

~ Scarred for Life ~

by Shea K

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General warning: This story will eventually involve a sexual relationship between two women. There will also be extreme language and descriptions of drug use, so if that's not your cup-o-tea, move on.

Special thanks to my betas, Ken-zero and Faioxromokitoma, who made this story the best it could be. Many thanks to you guys. You are the best.

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

1: The end. Already?

An early spring typically makes people think that the year had promise. The beauty brought on by the bright greens of the grass and leaves, the cheerful songs of all types of birds, and the caress of the light breeze makes it seem like everything was fine in the world. It was as if everything was right everywhere and nothing could ever go wrong.

Keeping up the façade that everything was right was the look of the neighborhood, holding just as much promise as the day. Well-kept, two-story houses lined the spotless streets. If fences made good neighbors, everyone around must have gotten along rather well since either a fence, gate, or hedge separated each home. Each house had a large front yard with lush green grass, as if no one dared to mess up the perfect picture by having a piece of grass out of place. Some yards did have children's toys or bikes littering the walkways or the lawns, but those flaws added a soft touch to the scene, making everything seem almost sickeningly sweet.

Would everything be so sweet if they knew a former predator roamed their fair streets? If they knew a Wolfe was wandering about their picturesque little neighborhood? If they knew that the Great Dane was outside their doors and could later on be picking up their daughters? Well, could, but more than likely would not.

Dane shook those thoughts away, continuing down the street of the pleasant looking neighborhood, a noticeable limp in her step. Quaint was the word that came to mind; it seemed like some place comfortable, and even held the possibility of being... real. She had not had the opportunity to spend time in many real places, but she was willing to bet that the quaint-looking neighborhood was just as phony as other environment she had had the displeasure of walking through.

Dull grey eyes glanced around each house, Dane liked to think that each held a happy family that was doing the right thing to an extent, but she was certain that was just a dream-the last shred of human hope held in her withered, tired heart. From her experience, she was sure that every house, every individual, had more secrets than most would fathom. Some of those secrets were quite benign, she would give them that; any healthy life racked up a few mild secrets. But, others...others could mean jail sentences, children taken away, property lost, excommunication, and exile from the community. She had met and kept her fair share of both.

Dane liked to think that she was not completely jaded with the world, as her eyes were grey, not green. She figured that somewhere in all of those prim yards, tidy driveways, and well-kept houses there was a family that was generally all right. Somewhere in the pile there were people that actually cared for each other and others and tried to do the right thing more often than not, no matter how insignificant matters might seem. It was the law of averages, she supposed.

But, all in all, she could guess the story of the suburban neighborhood. The beautiful façade was draped over everything, hiding the real show from the world like curtains on a stage play. All the world was a stage, she knew, but some places wanted to hide their show more than others. The show had stopped interesting her years ago; the masks were better left off, and all the actors naked before her to let her know that everybody was more fucked up than they wanted to let on. Herself included, of course.

As she continued on down the dark grey sidewalk, she came to a street with children playing. She chuckled a bit to herself; she used to think that children did not do that anymore, but apparently she was wrong. Well, it was either that or she managed to get sucked back in time ten years. Not being high, she leaned more toward the former than the latter. It was nice to see kids playing outside, on a block, almost like a television show.

Youthful eyes stared at her as she came through. She suspected that she might have had the word "outsider" branded to her copper-tone forehead or they just knew that she did not belong. This time, she was sure it was the latter; she liked to think that she was alert enough to notice if someone branded her sometime in the last twenty-four hours.

It seemed like the type of little neighborhood where everyone knew everyone else, at least in passing. Of course, no one knew her. She was new, she stood out, and she carried herself in manner that she doubted was fit for the pure-and-simple area.

There was the chance that she might be mistaken for a delivery person. She was pushing a ratty, rusted bike. In fact, the bike was disturbing the peace and quiet because it squeaked rather badly. She had a bag; sure, it was a book-bag with one strap broken and duct tape covering the bottom as well as a hole on the side. She doubted that anyone was going to think that she was delivering any kind of food and if she was, they were probably going to urge the recipient not to eat it. Destroying any chance of being mistaken for anything but the weirdo she knew they thought she was, she was carrying a worn guitar case.

She doubted that it helped that she had piercing on her face; there were two bars in her left eyebrow. She was also wearing a worn-out pair of sky blue shorts that went past her knees; some

puffed-up scars poked out from underneath the right cuff while light scars cut cross both legs. She had a clear limp that seemed to beg people to stare, at least for a few seconds. A chain dangled from her pocket to her belt loop, and the movement seemed to catch some of the attention that she was getting. The noise of the chain hitting against her slim thigh also deflected some attention from directly on her.

Having become an expert in ignoring people and shutting out the god-forsaken world whenever she wanted to, Dane pressed on as if she walked these streets a million times in her life. She crossed a street and noted the sign telling her that she was now on 23rd street. She went into the pocket of her large, blue jean shorts and pulled out a wrinkled sheet of yellow paper. Written on it was simply, "23rd and Jordan ave. 23-07."

She checked the deep green and perfect white street signs to make sure she was on the right track. As far as she knew, she was. She scratched her head, mussing her already wild mop of ebony hair, with the hand that held the paper. She then put the paper away, pushed her bike onto 23rd street, and began scanning for the house in the fading light of day.

She came to the middle of the street and thought that she had finally come to the house that she was looking for. It was a clone of the houses around it, but painted a deep red while most of the other houses were white. The short, verdant lawn was divided in two by a walkway leading up a clean, long porch. There was a tree on the left side of the lawn that her gaze lingered on for a moment, thinking about how she would have loved to climb the long, thick branches when she was a child. She quickly rid herself of that thought, knowing that it would take her to dark, dark places.

She dropped her bike at the bottom of the steps at the porch and scaled the five low stairs to the porch. She glanced at the two windows flanking the door and saw that the house was dark. Still, she decided to knock before assuming that no one was home. When the loud knocking was not answered, she figured no one was there or she was not wanted. Either way, she was not getting in the house.

She glanced over at the driveway and noted the luxury black sedan that was parked there. She was a bit curious why the car was in the driveway, but no one was home. She considered that someone might be back quickly. There were stores, restaurants, and take-out places not too far from the house, so a person walking was not farfetched.

Dane was about to sit down on the stairs and wait, as she had nothing better to do with her life. She could use a break too; her leg was practically screaming for her to take a moment to stop. A grumbling noise halted any plans that she had for resting. She glanced around and when she did not see any angry bears around, she gathered that the noise had come from her stomach. She glanced down at her growling belly, seeing nothing but her torn black, short-sleeve shirt.

"All right, monster, I'll feed you. I just need to see how much money I have," she muttered as she went into her pocket. She pulled out her worn leather wallet, which was connected to her shorts by the long chain at her side. When she opened the wallet, she was surprised that a moth did not

fly out of the thing because it was so empty. "Hmm...couldn't even buy a stick of gum right now. Isn't that always the way?"

She chuckled a bit at her own question and shook her head while placing her wallet back into her pants. She gathered her bike and proceeded to make her way off of the property. Her stomach voiced its displeasure again, much louder than before, and she just laughed again.

"Cry all you want, but it damn sure isn't putting food in you and it ain't putting no fucking money in my wallet either," she remarked, but her empty belly missed the joke. It grumbled again and she ignored it, like the rest of the world. She could get some money, but she just was not in the mood to search for a bank right now.

A pair of car doors slamming echoed through the quiet neighborhood that was now blanketed in a comfortable spring night. The bright moon overhead, shining down on the world like a spotlight, was witness to the loud clicking of high heels that moved in annoyed stride up the stone walkway. The heels were quickly accompanied by the soft sound of leather shoes.

Pink-painted, glistening lips twisted into a frown when the sound of the other shoes echoed through the night. The high heels clicked quicker for a few seconds before resigning to fate and returning to the original, but tense pace. They clicked up the wooden stairs and were followed by the patter of the other shoes.

Keys jangled mirthlessly as they were freed from the small black handbag that had been their prison for hours. Before they could do their job, they had a meeting with gravity and ended up on the wooden porch. A groan followed the plummet; the groan did not come from the injured keys.

"Come on, babe, it's cold," the owner of the leather shoes commented. He was a slightly tall man with dark brown hair combed back, but a few strands fell into his equally dark brown eyes. He had a sort of baby face with his deep brown eyes and rounded jaw. He was wearing a white oxford shirt and black slacks. He had left his jacket because it was so nice when they left. He did not assume that it would be a few degrees cooler when night rolled around.

"Yeah, I hadn't noticed that all, Tyler," his companion answered as she leaned down to pick the keys. To help the matter, Tyler checked out her ass as her black dress rode up her lovely legs a little more.

If she saw his "help," she did not say anything about, but she did roll her emerald green eyes; eyes that were fiery and hard as the gem they were colored after. She picked up the keys and put them in the lock. She quickly opened the door and almost shut it before Tyler could come inside. She caught herself, as well as the door, before it slammed into Tyler's perfect nose.

"It was great to go out, wasn't it, Nikki?" Tyler asked as he shut the door. He failed to see her visibly flinch when he said "Nikki."

"It was all right," Nicole, as she preferred to be called, answered in a flat tone. Really, the only way the evening even ranked "all right" was if she was truly fine with picking up the entire check at a restaurant that she did not even like to eat at after seeing a movie that she had never wanted to waste her time on. If she was going to be honest with herself and rank the evening on a scale of one to ten, she would give it a two and the only reason it got such a good score was because she was able to check her email while she was at dinner. She was going to have a light day at work on Monday.

"It was more than all right," Tyler insisted while wrapping his arms around Nicole's slim waist and pulling her to his taller form. He nuzzled her olive-toned neck, breathing deeply on her skin. "You smell so good..." he whispered in a seductive voice.

"Yeah, well, I'm tired," she replied in a clipped manner while pulling out his embrace.

"Babe," Tyler said as he reached out for her. She made sure to get out of his arm length as quickly as she could.

"I'm going to take a shower," she informed him and did not have to look back to know he was fixing his mouth to say something stupid. "No, you can't join me," she added.

Tyler's shoulders slumped and he pouted as she retreated from the room, going upstairs. After a few seconds, he marched up the stairs too. He heard the shower going already and he went to the master bedroom. He started unbuttoning his shirt before he even turned on the light. He flicked the switch and dropped his shirt to the floor.

By the time Nicole came into the room, dressed in a complete plain, light blue pajama set, the first thing she noticed were clothes on her otherwise clutter-free floor. She growled, low in her throat, and cast her eyes on Tyler. He was reclined on the bed, watching television in his boxers.

"I guess you're staying the night," she commented in a controlled tone. A vein throbbed at the side of her head.

"Yeah, I thought it would be a nice end to a nice evening," he replied with what he wanted to be a sexy smirk. She frowned at the sight and pushed down bile as it rose in her throat.

"Well, I'm tired," she stated soundly, hinting strongly that she just wanted to go to sleep.

Well, she thought that she was hinting strongly. Tyler apparently missed the whole clue because he leaned over to her side as soon as she lied down. He reached over, large hand caressing her thigh before she even completely settled in. She shuddered, but he mistook it for a shiver.

"I just said I'm tired," she snapped mildly while removing his hand. She actually thought his hand was small for someone his height. He stood just over six feet and she knew that he could not palm a basketball, so she assumed that meant his hands were small.

"Baby, you're trembling for me," he whispered before kissing her cheek and trying to turn around to him. She saved him the trouble and faced him.

"I don't want to!" she huffed, shoving him squarely in the chest, knocking him to the other side of the bed.

"Babe..." He looked incredulous, eyes wide with shock while glancing down at himself first as if making sure everything was intact. He then directed his gaze toward her. He glared at her, demanding that she explain herself.

"I said I was tired," she repeated in annoyed tone with a tight expression on her smooth face. Come on, she was wearing a full set of pajamas! Did it look like she was screaming, "Come and get me"?

"I thought you were just playing hard to get. The night was so nice, I thought we could cap it off," Tyler replied while reaching over to run his fingers up and down her arm, but she moved out of his range. She was close to falling out of bed now in order to get away from him.

A vein at the side of her bulged and throbbed. "I'm tired and I have work to get to in the morning," she stated in a deliberate manner.

"It's Sunday tomorrow," he pointed out.

She growled. "I had to bring work home," she informed him.

"Oh. But, I thought you had easy cases," he stated.

Nicole balled up her hands into fists, but then counted to ten slowly in her head to prevent herself from lashing out again. The vein at the side of her looked like it was ready to burst. She mentally asked herself why he was saying such stupid things. He knew that sometimes she had to take work home with her just like he had to take work home with him. They did have similar jobs, after all! But then again, she doubted that he was interrupted as much as she was when working.

"I don't have time for this. I'm going to sleep. Make sure you pick your clothes up off the floor," she said and she turned her back to him. Her tone held such finality to it, as did her move, that he knew better than to touch or any anything to her now.

Tyler grunted and frowned at the back presented to him. He looked at his offending clothes and decided to leave them where they were. She would get them when she woke up; he knew that as much as he knew the sun would rise in the east. He turned his attention back to his television show.

There were lights on upstairs and a familiar-looking, red sports car was settled in directly in front of the house. The knock was loud, needing to reach upstairs as far as she knew. Mumbled curse

words let her know that the knock reached its designated target like a missile, and as if being hit with that missile, the target did not seem happy. Without bothering to ask who, the door was ripped open; if it was alive, the door would have winced.

"What?! Do you know what fucking time it is?!" Tyler demanded to know, standing in the doorway in his orange boxers and white v-neck tee shirt.

She blinked hard; actually, no, she had no clue what time it was. Knowing what time it was usually involved owning a watch of some kind. She had lost hers some time ago and never bothered to replace it. The best she could do right now was say that it was late and the only reason she assumed that was because it had been dark for quite a while now.

"No, Tyler, I don't know what time it is, but then again, I was always skeptical that you could tell time," she commented. Her brain scolded her, "*Don't insult the person you need to ask for a favor.*" She ignored her brain; she would insult whoever she damn well pleased.

"Dane? The hell are you doing in here?" he snapped, brown eyes glaring at the woman on the porch.

"I need a place to drop for a couple of days. Nothing too long," she answered while tugging at the one good strap that her book-bag had.

Tyler's hand on the door shook with the urge to slam the door in her face. His tongue was ready to lash out at her, tear her apart, and leave her standing on the porch looking like the ass he thought she was. But, he knew that would be a bad idea for a number of reasons. *Aunt Christine would never forget it.*

"A couple of days, but that's it," Tyler stated soundly while stepping out of the way to let her enter.

"That's all I need," she answered with a shrug as she stepped in. It was all that she would take from him. It was much more than she wanted, though.

"Good." He slammed the door behind her. "You stay in the den over there. Don't come out until you're leaving, don't eat any of the food, don't touch anything, and make sure I don't have to see you anymore."

"Wow, such hospitality," she remarked sarcastically while looking into the dark room that he wanted her to stay in. It was off to the right side and she could not see that far in, but it did not look very big.

"I could just leave you on the streets, you bum," he pointed out in a gruff tone, making it obvious that he thought he was going to win the Noble Peace Prize for just taking her in for two days.

She rolled her smoke-colored eyes and marched off into the room, swallowed whole by the blackness and peace. Tyler rolled his eyes too and marched back upstairs. He crawled back into

bed and looked at Nicole's back. She still appeared to be sleeping, so he continued to watch television for a couple of hours.

Nicole awoke to something poking her in the back. She groaned in disgust and moved away, only to find the annoyance following her. She ended up falling out of bed, which was quite the crappy wake-up call.

"Damn it," she muttered, rubbing the top of her wild, long, dark auburn hair.

"Nikki, what are you doing?" Tyler asked as he peered over the side of the bed.

"No, please, don't try to help me up," she commented sarcastically as she climbed to her feet.

"Come on back to bed. Let's have a little bit of fun," he proposed with a smirk.

"I've got work to do. I told you that," she reminded him in a sharp tone.

"It's Sunday, babe. You don't need to get to it right away. Besides, your parents own the firm. You know they'll cut you a break," he pointed out, still smirking from the confidence that he had in her getting back into the bed.

"That's not the point," she growled so deeply that her lips did not even move.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You can do it later. Come on back to bed. We can start the morning off right and then you can make breakfast."

"And then let me guess what your plan holds, we'll go back to bed?" she figured. Her generally lovely face was twisted to the point of looking like a cartoon version of herself. The fact that her hair was going off in every direction did not help her look serious.

"Brilliant idea! So, come on, back to bed," he said while lifting up the blanket for her to crawl back into bed.

Nicole growled again; stray dogs would have run from her if they heard the noise. Tyler was either deaf or insane because he continued smiling as she glared at him. She knew that his expression was due to the fact that he did not take her seriously, which only made her glare harder, eyeing him as if she was trying to set him on fire. Nicole decided not to let him ruin her morning anymore than he did, so she walked to the bathroom in the master bedroom. She started brushing her teeth and then a thought came to mind.

"Who was at the door last night?" Nicole asked curiously with a toothbrush hanging from her lip.

"My cousin," he answered with a shrug as he sat up in bed.

"Oh. What did he want? Is everything all right?" she continued on, not thinking that it was all too strange for his cousin to come by. It was a little weird for the cousin to come by in the middle of the night without calling first, but there could have been an emergency.

"Everything's fine. The bum just needed a place to stay for a couple of days. I put her in the den."

Water continued to run, but the scrapping of the toothbrush stopped. Somewhere in the distance, there was the sound of a camel's spine shattering completely. Nicole emerged from the bathroom to stare at Tyler in disbelief. There was not even a hint of anger in her gaze, just sheer and genuine disbelief at the gall of the man.

"You're letting your cousin stay in *MY* den?" Nicole inquired in a stern tone. Her emerald eyes looked like they were trying to cut Tyler in two, vertically.

"What's wrong? It's just for a couple of days," he argued with a shrug.

"What's wrong is that it's *MY* house! You don't live here, so you don't just let your damn family crash in my damn den!" Nicole screamed.

"I live here too," he countered.

"No, you don't! This is my damn house! You have an apartment downtown and that's where you live and that's where you should have put your cousin! You're so damn selfish! You never take anything I want or how I feel into consideration! I'm not a fucking doormat and I'm not going to let you walk all over me anymore!" The dam was broke and her feelings were flooding out, and she was so happy for it.

Tyler blinked hard, in total shock. "Walk all over you?"

"Yes! It's always about you! Whenever we go out, it's where you want to go and what you want to do! You never ask me! You come here, you litter my house with all of your crap, not caring about how I keep house! You bring your dirty clothes over here and wait for me to do your damn laundry! You eat my food like a pig, never a word of thanks when I prepare meals for you and leave all of the dishes for me! You don't even bother to take the garbage out when you're here!"

Tyler scoffed. *Take out the trash?* How lowly did she think he was? All of that other stuff, well, he thought that was what a woman was supposed to do and he thought that she liked doing those things. The red fire in her face told him that he had better keep that thought to himself.

"Babe, come on, you're just nitpicking," Tyler said with a forced laugh as he stepped out of bed.

"I'm not! I'm so sick of you and how you never take anything about me seriously! I'm not your personal slave nor am I your whore and I damn sure am not your bank!"

"Is this about paying for dinner last night?" he asked while taking a step toward her.

"NO! And don't come near me, you ass! This is about everything! I pay for everything, even your bills on your apartment! Why is that? You work the same job as I do! In fact, you tend to have much bigger cases than I do based on the fact that you have family connections, so why the hell do I pay for everything? And why the hell is there money missing from around my house sometimes?" she demanded to know, stomping her foot hard on the floor, shaking every piece of furniture in the room.

Tyler sputtered his response, "You think I'm stealing from you?!"

"I think you're borrowing without asking and without intent to pay back, which sounds a lot like stealing to me!" she snapped like an angry alligator.

"Are you fucking insane? I don't need to take anything from you! Do you know the family I come from?!" he demanded to know. His face was now hard and his eyes were trying to match the fire in hers, but not coming close to her outrage.

"I don't give a damn! I want you out of my house! I want you out of my life!" In the back of her mind, she knew that last bit was roughly impossible because they worked at the same firm, but she just wanted him gone right now.

"Fuck you, you prudish bitch!" he roared and picked up his clothing off of the floor. "You'll regret this shit, Nikki," he promised her.

Nicole did not even wait for him to get dressed after that. She started shoving her boyfriend...well, now former boyfriend, out of the room and down the stairs. She was far from petite, but he was surprised that she could push him around so easily. He was almost six inches taller than she was, yet he found himself falling ass-over-head out of the front door. The door slammed shut before he even knew what the hell was going on.

"Hey, what about my stuff?!" he hollered while pounding on her door.

There was no answer, even after he punched on the door for over a minute. He grumbled incoherently as he dressed in his clothing from last night on the front porch. He then checked his pockets and realized that his car keys were inside on the stand by the stairs, where he always put them down. He tried the doorknob and was surprised to find it still open. He wondered if that was a hint that she still wanted him or if it was just an accident. He figured it was the former because he was irresistible...in his own opinion anyway.

Tyler stepped in and grabbed his keys. He then climbed the stairs, heading back to the bedroom. That door he did find lock and he started pounding on it.

"Go the fuck away, Tyler! I'm through with you!" Nicole screamed from the other side of the door.

"Goddamn it, Nikki! Be reasonable!"

"And stop calling me that! Only my parents can call me that!"

"Stop being such a fucking bitch!"

"Calling me a bitch isn't helping. Get the hell out of my house before I call the police!"

Tyler dared to grumble that five-letter word again, but he did it while marching down the stairs and out of the house. A yelp and what sounded like a bike hitting the pavement followed the slamming of the door. Nicole did not care what that was about and sighed in relief when she heard a car pull off, happy that Tyler was finally out of her life in a big way.

With that done, the auburn-haired woman finished her morning ritual of brushing her teeth and then she brushed her wavy hair. Her auburn mane fell just past her shoulders to the middle of her back when straight, but it always bounced up a little when she was done because of her waves, so it looked shorter than it was. She yawned and smiled as she finally exited the master bedroom and went to make herself some breakfast. She sat at her table with some pancakes, scrambled eggs, and a couple of slices of bacon. She was at peace until a strange voice called out to her.

"Would it be asking too much trouble if I could have some?"

Nicole spun around to see the owner of the voice and her heart pounded heavy as she saw a stranger standing in her doorway: a scruffy-looking girl with caramel skin that had a copper undertone to it, giving her a rich complexion. Her thick, jet-black hair was cut short, barely falling to her long neck, and there were traces of blond highlights thinly streaking through. She was tall, lean with grey eyes and two silver bars in her eyebrow. She looked like she could have been from the Middle East or possibly Hispanic or even an Aborigine.

"Who are you?" Nicole demanded to know.

"Oh, sorry." A sheepish laugh echoed through the kitchen. "I'm Tyler's cousin."

Nicole could have been knocked over with a feather. Tyler left the house and did not take his cousin with him? *JACKASS!*

2: Relative

Nicole felt a headache building right between her eyes, pounding on the front of her skull like a spiked mace. She was almost certain that the bone was going to crack because of the rhythmic hammering. She could not believe that Tyler had left the house and failed to take his cousin with him. It just did not make any sense. She swore that man did not have two brain cells to rub together! *What the hell did I ever see in him?!*

Shaking that thought away, Nicole wondered how in the world the person standing before her was Tyler's cousin. The girl, well, Nicole assumed the young woman was a girl, probably a

teenager, looked nothing like Tyler. The most notable difference was that Tyler was quite clearly Caucasian, but his cousin was quite clearly...something else. What, Nicole was not sure yet. Being half-Puerto Rican herself, she knew and was open to mixed families, but she did not expect that with Tyler's family, not after getting to know him.

"You're Tyler's cousin, huh? He didn't bother to wake you up or anything when he left?" Nicole asked curiously, eyes not leaving the newcomer. Tyler had not left a good taste in her mouth, so she was not willing to take her eye off of someone related to him.

"Nope." She shook her head a little to emphasis her answer. The movement took Nicole's attention to the two piercings that were in the girl's left eyebrow. Another thing that made her skeptical that the girl was related to Tyler, but then again, *who the hell would lie about being related to that jackass?*

The pounding in Nicole's head just got worse. "What an ass! Look, I don't know what Tyler told you, but this isn't his house and he's not going to be back anytime soon," she stated in a tone that could only be the hard truth.

There was a nod of understanding. A copper hand went through short wild ebony hair while grey eyes looked off to the side, looking like she was rolling around the information in her head. Suddenly, she shrugged as if everything was great.

"I understand. I'll get out of your hair then," the younger woman said as if everything was that simple.

"If you wait a few minutes, I could give you a ride to wherever you need to go," Nicole offered. She did not have anything against the girl, after all. It was that damned Tyler that she was upset with.

"No, that's fine. Enjoy your breakfast."

"You can have some, you know. There's plenty." Nicole motioned to the counter where there was more food. She found it impossible to make enough pancake batter for only two pancakes, so a stack of six rested on the black marble kitchen counter near stainless steel sink.

"Thank you..."

Nicole blinked hard from the shocked that someone from Tyler's family knew such a phrase, but figured that it would be rude to say such a thing. "You can have anything up there you want. I'm not going to eat anymore of it," she informed the girl.

A nod was her reply. All six pancakes were taken as were the small spot of scrambled eggs that were left over. There were no complaints as the guest sat down with her food. She was ready to dig in, but was missing something.

"Um...forks?"

Nicole pointed the girl to the drawer that contained her silverware. Quietly, her guest retrieved a fork and proceeded to inhale her food. Nicole did not mean to stare, but she had never seen someone devour six pancakes in under a minute. She was treated to another "never" while in her guest's presence—a stench.

The stench was not something like her guest had just finished working out. It was more a smell that suggested her guest had not bathed in a few days. Nicole frowned and her guest noticed.

"Um...sorry about the table manners. I haven't eaten much in the past few days. Restaurants weren't too willing to let me in and from the tears in your eyes, I'm pretty sure you know why," the girl remarked with an amused smile. Oddly enough, her teeth were perfectly white and straight.

"It's all right. You can use my shower. Um..." Nicole glanced away and shifted a bit, not sure if manners permitted that she ask what was on her mind. "I get the feeling that offering to drive you some place isn't necessary, correct?"

"You are correct. Thank you for the shower offer. I'll take it so I don't have to choke anyone on the street with my smell." She laughed a bit, which got a giggle out of Nicole.

Both women smiled at each other, keeping things from being awkward, and then the guest rose. She walked over to the sink and proceeded to wash her dishes. Nicole's mouth hit the floor and her eyes rolled out of her head. *Someone related to Tyler was doing dishes in her kitchen?!* It was surreal.

Nicole was knocked out of her thoughts by the question, "You done with yours?" All she could do was nod to indicate that she was. The shock was then doubled as her guest washed her dish too. Nicole was almost sure that she was in a parallel universe.

"A Wolfe is actually doing dishes in my house?" Nicole muttered while shaking her head. She could not tear her eyes away from the scene, though.

"I'm guessing Tyler didn't wash anything when he was here," came that thought-disturbing, but smooth voice that would not let Nicole live in her own head for a few seconds.

"No, he wouldn't even turn on the dishwasher. Hell, he barely ever put dishes in it. He just left them on the table, like they were going to clean themselves," Nicole remarked incredulously, throwing her hands up while she was at it.

"Yeah, sounds just like the jerk I used to beat up when he came over to the house. I could probably still take him. You want me to go teach him a lesson or two?" The offer was made with a good-natured grin, but those stormy grey eyes were serious.

Nicole shook her head. "No, I don't want to have to bother with him anymore. I don't want him to have an excuse to come back here. In fact, I need to pack up his stuff, so I can just mail it to him tomorrow before he thinks about coming over here to try and make up."

"I can help you with that if you want me to. I mean, you did just let me camp out in your house, even if you didn't know until I disturbed your breakfast," the guest remarked with a half-smile.

"It's all right. You don't have to," Nicole objected. What kind of hostess would she be to if she let a guest, even an uninvited guest, to help her pack away her jerk-off, ex-boyfriend's stuff? It was bad enough that she allowed the girl to do the dishes, but she had just been in such shock.

"It's all right. Not like I have to be anywhere. So, let me just grab that shower you were offering and we'll get things done."

Nicole opened her mouth to argue, but the stranger in her house was gone already. She considered that her guest-whose name she did not even know, she realized-might just have been stalling to stay in the house a little longer. She shivered, thinking about what happened with Tyler. *What if the cousin was like Tyler?*

"Well, I don't have any loose money around anymore thanks to Tyler," Nicole reminded herself. She put everything away now. It was not like large amounts of money used to go missing, but five dollars here and ten dollars there added up over time. Not to mention a lot of CDs that she liked grew legs and walked out of her house, which she figured was thanks to Tyler.

Sometimes, Nicole wondered what Tyler did with her money that he made magically disappear. She figured that he brought little things with it, like snacks or added to his gas money. Other times, she let her imagination go and imagined that he started a savings account with all of the money and had managed to save up hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Suddenly, her thoughts were broken the same voice they had been disturbed by for the whole morning.

"So, let's get to dipshit's stuff!" her guest cheered.

Nicole snickered. "I can't believe you called your cousin that," she said, even though she felt it was an accurate description. She just would never say such a thing about her family, especially if talking to a complete stranger.

"It's what he is. So, we should get to it just to make sure we beat him out before he tries to come back and beg for your forgiveness," the guest explained with a smile that was almost wicked. Her grey eyes sparkled; apparently, the thought of putting one over on her cousin was amusing.

"Tyler beg for forgiveness?" Nicole rolled her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, before dipshit comes back, blames everything on you, and then calls you an idiot if you don't take him back," she corrected herself.

Nicole smiled and laughed; her own eyes shining now. "Now, that sounds like Tyler!"

"He hasn't changed much at all, but then again, he's a Wolfe."

"Are you saying you act the same way?" Nicole asked curiously.

"I'm the black sheep of the family...in more ways than one. Well, the black wolf of the family..." Grey eyes glanced to the ceiling. "Hmm...not sure exactly how it would work. Never really thought of it. Not that it matters. Come on, let's get packing."

Nicole watched her guest leave the kitchen, correctly assuming that nothing in the kitchen belonged to Tyler. She finally noted the very bad limp that her guest had, but she found out that did not slow the young woman down. She favored her left leg, but it seemed like she was trying her best to balance on both...and Nicole was still the one that had to keep up.

She also took in the way that her guest was dressed. She still looked scruffy, but not like before; that was an I-just-got-out-of-bed scruffy. She was dressed in a faded black shirt tank-top with form-fitting white, long-sleeve shirt underneath it. She was wearing dark blue basketball shorts with high socks that reached her knees; the shorts went beyond her knees. Her hair was puffed up from the humidity in the shower. To avoid staring at the odd style before her, Nicole focused on packing up Tyler's things.

Nicole breathed a sigh of relief while grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator. She offered one to her guest, who took it with a grateful smile. Nicole smiled back.

"Thanks. I can see why my aunt thought Tyler lived here. He's got a lot of shit under your roof," the young woman commented as she wiped her glistening forehead. She could not believe how much stuff they packed away for her cousin.

"Yeah, I didn't realize that there was so much stuff. I don't know how I'm going to get it all in my car," Nicole said with a sigh.

"Why would you need to get it in the car? I would just put that shit out on the curb and let the city do the rest."

"No, I'm not going to do that. I mean, he was an asshole and everything, but I'm not going to throw his stuff away. I can give it tomorrow to him at work."

The guest blinked for a moment and grey eyes watched Nicole. Nicole did not say anything and the staring did not last long at all. There was barely a break in the conversation.

"Geez! You work with that ass-hat too? I feel sorry for you. Well, if you don't need any more help, like putting the boxes in the car, I'm going to get out of your hair. I shouldn't waste any more of your Sunday," the guest said as she took a gulp from her water before screwing the cap back on.

Nicole watched her guest limp off and wondered where the girl was going to go. She really did not want to ask if the girl had run away from home or something like that since they had been getting along so well, but she would feel bad if the kid's parents were looking for her. Surely someone was worried about such a sweet kid, she thought.

"Hey," Nicole called and once again realized that she had not gotten her guest's name, despite the fact that they had just spent the entire morning together.

Not only had they spent the morning together, but they had gotten along fairly well. Nicole felt bad for not getting the girl's name through all that time. She strolled out of the kitchen through the living room and to the front of the house where the den was located. She knew that the girl had put her things in the small, front room.

"Is there someone you need to call or something to let them know that you couldn't stay with Tyler?" Nicole asked curiously, hoping that there was someone that the girl decided to talk to.

"Nope," was the simple answer from inside the dark room. The light bulb had blown out months ago and since Nicole rarely went in there, she never bothered to change it.

Nicole sighed and tried to think of an easy way to put what she wanted to say. "You could call your parents to come get you, if you want," she offered.

There was a scoff. "I could do that, but they wouldn't come. Hell, they might hang up when they realize it's me."

Nicole blinked hard as if she did not understand what she was being told. "What do you mean? I'm sure your parents are worried about you."

"Not bloody likely, my friend."

"Why don't you give me the number and let me call them?" Nicole proposed.

That tall, lean body came to the doorway and leaned against the frame. "What the hell kind of questions are these? Why the hell would you need to call my parents?" she asked with a confused look clouding her eyes. Her forehead wrinkled a little, waiting for an explanation.

"Oh...um...well, I thought they might be worried and I'm sure you have school tomorrow, so you'd like to get home as quickly as possible..." Nicole explained, trying her best to sound normal.

A snort. "You think I'm some punk kid, don't you?"

"Aren't you?" Nicole countered. She was certain that the girl before her was no older than seventeen and that was being generous. Yes, she thought the girl was just some punk kid. A *sweet* punk kid, but a kid nonetheless.

"I'm twenty-four!"

"Liar!" Nicole blurted out with a laugh. She quickly put her hand over her mouth as she realized what she said. She waited for some form of fury, but was met with a few laughs, most of which was due to the fact that Nicole had her hand over her mouth like a child that just said a bad word.

"You don't believe me? Here's my ID," the young woman huffed while digging into her wallet. She flung a card at Nicole.

The homeowner yelped as she caught the card by sheer accident; she just put her hands up to block the object sailing at her. She looked down and found herself holding a driver's license. Upon closer inspection, it was her guest's license. Not remembering that she did not know the girl's name, she went right for the birthday and saw that the "kid" was actually twenty-four.

"This could be a fake ID," Nicole teased, but she was serious. She saw more than her fair share of those.

"Gimme this!" She snatched back her ID. "Fake indeed. Like I would waste a perfectly good fake ID on you. I'm twenty-four."

"Sure you are, kid," Nicole remarked, rolling her eyes to make matters worse. She was not sure if she believed her guest or not, but she had to admit that the girl had a point. Why would she waste a good fake ID on Nicole?

The guest scoffed. "Whatever. I don't have to prove shit to you. How old are you anyway? Twenty?"

"I wish! I'm twenty-seven! Hell, I'll be twenty-eight sooner than I like!"

"Now who's the liar?"

"I am twenty-seven," Nicole insisted.

"Sure you are." With that, the tall young woman disappeared back into the den. She reemerged moments later with her beat-up back-pack on her shoulder and broken down guitar case in hand. "Well, thanks for everything."

"Are you sure you don't want me to call your parents?" Nicole asked.

"I promise you I'm old enough to not only take care of myself, but also vote and legally obtain a drink if the urge overcomes me. So, no, you don't need to call my parents."

"Are you sure I can't drive you anywhere?"

"You already guessed that I really don't have any place to be, so there's no place for you to drive me."

Nicole's forehead wrinkled. "So, what're you going to do?

Where're you going to go?"

A lighthearted shrug was the first answer. "I don't really know right now. I'll just walk around until I get smelly enough to where I have to beg or buy a place to stay, so I can get a shower. That's pretty much what I do."

A strange groan escaped Nicole as she nodded her understanding. "That's some way to live there." She really wanted to say, "That's no way to live," but thought that it would be rude.

"It could be worse. Well, let me let you get back to your Sunday."

Nicole felt something on the tip of tongue as she watched her guest grip the strap of her book-bag tighter. Whatever was on her tongue started to weight the muscle down as she watched her guest limp toward the door. As a tanned hand reached for the doorknob, something finally leaped off that tongue.

"You never told me your name," Nicole blurted out. She doubted that was what she really wanted to say, but at least it proved her mouth still worked.

"I didn't? To be fair, you never told me yours either," the younger woman countered with a charming, lopsided smile.

"What're you, six? This is like a sick version of 'you show me yours and I'll show you mine'? C'mon, what's your name?"

"Most people call me Dane," she answered.

"Dane Wolfe?" Nicole laughed at the absurdity of it all. She knew instantly that was not her guest's real name. "Be serious, what's your name?"

"I told you, most people call me Dane. The Great Dane."

Nicole laughed again, harder than before. *Oh, what a horrible nickname!* It was just too much.

"Tell me your real name. What's the name on your birth certificate?" Nicole inquired.

Dane ran her hand through her short hair and looked away. Suddenly, her mouth was moving and saying things she was certain she did not give it permission to say. "Well, the name on my birth certificate is Danielle Wolfe..."

"Ah, now that is the name I would expect from someone in your family. I mean, I knew that no one from Tyler's family would be called 'Dane.' Great Dane no less," Nicole commented with a laugh.

Dane put down her guitar case in order to fold her hands across her chest and frowned. Nicole noticed and quickly stopped giggling. Dane leaned on her strong leg and scratched the bridge of her nose.

"I'm sorry, Danielle," Nicole apologized.

Dane winced. That name sounded just as horrible now as she recalled it being the last time someone called her that, which was many years ago. She supposed it would not matter since she was going to be leaving her hostess' company in less than a minute, so she could let that slide.

"So, what's your name?" Dane inquired.

"Oh. I'm Nicole Cardell. It's a pleasure to meet you and never call me Nikki," she remarked while putting out her hand.

Dane wasted no time shaking the offered hand. The handshake lasted all of five seconds before Dane let the hand go. Dane then turned her attention back to the door, ready to get a move on. Nicole felt a nervousness flutter to life in her stomach and she knew exactly what it was.

"Hey, wait," Nicole said.

"Yes?" Dane inquired, turning to see her hostess.

"Look, I know I don't know you and you don't know me and for all either of us know the other could be an axe murderer, but I just don't feel right about letting you walk out with no destination in mind and no place to stay." She paused for a moment, needing to take time to consider just what she was about to offer. She fiddled with her fingers and took a deep breath before continuing. "You could stay here for a little while...until you figure out what you're going to do anyway," Nicole informed her guest, motioning to the floor with one hand.

Dane was set to decline; she knew exactly what she was going to do. Her words halted and died in her throat because she saw in those emerald eyes that the offer was not just for her, but also for Nicole. She finally took the time to realize that she was in the presence of a gentle soul, someone that actually cared about another person's wellbeing. The deep, bottomless expressive eyes told her that Nicole was someone that truly cared in general, not just when an audience was around or to make herself look good. Nicole was pure genuine and the fact hit Dane hard just because she was not used to such a thing.

She had a feeling that if she left, it would haunt Nicole, plague her for quite a while as she wondered whatever became of Tyler's homeless cousin. Nicole would wonder if there was something that she could have done or said to make things better. She would trouble herself, torment her mind, and bother her spirit as she imagined all sorts of horrible fates that could have become of the vagabond that left her house.

"*I guess I can let her do a good deed for a few days,*" Dane said to herself. The last thing she wanted to do was screw up one of the few good people in existence. "I'll stick around on one condition."

"Which is?" Nicole inquired.

"You never call me Danielle again," Dane stated with extreme seriousness.

"Well, I'm not calling you Dane. That's just silly and I bet you made it up yourself when you were like four years old and your family had a great dane for a dog," Nicole quipped with a taunting smile.

Dane arched an eyebrow. "I was five and our neighbors had the dog, but that's beside the point, Nick. I'm Dane and that's that."

Nicole folded her arms across her chest and cocked out her hip. "I'm not calling you that. I'm sure your family doesn't call you that."

"Yeah, they do, *Nick*." Dane hoped that she was being annoying with the name that she was imposing on her hostess. She thought it would help convey her feelings with being called something she hated.

"Well, that they might, but I'm not calling you that," Nicole stated.

Dane sighed, once again able to read Nicole's mind through her touching eyes. Apparently, the matter was not going to be dropped. Well, Dane had no desire to be called Danielle, no matter how short her stay was.

"Fine, my friends call me Danny," Dane said while throwing her hands up in defeat.

"Nice to meet you, Danny. So, why don't you go put your stuff down? I'll fix us some lunch," Nicole offered.

Dane did not argue, noticing that she had not won the last debate and was not interested in racking up any loses too quickly. Besides, she could go for some lunch. So, while Nicole went to the kitchen, Dane went back into the den and put her things down. The pair decided to get to know each other a little better over lunch. Dane was not totally sure what to make of Nicole, but she was certain that she had come across someone without any serious secrets, someone without a mask on this stage, someone real.

3: Law of the land

Dane, or Danny as she was now being called more often than not, set herself up in Nicole's den. Nicole had tried her best to give Dane one of the guest rooms; she had two spare rooms that were fully furnished. Dane would not hear of it, arguing that her stuff was already in the den. Nicole did not think that was a very valid excuse since all Dane had was a book-bag and a guitar case, but the copper-toned female would not concede the matter.

Nicole forced Dane to look around the rest of the house before letting Dane continue on with her wild idea of staying in the den. It was an impressive sight, with three bedrooms upstairs, a full

bathroom on each floor, and library/office, but despite all of that Dane took the den: the smallest, most cluttered space in the whole place. It suited her just fine and she said as much.

Nicole sighed and gave up for the moment. She did not want to come across as pushy or bossy and she wanted her guest to feel comfortable around her. Dane took the opportunity to really look around the den while she had the sunlight to do so.

There was a broken bookshelf along the far wall, holding dusty books and torn magazines from years back. On the back wall, there was a grey sofa that had seen better days a long, long time ago. The coffee table was stained with ancient drinks and each leg was a slightly different height, causing the table to lean to the side with the most junk piled on it. And there was no shortage of junk on the table.

Dane did not bother with going through the stuff on the table. She also avoided going through the piles of things in the corners. She leaned her guitar case on the edge of the sofa and dropped her book-bag on the floor. She flopped down on the couch; dust leaped up to greet her.

"I guess spending the next couple of days here won't be too bad," Dane said to herself. All and all, she had definitely seen and spent time in much worse places. Having four walls, a ceiling, and heat was really good enough for her at that point.

Nicole paced her bedroom, taking a few moments to panic over a couple of different things. First of all, she could not believe that she just suggested that a homeless stranger stay with her. *What do I know about Danny, aside for the fact that she's Tyler's cousin?* Hell, being Tyler's cousin should have been a huge strike against Danny for a bunch of reasons!

"What if she's a thief like him, but worse? She could rob me blind or something! What if she's as annoying as he is or worse? God, he got on my nerves almost every minute of the day after a while. Hell, what if she's plain worse than he was? Who the hell knows what kind of family he really comes from," Nicole muttered to the air.

Well, really, she knew some things about the family that Tyler came from. The Wolfe family was somewhat well known, having enough well-off businessmen in their ranks for people to take notice. But, they were infamously phony and she had seen that first hand with Tyler, so she stood by her initial statement. Who did know what type of family the Wolfes were when no one was around? She suddenly shook her head as she paced, like she was already disagreeing with herself.

From the short time in the morning that she had spent with Danny, she knew that the kid was nothing like Tyler. First off, there was no way that Tyler would help her with anything, even if she asked him to. Tyler would never thank her for anything or volunteer to do a household chore either. No, there was something almost tangibly different about Danny when comparing her to Tyler.

"She's sweet in a way that Tyler couldn't even dream of and it wasn't like she was pretending either, which is why I couldn't just let her go back out onto the streets. Despite what she says, I'm sure she is just a kid. Hopefully, I can get her to tell me about her parents eventually," she continued to converse with the air.

The second thing bothering her was, yes, she had opened her home to Danny and was willing to let her stay, but she did not think that she was being a very good hostess. She settled for putting Danny up in the den. She used the den as a storage space for junk that she never planned to use, but did not have the heart to throw out. It was full of old gifts from her parents and other family members for various occasions. She kept a huge box of Christmas lights in there; she just could not untangle the damned things. Old clothes were in there, waiting for her to have the time to go donate them to a charity. There were books in there that she bought, but did not like, but was certain she would donate them some place when she got the time. It was chock full of just junk and she had left a guest in there. The door to the room was not even on its hinges! It was just resting along the side of the doorway. And topping it all off, the light did not even work because she never bothered to replace the bulb when it blew the last time she was in there months ago.

"Horrible, horrible manners. Maybe at dinner I could get her into one of the guest rooms. I mean, I know she has to be used to better accommodations than my den," Nicole convinced herself.

Nicole figured that Danny had to be used to better places than her den because Tyler liked to brag so much about his family. The Wolfe family was basically full of business people and gained a fortune in owning retail outlets. Tyler liked to make it seem as if the family had more money than God, but she doubted that since he had to work for a living same as she did.

"Geez, she must think I'm cheap the way I just gave her the den. But, then again, who the hell is she to judge me? She's the homeless one...or the runaway...or whatever! She's the kid!" Nicole huffed, succeeding in confusing herself more so than she had when she started out because now she did not even know why she was pacing.

Nicole ran her hand through her lush, rust-colored hair and decided that just the idea of having a guest was making her jumpy. Well, a guest that she did not know, but a guest nonetheless. She was stuck between thinking of Danny as a guest and thinking of Danny as a stranger...a stranger related to Tyler to make matters worse. It had been a while since she had a guest point blank, but with the odd circumstances surrounding Danny, Nicole just felt out-of-sorts for reasons that she could not figure out.

In order to stop thinking, Nicole rushed out of the room and marched into the kitchen. She glided across her polished black tiles between the large, well-stocked silver refrigerator and the marble countertop, pulling things from one and placing them on the other. She then rifled through the snow-white cabinets, pulling out various spices and flavors. Cooking was done on autopilot, and plaguing thoughts ceased.

After making a meal that she knew would be too much for two people, but taking into account the way Danny inhaled breakfast, Nicole made the table in the corner of the kitchen. It was a

cozy little nook that she liked to eat at when she was alone. She was still working on automatic for the most part, so it did not even cross her mind to set up anything in her dining room.

Once the food was on the table, Nicole marched off toward the den. She was about to walk right into the room, as she was used to doing, but stopped just shy of the threshold. It was someone's room now, she reminded herself. It would be rude to burst right in. Too bad there was no door to knock on.

"Danny, dinner's ready," Nicole called into the dark room where she could make out a figure moving.

"Dinner? You didn't have to make dinner for me," Dane said while poking her head out of the room.

"Well, it's too late. I already did and you're going to have to eat it or waste it," Nicole commented with a firm nod of her head.

"Well, I do hate to waste food," Danny replied with a smile that Nicole was sure could light up a room. *How is Danny possibly related to Tyler?*

"Somehow, I had a feeling that would be the case," the shorter woman said with a chuckle.

Dane flashed a monster grin, looking more childlike than ever and feeling better than she had in a while. Her grey eyes shined like silver when she saw the meal; Nicole could not help laughing. On the inside, she felt a little lighter too; no one had ever looked at something that she cooked with such intensity and appreciation. *Maybe having a guest won't be so bad.*

"This all looks wicked good," Dane said as she slid into one side of the small, booth-like nook.

"I hope it tastes as good as it looks. What kind of beverage would you like to go with it?" Nicole asked politely.

"Whatever you're having is fine. I'm not too picky."

"Are you sure you're related to Tyler?" Nicole teased with an amused smile.

"Unfortunate side-effect of our fathers being brothers and all," Dane replied with an equally amused expression.

Nicole laughed, her face lighting up in a way that would have surprised her a little. She knew that she had not been laughing much lately, so she was thankful for the ones that she was getting now. She recognized that it felt like a weight was being lifted off of her shoulders and off of her chest with each laugh that she had.

Dane could understand that. It had been a very long time since she laughed. In fact, she was surprised that she still knew how to laugh. Nicole managed to get through her barriers and she

was stunned that she did not mind. It was refreshing to be around someone that wanted to bring a smile to her face just for the sake of conversation.

"Here we go. Two tall glasses of fruit punch," Nicole said while putting down a glass for her guest. She happened to glance at the taller woman's plate to see that she was already halfway done with her large portion.

Dane noticed the wide-eyed look she was getting and laughed. "Hey, it tried to pull a gun on me, so I did the only thing I could!" she joked about why half of her dinner was already missing.

"I'm sure you taught it a lesson it won't soon forget." Nicole chuckled as she settled into her seat.

"So, you said you work with Tyler. You poor, unfortunate soul. Defense attorney?" Dane inquired. If they were strangers on the street, she actually would have guessed that Nicole was a prosecutor, but dipping into the little bit of knowledge that she had about her cousin and where he worked, she figured that was not the case.

"Worse. Corporate."

"Oh, well, daughter of Satan, I'll be sure to sacrifice a live virgin to you before I leave," the Wolfe girl joked.

"You know...I didn't want to be a corporate lawyer..." Nicole muttered, green eyes glancing away as if she was ashamed. She was not sure what made her say that, but she did not like being teased about her job and not because she took pride in her career.

"Hey, it's cool. You're a step ahead of me. I don't have a gig at all!" Dane pointed out, hoping that would put the smile back in those emerald eyes and on that soft face.

"You're just batting a thousand in life, huh?" Nicole teased, forcing out a smile.

Dane grinned, but the expression did not quite take up her whole face like the others before it did. "You have no idea. So, aside for making a bunch of money and cooking a mean fucking chicken, oh, and of course taking in the homeless, what do you do in your spare time?"

"Read. You?"

"Nothing much."

"I noticed your guitar case. Do you play?"

