance around the bicycle the way she moving so giddily around it. Nicole watched as Dane mounted the bike, testing it out by peddling only a couple of times.

"It's perfect!" the younger woman proclaimed.

"I'm glad you like it," Nicole replied, smiling.

"Like it? I love it!" Dane hopped off of the bike and rushed back over to Nicole, taking the redhead in her arms. "And I love you," she whispered, before dipping her head and taking Nicole into a heated kiss.

"Danny, baby," the lawyer said, pulling back a little. "As much as I love you, I don't like sharing it this much out on the front lawn," she remarked.

Danny chuckled and took Nicole by the hand. She led Nicole back into the house; it was safe to leave the bike out in the yard. She then directed Nicole into den, which the redhead thought was odd. Turning on the light, Nicole saw a dress draped across the couch.

"You change into that for an early dinner," Dane instructed. "I have to go get my own clothes on."

Nicole nodded and Dane limped out of the room, looking as giddy as she felt. Nicole changed quickly, even though she wished that she had been able to take a shower before doing so. She always felt more relaxed after having a shower. But, if Danny wanted an early dinner, then they would have that. She could always have her shower later.

Nicole was dressed before Dane and waited in the den, just in case Danny had surprises around the house. She would prefer that they stay surprises because she liked it when Danny was romantically shocking. When Danny returned, she was looking quite dashing; it was almost hard to believe that she had prepared herself on her own.

"My, my, my, our anniversary actually warranted a brush," Nicole remarked, running her fingers lightly through Dane's brushed and combed hair. Her usually wild onyx mane was managed and shining, her natural blond highlights popping out.

"I needed a quick tutorial from Terri on how to use the damn thing," Dane quipped. She had asked Terri for advice since their hair was practically the same length.

Nicole laughed, but thought that Danny did a wonderful job on her hair. She already knew that she was going to spend a great deal of time playing in the soft, short locks. She then took the time to take in Dane's outfit. She was wearing cream pants with a matching vest and a long-sleeve lilac shirt. The aroma coming off of her seemed to be the scent of lilac.

"You're wearing the perfume that Mina bought you," Nicole realized.

"I know you like how it smells," Dane answered, blushing just a little.

"It is intoxicating," Nicole admitted, moving to bury her face in Danny's neck. When the sniffing turned to kissing, Dane pulled away.

"Tsk, ts. There'll be plenty of time for that later. Right now, we need to have our anniversary dinner. Well, actually we need to do something before that," Dane stated.

"Something before dinner?" Nicole was intrigued.

"Come."

Nicole nodded in agreement. She offered Dane her arm, which Danny readily took. Stepping into the living room, Nicole noticed that things had been rearranged, so there was a large empty space in the middle of the floor. While green eyes scanned the space, Dane grabbed a small remote and pressed a button. Soft music invaded the cozy area, causing the shorter woman to turn her attention back to Danny.

"May I have this dance?" Dane requested, leaning down to kiss Nicole's fingers.

Nicole smiled. "Of course."

Dane grinned and moved her hand to Nicole's hip. They glided through the open space as much as it would allow as the music played. Nicole pressed herself into Danny, resting her head against the musician's shoulder. A content sigh escaped the attorney as her eyes drifted shut.

"Danny, this is wonderful," Nicole commented, swaying with her lover.

"I figured you'd like dancing and I don't mind it when people can't see how bad I am at it," Dane remarked with a cheeky expression, not that her girlfriend could see.

The redhead snorted. "Okay, you stop talking now. You're ruining the moment and I want it to last for as long as possible."

Dane chuckled, but did as ordered. She savored the moment too, closing her eyes and resting her cheek against soft auburn locks. They moved together for the whole song, holding each other close and taking each other in. When the song ended, they kept moving, not realizing it was over for a while.

"Danny," Nicole whispered.

"Hmm?"

"I think the music stopped."

Dane's head popped up. "So, it has. I suppose we should stop dancing then."

Nicole cuddled closer. "Only if you want to."

"Well, dinner will get cold if we just stay out here, dancing to nothing," Dane pointed out.

A long sigh escaped the redhead. "I guess we can stop...you know, for the sake of dinner."

"You'll enjoy dinner," Dane promised. "Come on."

Nicole nodded and once again allowed her sweetheart to lead her off, both of them smiling like two happy teenagers all the way through. They went into the kitchen where dinner was set up on the table. All Dane had to do was light a candle for the right atmosphere and then motioned for Nicole to sit down. The couple smiled at each other from across the table, eating and feeding each other the rich meal that Danny had prepared.

"Baby, you outdid yourself with this," Nicole moaned as she swallowed down a juicy piece of chicken breast.

"I wanted to tantalize your taste buds," Dane replied with a wicked smirk.