Dane shook her head. "There's no guitar in that case."

From the way Dane's eyes clouded over, like a storm coming in, Nicole knew that she hit a topic she needed to walk away from. Instead of persisting, she took the conversation to something less personal. They spoke about television shows and things of that nature, finding out that neither of

them watched much television or saw many movies, but wished they did. In between all of the light conversation, Nicole fetched her guest seconds and thirds on the meal; Dane really could put the food away. In fact, there were no left-overs by the time dinner was done.

"I'll get the dishes!" Dane volunteered, quickly hopping up to collect the used dishes quickly.

"Danny, you don't have to do that! You're the guest!" Nicole objected.

"I'm the freeloader. I can do a few dishes no problem. You just sit back and relax," Dane replied, making sure to flash a charming smile while she was at it. She was not sure what was coming over her. Typically, she hated doing anything, saying anything, but right now, she was pleased to return the kindness being thrown her way in any way possible, no matter how small.

Nicole decided to do just that, even though she really wanted to protest. It was just...well, it was nice to have someone doing something for her a change. She watched as Dane scrubbed the dishes and while taking in the scene, she noticed something odd-Dane's left hand.

The lawyer had seen the few scars marring her guest's hand, both the top and the palm. What she was witnessing now was something more than just old wounds, though. Danny's face tensed into a look of extreme concentration as she gripped the dishes with her left hand. Once she had the dish, her face relaxed and she thoroughly cleaned it. She would then shift the dish into her right hand to place it in the dish-rack, even though the rack was on the left side.

Nicole's mouth opened and she knew that she was about to say something about Danny's left hand. She dodged a bullet by managing to get mouth to say something different at the last moment. "I think I'm going to have a glass of wine. Would you like one?" she offered.

"No thanks. I try not to drink," Dane answered while finishing up the last dish.

"No? Well, I don't want to drink by myself, so how about we share some ice cream instead?"

There was that bright, toothy grin. "Now that's an idea I can get behind."

"You're just a bottomless pit when it comes to food, huh?"

"Guilty as charged, your honor."

Nicole fished out a container of chocolate and vanilla ice cream from the freezer, which was on the left side of her fridge. Dane grabbed two spoons and two bowls. They met back at the table in the corner and proceeded to feast on ice cream while getting to know each other a little more.

"Well, that was great. Danny, I think I have to call it a night because I have some work to get out of the way before I can actually go to bed. If you need anything, I'm right upstairs, basically the same place you could be if you take one of the guestrooms," Nicole said, not caring about subtlety anymore.

"I don't need the guestroom. I'll be fine in the den," Dane replied as she finished the last of their desert dishes. She could not stop smiling, even while doing such a boring chore. She was not sure what came over her, but she was enjoying it and did not fight it.

"Are you sure? I mean, the den doesn't even have a TV or a radio. It's the furthest room from the bathroom down here," Nicole pointed out.

Dane chuckled. "I'll live, Nick," she replied, using the nickname in an attempt to get her hostess to leave her be.

"I want you to live comfortably, Danny," Nicole countered, rolling the name off of her tongue as if it was a counter for this new moniker that her guest was trying to stick her with.

"Been there, done that, and I will again, in the den. I'm going to be fine, Nick. Go take care of your evildoings for your corporate masters," Dane teased.

For a moment, Nicole flinched and Dane figured that she went too far. One grey eye closed in anticipation for the verbal assault that she was too sure was coming. Nicole took a deep breath and chuckled a bit.

"You think you're so clever, don't you, big dog?" the lawyer countered, a half-smile gracing her olive-toned face.

"Hey, it's Great Dane!" the taller woman playfully huffed.

Nicole chuckled and they parted ways after bidding each other goodnight. She did not want to push too hard and end up pushing Danny right out of the door. So, if the younger woman wanted to say in the den, then she could stay in the den.

Later that night, Nicole crawled out from under her work and made sure to put it all away in her briefcase. She then took a long, hot shower and changed into her favorite pajamas, cotton light blue pants with a matching tank-top that had a baby duck on the front. She was about to flop into bed when she remembered her guest.

"I'll just go check on her and see how she is," Nicole murmured to herself.

The lawyer stepped downstairs as quickly as possible, finding the lower level of the house blanketed in darkness. She waited for her eyes to adjust before trying to find the den; she did not go there enough to feel confident enough to make it to the room in the dark without the aid of her eyes. Once her eyes adjusted, she went to the doorway of the den and saw Danny laid out on the undoubtedly uncomfortable and too short sofa.

"Oh, that's it. Tomorrow I'm going to get her to take a guestroom," Nicole stated soundly in her own head. There was no way that she was going to have a guest sleeping on a busted couch that was too small for her tall frame.

Aside for the fact that the couch was too small, Dane was not covered with anything except the torn clothes on her body, and the night was cool. Nicole retreated from the room and went to the linen closet. She pulled out a powder blue blanket that she was sure would not be too heavy and she draped it over her guest. Leaning down to make sure that every inch of Danny was properly covered, Nicole noticed that there were large earphones on Danny's head with music blaring through them.

"She's going to make herself deaf," Nicole said and she slid the headphones off.

After taking off the headphones, she had to locate the source of the music. Following the cord, she was able to yank the MP3 player off of the floor and turn the device off. Danny did not move at all during this time. Nicole left the room after that and went back to her own bedroom.

"God, Nicole, don't let your instincts screwed up all over again," Nicole silently prayed as she lay down for sleep. "Especially not with another Wolfe." It would be like making the same mistake twice almost.

The sun invaded the small room with a vengeance, shining directly in Dane's copper face. A grumbled escaped her and she turned her back, hoping to escape her tormentor. The sun was not alone in its assault. Birds started singing, disturbing Danes rest.

"Fine, I'm up!" she huffed, sitting up and flinging the blanket off of her. "Wait, where did this come from?" she wondered aloud while holding onto the blanket. She smiled as she realized the only place that it could come from. She guessed that the blanket was to replace her headphones, which were resting next to her head.

She stood up and stretched out her long frame. Several joints and bones could be heard popping and snapping throughout the room. She did not seem bothered by that, not wincing or flinching as she heard the sounds. She then exited the room, making her first stop in the bathroom. She happened to glance at a clock on her way to find that she was up way too early in the morning; it was seven. Shockingly enough, she felt well-rested; sleeping on that couch was the best sleep that she had had in a very long time.

"I wonder when Nick wakes up," Dane muttered to herself as she washed her face, getting a good glop of sleep out of her eyes.

Her face lit up like a candle as a light bulb went off in her head that made her forgo a shower and she rushed into the kitchen. She started going through cabinets and the refrigerator, smiling proudly all the way through.

Nicole awoke with a yawn and sat up while wondering why her alarm was not going off if she was up. She glanced over on her nightstand at the small, black clock-radio. Her question was

answered; the alarm was not going off because she was up twenty minutes too soon. She groaned and dropped down onto the pillow.

"Why am I up then?" she groaned and wished that she could throw a tantrum to get back to sleep. Instead, a scent caught her attention and went right to her stomach.

She followed her nose, out of the bed, and downstairs. She discovered Danny in the kitchen, setting up plates on the table in the corner. Nicole thought that her insides might fall out of her body and she might faint from the shock that she was feeling.

"Hey, Nick," Dane greeted the stunned woman when she saw her hostess standing in the middle of the kitchen.

"Morning... Nicole muttered in a perplexed tone. A bewildered expression twisted her normally soft features.

"Not a morning person, huh? I'm not usually one for it either...but then again, I'm just not good with waking up point blank." That bright grin followed like clockwork. "Today's different, though. I woke up feeling really refreshed."

"You made breakfast..." Nicole said in a shaky tone while trying to lift her hand in order to point at said meal. Her brain was not functioning properly enough for her to point, though.

"Yeah, I figured I could get breakfast since you handled everything yesterday. Plus, I was wide awake and needed something to do. I didn't know if you'd want something light or heavy for breakfast. I made French Toast, eggs, and sausage. You're going to have to make your own plate. I just set everything up on the table, like a buffet, because I didn't know how much you usually eat."

Nicole could only nod while making her way to the table. They both made their plates from the piles of food that were laid out on the table. They existed in a comfortable silence for a few moments.

"What do you usually drink with breakfast? Coffee? Tea? Orange juice?" Dane inquired. She had Nicole pegged for a coffee person because she did not seem to do well in the mornings and probably needed something to pep herself up.

"Danny, you don't have to do all of this," Nicole protested strongly.

"I don't mind. Let me do something for you, Nick," Dane said in an almost seductive whisper.

Nicole gulped. "Wha...what?" She suddenly felt warm and hoped that she was not blushing.

"I have a feeling you're the kind that just *does* for everybody else. Let me do something for you. You don't have to take care of me," Dane insisted. "Sit back and relax. Now, what do you take with breakfast?"

"Orange or apple juice is fine."

Dane nodded and gave Nicole a stern look, which caused the lawyer to sit back as instructed. Nicole's mind was spinning. Danny was very right; she was always taking care of everybody else. No one had ever in her adult life made breakfast for her, served her, and insisted in doing so. She always did that for someone else.

"Thank you so much, Danny," Nicole said as her juice was put before her.

"Don't mention it. It's the least I can do. You're going to need strength for when you got to work and deal with Tyler," Dane remarked with a teasing grin.

Nicole groaned. "Don't remind me."

"Just don't take any of his shit, Nick," Dane said in a stern voice. She received a nod and a smile.

Nicole, dressed in a black suit with a silk burgundy shirt, marched into the firm like she owned the place. Her stride was powerful, majestic, like a tiger surveying her domain. Coworkers watched her move and wondered what had gotten into her; everyone was fairly certain that they had never seen Nicole step into the office with such command and presence. She made a beeline for Tyler's office, but spotted him in the lounge making coffee. She walked up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned from his conversation to insult whoever was interrupting him.

"What the fuck-" Tyler started and then stopped when he saw who it was. A huge, confident smile overtook his round face. "Hey, babe-" He did not get to finish that sentence either.

"I'm not your fucking babe," Nicole snarled. "Your shit is outside. Next time you invite your cousin to stay somewhere, try taking her with you when you leave." With that said, Nicole marched to her office, a smile tugging at her lips and her insides doing a happy dance. It was going to be a good day for her...meaning that it was going to be a tough day for anyone that she was up against.

4: Wake up call

Dane yawned and stretched while standing in the living room of Nick's-she liked the nickname now-home. She did not know what to do with herself, which explained why she just walked in a circle for the sixth time, looking very much like a dog trying to figure out where to mark her territory. Although as large as the living room was, if anyone walked in on Dane wandering in the circle, she would assure them that she was doing that just to make sure she did not get lost and she figured that they would believe her.

"And I don't have any bread crumbs to drop," Dane joked to the air. She was not surprised that she did not get a laugh.

Really, she did not want to do anything, but she wanted to do something. Sometimes she was fidgety, and sometimes she was...well, she could make a boulder look active. She preferred the latter to the former, being able to completely shut down if she could, but she could not control when she would get fidgety. Sometimes, she could go weeks without restlessness creeping up on her and other times, it could hit her for days at a time. Right now, it was hitting her hard. She suspected that it might have been jump started from her activities yesterday and that morning.

She felt anxious and trapped by life at these times, feeling like everything around her could come to an end if she did not do something. Her muscles itched for movement and her nerves twitched, like everything inside of her was ready to flee her skin. If she could find something to do, everything would be fine, she promised herself.

"I just...I just..." She gnawed on her lip and ran a shaky hand through her hair. Panicked grey eyes scanned for something to do before she ended up running from the room screaming.

Thankfully, something caught her eye. She happened to glance down at the coffee table, which was a nice, shiny obsidian-colored table. There were some magazines scattered and she recalled that she and Nick made the mess yesterday. Tyler had a huge pile of various magazines, some over six months old, and those had definitely been dumped. They did not bother to stop and straighten up anything while ripping his stuff apart.

Dane was moving before she even realized what she was doing, neatly stacking magazines and the couple of photography books out. She also straightened the vase with its single, lavender rose in it, adding a dash of feminine color to the black and light blues around the room.

Nicole sighed as she pulled into her driveway. She rubbed her eyes as she put her black sedan in park and cut the engine with the push of a button. She stepped out, her heels clacking against the concrete, and her eyes gazed at the lawn. She saw the ratty old bike that almost killed her that morning and a smile spread across her face without her knowledge.

Nicole stepped into the house and felt like the world was lifted off of her shoulders as soon as she was across the threshold. She was not sure why that was since it never happened before. She glanced to the left immediately, finding the den just as black as it always was. She arched an eyebrow, wondering where her houseguest was. She walked through the house, finding Dane in a backroom that started out as an office, but was now a library. A thoughtful look appeared in deep green eyes as a tanned head tilted to the side to take in what she was seeing.

Dane was on the hardwood floor, looking much like a very big kid, buried in a thick book. She had her legs crossed underneath her and cleaning products near her thighs, clearing up any mystery as to why she was in the library at first. She obviously got sidetracked from her original mission. Nicole could not help thinking that her guest looked adorable.

"I hope you haven't been sitting here long," Nicole remarked, teasing because of the small amount of pages that Dane had gotten through.

Dane's head shot up to the doorway to see a smiling face greeting her. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I can see you were too distracted by the book. I think it distracted you from a few things," Nicole commented while nodding toward the cleaning supplies.

Dane saw where those lime eyes were. "Oh." A sheepish laugh; she could not remember a time she felt silly. "I was cleaning. Sometimes, I get this urge..." She was not sure how to explain it. She also was not sure why she was trying to explain it.

"To clean?" Nicole asked. She could understand that one, as she often got hit with the urge, especially when she was frustrated or upset.

"Not to clean, per se. To do something," Dane explained. "It started out with cleaning and then when I got here it shifted to reading."

Nicole nodded, even though she no longer understood. She was happy to see that Danny was still at the house, though. She had feared that the kid-as she still thought Dane was one-would have bolted the second that she left for work.

"Well, I'll leave you to your book then," Nicole said as a beat of awkward silence tried to build between.

Dane did not reply and Nicole walked away, feeling somewhat dejected now. The lawyer thought it was odd that for that moment, Dane seemed strangely detached and cold, nothing like the person that she was yesterday and that morning. She decided not to let it bother her and just go through her evening rituals. The only disturbance in those rituals was that Dane cooked dinner.

"You don't have to keep doing this, you know," Nicole pointed out as she sat down to eat. If Danny kept cooking, Nicole thought that she might have to redefine what manners she actually learned when growing up.

Dane shrugged. "It was something to do." That horrible urge was finally going away and she did not need to do anything anymore; she thanked whatever divine being there was for that.

"Is everything all right, Danny?" Nicole asked with concern. Internally, she admitted that she did not like the change in her houseguest. She reached across the table and put her hand on Danny's arm.

Dane was about to pull away and say something when she looked into those emerald eyes. She mentally sighed and wondered when exactly she started giving a damn about people being sincere. Well, considering the fact that she could not recall the last sincere person she actually

met, she thought it might have been a weakness all along and she just never knew about it because it had never come up.

"I'm fine. I just feel bad about freeloading off of you," Dane lied. She did feel bad about that, but her mood had nothing to do with that.

"It's fine. I'm glad you're here. It was nice to come home to someone, even if it was a person I just met." The smile was it for Dane, shutting her down for a few seconds.

Dane returned the smile and was shocked to find her brain working again. Her brain was stunned by the fact that someone was happy to come home to her. *Since when?* She ignored the thought and took Nicole at her word.

"So, how was work?" Dane asked, looking to start a proper conversation since Nicole was being so polite to her. The hostess blinked hard and her brow wrinkled slightly. Silence coated the room and Dane thought that she might have overstepped some line that she did not know about. "I mean...um...Tyler didn't give you any trouble, did he?" she asked, hoping to salvage the mistake now.

Nicole blinked again, which helped start her brain. "Oh, no! He didn't give me any trouble. He was more shocked by the way I stormed in there and told him just where his stuff was. I left it outside on the curb, like you said."

"That's good. It shows him that you mean business. He'll think about things for a while before he approaches you to try to take him back. And, do yourself a favor by not taking him back," Dane suggested.

"I never make the same mistake twice."

"Good because I can tell you're too nice. You shouldn't be too nice to Tyler. He's an asshole. Frankly, I don't see how you can be a corporate shark with how nice you are," Dane rambled; she was not totally sure why she was going on and on like she was. It had been a long time since she had a real conversation with someone, so she considered that might be it.

"I'm very different when working. Tyler...he's a different story. Usually, I wouldn't be so stupid as to date someone I work with, but my parents kept singing his praises and pushing for me to go out with him. I should've known something was wrong with him. He's a personal injury attorney," Nicole quipped with a smile.

The crack earned the desired laugh from Dane. "Is that what he does? My uncle and dad just say he's a lawyer. They're damned proud of it too."

"I don't know why. Tyler is an ass..." Dane had a smart comment to throw in there, but Nicole did not pause to give her the chance. "...He's so full of himself. I mean, even in the beginning, he just had no shame, like he thought he was God's gift to me. I did everything for him, but then again, I'm like that in every relationship."

"It's not a bad thing to be nice to people," Dane assured her hostess, wanting to get the sorrowful look out of those deep green eyes.

Nicole nodded, glad to know someone thought so. "Still...it's caused me more than my share of misery."

"I'm sure it has. You have to deal with dipshits like Tyler, forcing their way into your home and acting like they fucking live here and shit. But, in the end, you obviously have enough and you move on with your life."

Nicole nodded again. "Yeah, sometimes it takes longer than others. I was dating Tyler for almost a damn year. It didn't take long, but after a while, whenever we went out it was where he wanted to go and somehow I always ended up paying. You know, I think the bastard was stealing from me after a while."

"Tyler's lower than I thought. What the hell was he stealing, though?" Dane inquired curiously. Personally, she bet that it was something pathetic, like underwear.

"I think he took some of my CDs and some small amounts of money. I don't know what he was doing with it, maybe laundry money on days he didn't just dump his dirty clothing over here. Maybe gas money. I really don't know. He refuses to admit it."

"Of course. He's too much of an asshole to admit that he was doing something stupid and wrong. Well, I promise, this will be one Wolfe that doesn't steal any chickens from your henhouse." Dane pointed to herself and let loose a big smile.

Nicole burst out laughing. "Danny, that was just awful!"

Dane just flashed a dashing grin, surprised at how automatic it came. The pair continued on with their conversation as they ate. Before they knew it, they worked up a routine. It all just seemed so simple; something that they both needed and enjoyed.

"Danny, I'm home!" Nicole announced as she stepped in the house. "And I almost killed myself on your bike again!"

Nicole arched a rust-colored eyebrow when she did not receive a response, especially in regards to her near-death experience. She wondered if Danny was sleeping; the kid seemed to take naps at the oddest hours. More than once, she had come home to find Danny knocked out on the sofa with the television watching her, or the radio listening to itself. So, the first place she checked was the living room, but found it to be empty...and spotless.

"She's on another cleaning binge," Nicole deduced from the state of the living room. She was aware now that Danny got "the urge to do something," as she put it. "Doing something" typically involved cleaning from what Nicole could tell.

The lawyer made her way through the house and found Danny in the one room that she never seemed to get around to cleaning—the library. Whenever Danny went in there she got "distracted," as they both put it, and started reading. As far as Nicole knew, Danny had yet to finish any books and never seemed too interested in doing so.

"Danny, what're you doing now?" Nicole asked with her hip cocked out to the side as she watched Danny just looking at the right wall of her expansive library.

"You have a lot of chemistry books here," the ebony-haired female answered, scanning the shelves in front of her. There were rows of chemistry books of all types. She was sure the selection could rival a college library's collection.

"I like chemistry. My bachelors' is in chemistry," Nicole stated while stepping deeper into the room to stand next to the taller woman.

"No kidding." Dane looked her hostess up and down. "Hottest damn scientist I've ever seen."

Nicole chuckled and waved the younger woman off. "Stop being silly."

"You've got like a mint of chemistry books here. That settles it, I'm calling you 'chem' from now on," Dane declared.

An olive-toned face twisted in bewilderment. "My name's nowhere near Kim. You're just desperate not to call me Nicole."

"Not 'Kim,' but 'chem' as in 'chemistry.' And you're right, chem, I'm not going to call you Nicole until you call me Dane," the taller woman proclaimed, folding her hands across her chest.

"Well, then, I guess I'll just have to start calling you 'kid' until you stop with your ridiculous nicknames," Nicole stated while crossing her arms over her chest.

"You can call me 'kid' all you like. I've heard much worse, *Nick*," Dane let the name roll off of her tongue and she hacked out the "ck" at the end. Emerald eyes narrowed on her.

"You've won this round, kid, but mark my words, I'll be back. After I have a nice hot shower, my brain will reset and I'll be ready for the second round," Nicole countered with mock determination.

A smirk hung on Dane's mouth. "Ah, then I'll just put some food in you and all you'll want to do is watch a movie before going to bed."

Nicole had to swallow down a laugh. "Damn, you know me so well." Amazingly enough, she meant those words. She was surprised by it because they had only been sharing a space for a few weeks.

"Yeah, I've been known to pay attention to a thing or two." *Just not known for using the knowledge in a constructive manner.*

Nicole smiled and then went off to take her shower. When she emerged from upstairs, she was dressed in her pajamas, which consisted of a pair of thin, long black pants and a matching tank-top. She was not surprised to find Danny in the kitchen, checking on a couple of pots.

"Did you have to go shopping today? Is that why I nearly broke my face on your bike when I came home?" Nicole inquired as she went to inspect the pots to see what they were having. There was already a small, roasted Cornish hen waiting on the counter. It was to be served with green beans, yellow rice, and carrots. Her stomach rumbled just a little to let her know that it agreed with what was prepared.

"Yeah, I went shopping," Dane confirmed with a shrug of indifference.

"You should've said something. I would've left you money," Nicole said and then she rushed to the fridge to see exactly what Danny's shopping trip involved. "Danny, you really should've told me. How did you even manage to carry all of this back with your leg? Does your leg hurt?" Nicole inquired with worry.

Dane looked dazed and her mind was trying to catch up with everything coming at her. Even after four weeks of being with Nicole, sometimes the older woman just took her by surprise and overwhelmed her, especially when showing concern. Her mind needed to catch up, which Nicole was starting to recognize; when she first started bombarding Danny with questions, she could go on for several minutes and panic when she did not get an immediate answer.

"Sorry. Too much, right?" Nicole asked with a sympathetic face. Sometimes, she worried that her concern was going to frighten Danny into leaving because of the look in Danny's eyes, like a deer in headlights. Nicole just could not help it, though.

"Not too much, Nick. It's just I needed to catch up. It wasn't that hard to carry all of the bags. I was able to put a lot of it in my book-bag. My leg is fine. I just needed a rest when I got in," Dane assured her friend.

"I wish you wouldn't do that." Nicole knew by now just how bad Danny's lame leg was, having seen it troubling her housemate on a few occasions. She disliked Danny taxing her leg with chores that could easily be done if she would just wait for Nicole to come home.

"It's all right. I need the exercise every now and then."

Nicole could not argue that because as far as she knew, the only time Dane left the house was when she went out shopping. So far, Nicole was aware that Dane left the house twice in four weeks. Other than that, Dane stayed in the house, cleaning or sleeping by the way Dane told it.

"Okay, but next time you go shopping, tell me. I'll leave you money for everything," Nicole stated, trying to lay down the law, but already aware of the resistance that she was going to meet.

"You don't need to leave me money. I eat more than you, so it makes sense for me to buy the food."

"Yeah, but I know you brought more than food."

"Well, I brought some cleaning stuff, yes, but I clean too. I brought some laundry stuff and things like that because I do the laundry. Speaking of laundry, I'm going to be doing it tomorrow. You have everything in your hamper?" Dane asked. Her tone was like she was speaking to a small child.

"Yes!" Nicole replied with a laugh. She picked up a dry sponge and threw it at Danny as payback for the teasing.

A charming laugh rang out of Dane's mouth. It was something that Nicole was used to, but it perplexed the taller woman. Dane was not sure where the hearty laugh came from, but she could not stop it whenever it escaped her.

Nicole entered the house and was greeted by soft, classical music playing. She was not surprised by it; such tunes had greeted her quite a few times when she had come home. She was also not surprised by the sight that greeted her when she walked into the living room; Dane was knocked out on the couch and the music was listening to itself.

"If I didn't see her most of the night, I would think she works the nightshift," Nicole remarked to herself. That simple joke did get the wheels in her mind turning.

The lawyer did not bother with waking Dane at that moment. She went to take her shower and get settled in for the night. She returned to the living room and turned off the radio. She then sat down next Dane and reached for the television remote. After finding something to watch, she shook her guest awake.

"Huh? Wha?" Dane muttered as she rapidly sat up, looking around frantically with a panicked expression in her eyes.

"Calm down, Danny," Nicole said quickly. She knew from experience that sometimes Danny woke up disoriented and confused. She thought it was just a quirk in her friend's personality, but she did realize that it could come from living on the streets. She hoped that it was the former and not the latter, but she was too scared to ask Danny about it. She did not want to find out that Danny had been hurt living on the streets or something.

"Nick?" Dane blinked hard and her grey eyes started to clear up, showing that she was coming to her senses. "When did you get in? What time is it?" She yawned and then glanced at the clock. "I should start dinner soon..."

"Don't worry about, Danny. Sit with me and watch a movie for a little while," Nicole requested and she noticed that Dane was still trying to get up. She put her hand on the bare, copper-toned arm. "Kid, sit still for a minute or two."

Dane shrugged and settled into her seat. "Whatever."

Nicole eyed her housemate curiously. "Danny, do you think that you might have a medical problem considering how much you sleep?"

"I don't," the taller woman grunted.

"Maybe you need a hobby, something to do during the day when the urge to clean everything doesn't hit you. You need more than just the usual chores you do."

"Ah, chem, you forget my hobby of reading the first twenty pages of yours books," Dane replied with a smirk. Mentally, she rolled her eyes because she never made it past the first ten pages in any of the books and she had no interest in any hobbies. *Why the hell doesn't Nick just leave it alone?*

"Don't be a smartass. I think you need something to do with yourself throughout the day. I mean, you've been here for a month and you've been outside a total of three times to hear you tell it, and that's only because you grocery shop. I'm sure it's not healthy to be cooped up inside this long. I come in and I find you passed out on the couch more often than not."

"Not true. Sometimes I'm passed out on the floor." It happened when she rolled over on the narrow sofa and fell over the edge. She never bothered with picking herself up whenever it happened.

"Well, have you considered getting a job?" Nicole suggested. She was certain that Danny needed something to occupy her time more often if there was nothing medically wrong with her to explain why she slept the day away. It just did not seem right for someone so young to sleep all of the time.

There was a flash in grey eyes and a storm seemed to gather. Faster than what Nicole would have thought physically possible, Dane was on her feet and glaring down at the lawyer as if she had just committed the ultimate sin. Nicole's heart sped up and her stomach flipped.

"What the hell are you trying to say? You think I'm just a bum?! A freeloader?! I can't hold a job? Are you saying that because Tyler said something to you? Well, fuck you and fuck Tyler! If you want me out just fucking say so! I don't need this bullshit! You're going to listen to whatever that asshole Tyler says about me and then make it seem like I'm a fucking deadbeat! What the fuck?!" Dane hollered before tearing out of the living room.

"What the fuck indeed..." Nicole muttered in shock. She then blinked hard twice and realized that she was staring at air. "Danny, wait!" She shot up from the couch and went to the front of the house, to the den.

"This is bullshit..." Incoherent mumbles were heard after that.

"Danny, wait! I haven't been talking to Tyler!" Nicole shouted into the room. She was standing at the doorway, looking in where she could make out a figure collecting things through out the dark room.

"You expect me to believe that shit? If you want me out of here just say so! You don't need to talk about me to that dipshit!" Dane demanded while marching over to the doorway with her book-bag and guitar case in hand.

"Danny, damn it, will you just listen to me!" Nicole screamed while pressing her hands into her guest's chest to keep her there.

Grey eyes cut into Nicole. "Why should I?" Dane snarled.

"You're being unreasonable! I wasn't talking to Tyler at any point. I haven't spoken to him since I threw him out. I make it a point to avoid him at all costs. I don't think you're a deadbeat and I don't want you to leave," Nicole stated soundly, voice laced with emotion.

"Then what the hell was that shit?" Dane demanded, motioning to the living room with a sharp cut of her hand.

"Come, sit with me and we can talk about this. Don't just leave like that," the shorter woman pled. Her hands moved to grip Dane around the shoulders and she did not plan on letting go.

Dane's frown looked like it could have diced a diamond, but she gazed into those eyes...those expressive eyes that seemed to keep her in check. She sighed and ran her hand through her messy hair. She started marching to the living room and Nicole followed behind her, watching as her guest limped heavily.

"How's your leg?" Nicole asked quietly.

"It's fine," Dane snapped while flopping down onto the sofa. She dropped her guitar case and back-pack while she was at it. Her leg was fine now that she was sitting down. Her knee was throbbing, but she ignored that pain to focus on the anger that she was feeling.

"Danny, please, calm down. I only suggested that you get a job so that you get out more. I worry about you being in the house all day without anything to do," Nicole said quickly, wanting that out there before her friend went on another tirade. When it did not come, she continued. "I haven't said a damn thing to Tyler. I don't know why he might talk about you or say bad things about you, but I wouldn't believe a damn thing he said anyway. You know that. Like I said, I just think you need something to do."

"I don't want to do anything," Dane stated blandly, turning her head to look away from Nicole. She figured that she might stand a chance in the argument as long as she did not look Nicole in the eye.

"What about when you get those urges to 'do something'?" the lawyer inquired.

"It's not that often."

"I still think that you need something to occupy your time. I just don't think it's healthy that you hang out in the house all day. I don't want you to go stir crazy or get cabin fever or anything like that," Nicole said in a tender tone. She then reached out and cupped Danny's face, gently turning her head so that Dane was looking at her.

Dane closed her eyes for a moment and took a few calming breaths. She then nodded. "I'm not."

"Okay, okay, okay. I'm sorry I brought it up. I just thought it would be good for you. I thought that a job would just occupy your mind and take up some of your energy, so you don't sleep the day away. I mean, I really don't think that's healthy." Nicole slide her hands from Dane's face down to her arms, noticing that the contact kept Dane calm and she did like touching her housemate.

A copper hand went through short ebony hair again. "Sorry I blew up at you. It's just I haven't had a real job in...well, ever. I spent my life hearing shit about getting a 'real' job and doing something 'useful.' I had a job and it was a damn good job. I just can't do it anymore," Dane said with an anguished sigh and her eyes clouded over with despair.

Nicole had never heard Danny sound or look so distressed. "Oh...what job did you used to have?" she asked while caressing Dane's arms, letting the younger woman know that she was there for her.

There was a long pause before the words found their way out of Dane's mouth. "Well, I was a musician. I've been making a living as a musician since I was fifteen. I made some good money from it..."

Nicole glanced down at the floor. "So, that's why you're traveling with a guitar case, but I know you don't have a guitar in there." She had been given a glimpse a couple of times and saw that it had junk in it. Danny described it as junk anyway.

Dane stared at her guitar case. "Once upon a time, it held my life, my dreams. Now, it holds crap." *Sounds like my life still.*

The lawyer nodded. "What happened to the guitar?" she asked quietly. Something in those grey eyes told her not to pry too deeply.

"Sold it. I didn't need it anymore."

All four eyes went to Dane's left hand. A frown cut across a bronze face while a lump settled in a tight throat. Suddenly, a lighter hand took that left hand. Dane glanced up, seeing a smiling face and shining green eyes. A tiny smile came over Dane without her permission.

Next time: Dane lets Nicole in a secret before Tyler shows up and nearly ruins their weekend.

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**~ Scarred for Life ~
by Shea K**

Disclaimer: See Part 1
5: Ghosts of the past

"Danny, you need to get off your leg for a little while," Nicole chastised her friend as she watched the taller woman limp around the living room, straightening things up.

"I'm fine, Nick. You don't need to worry about my damn leg so much," Dane replied right before banging her knee against the dark wooden wall unit that held Nicole's vast entertainment center. "SHIT!" Bronze hands went right down to her bare, scarred knee; she was wearing yellow basketball shorts. She crouched over in pain as she grimaced.

"Danny, are you okay?" Nicole rushed over to her friend and leaned Dane against her. She instantly started caressing Dane's arm while she pressed the taller woman against her.

"Fuck," Dane hissed through clenched teeth.

"Come on, let's go to the couch."

There were no protests or smart remarks that time. Nicole gently placed Dane down on the couch and propped her legs up on the coffee table. Nicole then started massaging the injured part. Dane winced, but that did not last long. She watched as Nicole tenderly worked out the pain from her body.

"That's what you get. You should've just listened to me and just sat down," Nicole boasted, teasing smile making her face light up.

"Nobody likes a braggart," Dane huffed. She turned her nose up, pretending to be offended.

"Ah, you love me." Nicole grinned teasingly at her housemate.

The former musician held her head up higher and crossed her arms over her chest. She pouted, exaggerating her mood even more. She had to work hard to keep that up thanks to the magic fingers rubbing her knee. She felt like warm jolts were passing from Nicole's fingers into her

body. Suddenly, she flinched and it looked like she had been punched in the face; the expression had nothing to do with her knee. It was like a light bulb went off in her head. She turned her attention back to Nicole, who was looking at her quite curiously.

"What's wrong?" the lawyer asked with concern. "I didn't hurt you or something, right?" she begged to know while changing the pace of her fingers. The massage was lighter now, but still very pleasant feeling.

"There's something I should tell you. I probably should've told you a while ago, but it never crossed my mind to do it," Dane replied. It never crossed her mind because Nicole had never touched her in such a way before and caused such ripples of pure pleasure to course through her body like a gentle stream.

"And what is that?" Nicole asked curiously, eyes focused on Danny and her fingers still doing their job.

"I'm a lesbian." The statement was bland, but out there, waiting for a reaction.

Nicole blinked, thinking that she might have misheard. Dane had said it so casually, like she was talking about a movie on television. There was no shame in her face, but she did look defiant, as if waiting for Nicole to challenge her on it. The lawyer smiled, eyes shining with an understanding that Dane suspected she should have known would be there.

"Kid, I don't know who might have cared about that in your past, but I'm not one of those people. Who you love is your business, not that you seem to be loving anyone at the moment." Nicole paused and then a teasing grin lit up her face. "Except for me anyway." She then touched Dane's knee in a way that made the younger woman purr.

"You got me there," Dane concurred while sinking to the sofa. She did not say anything further on the matter, not seeing the need to.

Nicole continued to massage Dane's knee after turning on some music. She was not surprised to find Danny sleeping minutes later. She regarded the snoozing musician and wondered about her. She had a feeling that Danny was used to catching hell about her sexual orientation; she gathered that much just from knowing Danny's cousin and hearing him talk. But, she had expected Danny to make a thing out of being lesbian, defending herself and not letting the issue go because of the defiant look those smoke-colored eyes had offered.

Instead, Danny let things drop easily after Nicole showed that it did not bother her. It was like she instantly believed Nicole, which was very nice as far as the lawyer was concerned because she made it a point not to lie if it could be helped. Nicole noticed that Danny did not usually put up a fight or argue if there was a chance for it. Hell, the only time that she saw Danny lose her temper was over the miscommunication when she suggested the younger woman get a job. Other than that, Dane was always laidback, much of the time to the point of being unconscious, like she was now. It was...nice, she realized. It was great to not argue or put up with someone's irritating frustrations.

Nicole grabbed a book after a few minutes and decided to do some reading since she did not like watching television alone. She was happy that the book was within arm's reach; *Danny straightened things up perfectly*, she thought. Danny always managed to put things that Nicole was going to use in nearby places while things that Nicole would never think of were out of the way, but still in sight just in case they did come to mind for Nicole. Dane was a quick study, it would seem, since they had only been living together for a little over a month.

For a while, the house was completely quiet. Nicole focused on her book, but also took note of the content feeling that settled in her body. She was actually relaxing while at home. It was not something that she would have done not too long ago; she would not have been able to do it.

Mumbles drew Nicole's attention from her book. She glanced over at the lanky body near her as Dane awoke from her nap. As usual, Dane's eyes darted about when she first opened them, as if she did not know where she was. Sometimes, when she woke up, she truly did not know where she was. She sat up sharply, blinked a few times in Nicole's direction, and then yawned.

"Nick?" Dane said as if she expected someone else.

"Of course," the lawyer answered in a gentle tone. Something inside of her always kept her from teasing Danny at moments like these. There was just something unnerving about the grey-eyed woman's confusion.

"Whatcha reading? A chemistry book?" Dane inquired while rubbing her eye with the heel of her hand. She was calm now, knowing where she was and who she was with.

"Yes, I'm reading a chemistry books. What's it to you?" Nicole replied, smiling widely.

"You're weird, reading chemistry books for fun. If you like chemistry so much, why the hell didn't you become a chemist?" the former musician asked with a craned eyebrow.

Nicole shrugged. "I dunno." The tone of the response was far from the usual teasing that they did.

Lush lips twisted, turning Dane's mouth upward in disbelief. She was going to say something, but decided against it. *It doesn't matter; she doesn't owe me anything.* Dane suddenly stood up.

"Danny," Nicole said, sensing in the air that she had just screwed up.

"I'm gonna start dinner. We're going to have fish tonight, okay?"

"Danny, sit down," Nicole ordered...well, suggested. It sounded much like a suggestion, but it was meant to be a command.

Dane waved the request off. "I have to make dinner if we're going to eat tonight, so let me do that. You go back to your book."

It was time for the lawyer voice. "Damn it, Danny, why do you have to make things so difficult? Just sit down for a second, so I can talk to you."

Dane suddenly found her butt planted on the sofa, as if Nicole hit a button to put her down without any of her own conscious control. It was not the first time that Nicole managed such a thing. She sighed and resigned herself to her fate; she was sitting down already, after all. Nicole turned her attention completely to Dane.

"First off, I was playing with you when I said I don't know. I guess I'm not too good at this playful thing yet since sometimes you don't know I'm doing it. I'm out of practice, you know," Nicole remarked with a charming smile.

"You seem to be doing fine right now," Dane countered in her own playful tone. *Why the hell can't I stay mad at this woman for more than a couple of minutes?*

"You bring this out in me. I don't know why, but I feel like I can do this with you and it's very relaxing. I could never play around with Tyler. I can't joke around at work, but when I come home to you, I get to unwind a little and play around." Nicole paused and glanced away for a moment. "So, it really bothers me when you get so...well, when you take me seriously when I'm playing and then sort of brush me off," she explained, sounding almost shy.

Dane rubbed her forehead with two fingers and then ran her hand through her short hair. Her face wrinkled up, as if she was perplexed. Nicole chuckled a bit and started massaging the copper forehead with her own two fingers.

"Being playful right now, right?" Dane asked, even though she knew the answer to that.

"Indeed I am. And if you're actually curious as to why I didn't become a chemist, it's because my parents wanted me to be a lawyer." A bronze face only wrinkled more, so Nicole thought it was best for her to continue. "My parents were all right with me getting a chemistry degree, but I had to go to law school afterwards."

"Did they pick what law you would study too?" Dane inquired. Corporate law just did not seem like Nick. She could see Nicole doing something that was more personal and helpful to "the little guy." After all, Nicole had a big heart, big enough to take in a bum cousin of her ex-boyfriend, so it just seemed like the green-eyed woman would do something like prosecuting criminals or even working on an innocence project, helping getting people wrongly convicted out of jail.

Nicole nodded and her eyes flashed with several emotions in less than a second. "They didn't outright say it, but it was strongly implied."

"And being a good daughter you are, you went with it. Seems a little weird, but I'm guessing it's because I never did anything my parents wanted," Dane commented.

"Really?" Nicole was interested in that, especially since Danny never spoke about her family.

"That's a tale for another time, though. We don't really have the time for me to tell you about all of that. I need to make dinner now. So, is fish okay?" Dane asked again, a small smile tugging at her mouth this time.

A smile brightened emerald eyes. "Sounds great."

"Oh, shit," a hiss rang out through the dark house. Footfalls could be heard down the stairs and to the front door.

Dane went to the doorway of the den and saw Nicole at the front door, in her pajamas and putting on her shoes. "And just where do you think you're going, young lady?" Dane inquired, sounding much like a parent that busted an escaping teenager.

"I left paperwork for my case on my desk! This is what happens when I start thinking about dinner when I'm still at work!" Nicole huffed quite seriously, pulling one of her shoes on. It did not even occur to her to put on socks beforehand.

A low, deep chuckle escaped Dane. "So, the thought of baked chicken got to you that much, huh?"

"It was everything that you said before you were baking chicken too. I forgot to eat lunch again, so you just had my stomach when you made your suggestions about dinner," Nicole explained. She had been close to drooling when Dane surprised her with a call at work about what they should have for Friday dinner.

"You need to take better care of yourself," Dane scolded Nicole. This was not the first time that she heard about the attorney missing meals. She also knew that a lot of nights Nicole did not get the right amount of sleep.

"Hey, you got nerve to talk. You weighed under a hundred pounds when you first got here," the lawyer pointed out. Danny did not show much of her body in her big tee-shirts and baggy shorts, but the sight of her arms and legs hinted that a skeleton used to be hidden underneath her plain clothing.

"Well, counselor, in my defense, I was in between homes at the time. I was also trying my best to save money just in case something happened, so I wouldn't eat unless it was absolutely necessary or free. You have no excuse, though. You skipped lunch to work and now you're trying to go out at a late hour to get more work to do over the weekend. Making it weirder, you're doing work you don't really like," Dane commented with an incredulous look in her grey eyes. She shook her head, which helped settle her wild onyx mane.

"It's not about liking it. It's about doing it to the best of my ability and that's what I want to do. In order to do that, I need to go get those briefs off of my desk," Nicole countered forcefully as she finally managed to get one shoe on.

An ebony eyebrow arched at the authority in Nicole's voice. *Oh, that must be the lawyer in her coming out*, Dane thought. She often wondered how Nicole intimidated people as an attorney, but now she could see it. The strong and fierce pose, the demon glare in hard eyes, and the powerful as steel voice. In theory, she figured it would frighten people, but it made her want to laugh. She held that in since it was a serious matter that they were discussing.

"Nick, look, it's eleven at night and you know the city is crazy at night. Plus, it's fucking Friday. The traffic, the parking, the insane college kids going to clubs, the drunks, and the general maniacs are all factors in this. You don't want to be out there at this time and I'm not letting you go out there at this time," Dane countered soundly.

Nicole blinked, not sure if she heard right. "You're not what?" Her tone was almost daring now.

"I'm not letting you out of the house to go downtown, not at this hour. It's too dangerous," Dane said as if that was final.

The auburn-haired attorney's jaw tensed. "Who do you think you are, telling me what to do?"

It was Dane's turn to blink hard, as if her brain just clicked on. Who was she to tell Nick what to do? Why the hell did she even care?

"When was the last time I gave a shit about anything?" Dane asked herself. She paused and was able to go down a list. The list began and ended with things involving Nicole. "Chem, I'm only telling you this because I'm worried about you. I'll be honest, I don't have a fucking clue the last time I worried about someone that didn't come back and bite me in the ass, but I worry about you. I don't want you to go there and something happen to you."

A mouth opened with a rebuttal that the brain did not have. She was stunned to hear Dane openly admit to worrying about her safety as a reason for not letting her out of the house. She was not sure if anyone had ever said such a thing to her. Her mind drew a blank when checking for times in her life when someone attempted to worry for her safety as a reason for her to listen to that person.

"You worry about me?" Nicole asked quietly, eyes searching for the truth in cloudy grey orbs.

A bare toe rubbed against the pearl-colored carpet while a hand with through a mop of black hair. "I guess..." she mumbled.

"Damn it, Danny, just tell me!" Nicole huffed, emotion almost making her voice catch in her throat.

"Yes, I worry, okay? You don't live with someone for damn near two months and get along really well and not have some concern for their safety when they start talking madness about going downtown this late on a Friday," Dane explained, as if it was nothing. She was not surprised that she did not care about saying the emotional statement, but the fact that it was emotional. Nicole made her feel, made her care, and she did not mind.

"Then what do you want me to do?" Nicole inquired. "I need those briefs."

"No, you want those briefs so you can keep working, on a case you don't like."

"How do you know I don't like it?"

Dane shrugged. "Aside from the tone in your voice when I called you today? I know you don't like your job point blank, even though you really don't want to come right out and say it. When you come home and you talk about your day, it's obvious how you feel about the whole thing. It's even more obvious when you don't talk about it."

"I don't mind my job," Nicole argued; her voice was not nearly as strong now as it had been a few moments ago.

"You might not mind it, but you don't like it. It's just a job, a way to make money. It's not *the* job for you, though." Or so Dane believed anyway. No one with a gentle nature like Nicole could really enjoy being a corporate lawyer.

"You think you know me so well after two months of living together?" A teasing smile tugged at her lip and danced in her emerald eyes.

"I think I know you need to march your ass right upstairs and read yourself a bedtime story, chem," Dane remarked with an amused smirk of her own. She went so far as to point back in the direction of the stairs.

"Danny, I really need those briefs," Nicole said seriously while eyeing the doorknob.

Dane shrugged. "So? I'm not letting you out. I'll carry you back upstairs if necessary."

Nicole was a breath away from calling Danny's bluff, but something in those smoke-colored eyes told her not to push her luck. The last thing she needed was for Danny to try to prove a point, lift her up, and then they both end up falling down the stairs, landing right in the hospital.

"Danny, please, I just-" Nicole did not make it far into that request.

"Need to march your ass back upstairs right now. It's as simple as that." Dane pointed upstairs again.

Nicole's jaw tensed and her fingers twitched in the direction of the doorknob. A sigh escaped her lips and her shoulders slumped in defeat. Dane smirked proudly in victory as Nicole slipped her shoe off and went back to her room.

"It's not a punishment, chem!" Dane called up to the stairs.

Nicole did not respond and Dane returned to the den when she heard a door slam shut upstairs. She flopped down onto the sofa on her back and stared at the ceiling. Her eyes closed without her permission, but the lack of noise let her know that it was all right to sleep.

Doorbells were not meant to play "Moonlight Sonata," but there had been no way Dane could help herself one day last week when she installed it. Now, she was regretting it as the song was taking her from her sleep. She rolled over onto her stomach...and onto the floor because the couch never seemed to be wide enough. She groaned as she picked herself up from the sofa and moved with the intent of stopping the maniac on the doorbell.

"Did you change the bell?" Nicole asked as she met Dane at the den door. She was also intent on stopping the fool that was waking them up on a Saturday morning. *There better be a fire or somebody better be dead on the lawn.*

"I thought it would be cool," Dane replied with a yawn.

"You thought this high-pitch whine masquerading as Moonlight Sonata would be cool?" Nicole inquired in disbelief. Her expression made it clear that she was calling Danny a maniac in her mind.

"It didn't sound like this in the store, I swear. I'll take it out later today," Dane promised while sticking her fingers in her ear.

Nicole yanked open the front door. "Yes?" she huffed while running a frustrated hand through her wild, auburn locks, which were trying their best to defy gravity.

"Nikki," Tyler purred with a charming smile.

"Tyler," Nicole deadpanned. Her expression, shoulders, and all around demeanor dropped. Even the air around her felt heavier.

"I'll get coffee," Dane suggested, knowing that it was definitely time for coffee. They needed to be completely awake to hear Tyler be pathetic and for Nicole to purposely curse him out.

"The hell?" Tyler's jaw dropped as he watched a familiar form walk off to the left. "Was that Dane? What the hell is she still doing here?" he demanded to know, glaring at Nicole while trying to see through the wall at the same time to keep an eye on his cousin.

"What's it to you if it is? You didn't seem too concerned about her when you left before," Nicole pointed out in a cross tone, glaring at him. She thought it spoke volumes on his character for him to abandon Danny, and it did not say anything good.

"Are you out of your damn mind? Why the hell are you letting Dane stay with you?! Do you know she's a damn dyke?! She might try something with you!" Tyler hissed, keeping his voice

down so that none of the neighbors heard him. No point in spoiling Nicole's reputation with her neighbors; that would not get him back in her good graces if he did, after all.

"She hasn't tried anything with me. And, yes, she did inform me of her sexual orientation, but thank you for outing her anyway," Nicole commented sharply.

Tyler scowled, but regarded Nicole with a haughty look in his chocolate eyes. "Oh, did she happen to inform you that she's a drug addict that can't hold a job too?" he demanded to know.

The new information wobbled Nicole internally, but she made it a point not to show it. She was very good at keeping her emotions in when necessary; it was important for her to do so when working. She continued to glare at Tyler while wondering if Danny really was a drug addict. She had not noticed anything that would lead her to believe that, but she still wondered.

"How do you know all of that?" Nicole inquired with her mouth turned upward, showing her disbelief. She noticed that Danny and Tyler did not seem to be the closest cousins on the planet, so she did not see the point in taking anything that he said at face-value.

"Because I know her! She's trying to take advantage of you! She's a fucking leech! She's probably planning to rob you blind in order to go buy drugs! She does things like that," Tyler stated while stepping closer, as if he was trying to force his way inside.

Nicole held her ground, not giving him an inch to move anywhere. "She hasn't done anything like that yet. What the hell are you doing here anyway?" she demanded to know, speaking through a tense, clenched jaw.

"I brought some papers that you left. Your parents figured you would need them to work on your case," he easily explained and held up his briefcase to make a show that his words were truthful.

"Give me the documents and leave," she ordered harshly. She held her hand out for the papers.

Tyler blinked and looked as if he had been shot. "I thought that we could talk a little...about us and where we're going."