Nicole smiled, but relished the delicious meal as best she could. She tried her best not to hurry through dinner, but paced herself in the same manner that Danny was. They went back to feeding each other until the meal was all gone. Nicole then got up and went to sit on Danny's lap, but was stopped.

"You should go take a shower while I get these dishes and things up," Danny suggested, a happy glint in her eyes.

Nicole pouted. "You mean there's no dessert?"

Snickering through her nose, Dane smiled and rubbed her hands together. "You'll get it once you get out of the shower. Oh, and use the bathroom at the end of the hall, not the one in the bedroom."

The redhead nodded instead of arguing, wanting to see what Danny planned next. Nicole marched off, swaying as she moved because she knew grey eyes clocked her as she left. Dane growled as she watched Nicole sashay out of sight. The movement of those hips and that ass got her moving to get to the next part of the day.

Nicole was of like mind on wanting to get to the next part, especially when she saw what was waiting for her in the bathroom. Danny had left the undergarments that she wished for Nicole to wear after her shower. Waiting for her to wear were white lace and ivory silk and she shivered in anticipation. She wanted to give Danny time to set up whatever she needed, but she could not stay in the shower for long. Once she was done, she strolled down to the bedroom, where the door was slightly ajar.

From the crack, she could tell the room was bathed in the expected candlelight, but she was not sure what else awaited her. Taking deep breath, she opened the door and immediately turned her attention to the bed, which was covered in shattered rose petals. Resting on top of the linen like some kind of big cat, Dane was reclined, hands across the pillows at the head of the bed, in all of her naked glory. She beckoned Nicole closer with a simple crook of her finger.

Nicole moved, swaying all the way, teasing her lover's senses. Once she got to the bed, she climbed up and moved on all fours toward Danny, not stopping until she was astride Dane's body and they were face to face. Unable to resist each other, their mouths drew together like opposite ends of a magnet and they stole each other's breath away. They did not pull apart until it was absolutely necessary.

The redhead was about to lean in for another kiss, but was halted when Dane presented her with a ruby red strawberry covered in whipped cream. *So that was dessert*, Nicole thought. Nicole had to make a show out of licking the cream off before taking the fruit into her mouth, twirling her tongue around it and sucking on it. It was not until Dane groaned in envy of the fruit did Nicole finally eat the strawberry.

"I hope you don't have many of these. I'm in the mood for a different sort of dessert," Nicole remarked with a smoldering gaze.

"No one said we had to eat them now," Dane commented with a smirk.

"Then let's save that for later and get to the real treat."

Dane nodded in agreement and Nicole's lips returned to hers. As they eagerly explored each other's mouths, Dane leisurely caressed Nicole's body. Her hands ran up and down Nicole's side, over her back, and eventually inside her silk gown. Nicole shuddered in pleasure as soon as her lover's tender hands were on her heated flesh.

"Take it off," Nicole begged, voice quivering, lips hovering right above her beloved's mouth.

"Your wish is my command, but for that to happen, you need to roll over," Dane bargained.

Nicole nodded in agreement and quickly moved so that she was lying on the bed. Danny moved over Nicole. It had been months since they had been able to be with each other like this. It was only recently when Danny's leg was able to support her and she loomed over Nicole in a way that made the redhead shiver with anticipation. She could not wait to feel Danny against her.

Danny peeled Nicole out of her gown and flung it somewhere at the foot of the bed while leaning in for another kiss. Nicole wrapped her arms around the younger woman and tried her best to touch Danny everywhere. Dane purred from the attention, but moved a bit every time Nicole touched her shoulder. Nicole did not think too much of it, figuring Danny was just eager. Dane returned the attention by stroking Nicole's breast.

The redhead moaned in pleasure, trying her best to press herself as much as she could into Danny's hands. All of the movement made Danny groan deep in her throat. It felt like it had been an eternity since they had felt their bodies together. It was almost a religious experience and they had not done more than kiss yet. They were both a little skeptical that they could survive a complete sexual session if a simple kiss was making them see stars. Of course, it was not going to stop them from trying.

Before long, Dane's mouth was mobile, kissing and licking her way down Nicole's body, reveling in the taste of her lover. Nicole hissed and arched her body into Danny's when the musician nipped at her neck; they both knew there would be a mark there later. Dane growled when Nicole's body rubbed up against hers, reminding her that she still had clothing to take Nicole out of.

"While you do look incredibly sexy in this, you're wearing too many clothes," Dane admonished the lawyer.

"You wanted me to put them on," Nicole reminded her, panting already.

"Silly me."

Danny moved to correct her mistake, reaching around Nicole to unclasp the bra. She smoothly removed the piece and flung that behind them. Nicole arched her body as soon as she was free, pressing her torso to Dane's body, causing them both to moan. They took a moment to enjoy the feeling of their naked torsos touching before Danny went back to kissing all over Nicole's sweet form.

Nicole clung to Dane as she moved. Throwing her head back, she howled when Dane's lips attached themselves to her left nipple. Delighted by that action, Dane applied more pressure while her right hand went to occupy the other sensitive gem. Nicole bucked against her and she groaned as she felt Nicole's center press against her thigh.

"Oh, angel, you are soaked for me," Dane realized, feeling the moisture against her leg.

"You know that your body against me like this drives me wild," Nicole replied with a feral growl. "And it's been so long," she added. *Too long! I need her so much right now.*

"Maybe I should just take the edge off for you. I want this to last," the musician said in a low tone.

"Just keep going, baby. Don't worry."

Dane responded by that switching breasts and rolling Nicole's nipple around with her tongue. Nicole mewed and wiggled, making sure to keep her grip on Danny, silently letting Danny know to stay close. The only time Danny left her was to slide her panties down her legs. Danny then kissed her way back up Nicole's body, pausing at the apex of her thighs.

"Don't tease me, baby. Please, don't tease," Nicole implored her lover, shamelessly pushing herself into Danny's face.

The younger woman kissed Nicole's most intimate area and then placed an almost shy lick to the same space. Nicole whined, which turned into a long moan as Danny's tongue stayed with her, explored her, mapped her center with tender care. Nicole's body moved with Dane's mouth and the musician needed to hold onto Nicole's leg to keep her steady. A long, almost-wail like moan

escaped Nicole as Dane worked her tongue in, out, and around her core. Dane knew that she was doing everything right thanks to that strange noise.

"Danny, up!" the redhead ordered, knowing she would not last long with this attention, but she wanted to feel Danny's body against her when she climaxed.

Dane complied with one final nip, kissing her way up Nicole's body. Their lips met as Danny slipped two deft fingers into the warm, moist canal, making Nicole's breath hitch. The redhead arched and whined, waiting for her lover to do something. But, for a long moment, Dane was still, taking in the moment, reveling in the feel of Nicole gripping her. Nicole took that moment to slid her leg in between Danny's legs and the sudden presence jumped started Dane's brain. Slowly, Danny began to play her favorite song.

Nicole eventually broke the kiss, panting and growling as Danny moved within her. "That feels so good, baby," she murmured, moving to keep pace with her lover.

Dane did not respond. She kept her mouth occupied by nipping at Nicole's neck and collarbone, pausing only to whimper from the feel of Nicole's thigh against her. She was about to move back to Nicole's mouth when she felt the telltale signs of Nicole's peak. Nicole threw her head back, screaming in pure ecstasy. As muscles clamped down on her fingers, Danny did not stop, did not want to stop.

"Oh, god, Chem," Dane whispered, having to close her eyes for a moment and just take in what was happening between them.

The feel of those tight muscles gripping her long digits caused Dane to groan and she moved with more fervor against Nicole's thigh, falling off the edge herself. Even as she reached that apex, her fingers did not cease. Nicole soon was crying out again, tears dipping down the corners of her eyes.

"No more," Nicole begged in a small voice.

"One more," Dane countered, continuing on. She figured that she would be able to crest again too if they could just go a little longer. "I need to stay... You feel so good... One more..."

Nicole locked eyes with Danny and then nodded. As Dane picked up where she left off, the redhead leaned forward wanting another kiss. The kiss did not last long as Nicole tossed her head again, calling Dane's name as it felt like her body exploded in complete and total bliss. She clutched Dane tightly, forcing the younger woman harder onto her thigh and Dane joined her in that explosion. Clinging to Danny, Nicole tried to get her breathing under control as she felt Dane ease out of her. She whimpered a bit, almost feeling lonely without Danny's fingers.

The loneliness was forgotten as she watched Danny bring her fingers to her mouth and suck them clean. She moved and grabbed Danny's hand, pulling the fingers away. Dane was confused for less than a second as Nicole slipped the fingers into her mouth. Dane made a noise between a moan and gasp as Nicole's tongue ran up and down her digits.

"All clean," Nicole purred as she released Danny's hand.

"That was intense," Dane muttered, wiping a bit of sweat from her brow. She had almost forgotten that making love could be like that since they had been somewhat limited with her broken leg and busted ribs.

"That was only half of it," Nicole remarked, her fingers lightly trailing down Dane's body.

Dane chuckled a bit and glanced down, trying to see what her lover's busy fingers were up to. "I can't wait for the other half then."

Nicole smiled before pulling Danny down onto her, initiating another kiss. One her hand trailed up and down Dane's torso while her other swirled around Danny's bellybutton, purposely teasing her. The taunting stopped when Dane rocked her hips against Nicole, earning a groan from the redhead.