"There is no 'us,' Tyler. There is a 'you' and a 'me.' Right now, I want *you* to give *me* my papers and then *you* can leave, going about your business. You'll notice that there wasn't an 'us' uttered in that statement at all."

A frown cut through Tyler's thin lips and his eyes hardened. "We should talk about this," he stated in a forceful tone.

"There's nothing to talk about. Now, give me my papers and go," Nicole commanded once more, using her best lawyer-voice.

Tyler leaned closer to her. "Is she doing something to you? You can tell me and I'll get the cops down here for you and arrest her fucking useless dyke ass," he said in a hard tone, implying he

believed his cousin to be capable of almost anything. His eyes glanced quickly to the left to let her know just whom he was talking about.

It was Nicole's turn to frown, looking so offended that a passerby might have assumed Tyler insulted her mother. "She hasn't done anything. Now, stop talking all of this nonsense and just give me my papers, or do I have to file a harassment complaint?"

His frown was now a full-fledge, diamond-cutting scowl. He stepped forward again, seemingly trying to back her up in order to get in the house. She did not move, so they were now standing almost toe-to-toe. Rigid jade eyes stared at his cream-colored face, waiting for his next move, challenging him. Seconds that felt like years ticked by with neither of them moving.

A deep grumble originating in Tyler's chest escaped his lips as he fumbled to open his briefcase. He yanked out the first couple of manila folders and shoved them into Nicole's chest, pushing her back a step. She glared at him as if trying to set him ablaze with her eyes, and he wisely turned away to retreat back to his sports' car. She slammed the door before he was even off the porch and a smile crept onto her face as she heard the familiar sound of rusted metal banging into bone. A pained yelp from outside solidified the smile.

"Danny's bike is going to be the death of someone," Nicole mumbled as she entered the kitchen. She was not surprised to find Danny working on breakfast.

"You got rid of him pretty quickly," Dane commented as the attorney stood next to her as she scrambled some eggs.

"Not quick enough. He brought by those documents that I was trying to get last night," Nicole informed her friend. She was not sure why she told Danny that, but she was glad that she did.

"I guess I should've let you go," Danny remarked with a light laugh.

"I'm actually glad you didn't. I had a good time slacking last night. I got to finish my book, watch a little television, and went to bed at a decent hour. It was a good night," Nicole stated with a genuine and thankful smile.

"Well, that's what matters, chem. Just to let you know, I'm not letting you waste your Saturday with those things either. Work is for work and home is to relax. You shouldn't stress yourself in a place that's for relaxing," Dane declared, and she was not sure where the hell those words came from. *Home is for stress and work is for relaxing*, as far as she knew anyway. But, then again, she was starting to assume some things in her life were a little backwards.

Nicole smiled a little more and knew that Danny meant those words; she was not going to work on the weekend. She was shocked that she did not go into a panic and put up a struggle. Instead, she just went with it, finding it just as rewarding as she found last night.

The auburn-haired lawyer was glad that she went with Danny's flow. They ended up eating a good breakfast with light conversation. They retired to the living room and found a movie to

watch. Around noon, Dane made some hot chocolate, which they drank while listening to music. They accidentally took a nap; Nicole woke up to find herself lying in Dane's lap.

"*Who's taking advantage of whom?*" Nick thought with an amused smile. She noted that she was very comfortable against Danny, holding onto the younger woman almost like she would hold onto a giant teddy bear, which only made her thought tickle her more. She wished that she could stay where she was all day.

She then glanced at the clock, seeing that they had lounged around almost for the whole day. The idea of doing that made her smile grow. She was close to giggling like a child that got away with doing something naughty.

Nicole sat up and yawned, stretching while doing so. She then turned her attention to Dane, taking in the sight of the younger woman with her arms spread out on the back of the couch and her head reclined back as far as she could go without breaking her neck. Her mouth was closed, but there was a line of drool escaping out of the corner of her full lips.

"*I wonder if she even has a clue of how cute she is?*" Nicole commented in her mind.

While taking in her friend's sleeping form, Nicole did try to find some evidence her being a drug addict. She recalled how thin Dane was when she first arrived, but now Dane was putting on weight, which was not a trait associated with drug use. There were no track marks on her arms or legs, which Dane was always showing because she never wore shirts with long sleeves or pants with long legs. She did not seem to have paranoia, nor did she stay up for days at a time; hell, sometimes it was hard getting her to stay up for hours at a time. She rarely seemed fidgety, except for her sudden urges to "do something."

Nicole decided to dismiss the whole notion. Tyler was probably just being the jerk that she knew him to be. After all, look how quickly and callously he outted Dane and then jumped to the conclusion that her sexuality would be a problem. Not to mention his harsh usage of the word "dyke" when describing his own cousin. *What an ass!* But, then again, she was already aware of that.

"I'm sorry for even listening to that bastard," Nicole stated, as if she was apologizing to Dane.

"Huh?" the former musician mumbled and turned her head to face Nicole. "Nick?" Grey eyes opened, scanning the area quickly.

"I'm right here, Danny," Nicole answered, resting her hand on Dane's thigh. The younger woman calmed down almost instantly.

A yawn followed by stretching and joints popping came before reply. "I was having this weird dream."

"What was it about?"

"I dunno. I don't really remember. I just know we were cats and we were sleeping on the couch." Dane looked around and chuckled. "I guess I got one part right."

Nicole laughed. "You're too weird sometimes, Danny." A pause. "Hey, what do you say we go out for an early dinner this fine Saturday night?"

"Early dinner?" the younger woman echoed as if she did not understand.

"Yeah. I thought it would be nice for us to get out for a little while. Plus, I think I owe you dinner after all of the days you've cooked. So, will you get ready already so we can go out?" Nicole teased.

"Oh, I suppose you're ready then. You'll be going out in your pajamas."

"Of course!" Nicole could not help laughing after that. "I'll get ready and you get ready. We'll meet back here in a half hour."

"I guess." Dane was sure that she did not need that much time to take a shower and get dressed. "Are you sure you don't want me to just cook? We could have that pasta I brought a couple of days ago," she suggested.

"No, Danny, I want to take you out. You're always doing so much around the house. I want to have dinner outside of the house with you. Are you going to make me tickle you out of this place?"

Dane snorted. "I'm not very ticklish. I won't push you to such undignified actions, though. As long as you promise not to take me out to some place fancy. You know I don't have the clothes for it."

"Don't worry. I won't take you anywhere where you'd have to wear an evening gown," Nicole replied with a laugh.

"You'd be the one in the gown if we ever went out," Dane commented with a smile.

"Is that an offer?" was the tease.

"Don't tempt me. If I have pay for an expensive meal, you'll be the one *out* of the evening gown sooner or later." A wolfish grin followed that statement. She wiggled her eyebrows to add to it and make sure it came across as the joke it was intended to be.

"I think I need to watch out for you, Miss Wolfe. It is good to know that you'd at least take me to dinner first, though."

Dane was about to say something else, but thought that it might be dragging the banter too far. She was pleased that she could joke around with Nick and not frighten the woman or anything. It

seemed that Nicole truly was fine with her being gay, which was very nice to know. She did not want to push her luck, though.

The pair parted ways to freshen up for their night out. Dane was ready first, mostly because she did not believe in brushing her hair. She threw on her usual torn-up, jean shorts that went just below her knees; a chain dangled from her pocket, going all the way down to her knee. Her shirt was a plain blue jersey and a white, short-sleeve shirt underneath.

"Chem, you dressed yet?" Dane called upstairs.

"I'll be down in a second," was the response.

The ebony-haired woman nodded and found that Nicole was not kidding. Moments later, the lawyer emerged and headed down the stairs. Dane looked up and laughed a little.

"You never wear jeans, do you?" the taller woman asked. Her friend was dressed in grey pinstripe pants that hugged her hips with a white, v-neck tee-shirt that did a little more than hug her torso. Her stylish black boots put her at almost the same height as Dane.

"Not often," Nicole admitted with a shy smile as she watched Dane give her the once over. She had to fight back a blush when Dane nodded in approval.

"I'm not complaining," Dane remarked with a smile.

"You keep looking at me like that you'll be buying me dinner, cowboy," Nicole said, laughter dancing in her eyes.

"If I get a nightcap, I'll buy you whatever the hell you want," Dane countered with a wolfish grin.

Nicole smiled brightly. "Really? So, I hear Paris is nice."

Dane burst out laughing. "Shit, you're an expensive date. I think you better just treat me to dinner like the original plan was."

"I thought as much."

The pair was off on that note. Nicole drove her car, a black luxury sedan with tan leather seats, into the city. There was not much traffic since it was only the evening. They knew that later that night, everything would be bumper to bumper because everyone would be out hitting clubs, seeing shows, going to the movies, and dining out. The city had a little bit of everything for everyone and during the weekends it always seemed that everyone was out trying to do everything, usually at night.

"I know a spot we could go to," Dane offered. She was trying to get out of going someplace fancy, as she had a feeling her driver was going to try to take her.

"The food's decent?" Nicole inquired.

"I wouldn't take you some place where the food sucked."

"Hey, for all I know you could try it, so I never volunteer to take you out again and you never have to leave the house except to shop once a week," the attorney remarked with a broad smile.

"Got me there." Dane paused to smile. "No, I know a spot with some good food."

"All right. Just tell me how to get there."

Dane had no problem with giving directions and it only took a few minutes to get to the restaurant. There were plenty of parking spaces and there was no wait to be seated. There were not that many people inside of the place, but Dane told Nicole that the place usually got crowded between midnight and the break of dawn.

"A lot of people come here in between club-hopping and after clubbing, " Dane ended her report on the eatry.

"So, how do you know about this place?" Nicole inquired while glancing down at the menu in front of her.

"I heard about it in a past life," Dane remarked with a teasing smirk.

The lawyer laughed a bit and continued to scan the menu. "So, what do you recommend, O-reincarnated-one?"

"They make a hell of a grilled chicken breast and serve it with some smoking Cajun rice. If I were going to have something for my first time here, it would be that."

Nicole nodded. "That it is, then." She placed the menu down.

The pair ordered and made small talk. By the time they had desert, they had been in engaged in an unending conversation. The flowing discussion was interrupted by a surprise-someone that knew Dane.

"Dane, I thought that was you!" a young woman of average with pale skin dressed in all black said as she stepped over to the table. She had a hoop earring through the corner of her bottom lip, a nose stud, and two eyebrow rings like Dane's. Her short, black hair was spiked and her jeans held a chain much like Dane's shorts did.

"Crow, what're you doing around here?" Dane inquired as she turned to the newcomer.

"I was heading over to Brimstone when I was passing here and saw you in the window. My god, it feels like it's been forever!" The young woman, Crow, leaned down and engulfed Dane in a hug that was barely returned. Crow did not seem put off by that as she pulled away from Dane.

Crow's excitement and happiness was almost tangible and it managed to put a ghost of a smile on Dane's face.

"It has been a little while. Let me introduce you to my friend, Nick Cardell. Nick, this is a very old friend of mine Crow," Dane introduced the pair, motioning between them with one hand.

"Nice to meet you," Nicole said politely while offering a hand that Crow barely shook, touching Nicole out of courtesy. Crow kept her attention on Dane, not even glancing at Nicole. The lawyer thought that the rude behavior might have been because Crow was just so obviously glad to see Dane that Dane was the only person on Crow's mind.

"It is so good to see you, Dane. There were rumors going around that you died. They said you owed the mob money and shit like that and you were at the bottom of a fucking lake or something. I can't wait to tell everyone they can go to hell! I know nobody can fucking kill Dane!" Crow proclaimed in a jubilant tone. She grinned all the way through her words and bounced, like she was ready to explode.

"I just dropped off for a bit. Nothing serious," Dane lied in a low tone that seemed to go right by Crow.

Nicole sensed something was amiss here, but she did not say anything because she could not totally figure out what was wrong. Dane seemed a little uncomfortable with Crow's presence, but the small smile on her face made it seem like she did like Crow. Plus, she introduced Crow as her friend, so the pale woman could not be totally bad, Nicole thought. She doubted that Dane would say they were friends if she actually disliked Crow. Still, there was something about Crow looming over them that clearly bothered Dane.

"Well, you need to drop back in. We all miss you, especially Bryan. He's playing down at Silversmith's. Actually, he plays there almost every Saturday. You should come see him. You can bring princess," Crow remarked with a naughty smile while nodding toward Nicole.

"Nah, she wouldn't be into it," Dane said dismissively, waving the suggestion off.

"You haven't even asked her. Look, we never see you anymore. It's seriously been forever and, damn it, we miss you. The least you can do is come watch your best friend play," Crow argued, thinking that would get Dane moving. She knew that Dane would do anything for Bryan. Her pleasant smile was gone now and she was bordering on angry with a hard look on her face, but beyond the anger was a plea for Dane to give in. Her eyebrows were drawn in, wrinkling her forehead, and her eyes shimmered.

"He's not my best friend anymore," Dane practically growled. Her frown would have sent most people running, but Crow was not one of those people.

Crow frowned and finally glanced at Nicole, taking in the attorney's appearance. "Oh, so, you move up to some elegant ass and now you're too good for us?" she demanded to know. Nicole was about to jump in, but Dane saved her the trouble.

"Nick and I aren't even like that. And you don't fucking know her to be talking about her like that. Why don't you just move your ass along and come back when you got some fucking manners," Dane ordered.

Crow reeled back and a wounded look conquered her whole face. Nicole instantly felt sorry for the pale woman. She got the feeling that Crow was just upset that Dane would not hang out with her, not that she was really rude. Dane, on the other hand, looked bored more than anything else. Crow's lip quivered for a moment, like she was about to cry, but she managed to pull herself together, taking a deep breath.

"So, it's like that?" Crow asked in a quiet tone.

"It's like that for right now," Dane replied. Neither of her friends could figure out what that even meant.

Crow sucked her teeth. "You drop us, your real friends, for her? Sellout," she huffed and then marched off.

Nicole watched Crow leave and also watched Danny as Crow left. There was a hint of sorrow in those grey eyes; Nicole suspected that Danny did not mean to treat Crow so harshly. Nicole was not sure what to make of the exchange. Now, on a small level, she enjoyed having Danny all to herself, but she felt like Danny needed more. Her companion's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"She's not usually like that. She's just pissed because it has been forever since I've seen her," Dane explained. She felt like she could guess why Crow was pissed, but some small voice inside of her—a voice that she was certain was dead before now—requested that she give Crow a little more credit.

"How long is forever?" Nicole asked curiously. She silently hoped that Danny really had not been blowing her friends off just to hang around her house, even though she liked having Dane around. She just doubted it was healthy behavior.

"About a year, maybe a little more." She made it a point to try to forget the exact date when she cut everything out of her life.

"Damn, Danny, that is a long time to not see your friends. You should let them know you're all right and go hang out with them every now and then. It'll get you out of the house sometimes. You need fresh air and human contact." Yes, she liked having Danny to herself, a little, but she wanted what was best for the younger woman too.

"I have you for human contact," Dane pointed out. Nicole was a whole different level of human contact than she was used to. She was not looking to trade it in for the old human contact that she had, even if it meant that she would not be able to see Crow again.

"You need more than me. Hell, even I have friends, Danny. You should go and hang out with them, see what they're up to. She said that this Bryan guy is your best friend. You should go see

him play," Nicole urged the younger woman, reaching across the table and wrapping her hand in Danny's.

Dane considered pulling her hand back, but did not. She did grit her teeth in a scowl. "He's not my best friend. I don't want to see him play." *Fuck the fact that I would be seeing him play an instrument he stole from me at my one-time favorite fucking club.*

"You need to go out more, Danny. Okay, maybe not to see him play, but just to go out. Please, think about it," Nicole implored and those deep green eyes of her begged even more than her voice.

Dane swallowed hard and sighed. "I'll think about it," she grumbled while dropping her head.

"That's all I ask."

Dane was not sure why she went. She really had no intention. Maybe it was morbid curiosity, she told herself. Maybe it was the fact that she wanted to feel some connection to her past. Maybe she just wanted to see Bryan and beat him in the head with his guitar. She was not sure which, but she found herself sitting in the back of the small club known as Silversmith. She was curled up in a corner and waited for him to come out on stage.

She had sneaked out of the house to see the performance. She did not want Nicole to know that she had given in, as if she was doing something wrong. She just hoped that she could sneak back in later on that night without waking the lawyer or making her think that someone was breaking in.

As the show started, she focused on the lone figure on stage, strumming the strings of his guitar. She could already see some of the women pining over him as he played the guitar like he had been born with one in his hand. His neatly trimmed dark brown hair, clean-shaven face with a strong jaw added to his appeal...for some anyway; he looked almost heroic or at the very least like the boy-next-door. *What a lie.* But, then again, she was certain that everything about him was a lie, everything that he presented and offered was a lie.

"Bryan, you bastard," she hissed to the air while watching him play. She peered down at her left hand and frowned. *Lying Bastard!*

6: Light and dark

"Hey, Danny, don't wait up for me. We had a meeting that ran late and I really need to work on this case, so I'm going to be out late. I'm going to have dinner with some coworkers-no, not Tyler-so, you don't have to worry about me taking care of myself. Why don't you go out? Maybe

you can hang out with your friend, Crow. I'm sure she would appreciate it," Nicole's disembodied voice suggested through the answering machine.

Dane sat on the sofa next to the phone and listened to the message for the tenth time. Something inside of her was hoping that Nicole would call back, explain that everything worked out, and she was coming home immediately. No such luck, though. She sighed and ran her hand through her hair.

"Fine, she wants me to go out. I'll go out," the Wolfe girl snorted as if Nicole was somehow punishing her and, in turn, she was doing the same. For some reason, it did almost feel like a punishment to be away from Nicole for the night, but she tried not to dwell on that.

She ripped herself from the sofa and trudged into the den to find some clothes that she would not be ashamed to be in the street with...which could be a little tricky considering her wardrobe; at least half of her clothes gave away the fact that she was a vagabond. She threw on some dark blue jean shorts and a matching jersey. She ran her fingers through her hair a few times-the closest she ever came to brushing the thick, ebony mess.

Dane had no problem riding her pathetic bike to the city, although it did creak and groan for the entire ride. Her knee and leg joined in the complaints, but she ignored both. Her bike and body held out for the journey, but it did take her longer than she thought it would.

She chained her bike up when she arrived in the city, even though she doubted anyone would think about stealing it. She would not be surprised if the garbage men picked up her bike, though. With the bicycle secure, she walked around in the congested city, barely noticing the flashing lights, loud music, blaring horns, thick air, and dense crowds.

She could not ignore the music for long. She could feel it in her bones, traversing her nerves, and settling in her soul to be ingrained in her spirit, awakening things that were supposed to be dead and buried. The music controlled her, beckoned her, moved her to places and she did not have to think. All she needed to do was feel, experience, breathe the music and feel like she was home.

"*No, home is far from here now,*" Dane thought while wandering into a small jazz club and listened to a band play a set. She closed her eyes and took in the tunes before she started to crave more, her spirit itching for variety and her nerves twitching with desire. She was back on the street before the band even left the stage, seeking more musical enjoyment and trying her best to keep down other demons.

It was easy to find more of what she hungered for, more of what her soul longed for. Music of all types replaced her blood and flowed through her veins. Music surged between her nerves and moved her muscles. She was the music; she could not help it.

"Dane?" Crow came up behind the tall musician, who was leaning against a rail, looking down at the stage in another small club. Crow peered around her, watching the copper-toned face. "I know that look," she commented, her voice close to singing, with a fond smile.

Crow did indeed know the peaceful expression in the smoke-colored eyes, but she failed to recognize the tormented anguish behind that expression. The storm behind calm, cool grey was carefully hidden as a guitar soloist shattered her and put her back together in each note. A little bit of her was lost on every reconstruction, but she could not tear herself away. Crow could only see the happiness and that kept the smile on her face.

"Hey, Crow," Dane said after a minute, turning her eyes away from guitarist, as if that would shut off the music, drown out the pain, and end her misery. No such luck. Thankfully, the music hit her in a good place too and that helped keep her settled.

"So, the princess let you out the castle?" Crow asked with a teasing smile spread across her peach-painted lips.

"You talk a lot of shit for someone that hangs out with fucking Bryan," Dane countered in a mundane tone. Her eyes flashed, clear evidence of a storm inside of her was shown.

The teasing smile quickly vanished and was replaced by a bitter frown. "At least Bryan didn't completely abandon us, even though he started this business school shit and whatever the hell else he's doing," she countered with a hiss.

"Yeah, Bryan's a saint," Dane concurred in a deadpan tone while rolling her eyes. "If I'm such a piece of shit, why the fuck are you bothering to talk to me?"

Crow sighed while wondering what was wrong with Dane. Something was very much off about the musician. She was not like how Crow remembered and she considered that it might have something to do with her friend vanishing for over a year.

"I didn't say all that, Dane. It's not like you to put words in people's mouths," Crow stated.

Dane nodded in agreement. "My hide is a little raw over a couple of things. Don't worry about it. So, what's been up since I've been gone?"

Crow grinned now, happy to relay the information. She bounced a little too, which Dane just thought was part of her personality. It did not occur to musician that her friend was pleased to be holding a conversation with her.

"Well, I would guess I'll start with the obvious. Destined for Nowhere broke up when you disappeared. Bryan tried to be the front-man, but we all know he ain't you, sweetie. He can't play like you, can't sing like you, can't write like you, and can't control the crowd like you. He just ain't you and it just wasn't the same band without the Great Dane." A sorrowful smile reached all the way to Crow's eyes, which were scarlet that night; she had a vast collection of colored contact lenses.

"It wouldn't've been the same with me," Dane stated in a plain tone.

Crow arched an elegant and skeptical eyebrow, but continued on without pressing her friend. "The scene hasn't been the same without you. First and foremost, the music sucks without you around, even though some people are holding their own. They just ain't you, though. A lot of us wondered what the hell happened to you. Hell, I was telling people I ran into you and they were just calling me a liar. I serious mean they were calling me a liar right to my damn face. Said I ran into someone that looked like you and shit. They all thought I was off my nut."

Dane chuckled a little. "You are off ya nut."

"That's beside the point!" Crow laughed and then grinned again. "You out for the night? I know a few spots that you'd love to hear."

Dane shrugged. "I'm out for the night."

"Great! I know so many different places that you'd just love. Some of the guitars will just make you cry. Of course, they don't have shit on you. God, people aren't gonna believe you're with me!"

Crow interlocked their arms and then guided/pulled Dane out of the club. Dane struggled to keep up with her overexcited friend, who did not take notice of taller woman's limp. Dane did take note of the direction that they were headed and she knew just where they were going after a couple of minutes. They turned onto another crowded street and disappeared down a hidden flight of stairs. They pushed past the line in a long, dark corridor and Crow's smile grew wider with every step they took. By the time they got to the door, she was out and out grinning to the point where it looked like she might split her pale face open.

"Ares, look who I have!" Crow proclaimed while throwing her arms around Dane, who offered a half-smile that bordered on shy as the mountain of a bouncer turned to them.

"DANE!" the bouncer declared with a scream that was so effeminate Crow and Dane felt shame for him. How he got the name "Ares" they could only guess. Going against his voice and manners, but supporting his name was his outfit. He was dressed in pressed black slacks with a black and silver football jersey and cool sunglasses.

"Same ole Ares," Dane groaned as she was engulfed in a hug that she was almost certain was meant to crush her ribs and deform her spine. He was so affectionate and she was almost ready to concede that it was genuine because he did always seem happy to see her.

"I was so sure you died! I mean, you don't come around for so long, what was I supposed to think? How could you just let me think you died!" The bouncer sounded like he was on the verge of tears, and knowing him like they did, they thought that he might be ready to cry.

"...Sorry...?" Dane said. She was willing to say just about anything to keep Ares from snapping her in half.

"It's okay. You're here now. Oh, god, you better not leave without saying bye to me!" Ares ordered, showing off pearl white teeth with his bright smile.

"I promise I won't," Dane vowed and that got her out of the bouncer's crushing grip. She breathed a low sigh of relief when she was safely on the ground.

Crow tugged her friend into the club, which was full, but not crowded. The scene was dark and smoky. Dane clicked onto autopilot, body moving toward the stage, where she knew there would be a live band. Crow smiled as she watched Dane go.

"Now, that's the Great Dane I know," Crow commented to herself, feeling joy bubble up inside of her. Before she could catch up with her friend, she was yanked aside by someone.

"Was that *the* Dane that just walked in?" a woman inquired in an eager tone. She bounced around like she was going to explode waiting for an answer. Her excitement got Crow started, who began bouncing too.

"That was Dane," Crow confirmed with a smile and a nod.

With that, the woman was off to spread the word. Dane did not notice the movement around her as she watched the band, nodding hard to the heavy metal. Suddenly, people were on her back, swarming her like busy bees, asking where she had been, wanting to know how she was doing, and demanding that she play a set.

"You should play for us, Dane," a woman cooed while caressing Dane's shoulder and shamelessly pressing herself into Dane's back.

"I don't have a guitar," Dane answered while stepping just out of the woman's grasp. She suppressed a shudder that wanted to ripple through her while making sure to stay out of range of the other women.

"We can get one for you!" another woman volunteered with an eager grin.

"Dane's not here for all of that! She's easing back into the scene, you scavengers!" Crow declared while coming in between Dane and the circling females.

The former musician did not bother to correct her friend by saying that she was not coming back into any scene. She just wanted to enjoy the music and she was willing to put up quite a bit for that, including a lot of questions and dozens of women. But, then again, she did not respond too much to them and Crow did keep the more insistent women at bay.

Crow chuckled a bit as she watched Dane, who was focused on the band. *Same old Dane*. It was always the music first and she treated women like they did not exist, which only seemed to attract more women. Crow was certain that Dane acted aloof on purpose, just to get the attention of women. And if that was the case, it was a damn good plan because it worked everywhere they went all of the time!

"Did you have a good night out?" Nicole asked as she walked into the kitchen the following morning.

Grey eyes blinked hard in surprise. "You knew I went out?"

"Of course. I heard you come in. You cursed out the den doorway when you stubbed your foot," Nicole commented with a teasing smile as she went about setting the table since Dane was busy making breakfast.

"Well, all the lights were out and I didn't want to wake you up. Guess I wrecked that," Dane said while scratching the end of her nose in a sheepish manner. She then ran her fingers through her hair.

"It's fine. I'm glad you went out. I thought you were going to wait up for me or something crazy like that."

"I thought about it for a long time," the taller woman admitted. Part of her regretted that she did not just wait up for Nicole, but another part of her was happy that she went out and experienced some music.

"Well, I'm glad you went out. It's good for you to interact with the rest of us mortals every now and then," Nicole teased and she bumped Dane with her hip while she was next to her friend.

Dane laughed a bit and a smile settled onto her face. "I guess. How was your night?"

"It was pretty much what you would expect. We had the meeting, a long, long meeting. I went out to eat with some coworkers. It was pretty much a bunch of lady lawyers getting drunk and eating dinner. No Tyler," Nicole answered.

"I recall you saying as much before," Dane answered in a bland tone.

A rust-colored eyebrow arched. "Are you okay, Danny?" She reached out and rested her hand on a bare copper arm.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Maybe just a little tired. I got in pretty late." Honestly, she was not sure what came over her, so maybe she was just tired. For a brief moment, she did consider that she was upset and jealous because she did not get to have dinner with Nicole, but that seemed silly to her, so she quickly dismissed it.

Nicole chuckled a bit. "And didn't get your necessary twelve hours?"

"Is that all I get? I thought it was more like fifteen," Dane countered with an amused smile, which set the lawyer at ease.

The pair then went about their Saturday as they usually would. The next time that Nicole had a meeting, which was not too far off, she was confident that she did not have to worry about Danny staying in the house. Dane did not disappoint, not waiting up, as Nicole's disembodied voice requested through the answering machine.

"Nicole, what's this stupid shit Tyler's talking about you being a lesbian?" one of Nicole's coworkers inquired. She was a striking woman of Nicole's height with mocha skin, deep chocolate brown eyes, and flowing black hair that was pulled back a little bit because of her flat twists. Her full lips were turned up slightly due to her curiosity in Nicole's private life.

"It's Tyler talking shit, that's what, Mina," Nicole answered, waving it off.

"That's all Tyler does," the other member of their trio commented. She was petite woman with deep, honey skin with hazel eyes and short, wavy brown hair named Clara. Her face was clear of makeup; she washed it off the little that she had as soon as it was just the three of them.

All three women were dressed in business suits, but they had discarded the jackets as soon as the business day concluded. They were sitting at a table in a restaurant with drinks in front of them, relaxing as best they could after such a long meeting. They were waiting for food to arrive, but they were working on their second drinks of the night.

"He says you're being pimped by some lesbian or something," Mina went on. Now, she looked ready to laugh.

"Why are you even entertaining Tyler by listening to the things coming out of his mouth? The sorry bastard is still upset that I broke up with him," Nicole pointed out.

"We figured that out when he started hitting on anything with tits. I can tell you that Howard down in family law was not amused when Tyler offered to buy him coffee," Clara remarked, earning laughs from both of her comrades.

"He is just getting horrible. He doesn't know what he wants either because he's hitting on girls one minute and then asking about you in the next breath," Mina informed Nicole. It was quite confusing, but she made it a point not to tell him anything about Nicole. She liked stringing him along and watching him squirm right before she dismissed him without giving him anything that he wanted.

"Well, he needs to stop worrying about me. He showed up at my house a couple of weeks ago and was trying to force his way in." Nicole shook her head before downing the rest of her drink. She wondered what the hell Tyler was saying about her and Danny behind their backs.

"He's such an ass. He's got all the clerks and shit fawning over him, though," Clara said, shaking her head in disgust.

"Can we change the subject? I get enough of that ass at work," Nicole stated. She did avoid Tyler in the office, but she heard about him more than she liked.

"So, are you getting pimped out by a drug-dealing, drug-using lesbian?" Mina asked with a laugh and she took a sip of her drink.

Green eyes rolled. "Please, hardly anything that exciting. I have a roommate now," Nicole informed them.

"Aw, that's the girl that calls you to make sure you eat lunch," Clara cooed and then she focused on Mina for a second. "She calls her Nick. It's too cute."

Nicole rolled her eyes again, even though she was fighting down a blush. Danny called her almost daily to make sure that she had lunch. She did not have the heart to tell Danny that she should not be on personal calls at work, especially since she enjoyed hearing from the younger woman. Danny's voice helped keep away stress.

"Yeah, that's her. She's a sweet girl. I thought she was a runaway at first, but all of her ID matches up," Nicole explained with a small, amused smile.

Her coworkers had to laugh at that because they did not know if she was joking or not. "Sounds interesting," Mina commented. Her eyes shined as she sensed intrigue with Nicole and Danny, which was due to the fact that this was the first that she was hearing about Danny. Added to it was the fact that she knew Nicole tried to never take personal calls at work, but Danny seemed to call enough for Clara to overhear a few conversations. *There has to be something there*, Mina concluded.

"It's rather nice. I enjoy living with her more than any other person I can think of. Maybe it's because we're just roommates and I don't feel any expectations from her. We take care of each other. She calls and makes sure I eat lunch while I nag her to make sure she goes outside," Nicole remarked, still smiling.

Her face lit up while thinking about how she and Danny got along. Her friends could not help smiling right along with her. They were not sure the last time that they saw her so happy.

"This is sad. It sounds like the most rewarding relationship you've had in the ten years I've known comes from the one with your roommate," Mina said while shaking her head.

Nicole only tilted her head and appeared to take in the words, but she did not reply. Their food was brought to them and the conversation shifted to business talk. As they turned their attention to their meals, they started discussing casework.

"Nicole, don't you have to go out of state in a couple of weeks?" Clara asked.

"Shit, I meant to check on that. That trip just keeps getting rescheduled. In a moment, I'm just going to quit the case. They're screwing around with me," Nicole answered. The only reason that

she was even on the case now was because her father told her that she was taking it. Now that she thought about, she wondered if it was even possible for her to quit it.

"I think that's why you got the case. Dwight was working it before and he couldn't take it. I think he ran out of a conference call screaming," Mina remarked.

"I remember that day. He just got in his car and said he was going to keep driving until he ran out of gas to get away with those people," Clara added in.

Nicole groaned and green eyes sank to the table. "Damn it."

"Yeah, that's the problem with being so good at what you do and having people in charge know you've never fucked up anything in your life," Mina teased while reaching over and grabbing Nicole around the shoulders. The gesture was meant to comfort, but a pout conquered Nicole's face.

"Cheer up, Nick," Clara teased, thinking that using the nickname would get a better reaction than the embrace.

"This trip is going to be hell," Nicole groaned again and slumped in chair. She was the last stop on the case from Hell and she could not do anything about it, except work on the case.

"Look at it this way, at least you get a free trip...that you have to drive...only to meet with people we know are assholes...I'm going to stop helping now," Mina decided.

"Good plan," Nicole and Clara concurred.

Dane stumbled into the house, making sure not to bang into anything to avoid waking up Nicole. A light coming from the living room made her guess that waking Nicole would not be an issue. She strolled over to the light as if it was a beacon and saw the lawyer curled into a ball on the couch with a forgotten book in her hand. A soft smile worked its way onto Dane's face.

"Who's waiting up for who now?" Dane commented with a chuckle as she made her way over to Nicole.

The former musician leaned down and gathered Nicole in her arms. She lifted Nicole with some difficulty; her knee screaming to know what the hell she thought she was doing. She ignored her knee and leg while shifting Nicole in her arms. The sudden movement and now shaky foundation caused Nicole to stir from her sleep. The first thing that she noticed was the smell of smoke, alcohol, and...something that she could not place, but it smelled pretty bad. Not the best wakeup call until she realized whom probably woke her up.

"Danny?" Nicole yawned. "Did you just get in?"

"Yup," Dane admitted.

"Have you been smoking?"

"No, around people that smoke."

"What time is it?" Nicole blinked a few times, trying to wake up as completely as she could.

"About five in the morning."

"Wow, Danny, you certainly are a party animal," Nicole teased, a drowsy smile tugging at her lips.

A smooth, mellow chuckle floated through the room. "I am the Great Dane Wolfe. You definitely don't want me guarding the henhouse."

"I hope you had a good time."

Dane rocked her head side to side and looked down. Nicole was not sure what to make of that response. It was the moment of silence between them that gave Nicole a chance to see that Danny was cradling her.

"All right, superwoman, you can put me down now before you blow out your knee cap," Nicole quipped, but she was quite serious. She had watched Danny struggle with her limp too often to know that the taller woman was not quite up to bearing the cargo in her arms.

"I'm fine," Dane lied. *I want so badly to be fine, though. When did I start caring about being fine again?* She did not have the answer to that question, but she did know that she wished that she could carry Nicole upstairs and place her in her bed as she planned on doing. Alas, that was just a fantasy as far as her leg was concerned.

"Bullshit. Put me down, kid," Nicole commanded in a stern, but civil tone.

Dane did not put up an argument and her entire leg sighed in relief when Nicole was placed back on the sofa. Dane flopped down next to the shorter female. They leaned against the sofa back and stared off into the front of the room, silently enjoying the other's presence.

"I'm glad you're getting comfortable in going out more. If you want, I'll even lend you the keys to the car sometime," Nicole proposed. Somewhere deep inside of her, she disliked the idea of loaning Danny the car because she thought that she might see less of the younger woman, figuring Danny would be able to get more places in less time and she would be encouraged to stay out later.

"That's not necessary. They're not that important," Dane replied in a dull tone.

"They're your friends." Despite her own feelings, Nicole truly believed that Danny needed to spend time with her friends. She needed to socialize with people and Crow seemed so happy to be around Dane.

"You're my friend. They're not the same and they're not that important. I can take or leave them alone. Don't worry about. How was your night?"

Nicole chuckled a bit, recalling her night. "Tyler's been talking about us at work, so my friends thought you were a drug-dealing, pimp lesbian. I told them that we're just roommates. My friend Clara-you've spoken to her a couple of times when you called up there and she's answered my phone for me-said it was cute that you call me Nick. After that, they reminded me that I have this stupid business trip in a couple of weeks. You'll end up having the house to yourself for the weekend."

"Oh, maybe I'll make it through one of your gripping chemistry books, chem," Dane joked.

"Good luck in that, even though I bet you won't do it."

"That's a bet you'll win. You'll call me while you're gone, right?" Dane asked. Her brain wanted to know where the hell that question came from, but it was too late to take it back now. Besides, she really wanted to know the answer.

"You can call me. I'll give you my cell phone number. That way you can check on me and see if I'm eating right and going to bed on time. I'll call just to make sure you don't sleep the whole time away," Nicole remarked with a smile.

Dane smiled and nodded too. "Sounds like a good idea."

7: Lose it

Two weeks went by faster than the pair expected. Dane watched Nicole drive off after they had dinner Friday night. Their demeanors were noticeably subdued, but neither of them said anything about it. Nicole had dragged her feet to the car, but eventually was able to pull out of the driveway because she knew that she had to. Dane eyed the car as it disappeared into the setting sun and Nicole watched Dane standing in front of the house until she was out of sight.

"*It's just for the weekend...*" they both thought as they tried to will their insides from feeling as if they would fall out.

Nicole tried to ignore the slightest twinge of separation anxiety that decided her belly was a good place to camp out. Making matters worse, loneliness was already trying to nip at her insides, forcing her to miss Danny before she was even two blocks away. She had to force herself to keep going forward, but she was plagued by wishes for the weekend to end already. She wanted to be back with Danny now.

"I guess this is what happens when you live with someone for a couple of months and they don't get on your nerves," Nicole commented to the air with a smile.

She took a moment to reflect on the past couple of months of living with Danny; it was actually closer to three months now. They shared wonderful meals, conversation, and relaxation time. Hell, she barely knew what it meant to relax before Danny came along, but the musician made sure that she was very aware of it now.

She did not have to worry about picking up after Danny. She did not have to worry about money missing; hell, she almost had to kick Danny in her bad leg to get her to take money for groceries, dry-cleaning, and other chores. She did not have to worry about coming home and having to cook or anything really. Danny took care of the house and household chores. It was the first time that Nicole had ever lived with someone like that.

"It's such a relief. Ever since Danny, I don't feel worn out when I come home and I don't have to worry about the house," Nicole reminded herself and that brought a smile to her face. Those thoughts brought her comfort for the first length of her trip.

Dane was lying on her back on the sofa. Music was playing, but she was not really listening to it. Her arm flung over her eyes, her mind focused on nothing but the stillness around her. She could feel the quiet underneath the music. The emptiness that surrounded her and crept closer to her, wanting to devour her and she was almost willing to allow that.

"Since when do I give a shit?!" Dane demanded to know, breaking the silence, but getting no answers.

Once upon a time, she remembered that nothing mattered. There was no such thing as loneliness. There was no such thing as caring. There was only emptiness, a different emptiness than this, one that suited her just fine...once upon a time.

"Fuck," Dane snarled while tearing herself off of the couch. She changed her clothing, marched out of the house, and took off on her bike, heading toward the city.

It was already late when Dane left, so it was past midnight when she showed up in a club. She got a back-breaking hug from the giant bouncer Ares and then staggered into the smoky area full of moving bodies and loud music. She found a corner to settle into and listened to the band play, nodding her head in time with everything. She glanced to her side when she felt a presence. She was expecting Crow, but was pleasantly surprised by who was there.

"Hey, Stace," Dane said in a smooth tone while wrapping her hands around the slim waist of the petite, young woman next to her. She had long, flowing black and brown hair and coffee-colored skin with a rounded nose. Her all around looks gave away her West Indian heritage.

"Hey, wolfie," the woman, Stace, replied as she molded herself against the tall, solid form of the former musician. She closed her dark brown eyes and settled her head against Dane's shoulder.

This was actually how they met. Not too long ago, when Dane was out, minding her own business and trying to listen to music, Stace came out of nowhere and just sat on Dane's lap. The outrageous behavior did not get to Dane and she had just continued what she was doing, so Stace had gone a step further, resting her head on Dane's shoulder. Stace had refused to move until Dane not only paid her some mind, but also held a conversation with her. That boldness captured Dane's attention and the fact that Stace was new to the scene was enough for Dane to see if they could be more than friends, and also more than fuck-buddies. She was tired of using women for sheer physical pleasure and being used as a sexual object, so she decided to try something new-to be in a relationship.

"You've been being good without me?" Dane asked, running her hand along the thick thigh settled on her legs.

"You know I have. I was waiting for you, hoping you'd show up. You know how I much I miss you, babe," Stace cooed. She brought her head up and gave Dane a quick peck on the lips.

Dane fought the urge to roll her eyes and let any negative feelings be washed away, purified by the music. She pressed Stace closer to her, reminding herself that someone was there. *It's not an "old" someone*, her brain reminded her. This was someone new, someone that she was willing to give chance because Nicole seemed to think that she needed to give people a chance. Someone that could prove to be much better than the "old someone's" as long as she gave Stace a chance, she reminded herself.

"You want to go for a walk?" Dane suddenly proposed. It seemed random, but she was proving to herself that Stace was "someone new." Someone old would never want to go for a walk, unless it involved Dane finding them a room somewhere with some decent drugs and alcohol; a lot of the time, a bed was not even a requirement.

"I would love to," Stace replied with a bright smile.

The couple exited the club before anyone else noticed Dane. They strolled around the city with Stace holding onto Dane, who had her arm around Stace's waist. They were silent for a while, which Dane appreciated. Usually, women liked to talk her ear off, filling the air with conversation that lacked depth-to Dane anyway. She understood that they were just trying to get her to open up, but that had never been her style, not now and not when women were throwing themselves at her...well, more so than they were doing now.

"Dane, you know, some of your old friends were telling me you used to play the hell out of a guitar. Do you really play?" Stace asked curiously.

"Used to. Don't anymore. Why are you talking to my old friends?" Dane countered with a teasing smile. The expression was somewhat forced; these smiles did not come as easily when Nicole was not around.

"Well, whenever you're not around, a lot of girls always bug me about why I get to be with you, even though I don't know who the hell you are, so people like Crow come help me out. It wouldn't happen if you were around more," Stace teased right back and patted Dane's flat stomach.

"Has Crow talked to you?" the former musician inquired. That did not sound like Crow's style, but she was not willing to put anything past anyone anymore.

Stace pouted, sticking her bottom lip out while she was at it. "No, she won't talk to me much. Other girls talk a lot, though. I would rather hear it from you, but they try to fill me in on some things."

There was a nod and more silence. "Have they told you anything else?"

"Just that you're famous."

Dane nodded. She was famous...kind of anyway; a local star, she supposed. But, that was another lifetime. She just could not get her so-called friends to believe that. They were trying so hard to tug her back into things, make her who she used to be, a person that she had no desire or energy to go back to being. They ignored her silent resistance, especially Crow, whom she noted seems to think that she was happier when she was that person. They wanted her to be that person; a person that she knew was dead.

"You used to play in a really good band and then you disappeared," Stace continued on.

"Yeah, that sums up my life pretty good," Dane stated, not feeling the need to elaborate, even though she could tell Stace wanted her to say more.

They continued walking on, silence reigning again. The next time that the quiet was broken, it was actually by Dane. She started pointing out clubs that she used to play at and how they were. Stace hung onto her every word, even when she suddenly switched from talking about herself to all of the musical talent that those clubs and buildings had seen. It was like Dane knew the whole musical history of the area; in truth, she knew a lot about the music scene of the city, past and present.

"It's getting pretty late. I should get you home or at least back to your friends," Dane commented. The sun was sneaking into the sky, greeting them with another beautiful day. *It'd be a much better day if Nick were back*, she thought.

Stace pouted for a moment, but straightened up. "Okay. Can I call you later?"

"I'll call you."

And the pout was back. "You never let me call you, Dane. I know we haven't been dating that long, but I want you to treat me like your girlfriend. I want this relationship to go some place," Stace pled with her deep brown eyes shining with hope and sorrow.

Dane sighed and ran her hand through her unruly locks. "You make a point," she conceded. She could hardly call herself in a relationship if she was treating Stace as if they were sneaking around. She needed to try to make things work.

"So, can I call you? Or better yet, can I come by your place? I want to see where you live!" Stace bounced on her heels while smiling from ear to ear.

"Uh..." Dane hesitated for a moment, thinking how troublesome such a thing could be. If something went wrong, it was not her place they would go wrong in. But, then again, Nicole was the one that wanted her to have human interactions and she was trying to believe that her interactions could be meaningful in a different way than they used to. She just needed to try, like Nick wanted her to. "I guess..." she mumbled.

"Great! Should we just go now? I've got a car," Stace offered with a grin so happy that her whole being seemed to glow.

"Nah, come by later. I need to get some sleep and shower and shit like that," Dane answered. She ignored the fact that she did not feel much excitement from the idea of Stace coming over to the house. She silently convinced herself that her lack of enthusiasm was from the fact that she was out of habit when it came to being with a woman.

"Oh, right. Me too!" Stace said while her mind began working. For everything that she wanted to do, she definitely would need sleep and a shower.

"So, let's get you back to your car." Dane turned them in the direction that they needed to go.

Dane was taken from her sleep by the sound of the doorbell chiming; it was now a normal bell again, but she had been eyeing some other tunes that she thought would fit the door. She rubbed her eye with the back of her hand while shuffling to the door as if her feet hurt. She opened it and was not surprised to find Stace standing in front of her.

"Good afternoon, wolfie!" Stace then leaned in to give Dane what she felt was a proper greeting—a deep, open-mouth kiss. She got her way for about one second.

"It certainly is a good afternoon. Now, get in here before the conservative neighbors see you and try to hang us on the lawn," Dane joked while yanking the petite woman into the house. She gently shut the door behind them while Stace let loose a long whine because Dane halted their kiss.

"I'm not too early, am I? I know you said that you were probably going to sleep late, but I really wanted to see you," Stace explained quickly, speaking very rapidly while leaning against Dane's body. The former musician arched an eyebrow because of how fast Stace was talking, but she did not think anything of it. Stace was often hyper and energetic to a fault.

"It's okay. I would've slept until you showed up no matter what," Dane replied with a shrug.

"Oh, okay. I brought us some lunch and beer." Stace held up her bounty, which was in a plastic bag, while grinning. Dane paused again and regarded her girlfriend, trying to determine if Stace was being her usual hyper self or if she was having help in that department. She did not look under the influence, so Dane brushed it off.

"Cool." It certainly was cool that Stace brought food since Dane had no intention of cooking. She just did not feel like it and doubted that she would have changed her mind, even if Stace was hungry.

Dane went to go put on something a bit more appropriate to entertain company in, which only meant putting on a plain white tee-shirt over her tank-top. Stace gazed around the house for a moment, bouncing on her heels, and she commented on how nice it was. Dane made sure to inform her girl that the house was not hers and they were to treat it with the utmost respect. Stace nodded to show that she understood.

They ate lunch while Dane put on some alternative rock; Stace drank a beer with her meal while Dane had water. Stace retired to the couch when they were finished eating and Dane joined her later, after washing the dishes. Stace parked herself on Dane's lap immediately, straddling her waist. Dane bit back a wince as the girl made herself comfortable on Dane's bum leg, resting most of her weight on that leg, putting pressure on the ailing knee.

Stace leaned in, crashing her lips against Dane's, ravaging the former musician's mouth. Dane went with it, following Stace's lead for the moment. She could feel the smile that Stace was sporting before Stace parted her willing lips with her tongue. Stace moaned from immediate contact while Dane was trying to force her mind to stay focused on the task at hand and not think about how she would rather be sleeping than making out.

Dane tried to scold her brain. *How could I prefer sleeping to having a beautiful woman in my lap willing to put her tongue who knows where? Why does it feel the same as it used to-bland, forced, and like I could give a fuck less?* Stace was different, so things should be different, she reasoned. Instead, things were the same. Things were empty and unmoving.

Before Dane could get anymore philosophical with herself at such an inappropriate moment, she felt something small and round touch her tongue. Her mind jumped to an instant conclusion and her body reacted with a jump of its own. She leaped off the couch to her feet, dropping her girlfriend to the floor in the process. She spit out whatever was in her mouth and watched it roll under the end of the long, curved sofa.

"Dane!" Stace whined with a pained tear in her eye. She rubbed her hip, which hit the coffee table before she ended up on the floor.

"The fuck was that!" Dane demanded to know, pointing to the discarded item under the couch.

"Just a little E tablet. I heard you really like E-" Stace did not get to finish that explanation.

"FUCK!" Dane ran off as if her whole body was on fire.

Stace heard a door slam near the back of the house. She sniffled while picking herself up off of the floor. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number as she started to cry.

"Hey, it's Stace. I'm at Dane's house and everything was going great. We were making out and everything, but then she flipped when I gave her some E. I don't think she does it anymore. What should I do now?" Stace inquired in a panic with tears flowing down her face.

"Calm down, calm down. Gimme the address. I'll bring something I know Dane likes and you can go back to your little party. Dane'll pay for it, so don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?" Stace sniffled. She really wanted to impress Dane and get the musician to like her.. She had been told that the best way to get on Dane's good side was to have her favorite party drugs available.

"Dane always pays for it. She's cool like that. That's one of the great things about hanging out with the Great Dane. She is the local goddess of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll!"

"Okay."

Dane paced up and down the large bathroom, going to the cream-colored whirlwind bathtub all the way across the room to long, lilac-colored sink counter. The only noises in the room were her bare feet softly hitting against the floor tiles and her heavy breathing. She stopped when she got to the counter the fifth time and stared at herself in the large mirror. Her eyes were wide and she was trying her best to tell if her pupils were dilating.

Quickly, the water was turned on. Hands rapidly gathered the freezing water and Dane wasted no time splashing herself in the face three times. She rested her shaking arms on the sink top and watched herself with anxious grey eyes. Her breath started coming in pants and her heart raced.