Nicole decided to get Danny back and moved her free hand to Dane's breast. Kneading the globe with great care, Dane let loose a long moan into Nicole's mouth. While Danny was paying attention to that sensation, Nicole's other hand slid to where it was wanted the most. Danny had to break the kiss and as moan mixed with a deep growl tore out of her throat. She was moving before Nicole's fingers were and Nicole had to settle her down because the redhead did not want a hurried pace.

"Slow down, baby. We're here all night," Nicole pointed out in a hushed down. All Danny could do was nod, thinking about how Nicole's fingers were so much better than her thigh.

With each stroke, Danny felt like she was falling apart and being pieced back together. She moved to kiss Nicole again, but Nicole decided at that moment to change pace and twist and crossed her fingers. Dane's head dropped to Nicole's shoulder and a voice she was certain was not hers groaned as euphoria rushed through her. Panting in Nicole's ear, the redhead took the heavy breathing as a plea for more and smiled as she moved faster, curling her fingers and massaging her lover from the inside out. A strangled bellow accompanied Dane's fall over the edge that time and she collapsed on top of Nicole, no longer able to hold herself up.

"I give. You win," Dane remarked as she caught her breath.

"I always win, baby," Nicole teased.

"That you do," Dane agreed. They were silent for a while before she had the strength to roll over. In the move, Nicole noticed something quite new on Danny's back.

"Honey, when did you go out and get a new tattoo?" Nicole inquired, only seeing a glimpse of the new artwork just now.

"A couple weeks ago," Dane answered with a strange smile. She had hoped, but had not thought, she would be able to keep it a secret that long. But, she managed to pull it off.

Nicole made a curious noise. "That explains why you kept wearing shirts with sleeves and wouldn't let me take a shower with you. May I see?"

"Of course."

Danny sat up and turned her back to Nicole. While the redhead focused on her new tattoo, she reached over to the nightstand to grab something. Nicole could not believe Dane had gone out and gotten a tattoo of angel wings on her shoulders. The wings flanked her other tattoo of the word "demon" down her spine. Inside of the wings at the top, on the right was the word "chem" and on the left were words "love forever."

"Danny, you didn't have to do this," Nicole whispered, voice mixed with awe and disbelief.

"No, I did have to. Just like I had to do this," Dane replied and she turned around to present Nicole with a ring.

"Danny...?" Nicole said, voice trembling as she looked down at the jewelry. It was a simple ring of a gold band and a row of small diamonds. Her body started to shake a little, not sure what to make of the gift.

Dane reached out and stroked Nicole's cheek, calming her down. "This isn't a proposal, Chem. I don't think I'm in the best place to propose to you just yet. I do have growing to do and you have growing to do, but this is a promise that I will forever be committed to you, to our relationship, and to our family. This is a promise that I will be ready to marry you soon. This is a promise that there will be a proposal in your future. This is a promise that I'm not going anywhere, no matter what. I promise that I will always be there and I promise that I will always love you," she vowed as she slipped the ring on Nicole's left ring finger.

Nicole could not even speak as tears welled up in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. Dane reached up and wiped away the tears before leaning down for a kiss. Nicole returned it with as much passion as she could muster.

"I have to go out and get you one of these," Nicole remarked as they broke apart for air. Tears still slid down her face as she held up the ring to admire it. She doubted that she had ever felt so overjoyed before in her life.

"Since I know I can't say anything to stop you, I'll just accept whatever you give me," Dane replied with a small smile. She was glad that Nicole had such a positive reaction to the ring. It gave her a boost of confidence and led her to believe despite their hardships, she was doing fine at this relationship. She just wanted to do better and be everything that Nicole deserved.

"I promise to always be there for you, Danny. I will always be your support and your shoulder. I will always love you too," Nicole vowed. She was flattered that Danny thought so much of her, going so far as to mark her body for Nicole. It made her feel more secure and it also made her feel like she had to better herself to be all that Danny deserved. "And don't think that you might not be the one with a proposal in your future," the lawyer added with a smile.

Dane did not dispute that. She just sealed the pledge with another kiss. They were willing to fight for each other, to keep each other, and they would always be willing to do that. They would always support each other. They would continue to grow individually and together. They would be all that both deserved and they would make it. They were sure sometime in the future they would be ready for a real engagement and then a marriage. They both wanted it and they knew if they worked for it, then it would be so. Looking at each other and seeing nothing but love, they knew that it would be so.

The end.

Once again, contact the lunatic at starving.lunatic@gmail.com and lemme know what you think. Thank you again for reading my work. I hope you enjoyed the story! If so, find more of my insanity here for fanfics: <http://www.fanfiction.net/u/932292/> and for more original work here: <http://www.fictionpress.com/u/576301/>

Shea K's Scrolls
Index Page