"You're okay. You're okay. You didn't swallow it. You're okay. You're okay. You didn't swallow. You're okay. You are okay, damn it!" Dane chanted over and over, losing all sense of time.

Crumbling to the floor and throwing her hands over her head as if to protect herself, she continued her chant. She rushed to the toilet and forced herself to vomit, more than once. She rinsed her mouth out and went back to staring at herself in the mirror. She continued her chanting.

"You're okay. You didn't swallow it. You're okay. You're okay," she promised herself.

Her chest heaved, as she continued to pant and wait for signs of being high. She was not sure if she was feeling effects of the drugs or if it was just her panic, but she did not move for a long

time; she was not sure how long she had been in the bathroom. Slowly, her ears started picking up noises outside that drew her attention from her own plight to wondering what was taking place in the rest of the house.

She strolled to the door and could feel music slamming against the walls; the bass was thumping so heavy that it vibrated through her bones. She tore out of the bathroom to be greeted by loud rock and louder voices. Her mind screamed, *OH, Hell NO!* There better not be a party going on.

"Hey, Dane!" an obviously intoxicated male greeted her, huffing his alcohol-charged breath all in her air. She did not know him and she did not know what he was doing trying to go further back into the house. She did not hesitate to grab him by the collar.

"The fuck are you doing here?!" Dane demanded to know.

"Party on the Great Dane Wolfe!" He then howled like a canine.

"Shit! Who said there was a party?" she inquired, shaking him silly just for doing what used to be her signature cry.

"I dunno!" he answered with the hope that it would get her to stop.

Dane flung him aside, not caring if he was all right or not, and rushed out to the foyer. There were people wall to wall, talking, dancing, and doing so much more than that; if they were outside, they would have been arrested for lewd behavior. Cups, cigarettes, and other less-than-legal contraband were being exchanged like candy. If it was possible, Dane's eyes would have fallen out of her head and rolled across the floor. Her jaw would have been on the floor, tongue rolled out like a red carpet.

"Stace!" Dane called out, knowing all too well that her girlfriend was responsible for what was happening.

"Wolfie, sweetheart!" Stace threw herself against Dane and eagerly pulled her into the crowded living room. The way that she was tugging on the former musician let Dane know that Stace was wired. Her energy was now much too familiar to Dane for her to not know that Stace was as high as the damn sun in the sky.

"Stace, what the fuck is the deal with all of these people?" Dane demanded with a tight scowl on her face.

"My friend brought a gift for you and then a couple of people came with her," the hyper woman explained, bouncing on her heels much faster than usual. She looked like she might rocket right out of her shoes.

Dane motioned angrily around the house with her hand. "A couple of people? This isn't a couple of fucking people!"

All words died in Dane's throat when she saw what was on the coffee table. Stace grinned, proud when she saw where Dane's gaze fell. Her grip on Dane's body tightened and her bouncing became more pronounced; it was shocking that she was not a blur by now.

"That's my gift!" Stace grinned while present Dane with her present.

"Lines of coke?" Dane felt her chest grow tight and heavy. She was not sure if she would breathe ever again. "How much fucking coke is in this house right now?" she demanded to know in a low growl. She saw the five lines waiting for her, so she could guess how much the guests were having. There was no way that lines of coke would still be waiting for her if the guests did not have drugs of their own.

"It'll help relax you since you didn't like the E," Stace explained, missing the musician's hostility altogether. She was still smiling like the cat that got the cream and pressing herself against Dane like they were glued together.

"I don't do drugs anymore and I don't want drugs in this house. Everybody get the fuck out!" Dane screamed at the top of her lungs while pointing to the door. The party paused, everyone looked at her as if she was joking, and then went back to partying.

"Wolfie?" Stace yelped, surprised by her girlfriend's reaction. Everything that she had heard about Dane led her to believe that the musician would have been totally in favor of everything happening, so she did not understand why she could not get a smile out of Dane.

Dane snarled like a mad dog and started making move to get everyone the hell out of the house. She was not going to stand for illegal activities going on in Nicole's home, nor was she going to stand for people disrespecting Nicole's home. She acted like a woman possessed and literally began throwing people out of the house. Yelps, groans, and even some screams accompanied bodies as they soared over the porch and into the front yard.

The music stopped and the crowded thinned as the sun made its nightly descent. It took hours, but Dane was able to empty out the house of most of the people, especially since almost no one wanted to leave under their own power. Of course, she got a lot of resistance and was cursed out more times than she liked as she tossed people out into the street, but she did not give a damn about what they had to say. She wanted the house empty of everyone and thing that did not belong there.

"Dane, dude, you owe me a little bit for my goodies, you know?" a woman commented as she hung on Dane's shoulder.

"Fuck," Dane sucked her teeth. "The hell do I owe you?"

"Well..." A price was whispered in a copper-toned ear.

"Shit." Dane rubbed her face. "Stace!" she roared.

"She left already. Cursed you out on the way if I'm not mistaken. Said you weren't as fun as everyone claimed you were. Guess she wanted the goddess of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, like everyone does," the woman said with a purr while running her fingers across Dane's jaw.

"Get the fuck off me. I'm not that bitch anymore and you all need to get that shit through your hard fucking heads," Dane growled while moving out the woman's grip. She could not look more disgusted if she tried, but that did not affect the other woman.

"I think you just need the right woman to ease you into it. A woman willing to do anything..." A sexy smile and a dangerous wink followed that statement.

"Fuck anything. I don't do that shit anymore and I don't want to do that shit anymore," Dane stated. Everything about the scene was a lie and she refused to deal with it anymore.

"Fine. So, when do I get my money?" the woman inquired, hip cocked out to the right.

"Tonight. I'll get it to you later tonight," Dane vowed with a sigh. She just wanted the trouble out of her life and it certainly would be easier for that to happen by paying the woman. Heaven knew she did not need to cross anyone else in the underground by arguing over money.

The woman nodded, knowing that Dane was good for it from past experiences. She left and soon Dane was alone with a huge mess, including spilled alcohol, discarded cigarettes, napkins with food, spots of forgotten drugs, and a few substances that Dane did not even want to speculate on what they might be. The house smelled like the dump that it looked like. Dane's body started to shake with uncontrollable rage.

"I'm not that fucking person anymore and I don't want to be. Who the fuck are they to come in here and assume I am? Who the fuck are they to assume I would be happy with this shit? Who the fuck are they to come in here and disrespect Nick's fucking house!" Dane screamed as loudly as she could, hurting her throat in the process, but not succeeding in making herself feel any better.

The fury that pumped through her right now was like nothing that she ever felt. She did not even know what to do with herself, but she knew that resenting all of the idiots that ruined Nicole's home was not getting her anywhere. She just thought about how Nicole would react when she came home and with that thought, her body went on autopilot.

The former musician went on a tear through the house, trying to clean up as best she could. She checked all of the rooms, hoping that nothing was missing. There were plenty of things broken, which she expected. She was not sure what she was going to do about those things, but right now, she just wanted to get the house presentable before Nicole came in from her business trip.

"Shit! She's not going to want to see all of this shit after a day with fucking clients she hates!" Dane tried to work faster, but felt like she was not getting anywhere.

The more that she worked, the more her brain stirred up panic in her. The panic gradually replaced the anger that she was feeling. Soon, all she could think about was how Nicole was going to feel when she came into the house and how Nicole was going to react when she came in.

"Shit, shit, shit," Dane muttered, quelling the urge to throw up. She blamed that on the smell of certain things as she was cleaning them up, but underneath it all, she knew the real reason for her stomach threatening to rebel.

The day only got worse as she heard a car pull into the drive. Long ago, she had been convinced that whatever force worked in the universe hated her, so she was not surprised to see the familiar car coming into the house driveway. Usually, she would have accepted fate and moved on with her life, but not now. Something inside of her was too scared and anxious to let Nicole see the house as it was. Something inside of her knew that she would not be able to move on like she used to.

Dane's panic reached its zenith when she heard the engine of the car turn off. For a long moment, everything around her seemed to blur and an assortment of colors flashed before her eyes. She swayed like she was about to pass out, but stopped herself from doing so by sheer will. Now was not the time to have a breakdown.

She tried her best to move at the speed of light to clean up. It did not work and she stood like a deer in headlights when the front door open. Her throat seized on her as she locked eyes with Nicole, who was scanning the ruined house. The lawyer dropped her keys and her bag at her feet because her whole body was limp. Dane swallowed down some bile trying to escape her empty, disturbed stomach.

"Danny...what...what happened?" Nicole asked in total shock as her eyes swept through the house in sheer confusion. *Were we robbed?!*

"I...I..." Dane stammered. "They...it..." *Brain, just make a fucking complete sentence!*

"Was it burglars? Oh, god, what did they steal? Were you hurt?" Nicole inquired, rushing over to Dane and putting her hands on shaky copper arms.

The former musician started hyperventilating. *Nick's worried about me?* After all that was happening and the state of the house, Nicole was concerned about her?! Dane felt like she was yanked under water, drowning from an overwhelming amount of emotions that her brain could not even make any sense of at the moment.

Dane dropped to the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. She howled as if in sheer pain while curling into a ball on all fours. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for this to happen! I know it sounds stupid, but I didn't mean it! I didn't mean any of this!" She doubted that an apology ever be enough, but it was all she had right now.

Nicole was down by her friend's side almost instantly, her own shock forgotten for Danny's tears. She wrapped her arms around the sobbing woman, embracing her, engulfing her really because to Dane it felt like Nicole was everywhere. She shushed the taller female, rubbing her back with the hopes of soothing her. She suspected that what hit her house was no burglary now, but she ignored that for the moment.

"Danny, it's okay," Nicole lied as she took in the scene more closely. It certainly was not okay. Her house was in shambles and from the smell of the things, they would be in a lot of trouble if anyone bothered to call the police about a large party.

"I'm so sorry! You trusted me and I let this happen!" Dane hollered, her voice raw with emotion and from pain. She did not even know where the intense agony was coming from, but it was there, dicing her into a million emotional pieces.

"Danny, calm down. Please, just calm down. You can explain what happened. I'm sure things aren't that bad," the lawyer said in a soft tone.

Dane did not respond. She continued sobbing; it felt good, which stunned her, especially since underneath that she could feel fear creeping out. After almost ten minutes, she finally stopped. Nicole continued holding her, even as she sat up with the intent of explaining herself.

"Sorry for the emotional outburst. I think everything just caught up to me..." Dane said while running a shaky hand through her hair. *God, I don't think I've ever felt anything this intense. I'm scared, overwhelmed, and just a mess.*

"It's okay. Take your time," Nicole said, caressing her friend's shoulders.

"It's just that...I was trying to be...normal I guess. Go out more, like you said. Went to some clubs, it was nice. God, the music. Fantastic...the people...just as I remember. They think I'm just...I used to party like this. All the drugs and women. I used to have a good time with it...I think anyway. But, I'm not...that person anymore...and they don't believe it," Dane sniffled.

"So, they came here ready to party with you?" Nicole scanned the house and saw all the signs of a wild party. A very wild party; she was stunned that the cops were not at the house when she showed up.

"Didn't even invite them... Just invited my girlfriend. I was trying to be more open, maybe feel again. But, I didn't feel...and she had E... and then brought coke... and all these people! They just party like it was old times when I keep telling them it's not! All the parties aren't on me anymore. I don't wanna party anymore!" She clutched onto Nicole as if the woman was a life preserver in rough waters. "I just thought she wanted to be with me...with the new Dane..."

"It's okay, Danny. They'll learn," Nicole tried to assure her friend shifting and caressing the side of Dane's head.

"I'm different. I don't want to be that Dane anymore. I don't to live in a lie. I just don't want to do it anyway," the former musician begged in a low voice.

"I believe you, Danny."

"I kicked everyone out as soon as I found out. Took a while. Had to hunt some people down, but I got everybody out. I've been trying to clean up. I didn't want you to see the place like this. I didn't want you...I didn't want you to kick me out..." It was then that Dane realized why she was scared. She was frightened that Nicole was going to throw her out because of the party. She tensed and sniffled, thinking that she had just given Nicole the opening to throw her out.

Nicole tightened her grip on her tense friend and continued cuddling her. "I won't, Danny. I won't kick you out for this. I believe you," she promised. She had to believe Danny because she had never seen the taller woman such a bundle of emotions before. She never saw Danny breakdown and it was bordering on scary.

"I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to..." Dane was shaking again. She was not sure what it was, but a shiver in her gut let her know that she did not want to leave Nicole. She did not want to leave this one person that did not expect the old Dane.

"It's okay. Come on, let's get this place cleaned up. It's all right," Nicole promised while continuing to caress Danny.

Dane nodded and weakly climbed to her feet, even though she really did not feel up to standing. She watched Nicole move and wondered if things really were that easy. It could not be that easy, not with all of the damage that was certainly her fault. Nothing was ever that easy and she had never seen an apology fix things, especially not that quickly. Her stomach tied itself in a knot and her guts continued to tremble as she cleaned up the house with Nicole.

8: Wounded

Nicole watched Danny trudge through the kitchen, making sure everything was perfect. She frowned as she watched the younger woman move. It was painful and Nicole could feel it in her stomach, spreading slowly but surely. Nicole knew that sooner or later she would feel totally sick just from watching Danny move around on her lame leg, so she needed to step in.

"Danny..." Nicole said, hoping to get a word in, but she waited a second too long.

"Breakfast'll be done in a second. I've got your dry-cleaning and everything ready. If you want to get dressed first, you can," Dane answered in a rush while grabbing a couple of plates for the meal.

Nicole sighed and walked out of the kitchen to go get ready for work. Talking to Danny had been next to impossible since she came home Saturday night. Whenever she started to say something,

Danny would chime in with something else, usually a list of things that she had done. It was like Danny was trying to prove something and Nicole could guess why.

The lawyer could see the aura of uncertainty and anxiety clouding Danny. The worry gathered in grey eyes like a building storm and the sorrow seemed ready to pour out like a hurricane as she waited for the hammer to fall. All of her activity and chores seemed to be her way of showing that she apologized for everything that happened, and also a way of begging for forgiveness.

Nicole had been trying to assure Danny for the whole weekend that things were fine. She could tell that she was not getting through because with each second Dane looked more and more like her execution was approaching. She guessed that this was something that only time would prove, but that did not make it any easier to stomach. She did know that any anger that she could have possibly been feeling because of the party were definitely gone just from waiting Danny punish herself for things that happened on Saturday.

"So...how was your trip?" Dane asked as they set down for breakfast. She had been avoiding asking anything about the trip or Nicole's sudden return because she did not want to remind Nicole of the scene that she walked in on after the trip. But, she wanted to be polite.

"It was fine. I settled it as quickly as possible so they wouldn't be able to back out again. They were pissing me the hell off and I just wanted to get away from them," Nicole answered, shaking her head with the hopes that it would rid her of memories of that accursed trip.

"So, it was a bad trip and then you had to come home to my bullshit," Dane growled, eyes looking away in shame.

"Danny, it's not like that. I told you it's all right," Nicole stated sincerely. Even if it was not all right then, it was all right now. The way Danny was beating herself up over it was better than any apology could ever be since it showed her sincerity.

"It's not all right. You could've gotten into so much trouble because of everything going on in here. If the cops knocked on the fucking door just because the music was too loud, then that would have been it!" Dane pointed out in a tense tone. Her jaw was tight and her eyes flashed with anger, directed at herself.

Nicole did not argue that, since that had crossed her mind the second that she walked in. The drug-use at the party was just blatant and out in the open. When they cleaned up, she came across more than enough forgotten marijuana cigarettes, pills, and powder that had nothing to do with makeup or donuts. She did not even know what to do with all of the contraband and left them for Danny to clean up. Dane did so without a word.

"Danny, there's no reason to dwell on things that didn't happen or things that you didn't mean to happen. It's done and over with. As long as you don't bring drugs in here anymore. I don't mind you having friends over, but I have to draw the line at drugs," Nicole stated soundly.

"There won't be anymore parties!" Dane vowed vehemently. "I'm never bringing anyone over here again." Her eyes were cold as steel, making it easy to tell how sincere she was.

"I don't mind you having people over," Nicole insisted, softening her voice. "But, I don't want any drugs in here." She did not want Danny to cut off all social ties because she still believed that Danny needed human interaction beyond what she could offer.

"I don't want drugs point blank. I don't want to be around anyone using them, and I damn sure don't want people over here that'll disrespect your place. Obviously, everyone I know will do just that because that's what they did the other night."

Nicole nodded and paused. "Danny...can I ask you a personal question?" she inquired shyly, voice low and eyes shifted to the right.

"Yes, I used to use," Dane confirmed as if it was nothing.

The lawyer was not stunned by Danny's candor. While the younger woman did not talk much about her past, she tended to be blunt about things when she was asked. There was no shame, except for her outburst a couple of nights ago. But, then again, there was no pride or joy in her tone either whenever she talked about such things. She was always bland, like talking about the weather.

"Were you an addict?" Nicole asked, still looking away.

Dane shrugged. "Probably. I never went out itching for a fix or anything, but then again, I never had to. I was a party girl. Partied almost every night. Hung out with dealers and people that knew how to get stuff if we couldn't find our usual dealers. I never stole anything to get drugs. I don't think I ever would have, but I did it so much, I had to be an addict. Shit, I did coke like people eat cookies."

"When did you quit?" the older woman inquired quietly. They both knew the real question was: did you quit?

The former musician scratched her shoulder. "I guess I quit about a year ago. Maybe a little over a year. I don't know the exact day."

"How'd you quit?"

"Just cold turkey. Stopped one day and never felt the need to start again. Never felt the need to start a lot of things again. It was pretty bad for a while, but I had already gone through hell, so it wasn't a really big deal."

Nicole nodded. She had a feeling that she had barely scratched the surface with Danny. She wished that she had the time for it right now, but she knew that figuring her roommate out would take a lot more than one breakfast. She hoped that they had enough time for her to get to know all of Danny.

"I'm glad you stopped using...I hope you don't start again..." Nicole said in a quiet tone.

"I haven't planned on it..." Dane replied. Well, really, she just had not felt like it for a long time. What was the point of it? What was the point of anything? But, now, now was different. She knew her words were true now. It was not about not feeling like it, it was about having a conscious plan of not doing drugs anymore.

"Good."

Dane nodded. More than the fact that she did not feel like doing drugs anymore, there was the fact that she did not want to bring trouble to Nicole. She ran her hand through her hair while trying to place the last time she gave a damn again and why she was starting to give a damn now. She could recall the last time she bothered caring and it was not a pleasant memory, but it was not holding her back. She stared into the green eyes across from her and told herself that there was no reason to hold back...not that she could help it.

"Well, I need to get going. My parents ride my ass whenever I'm late," Nicole commented with a smile.

Dane smiled a little in return. She found it amusing that Nicole worked for her parents at her law firm. Most people tried to get far away from their parents as far as Dane knew, but Nicole stuck close to the couple, following in their footsteps for much of her life. Dane never said anything about it, even though she was forming some opinions on things.

Nicole got up from the table and stared at Dane for a long second. The former musician was not sure what was going through Nicole's mind, but she could see a struggle in those bright emerald eyes. She did not get a chance to contemplate on it since Nicole made up her mind. Nicole leaned down and placed a chaste kiss to a copper cheek. Grey eyes shot open and all breathing stopped as far as Dane was concerned.

"Be good today," Nicole said and with that she was gone.

Grey eyes were still wide when the door slammed shut. If someone was to see Dane now, they would assume that she had never been kissed a day in her life. Her hand went to her cheek like a dazed elementary schoolgirl who was pecked by her crush.

"Nick, what the hell can of worms are you opening?" Dane wondered aloud as her mind finally restarted. She shook away the thoughts and feelings racing through her, believing that she already had enough to deal with and did not need something even more complicated to add to that list.

She ripped herself from the table and washed the dishes. She threw on her street clothes and locked up the house. She grabbed her bike and charged off toward the city. She parked her bike in front of a bank and entered the establishment. As she filled out the slip, she mentally went over a checklist of what she had to do for the day. It was going to be a busy day.

"Good morning, how can I help you?" an overly cheery teller asked Dane.

"I'm closing out my account," Dane answered in a mundane tone while passing the slip to the teller.

Not too many minutes later, Dane found herself as poor as she looked. There was cash in her pocket, but it was no longer hers. Once upon a time, she had had quite the nest egg. While she might have been a party-animal not too long ago, she always understood that she needed to save her money just in case something happened. A lot of "something" had been happening to her in the past couple of years, but she still managed to tuck away some money. She rarely spent it before living with Nicole and since living with Nicole, she took out enough money to buy household things. Well, there would be no more of that, not with this money anyway.

She retrieved her bike and made her way to the owner of her money. Most of her funds had gone to pay for all of the controlled substances that found their way to that party she did not authorize. What she was left with went toward making amends with Nicole and the hope that she would still have a home by that time next week.

The final step of her day involved riding her bike to a rundown building that was surrounded by several other dilapidated buildings. She dumped her bicycle down and trotted into the building as if it was something that she did everyday, avoiding several large chunks of concrete that used to be steps to the broken down front door. She had to duck some yellow "caution" tape, and she ignored quite a few signs that announced the building was condemned.

"With my luck, someone stole it..." Dane muttered to herself as she climbed filthy stairs that complained loudly about her weight.

Noises continued to follow her with every step she took. The floor groaned louder than the stairs. Dust flew up and fell down around her, trailing her toward the shadows of the back of the room. Mice, roaches, and other occupants scurried out of her way as she moved through the place like she owned it. She stopped at the back wall.

Moving boards caked with things that Dane did not bother to think on, she revealed a dirt-covered poster of some band that she never heard of. She yanked that down and tossed it carelessly behind her. There was a hole in the wall and she put her arm in there, feeling for her treasure. She grabbed a strap and yanked out a black, vinyl case. She quietly unzipped it to reveal a pristine guitar inside.

"Never thought I'd open this again..." Dane said while trying to ignore the bubbling feeling building in her stomach working its way up her throat, threatening to spill out her mouth and eyes.

She swallowed everything down, shaking her head at the thought of being choked up over things. She mentally scolded herself for almost getting sentimental. She reminded herself why she put the guitar away in the first place, which killed every emotion in her instantly. Posed as if bullets

would bounce off of her, she marched out of the building and back to her bike. She shouldered her case and took off, wincing a little as she worked her leg.

"*What am I doing?*" Dane wondered. She wanted to tell herself that she did not know what she was doing, but she hated lying to herself. Life was starting to get complicated, yet she knew that she was going to stick with it. For the first time in a long time, she could say that she liked her life. "I never let anything go without a fight either."

Nicole sat at her desk, going through some files while thinking about her morning...and her weekend. First, her morning where she kissed Danny on the cheek, and was surprised that she was not embarrassed by her actions, even after thinking on it for a long time. It did not seem like she crossed a line and she felt like Danny could use the affection. She consciously decided to try the move again until Danny showed signs of discomfort. Besides, it was nice to kiss Danny.

The thought about kissing Dane's soft cheek swirled around her mind for a moment. It was a very pleasant sensation, kissing Dane. She then shook that away, feeling like it was unnecessary to even think about. She went back to considering that Danny needed to know someone was there for her just to be there, not because there was something in it for Nicole.

The reason she made the decision was partly because of what she knew about Danny and the party. The former musician was trying to open up to her girlfriend-well, now, *former* girlfriend-with the hopes that she would be accepted for the person that she was, not the person that she used to be. It was clear from the way Danny told the story and the way that she semi-moped around the house that being shunned wounded Danny...or so Nicole thought anyway. It never even occurred to her that the real thing bothering Danny was what she wept over the night of the party-the thought of being kicked out.

With the party in mind, Nicole thought about the things that she lost to her unwanted guests' carelessness while being in her home. She lost a lot items in that party; some things that she liked quite a bit. She hid her disappointment and hurt while cleaning it up with Danny because she did not want to make the taller woman feel even worse, but some of that stuff could not be replaced.

"I hope Mom doesn't come by the house anytime soon. I don't need to hear about all of the things that she brought that are now missing," Nicole commented to the air.

She doubted that her mother would be making any stops by her house anytime soon, but with the way her luck went, she would not be surprised by the misfortune. Her mother and father had been so busy with their own caseloads that they barely had time to interrogate her about her new roommate. She was more than thankful for that.

"Apparently, I do have a guardian angel," she thought with a chuckle.

Her parents, while busy, did check up on her a lot. They allowed her to explain her roommate situation after Tyler had tried to start a mess. Thankfully, her parents were a little more than

willing to believe her over her former boyfriend, even though they had put up a fight over it. They had argued that Tyler would know his cousin better than Nicole, but Nicole was able to cite several occasions that Danny proved to be the opposite of what Tyler told them. They had also heard about how Danny checked up on her about eating well and things of that nature, and that seemed to be good enough for them for the time being.

She hoped that held true, but her parents had a track record for second-guessing her. They always thought that they knew better; she guessed it was because they were the parents and she was their child, but it did make things difficult when she tried to have her way on something that they did not agree with or think highly of. And they did think that it was just plain strange for Nicole to have a roommate at this point in her life when she could easily pay her own way on everything and she should be looking to settle down with someone... some guy preferably.

"I'm sure if they find out about the party, they'll be up in arms, though," Nicole said, but quickly shook that thought away. She did not want to consider what type of noise her parents would make about Danny if they knew about the party and she did not even want to entertain those thoughts. She did not want to think about what her parents would try to do.

She focused on her work to get her mind off of her parents, which was not easy since the two were intimately linked. She often got cases that her father did not want or he was just trying to throw clients her way. She never let him down, which only encouraged him to do it more often. Her current work was gotten by her own impeccable reputation, but that did not stop her father from popping by just to say she got that reputation thanks to him, which she supposed was true.

She did her work for the day and made her way home as usual. Dane was there, on the couch, fast asleep with some rock music playing at a decent volume. Nicole left her friend to her nap until she was comfortably in the house.

"Danny..." Nicole said while picking up the younger woman's head, so that she could sit down.

"Huh?" Dane muttered.

"It's me, Danny. Only me." Nicole caressed thick ebony hair to keep her roommate calm. It worked very well.

Dane yawned. "Nick? When the hell did you get in?"

"Oh, thank you. It's nice to come home from a long day at the office, doing work I hate, to be greeted by a grumbling sleepyhead," Nicole said sarcastically, continuing to rub the musician's head.

"Sorry." Dane was about to sit up, but slight pressure on her head told her to stay right where she was. She sighed while settling in and enjoying the delightful caressing.

"Don't apologize, silly. I'm just teasing, kid."

A bronze hand rubbed a grey eye for a moment. "I knew that. Are we watching a movie?"

"I haven't looked to see if something's on. How was your day?"

"Normal. What about yours?"

Nicole forced out a smile. "Mine was normal too. A client called and cursed me out for doing what I was supposed to. Tyler was looming outside my door, hoping that I would leave for lunch with him, but someone packed me a lunchbox and I didn't have to go out." She paused to allow her fingers to dance through Dane's hair, earning a smile. She loved the way that Danny's hair felt; it was much softer than it looked.

"Sounds par for the course so far. Did your assistant have to leave early today too?"

"Does that shit happen that often?" Nicole asked incredulously with an expression to match. She never really stopped to think about it, but she guessed that it happened often enough for Danny to know about it.

"Hell, yeah, it does. Bitch calls me Dash when I call too."

"I know," the lawyer replied with a sigh. "She's better than my last assistant."

"I'm willing to bet that you get a lot of shitty assistants. So, did she leave early or what?" Danny asked.

"She did. She finished most of her work, though. Anyway, she left early. I had to help a few coworkers..."

"Your days are like a repeat of each other where everybody just takes turns bending you over. You have to stop doing this, Nick. Shit, this is why you pass out so early when you come in, that is if you don't bring home work with you."

"It's not so bad. I like helping out. I'm also a little flattered when people ask me for help," Nicole said softly. Her fingers never stopped rubbing Dane's head, both of them loving every second of the touch.

Dane was quiet for a moment. "So, did you at least get out of the office at a decent hour or is it really like seven right now?" She had not bothered to check the time yet.

"It's six. I stopped coming in past seven over a month ago and you know it!" Nicole playfully slapped Dane's shoulder.

"Yeah, but you still can't stay up past eleven on your best night!" Dane shot back.

"Well, Danny, some of us do have jobs!" The lawyer hoped that was not going too far. She remembered the last time that she brought up Danny having a job. There was a moment of

silence that was too long for Nicole's liking and she was about to apologize, but her friend started talking.

"Hey, I do a damn good job sleeping on this couch and it is nine-to-five. Hell, sometimes I even do overtime!" A grin followed those words.

Nicole chuckled. "That you do. You also do a good job at cooking, cleaning, and everything else around the house."

Like tearing it up. "Speaking of all of that...do you think you could loan me a couple of dollars?" Dane inquired, stunned to find it was not as hard as she thought. She had never asked someone for money whose last name did not match her own and she made it a point not to do that often. Usually, when she took money from her family, she accepted that she was taking advantage of them because she did not intend to pay them back, but she knew why they were giving her money anyway. They thought that it would get them in good with her mother, which she did not understand since it was no secret how her parents felt about her. With Nicole, she felt like she was taking advantage and it made her feel bad, not because she was so independent, but because she thought that she took so much from her host already.

"You sounded like that pained you, Danny," Nicole commented with a laugh.

"It was actually surprisingly painless. You're the first person I've ever asked for money." *Well, with the intent to pay it back.*

"And you want it to go shopping and buy things that I'll be using too?"

"Well, just dinner and some other things," Dane answered.

"I'll leave money on the coffee table for you. I'm glad you asked."

Dane smiled, liking the sincerity in Nicole's voice. The sincerity made it easy to ask, but also caused a twinge of guilt to surge through her. She still felt like she was taking advantage of Nicole, like the rest of the world did, even though she was going to use the money for things that would benefit Nicole.

"I'll pay you back," Dane promised.

"Don't worry about it, Danny. We live here together," Nicole argued.

"And? You do all the work and have to pay for everything? That's not fair. I'll pay you back," Dane stated.

"You watch a few movies with me that we both know you hate and that'll be payment enough. You know no one's ever spent this much time with me doing things that I want to do." She did not say it, but the attention that Danny paid her made her feel special, which was not a feeling many people were capable of doing. Even fewer people seemed to try to bring out the feeling;

Danny did it without really trying, as far as Nicole could tell. She wanted as much of that feeling as she could get.

"Even still, I like spending time with you, so this doesn't count as pay back. I'm going to pay you back."

Nicole knew better than to contradict Dane, so she let the matter drop. The lawyer found a movie for them to watch. In fact, it was a movie that Dane hated, but she kept that to herself and entertained Nicole. It was a good night for them after exhausting days.

Nicole rubbed sleep out of her eye as she entered the kitchen and stopped in the doorway as she heard a lot of muttered swear words. Her eyes fell to the source the swear words and she could guess why they were flowing like water that morning. Danny was practically walking the kitchen on one leg. Every time she put the slightest bit of pressure on the other, her face contorted into a series of grimaces. *Her limp seems to be getting worse everyday*, Nicole noted.

"Danny, maybe you should see a doctor about your leg," Nicole commented as she stepped deeper into the kitchen.

"I don't need a damn doctor," Dane grunted while leaning on the counter to take the weight off of her leg.

"Your leg's been bothering you for over a week now. Go to the doctor," Nicole insisted.

"It's not bothering me. It just hurts a little." *It just hurts a lot!*

"Doesn't look like a little from where I'm standing."

"I'm okay," Dane promised.

"Can I at least look at it?"

Nicole did not wait for an answer. She moved, turning Danny around, forced the younger woman to lean against the counter, and bent down in front of the former musician. Dane yelped in surprise and winced from the movement. She glanced down and saw wild, auburn hair. She groaned as flashes of very dirty thoughts rushed through her mind thanks to their positions. Those thoughts were gone as quickly as they came as Nicole touched her knee.

"Ah, shit!" Dane screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Danny, sweetie, your whole leg is swollen," Nicole informed her ailing "patient."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not. Go lay down on the couch right now!"

Dane opened her mouth to protest, but glaring emerald eyes silenced her quickly. She limped to sofa, making sure to look at indignant as possible while making sure to keep down any sounds of anguish. She flopped down on the couch and put her leg up.

She was not alone for too long. Nicole showed up with a couple of baggies of ice and an ace bandage. Dane hissed as Nicole went to work, placing the ice on her knee and leg, and then wrapping the ace bandage around the bags to keep them in place. She then put a small pillow underneath Dane's foot.

"Stay off of it for the day," Nicole ordered.

"What about breakfast?" Dane asked while turning, as if she was about to get up. The glare that put her on the couch kept her there.

"I've got it. You stay here and you don't move," the lawyer commanded, pointing at Dane as if her finger could shoot bullets to keep Dane right where she was.

The musician nodded and made herself comfortable. Nicole came back with more pillows and a blanket. She put the pillows under Dane's head and put the blanket over the younger woman. Once again, Dane was about to protest, but Nicole did not stick around to hear it. She handed the television remote and the stereo remote to Danny before walking out of the living room.

"You're going to be late for work at this rate!" Dane called into the kitchen.

"Stop worrying about me for five minutes and let me take care of you!" Nicole barked back.

Dane grumbled under her breath and looked like a pouting child by the time Nicole came back into the living room. Nicole smiled and handed Dane a bowl of oatmeal. As Dane took the offering, Nicole patted the younger woman on the head. Her fingers suddenly decided to crawl through soft black locks and she massaged Danny's head.

"You know...no one's ever done that to me before..." Dane commented out of the blue.

"What? Make you oatmeal or take care of your when you're sick?"

"Well, there are those things, yes, but no one's ever pet me before. I guess it just never crossed minds before considering how tall I am," Dane said. *And maybe considering the fact that if anybody ever tried it, I would break their damn arm.*

"If you want me to stop-" Nicole said, but did not make it through the rest of her offer.

"No, no, it's cool. I was just saying that no one ever did it before, but it's pretty relaxing. Now, you need to stop worrying about me and get moving. You're going to be late and I bet your parents never let you hear the end of it!" Dane teased.

It was Nicole's turn to yelp; Danny was too right about that one. She rushed off to get ready, but could not stop checking on Dane in the process. She was almost fifteen minutes behind schedule by the time she was dressed and instead of doing her usual checklist, she went to make sure that Dane knew to stay her ass on that couch for the day.

"Here's water for you." Nicole placed down two liter bottles of spring water on the coffee table. "Here's lunch." She placed down a plate that was covered with plastic wrap. "Once all of the ice melts, just stay there. I don't want you even getting up to put more ice on it." She knew that Dane would not bother to put more ice on her leg, so she did not want Dane to have that as an excuse to get up.

"What about the bathroom?" the musician inquired with a perplexed look.

"Yes, you can go to the bathroom. Just don't get up every five minutes and then lie to me when I come in, saying that you had to go to the bathroom."

"I wouldn't lie to you!" Dane huffed indignantly. She had the nerve to fold her arms across her chest, even though she knew that she would not be able to keep her word. It did bother her, but it was necessary.

"I'm teasing, Danny. I just want you to get better. So, please, stay on the couch and rest your leg," Nicole implored her friend.

Emerald eyes shined and sparkled, forcing Dane's hand. "Fine, I'll stay on the couch and rest my leg." *For now.*

"Thank you." Nicole leaned down and kissed Dane's cheek. The affection paused the musician just as it did the first time Nick did it.

"Have a good day at work," Dane called to the retreating lawyer.

Nicole smiled as she closed the door behind her. She rushed into her car and waved to her neighbor, who was not usually out when she left, so she knew that she was running late. Her neighbor, a middle-aged gentleman that ran a framing business downtown, waved to her, as if calling her over, but she did not have the time.

Nicole hopped in her car and pointed to her watch, indicating that she was late. She pulled off before he had a chance to signal for her again. She ran into the office, even though she was already late. A few of her colleagues that were in the lobby of the firm threw a few teasing jeers her way.

"Better hope the momma bear doesn't find out baby bear is late for work," Clara remarked as she walked by Nicole.

"Don't say anything," Nicole begged. She knew that she was pleading with the wrong person. She could trust Clara; it was the other people around the building that would probably turn her in.

"You know I won't, but you better get your ass to your office before Tyler finds out you're late. You know he'll rat you out for the brownie points he'd get with your folks," Clara reminded her friend.

Nicole nodded in agreement and rushed to her office. She quickly set herself up to look like she was working, just in case she did get any surprise visits. She relaxed as the morning passed and she seemed to get away with being late.

"Nikki!" The door to her office burst open.

Nicole yelped as her father burst into her office, filling the space with his vibrant energy as soon as he entered. She looked up as the man that she heavily favored stepped into the room. Nicole's father, Raymond Cardell, stood at exactly six feet tall with deep auburn hair that was professionally cut short and combed back. His thin mustache was also done by a professional, making sure it was neat and even. He had green eyes that were always alert and sharp; the look often came over Nicole's eyes when she was working. His skin tone was much lighter than her own, but it was always easy to tell that they were father and daughter.

"What can I do for you, Daddy?" Nicole asked. She recalled when she first came to work at the firm. She was not sure how she was supposed to address her parents, senior partners in the vastly successful firm that they basically built from the ground up. She did not want to seem unprofessional or that she gained the job through nepotism (even though she was sure that she did), so she tried calling them "Mr. and Mrs. Cardell." They did not stand for it and she quickly reverted back to using the titles that she had from birth.

"I need the briefs for the Tashlin account before I have to go and strangle the man myself," Raymond reported. She sighed in relief, happy that he was not there to say anything about her being late for work.

"Sure thing, Daddy." Nicole opened her briefcase and then her face fell.

"What's wrong, Nikki?" Raymond inquired with some concern because of the disappointed look on his daughter's face.

"I forgot them on my nightstand. I was in such a rush this morning," Nicole explained as she turned her attention to her father.

"What were you in a rush for?" he asked curiously. He knew that she tended to manage her time well; she always had, even when she was in elementary school.

"I was just behind schedule. I'll go home and get them."

"Isn't your roommate usually home around this time? Why don't you just call her and ask her to bring them around?" he proposed. He would like to see what this roommate looked like anyway. He had not heard good things about her from Tyler, but Nicole swore by her, so he wanted to see what she was really like.

"Danny doesn't drive, Daddy."

Raymond's expression showed that he seemed to think it was impossible for an adult not to drive. "She's got a license, doesn't she?"

"Yes, she does. She doesn't have a car, though. She gets around with a bike."

Raymond had to laugh. "The little things you tell us about this roommate of yours just makes me wonder how she's related to Tyler at all."

"You and me both," Nicole muttered, knowing her father meant it differently from her. "I tell you what, I'll go pick them up. I need to check on Danny anyway." She wanted to make sure the younger woman was staying on the couch and off of her leg.

A thick, auburn eyebrow shot up. "Why's that?"

"She's not feeling well, but she's one of those annoying people that swear they're fine no matter how sick they are. Kind of like you," Nicole teased with a grin.

"Watch it, Nikki. I happen to know your mother needs a second chair for a case she's working and I have no problem with dropping your name to her."

Nicole's face dropped in horror. "And I thought you loved me, Daddy."

"I'll love you even more when you get those files in my hand."

"I'm on my way."

Nicole quickly grabbed her keys and rushed off. The last thing she wanted to do was work with her mother; the woman was frightening when it came work. Nicole drove home, surprised at how quickly the drive was without the usual traffic. She got out of her car to see her neighbor out watering his lawn.

"Hey, Nicole, you're home pretty early," her neighbor commented.

"Hey, Mister Boyler. Sorry about this morning, I was running late. That's the reason I'm back here too. I forgot something this morning," Nicole explained.

"I wanted to tell you about that kid living with you. I've been keeping an eye on her since she threw that crazy party while you were gone. Hell, the only reason I didn't call the cops then was

because I didn't want to get you into any trouble. Anyway, you know I keep odd hours since my daughter started running the business, so I'm home a lot of time now."

Nicole nodded, hoping the story was going somewhere now. "Thank you for thinking of me, sir. We've taken care of that problem."

"Oh? I wanted to tell you this morning that the kid's been coming and going a lot in the past couple of weeks. I don't know, she might be planning something else. You know how kids can be. I mean, you remember my son? All the trouble he got into last year. I just hope the little scamp isn't doing the same thing in college now too," Mister Boyler rambled.

"Coming and going?" Nicole echoed, her forehead wrinkled and her eyebrows curled up a little. That did not sound like Danny at all. After all, even when she was hanging out with her friends, she left late at night, not in the morning or afternoon. Besides, Danny was always home by the time she got in and never said anything about going out.

"Yeah. In fact, she rushed out of the house an hour ago and hasn't been back yet. I don't want her tearing up your property or getting you in trouble, Nicole. You're a nice person. I don't know why you always have such characters staying with you," he ranted on.

Mister Boyler had lost Nicole when he said that Dane rushed out an hour ago. "Thank you, Mister Boyler," she said in an absent tone while marching to the house and entering. "Danny! Danny, your ass better be in here!"

Doing a search of the house, Nicole found it to be empty. She growled as she grabbed the items that she needed and marched back out to her car. She cursed Danny out all the way back to work.

"Damn her! I told her to stay off of that damn leg! Stubborn, smartass Wolfe! Now I see how she's related to Tyler! Damn, pigheaded, stubborn jackass!"

"I'm home, Danny!" Nicole called as she entered the house and she was happy to be there after yet another day of the same thing at work. She walked right to the living room and discovered her roommate knocked out on the couch, just as she had left Danny that morning. The only problem was that Danny was wearing different clothes from that the one's she had on in the morning. Nicole's gaze narrowed. "What's going on, Danny? What aren't you telling me?"

Instead of waking Danny to interrogate her, the lawyer went to take a shower and wash away the grim of the day. Her body did not relax as much as the hot shower as it typically did. Tension remained wrapped around her body like a giant anaconda. She could guess why that was.

She went downstairs and went to the couch like always. She stared down at Danny and wondered if the younger woman was going to say anything about where she was earlier. *What's going on? Why is Danny sneaking around?*

"Nick?" Dane yawned as she turned in her sleep.

"Danny, you awake?" Nicole asked.

"Hmm..."

Nicole smiled a bit. "Of course not. You never just wake up when I sit down. I have to do this." She massaged the musician's scalp.

"Nick." Dane smiled before yawning. She blinked a few times and then opened her eyes to look at her housemate.

"Hey, Danny. How was your day?" she asked while continuing to work on Danny's head. She found that rubbing Danny's head to wake her up prevented the younger woman from waking up in a panic.

"Same as always."

Nicole waited for an elaboration. Maybe some hint as to where Danny was that afternoon, but nothing else came her way. "How's the leg?"

"A little better...I think..." Dane said while glancing down at the aforementioned limb. *It fucking hurts!* It just did not hurt as much as this morning.

"That's good. You should probably stay off of it tomorrow too."

Dane nodded. Nicole bit her lip to prevent herself from starting an interrogation. *Why is Danny lying? Is she up to something?* Nicole shook those thoughts away. Danny had not shown any signs of doing anything wrong or doing anything to endanger herself or Nicole. The one thing that Danny had done that was over the top, she made sure to apologize thoroughly for and she was clearly sincere. Nicole decided to give Danny the benefit of the doubt, not matter how suspicious Mister Boyler made everything Danny did sound.

Nicole came in from work and tossed her briefcase aside. She rubbed her temples as she went right to the living room to make sure Dane was where she usually was. There were lines underneath Nicole's tired green eyes as she wondered if Danny's leg was any better. For over the last week, Danny's leg seemed to be getting worse, but the musician did not want to say anything. The limp and the cursing were what gave away Dane's agony. Nicole was going out of her mind trying to figure out what to do about her friend; not to mention, work was as grueling as always.

The musician was on the sofa, sleeping. Her leg was propped up and there was a curious item resting next to her. Nicole approached the couch and put her hand on the black, vinyl case that

was by Dane's head. Nicole unzipped it slightly and saw that it was what she thought it was-a guitar.

"I thought she didn't have a guitar..." the lawyer muttered. Everything with Danny was getting stranger. "I don't think I can take any more of this..."

She left the sleeping form on the sofa and went to get comfortable, going through her usual routine. She then flopped down hard on the couch, accidentally waking Danny. Dane shot up from the couch, snorting and twisting from the shock. She relaxed when she saw Nicole sitting next to her and settled back into her original resting position.

"Nick?" Dane said, blinking hard to get her eyes to focus. "You don't look so good."

"Thank you," Nicole replied sarcastically.

"Sorry. You really don't look good, though. Are you okay?"

"You're one to ask. How's the leg?" Nicole countered.

"Leg's how it always is. It's you that I'm concerned about. You seriously look like hell. Maybe you should go to bed."

"No offer to carry me up there?" Nicole teased with a light laugh.

The idea was so ludicrous at the moment that even Dane had to laugh. Just the thought of lifting anything made her leg scream in pain. She was not sure what she was going to do about it.

"Danny, what's this guitar doing here? Are you holding it for a friend or something?" Nicole asked curiously.

"Guitar?" Dane shifted to see what the hell her friend was talking about. "Oh! No, that's my guitar."

"I thought you didn't have a guitar."

"I don't have one in that case you see me carrying around. I had this one put away for a long time."

"And why do you have it now? Are you playing again?"

Dane chewed on the inside of her cheek for a moment. Nicole was about to withdraw the question and apologize, but the musician proceeded to explain. "Well, I'm not exactly playing again. I've been giving lessons...you know...like a job...thing..." She glanced away, as if she was embarrassed to admit that.

"You got a job?" Nicole asked with a smile.

"Don't bust a gut with joy here, Nick. Yes, I got a job. I figured it would keep me out of trouble. To be honest...I was going to surprise you by buying replacements for all the stuff that got broken at the party."

"Aw, you are too sweet, Danny," Nicole cooed and she leaned over, placing a light kiss to Danny's cheek. She was overjoyed to know that Danny was not doing anything dangerous. She had worried for nothing, she scolded herself mentally. "Wait, how do you get to these lessons?"

"I ride my bike, of course," Danny answered while trying to fight down the blush in her face that shot up because of the very light peck.

"That's why your leg is killing you! You've been working it too hard and more than it's used to! You silly girl!" Nicole chastised the musician. She went so far as to slightly pluck Danny in the nose since the younger woman was still lying down. That got rid of the blush.

"Sorry! I just wanted to do something right. I thought if I got the job and paid you back...you'd, well...you'd be happy," Dane informed her friend. She could not help noticing how badly she was stammering while talking to Nicole. She never had such a problem before and it was slightly unnerving to have it now.

"Danny, I am just happy that you're here. You don't need to get a job or even to pay me back for me to be happy. The job suggestion before was for you. I thought you needed something to do with your day to keep you occupied."

Dane nodded. "You were right. I've been having a good time teaching, even the few idiots that I have. God, they don't know a guitar from a whistle, but it's nice to just hold a guitar again."

A grin spread across Nicole's face and made her eyes sparkle; Dane loved it when that happened. "I'm glad you're happy with that. You should do something you love."

It was Dane's turn to grin. "I was thinking the same thing about you." The musician sat up quickly and yanked her guitar case toward her.

"Are you going to play for me?" Nicole teased with a smile. She would like to hear Danny on the guitar sometime, but she would rather it when they were not worrying about each other.

"You don't want to hear me play. I have something much better for you. When I started this peace-offering, I thought about how much you like chemistry and how much you dislike your job-"

"I don't-" Nicole did not make it past those two words.

"You do. You only do your job because that's what your parents want. Your heart is in chemistry. That's why you read the damn books to relax. So, I got you this." Dane lifted a box from her case and handed it to Nicole.

The lawyer laughed as she saw that she was holding a box for a children's chemistry set. She was about to say something when Dane held up one finger, silencing her. The box was opened right after, revealing not a chemistry set, but a stack of papers.

"Danny?" Nicole was perplexed.

"They're college applications. So, you can apply to grad school...for chemistry," Dane explained.

"Oh, Danny!" Nicole was so caught up that all she could do was fling herself onto the taller woman's lap. She was conscious enough to be careful of the musician's sore leg.

Dane did not seem to mind. She thought about putting her arms around Nicole, but was too nervous at the moment to do so. She tried to ignore how nice it felt to have the lawyer against her and she wanted to avoid the temptation of holding onto Nicole. The redhead put her arms around the younger woman and embraced her tightly.

"I want you to be happy, Nick. Those are all local schools with that claim to have good chemistry programs. Do something for yourself for once, please," Dane begged.

Nicole just held on. No one had ever encouraged her to follow her own dream; it was unreal. Danny was unreal, so she held on, assuring herself that she was not dreaming. Danny was there, supporting her, encouraging her, and making her feel in ways that she never imagined possible.

"You're a godsend, Danny," Nicole said in a tearful tone.

"I'm just a bum musician with a bad leg. You're the angel. Take care of yourself, angel," Dane replied as she shyly wrapped her arms around Nicole. She silently vowed to hold onto the angel in her arms for as long as she could, but she figured one day, she was going to have to let the angel fly away. "You are precious and never let anyone make you feel anything less."

Next time: Nicole finds out it's Danny's birthday and she finds out from...Tyler? Nicole learns more about Dane thanks to that.

**Shea K's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ Scarred for Life ~
by Shea K

Disclaimer: See Part 1
9: The greatest gift of all

"How's the leg?" Nicole asked Dane as they moved about the kitchen for their usual breakfast.

"It's better. Still a little sore and swollen," Dane answered honestly. She was moving about much better, so the lawyer did not doubt her word on it.

"Do you have any students to see today?" Nicole inquired.

"Actually, today I get to give my first piano lesson, but it should be fine. The person lives a few blocks down," the former musician replied, gesturing with her hand what direction she would be going in as if that would help.

Nicole paused for a moment and regarded her roommate with a curious look. "You play the piano too? You really are just full of surprises."

Dane smiled and blushed ever-so slightly. It was a rare day for someone to find out that she played piano; it was rarer still for her to be complimented for that talent. Usually people just asked why the hell did a rocker like her play the piano.

"How many instruments do you play?" Nicole asked curiously as they sat down at the table.

"Well, don't go spreading this around... wouldn't want to ruin my reputation and all," Dane joked and she earned a light laugh before continuing. "I play six instruments. Guitar, bass, and drums."

"Somehow I get those aren't the ones I shouldn't go spreading around," Nicole remarked.

"And I play piano, violin, and trumpet."

"The trumpet?" Nicole echoed. It seemed a little out of place, even with that lot.

Dane shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe I always wanted to play something that would deform my face. I don't play it that well."

"You're musically inclined. That's wonderful. So, I'm guessing that the guitar is your favorite."

The taller woman nodded and smiled. "Of all time. I don't know why, but I connect with my guitar. I never told this to anyone, but I feel like I can work through anything as long as I can play my guitar," she said. She suddenly flinched. *I used the wrong words there.*

"What's wrong, Danny?" The attorney's face scrunched up with worry and she reached across the table, taking Dane's hand in hers. "Is it your leg?" Nicole had a feeling it was something deeper than that, but decided to go with the safer question.

Ebony locks shifted a little as Dane shook her head. "No, no. It's just that I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay. I'm glad you're sharing with me." It was incredibly touching for her to know that Dane felt safe enough to do that.

Dane smiled a little, looking almost shy. "I feel a bit better sharing..." she admitted. It felt like weight was lifted off of her every time she revealed a little more about herself to Nicole. She felt...safe. Not in a physical sense, but in some way that she did not even know existed. It was like everything about her was safe with Nicole; it felt weird, but good. *Can't fuck this up*, her brain ordered her. No, she definitely could not do anything that might jeopardize this new feeling.

Breakfast was over too soon for their taste, but it always was. Nicole left after their usual farewell with the additional kiss on the cheek from Nicole to Dane. Dane was also ordered to stay off of her leg as much as possible, which she did not respond to in order to avoid lying.

Nicole went to work with a good feeling in her system that was typically replaced by stress about an hour into work. Today things were a little different. She barely got to enjoy her happy morning before it was ruined by the presence of her ex.

Tyler barged into her office without knocking, as he had a poor habit of doing. He was smirking, looking cocky in a manner that made Nicole just want to punch his face in. She would never do that in real life, but she enjoyed entertaining the idea.

"Good morning, Nikki," Tyler cooed, trying so hard to sound charming. So much so that he forgot that she hated to be called that.

"What do you want, Tyler?" she demanded to know while moving papers out of his sight. She would not put it by him to try to find out what she was working on to somehow weasel his way into her cases; he had done it when he was trying to get her to date him.

"I was just wondering how much money you gave her," Tyler said with a strange glint in his eyes. He looked so cocky for a reason that was just beyond Nicole.

"Gave who money?" Nicole asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Dane. I know she had to scam some money out of you, playing up the fact that it's her birthday."

"Her birthday?" Nicole glanced off for a moment, devoting her attention to searching her memory rather than paying Tyler any mind. She tried to remember the date on Danny's driver's license. She blinked as she realized it was Danny's birthday. "She didn't say anything," she muttered with a frown. She could not believe that Danny had not said a word about it being her birthday.

"What? You're kidding? She didn't come begging to you for money since it's her special day? You know she's just going to use it for drugs," Tyler stated smugly, folding his arms across his chest.

"She doesn't use drugs," Nicole countered in a tense tone. She glared at him as if she was trying to set him on fire merely for suggesting such a thing.

Tyler flinched for just a second, unused to that voice or that look from her. His forehead wrinkled as a perplexed look conquered his face. Then, he was suddenly back to normal. He marched closer to her desk.

"She didn't do anything to you already, did she? You're trying to defend her. If she did something, just tell me right now. I'll have her removed from your house immediately," Tyler declared. "That filthy bitch is disgusting and low, putting her hands on whatever, acting like she owns the damn world," he grumbled, mostly to himself, but he was speaking aloud.

For a moment, Nicole was bewildered. She did not get what he meant by Dane doing "something" to her, but it quickly dawned her. He was implying that Danny might have touched her inappropriately, maybe even violated her. She frowned deeply and looked offended by the very idea that he would imply such a thing. Emerald eyes flashed as anger poured out of her directed right at Tyler.

"Danny would NEVER do something I didn't want. Stay out of my business, Tyler. Also, don't mix personal things at the office. I have a job to do here and I don't need you distracting me from that with your bullshit," Nicole said in a stern voice.

Tyler scowled tightly and his jaw tensed. "You think I'm distracting you? You need to open your eyes and realize that Dane is bad news. She's nothing but a junkie that's going to rob you blind."

Nicole tensed a little herself. She could not believe the arrogance, the gall of Tyler. *Who the hell does he think he is? How dare he judge Danny?!* Danny had been nothing but sweet and kind to her. Danny showed her affection that she doubted Tyler could ever imagine, yet there he was judging Danny. She could not believe how he was standing there, staring at her with hard dirt-colored eyes as if he truly thought that she was stupid for not listening to him.

"Funny, I'm missing less money with her around than I was with you around," Nicole snapped with a fury that he never witnessed before blazing at him in her emerald eyes. He was not sure where the emotion was coming from, but he wanted her to put it away. Hell, she was not sure where the emotion was coming from, but she would not put it away until he stopped saying horrible things about Danny and he got out of her office.

He cleared his throat and glanced away. "Well...she's obviously just bidding her time. I know Dane, Nikki. You're going to regret taking her in," he vowed.

"Get the hell out," Nicole commanded, pointing to the door.

"Just watch," he said.

She growled and scanned her desk for something to throw at Tyler. He was smart enough to retreat from the office before she got her hands on something that would give him a nice knot.

She got up to slam the door shut-loudly-and then went back to her seat. She then tried to go back to work, but found it hard to concentrate.

"Damn him," she hissed and then went into her briefcase, searching for something else to work on.

Two folders were ignored and then she came across a folder that she did not recall putting in her case. She took it out and opened it. She could not help smiling when she saw what was in there-the applications for graduate school.

"Danny, you are too sweet. I can't believe it's your birthday and you didn't say anything. Maybe her friends are doing something with her. She didn't say anything about that, though. Well, Danny doesn't usually say anything involving her friends or plans or anything," Nicole reminded herself.

She absently went through the stack of applications while trying to think of what Danny might be planning for her birthday. The musician had not shown any indication that it was a big day, going about her morning as usual. There were no clues that Nicole could think of during the morning, yesterday, or at any point that hinted at Danny's birthday.

"Why didn't you say anything, Danny?" Nicole wondered.

The attorney was taken from her thoughts by the sound of her phone ringing. For a moment, she almost daydreamed right through the annoying sound. By the time that she picked it up, she had to pause for a moment to avoid sounding upset. She frowned when she was greeted by her father's voice.

"Nikki, I just got another case for you. It shouldn't be too difficult for you," Raymond informed her.

"Daddy, I've already got enough cases," Nicole argued. *More than enough.*

"Nonsense! I know you can handle this with no problem. We have to make sure you stay busy, so you can become the youngest partner in the firm!" he pointed out.

"Of course," she grumbled, making sure to say that away from the receiver. "Daddy, I'm only one person."

"One extraordinary person. I'm going to bring you everything you need and go over it with you, but it is your case. I know you'll be able to do it justice just as quickly as you always do," he declared, his pride so obvious that it would not have been surprising if it oozed through the phone.

Nicole did not have a chance to argue, not that she planned on trying. She knew that it was no use; she would never be able to talk her parents out of anything. Also, there was no point in arguing because her father hung up as soon as he was finished explaining why he called. She

sighed, knowing that her workload was about to grow. She could only hope that her mother did not come across a case or a contract or anything that she could do or she would be working at home and through her weekends to stay on top of everything.

"*Danny isn't going to like that, so I hope my mother doesn't call,*" Nicole said to herself. There was no way that Danny would let her do so much work, which she was thankful for.

A smile spread across her face as she thought about the times that Danny kept her from working. Danny would curl up with her on the couch and they would either watch movies or listen to music. Sometimes they would both read or just Nicole would read, but Danny would stay there with her, never complaining and always comforting. *So different from Tyler.*

The more Nicole thought about it, Danny was just different from any other person that she had let into her life—even her friends. Her friends were always on her case, trying to get her to help them with their work or personal problems or anything. Sometimes, she felt like a servant with her friends. It seemed like she was there to support everyone, but no one really did it for her. They would tell her nice things to appease her, "Oh, Nicole, you're so strong," "Nicole, you'd never end up in a mess like this," "Nicole, you're like a superwoman." She suspected that they said it more to ease any guilt that they might have than to really compliment her.

She shook her head, ridding herself of those thoughts. She shoved the college applications back into her briefcase to get her head out of the clouds. She then went back to what she was working on before Tyler came into her office. Unfortunately, he was not the only distraction of the day.

Her assistant came in with some bogus story about needing to leave early because of a sick grandmother; by Nicole's count, her assistant's grandmother should have been dead considering all the ailments the elderly woman came down with. That was, of course, assuming the elderly lady was not already deceased considering that her assistant already went to her funeral three times as an excuse to get the day off. She supposed it was possible to just have about six grandmothers, although she was not sure how.

Nicole did not say anything, though. She would manage without the assistant, as she often did. The woman claimed that she would finish up with her work before she left, which was going to be during lunch. Nicole doubted that, but still did not say anything because she had other things to do.

Before lunchtime could even arrive, Nicole was interrupted yet again. Her good friend Mina entered her office. Nicole knew that it had to do with business since Tyler was the only one unprofessional enough to enter her office during work hours and want to talk about something personal.

"Nicole, I need you to look at this contract for me," Mina requested, holding up a folder.

"Why? What's wrong?" Nicole asked.

"That's what I'm hoping you'll tell me. I want to be sure that it's as good as it looks and I know you have that eagle eye for details like this. You're also good at finding hidden meanings to things."

Nicole sighed. "I guess I can look at it during lunch..."

"You're going to spend your lunch inside again?" Mina asked incredulously, throwing her hands up.

The redhead frowned a little, as if she was insulted by her friend's dramatic action. "I don't mind spending my lunches inside."

Mina smirked. "Oh, that's right. Your little roommate makes you lunch now. Does she give you midnight snacks too?"

Nicole glared, erasing the smirk right from her friend's face. "My relationship with Danny is nothing like that."

"Okay, okay. Ease up, Nicole." Mina held her hands up to show that she surrendered. "I was only teasing you. So, are you going to look at the contract?" she inquired, not to make sure, but to take the conversation back to the matter at hand. She would talk to Nicole about the fabulous Danny some other time, outside of work since she knew that Nicole preferred talking about personal matters when business hours were done.

Before Nicole could repeat that she would, the phone rang. She put it on speakerphone. Her assistant, surprisingly still working, reported that there was a "Dash" on the line that wished to speak with her. Nicole rolled her eyes.

"Put her through," Nicole ordered in an upset tone that made Mina arch an eyebrow. "Hey, Dash."

"Did that lazy bitch call me Dash again?" Dane demanded to know with a huff.

"Danny, please don't call her that," the attorney requested, shaking her head a little, even though her roommate could not see.

"Why? She is. One day I'm going to end up at your office just to put my good foot up her ass. I bet she's abandoning you in a few minutes too."

"Danny," Nicole said in a pleading tone.

"Fine, fine, fine. I was just calling to see how you are, chem. I don't want you to get too stressed. Just remember you're surrounded by ungrateful idiots."

Nicole smiled, which also got an arched eyebrow from Mina. The mocha-skinned lawyer eased her folder onto Nicole's desk and eased out of the room, just knowing deep down that she was in

the middle of an intimate conversation-no matter what Nicole would tell her later on. She did make a mental note to ask Nicole about it sometime when they were not working.

"You're just too sweet, Danny. My day is going how it usually does. I just got a new case. My father is forcing me to work on it," Nicole reported with a huff, knowing that she would get some desired empathy from her friend.

"Well, that sucks. You should tell him that you already have enough on your plate."

"I tried," Nicole insisted weakly.

"Yeah, but you didn't try in your I'm-not-taking-any-bullshit tone. I've seen how you talk to people, chem. I don't understand how the hell you're a corporate lawyer with the way you do."

Nicole sank in her seat a little, looking much like a reprimanded child. "I'm...different...when really working."

Dane picked up on the mood and chimed in with a gentle, soothing tone. "Hey, you don't need to sound sad about it. It's good that you can be assertive when you're being a kick-ass spawn of Satan. I just want you to be kick-ass more often in life, so you don't have to get saddled with so much shit. Anyway, I didn't call to scold you or anything. I want you to make sure you eat lunch. I packed you two puddings to lift your spirits."

The smile on Nicole's face was priceless. "Thanks, Danny, although those things have a lot of calories in them-" she was quickly cut off by her roommate.

"Damn it, Nick, live a little. Don't be a calorie-counter for everything. If it helps, I'll go with you to the gym."

Nicole laughed. "And do what? The last time you went, you almost killed yourself on the equipment because you don't know how to listen."

"It wasn't me. It was my leg!" Dane joked. Never before would she have joked about something being her bum leg's fault, but she felt like she could do it with Nicole. She guessed that meant that she was comfortable with Nicole. *When was I ever comfortable with someone like this? ... Was I ever?*

"Yeah, it was your leg. Whatever." Nicole laughed and rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Speaking of my leg, I would like to tell you that it is feeling better. I went and taught my piano lesson, came home, and iced my leg down. The swelling is going down. It almost looks normal...you know, aside for all of the scarred tissue and everything," Dane remarked.

"Well, let's work on what we can work on. When you start leg modeling, we'll get the scarred tissue."

Dane burst out laughing. "You just made me spit out my apple juice!"

"Then my work here is done. Speaking of work, I need to get back to that since I now have more than I started with this morning."

"I swear, you're the only person whose work grows the more she does it on the daily basis. Have a good day, chem."

"Bye, Danny."

The call was disconnected and Nicole could not rid herself of the smile on her face. She was just so happy that someone called to check up on her and make sure that she was all right. *No one ever did that!*

"That settles it. I have to do something extra-special for Danny's birthday," Nicole decided.

"Danny, I'm home!" Nicole called as she carefully entered the house, not wanting to ruin the bouquet of yellow roses that she had purchased on her way. She also had to be careful of the small box that she was carrying. It was a hard balancing act since she was carrying her briefcase too, but she managed it.

When there was no answer, she knew that Danny was sleeping. She marched to the living room and found her roommate in a familiar state. Dane was out like a light on the sofa, eyes closed and mouth wide opened. Her leg was wrapped and elevated by a throw pillow. There was faint heavy metal music coming through the stereo.

"And you say I'm precious," Nicole remarked with a smile.

She left Dane as she was for the moment, wanting to get comfortable in the house. First things first, she went to put the box that she was holding in the refrigerator. She then turned around to go upstairs. She barely reached the stairs when the phone started ringing. Luckily, she had a phone on the table right next to the stairs. She put down the flowers in order to answer.

"Hello?" Nicole greeted the caller.

"I'm looking Dane," a female voice stated.

"She's sleeping right now. May I take a message?"

The dial tone was Nicole's response to that. She did not think too much of it, even though she did note that Danny knew some very rude people. She made it to her bedroom before the phone rang again. Once again the person was looking for Dane and did not leave a message.

"I guess everyone's looking for her since it's her birthday. They probably all have big plans and things for her," Nicole thought. Danny did not seem like she was up for those plans, though, since she was knocked out instead of out partying.

The lawyer put down her things and went to take her shower. She changed into house clothes, which were the grey sweat-shorts and a white v-neck tee-shirt. She went to go sit with Danny, but the phone halted her for a moment.

"Hello?" Nicole greeted the caller once again.

"Is Dane around?"

"She's sleeping."

"Hey, is this the princess?" the caller inquired, sounding curious and oddly cheerful.

Nicole's brow furrowed. "Excuse me?"

"Shit, what was your name again? Nancy? Carla? Kim?" The guesses were not said in a rude manner, but it still bothered Nicole that someone would call her house, call her something other than her name, and then have the nerve to not recall her name.

"Nicole!"

"Right! Nicole. Well, this is Crow. Do you think you could wake the party animal up? Everybody's ready for her to give the word, so we can go get fucked up," Crow admitted shamelessly.

"Excuse me?"

"We want to party with Dane, so wake her up, please," Crow requested, having the nerve to sound polite there.

"I'll have her call you back."

Nicole disconnected the call before she could get an answer. She did not like the sound of the plans that Crow had, and the fact that she was trying to involve Danny made Nicole's skin crawl. It was like none of Danny's friends paid attention when she told them that she did not use drugs anymore. Hell, Danny did not even drink alcohol, so she would not want to a part of the parties that her friends were trying to throw.

The attorney went to the living room. She set the roses on the coffee table, right where Danny would see them after she got over her momentary disorientation that always accompanied her after sleep. Nicole then sat down, moving Danny's head to rest in her lap.

"Wake up, birthday girl," Nicole purred into a bronze ear.

A smile that could only be described as lecherous curled onto Dane's sleeping face. Nicole recognized the expression and decided that she should not joke around with Danny in her sleep, especially since it made her heart flutter a little. She quickly shook the musician awake as Dane was turning, seemingly about to rub her face into Nicole's stomach.

"What? What?!" Dane shouted as she shot up from her comfortable rest. Her eyes scanned everywhere in a panic.

"Danny, calm down!" Nicole put a gentle hand on Dane's shoulder.

"Nick?" Dane asked while rubbing her eyes with her thumb and index finger.

"Who else?" the auburn-haired woman replied with a smile.

"Who else indeed." Dane rubbed her face, trying her best to get herself together. She shifted a bit as she dropped her hand and she noticed something odd on the table. She rubbed her eyes again to make sure that she was not seeing things. "Did someone at work give you flowers?" she asked curiously. For a brief moment, jealousy shot through her, but her friend's response chased that feeling away.

"Those aren't for me, silly," Nicole answered with a light laugh.

"No? Then who are they for?" Dane asked, scratching the end of her nose while her brow furrowed in confusion.

Nicole smiled as she turned and regarded the flowers as if she had no idea where they came from or who they were for. "Well, the way I see it, they belong here and they're not for me. Only two people live here, so I'm guessing they're for the other occupant of the house."

Dane rubbed her forehead with two fingers and then ran her hand through her thick, onyx mane. "You brought me flowers?" She sounded like she did not understand why Nicole would bother to do such a thing.

"How'd you know it was me? I might have intercepted the delivery man outside," Nicole remarked.

"You're the only person that cares enough to do something like this," Dane honestly and seriously admitted.

"Oh. No old girlfriends out there that might be thinking of you?" Nicole asked curiously. She found it strange that no one would miss a sweetheart like Danny.

"Cursing my name possibly. No one thinks of me and then thinks 'lemme send her flowers.' I don't think I've ever gotten flowers in my entire life," Dane realized. She reached out and took hold of the bouquet that was in a thin vase. She smiled while taking a smell, delighting in the

subtle aroma. "They look nice..." She was not sure what else to say, but from the shining look in her eyes, that was more than enough.

"I'm glad you like them. For a moment, I thought you might not like flowers or something and that's why no one's ever given them to you," Nicole said while breathing sigh relief. She felt good thanks to her gift and being able to be the first to present someone like Danny with flowers.

Dane flashed a charming grin while lying back down, putting her head in Nicole's lap. "I love 'em! I'm kinda happy that you're the first person to ever give me some, though. It makes them more special or something," she said, letting her mouth run away with her. She blushed as she realized what she was confessing. Her face would have turned completely crimson if she realized that she had just laid in Nicole's lap without permission, but then again, Nicole did not even bother trying to move her.

Green eyes shined with delight. "I'm glad you like them," she repeated, not sure what else to say. She felt a little emotional thanks to Danny's words and the musician's happy expression. *I like it when she looks at me like that...* Nicole mentally shook that thought away.

"Thanks. Why'd you get me flowers, though? I hope not because I do the cooking and cleaning around here," the taller woman said in a warning tone and a semi-stern glare.

"No! I got them because it's your birthday. Happy birthday, Danny."

Before Dane could reply, Nicole started to lean over. Dane knew what was coming and was suddenly hit with the urge to turn her head ever so slightly so that her mouth would occupy the space that her cheek was in. She resisted the temptation and Nicole's tender lips landed on her right cheek, sending a sweet, mellow sensation through out her whole body. A jolt of electricity followed the mellowness as Dane realized Nicole's breasts were rubbing against her face. She fought down the luscious and feelings and just reveled in kiss.

"You're just too much, angel," Dane said in a whisper as Nicole pulled away.

It was the lawyer's turn to blush. She made a conscious effort to get rid of the crimson stain; after a few seconds it dispelled. Nicole thought it might be wise to change the subject before she did something more embarrassing, especially since she was tempted to kiss Danny's other cheek...just to even things out, of course.

"So, a lot of people are calling for you. I'm guessing your friends have a big night planned for you," Nicole reported. She managed to keep her tone neutral, even though she had many opinions on Dane's friends thanks to their phone calls.

Grey eyes rolled and were accompanied by a scoff. "Like hell they are. They're calling because they think the Great Dane is going to throw a party like I used to, complete with enough drugs and alcohol to get a small state fucked up."

"Really?"

"That's the only reason. That's how I used to celebrate."

"You used to make enough money to blow it all on drugs and alcohol?" Nicole inquired in disbelief. She was not asking because Tyler was trying to make her think that Danny was a drug dealer and addict, but she just could not believe that a musician that was not famous could make that much money.

Dane laughed a little. "I was a local celebrity. Clubs used to beg for my band to play there. We made enough money to blow it on pussy, beer, and blow more often than not. My happy birthday to me used to be a big party in a club with all the free drugs and alcohol they could do. It felt like I had friends." A shrug capped off the statement, going along well with the tone.

Nicole was about to comment on how lonely Danny always seemed, but she stopped herself. She did not want to see rude or insensitive, but it did seem to her that Dane knew a lot of people, but she did not seem to have very many friends. Nicole then suddenly remembered something that Dane told her when they first met, "my friends call me Danny." But, no one called her Danny. Everyone called her that ridiculous-in Nicole's opinion-nickname.

"Danny, does everyone call you Dane?" Nicole asked curiously.

"Everyone except for you," Dane answered.

"Even your family?" She did recall that Tyler referred to his cousin as "Dane" all the time; he never even slipped and called her "Danielle."

"Everyone except for you," Dane repeated.

Nicole nodded and she had a feeling that meant something, but she did not want to admit to herself; it just seemed narcissistic to her to even silently admit what she thought the information meant. It was as if she was Danny's only friend if Danny exactly meant her friends called her Danny. If nothing else, Nicole was ready to silently admit that she meant something special to Danny to be the only one that called her that name and Danny was perfectly accepting of it. It did not even cross her mind to ask if it was all right since she was the only person that called the musician Danny; she was well aware that it was all right.

"Do you have any plans for your birthday?" Nicole asked curiously, wanting to change the subject again. She did not want to travel down the road her mind was on, where she was special to Danny. She did not want to deal with something like that, something like actually wanting to be special to Danny.

"I was planning to hang out with a girl," Dane answered and for a moment she watched disappointment flicker in those bright emerald eyes, so she continued. "I figured we would watch a movie or two on the couch. I'd make her dinner. Then I'd keep her company while she did a little homework and I'd send her to bed at a decent hour."

Nicole laughed. "You do that every night! It's your birthday, Danny. Surely you want to do something more."

"I don't mind, chem. I just want to stay in and be around you. It would actually be the best birthday I've ever had," Danny said with startling sincerity.

Nicole was paused for a moment, her heart beating just a little faster than usual. It was hard not to think that she was special to Dane when the musician was saying things like staying in and being around her would be the best birthday and she meant it. It was enough to blow Nicole's mind because no one had ever made her feel so important to them. She blinked a few times, clearing her mind, before she was able to speak again.

"Even if that's true, I want to do something with you. Now, I thought you would have plans with your friends, so I made us reservations to eat tomorrow at seven-thirty. Is that good for you?" Nicole inquired.

Dane ran her hand through her hair. "Um...you know I don't have clothes for that..."

"Let me worry about that. Is it okay for us to go out for dinner?"

"As friends, right?" Dane asked. *Stupid! Why'd I ask that?! Of course as friends! She's not interested in a bum like me and I better not even think about ruining the best thing to ever accidentally step into my shitty life!*

"Of course. You think I'm going to make a pass at you, Miss Dane?" Nicole's eyes shined as she bumped Danny with her hip.

"Well, I am irresistible," the taller woman replied with a laugh.

"I can tell by all of the phone calls you keep getting."

"Well, for the rest of the night, you should just ignore numbers that you don't know. Let's watch some movies. I'll make us some popcorn."

"Yay!" Nicole cheered like a child. "My hero."

Dane laughed as she got up to go make popcorn. Nicole decided to put on a DVD rather than scan the television for something. They curled up on the couch, like they did every night, and watched movies together. Nicole cooked since it was Dane's birthday. She also presented Dane with a small cake, which had been in the box that she was carrying earlier.

"No," Dane gasped as Nicole came toward her with the cake and singing the birthday song.

Nicole continued singing the song as she put the cake down. In lovely cursive writing, written in icing read, "Happy Birthday, Danny. Hopefully we'll share more days." Emotion bubbled up into

the guitar-player's throat and she found herself unable to blow out the candles, two of them, when Nicole was done singing.

"Danny?" Nicole said while waiting for the birthday girl to blow out the candles.

Tears silently slid down copper-toned cheeks. "I never had a birthday cake before..." she said in a shaky voice, words barely escaping her trembling lips.

"What?!" Nicole screamed in disbelief.

"Never..."

"Oh, god." For a moment, Nicole was totally speechless and all she could do was hug Danny while the musician silently cried. Nicole had never heard of someone never having a birthday cake before. For a moment, she was angry with everyone that had known Danny before her and neglected such a sweet woman so openly, but she let that emotion pass. She made a promise to herself that she was going to make sure that never happened again as long as Danny was with her. "I hope you'll have many more birthdays and birthday cakes in the future. For now, blow out the candles and we can eat some," the lawyer suggested.

Dane nodded and did as she was told. She was glad that Nicole had not asked her about why she never had a birthday cake before; Nicole instinctively knew to steer clear of that subject for the time being since it was supposed to be a happy moment. They both had a slice of cake and Nicole complained about how long she was going to be in the gym working off all of the junk that she consumed all day. They retired a little after ten.

"Nick really is a damn angel," Dane commented, staring at the ceiling from her pallet on the floor. That was the only way she could explain Nicole caring so much about her and doing so much for her.

"Nick, you really didn't have to buy me an outfit to wear out," Dane said as Nicole handed her a plastic bag.

"I did. You can't wear shorts and a tank out to a real restaurant," Nicole stated.

"You could, but you'd look like an ass."

"Well, I'd rather go out without you looking like an ass. I don't want to be an ass by association."

Dane could not help laughing as she went off to take a shower and get into her clothes. Nicole went to shower also and change. They met back in the living room and Nicole had to smile when she saw the clothes fit Dane like they were made for her. She had to fight off the urge to whistle.

"You're so handsome..." Nicole said, needing to get those words out to make sure she did not whistle.

"You're good," Dane commented while looking down at her outfit. It was nothing too fancy, just khakis and a black oxford shirt. The way everything fit her was perfect, though. Nicole thought things were perfect too, not the outfit, but the way Danny looked in the garments and the way that she filled the clothing out.

"Well, it wasn't too hard. You're not that much taller than me. I just had to figure out what style wouldn't be too offensive to you. I went with the plain thing just to be safe," Nicole explained. Plain worked very well. She was afraid that if she had gone with something just a little fancier, she would have done nothing but stare at Danny for the whole night.

Nicole shook her head, trying to rid herself of that thought. She did not know where the desire to leer at Danny came from. She tried to dismiss it as just admiring a beautiful body, which Danny certainly had. She also tried to tell herself that the thought came from the fact that she was no longer dating. Or maybe it was her brain just grasping for things now, anything to keep her from thinking of Danny beyond the friend that she was.

"No, no, no, this is more than fine. It's comfortable and not showy. Just my speed." Dane brushed imaginary lint off of her shoulder while trying to act like she did not notice Nicole staring at her. She downplayed it to shock since Nicole had never seen her outside of her street-clothes.

"You don't want to be showy? You go outside everyday in shorts and a tank-top, no matter the weather. If it's raining or cold, what do you do? Put on pants under the shorts. I'm sure a couple of people have stopped to stare at you, sweetie," Nicole remarked. *Myself included apparently.* She shook that away again.

Dane found herself sticking her tongue out at Nicole in retaliation. The lawyer rolled her eyes and grabbed her friend. They made their way to the car and were off to the city. They made small talk with some music playing for the ride. The conversation was paused when they arrived at the restaurant, which Dane could see did require suitable clothing if the outside of the place hinted to anything happening inside.

The inside of the restaurant did not disappoint either. Hell, Dane felt under-dressed even in her new clothing. It was not too bad, though. They were seated immediately at a good table by the window that had a view of the city's largest park, complete with the lake inside of the park.

"Wow, you were able to get this in a day?" Dane asked in disbelief. She could not help wondering what kind of pull Nicole must have in order to get such a table so quickly.

"Well, my firm does a lot of business here for casual meetings with clients and everything..." Nicole semi-explained.

"Oh, Nick, did you do something bad and it wasn't during work?" Dane teased, half of a smirk forming on her face.

"Hush." Nicole playfully swatted at the younger woman. "So, how does it feel to be fifteen?"

"I don't know, you tell me," Dane countered smugly.

Nicole laughed. "All right, you got me. Okay, for real, how does it feel to be twenty-five?"

"I'm glad I made it this far. Nick, I meant it when I told you this is the best birthday I've ever had. Hell, I'm surprised I lived through some of my 'better' birthdays. I don't even want to get into the birthdays I had when I was little. Some years I didn't even know I had a birthday! So, to answer your question, it feels good. It's a fuck load better than when I turned twenty-four. Thank you for this." Her voice was so sincere that it threatened to bring tears to Nicole's eyes, but the attorney managed to keep the waterworks at bay.

"It's not over. Let's make it through dinner and then you can thank me." Nicole then smiled and Dane was at a loss for words for a moment.

Dane nodded and ordered her mind not to think about any hiding meaning to those words. *There is no hidden meaning!* Dane was starting to think that she was going to have to go out and get a girlfriend. She felt like she had to be in need of a mate if she kept having inappropriate thoughts about Nicole.

They continued talking while they ordered. Nicole had a bottle of wine brought over; they both did have to show ID for it. They both only indulged in one glass of wine; Dane did not even finish hers. The pair enjoyed each other's company as always. Dane was happy that no one came out singing "happy birthday" to her in the end.

"So, what're we going to do now?" Dane asked as they exited the restaurant and waited for the car to be brought around.

"Let me worry about that. You just go with it," Nicole replied. She was happy that Danny went with things for dinner. She had not been in the mood to argue over the bill, especially since she knew that Danny had very little money on her.

"Fine." Dane sighed dramatically, but the noise fell on deaf ears.

They piled back into the car and took a short drive a part of the city that Dane knew about, but did not frequent. It was sort of the art district; there were plenty of upscale galleries and a few museums. She wondered what they were doing there and turned questioning eyes to the driver.

"Just go with it, Danny. Geez, I'm not kidnapping you," Nicole promised.

Dane only nodded. Nicole parked the car in a small lot adjacent to a dark building. Dane followed Nicole's lead, going to a back staircase that was poorly lit and through a door. Before Dane could even see where they were, her ears heard it and her soul felt it-jazz. Nicole paid the cover charge and they were seated at a small table with a clear view of the stage where a jazz band was playing.

Nicole did not say anything, just watched as Dane was wrapped up in the music as soon as they sat down. A faint smile worked its way onto Nicole's face as she saw Dane drift with each note. It was something she noticed when they listened to music at home. Music seemed like a whole different world for Danny.

Dane was mesmerized by the instruments and taken over by the songs. Her fingers moved without her permission, playing along with the bass. She tensed as seconds went by, but her fingers continued to move. Nicole noticed the change evolving in Dane's demeanor.

A bronze left hand trembled and then shook before starting over, as if holding the strings of a bass. Dane sucked her teeth after a few minutes, realizing what she was doing. She dropped her hands, but they could not keep still for long. Slender fingers plucked imaginary strings, but gradually the left hand slowed and trembled, being outpaced by the right. Teeth sucked again; a vicious cycle had begun.

Nicole had noticed the weakness of Danny's left hand many times before, but never before had she seen it cause such obvious distress in the younger woman. Grey eyes silently panicked and implored nothingness as the left hand slowed again and again before eventually having to start over. By the end of the show, Dane looked like she was ready to burst into tears and explode in pure fury.

"Danny, are you okay?" Nicole asked as they walked back to the car. She was glad that the show was only an hour or she was certain that Dane would have run out after a few more minutes.

"Fine," was the strangled reply.

Nicole sighed, not sure what to say at the moment. They entered the car and silence reigned before a short moment. Dane took some deep breaths and then turned her attention to the driver.

"Thanks for all of this, Nick. This is the best birthday gift I've gotten since my guitar," Dane said.

"Really? I didn't think you liked it. I thought you were upset at the show," Nicole replied in a low tone, keeping her eyes on the road.

Dane's eyes flashed with endless joy and her mouth dropped open incredulously. "What? Hell, no! The show was great! Those guys really know how to play too. I was just pissed because..." she trailed off and looked away.

"You don't have to explain if you don't want to..." Nicole stated gently.

Dane nodded and there were a few tense beats of silence. "I know you've noticed my hand."

"I have."

Dane started speaking in a low, detached voice. "It got messed up back when I got the limp a little over a year ago. The nerves are pretty damaged and I'll probably never play the guitar the

way I used to. I used to be so fucking good. You'd never believe a punk like me could be as good as I was. But, after what happened with my hand, I could never be that good again, no matter how much I tried. I quit trying after a while. I mean, you saw how hard it is to move and how slow it is. Makes teaching a lot of instruments a bitch. Makes playing 'em even worse..." She wanted to sound like it did not matter, like she was talking about anything else, but it was clear that she was talking about something that meant the world to her.

Nicole swallowed and asked the question that had been on her mind for a while. "How'd it happen? How'd your hand get messed up?"

Grey eyes flashed like a storm was brewing behind them. A snarl tugged at her lip for a moment and she made a tight fist with her good hand. Nicole doubted that she had ever seen Danny so emotional, so angry.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Nicole said.

Dane bit her lip, trying to gather herself. She took another calming breath while releasing her fist. She blinked before turning to Nicole with sorrowful grey eyes.

"Over a year ago, I had this best friend, Bryan. We were fucking joined at the hip when it came to a lot of things. Got along as smoothly as two punk kids can. Bryan played in my band. He played bass. He was pretty good, not as good as me, but good enough to be on stage with me. While I liked to waste money on drugs, Bryan liked to gamble. Not being good at managing money, he tended to gamble more than he had and he owed a lot. He owed a lot to the wrong type of people.

"One day he comes to me with a black eye and busted lip, crying about how they're going to kill him if he doesn't come up with the money. He begs me to go talk to them, tell them he's good for it and all of this bullshit. I was stupid. I went. I told them he was good for the money and we'd get it back. They gave us a deadline. I told him if we hustled our asses off we should be able to pull it off. He jumped on board.

"Time to collect rolls around, I met up with the guys, but Bryan's nowhere to be found. I had part of the money. Part of the money meant they wouldn't break both my legs. However, it didn't save them from beating the shit out of my knee and leg and fucking up my chances to ever play the guitar like a god ever again," Dane snarled with untamed ferocity.

"Oh, my god, Danny. You don't still owe these people, do you? They're not going to come after you and hurt you again, are they?" Nicole begged to know, concern pouring out of her voice and through her eyes.

Dane was paused for just a moment. She was shocked by Nicole's concern for her; it was not even that Nicole was concerned that her own life was in danger, but that Dane's life was in danger. Dane felt her heart beat in a manner that it never had before and she tried to shake it off while continuing the conversation.

"Nah, they're not going come after me or hurt me again. Bryan might have run then, but he did have to pay them back eventually. He handled his share, but by then I was already in the hospital. They cut my hand and leg pretty good before wailing on both with a bat, thinking I was hiding the money or some shit like that and I would tell them where it was if they did that. I was in the hospital for a good long time. The bastard even had the nerve to visit me, but didn't have the decency to apologize or tell anyone the fucking truth about what happened," Dane commented with slight bitterness, but not as much as one would expect her to have.

"And he was your best friend?" Nicole was incredulous. She would never do that to anyone that she viewed as a friend, especially not a best friend.

"Very best friend. Knew him for years and would've done anything for him, thought he felt the same way. Instead, he fucked me over as soon as it was convenient for him. These are the type of people I knew. Hell, these are the type of people I come from. After all, you've met Tyler and he's one of my parents' favorite nephews. My parents love Bryan too, thinking he got his life together because he's going to business school and shit, asking me why I can't be more like them," Dane stated in a bland tone.

Nicole nodded, not sure what to say. She glanced over at her passenger. She reached over and took Dane's larger hand in her own.

"I would never do anything like that to you," Nicole promised. She brought Dane's hand to mouth and gently kissed copper knuckles.

"I know you wouldn't," Dane replied in her usual plain manner, but sincerity oozed off of her like bright energy.

The rest of the ride home was spent in a very comfortable silence. They did not let go of each other's hands either. Dane silently admitted that it was the greatest birthday that she ever had and she wanted to share another with Nicole.

10: Healing powers of music

"Come on, we're going out to lunch," Mina commanded as she marched to Nicole's office.

"What?" Nicole asked with a puzzled expression on her face as she looked up from her work.

"We're going out to lunch. We need to talk," Mina insisted.

"I have lunch," Nicole commented, still looking quite baffled. She pointed to the small, black fridge that most people did not know was in her office. Mina was very much aware of the refrigerator and she knew that Nicole kept all of her "Danny-made" lunches in it.

"I'm sure you do," Mina replied. "But, we're going to lunch anyway."

"But, I have lunch. It's left over lasagna. Danny makes a hell of a lasagna," the auburn-haired woman argued quite seriously. She was looking forward to eating her lunch too.

"You can eat it later. Right now, we need to go out to lunch so we can talk. I know you're not going to talk here," Mina pointed out. It went beyond Nicole not wanting to mix personal things and business, going on to include trying to avoid Tyler hearing something that she might not desire him to hear. They never knew when he was lurking about, after all.

"Why do we need to talk? I need to finish something today," Nicole groaned. If she got one more assignment to write a contract, study a contract, or figure out how to break a contract, she was going to snap. She needed to get something out of the way or someone was going to find her on the floor on her office counting the carpet fibers.

"Come on, putting it off for one day isn't going to kill you. I want to talk to you now," Mina insisted, folding her arms across her chest.

Nicole sighed and rubbed her eyes. She finished up with what she was doing and turned her computer off. She put away other files, making sure her desk was clear, and then stood up to leave with Mina. The mocha-skinned lawyer looked quite smug because she knew that Nicole was going to give in.

"I don't see why we suddenly have to talk so insistently," Nicole grumbled as she marched out of her office. Mina followed right behind her, closing the door as she left.

It was a nice day, so they decided to walk down the street to a little café that they both liked. They grabbed a table outside and ordered their lunch, along with a couple of drinks. They then turned their attention to each other.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Nicole asked curiously.

"What's going on with you and Danny?" Mina inquired directly, as was her style.

Emerald eyes blinked quite a few times. "Excuse me?"

"You and Danny, what's going on? There's more to this thing than her being your roommate, isn't it?"

Nicole balked. "No! We're just roommates. Why would you even ask that?" she countered as if she truly did not understand.

Mina scoffed. "Because I've known you for ten years, Nicole. I've never seen you react to a person the way that you do with Danny, not even people you date. You brighten at the mention of her name. When I saw you on the phone with her the other day, your smile could've put the sun out of business. What's going on? You're going back to women again?"

The redhead shook her head. "No. I don't like Danny like that. We're just good friends. You're seeing things that aren't there," she insisted, waving her hand to dismiss her friend's ideas.

"Sure I am." Mina rolled her chocolate eyes. "I know what I saw. Have you kissed Danny yet?" she asked with a smirk, as if she was walking her friend into a trap to prove that she was right.

"Only on the cheek and that's the only place I plan to. I'm not ruining what I have with her. The friendship I have with her is not something I'm going to screw around with," Nicole said soundly with a hard look in her eyes that told Mina to back off.

Mina obeyed the look in her eyes, having seen it before when Nicole was working. She just rarely saw it when Nicole was not working, which made it a shocker. She also found it hard to believe that there was nothing going on between Nicole and Danny considering what she witnessed when the pair was on the phone a few days ago. She did not even want to get into how Nicole spoke about Danny in general, but she did feel like it was evidence to support her theory that there was more between the two than being roommates.

"Is this really what you wanted to talk about?" Nicole asked incredulously. She thought it was nonsense and she disliked being dragged away from her work for nonsense. There was no way that she was going to ruin what she had with Danny by trying to make it more than what it was or more than what Danny wanted.

"I thought there was something to it. If you say there's not, I'm guessing there's not. You haven't lied to me before and I don't see why you would start now," Mina answered with a shrug and she meant that. Nicole told her pretty much everything and it would be silly for her to lie about her relationship with Danny. After all, Mina was aware and comfortable with the fact that Nicole dated both men and women; Nicole never described herself as bisexual, but in essence, she was bi.

"There's nothing going on there. Just a very different and fulfilling friendship," Nicole insisted, her voice still defensive. She would never do anything to ruin what she had with Danny because it made her feel wonderful in ways that she did not even know existed. She wanted to keep that feeling for as long as possible.

"Okay. I believe you. Ease up, cowboy," Mina remarked with a laugh, holding her hands up in a surrender-like gesture.

Nicole sighed and decided to put Mina's nonsense out of her mind. There was just no way that she would jeopardize what she had with Danny. She did not want to tell Mina, but she thought that her relationship with Danny was the best thing to ever happen to her; she did not want to hurt her oldest friend's feelings by admitting such a thing.

The pair had lunch then and discussed other things. They parted ways when they reentered the firm. Mina was not about to let go of her theory that there was something going on between her friend and the mysterious Danny, but she was not sure what it was. After all, Nicole had never

lied to her before and she did not see why Nicole would start with her relationship to Danny. There was something that she was missing and she was determined to figure it out.

Nicole went back to work, frowning as she realized that she was going to have to take work home yet again. *Every night I have to take something home*, she mentally complained. Her mood soured more as she thought about sitting up until the middle of the night with draft after draft of legal jargon staring her in the face and she knew just what to do to lift her spirits.

The auburn-haired attorney retrieved her homemade lunch and went to the lounge area to use the microwave. She passed her assistant's desk on the way there to see that the woman was gone already. Nicole made a mental note to fire her assistant, who was now just leaving whenever the urge overcame her without bothering at least make up an excuse it.

Dane hooked her guitar onto her back and rode off to teach a guitar lesson. It was not long, just an hour. She made a meager twenty-five dollars per lesson. She was happy for any money, even though it was nothing to what she was used to. It was a pain getting to the lessons and getting home later, yet she always left the house with a smile and always returned with one, no matter how much her leg ached and her hand frustrated her.

When she got home, she made sure to ice her leg and elevate the sore limb. She continued to smile, thinking about what Nick would like for dinner. Her mind then drifted from contemplating dinner to just lingering on Nick, going from thinking about how much she liked to cook for Nicole to just imagining Nicole around the house doing mundane things, which progressed to a little more than that. It took her several minutes to realize she was daydreaming.

"Shit, I've got to stop thinking about her like that. I need to go out and get a girlfriend before I fuck things up with Nick. The last thing I want to do is ruin things with that angel," Dane told herself.

When Nicole came home, they spent their evening like they usually did. As they lounged in the living room, Nicole took a few moments to occasionally glance at Danny. Nicole was supposed to be reading a book while Danny was resting against her and jotting something down on a legal pad. What Mina assumed floated through the lawyer's mind.

"There's nothing going on between me and Danny," Nicole silently insisted. "We just enjoy a nice...somewhat domestic existence. There's nothing wrong with that. Just because you like someone's company and like living with her doesn't mean something has to be going on. Besides, Danny doesn't seem to be interested in me like that at all..."

She thought about Danny's rocker status and how women probably threw themselves at her. Danny practically said as much, but she was not interested in those type of women anymore. Nicole could only wonder what type of women Danny was interested in now...and what would happen when Danny met such a woman.

"I guess I shouldn't get too attached to this domestic bliss. Surely, eventually Danny's going to find the perfect woman and move in with her. I'll be by myself again until the next asshole wanders into my life..." Nicole frowned. Her life was going to be miserable again when she lost Danny.

"Chem?" Dane said, snapping the attorney out of her thoughts.

"Hmm?" Nicole asked.

"What were you thinking about so hard, chem?" Dane inquired curiously. She could not recall a time when she saw Nicole just staring at her, but obviously not seeing her. She felt more concern when she could see some distress in Nicole's eyes.

"Nothing."

"Nothing must've been on your mind pretty heavy. Personally, I think it's all of those chemistry books you're reading. They're rotting your brain."

Nicole could not help laughing. "Is that in your expert medical opinion?"

"Of course. Doctor Dane's prescription is for you to fill out those college applications, so that you can do something you like," the musician remarked with a charming smile.

"I did contact a few of the schools to find out what I would need to do aside for filling out the forms, thank you very much," Nicole said smugly.

Attention grabbed, Dane put down her pad and turned to fully look at her housemate. "Really?"

"Yes."

"I'm..." Dane bit back her words and mentally scolded herself. *You think that she gives a shit that you're proud of her?*

"Danny, tell me," Nicole pled.

"It's just...well, I'm happy you're going to try to chase your dream. Believe me, it's incredible for you to be able to do something that you love. There's nothing like it in the world," Dane replied.

Nicole was speechless this time. She realized that Danny knew what it was like to do the one thing that she loved for a living...and she knew what it was like to have that taken from her. Not only was that taken from her, but it was taken from her by her best friend. Without orders from her brain, Nicole found her hand reaching out and touching Danny's cheek. The musician flinched and pulled back.

"I'm so sorry, Danny," Nicole said in a sorrowful voice.

Dane shook her head and shrugged slightly, knowing why she was getting the apology. "Don't be. To quote a poem, 'life for me ain't been no crystal stair.' If it's not one thing, it's another with me."

"You surprise me everyday. You read poetry too?"

"I do a lot of things," the taller woman remarked. She then mentally slapped herself. *No flirting!*

"Just a regular renaissance woman." Emerald eyes sparkled like the gems they were colored after.

A smile from copper lips was the only answer that she received. They went back to what they were doing, enjoying their time together. Would things always be like this?

Dane decided to go to the park after teaching her lessons for the day. Her leg was not bothering her much and she did feel a connection to the park that was close by. No, she had never been there, but there were parks in the city that she used to frequent when she was not sleeping her mornings and afternoons away. She was curious about the park around the area. It could end up being some place that she liked to go and then she would be able to get out more, which she knew would please Nicole.

Rusty bike wheels groaned as the bicycle was pushed up a small hill and then through a black iron gate to enter the grassy, vibrant park. The first thing that grey eyes took in was the playground area, which had swings, see-saws, slides, monkey-bars, a jungle gym, a castle, and even a little maze. Young children were playing on all of those things with their mothers, babysitters, and nannies not too far off, keeping a close eye on them.

Beyond the playground was just a huge meadow area, made for running around, playing with pets, and possibly flying kites since there were no trees there. A few dogs and their owners were currently using the space. A track, baseball diamonds, basketball courts, and tennis courts were just beyond that. And no park was ever complete without a pond, which had to be the bluest and cleanest pond that Dane had ever seen. *No parks like this downtown.*

The musician parked herself by the pond on an empty bench. There were ducks not too far away and a little girl was going to feed them. The child could not have been more than three or four and each time she got close enough to a duck to give the bird the bread in her hand, she ran away when the ducks started coming to her for the food. Dane laughed while watching and silently rooting for the girl to eventually feed the ducks like she wanted to.

"Is that a guitar you have in that case?" The question was asked by a curious voice from Dane's left side, so she had to turn to see the person. Her eyebrows raised slightly as she laid eyes on a rather beautiful woman dressed in jogging gear, which consisted of little shorts and a tank-top; both of which were dark blue. Creamy, well-toned limbs were on display as well as the tops of pert breasts that were glistening slightly from the light sweat coating the jogger. Dane greedily

drank in the sight, believing that it was never wrong to appreciate the beauty of a woman as long as she did not touch the woman without permission.

"Yes, it's a guitar," Dane answered, a nonchalant look in her eyes and a half-smile tugging at her lip.

The woman then glanced around the musician curiously, trying not to be too obvious with her actions. She appeared to be searching for something. She was disappointed after the thirty-second search.

"What were you looking for?" Dane asked.

"Well, I figured that you would have a hat or a heavier case if you're going to play the guitar for money," the woman commented.

A very light chuckle escaped Dane's throat. "That wasn't the plan, but if you want to give me a dollar, I'll do a little dance for you."

"And let me guess, you'll want me to stick it in your waistband," the woman replied with a smirk on her face.

Dane's grin was definitely wolfish in nature, as was the glint in her eyes. "Only if you want to."

The woman laughed heartily, throwing her head back, allowing her long blonde hair to flow behind her like a golden waterfall. She righted herself after a couple of seconds and focused interested blue eyes on Dane, who remained as cool as ice.

"I don't think I've ever seen you around here before. Do you live around here?" the woman asked curiously.

"Not to far from here," Dane answered in a mellow tone. She knew the question was asked just to make sure she was not a bum or as homeless as she appeared to be thanks to her usual unkempt style. She doubted that it helped her case that her shorts and tee-shirt both had a hole in them.

"So, you're going to be in the park more often?"

Dane nodded. "Probably. It's a nice place. I think next time I'll leave the guitar and just ride my bike around."

"But, if you leave your guitar, you won't get to play for me," the woman pointed out with a pout.

"Then I guess I'm bringing my guitar, but it would be nice to know a few things if I have to lug this thing around again."

"And what's that?"

"Well, for one, who I'm playing for exactly and when you'll be around here again. It would be a little creepy to just come here everyday, sit in the park, and hope you show up. I'm sure someone would call the cops on me," Dane commented plainly.

"I'm Gloria and I jog here everyday at this same time," the blonde answered.

"Well, Gloria, I'm Dane and maybe I'll see you around," the musician replied in a noncommittal tone.

Gloria smiled. "I'd like that."

Dane gave the blonde a small smile and Gloria then resumed her run. Dane made it obvious that she was checking Gloria out as the leggy woman disappeared back onto the track; Gloria continued to smile, knowing Dane was watching her ass as she left. The musician then turned her attention back to the little girl and the ducks, genuinely smiling when the child finally worked up the courage to give the birds her bits of bread.

"So, how was your day?" Dane asked Nicole as they made themselves comfortable on the couch in the living room.

Nicole just looked at Dane with tired eyes. The musician did not say anything further and got up from the couch. Nicole did not say anything either, rubbing her face with her hands before throwing her head back on the couch. She closed her eyes and tried to will away the headache that was pounding between her eyes and at the back of her head. Between the painful throbbing, she wondered if Danny was just going to leave her alone for the night. The answer for that came quickly.

"Here, take this," Dane quietly ordered, placing a pill to Nicole's lips.

Nicole did not even bother to open her eyes and just took what Dane was offering. A cool glass of water was then put to her mouth and Nicole drank from that without opening her eyes. Dane caressed Nicole's forehead for a moment and then left the room again for a while longer that time.

"Okay, so I made hot chocolate, got you some cookies, and we're going to watch a marathon of your favorite cheesy romance movies," Dane announced as she sat down on the couch and put a tray on the coffee table.

"Chocolate chip...?" Nicole asked in a childlike tone, peeping out from underneath her arm.

"Yup. And since you can't eat or drink anything through your arm, put it down," Dane gently ordered while removing the limb for Nicole.

The attorney did not put up a struggle as Dane adjusted her to a comfortable position on the sofa. Dane put Nicole's legs up, resting them across her own thighs. She then passed Nicole her cup of cocoa and after that put the first movie of the night. By the end of it, Nicole's head was feeling much better.

"You know, Danny, I never asked how your day was," Nicole realized with some shame coloring her bright green eyes. She was so caught up in being pampered that she was forgetting her manners, she mentally scolded herself.

"It was cool. I taught a couple of lessons. I went to the park up the street, just wanting to check it out. Watched this kid feed some ducks; she was cute. Met this jogger, Gloria," Dane replied with a shrug.

"Gloria?" Nicole echoed, brow wrinkling and eye flashing with unnamed emotions for just a second.

"Yeah, she was jogging around the park. Stopped to talk to me for a couple of minutes. I think she thought I was a bum or something, dirtying up your nice, clean park," Dane remarked with a small smile. Well, maybe her first impression was that Dane was a bum, but she had shown a lot of interest after that, so Dane was not too sure what Gloria thought about her at first sight.

"If you were dressed how you're usually dress, I would think you're bum too. Where'd you get this style from anyway?" Nicole teased.

Dane shrugged. "I really don't know. I've been dressing like this for like ten years. I guess when you're a nutty teen, you just do things to be different. Now, just do it because I'm used to it and it's kinda like my look. So, what movie are we going to watch next?"

"You don't have to sit through a bunch of movies you don't want to..."

Dane gave Nicole a light swat to her calf since Nicole's olive-toned legs were still resting on her lap. "I do want to watch them. That's why I asked which one do you want to see next. So, come on."

A smile brightened Nicole's face and she picked another movie. They remained on the couch; Dane did not even move to make dinner. They ordered a pizza and continued to enjoy each other's company to the point that they fell asleep on the couch. Around midnight, Dane woke up and stared at Nicole's sleeping face, which was illuminated by the flickering television. Nicole looked practically ethereal.

"She's so beautiful...inside and out. Not for this world, not of this world..." Dane thought with a smile gracing her features.

The musician was not sure when she made the decision, but she stood up and gathered Nicole in her arms. She bit her lip as her leg screamed at her. She ignored the nerve endings' protests and slowly lifted Nicole off of her couch. She cradled the lawyer in her arms and started for the

stairs, each step making a grimace tear through her face, but she was determined to make it upstairs.

Sweat gathered on a bronze forehead as she made it out of the living room. She was able to make up two steps before she winced. Halfway up, she fell against the wall and a cry escaped her throat. The noise disturbed Nicole's rest. Nicole groaned and shifted a little. She leaned her head into Dane's chest and rubbed her cheek into the warm space.

"Danny?" Nicole muttered as her eyes flickered open and tried to make out her surroundings. *Something's off*, she silently noted. She was pressed against something soft and warm, feeling safe, secure, and comfortable in ways that she would have never thought possible.

"You can go back to sleep, Nick," Dane said through gritted teeth. She was trying her best to hide the fact that she was in pain, but she was not doing a very good job because her knee was throbbing something fierce. Luckily for her, Nicole was not awake enough to notice the strain in her voice at first.

"Where are we?" Nicole glanced around as best she could in the dark. She then realized that she was being held. "Danny, your leg!" she gasped. She was wide awake now.

"It's fine," was the lying response.

"I think not! Put me down this instant before you hurt yourself," Nicole commanded in a very firm tone.

"But-"

"This instant!"

Dane sighed and did not argue. She quietly slid Nicole down to the next step, making sure to place the redhead down gently. Dane's leg cried out in relief and she slumped against the wall to take even more pressure off of her sore limb. She forced out a smile when she noticed Nicole was glaring at her, reprimanding her with those expressive green eyes.

"I just didn't want to wake you up..." Dane offered as an explanation, glancing away like a scolded child.

"So you hurt your leg? It's sweet that you wanted to carry me to bed, but I don't want you to hurt yourself, Danny," Nicole replied in a gentle tone, reaching down and putting her hand to a soft cheek. With her other hand, she reached down and placed her hand in Dane's palm. Grey eyes locked with green ones.

"I know, but you looked so peaceful..."

"Thank you for the thought, though. Let's both go to bed."

Dane nodded. "I hope you have a better day tomorrow. Make sure you look through more of those applications too."

A smile graced smooth, olive-toned features. They bid each other goodnight and went to their respective bedrooms, their hands gliding apart as they parted ways. The next day, Dane did not have any lessons and stayed around the house, fixing things up to make sure it was perfect for when Nicole got home. She called the attorney around noon to find out how the day was going so far and seemed like she made the right decision. It took a few days before Nicole's work life seemed to be getting back to normal, which for her was better than the way things were going now.

"I'm home!" Nicole called into the house as she stepped inside, placing her briefcase down by the door. She went on her usual hunt for Dane, thinking that the musician would be knocked out on the sofa.

"I'm in the kitchen!" Dane replied.

Nicole almost fell over. She was unable to remember the last time the younger woman was awake when she got home. She marched to the kitchen, finding Danny moving about the place like a woman on a mission.

"What're you doing?" Nicole asked in shock.

"I went shopping today and just brought a bunch of junk," Dane answered with a smile as she dipped into a bag to pull out some items.

"How'd you carry all of this on your bike?" Nicole scanned the floor, seeing almost a dozen bags littering the area.

"I didn't carry it on my bike. I met Gloria in the park and she said that she needed to do some shopping. Since I did too, I tagged along. We had like a shopping date, I guess," Dane reported.

"Shopping date? So...Gloria is your girlfriend?"

Dane shrugged. "Haven't said so out loud or nothing like that. I've seen her a couple of times since meeting her. We'll see how it works. Should work out better than my last girlfriend."

An absent nod was the reply. Nicole moved mechanically as she went to help Danny put things away. The attorney was not sure why, but she was not as happy now as she would have been a little while ago if Dane came in and said she had a girlfriend. Maybe it came from the point that she thought it was a step closer to Danny leaving her and then she would be alone and fall back into her old practices. She was not looking forward to that.

"So, you like Gloria, huh?" Nicole asked curiously.

"I suppose. She's hot, but that's not the only thing about her I like, of course. She's a nice girl. She's really into athletics and sports. I know a little bit about sports, so it's something that we could talk about for a little while. She's a trainer at a gym or something like that. She talks a lot, so I sorta tune her out after a while," Dane admitted with a shrug.

Nicole blinked in shock. "You tune her out?" That did not sound anything like her Danny. One of the great qualities about Danny in Nicole's opinion was that she was such a great listener.

"Yeah, sometimes I tune people out. It's really easy when a person likes to hear themselves talk." Another shrug.

A wave of nervousness washed over the lawyer. "Have you ever...tuned me out...?"

Dane paused and stared at Nicole as if the shorter woman had lost her mind. "Seriously, chem, you shouldn't ask such silly questions. You know I never tune you out."

A flash of white teeth came with the smile that took over Nicole's face. "Well, it's good that you're going out more. I hope you make some better friends."

"I doubt I could," Dane said. "After all, friends don't come much better than you."

Right, friends. Nicole was glad that Danny reminded her that they were friends. They would always be friends if she had anything to say about it. No one would ever stop them from being friends. With that thought in mind, she was able to help Danny put the groceries away and make normal conversation without any worries. They went on to have a normal day after that.

"Hey, did you know your assistant is gone again?" Nicole's friend Clara asked as she poked her head into the hardworking attorney's office.

"Again? I guess that explains the silence out there. This early she's usually making personal calls," Nicole said with a frown.

"I think it's time for you to fire her," Clara commented.

"Agreed. The only thing is that I would have to see her to fire her. At this rate, I'm going to have to call her cell phone to fire her or send her an email. She comes in late and leaves whenever the hell she wants to," Nicole stated. Not to mention, she still referred to Danny as "Dash" whenever she called...which had not been in the past few days. The lack of calls did sour Nicole's mood, but she refused to accept that as the reason for why she felt so down lately.

"Well, you need to get around to it. The fact that you have to do your job and her job is why you've been worn out lately. You look worn out too. The magic Danny not working her magic anymore?" Clara asked with a teasing smile, unknowingly striking a nerve that her friend did not want to acknowledge existed.

Nicole glared at her friend in a manner that would have made the devil run. The stare wiped the smile off of Clara's face and filled the large office with tension like a balloon with air. Clara closed the door behind her as she stepped deeper into the room, watching Nicole go back to pouring over her latest assignment.

"Is everything all right with you and your roommate, Nicole?" Clara asked while ignoring how strange the question seemed to her because of her tone. She asked it like a person would ask if there were problems between lovers.

"Everything's fine. That's not really something to talk about here," Nicole replied quickly. She wished that Clara would just leave, so she could get back to work and forget about the fact that Danny did not seem to be quite as interested in her life as she had been before she got a girlfriend.

"Then come out to lunch with me and Mina and talk about it there."

"There's nothing to talk about and I have lunch with me, like always." While Danny had stopped calling to check up on her, the former musician did make sure to send her off with lunch everyday. She wondered how much longer that would last; she feared the homemade lunches were on borrowed time, as was her life with Danny. It took a lot of willpower to keep from frowning at that thought.

The petite woman understood the underlying meaning of the statement; Nicole and Danny were fine enough for Danny to make her lunch as usual. Still, there was something that was putting the lines on Nicole's face and she knew it was not the typical overworked syndrome that Nicole forever suffered from. Nicole could stand the work, but this was something else. Something that Nicole could not even hide well, so she knew it was deep.

"Come on out to lunch, Nicole. Don't make me have to bring Mina in here to change your mind," Clara threatened.

Nicole sighed. "Fine, I'll go to lunch with you." It was either agree now or agree when Mina showed up.

On the way out, Nicole left her assistant a memo, informing the woman that she was fired. It did make her feel little better, not as better as she was sure that she would feel if she ate her "Danny-made" lunch, but it was a start. She would get to the lunch later on after she got her friends off of her back.

"Before you guys start..." Nicole began herself as they sat down in the restaurant.

"We know, you're only roommates with Danny," Mina said with a sigh.

"I am," Nicole insisted.

"But, you have to admit that you rely a lot on her to keep you centered, which is completely fine. Right now, it looks like she's not doing that job anymore, though," Clara pointed out.

"Why do you say that?" Nicole asked, her face scrunched up a little as if she was offended.

"You've been looking pretty worn out, sweetie. Now, we know a couple of weeks ago you were having a tough time, but you said that Danny kept you straight. Right now, it looks like she just abandoned you, though," Mina answered.

"Look, she's not married to me or anything, so you can't say she just abandoned me. I'm fine," Nicole insisted. The bags under her eyes and the worry lines marring her face said otherwise.

"So, why do you look so tired?" Clara asked curiously.

Nicole shrugged. "I suppose because I am. I haven't been getting as much sleep as I used to. I've been taking a few things home with me to keep up to avoid having weeks like I did before. So, that's probably it."

"You wouldn't have to do that if you weren't doing your assistant's job at work too," Mina pointed out with a very pissed-off frown.

"Well, I left her a memo, letting her go. Now, I have to start the process of looking for another one. Anyone willing to let me borrow an assistant for a few days?" Nicole asked, even though she knew the answer to that. The day anyone that she knew let her have something that would help her, she knew that Hell would have frozen over.

"You should just hire Danny," Mina suggested with a laugh.

Nicole took a moment picture Danny working at her firm, complete with her typical style of dress. It brought an amused smile to her face for a second and then she shook the image away. "Danny has a job that she loves very much, even if being my assistant would be a huge pay raise for her."

"Not to mention, she's not trained to be the type of assistant you need," Clara added, just in case Nicole was entertaining the idea of hiring Danny. She would hate to see what would happen if Nicole went through with such a ridiculous suggestion. Work had ruined a lot of relationships at their firm and she did not want Nicole and Danny to be the latest casualties.

"From the last five assistants I've had, I'm not sure any of them had been trained. Danny is also very intelligent. She would be able to learn the job, but she's out of the question. I'll figure out what to do," Nicole stated. She had to figure out something quickly before her parents decided to step in and "help." That was always a good way to rock her life a little more than she needed.

"You always do."

Nicole rolled her eyes; everyone thought that she was a miracle worker and somehow could turn water to wine. At least one person knew and she was happy to get home to that one person. As soon as she entered the house, she felt her joy peak and then it was all downhill from there.

"I'm home!" Nicole called.

"I'm in the kitchen," Dane replied.

"Of course," Nicole muttered under her breath. If Danny was working on dinner already, it meant that she was not planning to stick around for the rest of the evening.

"Go take a shower. Dinner should be ready by the time you get out," Danny informed her housemate, speaking loudly to make sure she was heard.

"Are you going out tonight?" Nicole asked while making her to the table by the stairs, checking the mail, lingering downstairs. She was able to hide the bitterness that she was feeling from her voice, but it was a good thing that Dane could not see the look on her face at the moment.

"Yeah, I told Gloria I'd go with her to the movies. She's accusing me of being boring since I haven't taken her out," Dane reported with a light laugh.

"Neglecting your girlfriend, huh?" Nicole said, more in a mumble than anything else. *If only*. She tried to shake away the burning thoughts of jealousy that she was feeling. She wanted to be happy for Danny because her housemate found someone that liked her for who she was. *Everyone should be so lucky*. She ordered herself to stop feeling so selfish.

"Hardly. She just doesn't like staying in. So, I'm going to walk down to her place at around eight and go out with her," Dane explained.

"You want to take the car? I have no problem with loaning you the keys. I'm not going anywhere tonight. You don't have to stress your leg and I'm sure you'd get points with Gloria if you picked her up."

"In your car? Hell yeah I could, but I'm not too interested in driving."

"Why? You can, right? Your license isn't expired, is it?" Nicole inquired, walking toward the kitchen to speak with her housemate face to face.

"No, it hasn't. Although I'm sure I'm like one D.U.I away from it," Dane remarked with a laugh, smiling at Nicole as she stood in the doorway. Nicole was smiling back, doing a good job of looking normal and projecting that everything was as fine as they could be with her.

"Well, I doubt you'll be driving under the influence of anything tonight."

"I'm fine with walking to her house and letting her drive. I'm actually a little nervous to drive. Sometimes, my foot doesn't respond like I want to and I'm scared that I might cause an accident

or something too," the younger woman answered, looking a little sheepish at that admission. Even though she knew that Nicole would not judge her, Dane hated to confess her handicap to the lawyer. She disliked looking weak in front of Nicole, but on the flip side, Nicole was the only person that she would ever admit a weakness too. She made it a point not to contemplate why that was. She simply reminded herself that Nicole was her friend, only her friend.

"I'm sure you'd be careful."

"I would, but I'm still scared. It'll be fine, Nick. Now, you go get showered and into your jammies. I'll finish with dinner soon enough," Dane said.

Nicole did not argue. This had been the way things were for about the past week. She would come in and find Danny cooking dinner because by nine, Danny would be leaving rather than watching a movie with her. And it would be nine if she was lucky, which she was not that night.

Dane was gone a little after eight. Nicole kept herself occupied with work, as she always did at times like this. She stayed up until she heard Dane come in, which was around one in the morning that night. Nicole sighed, knowing that Dane would not come upstairs to say goodnight, probably assuming that she was already asleep. Nicole put her work away and turned out her lights.

"Goodnight, Danny," Nicole said as she settled into bed. She wished that she could say that to Dane's face again.

"I'm home!" Nicole announced. *And does it ever feel good to be home!*

When there was no response, Nicole rushed to the living room, thinking that Dane might be asleep on the couch. The sofa was empty and Nicole's entire being dropped. She collapsed, hitting the cushions of the couch with a heavy thud.

"Guess I won't be telling anyone about my day or hearing about theirs..." Nicole muttered to herself. Tears threatened to well up in her eyes, but she managed to keep them at bay.

She glanced down at the coffee table and saw a note addressed to her. *Hey, Chem. I'm out with Gloria. Hopefully, I'll be back before you get in, but if not there's food on the stove. I promise I won't stay out too late.*

Nicole rolled her eyes. She had heard that before, more times than she needed to from Danny lately. Gloria was always priority, which she supposed she understood since Gloria was Danny's girlfriend, but it was still bothersome. Nicole missed coming home to Danny, having a home-cooked meal, and curling up on the couch with each other. Ever since Gloria came into the picture that all slowly, but surely came to an end.

"I guess this is what happens when your most fulfilling relationship is with your roommate," Nicole grumbled. "I'm such a loser..." She threw her arm over her eyes and sat there, unsure of how long she was there.

"Fucking bullshit..." Dane grumbled as she entered the house, kicking her sneakers off as she came in. She marched off, storming toward the kitchen, but paused when she glanced into the living room. Nicole was knocked out, still in her work clothing, with her arm covering her face.

Dane quickly forgot her anger and rushed over to Nicole, thinking that something might be wrong with her. She studied the lawyer as best she could and silently decided that there did not seem to be anything noticeably wrong with Nicole. Dane flopped down next to her, smiling a bit from the sight, even though she was not very happy with what she was seeing. The movement woke Nicole up.

"Danny?" Nicole turned to her friend, blinking several times to focus her eyes.

"Hey. What're you doing sleeping out here in your suit?" Dane inquired, shaking her head a little in a disapproving manner.

The redhead yawned a little, making sure to cover her mouth. "I guess I just nodded off. What time is it?"

"Just a little after eight. Sorry I'm here so late."

"Late? I didn't think you'd be back until midnight or something. What happened with Gloria?" Nicole asked, unable to bit back some of the bitterness in her tone. *Damn Gloria and her Danny-hogging ways.*

"Me and Gloria had a little disagreement." Dane chuckled a bit and motioned to her shirt.

"Are you wearing the disagreement?" Nicole asked. Her friend's shirt was covered in what was more than likely red wine.

"I am. Got all upset because I never drink when we go out. Threw the glass in my face. Made me walk back here."

"Oh, my god! Danny, is your leg all right?!" Nicole turned her attention to the aforementioned limb. She could not believe that Gloria would be such a bitch to make Danny walk home, knowing that her leg could not stand a lot of stress!

"A little sore, but I think it's getting better because I've been using it a lot more. Anyway, I guess we can have dinner and watch a movie tonight. It'll be nice to be with company that will have the decency to at least hit me with something I do drink." Dane flashed a very charming grin.

"I can't believe anyone would throw something at you." Her eyes were soft and she reached out to caress Danny's cheek for a moment. She almost moaned as she felt a jolt go through her as soon as she touched her housemate.

Dane had to fight to keep her eyes from fluttering closed. She swallowed down a pleasurable purr of her own and let loose a hearty laugh to cover up what she was feeling at the moment. "You'd be surprised! But, this isn't Gloria's first little temper tantrum and it probably won't be the last. She's out for a good time and a lot of the time we don't agree on what it is. C'mon. I'm starved."

Nicole nodded and went to take her shower while Dane went to heat up dinner for them. The phone rang while Nicole was showering and Dane saw the phone on the caller ID was Gloria. She shook her head.

"Not tonight, baby. I'm spending time with my favorite girl," Dane commented with a smile. She would speak with Gloria tomorrow, but tonight was all about Nicole. And it was good night, better than any she had had in a while.

Nicole entered the house, not bothering to call out. She did not bother with it anymore because Danny was rarely in when she came home now. Spending time with Danny was pretty much a memory now, a memory that Nicole held onto. Thinking about their last night together helped her make it through the day much of the time, reminded her that once-upon-a-time someone cared about her enough to spend time with her that was not business related or in order to use her.

Her heart constricted a little as she remembered how things used to be with Danny. She decided that she would treasure those memories and try not to live in the past or mourn the future. Danny was supposed to put Gloria first; that was what a good girlfriend did. Nicole knew that she would do that, so she could not fault Danny for doing it. She just wished...no, she stopped that thought, knowing that it would not lead anywhere.

Her briefcase and keys were dumped on the floor. She did not even bother to go toward the living room and trudged upstairs to take a shower. Once she was changed into her pajamas, she felt some of the tension from the day melt away. She did not expect the level to go all the way down, but she could get it lower. For that to happen, she needed cookies and cocoa. So, she headed for the kitchen, but only made it halfway there.

Pausing, curious jade-colored peered into the living room, spying Danny on the couch with her guitar in hand. It was the first time that Nicole saw her housemate with her guitar. Her feet stepped closer without permission from her brain and she saw more than just Danny with her guitar.

There was pain in Danny's face. Grey eyes glared down at her guitar and her left hand, which was wrapped around the neck of the instrument. She strummed the strings, producing a heavenly sound...for thirty seconds.

"Fuck," Dane growled while flexing her hand. "Stupid fucking useless piece of shit..."

"Danny..." Nicole put her hand on Dane's shoulder, causing the musician to jump and turn.

"Nick," Dane said. "I didn't hear you come in..." she trailed off, not sure what else to say. She felt a little embarrassed for not hearing the door open or the shower going if Nicole's outfit meant anything.

"I didn't know you were here. You play beautifully..." Nicole commented for lack of a better thing to say.

Dane glanced away and scowled harder than she had already been doing. "Bullshit. Fucking left hand is a piece of shit. It's actually worse than it used to be. I used to...I used to be a god with this damn thing. And that's what everybody wants. Everybody wants the god. I just want to play." She sighed and shook her head in frustration. Not being able to play...she might as well not have a left hand in her opinion then.

"Gloria wants the god?" Nicole asked softly while moving to sit down. She went to Dane's left side.

"Yup. Everybody wants the god."

"How did Gloria even know?"

"It's not that she knew exactly about who I used to be, but she wasn't the right person for me. She wanted who I looked like, some wild woman or something like that. She wants a drinking partner and I just can't drink anymore. She wants someone to go to clubs with and dance and shit like that. Hell, I never danced even before my leg was fucked up. She wants to go out every night and party hard and I just don't want that anymore. I told her I couldn't be with her, not how she wanted."

"You broke up?" Nicole inquired curiously, hoping that her voice sounded normal.

A nod was followed by a weak shrug. "Didn't want me, so why stay together?"

"What do you want, Danny?" Nicole asked in a soft, tender voice.

Dane lost her concentration for a moment as the lawyer moved behind her slightly. The feel of Nicole's body brushing against hers was enough to make her forget what she was even talking about. She wanted to ask what Nicole was doing, but she could not trust her voice or her brain. She could not trust any part of her as her body felt like it would burst into flames from the light

contact and pressure of Nicole sitting behind her. She watched as Nicole moved her crippled left hand, taking its place. Nicole then put Danny's left hand over her own.

"Wha-what...What're you doing?" Dane asked, her voice low and shaking. She was very close to running, but her body refused to move. She was barely breathing, scared that the slightest movement would chase Nicole away. There was no way that her body was willing to give up the feel of Nicole so fully against her. No, she was just going to have to bear the intense throb racing through her being and hope that reminding herself that Nicole was just her friend would be enough to keep her from doing something stupid...and keep Nicole from moving away.

"No, Danny, I asked what you want," Nicole stated in a whisper of a voice. She was fighting for control of her own body, which was close to trembling from the feel of being pressed against her roommate. She could not believe that she had been so bold as to move behind her friend and sit there like she belonged there. She almost felt like she was taking advantage of Danny, who was obviously upset, probably stinging from a breakup with her girlfriend. Still, this knowledge did not move Nicole. She wanted the closeness, craved it, needed it. She needed Danny and she knew that, but now she was rapidly acknowledging *how* she needed Danny. It was that knowledge that kept her in place, even though it also made her want to get up.

Dane had to bite her lip to avoid saying the absolute truth. She was able to make another confession, thinking that it would get her to avoid trouble. "I want to play again." She also wanted her heart to stop beating like she had never felt a woman's body against her own before. She did not want to mess up things with Nicole, she reminded herself.

"Then let me help," Nicole said. "Just guide me, like you would do your students." She then settled completely behind Danny, her breasts pressing into the musician's back. Both of their hearts were racing and they wondered if the other could hear the loud thumping in their chests. They were both also fighting back tears, their emotions wanting to get out of their bodies somehow. Dane hoped that the emotions escaped through her music, like always, so she could keep her friend.

Dane nodded, unable to speak at the moment, not that she would have trusted her voice if she could talk. She started strumming and pressed lightly against Nicole's fingers to get her to hit the correct strings with enough pressure. It did not sound perfect, but it lasted more than thirty seconds. The more seconds that ticked by, the better the music became.

"We play good together, huh?" Nicole remarked with a smile, turning to stare into Dane's eyes. Smoke-colored eyes were clouded over, swirling with mixed emotions and the deep look was mirrored by Nicole's eyes.

"That we do," Dane concurred, realizing the music had done nothing for her. All of her emotions were still there and still directed at the one person that she was trying her best to keep as a friend. The feelings raging inside her did not want to allow that, though, and even her beloved guitar could not be the outlet it used to be. She paused for a long moment, taking in the passionate expression in the lovely emerald eyes that were locked onto hers as if the grey orbs were magnets. She found her mouth moving without her permission, asking a question that she was

almost certain she knew the answer to if the look in those eyes meant anything. "Nick, what do you want?"

"You..." Nicole answered before she could stop herself. She leaned forward, unable to help herself, and captured full lips with her own. The kiss was immediately returned.

The connection that they felt was like electricity flowing between them, but also like a warm, soothing stream passing through them, connecting them mind, body, and soul. Everything in the world seemed to still, put on hold just for them. Time froze and it was like they were allotted an eternity to feel each other. Even an eternity was not enough time. When they pulled away, they hardly put a millimeter of space between them.

"I want you too," Dane said, just to make sure that was understood. She eased the guitar to the floor and then went in for another kiss, which Nicole eagerly returned.

11: Rest and relaxation at last

"Nick..." Dane said shyly. She and Nicole were settled on the couch after an intense make-out session. It was the first of its kind for the pair and they hoped for many more. They cuddled into each other on the sofa, enjoying their closeness and warmth.

"Yes?" Nicole answered in a semi-sleepy tone. Her head was resting comfortably against Dane's shoulder. She was listening to the steady, but fast pace of Danny's heart, knowing she was the reason that the organ was racing.

"What now?"

"What do you mean?" the lawyer countered while turning her head upward to look into Dane's eyes. She felt like she could get lost in the deep smoky orbs.

"Are we...a couple?" The musician's voice was low and her brow was wrinkled.

Nicole smiled a bit because Danny sounded so shy asking that question. She doubted that she had ever heard such a tone from the typically confident musician and it was rather endearing. Dane took the smile as a good thing.

"I would like that very much," Nicole replied.

Dane breathed a sigh of relief. "Good, me too."

"Um...Danny, please, don't get offended when I ask this, but you know how relationships have been for me. You're not going to change or anything, are you?" Nicole asked, even though she knew the answer to that one in her heart already.

Dane was silent for a moment. She readjusted her grip on Nicole and pressed the lawyer firmly to her. Nicole sighed as she felt the soothing thump of Dane's heart. After that move and sound, Dane really did not need to respond, but she did anyway.

"I'm going to be just the way I always am. I'm not going to get lazy on you...well, lazier. We both know I need my twenty hours of sleep," the musician remarked with a cocky grin.

Nicole laughed a little. "Yeah, where would you be without those twenty hours?"

"I'm not going to change, Nick. I'm not taking this as a signal to take advantage of you. Even if I start doing it-which I don't plan on it-you should tell me. You can speak up to me, you should know that. I want this to work, chem. I want us to be a couple," Dane insisted, caressing Nicole's thigh, which was propped up on her legs.

"I do too, Danny. I do too."

Dane smiled and then leaned in for another kiss. She doubted that she would ever get enough of those, already loving the feel of Nicole's mouth against her own. Nicole felt the same way, thinking that Dane's lips fit perfectly with hers, Dane's body fit perfectly against her.

The attorney wrapped her around Dane's neck, pulling her closer, wanting more of the musician. Moans echoed through the room as they tried to get impossibly closer, clutching and caressing each other as if they were scared that they might shatter the other person. They only pulled away when they required oxygen, but they did not pull far. They rested their foreheads against each other, smiling like happy pixies.

"You're so beautiful..." Dane put her hand to Nicole's face and stroked her cheek with her thumb.

Nicole giggled, which she could not believe. "You're not too bad yourself."

Dane could not help grinning. "Oh, man, you're making me cheesy and cliché. Can't help it, though. You're just beautiful, inside and out."

"Stop. What should we do now?" Nicole asked.

"I've got a few ideas." Dane came in for more, thoroughly kissing Nicole. The lawyer was left panting by the time Dane pulled away.

"I meant beyond that," Nicole said when she finally caught her breath.

"What? I'll cook dinner and we can watch a movie," Dane proposed...or so she hoped. She hoped that Nicole was not going to suddenly change too and abruptly find herself needing to be more social. Dane was not looking forward to being asked to go out every night like Gloria tried to pressure her into.

Dane considered that she might be expected to go out more now, which she did not really want to do. She enjoyed being able to just lounge on the couch with Nicole, doing nothing in particular, just taking pleasure in their existence together. Now, she would not mind going out every now and then, but she did not want to do it constantly, like Gloria wanted. She was a little relieved to know that at least Nicole would not expect her to spring for drugs like her most of her previous girlfriends-if they could be called that-expected. Still she was not totally sure what Nicole was looking for in a partner, but she was willing to take the risk and find out.

"You don't have to cook. Let's order something and then we can watch a movie," Nicole suggested.

She nodded. "Sounds good."

They decided this was their first date and they spent it in a manner that they both liked. They had Chinese food and watched a couple of movies while remaining curled up on the sofa. Nicole rested her head against Dane's chest, listening to her heartbeat just as much as she watched movies. Dane occupied her mind with brushing her fingertips up and down Nicole's arm and occasionally placing a chaste kiss to dark auburn hair. After the second movie ended, Nicole began yawning and rubbing her eyes.

"It's someone's bedtime," Dane commented with a small smile.

"You're not going to try to carry me upstairs, are you?" Nicole inquired suspiciously. She narrowed her eyes on Danny, warning the musician not to try it.

"I'm not going to start off of relationship by damn near putting you in the hospital," Dane remarked with a light chuckle. "But, if the lady would allow me to walk her to her door?"

Nicole's face lit up from the idea, even though it was so ridiculous. "I would love for you to do that."

Dane grinned, flashing Nicole a smile she recalled from the first few days of Danny's stay at the house. They tore themselves from the sofa, Dane taking Nicole's hand while she was at it. They paused briefly, feeling a connection, an exchange of warm energy between them, and they never wanted it to end. And then, Nicole yawned again, reminding Dane of where they were supposed to be going.

"Let's get you to bed. You do have work in the morning," Dane pointed out.

Nicole frowned at the mention of work as they started upstairs. She wished that she could just stay wrapped around Danny for the rest of her life. The walk to her bedroom door did not last long enough for her; Dane thought the same.

"Well, here we are," Dane said while glancing at the door, as if that would make it farther away and they could continue walking with each other.

"Indeed. Thank you for a wonderful time out," Nicole quipped, smiling impishly as she spoke. She thought their actions and words were funny and kind of cute.

"It was my pleasure, sweet lady. I enjoyed this date. I hope we can go out again sometime," Dane played along.

Nicole was near grinning now. "I'll be sure to call you."

"I'll be waiting. Will the lady honor me with a goodnight kiss?"

Game over, Nicole leaned in for the deepest kiss of the night. For the first time in both of their lives, they were certain that they had souls because they could feel the other touching it with each movement of their lips. Mouths slowly opened and tongues touched, shyly, but curiously. The taste was sweet as nectar and they craved more, trying to take each other in and share one body.

This driving need to merge ignited passions in them, which flared up as the kiss continued. Their hands began exploring their bodies, first gently, but with each touch the desire for more grew. Their actions fanned the flames of their passion little by little. Dane put one hand behind Nicole's head, trying to bring her closer and Nicole respond by pressing herself closer, sliding her tongue against Dane's with more fervor and desire. A copper hand that settled on Nicole's shoulder blade began to slip down to the small of her back, wanting so badly to go further, but she did not have the nerve to take such liberties just yet. Nicole's hands were doing similar things, one roaming temptingly close to Danny's breast while the other caressed her hip. With each passing second, they could feel a tug, but they finally broke apart from their intense embrace, needing to breathe again.

"I really want to ask you to come in..." Nicole whispered as they broke apart. Her body was humming from their kiss and she really wanted to give into the feeling, but she knew that would be moving too fast.

"I would really like to accept that offer," Dane replied in a low tone. Every fiber of her being was aflame, burning for Nicole. But, she did not want Nicole to think that this was all about sex. Yes, she would like nothing more than to make love to Nicole, but she wanted them to build a real relationship and be a real couple, not just good friends who happened to be fuck-buddies too.

"But, it's too soon."

Dane nodded on complete agreement. "Understood and agreed. Goodnight, chem."

"Goodnight, big dog."

Dane smiled while Nicole disappeared into her bedroom. A hand went through wild, short ebony hair afterwards. She shook her head as she turned to go down to her own room.

"I can't believe I agreed with that. I do agree with it, but it's just weird that I agree. In the past, I would've been all over Nick, trying to bed her from the first second I thought I could, like any other girl. But, then again, Nick isn't like any other girl," Dane said to herself on her way down the stairs. No, Nick was definitely in a league of her own and she planned to treat Nicole just like that.

She settled down on her pallet and stared at the ceiling. She smiled to herself. *Life is looking up.* She felt good for the first time in a long time, maybe the first time ever. Nicole had to be an angel, she was sure of it.

"Delivered right to me. Wondered what I did that was so good in a previous life," she muttered as the excitement of the past few hours started catching up to her. Her eyelids were feeling heavy and as she drifted off to sleep, she prayed for her dreams to be filled with Nicole.

Dane woke up earlier and started on her morning routine. She glanced at her guitar and felt a stronger pull than usual to attempt playing it, but she knew from last night that she could not play it on her own. Her fingers ached to try, but she resisted the temptation. She considered that Nicole might be willing to be her fret fingers once again later on. It would be nice and Nicole seemed to enjoy when they played together.

She went and took a shower while thinking about last night, how wonderful it felt to play her guitar with Nicole's assistance, how heavenly it felt to hold the kindest woman in the world as far as she was concerned, how right it felt to kiss those soft lips. She had wished that last night would never ended, but then again, it did mean for a promising tomorrow.

"I hope we have a million tomorrows," Dane said to the water cascading onto her, washing away her troubles as far as she was concerned. For the first time in a long time, tomorrow sounded very promising.

She had never thought that she could spend a few tomorrows with a girlfriend and now she was thinking about forever-forever with Nicole. It was little overwhelming, but she was still high off of last night's joy and even the uncertainty of unfamiliar emotions was not going to take that away from her. She smiled to herself as she got dressed and went to start on breakfast.

"I'm going to take care of Nick in ways that no one could, especially that dipshit Tyler," Dane silently vowed.

The name caused her to pause and it was just the thing that slammed the brakes on her intoxicated moment, sending all happy emotions crashing through the proverbial windshield. *Nicole dated Tyler*, she recalled. *For almost a year!* And before last night, Nicole had not shown much interest in women.

"Wait, am I Nick's first woman? Shit!" Dane's whole demeanor dropped, along with her shoulders and expression.

As much as she had feelings for Nicole, she was not interested in being the experimental first. There were too many things that could and probably would go wrong with that. She doubted that that million tomorrows she wished for not even twenty minutes ago would end up being a few months and then Nicole would either decide that women were not for her or she would find a better woman.

"What do I have to offer anyway? I'm just a broken musician that used to have a drug problem," Dane grumbled as a sorrowful frown worked its way onto her face without her knowledge.

"Morning, Danny," Nicole said in a yawn as she entered the kitchen. She immediately took notice of the expression on her girlfriend's face. "Danny, sweetheart, what's wrong?" the lawyer pressed while urgently rushing to the taller woman's side.

She embraced the musician right away. Dane did not return the hug, which caused worry and tension to skyrocket in Nicole's system. She could not help wondering if Danny regretted last night.

Nicole figured that it was possible for Danny to regret last night. After all, Danny could have any woman she wanted-or so Nicole thought. In Nicole's opinion, Danny was so sweet and good-looking that she could have her pick of any woman. Why would Dane want to be tied down to an attorney who could hardly stand up for herself if she was not on the clock or pushed completely to the edge? She was pathetic and she guessed that Danny had come to that conclusion after having a night to think on it.

"Danny, it's okay..." Nicole whispered as tears gathered in her eyes. She sniffled and that got Dane's attention.

"Hey, chem, what's the matter?" Dane asked gently while wrapping her arms around the lawyer's waist.

"You want things to go back to the way they were, don't you?"

"What? No! Do you?" Dane countered, staring deeply into emerald eyes that were flooded with unshed tears.

"I don't...I just thought you did..." Nicole admitted with a sniffle.

"Well, nothing to fear. I do want to ask you something, though. Um...it's a little personal..."

"Well, if we're going to be a couple, we have to be willing to share a few personal things, correct? So, ask me what you would like," Nicole replied while wiping her eyes and smiling.

Dane nodded and took a breath before working up the courage to ask. "I was just wondering...have you ever dated a woman before?"

Nicole chuckled a little; so that was what was troubling Danny! She felt a lot better now knowing that Danny meant her words from before. She was back on cloud nine and could easily answer any question, as long as it meant that she and Danny got to remain a couple.

"I have dated women before, yes. Quite a few in fact. Although I'm sure my numbers wouldn't rival yours, but I have," Nicole admitted as if it was nothing.

Dane's face hit the floor and her eyes were wide as dinner plates. She could not believe what she was hearing. "And you never mentioned that?!" she shouted incredulously.

Nicole blushed a little, feeling somewhat sheepish for withholding that information. "Well, it never really came up in a conversation. We don't usually talk about past relationships and things. We just kind of glance over relationships in conversations, saying a few words and moving on. Hell, if you weren't here when I broke up with Tyler, you probably wouldn't know too much about him, either, would you?" she pointed out.

"Well, I would know he's a dipshit that harasses you at work, but other than that, you're right. All you ever talk about is how fucked up your past relationships were, but you never mention names or anything in real detail. Wow, I didn't think... I mean, I was getting vibes from you, but I thought it was my imagination from when I started to realize I was kinda attracted to you. So, you've seriously dated women. For how long?" Dane asked curiously.

"Ever since I started dating. I always went for guys and girls. I actually had a girlfriend for my senior prom. We went together and everything. Of course, she was an asshole like most other people I've dated," Nicole remarked, shaking her head a little.

"And your parents didn't have a problem with it?" Dane asked in disbelief. Her mouth was hanging out and her eyes wide with astonishment; she could have been knocked over with a feather right now. She would have thought that Nicole's parents would have picked out a husband for Nicole and everything when she was in kindergarten, but apparently, they were less controlling than she thought.

"Not really. My mother had some issues with it. Her biggest problem with it was it was something that was just me. She wants me to be just like her, like her clone. She used to tell me all the time that I'm her legacy to the world and she wants me to be perfect," Nicole tried to explain.

"So, being bisexual isn't perfect?" Dane stated, anger creeping out. She had heard more than her fair share of bigotry dealing with sexual orientation and it left a little raw spot in her. She did not want what she experienced to happen to Nicole, especially when it came to Nicole's parents.

"Calm down, honey. It's not that. It's that she wants me to be just like her. I actually used to like when she told me that I was her legacy in the world. It made me feel so important..." Nicole trailed off and then smiled. "You know how it is, little kids love to hear praise from their parents and all."

Dane shook her head, quite seriously. "No, I don't know how it is," she confessed. *I don't have a fucking clue!*

Nicole blinked hard and gazed into grey eyes as if trying to read Danny's mind. She could not hear the thoughts, but she realized something. Danny almost never talked about her parents and when she did, it was always connected to Tyler. Danny never said anything about her parents that had something to do with her.

"Tell me about them, Danny," Nicole requested in a soft voice.

"I should get back to breakfast," Dane mumbled and made a half-hearted attempt to escape the embrace. Nicole held onto her tighter, not letting her go anywhere.

"Tell me, please. Let me in, Danny."

Dane was silent for a long moment. "Out of all of the things that goes on with me, I'm pretty sure the fact that I'm a lesbian ranks pretty low on the reasons my parents are ashamed of me, even though they gave me shit for it too. It's something that they could ignore as long as I didn't come around them with a girl, which, depending on my mood, could happen often or rarely. My drug problem, they could ignore that. I walk around the house sniffing, they could just say I was sick or allergies or something else. Alcohol problem, hell, who doesn't have one of those in the world I come from." More silence.

"So...why are they ashamed of you? How do you know they are?" Nicole asked, sounding quite curious. She tilted her head slightly and her forehead wrinkled a bit, showing her confusion.

"My mother goes out of her way to ignore me and she always has. She tries her best never to look directly at me and if she has something to say to me, even if we're in the same room standing elbow to elbow, she uses a messenger. There is no talking to Dane." The report was made in a mundane tone, but the look in those grey eyes spoke of pain and resentment from being ignored by the one person who was supposed to love her unconditionally.

"Why?" Nicole was puzzled. She could not imagine going through life not talking to her mother. As much as the overbearing woman got on her nerves, they had plenty of meaningful conversations through her life and she would not trade them for anything.

"Well, apparently, the Great Dane ruined her marriage. Not that she ever told me that because that would require us to be on speaking terms. I've heard, though."

Nicole's face scrunched up from sheer bewilderment now, wrinkling her forehead more and squinting her eyes. "How did you ruin her marriage?" She considered herself a fairly intelligent person, but she could not for the life of her figure out how a child could ruin a marriage...unless the child was being used as a scapegoat to cover up for the parents' shortcomings.

"Her husband, my dad, doesn't claim me. He refuses to believe I'm his daughter, despite what two paternity tests said," Dane reported with a hollow laugh. She ran her hand through her hair.

"What? Why?" Nicole shook her head, like the action would sort out everything that she was hearing. Nothing about Danny's parents made sense to her and she could almost understand why the musician never talked about them if they were so strange.

Dane leaned down and gave Nicole a gentle kiss on the lips, hoping to change the subject and prove that she could give Nicole a kiss whenever the feeling claimed her. She smiled to herself when the kiss was returned. She pulled away before the show of affection got out of hand.

"I really should finish breakfast. I don't want you to be late. We'll save the long soap opera that was my life with my parents for another time, okay?" Dane suggested.

Nicole nodded, having a feeling that it was a story that would take a lot longer than one breakfast would allow. Dane went back to the food and Nicole went to finish getting ready. They had a normal breakfast between them, which caused the joyous feelings in their systems to increase because it seemed like nothing was changing with their routine. They both liked the routine and it felt reassuring to see that it was not changing because their status changed.

The break in the routine that they both were sure that they could get very use to came when Dane walked Nicole to the door. Before heading off, Nicole bid farewell to Dane with a deep kiss that left them both stunned when they pulled away from air. They stared into each other's eyes, saying things that their mouths could not work out. The messages that they shared led to another passionate kiss.

"At this rate, I might never make it out of the house again," Nicole joked in a breathless tone with a dazed smile.

"I would not complain, but you do need to go to work, so get moving, spawn of Satan," Dane playfully ordered, gently swatting Nicole on the butt to get her moving.

Nicole giggled, but she did as she was commanded. She practically floated into work, not caring that she still did not have an assistant and she was pretty sure her workload was going to double as soon as her parents found out that she was out of court cases. Nothing was getting the smile off of her face, though. People noticed and asked, but she did not explain why she was so happy.

She was eager to get back home, checking the clock on her desk and on her computer every few minutes. Time just was not passing quickly enough in her opinion. She was gifted with a surprise a little before noon when her phone rang.

"Hello, Nicole Cardell speaking," she answered her phone.

"Great, I was looking for the sexiest woman alive," Dane remarked, smiling if her voice was an indication of things.

Nicole blushed, her cheeks turning a deep crimson. "Oh, you. I was thinking about you...all day, actually. I'm having trouble focusing on the documents in front of me because of you."

"Oh, you were thinking about me? Should I talk dirty to you now?"

"Don't you dare! If someone came in here and saw me while you did that, they'd know just what you were saying. Besides, I want to wait a little while before we... Well, before you get me all hot and bothered..." Dane was quiet for a long moment, possibly not sure how to respond. Nicole laughed, knowing just why silence reigned over the phone. "You're thinking perverted thoughts, aren't you, Danny?" the lawyer accused her girlfriend.

"Guilty as charged. Can't be helped now that you put the thought out there."

"I guess you are a big dog," Nicole quipped. She did hope that Danny did not mind waiting for a little while before they slept together. She did not want them to jump into too much too quickly out of fear that it would somehow mess up their blossoming relationship.

"One that would like to lick you," Dane said before she could stop herself. "Oh, damn! Said that out loud. Sorry."

The attorney chuckled a little. "It's fine. It's nice to be desired..."

Honestly, Nicole never had a problem with being desired, but it was different with Danny. She was not sure why it was different, but it was one of the reasons that she wanted to wait before she was intimate with Danny. She wanted to sort all of these emotions out before she made a mistake along the line and messed things up.

"Um... Well, I was calling to make sure you eat lunch and everything," Dane said, trying to get the conversation away from sex before she ended up saying something that did cross the line. Or worse, getting herself more frustrated than she was now that she did want to talk dirty to Nicole.

"It's not lunchtime yet, but I will. I'm going to pop it in the microwave in a little while, though. Is there pudding in there too?" Nicole asked curiously.

Dane smiled, thinking about her girlfriend's sweet tooth. "Two. One vanilla and one chocolate."

Nicole pouted. "Did I eat all of the swirl already?"

"Don't worry. I'm going to get some more from the store today. You're also out of cookies, but I'm going to make sure you have more of those by the time you get in today."

"You are just too good to me."

"Somebody has to be. Don't work yourself too hard and look at those college applications," Dane commanded in a good-natured tone.

"All right, honey. See you later tonight."

"Okay. Oh, I wanted to tell you before... I like it when you call me honey... Well, really, I like it when you call me anything..." Dane admitted, sounding so adorably nervous.

"Good to know, big dog."

"I like that one too, chem."

Nicole chuckled and they said their farewells to each other before hanging up. The day could not end soon enough for her. She practically flew out of the office as soon as she could. The people still there could hardly believe it was her; she usually did not leave that early or that fast.

"I'm home!" Nicole called into the house as she entered the place.

For the first time, Dane actually met her at the door. They crashed into each other with a passionate force, meeting mouths and hands. Lips pressed and moved against each other, while tongues collided and caressed each other, trying to get to know each other as thoroughly as possible. Hands wandered shoulders and backs, wanting to touch more, but not wanting to cross the line just yet. They separated when their lungs were screaming for precious air. They pulled away from each other barely, panting and practically sharing breath.

"So, how was your day?" Dane asked in a low voice before leaning down to place a quick peck on red lips.

"It's looking up," Nicole replied, going in for her own small kiss for just a little longer than Dane.

"Well, before now, how was your day?"

The lawyer glanced away, looking a little embarrassed. "I actually don't know. I wasn't paying much attention to anything. I just wanted to get back to you."

Dane smiled and accepted that response. They had a semi-normal night, adding a lot of kissing and caressing to their usual routine. At the end of the night, Dane walked Nicole upstairs to her room like before. They shared a passionate embrace once again before bidding each other goodnight and going to their rooms.

Nicole was sitting at her desk, going over a contract. She was waiting for a call from Danny. The calls had increased since they became a couple, which Nicole enjoyed. Danny showed such an interest in her and it never seemed to get dull.

Before the phone call came, Nicole was taken from her work and her thoughts. The door to her office opened. She looked up to see her father enter, smiling, and arms full with a box.

"No, Daddy, no," Nicole pled, knowing that her father was bringing more work for her.

"Sorry, Nikki. They're from your mother. They're divided into things you need to proof-read, redraft, and a court case you need to get prepared for. Why haven't you hired a new assistant yet?" Raymond inquired while putting the box down on her desk.

"I want to make sure to get the right person."

"There's been nothing wrong with your other assistants. You just let them control the job instead of you controlling them. If you don't hire someone by the end of the week, I'm going to hire someone for you, so you can stop wasting your time on it. You need to start returning business calls too. A few clients I recommended to you have called me complaining that you don't get back to them right away. It's unprofessional and you're better than that." It was clear that he was scolding her and he really did it in a way that she did not like. He managed to merge the fact that he was her father and her boss whenever he reprimanded her.

"Daddy, taking a day to review my work before getting back to a client is not unprofessional," she argued. She was thorough and most people appreciated that since it almost always translated into victory in some form.

"It is if they complain about it. Now, you're better than this and you need to stay on the top of your game. Understood?" he demanded to know, glaring down at her with a hard gaze.

"Yes, sir," Nicole muttered like a thoroughly scolded teenager. She slumped down in her chair, as if trying to hide from her father.

"And don't slouch. What if someone was to come in here and see you slouching?"

"Yes, sir." Nicole straightened herself out.

She breathed a sigh of relief when her father left her office. She then looked at her new pile of work. Her expression fell, and her desire to go home at that very moment rose exponentially. She made a conscious decision that she was not going to stay late, but she was not sure if she would be able to live up to that. She knew that Danny would not let her work too hard at home and she needed to get things done.

"I'm home," Nicole called as she put down her briefcase, placing it out of sight because she did not want Danny to notice the bulge in the bag.

There was no verbal response, but Dane was out in the foyer almost immediately to properly greet her girlfriend. She took Nicole into a loving embrace and a passionate kiss. When she pulled away from the lawyer, she knew something was wrong.

"What happened at work today, chem?" Dane asked with concern, bringing up one hand to caress Nicole's cheek while her other hand went around Nicole and slowly rubbed Nicole's back.

The touch soothed much of Nicole's frustration, but there was a little underlying anger aimed at her parents for taking up her time, time that she wanted to spend with her girlfriend. "My workload just tripled in one day, that's all. It's not the first time it's happened, but..."

"That doesn't make it any easier to deal with. What happened?" the younger woman asked in a gentle, understanding tone.

"My parents. I guess they don't think I'm busy enough and they're always recommending me to people, getting me new clients. So, now I have a big pile of work to deal with. I just want to come home to you..." Nicole whispered the last sentence.

"Well, you are home with me right now. Let's work on unwinding you. Go upstairs and take a hot, long shower. I'm going to get things ready for you to relax and start on one of your favorite dinners."

Nicole nodded and Dane kissed her on the side of the head before releasing her. Nicole did as ordered while Dane went to get things ready for Nicole to relax. By the time the attorney came back downstairs, she could smell chicken cooking. She saw the latest book that she was reading on the coffee table in the living room with a plate of cookies and hot chocolate waiting for her. She sat down, thinking that things were almost perfect.

"You're good now?" the musician asked her girlfriend as she came to the front of the living room.

"Almost," Nicole answered.

"Almost?" An ebony eyebrow arched. *What did I forget?*

"I could use company."

The smile Dane wore lit up the whole room. She eased down onto the sofa with Nicole. The lawyer immediately made herself comfortable against Dane. Dane did not mind and wrapped her arms around Nicole to make sure that she was secure. While Nicole opened her book, Dane kissed Nicole's head and snuggled into her soft, auburn mane. They then had a normal night together.

Nicole ended up retrieving her briefcase later on, sneaking in some work. She had to get it done and it was either do it privately at home or stay late at the office. The latter really was not an option for her because she wanted to be with Danny. So, she made it her habit to stay up late at home and carry on working to make sure that she finished everything a prompt time.

Generally, Nicole was a morning person, so when she woke up, it was difficult to tell that she had been up late the night before. Dane did not say anything if she did notice anything about Nicole's late nights. She sent the lawyer on her way every morning with her lunch and the affection that Nicole craved.

At work, Nicole had to deal with the fact that her father had hired her an assistant, one that she did not very much like. Her assistant was a young man who leered her in a manner that made her uncomfortable. She told her father about it and he sort of brushed her off, saying, "Richard is overly qualified to work with you. Give him a chance." So, she was giving him a chance and hoping that lightning struck him, so she would not have to worry about firing him later on.

She settled in her office and it seemed like everyday without fail right before she got to her own work, someone needed help with their work. Help that had to come from her, apparently. All the time.

"How the fuck did these people make it out of grade school, let alone college and law school?" Nicole wondered while rubbing her throbbing temples. It was almost noon and she had not been able to start her own work. Her lunch was calling her, but she decided against eating and went right into her work, needing to get something done before her clients started calling with complaints again.

She was interrupted from doing her work when her assistant informed her that there was a "Darry" on the phone wishing to speak with her. Nicole arched an eyebrow. *Who the hell is Darry?*

"Nicole Cardell speaking," she said while putting the phone to her ear.

"Hey, chem," Dane purred into the phone.

"Danny?"

"Who else would it be? You sound like you expected someone else."

"No, my stupid assistant called you Darry. I was wondering who the hell that was."

Dane sucked her teeth. "Do they get all of your assistants from hospital trauma wards?"

Nicole let out a tired laugh. "I'm starting to believe that."

"You don't sound too good. How're you doing, baby?"

Nicole smiled because of the term of endearment. "Better since you called."

"That's good. You're eating lunch?"

"I'm trying to catch up-" Nicole was cut off right there.

"No, no, no, that's not you eating lunch. Eat lunch. It'll help keep your energy up, which you really need. You've been falling asleep a lot earlier than usual these past few days. Hell, last night you fell asleep at eight. I'm scared soon you'll just pass out in your dinner," Dane said quite seriously.

Nicole nodded as if Dane was right in front of her. She knew that her girlfriend was right. She was ruining her sleep-cycle because of all of the work. She fell asleep early now and then woke up in the middle of the night to do work. Sometimes, she took very short naps at her desk, in between helping people and trying to do her own work.

"Nick, you still there?"

"Sorry. I was nodding in agreement. I'm getting my lunch right now."

"Good. Try to take it easy, chem. Come in at a decent hour too. I don't want you to risk falling asleep behind the wheel."

"Yes, Mom," Nicole teased as she went into her refrigerator for her lunch.

"If I were your mom, I'd be forcing more cases down your throat rather than trying to get you to relax."

"That is the truth. Okay, I have my lunch out, I'm starting to eat. I'll see you at home, at a decent hour," Nicole promised.

"Good."

They bid each other farewell. Nicole worked and ate her lunch while praying that no one bothered her for the rest of the day, Meanwhile, Dane was working on fixing up a surprise for her busy girlfriend.

Nicole pulled into the driveway and arched an eyebrow in curiosity at the odd sight that greeted her. All of the lights were out in the house. A certain, rusty, killer bike was not thrown haphazardly on the front porch. She wondered if Danny was gone.

"Maybe she got angry with me for not keeping my promise..." Nicole considered. She was home late; it was almost eight o'clock at night.

As she drew closer to the house, she saw there was an ominous glow in the hall. She opened the door and glanced around in the dark. She saw there were candles on the floor, cutting a path upstairs. Her heart rate spiked and beat loudly in her ears.

"Oh, Danny..."

Nicole followed the candles upstairs and saw that they led to the bathroom. She made it to the door before everything in her stopped, including her feet and her breathing. There in the middle of the bathroom, which was covered in scented candles, stood Dane with a bouquet of flowers.

"Welcome home," Dane said with a slightly awkward smile. She had never done anything like this before and she was not sure if she did it well.

"Oh, Danny, sweetheart..." Nicole rushed over to the musician, embracing her and engulfing her in a heated kiss.

When Nicole pulled away, Danny was left in a slight daze. "I did good, huh?" she managed to ask.

The redhead nodded. "You always do, honey. Now, was your plan a bath for one or two?"

Dane chuckled and glanced away while running her hand through her hair. "Honestly, hadn't thought that far ahead. I just wanted you to relax since I know how hard you're working. I don't want you to get too stressed or unhappy."

"I can't be unhappy if I have you to come home to," Nicole replied, unaware until she said it, just how true it was.

Dane did not know what to say to that one, so did the one thing that she now did when tongue-tied: she kissed Nicole. The lawyer moaned and melted into the taller woman as she now had a habit of doing. When they pulled away, Nicole accidentally yawned.

"Uh-huh, boring you, am I?" Dane teased.

"Of course not. I'm just tired. Those assholes at work-"

"No, don't talk about work right now. Don't think about work. Take these flowers and then take a bath. It's hot and just full of all sorts of things I never heard of, but was told help make a bath perfect. So, I'm going to go warm up dinner while you take a bath."

"You're not going to join me?" Nicole remarked.

"Some other time, chem. Right now, I want to make sure you get some food in you and wash away the grim of the day. I'll take you up on that offer on a day I know you won't fall asleep on me," Dane countered with a grin.

Nicole nodded to show that she understood. She would have liked for Dane to join her, though. She smiled as she sank into the hot bubble bath, thinking about how she would like to be intimate with Danny. She allowed fantasies to play in her mind while she relaxed and thought that they might stay fantasies if she could not stay awake for more than an hour when she was home. That night was not the night because right after dinner, she collapsed into bed.

When Nicole woke up, the first thing that caught her eye was not her work. She saw a stack of papers on her nightstand. She would not have thought anything of them, but there was a note on top of the stack that she knew was from Danny because of the handwriting. She grabbed the note.

Hey, I took the time to fill these out for you as best I could. There's still some info that you need to put in and some of them do need an essay to go with them. Please, fill them out, even if you don't know where you want to go right now. You need it, trust me. You can work out where you want to go after you get accepted to all of these for spring term, which starts at the end of January. Get on the ball, Nick, and do something for yourself.

Danny.

Nicole took a look at that was waiting for her and saw that it was the graduate school applications. A smile overtook her face and instead of doing her work, she started going through the applications. She started working on an essay to send out with those that required it.

Dane watched Nicole leave, seeing how her step had slowed as days went by. She noticed the bags and lines getting darker and heavier with Nicole every day that went by too. She was running out of ideas on how to soothe the frayed nerves of the corporate attorney. She also finding it harder to ignore the hints that Nicole was dropping about what she thought would relax her, which was getting laid. The musician did not say so out loud, but she doubted that Nicole would be able to stay awake long enough to have sex. The only thing Nicole really did when she came home now was take a quick shower, eat her dinner, and then fall into bed. There was no room for anything else, so Dane thought that it would best to get Nicole to ease her way out of whatever was making her frustrated and tense before they hopped into bed together.

Dane scratched her head. "What's left for relaxing things to do? Flowers, bath, favorite meals, music, books, movies...I could take her away for the weekend. Oh, wait, no. Don't have the savings for that anymore. Shit."

The musician frowned, thinking about if only she had met Nicole earlier in life. She would have been able to take real care of Nicole. She might have found someone to spend her money on instead of snorting it or smoking it.

"Or I would've fucked her over like all of the other people in her life. Well, no use thinking about what coulda been. I need to do something before Nick breaks under the pressure," Dane told herself.

She sighed and figured that something would come to her eventually. She had time anyway. Most days, Nicole stayed at work late now and they rarely had their usual nights anymore because of Nicole's new work habits. Dane knew that she would not be able to do anything whenever Nicole was like that.

That day Nicole got in late and was so worn out that she did not bother eating dinner. Dane frowned as she put the food away, feeling like she had cooked for nothing. She had spent the entire day trying to think of how to relax Nicole, boggling her mind, all for Nicole to fall out around forty minutes after arriving home.

"Calm down, Danny. She's working hard, not because she wants to stay late, but because she doesn't want to let anyone down, because she doesn't want people to think she's slacking off, or because she doesn't want anyone to say that she's doing a bad job. I have to stand by her. She needs it. She deserves it," Dane reminded herself. She was not going to abandon Nicole just because times were rough. No, she could not do something like that.

Dane finished her clean up in the kitchen and went to the den. She stared at the ceiling most of the night, trying to sort out her feelings. She could not believe that she actually felt...well, under appreciated. She managed to shake away the thought by reminding herself how people took advantage of Nicole's kind nature. Nicole was sweet and gentle and needed someone around to take care of her. Dane wanted to be that someone and she was going to work hard to make sure she stayed that someone. She cared way too much about Nicole to run off when the attorney obviously needed her the most.

In the morning, when Dane woke up, she started in her usual routine. She paused when Nicole made her way into the kitchen, looking just about the worse Danny had ever seen her. Nicole was pale, pasty really. Her eyes were blood-shot and half-closed. The bags under her eyes were almost dark blue, like deep bruises. Her usually vibrant eyes were dull, glass-like. Dane would not have been surprised if Nicole dropped dead right in the middle of the kitchen.

"Nick, how're you feeling?" Dane demanded to know as she rushed over to the smaller woman. Her hand immediately went to Nicole's forehead, even though she really had no clue what she was doing. She had never done anything like that before, but right now, she felt like she could give medical tips to the best doctors in the world. Nicole felt a little clammy to her. She guessed that meant Nicole was sick, but she was not sure.

"Crappy," Nicole admitted with a pained groan.

"You look like that too and I don't like how your forehead feels either. Go back upstairs, go to bed. I'll call your office and let them know you're sick," the musician said.

"No, I'll call," the lawyer replied.

Dane blinked. "No fight over it?"

"No fight, on one condition," Nicole bargained.

A smile graced the taller woman's features. "Okay, what's this condition?"

"You lay next to me while I sleep." An arched eyebrow caused Nicole to continue. "We don't have to do anything. I just...I've been wondering what it would be like to sleep next to you...for a while. I've been dreaming about it-" Nicole was stopped there.

"It's okay, Nick. You don't have to keep going. I would be honored to sleep next to you."

That put a grin on Nicole's face that lit up the room. For a moment, she looked normal, like she usually did. She wasted no time calling, saying that she was not going to be in that day. She had breakfast and willing went back upstairs with Danny trailing behind her. Danny halted at the doorway, which Nicole noticed.

"Danny?" Nicole said.

"Sorry...it's just..." Dane ran her hand through her hair. "I've never been in your room, except that one time. You know, to leave your applications..."

An olive-toned hand reached out, taking a bronze hand in its grip. Dane was gently tugged inside the room and led to the bed. Nicole pulled back the sheets of her made bed and laid down, sighing as she touched down on the comfortable queen-sized mattress. It took Dane a few seconds, but she did lay down. Nicole made herself comfortable, cuddling against Dane's form. She was asleep in mere seconds and Dane was left to occupy her time, watching Nicole sleep. Dane drifted off with a smile on her face.

Dane woke up a couple of hours later to find Nicole still sleeping soundly against her. It was one of the few times where Dane woke up and knew exactly where she was the moment that her brain turned back on. She smiled to herself and her hands, which were around Nicole, started caressing the pajama-clad attorney. She was happy to see that the color had returned to Nicole's face while they were asleep and she decided to lightly stroke Nicole's cheek with right hand.

"I can't believe I had a moment of doubt where I thought I might walk away from this..." Danny scolded herself.

She would have walked away from heaven, the heaven of having Nicole pressed against her in such a trusting manner. Her steady breathing against Dane's neck made the musician smile. She felt so many different emotions in that one moment that she dared think that she would never be able to leave Nicole. She would be there forever, or at least for as long as Nicole would have her.

"Shit, I love this woman..." Dane realized, speaking out loud.

Nicole suddenly moved, cuddling into the musician. Dane stiffened, thinking that Nicole might have heard her. The tension that shot through Danny disturbed the resting body against her. The lawyer groaned a little, lips touching against Dane's neck. The musician whimpered and squirmed, which only made things worse. Nicole moved with her, rubbing against her frame, and lips touching her skin. Dane felt like her body was on fire after long seconds of this torture.

"She's going to kill me," Dane feared, but she knew that she would go with a smile.

She was taken from thoughts on her impending demise as Nicole started rubbing her nose into Dane's neck. Her hands went from lying limp by Dane's hip to wandering up by Dane's breasts. An antenna went up in the musician's head.

"I thought you just wanted to sleep next to me," Dane said in a mock-accusing tone.

"Now, I want to sleep with you," Nicole replied with a voice that was low from sleep. She kissed Dane's throat.

"You're in no shape for that sort of thing."

"I'm very well rested and I have the whole day off. I want to be with you and I think you want to be with me too..." There was a hint of doubt in her voice.

"Guilty as charged," Dane confirmed. She wanted to be with Nicole more than any woman in her life, but she did not want to harm Nicole either. She doubted it would be good to work Nicole up if she was really sick.

Nicole bit her lip and decided to carry on with the confessions. "I heard you...what you said..."

Dane gulped, pushing down a lump in her throat. "Didn't I say that in my head?"

"No, you didn't. If it makes you feel less like your head is on the chopping block, I'll make a similar confession. I do think I'm falling love with you. Maybe I am already. I don't know. I haven't felt anything like this before."

"I haven't either. My conclusion was just a lucky guess. I do know I don't plan to ever leave you, Nick, unless you want me gone. And even then, I warn you that I will fight for you. I just hope it doesn't go to a creepy degree."

Nicole chuckled, but she did not respond verbally to that. She pushed herself up, going after Danny's inviting lips. Dane responded to the kiss like she always did, returning all of the passion that her body would allow. Nicole moved over Danny, making sure not to break their kiss, but wanting to feel more of Danny, wanting to take the initiative to show the musician that everything was all right, that she was all right.

Dane did not put up a fight, moving her hands to Nicole's hips as the lawyer straddled her waist. Their mouths refused to part, so they breathed through their noses, while their hands quickly made it their business to get to wander cloth-covered forms. When hands hit heated flesh, they both knew they would not be cloth-covered for long.

"You feel so good..." Dane growled, breaking the kiss for a moment. In the back of her mind, she knew that she had somehow fallen into a trap and was being distracted from a concern that she had a few minutes ago, but the rest of her mind did not give a damn about that. If this was a trap, she wanted to fall for more!

"So do you."

They both decided that they wanted to feel more of each other. They practically tore each other out of their pajamas. They took a moment to appreciate the other's body, believing them to be

perfect. The moment was still until Nicole noticed something that she found interesting. Dane had five tattoos of small paw prints on her stomach, going upward to a body part that Nicole really wanted to inspect. She reached out, tracing the path that the tattoos took before arriving right where she wanted to be. Dane moaned lightly, which set Nicole on fire.

Greedy fingers clutched all of the freed skin, wanting as much tempting flesh as possible. Demanding palms rubbed, mapped, memorized each part of the bare body before them. Lips and tongues were not to be outdone and left the company of each other to feel the rest of the forms that they wanted to know better than their own.

Dane's mouth wandered down Nicole's neck, licking and kissing every inch she could. She wanted to taste all of Nicole at once and silently cursed that it was not possible for her to do. As she got to Nicole's breasts, her hands moved before her mouth had a chance to sample the goods. Nicole moaned loudly as Dane's hands played her like a fine instrument, making her body cry out.

"God, yes," Nicole hissed while pressing herself deeper into Dane's questing hands.

Dane growled, wanting to give Nicole more as she was silently demanding. Dane moved her decidedly useless left hand and replaced it with her mouth. Kisses and licks around the swell of the full mound made Nicole buck against the musician. The auburn-haired woman moaned loud enough to reach the heavens, when Dane's lips latched onto the center of her breast, suckling her as if she held the key to immortality. She wrapped her arms around Danny's head to keep her in place, even though she doubted Dane was going anywhere. She ran her hands through soft ebony locks while Dane continued playing her, bringing forth sweet notes deep from within Nicole's soul.

"Oh, Danny..." Tears gathered into emerald eyes, pleasure unknown coursing through her system. No one had ever touched her in such a way, making every little bit of her sing with bliss. No one.

Dane shivered when she heard Nicole cry out because of her. She sat up a little, wanting to take more of Nicole into her mouth. She also rolled them over, settling on top of the lawyer. Nicole moaned even louder, feeling the maximum amount of flesh against her in their new position. She wrapped her arms around the younger woman and tried her best to pull them infinitely closer.

Dane adjusted her mouth against Nicole's body and the wave of ecstasy that rippled through her was such a shock that she screamed. Nicole's body arched, letting Dane know that she definitely played the right note. Their bodies writhed against each other, which earned a hiss from Dane. *I need more.*

With one last nip, assuring that her mark would be left, Dane moved on. Nicole whined from the sudden abandonment, but the sour note was corrected as she felt quick licks going down her abdomen. She began panting, delight building as Dane played on. Kisses swirled around her navel before working down to her thighs.

"Danny..." Nicole cried, hands still lost in the unruly mop of thick onyx hair, stroking wild mane as Dane continued her wonderful torture.

Dane kissed the inside of olive-toned thighs and with each touch of her lips, it was as if she was hitting a button that controlled her girlfriend. Silky legs slide open with each loving touch. Dane purred and nuzzled her face on the warm flesh offered to her and the sound vibrated through Nicole, making her crave Dane even more, which she did not think was possible. Nicole's hips bucked and jerked slightly, begging for the heavenly touch of the musician. Toned, willing limbs were placed on an altar of broad shoulders and paradise was about to be achieved as Dane played on. Her tongue took short licks, like quick plucks to a finely tuned string. She soon had control of Nicole like she would any other instruments that she played and she used the utmost care with the woman that she suspected she loved.

Dane felt caring fingers glide through her hair as she tried to press herself impossibly closer to Nick's center while Nicole panted and pled for more. Dane was of like mind, loving the way Nick tasted and unable to get enough. She felt like she could drink of Nicole for the rest of her days and survive for centuries, especially if she kept getting such passion cries and adorable mewls from Nicole. She wanted more of the noise as much as she wanted more this fine drink.

Dane's typically detested left hand was brought to show that it could still play with the best of them, stroking Nicole with skill, earning loud, sharp notes from the auburn-haired woman. Dane felt a shudder roll through her because of the sounds and she needed more. One finger, and then two went to know Nicole as intimately as possible, strumming her as if Dane knew all about Nicole's body, and the crescendo was reached quickly. Nicole screamed so loud the neighbors probably heard, but she could care less. Her back bowed, tears flowed from her eyes, and declarations of love slipped by her lips. Danny was not done, though. She played on, bringing forth cries from her lover until Nicole was too tired to even scream.

"No more, please," the attorney begged, her chest heaving as she tried to take in as much air as her lungs would allow. Her body was glistening with sweat and passion; she could not be any happier.

Danny smiled into a mass of dark red curls before kissing her way back up Nicole's body. The lovers kissed deeply, soul-searing affection flowing through them. They then stared into each other's eyes, telling the other just how much they were loved, in ways that words would never be able to express.

"You're tired now," Dane playfully accused, smiling and beaming with pride. She could see sleep creeping up on her lover as Nicole's eyes drooped, almost closing completely.

"Just a little," Nicole admitted with a small yawn. She thought that she would be able to take the bedroom acrobatics, but her body was not yet ready for activities, especially not the way Danny performed. She did hope for an encore, though...after a nap.

"Go back to sleep. The whole point of today is for you to get in some rest and relaxation." The younger woman kissed her girlfriend on the cheek.

"You're going to stay, right?" Emerald eyes were full of hope.

Dane smiled brightly. "A crane couldn't pull me away. Go back to sleep." Dane rolled over onto her back and then pulled Nicole against her side.

Nicole made herself comfortable against Dane body once again, resting her head against sweat-covered shoulder. Dane gently caressed Nicole, which put her to sleep almost immediately. Dane followed once again, smiling.

12: Angels and demons

Nicole awoke from a nap and smiled unconsciously, memories of what happened an hour earlier playing in her mind. Looking for a prolonged repeat, she began kissing on the copper neck that was temptingly close to her mouth. She dragged her tongue along the tantalizing throat, feeling Dane's heartbeat under her curious tongue.

"Starting trouble again?" Dane asked in a sleepy tone, not opening her eyes. Her voice was playful and there was a smile tugging at her lips; she did not mind this sort of trouble in the least.

"I'm hoping I can finish it now," Nicole replied in a seductive whisper. This got smoke-colored eyes to open and looked downward, noting the lustful expression embedded in emerald orbs.

"Don't push yourself, Nick. You were exhausted. Taking the day off isn't to exhaust you more, but to get you to rest," the younger woman pointed out. "Besides, you might pass out halfway into this. Then we both lose!" The teasing grin on her face was precious, but it did not get the desired smile from her lover.

Nicole sighed, sounding defeated. "You're right. I just...I want to make love to you..."

Dane sighed too because she did not get the reaction she wanted, but caressed her girlfriend's shoulder to help lift her spirits. "Believe me, I want you too. I'd love nothing more than to spend the whole day making love to you, but we have to worry about your health first. Do you want some lunch?"

There was silence for a few moments. Hands wandered the somewhat soft form of Danny. Curious fingers traced ribs before going to Dane's slightly pudgy sides. A smile settled on Nicole's face as she played with Dane's stomach and sides. She could not believe the weight that Dane put on in the few months that they had been living together. She recalled when Danny first started staying at the house and how she looked like she weighed less than a leaf, but she filled out now. She had small love handles poking out of her sides, which Nicole adored and she continued stroking Danny's middle. Her fingers eventually wandered to the tattoos on her girlfriend's abdomen.

"These are cute and so you," Nicole commented. "Do you have any other tattoos I might have missed?"

Dane smiled. "I could tell you, but where's the fun in that? Now, about lunch?"

"Can we just order something? I want to stay in bed and I want you to stay here too," Nicole requested, hands still busy gliding over Danny's torso. She was willing to bet that there were other tattoos, but it would be more fun if she discovered them on her own. It was something to look forward to, among other things.

"We can order. I'll just have to get up to get it when it comes. So, you wanna watch some TV?"

Nicole nodded and scanned around for the remote for her bedroom television. She found it and turned the TV on to find something to watch. She curled back into Dane's body while Dane was on the phone, ordering Chinese food. She did not have to ask Nicole what she wanted, knowing the lawyer's preference already. She wrapped her arms around Nicole after she was done with that.

"Thank you, Danny," Nicole said out of the blue.

Ebony eyebrows curled in, wrinkling a bronze forehead. "Why are you thanking me?"

"For taking care of me like no one else ever has, for loving me in a way no one else has... or will I hope."

Dane leaned down and kissed Nicole's forehead. "You make it very easy. Seriously, Nick, you're the sweetest, kindest person I know. I can only hope to love you properly for as long as you'll have me."

"I'm going to have you forever, so you stop talking like I'm going to throw you out tomorrow. And you're doing a damn good job in loving me. I hope you don't change," Nicole stated.

"I'm not going to change. Um..." Smoke-colored eyes glanced away for a moment, which caused a worried look to come over Nicole.

"What is it, Danny?" Nicole inquired in a soft tone.

"I'm kinda new at all of this talking and everything, so bear with me. But, I was just going to say...I wish you didn't work late all the time anymore..."

Nicole nodded and now that Danny said something, she realized how unfair she had been being for their budding relationship. She was acting as if everything was still the same, but some things had changed. She had a responsibility to Danny as her girlfriend.

"I'm so sorry, Danny. I've been acting like we're still roommates," Nicole apologized, hugging Dane tightly and kissing her cheek.

"It's okay..." Dane sounded almost child-like. She really did not want to add to her girlfriend's troubles, but she wanted them to be able to spend time together. She liked being with Nicole so much and that feeling was what pushed her to bring up the subject.

"No, it's not okay and I'm glad you said something. I will stop working so late. I promise. I'll make this up to you too. Starting right now."

Dane did not argue as Nicole went about making things up to her, starting with placing light kisses along her jaw line. Nicole worked her way on top of Dane, as she had done earlier, but she had no intention of surrendering that position this time around. She placed a deep kiss to Danny's mouth, taking her breath away, before heading south, wanting to taste every piece of Dane.

The musician whimpered and squirmed as she felt gentle hands stroking her ribs and sides. Wet, tender kisses floated across her neck. Teeth bit down on her pulse, marking her as Nicole's and she could only hope for more possessive marks, letting her know that she was desired, wanted, and loved. She wiggled a little more as an adoring tongue continued on its journey and traced a path between the valley of her breasts while hands wandered her abdomen.

"I like that you have some weight on you," Nicole teased in a low tone. Her hands could not get enough of touching the taller woman, going over Dane's abdomen and sides.

"Should start working out..." Dane whimpered because Nicole decided at that moment to place a long, loving kiss to her collar bone. Dane had gained a healthy amount of weight since staying with the lawyer and she had been aware of the slight bulge around her middle. She had not really cared, but now that she realized Nicole would be seeing her naked more often, she considered that she might want to start working out to have a cut body to show off. She wanted to look good for Nicole and to make sure that she would remain desirable to the attorney.

"No, you're fine. I really do like it," Nicole vowed and touched Danny's abdomen as if she were worshipping the section, making her thoughts loud and clear that she really did like it.

Danny moaned from the attention and the sincerity in her girlfriend's word. Dane moved, seeking out more of the loving touch as Nicole's mouth continued on, as busy as her hands and just as vigilant. She made her way slowly to Danny's right breast, lovingly kissing every bit of the rise before making her journey to the center, the cherry on top. She captured the tip with generous lips and suckled so righteously that Danny hollered her name to the ceiling, trying to reach the angels in heaven from the sound of things.

"Nick!"

The auburn-haired woman smiled to herself and took a deep nip out of Dane's flesh, earning another scream, and a nonsense word too. Enjoying the reaction where it seemed like she was zapping Dane of her ability to think properly, Nicole could not resist rolling the gem around in her mouth with her tongue. She switched sides after a while, treating the neglected mound with the same fervent attention. Dane was gone, grunting and groaning things that might have been words in other languages.

"I want to stay here forever..." Nicole thought. *I want to love her forever.*

While Nicole's mouth did not seem to have any intention of leaving her breasts, her hands decided to tend to the rest of Dane. Her fingers were now on a pilgrimage, traveling to the center of all that was Danny. Affectionate digits curiously explored the blazing hot, moist altar that they planned to adore for all time. Dane pushed herself into Nicole's hand, pleading for more with her body while her brain tried to remember words to really implore her lover.

"Nick...now..." Danny begged in a low breath. She was tempted to grab Nicole's wrist and force her hand where she wanted it, but she managed to resist that impulse. In the past, she had done such things to plenty of girls, but right now, she instinctively knew it would be inappropriate and spoil the mood. So, she laid there, eyes pleading, body begging, but waiting for Nicole to do whatever she wanted.

"Patience, big dog," Nicole whispered, smiling a bit. She wanted to keep going until Dane could not speak real words at all, so her fingers lightly traced the molten area that they were traversing.

"Gonna...die..." Dane was sure that she was going to die if Nicole kept teasing her. Her body wanted this, wanted Nicole in ways that she had never wanted anyone ever before. It was an intense throbbing that could only be relieved by the wonderful being on top of her. No one else would do and she imagined that no one else would ever do.

"Then I'll take you to heaven, like you did for me," the lawyer vowed before placing a sizzling, adoring kiss to the side of Danny's breast.

Dane cried out as she thought Nicole finally put her out of her misery, two long fingers found their way into her center, but she soon found out that she was so wrong. Nicole began a deliberate, unhurried pace with her fingers, caressing Dane in a manner that was maddening for the musician. Nicole's mouth, which was still attached to Dane's breast, moved much like her fingers, painfully slow and amazingly hot. The musician began to swear in ways that would have made Nicole blush if only she was not focused solely on keeping Danny so passionately wound up. It would seem that Dane went from nonsense words to total profanity with some begging sprinkled in for good measure.

"Please, Nick. Please, Nick. Please, Nick..." Danny chanted like a prayer, going in time with each slow movement of Nicole's hand. Despite the pace, Dane could feel pleasure all the way up to the roof of her mouth and she wanted so much more. Tears fell from the corners of her eyes, a mix of bliss and frustration.

Nicole said nothing, intent on bringing paradise to her lover, intent on worshipping Danny with all of her soul and letting Danny feel that through her touch. She wanted the musician to know that she was giving their relationship everything in her. She desired nothing more than for Dane to know that Danny owned everything that was in her. She belonged to Danny.

The redhead knew that she would not be able to ignore those pleas for long, but she tried her best. The delight surrounding her fingers was too much, the taste of the skin in her mouth was

too great, everything was going to have to end soon for the simple fact that she wanted more. She wanted everything that was Danny and her hands and mouth gathered all she could before Dane's body went into wild convulsions, letting her know that she had driven the younger woman to the point of no return. Danny had reached the nirvana that Nicole desperately wished to give her.

"Wow..." Dane muttered as she finally gained some control of herself after almost a minute. "That felt...different..." she muttered. Nicole certainly touched more inside of her than what was physical. She was glad that Nicole had stilled her fingers because she doubted that she would be able to survive that feeling a second time so close to the first.

"A good different?" Nicole asked, head resting against her new favorite place in the world, Dane's breast.

"Great different. Thanks to you, I'm damn near certain I have a soul because I think you touched it. It might take a few more times like to confirm that, though," the musician remarked with a tired smile. She could not believe that she just said that, but she wanted more. Apparently, making love had fried her brain, or at least her good senses because she was not sure if she would be able to live through that again...not until the euphoric feeling settled and her body came back down to Earth anyway.

Nicole smirked, looking sexy and confident. "I think I can oblige."

Before Nicole could make good on her word, the doorbell rang, alerting them that their meals had arrived. Dane was about to move, but as she shifted, she moaned, reminding them of their positions. Nicole grinned at Dane before leisurely, teasingly sliding her fingers from their warm cocoon. The musician squirmed and whimpered, missing Nicole's presence already.

"I'll get the door," Nicole stated while placing a gentle kiss to Dane's cheek.

Danny only nodded; it was about all she could muster. She did manage a groan as Nicole took a moment to put her fingers in her mouth and lick them clean. Nicole then had the nerve to smile impishly at Dane, who was ready to leap out of the bed and take her girlfriend on the floor. Nicole seemed to know what Danny was thinking, so she quickly wrapped herself in her robe and then disappeared downstairs. By the time she returned, Dane's mind had fully recovered and she had gotten enough of a second wind to sit up. The couple enjoyed a hot lunch in bed before cuddling together to watch some television.

Eventually, they did get out of bed to take showers. They were surprised that they were able to manage separate showers, knowing that they would never make it out of the shower if they took one together. Dane started on dinner while Nicole went to get the mail. The attorney smiled as she noticed one large envelope in the pile of mail and opened it first. She grinned wider and decided to share the news with Danny over dinner.

"I hope spaghetti is good for you," Dane said as she brought two plates to the kitchen table.

"Spaghetti is fine, you know that," Nicole replied, lightly slapping at Dane, who sat across from her. She then made a show of the mail in her possession.

An ebony eyebrow arched at the show. "What's all that you got here?"

A monster grin spread onto Nicole face. "This, Miss Danny, is the mail."

"I can see that. You don't usually play around with it while we're eating dinner. So, what's the deal?"

"This..." Nicole held up the manila envelope. "...Is my first acceptance letter into a chemistry program at a grad school."

"No way!" Danny's mouth hit the floor. She did not think that Nick paid those applications any mind after she had to fill them out for the lawyer! She was quite happy to find out that she had been very wrong.

"Yes way. I'm not planning to go here, but I wanted you to see that I did send out the applications and hopefully the school I really want to go to will accept me for spring term. I'm going to be chemist one day, Danny," Nicole promised with a smile that made her eyes shine.

The musician's response to that was to rush to Nicole's side of the table, gently cup her face, and proceed to kiss her senseless. While Nicole was left in a short daze from the long and deep show of affection, Dane planted several small pecks all over Nicole's face. She did that until she was sure that she covered all of Nicole's face with kisses and she then went back to her side of the table.

"Whoa...will I get that sort of treatment for all acceptance letters that come in?" Nicole asked. She could only hope that was the case.

"You'll get all of that and more, just for existing."

The smile that overtook the attorney's face could not be helped and it lit up the entire room. "You are just too sweet."

The fact was not disputed and dinner was eaten as usual. They retreated to the living room afterwards, as always. As the night drew on and bedtime came closer, Nicole was plagued by a thought.

"Danny?" Nicole turned to face the musician, who she was leaning against.

"Yes?" Danny replied, turning to lock eyes with her girlfriend.

"Um...will you sleep upstairs...tonight?" Nicole requested. She added the "tonight" at the last moment, hoping to remove any pressure that she might have placed on her girlfriend.

"Tonight and any other night you'll have me," Danny answered with a happy smile. Internally, she was playing the air-guitar from her joy.

They retired to Nicole's bedroom a little after that. Dane stared at the bed as if she expected it to get up and run away. Nicole noticed and wondered if Danny was having second thoughts.

"You know...you could still go back to the den, if that's what you want," Nicole pointed out, hoping that her anxiety was not in her voice. It did not matter anyway since Danny could see her nervousness in her green eyes.

"It's not that. I mean, I just know some people have a side of the bed they prefer and everything. Is there a side you want? I mean, it doesn't matter to me and it's your bed and everything," Dane explained with a shrug. She could sleep anywhere...and had, so it really did not matter to her.

"It actually doesn't matter to me either. I never really developed a favorite side of the bed..." Nicole replied with a shrug of her own. She thought that she might have at one point in time, but some partner probably took it and she learned to live with whatever side she got.

The two were quiet for a moment and then they both slid into the middle of the queen-sized bed. Dane settled on her back while pushing the pillows back; she was not used to sleeping with such headrests anymore. Nicole curled into Danny's side, putting her head the copper shoulder and draping one arm across Dane's torso. Dane put her arm around Nicole's shoulders.

"Is this okay?" Dane asked.

"It's perfect," Nicole answered with a small yawn. "I'm glad you made me take the day off."

"I'm glad too," Dane admitted. They both needed it. They shared a deep goodnight kiss before drifting off into a peaceful sleep.

Nicole walked into the office with a pep in her step and a smile on her face that people had not seen for over a month. Her coworkers watched her walk toward her office and they not sure what to make of her. They did have a few guesses, though, and they were not ashamed to talk about them...at least when Nicole was not in the room anyway.

"Good morning," Nicole practically sang as she went by her assistant, who eyed her as if she had sprouted two heads.

The looked went totally by the attorney, who hummed as she went into her office. She set herself up to get to work, but as usual, before that could happen, someone came in begging for help. Nicole then did something shocking, she turned the person away-with a bright smile on her face while doing it!

"Wait...what?" her coworker asked as the words reached his brain. Nicole never said no to someone that needed her help!

"I don't have time for that. I've got my own work to catch up on," she pointed out; her voice still sounded like she was humming. She had lost a day of work after all...and what a day it was.

"But-" She shut that down before he even got passed that one word.

"Yes, I know it'll only take a moment or something along those lines." She waved him off. "You'll have to solve the problem yourself, Ted. You can read as well as I can and you went to law school just like I did. In fact, you went to a better law school than I did, so you should be able to figure things out on your own. I have my own work to get to," she stated soundly.

Her tone made her colleague, Ted, blink hard. Her voice left no room to argue and he was not sure if he had ever heard the tone before-not from her anyway. He backed out of the room, almost running into the next person that was about to come beg Nicole for help. Nicole turned that person away faster than anyone would have thought possible.

The auburn-haired woman was not going to be distracted. She was going to do her work and make sure she got home at a decent hour. She owed it to Danny. She was going to make sure to take care of Danny as best she could, just like Danny did with her.

She made good on her silent vow, leaving her office a little after five. She was able to make it home before six. She was smiling proudly and then she checked the mail, which only made her smile grow. She practically floated into the house.

"Danny, I'm home!" Nicole announced.

There was no response. The lawyer wondered if Danny was not even home yet. She was not too sure how the musician's schedule worked...or if she had a real schedule at all. Whenever Dane talked about her day, everything seemed pretty random. She never did things at the same time consistently.

Nicole was not surprised to find Danny sleeping on the sofa. She decided to leave the musician there. She went to take her shower and get comfortable before she let Dane know that she was home early, and that she got another acceptance letter.

Dane shifted on the couch and her brain told her that she might want to wake up. Her eyes fluttered open, not panicking because her body was just too relaxed. She felt too safe to panic. Besides, after months, she knew where she was sleeping now.

"Hey, chem," Dane yawned and smiled. Her head was in Nicole's lap and her head was being caressed by very loving fingers.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, big dog," Nicole teased before leaning down to plant a kiss on very willing lips.

"It is a pleasure to be here. I think I'm going to stay here too," Dane commented while turning and burying her face in Nicole's warm stomach.

Dane nuzzled Nicole's belly until she forced the tank-top up just a little over Nicole's navel. Giggles escaped the lawyer as Dane's breath tickled her exposed flesh. She wrapped her arms around Dane's shoulders and kept her in place, despite the tickling. Dane sighed while fond hands rubbed her shoulders.

"So, how was your day? Did the firm get shot up? How'd you get away so early?" the musician teased.

"Easy, I did my work and no one else's. I turned away wave after wave of people as they came to beg my help. I just wanted to get home to you. You gave me strength," Nicole whispered with a smile. She then leaned down and planted a kiss onto Dane's lips.

"You're giving me too much credit, chem. The Great Dane didn't have anything to do with that. I am happy that you did all of that to get home to me," Dane replied, smiling quite brightly. She felt beyond special at that moment and realized that she never felt this way before, not even when she was on stage in front of adoring fans.

"I've got something else for you." Nicole held up the large piece of mail that she received.

Dane craned an eyebrow before reading the name on the letter. "Is that...?"

"I haven't opened it to see if I got accepted, but generally when they're this big, it means I'm in. I like this program and the school is respectable. It's not too far from the firm either. Danny, you do realize that if I go back to school...we'll end up spending less time together," Nicole pointed out, speaking low and regretfully.

Dane smiled in a way that made her eyes sparkle and set her lover's heart fluttering. The younger woman sat up to look Nicole directly in the face. She locked eyes with her lover and refused to let go.

"Nick, I want you to do this. I'm not going to resent you doing something that I kept bugging you about. This whole thing works if you like it or not. I don't want you to do this for me and I don't want you to use me as an excuse to hold you back. You like chemistry, right?" the musician inquired.

"Love it..." Nicole admitted in a quiet tone.

"That's why you should go. You want to be a chemist, right?"

"More than anything else in the world."

"Then go back to school and make it happen! I'm going to be here, Nick. I promise I'll be here for you, angel," Dane vowed.

Nicole practically tackled Dane, knocking the musician back down onto the sofa cushions and attacking her unsuspecting victim with demanding lips. A guttural moan bounced off of the walls, but neither woman was sure who made the sound. Dane wrapped her arms around Nicole to press her closer while Nicole hands were working their way into the ratty white tee-shirt that Dane was wearing.

"Why, counselor, are you trying to take advantage of me?" Dane remarked with a laugh. Not that she planned to put up a fight of any kind, especially not with the way questing fingers were kneading her wanting flesh.

"Yes, so why don't you make it easy for both of us?" Nicole replied with a grin.

"I throw myself upon the mercy of the court."

"Wise decision. We'll make your end swift and painless."

Dane laughed, but she was not laughing long. She was quickly a quivering mass of flesh at the whim of her feisty girlfriend. She was glad to be at Nicole's mercy, though, which might have explained why the silly grin never left her face. Until it was her turn away.

"It's your time to meet a sweet demise, my dear," Dane quipped with a rather good German accent.

Nicole giggled and shook her head, disagreeing. She put up a pretend-struggle, wiggling out of Danny's grip once only to slide to the floor. She was pinned to the carpet by a hot mouth and a burning body. Her arms wrapped themselves around nude shoulders and pressed Dane as close to her as possible.

"Yesssss..." Nicole hissed like a snake as Dane peeled her out of her clothes.

Dane's assault was heavy and hard; Nicole did not stand a chance. Minutes after Danny started, Nicole was screaming profanities at the ceiling while tears poured out of her eyes. Dane kissed the tear streaks while Nicole's body calmed down after nearly passing out from Danny's sweet touch.

"I get the feeling we got sidetracked," Nicole remarked once she could think again.

"If this is going to be our usual tangents, I will follow you anywhere," Dane quipped with a wolfish grin.

A taunting smile spread across an exhausted face. "Oh, so I get to hold the leash of the big dog?"

"Big, bad wolf," Dane corrected her with a playful howl at the end before leaning down for a long kiss.

"So, I guess I'm Red?"

Dane grinned brightly. "Oh, do I get to eat you again then?"

Nicole laughed. "I should stop encouraging you. You just tainted one of my favorite childhood stories." She then stuck her tongue out at Dane.

"Don't you point that thing at me, Red. I know where it's been after all."

"I'm hoping it'll be there more often now that I should be getting in earlier. Maybe I'll even take another day off."

Dane grinned and gently stroked Nicole's bare sides. "I like the sound of that."

"Down, girl. I can't do it so soon after taking the day off before. Although, with the way that you keep making love to me, I might actually need a day to really rest. I will be getting in this time more often, I promise you that." Nicole smiled as she spoke those words, thinking about how much they would both love to spend the time together.

"I'll take that for now," Dane stated while pressing Nicole closer to her. The redhead purred as she snuggled into her girlfriend's warm body.

The couple eventually picked themselves up off of the floor and took a shower together. It was there that Nicole noticed that Dane did indeed have other tattoos. She had a howling wolf's head on her shoulder. Running down the length of her spine was the word "demon," printed as if it was something out of a medieval manuscript. She lightly traced each letter with two fingers while she was supposed to be washing Danny's back.

"Danny, I hope you don't think that's true," Nicole whispered, speaking into her lover's shoulder blade.

"I did see myself as a demon for a while. That's what I was led to believe and after a while I accepted it. I got it put on my back as a badge of honor, to show that they couldn't hurt me anymore," Dane explained before turning around and embracing Nicole. She leaned down to kiss the lawyer to let her know that everything was all right.

Nicole accepted the hug and the kiss, as well as the message behind them. They finished up in the shower after that and then they settled in for their usual routine. Dane was surprised by how much she cherished their routine. It was really the first bit of normalcy that she ever had in her life and it touched her to know that Nicole was making an effort to keep up their routine just because she requested it.

Nicole was sitting at her desk, getting her work done in silence with dreams of Danny dancing through her mind. A small smile that never seemed to leave her face nowadays remained steady when the door opened without a knock. Only a few people would barge into her office and she would prefer not to see any of them, even though two of them were good friends of hers.

"Nicole, I need you to look at something for me," Mina requested.

"Sorry, can't do it," Nicole answered, eyes not leaving her computer. Her fingers moved swiftly over the keys of the keyboard.

Mina blinked hard from confusion and stopped dead in her tracks. "Excuse me?"

"The Nicole help desk has been closed forever due to Nicole having her own work to do," the auburn-haired woman replied.

"I heard you stopped helping everybody, but what about *me*?" Mina put on an exaggerated pout, which included poking out her bottom lip.

"I can't help you either, Mina. I have to focus on my own work because I don't want to be here when they close the building down like I used to," Nicole replied.

An elegant, thin ebony eyebrow arched. "And why is that? You never seemed to mind closing the place down, unless you needed to get home to cook dinner or something like that. Who are you cooking for, girl?" A knowing smirk and a troublemaking glint appeared on her mocha face.

"I'm not cooking for anybody."

"Well, what the hell? You need to get home early to let Danny out or something?" Mina joked, having heard Nicole call Danny "big dog" a couple of times on the phone.

"What I need to do isn't much of your business, Mina," Nicole hummed. Her voice might have sounded playful, but it was very clear that she was being serious.

Chocolate eyes narrowed. "You're hiding something."

"I'm not hiding anything at all. I just want to go home with everyone else. Why is it I should be stuck here every night because everyone keeps asking me for help? Where's my help?" Nicole mildly snapped. Who the hell ever bothered to lend her a helping hand aside for her parents and Danny?

"Easy there, cowboy. We ask for your help because you know damn near everything," Mina pointed out, thinking that she was giving her friend a compliment. For as long as she had known Nicole, which was almost half of their lives, everyone always asked Nicole for help and Nicole always gave it...even when she had things to do. "Damn..." she muttered to herself as realization struck her like a bullet right between the eyes.

"What?" Nicole asked curiously because of the scrunched up look on her friend's face.

"It just hit me, we do ask you for everything. Hell, I've been doing it college, asking you for help and expecting it right then and there because you were always on point like that. I never thought

about it because you never said anything about it. Sorry," Mina apologized, looking at the floor and feeling like a horse's ass.

Nicole waved her off. "It's okay. I let you guys do it, after all."

"This is true. If I ever noticed, I probably would've barked at you about it. Well, you know, if I wasn't taking advantage of you myself at the time. Damn, I can't believe I missed that." Mina scratched her head a little. "Who made you stand up for yourself?" She could take a good guess.

"Why can't I just take a stand?" Nicole countered.

"Because you don't take a stand until someone's pissed in your cornflakes right in front of you. This is way too early for you to be taking a stand, especially when no one's pushed your buttons. This is Danny's doing, isn't it?" A pleased smile graced Mina's face.

Nicole's grin grew at the mention of her lover's name. "Maybe."

"Is that smile her doing too?" Mina asked curiously. She doubted that she had ever seen her friend smile so big and so often.

The grin now threatened to split Nicole's face open. "Maybe."

"Do I need to call a lunch session?" Mina inquired, smiling herself now. *Happiness must be contagious.*

"I've got lunch."

"As always. Well, I'll leave you to your work and your lunch, so you can get out of here at a decent hour."

Nicole nodded. "Mina, if you really need my help, I have no problem giving it, but I doubt you *really* need my help."

Mina's face was conquered by a soft smile. "It just feels really good to get your okay on things. I don't think you know how much people around here respect your mind, Nicole. You're brilliant and it just makes us more secure when you stamp your approval on something. Well, some of us anyway. Others do come in here to take advantage of you. I'm happy that Danny made you stand up for yourself. Maybe one day I can meet your wonderful Danny."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mina. Right now, I just want to finish this."

Mina nodded and eased out of the office, more pleased with things than she would have been if Nicole did help her out. Nicole kept her eyes on her computer, making sure to make it out of the office at the right time. She could not wait to get back home, back to her love.

Nicole typed away merrily at her desk, feeling pretty good about herself. She had been leaving the office at a decent hour every night, making it home to Danny at a decent hour. Hell, sometimes, she came in before Danny did since the musician's client list was steadily growing. Having more work seemed to make Danny happy, which made Nicole happy. It did cause a few arguments between them.

They had recently had a little spat over the fact that Nicole made dinner one day when she came in first. Danny made it seem like her domain had been invaded and started a big thing about something that Nicole viewed as very minor. It did not take long for Nicole to realize the reason that Dane was angry was because the younger woman felt like she was not contributing to the household if she did not do the everyday chores. Nicole was able to polish things over by apologizing and pointing out that Danny did a lot of things that contributed to the household.

Another small argument that they had was over the weekend when Nicole wanted to go out, but Dane-as always-wanted to stay in. Nicole was able to defuse that situation by promising nothing crazy, as she knew that was what Danny was always worried about. She also made sure the outing included some music, which instantly soothed away any left over sourness in Dane.

So, so far, their young relationship was going well. They had even celebrated a month anniversary not too long ago. It was the one night that Nicole was able to get Dane to go out without a struggle, mostly because Dane would follow her to the Gates of Hell if she was wearing a skirt and simple three inch heels.

"*So far, so good,*" Nicole thought with a bright smile while continuing on with her work.

Her mental celebration was cut short as her door flew open. She hoped that Mina was coming in, but that hope was short lived. She knew her father had entered her office, even without looking up from her computer screen. She silently prayed that he was not about to hand her more work.

"Nikki, what's this I hear about you shutting you door to any and everyone that comes in here and asks you for help?" Raymond demanded to know.

Nicole blinked as she realized that she was about to be scolded; one of the drawbacks of working with her parents. Not only was she about to be scolded, but she was going to be reprimanded because one of her colleagues that the nerve to tell on her. Someone went and told her father that she was not helping people. *What the hell?*

"I work with kindergartners," Nicole muttered with gritted teeth. She was not really surprised, considering the fact that many of her coworkers were just assholes that seemed to think she was their personal assistant.

"What was that?" Raymond demanded to know, not quite hearing her.

"Nothing, sir."

"So, what's this I hear about you being selfish? You used to be such a team player and now you're telling people to go away because you don't have time for them?" he inquired incredulously. His voice, though a decent volume, seemed booming to her.

"That's not it, Daddy. Everybody comes in here everyday needing something from me that any four-year-old would be able to do. They act like they can't do anything and it keeps me from doing my own work. You can't possibly expect me to do my work and everyone else's," Nicole countered.

"I expect you to help this firm and they are members of this firm. If they come to you for help, I expect you to give it to them."

"Even if I have to forsake my own work? Why? I don't work with babies," Nicole stated venomously. She could not believe what she was being reprimanded for and it was grating on her nerves in a way that she never felt before.

"No, but you work with people that respect you enough that they come to you when they need assistance. You are to give it to them because they are members of this firm and you want what is best for this firm," Raymond countered soundly while trying to keep down the tension in his body because he was not used to arguing with his daughter.

"And what about me? Do you think any of these bastards ever offer me a bit of help when I need it?" Nicole demanded, eyes ablaze from her fury.

"You never need it. You know you were raised to give help when it is needed and you will do that. It'll help you go far in this firm and that's that. Now, I don't want to hear anymore of this nonsense about you not helping your coworkers," the father said in only a way that a father could. His voice held no room for argument and a hard finality that made Nicole just want to throw something at him.

Nicole was left seething as her father exited the room as soon as he was done speaking. Not even ten minutes later, there were people in her office, begging for her help. Slowly, but surely, time went away from her work to theirs. Only when the trickle of people stopped did she see what time it was. It took every ounce of self-control in her system to not break down and cry.

"I hate this place so goddamn much! I hate this job! I hate these people!" Nicole fumed while fighting back tears.

She packed up her things as quickly as she could and exited the office, slamming her door hard on the way out. She ended up crying in the car, unable to hold her frustration back anymore, and the only thing that stopped her was that her cell phone rang. Danny was calling.

"Hey, Nick. I was worried, even though I figured you had to work late," Dane explained.

Nicole sniffled. "I did, but it's so good to hear your voice."

"Yeah? You just heard it...whoa, seven hours ago. I guess it's later than I thought. What happened? Big new case or something? Top secret contract you're drafting?" Dane joked a bit, hoping to lighten the mood.

"No, nothing like that. Really, it's the same old garbage. I'll tell you about it when I get in."

"Okay. When are you going to be here?"

"I guess in like a half-hour. Is that good?"

"That is just enough time for me to light some scented candles, run a hot bath, make some hot chocolate-" Dane's plan was cut off.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," Nicole corrected herself.

"Baby, don't kill yourself trying to get here. Everything will be there when you get here."

"Including you naked in the tub?"

"I dunno. If I agree is it going to miraculously take you fifteen minutes to get here?"

"Ten."

"Then, no, I'll be sleeping on the couch."

Nicole pouted. "Spoilsport."

Dane laughed. "I'm just trying to do what's best for you, baby. Do you want me to stay on the line while you're driving?"

Nicole did not even have to think of that one. "Yes, please."

"Can I talk dirty to you?" Dane teased.

"Not if you want me to make it home alive!"

The taller woman laughed and remained on the phone, without the dirty talk. Nicole made it home in one piece and collapsed into Danny's waiting arms when she came in through the door. Dane pressed Nicole into her, making sure to hold the exhausted lawyer up.

"I'm so happy to be home! I hate my job so much!" Nicole hollered into the warmth of Dane's neck.

"Rough day." It was easily a statement, but then again, almost everyday was a rough day for Nick.

"I'm so sick of everybody! Can I tell you about it in a hot bath with bubbles?" Nicole's voice was hopeful and quiet.

"Your wish is my command." It was times like there where Dane really wished that her leg was strong because she wanted to pick Nicole up and carry her up to the bathroom. She had to settle for walking with Nicole up there while keeping the lawyer pressed against her.

The couple disappeared upstairs. Nicole took a quick shower while Dane lit candles and prepared the bath. The taller woman also rushed out to get Nicole's MP3 player to play music while they bathed; it had a stand and speakers. Dane set the player up on the sink and pressed play as soon as it was right. Nicole exited the shower as soon as she heard the soft, classical music playing. She moved to the large tub while Dane stripped off her clothing.

The musician settled into the tub, wrapping her arms around Nicole and pulling the lawyer to rest against her. Nicole did not offer up any resistance and breathed a sigh of relief as she rested her head against Dane's chest. She closed her eyes as she listened to Danny's heart beating.

"You feel better?" Dane asked while rubbing Nicole's shoulder with one hand and caressing the redhead's thigh with her other.

"I always do when I'm in your arms. I love you so much, Danny," the attorney replied.

"I feel the same." There was a pause. "I love me too."

"Oh, you!" Nicole playfully swatted at the darker female. The hit ended up being a caress when it finally landed.

"So, what kept you so long? I missed watching a cheesy movie with you. I tried watching this horror movie, but I couldn't do it without you! Making fun of a movie by myself just seems like I'm crazy," Dane remarked with a laugh.

Nicole chuckled. "You are crazy."

"You make me that way. Now, tell me about your day. What kept you until crazy o'clock at night?"

"My dad. Some of my coworkers complained to my dad that I wasn't doing their work for them anymore and he came into my office and tore into my ass."

Dane's face twisted and scrunched up as she tried to understand what she was hearing. "Wait, your dad got on your case for not doing their work?"

Nicole nodded. "He told me that I should help my colleagues if they need it because it was good for the firm. I was..." Tears started building in her eyes again. "He just made it seem like I was the bad person for standing up for myself..."

"Aw, chem. You know you're the sweetest person to ever walk to the face of the Earth," Dane declared before kissing the auburn mane close to her head.

"Well, he made me feel so bad, like I did the worst possible thing by not doing their work for them. It's like he doesn't even care that I'm at the firm all hours of the night because they're too stupid to do their own damn work!"

Strong arms pressed Nicole tighter to a warm form. "It's okay, Nick. I'm sure he does care, but he probably thinks you can handle it since you've done it before."

"I don't want to 'handle it' anymore. I want to leave with everyone else. I want to get home to my girlfriend like everyone else."

"Did you tell him that?" Dane asked curiously.

"He didn't give me a chance. He never gives me a chance. It's just 'do this, this, and that, and you damn well better do it my way.' You should've seen the look he gave me today just for trying to argue. It's not fair."

"It's okay. It'll be okay."

Nicole sighed and decided to just believe Danny. They stayed in the bath for a few more minutes until the water began to cool down. They ate dinner and then retired to bed. As Nicole settled against Dane's side, she realized just how much better she felt, but there was still some underlying frustration with what happened.

"Danny," Nicole said.

"Hmm?"

"I want to stay in bed tomorrow. How about you?"

Dane looked down at the head resting on her shoulder. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I'm going to call in tomorrow. I just want to be with you for a while."

"I like that idea!" The grin that the younger woman was sporting confirmed that was true. Nicole smiled and pushed herself up to press a deep kiss to her lover's lips. Dane moaned and pulled Nicole on top of her. Yes, she was very much in favor of the idea of Nicole calling in and them staying in bed all day. It sounded like the perfect day.

A/N: the poem that Dane quotes is a poem by Langston Hughes called "Mother to Son."

Next time: the world comes crashing down on the two lovebirds when Tyler shows up at the door and finds out about the relationship.

**Shea K's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ Scarred for Life ~
by Shea K

Disclaimer: See Part 1
13: All fall down

The sound of the doorbell-a normal bell still-echoed through the mostly quiet house. The bell cut through light snores that were bouncing off of the bedroom walls. After the third ring, bothered moans now replaced the snoring. Grey eyes fluttered open while a copper face tensed because the noise was not going away.

"Damn it," Dane muttered with a growl, now fully awake thanks to the doorbell.

"Leave it. They might go away," Nicole suggested, staying cuddled close to her lover. She caressed Danny's stomach, figuring it would be able to help keep the musician lying right where she was.

"Okay."

The couple tried to settle back down to return to dreamland, but whoever was at the door seemed to be totally against that. Their visitor might possibly be leaning on the doorbell, they considered from the continuity of the noise. Eventually, it got on Danny's nerves to the point that she sat up. Nicole let out a long whimper, missing the warm body of her love already.

"I've got to get this damned clown off of the bell," Dane declared with a frown.

"My hero," Nicole remarked as the sound persisted. She resisted the urge to stick her fingers in her ears, knowing that would not help much.

Dane hopped out the bed, as naked as the day she was born. She was about to charge out of the room like that, forgetting her state of undress, until Nicole stopped her by clearing her throat. Dane turned around and saw Nicole holding a very familiar pair of basketball shorts.

"Going somewhere without these, stud?" Nicole teased, smiling in that way that made her eyes sparkle and Dane's heart flutter.

The younger woman glanced down at herself and yelped, realizing that she was about to give whoever was the door quite the show. She charged over for her clothing, the shorts and a tee-shirt that was nearby. Nicole handed over the shorts without a fuss, but she did go in for a brief kiss, which she got. While Dane put on her clothes, Nicole decided to see what time it was. She was shocked to find that it was almost eleven in the morning. She chuckled a bit.

"We're sleeping in really late this morning, Danny," Nicole commented.

"Well, since we're up now, I'll get started on breakfast," Dane replied before being interrupted by the bell again. "After I beat the shit out of a very persistent deliveryman," she added with determination in her voice.

Nicole laughed and scanned the room for her robe while Dane disappeared out of the door. The musician marched downstairs, barking that she was coming to whoever it was that did not want to believe no one was home. When she got to the door, she was so annoyed that she did not bother to ask who it was. She just yanked the door open and wished to that she not done something so foolish as soon as she saw who was standing in front of her.

"Tyler," Dane frowned so deeply it covered her whole face.

"Dane? What the hell are you still doing here?" Tyler demanded to know, a scowl immediately conquering his face.

"Minding my goddamn business, as you should be doing. What the hell are you doing here?" she countered. She had much more of a right to be there than he did, after all.

"Where's Nikki? What did you do to her?" Tyler snarled and reached out to grab his cousin by the collar.

Dane was unimpressed, even with his pale hand so close to her neck. "I didn't do anything to her, you fucking idiot. Now, what do you want with her?" she inquired in a hard tone.

"I have some things for her from work. Now, where the hell is she?" Tyler started shaking the ebony-haired musician, who looked bored by the whole process. Her expression earned a growl from him and he tightened his grip.

Dane was tempted to tell her cousin to "fuck off" in no uncertain terms, but she considered his words. If he did have things of Nicole's from work, then she knew that Nicole would want those out of his hands as soon as possible. He was a slimy bastard and never to be trusted, after all.

"Chem!" Dane called into the house.

"Who the hell is Kim? Did you bring one of your filthy, fucking whores in here? How dare you disrespect Nicole like that, you disgusting bitch!" Tyler snarled while shaking Dane some more. He was ready to ball his other hand into a fist, but he was holding his briefcase. He did figure

that if his cousin ticked him off a little more, he would just beat her with the case; it did not occur to him to just put it down.

"Chem!" Dane repeated, still looking rather detached from Tyler's abusive actions.

"What, honey? I'm trying to finish getting dressed!" Nicole replied from upstairs.

Tyler balked when he heard the voice and then he shook it off. *It can't be*, he thought. It was impossible.

"Chem, come on! I don't know how much longer I can stand here and not hurt this dumb motherfucker," Dane informed her lover.

"Baby, who the hell are..." Nicole trailed off as she rushed down the stairs and saw just who was at the door, manhandling her girlfriend.

"Baby?" Tyler echoed as his face twisted from confusion and his eyes went wide, making it clear that his brain was already coming up with a million and one excuses for why Nicole had called Dane by such a term of endearment.

"Tyler, what the hell are you doing here?" Nicole demanded to know, going to stand next to Danny. "And get your fucking hands off of her." Nicole proceeded to yank Tyler's pale hand away from Dane's person.

"What the fuck are you doing dressed like that and calling this disgusting bull-dyke 'baby'?" Tyler countered, motioning to both women as he mentioned them. Nicole was wearing her short robe and he was taking a good guess that there was nothing on underneath it. Dane was clearly in her pajamas also. He knew that something was up, but he did not want to believe that it was what it looked like.

"That's none of your business. What the hell are you doing here?" Nicole glared, a fiery look in her eyes that would have set Tyler ablaze if she only could.

"Saving you from Dane apparently! Did she touch you? Did she do anything to you? Anything at all? I'll call the cops right now!" Tyler started reaching into his pants pocket, going for his cell phone. He had every intention of calling the police.

"Don't you dare! She didn't do anything wrong," Nicole stated while pushing his hand down to keep him from dialing the police. She was not interested in making more of a scene than they already were; besides, if the police showed up, she would be tempted to have them arrest Tyler for harassment.

"I'm going to go start on some breakfast," Dane volunteered. She really did not want to leave Nicole alone with her overly excited cousin, but she doubt that her continued presence would help him calm down.

"Good idea," Nicole agreed for the same reasons. Dane was gone before another word could be uttered and Nicole focused her attention on Tyler, making sure he did not get into the house.

"What the fuck has she been doing?!" Tyler demanded, pointing inside of the house, almost hitting Nicole in the side of the head with his arm.

"That's none of your business, Tyler. What the hell are you doing here?" Nicole countered once again. She continued to glare at him, silently informing him that his presence was not welcomed.

"Why did you call her 'baby'? She seduced you, didn't she? She's nothing but trouble, Nikki! Her own family doesn't trust her! Her fucking parents don't even trust her! You don't know the real her and how fucking evil she is! She's probably planning to rob you blind when you least suspect it, so she can blow the money on dope! Who knows what kind of whores she brings in here while you're at work!"

"Now, you listen here," Nicole paused to snarl and poke him hard in the chest with her index finger. "Danny has been nothing but good to me in the months that she's lived here! She's sweet, generous, and takes better care of me any other person on the planet, so I won't have you standing her badmouthing her with all of your bullshit. So, just tell me what the hell you're doing here and then don't let me see you on my street again!" she commanded.

Tyler flinched, stepping back as if she struck him. "You're going to stick up for that bitch Dane instead of fighting for us?"

"There is no 'us'! I went over this the last time we spoke! There is no us! Now tell me why you're here or I'm just going to slam the door in your face!"

Tyler snarled from his fury and he was tempted to walk away from her doorstep without giving her the documents that he personally volunteered to deliver. The only problem was that he knew if she did not get the documents, it would be his fault and it could mean his job. So, he went into his briefcase and shoved the folders into her chest.

"Your father sent me to give those to you," he stated as if those words were an insult of some kind.

"Thank you," she shot back, like that was an insult.

"You need to watch out for Dane. The bitch is nothing but trouble. I don't give a shit how good she might eat you, you need to remember she's-" He was cut off at the knees for such vulgar words. Well, actually, he was slapped in the face for his words. The noise seemed to echo through out the neighborhood and ring in his ears. The sting to his ego was instantly a hundred times worse than the sting on his cheek.

"I didn't ask for your opinion! Danny is a hundred times the partner you ever were. Now, get the fuck off of my porch," Nicole ordered before shutting the door right in his face.

The auburn-haired attorney snorted and tucked the folder under her arm. She marched into the kitchen and was met by a cup of tea, which soothed her raw nerves before she even started to drink it. She smiled at Danny and was able to easily forget all of the bad things that Tyler had been spouting seconds ago.

"I hope the neighbors enjoyed the show," Dane remarked with a laugh as she sipped her own drink.

Nicole groaned. "Oh, god, I forgot about them. I'm sure Mister Boyler is telling his wife right now what a bad influence you are on me and screaming out there like that. Not to mention I slapped Tyler."

"Tyler deserves more than that. I was ready to kick him in the ass. Who's Mister Boyler? That's the bastard next door that always glares at me when I'm mowing the lawn?" Dane asked. She had taken to mowing the lawn to save her some stress when she got the "urge to do something" and she already cleaned the house. It saved Nicole some money since she did not pay for landscapers anymore.

"Yes, and I do wish you wouldn't call him that. He's been very kind to me since I moved into this place a couple of years ago. He just thinks that you're a crazy teenager and he wants to keep an eye on you so you don't get me into any trouble," Nicole explained with a teasing smile.

"Everybody's worried that the big bad Wolfe is going to get the precious Nicole in trouble," Dane commented, shaking her head. She stepped over to Nick and wrapped her free hand around her girlfriend's waist.

"What they don't know is that I have the big dog on a very short leash," Nicole quipped while bumping her hip against Danny's thigh.

Grey eyes rolled. "The Great Dane doesn't do leashes."

"Good thing I'm here with Danny then." Nicole put her cup down and hugged her girlfriend, holding her tightly. "I'm glad I'm here with you, Danny," she whispered.

"I'm glad to be here. Is it all right for Tyler to know about us? He'll tell your parents and everyone at your job, right?"

"It should be fine. My parents already know I date women on occasion and who gives a shit what people at work think? I hope this news will keep some of them away from my door!"

Dane laughed a little. "What about your friends? Will they care?"

"No. Hell, Mina knew I had the hots for you before I did, so I know there's no problem there. Clara will just be happy that I'm with someone that treats me well and respects me."

"You have really good friends to a certain degree, even if they do take advantage of you sometimes," the musician commented.

"They are good people. I know they already like you just from all of the stories they've heard and the times they've seen me on the phone with you. I've got nothing to worry about with Tyler. What about you? Can he make any trouble for you?" Nicole asked curiously.

"Hell, no. The only person in the world that gives a damn about me is standing right next to me. She's also the only person whose opinion matters to me."

Nicole blinked. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious. I love you, Nick. I've never felt this deeply for another person and I damn sure know no one has ever felt like this for me. There's nothing that Tyler can do that can keep me from you," Dane vowed.

Nicole smiled and she planted a deep kiss on Danny's mouth. Tyler was a memory after that, but not for long. He rushed back to the forefront of Nicole's mind when she remembered the documents he brought by. She looked down at the paperwork after taking it from its folder.

"These were in my desk. Did he go through my desk for these? Did Daddy go through my desk for these?" Nicole wondered. Both were not good prospects, but she knew that one or the other had taken place. She tried to dismiss it from her mind since it was already done, but she could not stop thinking about one of them rifling through her things and she knew that both of them would do just that if they felt like it.

Tyler drove around the city for several hours, brain trying to process what the hell he had just stepped into when he was at Nicole's house. He seethed and stewed while Nicole's voice echoed in his mind, a voice calling out the nickname "baby" and it was not directed toward him. No, it was directed toward *Dane*. He even said the name with venom in his own mind.

"That twisted fucking bitch Dane seduced my Nikki!" he screamed at the top of his lungs as he came to a red light.

His fist hammered heavy against the steering wheel and with each hit, the frown on his face cut a little deeper into his cheeks and wrinkled his brow just a little more. He could not believe that Nicole allowed Dane to touch her! He had heard tales of Dane's exploits, but he never thought that they were true until now. Dane had something that made women fall into her lap, all women, even sensible women like Nicole.

"Well, she's not getting my damn woman! Who the hell does Dane think she is anyway? She comes to my house out of the blue and then has then nerve to stay after I get kicked out?! What the fuck is wrong with her?! Stupid bitch thinks the world belongs to her when she's nobody! Nobody gives a fuck about her! She should just die!" Tyler hollered quite seriously.

He never liked Dane...but then again, no one in the family liked Dane. He never really had a personal reason to dislike her since they never really interacted much, but now that he did, he felt his hatred amplify over a thousand fold. *How dare that guitar-playing cripple bitch touch Nikki?!*

His head shook; no, he was not going to allow Dane to have what was his. He refused to let her even entertain that such a thing was going to happen. She might think that she had Nicole now, but there was no way in hell that he would allow her to keep such an elegant woman. *His* elegant woman.

His mind started moving, realizing that he had to do two things. He had to get Dane out of the picture and he had to get Nicole back into his arms. He doubted that he would be able to get Nicole to throw Dane out. If she wanted Dane gone, she would have gotten rid of the misfit months ago. So, whatever lies Dane fed her, she obviously believed, which did not surprise him.

"Nikki would believe it was night out even if the sun was staring her right in the face if told that enough times," he muttered while shaking his head.

He was convinced that his evil cousin had manipulated Nicole with some "lesbian mind trick" and whatever that trick was made Nicole think that Dane's word was better than his. Now, he had lied to Nicole many times in the past, but he doubted that anything he ever said was on the level of deceptions that Dane had to throw her way. How in the hell was he supposed to break such a spell?!

And then the solution hit him, like a bullet right between the eyes. He knew exactly how to get to Nicole and put an end to all of the nonsense with Dane. It was all so simple that he could not believe he stressed over the situation for so many hours.

"Don't worry, Nikki, you'll be mine again soon. I'll save you from that bitch," he silently vowed while taking out his cell phone.

Raymond Cardell was sitting in his office, even though it was the weekend. His daughter was not often the only one with piles of work. He knew how to manage it a little better than she did thanks to years of experience. He was willing to bet that she would figure out how to do it sooner or later. It was in her blood; her mother could handle enough work for a team of people and still have free time. His work was interrupted by the sound of his phone ringing.

"Raymond Cardell," he answered the phone.

"Raymond, I need to talk to you."

"Tyler?" Raymond asked. He knew the voice very well, but he always needed verification before continuing any discussion.

"Yes, it's me. I was hoping to talk to you about Nikki," Tyler informed his boss.

"What about her?" Raymond asked curiously. He knew that Nicole had been the one to end the relationship with Tyler, which he had not been too happy about. He kept those thoughts to himself, though. He thought that Nicole might have found something better, but then, such a person never showed up. It was a little disappointing and disheartening since he was hoping that his little girl settled down sometime soon to just have the support that only a spouse could give and to also start a family.

"Has she told you she's dating recently?"

"No, she hasn't mentioned anyone in her life recently. We thought she was taking a breather from the dating scene."

"No, not a breather, sir. Nicole is dating, someone I know very well in fact. She's dating my cousin, Dane," Tyler reported.

"She's dating your cousin? How did she even manage to meet your cousin?" Raymond wondered if Nicole had met more of Tyler's family than she let on, considering the fact that she was dating his cousin Dane and had his cousin Danny as a roommate. That made him wonder how deep her relationship with Tyler ran before she broke things off.

"My cousin stopped by one day a few months ago. I don't know what my cousin did to Nicole, but I know it's bad. My cousin is just bad news. Dane is a woman that can only do wrong."

"Dane's a woman?" Raymond sighed. *Now Nikki's back to women? What the hell is going on with her lately?*

"Not just any woman. She's a drug addict and I mean serious drugs, like cocaine and heroin. I wouldn't be surprised if she tried to get Nikki to start using. It's very likely that she's taking money from Nikki and she might even be doing more than that. She runs with a really horrible crowd, drunks, druggies, pimps, gang members, and hardened criminals. She's basically just like all of them too. She's into some seriously freaky and dangerous shit, not just with drugs, but with prostitution and gang stuff. She's just not a good person and I'm worried about Nicole being with her," Tyler sounded choked up, lost, as if he did not know what to do. He sniffled, like he was near tears.

Raymond was quiet for a few seconds, trying to take everything in. He was trying to make sense of what was being told to him. Nicole had not mentioned any "Dane" recently or seeing Tyler's cousin in a romantic way...or any way at all really. It was not like her to keep something like that a secret, but then again, it was not like her to date such an unsavory sounding character either. He did recall Tyler saying similar things when he talked about his cousin that was living with Nicole, so now he was wondering what type of family Tyler really did come from. *He seems like the best of the bunch.*

"How long has she been seeing your cousin...Dane?" Raymond inquired curiously. He was almost certain that her break up with Tyler now had something to do with this Dane person. Maybe Dane had come between the couple and somehow poisoned Nicole's mind...if she was as horrible as Tyler made her sound.

"I'm not sure. I didn't even know about it until a few hours ago. I can see why she wouldn't want to talk about it. My cousin isn't a good person, sir. She's definitely not right for Nikki. I'm really surprised my cousin's not in jail for some of the stuff she's done. I don't want to see Nikki get into any trouble because of Dane and I know it will happen. Dane's done all sorts of horrible things in her life and I don't want her to hurt Nikki." He sounded so pathetic, like a lost little boy.

"I'm sure you don't, Tyler. I'm glad you called me." *At least somebody's looking out for Nikki!*

"Oh, one more thing, sir."

"Yes?" Raymond doubted that he could take another surprise involving his daughter, but he needed to know everything going on around her with the hopes that he would be able to save her from herself. He supposed that he was starting to understand her recent behavior a little better now that he knew that she had such a bad influence in her life.

"I saw some weird files in Nicole's office when you told me to retrieve the other work that she needed. They looked like applications to college or something. Is Nicole going back to school?" he asked innocently.

"No, of course not."

"Oh, okay. Maybe she was just holding them for someone else. I hope you can talk some sense into Nikki, sir. I really tried, but she refused to listen to me. She believed more in my lying cousin than she did in me and she's known me for so much longer. I don't know what ideas my cousin could be pouring into Nikki's mind, but they're clearly working. I'm so scared for Nikki."

"Don't worry, Tyler. I'll get to the bottom of this immediately," Raymond stated. "I'll talk to you later."

"Goodbye, sir," Tyler said and the call was disconnected.

Raymond frowned deeply as his thick, auburn eyebrows drew together. He leaned back in his leather chair and tried to figure out what was going on. He wondered why Nicole had not said anything about dating a woman, Tyler's cousin, Dane. It just was not like her. She was not one to hide the fact that she was dating anyone, man or woman, but then again if Tyler was telling the truth then Dane was not any regular man or woman, like Nicole usually dated.

He did not see why Tyler would lie either. There was nothing in it for Tyler, as far as he could tell. It was not like Nicole was planning on going back to Tyler, although that was a hope. He thought that Tyler was the one for Nicole since they seemed to be rather close. After all, Tyler was the only person to call Nicole "Nikki" aside for her parents; they did not know she hated it

when he did that. They thought that it showed Nicole had a deep level of trust in Tyler and then she broke up with him out of the blue and then a short while later Tyler's cousin Danny was suddenly living in the house. Maybe Danny was the one that brought this Dane character over, he considered, trying to make sense of all of this.

"This is something that I need to talk to her about face to face. Should I tell her mother? God, Kate is going to flip," Raymond groaned just from the thought of telling his wife about what their daughter was up to.

It would be worse for him if he did not say anything and Kate found out, he knew that. So, that sort of settled things for him about involving Kate. He would tell her first and then they would confront Nicole about things.

"Nikki, what've you gotten yourself into now?" Raymond wondered with a sigh.

Nicole was sitting on the couch pretending to watch a movie, but really concentrating on Danny, whose head was in Nicole's lap and nuzzled into her stomach. Dane was placing light, wet kisses to Nicole's abdomen, which was uncovered thanks to Dane pushing her camisole up slightly. Every now and then, Dane's tongue would sneak out and draw circles around a quivering navel. Nicole's heart rate was pounding and then felt like it would explode when the loud ringing of the telephone interrupted their play.

"Shit!" Nicole hissed while reaching for the damned phone.

"You could just let it ring," Dane suggested while continuing her onslaught after a brief pause.

"It could be important," Nicole replied and then she saw the number. "Baby, I need you to stop. This is one of my parents."

"Really? Then I could get you off the phone faster if I don't stop," Dane reasoned.

"Honey, don't be a brat," Nicole lightly admonished her lover.

Dane pouted and whimpered into warm flesh. She was somewhat ignored. Nicole rubbed Danny's shoulder while answering the phone.

"Hello."

"Nikki, sweetie," it was her father. "We need to talk to you right now."

"Right now? It's can't wait until tomorrow?" She could talk to her parents at work or after work.

"No, it can't!" That was her mother and the snap in her voice told Nicole that she needed to move her ass before her mother moved it for her.

"Okay. I guess I can be by the house in an hour."

"Thirty minutes," her mother said and then she hung up the phone.

Nicole sighed and put the phone down. "So, apparently, I have to go to my parents house and I have to be there in thirty minutes, so that'll put an end to our day," she informed her girlfriend.

"No, it puts our day on pause unless you plan to move back in with your parents tonight," Dane corrected the older woman before sitting up to place a light kiss on willing and wanting lips.

"You're right. Hopefully, this won't take too long. I'll bring dinner back with me, okay?"

Dane smiled and nodded. Nicole ran off to get ready, not really having as much time as she would have liked to do it. She took a quick shower and changed into what amounted to casual clothing for her, a white polo shirt and khaki-colored pants. She then returned to Dane for a goodbye kiss, which left her breathless and weak in the knees.

"You keep kissing me like that and I won't be able to leave, let alone drive," Nicole commented in a low tone.

"Words like that, not gonna stop me," Dane remarked with a smile.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. I hope they don't have a serious emergency or something."

"Well, does this happen a lot?" Dane asked, not bothering to point out that it had not happened since she moved in.

"Sometimes they call because they want us to have lunch together or something. It usually happens when my mother feels like she hasn't seen much of me or my father, which has been the case lately. So, that could be it."

Dane nodded, even though she did not understand such a thing. She did not feel the need to point out that her parents never got the urge to see her. Instead, she kissed her girlfriend again and made sure to pout like a sad puppy as Nicole left the house and drove off.

The musician sighed and picked herself up off of the couch. She was not sure what she was going to do while Nicole was gone. She did not have any lessons lined up and the house was clean. She guessed that she might as well just take a nap. It seemed like a good idea and she wondered what it would be like to nap on the bed upstairs.

Nicole sighed as she pulled up to her parents' house, which was located in a gated community not too far from her own home. It was a pure white colonial-style mansion with a large front yard, garden, pool, and a tennis court. She parked in the driveway, which was where her parents' cars were; they all drove the same car, but in different colors.

She entered the house with her keys and found her parents in the den; it was where they usually were when waiting for her. She was surprised to see them sitting with drinks in their hands, but she did not say anything about that. They typically did not drink until the evening, unless something was troubling them.

"Have a seat, Nikki," Raymond said, nodding toward a chocolate leather armchair that was close by.

Like she did whenever given an order by her parents from more than likely the day she was born, Nicole nodded and complied. She slid into the chair and looked between her two parents, who were sitting on the small, matching sofa to the left of her chair. She could not help feeling in trouble, but she could not for the life of her recall doing anything wrong in the last few days.

"Nikki," her mother, Kate Cardell, spoke up as soon as Nicole was seated. Kate was a deceptively short woman and just near the point of being round now that she was middle-aged; the weight had caught her off-guard in her forties and she had never been able to lose it. Her silky black hair was cut to just above her shoulders and she had sharp brown eyes that caught anyone that she looked at in shock. She had a rich, olive tone that her daughter inherited from her and sometimes it saddened her to think that was the only thing that Nikki inherited from her.

Raymond chimed in before his wife had a chance to go on. "It's been brought to our attention that you might have gotten yourself into a mess."

Nicole's face scrunched up. "Not that I know of." She reviewed her activities for the past few weeks and did not see where she could have gotten herself into a serious mess...not something that her parents should be worried about anyway.

"Oh, so you're not dating some lesbian drug-addict that likes to make whores out of her girlfriends?" Kate inquired in a short tone.

The daughter blinked hard. "Wha...huh? Who told you that?" She was so thrown off that she did not bother to guess the one person that would tell them that.

"Never mind that. Is it true?" Raymond demanded to know. "Because I'll be damned if I'm going to let you throw your life away like this!"

"Daddy, I'm not doing anything like that and I don't know who would tell you such lies!" Nicole retorted and then a frown conquered her face as her wits gathered themselves. "You're been talking to that asshole Tyler, haven't you?"

"He says you're dating his cousin," Raymond said, as if that was a crime in and of itself.

"A woman," Kate chimed in with disdain dripping from her tone. "God, I thought you grew out of this nonsense," she muttered, not very quietly, making her stance on the issue clear already.

"Dane," Raymond finished off in a manner that told their daughter to start talking, explaining-now.

"Tyler's just being an asshole, like always! You two don't know it, but he is an asshole pure and simple," Nicole informed them. In any other situation, she would have known that was a poor defense, but her mind was having trouble keeping up with what she was dealing with...a common problem when her parents were involved.

"But, that doesn't tell us if he's telling the truth or not. Are you dating his cousin, a woman by the name of Dane?" Raymond asked.

"Yes, but-" Nicole was cut off by her mother.

"Isn't it best to assume that he knows his cousin better than you do since they are family?" Kate inquired.

"That's just it! Tyler doesn't know a damn thing about Danny! She's kind and sweet-" Nicole did not get to finish that either. She frowned; they had gone through this same crap when Tyler started telling them that she was living with Danny.

"Danny? You mean this Dane woman is your roommate Danny?" Raymond demanded to know. Both he and his wife's faces tensed as hard frowns cut across their faces, wondering why Nicole lied to them about "Danny's" status in her life from the start. Now, they were upset that they had not believed Tyler from the start; they were also upset that Tyler never told them his cousin's name when he was talking about her staying at Nicole's home since it would have saved them some confusion.

"Yes, she is," Nicole confirmed. Her face was scrunched up some because she thought that they knew that already. *Maybe they're trying to confuse me...and they're doing a damn good job.*

"Then why the hell have you been telling us that she was your roommate when she's obviously your live-in girlfriend?" Kate pressed as she squared her shoulders because more tension was ripping through her petite form.

"She's not! I mean, she is, but she wasn't before!" Nicole tried to explain. She was starting to feel very confused, knowing that her parents were already forming pictures in their minds and that their questions were now only going to help shape those pictures. Making matters worse, they probably would not let her get a word in unless it was to answer those questions. It had always been like that from when she was a small child.

"What happened, Nikki? I thought you were done with women and you've never been with someone so distasteful before. You had Tyler. He was a good guy. A gentleman with a steady, good paying job and then all of a sudden his no-good cousin shows up and you dumped him like a hot brick. That's not like you," her father said.

"I didn't dump him because Danny showed up," the younger woman argued, fury showing on her face now. *What the hell kind of lies has Tyler been telling?!*

"But, it was conveniently around that time, wasn't it? What did she do to you, Nikki? Does she score you drugs?" Raymond asked.

Nicole's blood was starting to boil and a fire was burning in her emerald eyes while her face flushed a deep crimson. "NO! Danny's not like that. She doesn't do those things anymore!"

"Anymore?" Kate echoed and her frown was now a diamond-cutting scowl. "Nikki, people don't just stop doing unsavory things! You can't be so naive to think that she's not doing drugs just because she told you that. Tyler is her cousin, surely he knows her better than you do."

"He doesn't know anything! He doesn't like her!" Nicole countered vehemently while fighting off a sense of déjà vu. They had had a similar argument about Danny already, but that was back when she was just a roommate. She also doubted that she was going to win this time.

"And I can see why! She's a scoundrel and you're too blinded by whatever spell she put on you to see that!" Kate proclaimed. The fact that she raised her voice caused her daughter to pause, blink a few times, and try to recall the last time Kate had seriously yelled at her.

"You need to stop seeing this girl and you need to get her out of your house as soon as possible," Raymond declared as if that was the end of the argument. To him and his wife, it was.

Those words jump-started Nicole's brain again. They wanted her to make Danny leave the house? She could not even fathom such a thing happening, so she knew that she would be unable to do it.

"I won't," Nicole replied in a hard tone.

Raymond did not seem to hear that response. "I'll ride over there with you and help her leave. She might get violent-" he was cut off.

"No, Daddy. I'm not kicking Danny out," Nicole stated soundly. There was no room in her voice for argument, but her parents were going to try anyway.

"The hell you're not! I'm not letting you stay in a house with some pimping, drug-dealing, drug-addicted woman who has more than one name apparently!" the father boomed, shooting up to his feet to glare down at his daughter.

"She's none of those things! And she does have one name, which is Danny!" Nicole was standing now too.

Raymond and Kate were silent for a moment, glaring at this stranger in their daughter's body. They had never seen her put up such a fight...not in her personal life anyway. Kate slowly rose to her feet, watching Nicole in a manner that the younger woman could not place.

"I don't know what *this woman* has done to you, Nikki, but it's making you into quite the ugly person. People have been complaining about you at work. You needed your father to hire an assistant for you. You've been missing days," Kate listed the offenses, counting off fingers as she went.

"It was two days!" Nicole hollered, wanting to tear her hair out, but resisting the urge. She could not believe that her mother was throwing two days back in her face, but it was par for the course with her mother. Every detail mattered to that woman, after all.

"It doesn't matter! I know she's the reason you're being neglectful at work," Kate said.

"And she's putting ridiculous ideas in your head about going back to school, isn't she? What's she trying to con you into doing, Nikki? Did she get copies of real applications or somehow get her hands on fakes and then talk you into giving her money for them?" Raymond inquired.

Nicole growled. "You were going through my personal papers? God, this is just like when I lived here! I don't have a bit of privacy!"

"The woman is trying to con you, yet you're getting angry with us? Unbelievable," Kate hissed.

"I can make my own decisions and pick my own partners. I don't need you to hold my hand through everything!" Nicole argued, throwing her hands out to the side in frustration.

"Obviously, you do, if this the type of person you want to have around you," Kate countered matter-of-factly.

"I'm going to take care of this shit right now," Raymond declared and he marched off.

"Daddy! Daddy, where are you going?" Nicole shouted, trying to follow behind her father, but Kate held her back. She turned to glare at her mother.

"He's trying to do what's right for you, Nikki, and you know that. You have to let this woman out of your life before she gets you into something deep. Let your father handle it," Kate stated.

"No! I'm not going to let him ruin the best thing in my life!" Nicole declared, trying her best to tear away from her mother, but she held back out of fear that she might hurt the smaller woman.

"You only think she's the best thing in your life because you've allowed her to brainwash you," the mother said.

"Like hell! You don't know Danny, Mommy!" Nicole broke away from her mother as she heard a car pulling off. *Damn it!* She knew that her father was leaving and more than likely heading to her house. She had to get there before him, she thought, as she raced to her car, ignoring her mother calling for her to come back.

Dane woke up to the sound of the doorbell ringing. She rolled out of bed, which she silently admitted was much better for napping than the sofa, and she marched downstairs. Not learning from her previous mistake of not bothering to ask who was there, she opened the door to see the last two people she ever expected to see unless there was a serious emergency.

"Dad, Mom, what the fuck are you doing here?" Dane somewhat demanded, sounding bemused and outraged. She was too confused to make her tone exceptionally harsh.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Barging into your cousin's life and stealing his girlfriend! Why did you do that? Just to amuse yourself? Prove that you could?" her father snarled, glaring at her with a familiar hatred.

Dane blinked hard. "Steal whose girlfriend?" *What new bullshit is he talking about?*

"Tyler's girlfriend. What the hell is wrong with you? Have you truly sunk so low that not only do you leech off of people, but then you repay their kindness by seducing their fiancées and leeching off of them next?" he hollered, energy building in his grey eyes.

"What the hell are you talking? What's this new bullshit you and Tyler are trying to put on me?" Dane inquired.

"You stole his girlfriend! You got her into drugs and other depravities, like you always do!"

"Oh, that's bullshit! But, of course, you'd believe Tyler over me. Nicole's none of your fucking business, so get the hell out of here," Dane ordered her father, brushing him off with a wave of her hand.

"No, I won't, not until you leave this poor girl alone. You know you're good for nothing and worthless like no one else. What can you do for this woman aside for getting her hooked up in drugs, gambling's debts, and all the other bullshit that comes with being around you? God, you almost got Bryan killed!"

Dane flinched as if she had just been beaten in the head with a baseball bat. *I almost got Bryan killed?! What the hell had that bastard been going around telling people?!*

"Dane, you're nothing but bad news. Even if you don't get that girl involved in those things, you know you bring that bullshit around just by presence. You're a poison, Dane, and you know it. You've proven it time and time again and Tyler's not going to stand for you ruining his fiancée," her father proclaimed.

"That's bullshit," Dane spat.

Raymond tried to pull his car into the driveway of his daughter's home, but was shocked to see a car already taking up the space. He considered that it was probably Dane's and he thought about

how Nicole told him that Danny did not drive. *A lie.* Nicole was lying to him thanks to this Dane person, which made him dislike her all the more.

After parking, he climbed out of his car, turning his attention to the front porch while he was moving. He paused, seeing three people standing there and two of them were arguing vehemently, faces twisted into expressions of pure hatred. He was taken from that haze as Nicole's car pulled up right behind his. He glanced over at her as she got out of the car and before she could say anything to him, she noticed just what he was looking at.

The father and daughter were certain that they came in on the tail end of the argument as the man at the door started pulling on Dane's arm. Dane was screaming and trying to pull back, but her father was bigger than she was and apparently in better shape than she would have guessed. He dragged Dane out of the doorway and onto the stairs. His face tensed with each moment that she resisted him, making his job all the more difficult to get her out of the house. He managed to yank her down the stairs and flung her on the walkway because of all of the struggling.

"Hey!" Raymond called. Sure, he did not know any of them, but he could not stand idly by while a man possibly harmed a woman, any woman.

The three individuals by the house turned to see who was speaking to them. Nicole rushed over to Danny in the moment of distraction. Dane's father turned his stormy grey eyes to Raymond, who was glaring right back.

"This isn't any of your business," Dane's father declared.

"It is when it's happening in front of my daughter's home. I suggest you leave before I call the police," Raymond replied.

Dane's father frowned deeply and then turned his attention back to Dane, who was still on the ground. "This isn't over, Dane. You know you're poison. Leave this woman alone before you ruin her life like you've done with everything else you've touch." He then turned to go to his car with his wife by his side. She paused just to give Dane a good look of disdain.

"Danny, sweetheart, are you okay?" Nicole asked in a low voice.

"I'm fine. I've had worse," Dane answered. She landed on her good leg, but her hand and wrist were throbbing from catching herself. She scratched up her palm and calf pretty good too.

"Danny, who the hell are those people?"

"Them? My parents," she replied in the coldest, most detached tone that Nicole had ever heard.

Nicole blinked hard and turned to look back at the couple before they were gone. The one thing that stood out was that they were both Caucasian. She considered for a moment that Danny might be adopted, but Danny never mentioned that she was adopted when she spoke of her

parents. Instead, she made it seem like she had serious problems with her parents and from what Nicole could see that was an understatement.

Danny's parents looked something like Nicole would expect Tyler's parents to look like. Her father was dressed in a black tailor made suit with expensive leather shoes to match. He amazingly enough looked very much like Dane with the same grey eyes and ebony hair. It was clear that Dane got her height from him, her facial structure, and even her nose, although his was bent slightly to the left. Nicole could only wonder how the man refused to claim Danny when it was so clear whom Danny took after.

Dane's mother, who had not said a word so far, was wrapped up tightly in a long fur coat that covered most of her body, which was about average height. She had deep brown eyes and long blonde hair. She quickly made her way to the passenger side of the car, rushing to get in. Her husband was not as quick to move, turning to glare at Dane for another long moment and look completely disgusted by her existence, before entering the car, and driving off.

"Danny, are you sure you're okay?" Nicole asked, noticing the haunted look in Danny's eyes as she watched her parents drive away.

"Nikki," Raymond said.

"Not now, Daddy. Can you just leave, please?" Nicole requested in a deep, troubled sigh.

Raymond had the good sense to recognize the look of resignation in his daughter's eyes and her tone. He slumped his shoulders and he marched to his car while Nicole helped Danny to her feet and into the house. The door closed, but Nicole had a feeling that something was opening and had the ability to tear apart their happiness.

14: Ticking time-bomb

Dane was sitting in the den, staring at the dull walls, grey eyes looking for answers that were not to be found outside. Seeing her parents should not have disturbed her as they did, she mentally scolded herself, but she could not help it as the stirred up memories that she would have rather forgotten, things that she had forgotten. *Convenient, very convenient of me.*

"Of course I'd forget those things while I'm with Nick. Why should I remember what sort of ass I am? Or how fucked up I am? I've been lying to her all this time, lying horribly. All it would take is one slip and I could fuck up her life so badly that it would be beyond repair..."

Her parents had planted a bomb in Dane's head and it was close to detonating. The more that she thought about her past, the more she could see just how she would be trouble for Nick, and the more she could see the future was not the bright sun-shiny day she had envisioned less than twenty-four hours ago. A little voice in her head that sounded suspiciously like her father told her that her future bleak, hopeless, pathetic, just like her past. She was nothing and would never

amount to anything, the voice reminded her. She was worthless, could not be trusted, and things would always be that way. She tried to ignore it, but she knew what was coming. With each second that ticked by, the bomb was closer to exploding and Dane knew it.

10...9...8...7... The musician tried to counter the bomb with words of assurance that she was a different person. She did not do the things that her parents mentioned anymore. She was done with drugs, alcohol, and other mind-altering substances. She was done with fast women and she was done using women as toys. Hell, she had never been a gambler; that was all Bryan's fault, not that her parents would ever believe that.

...6...5...4...But, there was a little voice of doubt, which was attached right to that bomb from her parents. The voice questioned just how long did she think her old life would no longer interest her? She just stopped one day and she could just start again any time now. She knew that she could start again any time; her father outright said that she was a drug-addict and would always be a drug-addict! She was a useless junkie, a user of people.

3...2...1...She could start again any day and that would affect Nicole. If she got back into things as deeply as she used to, it could really affect Nicole. She was not pleasant to be around when she was drunk or high. All of the emotions that she kept pinned inside and tried her best to pour out of her guitar came out when she was drunk and high. Those emotions were almost never positive ones and she directed them at whoever was around at the time. That would be Nicole now. She would end up hurting Nicole.

Dane later would not recall gathering up her few belongs from the den, just the things that she showed up with so many months ago. She would not recall quietly leaving her sanctuary either. She just knew that she had to get far away from Nicole before she poisoned and tore down her love in ways that she could barely fathom. Her brain did not think, her body just moved, moved to free Nicole. Destruction complete.

Nicole had fallen asleep early that night; Danny had been by her side then. So, she was shocked to wake up to an empty bed. The bed never seemed so huge until it did not have Danny in it. She ran her hands over the space that Danny had occupied the night before to find it cold, so it was clear that the musician had been gone for a while.

"Danny," Nicole called as she climbed out of bed. She was wearing pajamas; the previous day was too emotional for them to muster any energy once they laid down in bed to do anything aside for sleep.

She wandered downstairs, thinking that Danny woke up earlier and probably started breakfast. It was not like that was unheard of, after all. But, when she reached the bottom of the stairs, the silence that greeted her let her know that Danny was nowhere near the kitchen. Still, she could not help checking it and the living room.

"Danny?" Nicole said again while scanning the kitchen a second time, just in case her lover magically appeared there while she was in the living room.

She bit down a little panic that rose into her stomach and traveled up her throat. She rushed over to the last room that she thought Danny might be holed up in—the den. She walked to the room with the broken door and knocked on the wall, hoping for some kind of answer. She did not hear anything that could be mistaken for noise in the dark room. She stepped in and flicked on the light. Her heart shattered with the sudden burst of light, revealing the bare room to her.

"Danny..." Nicole whimpered. The beat-up guitar case that Danny lived out of was gone, as was her guitar. The pallet that she usually left on the floor was cleaned up, folded, and on the couch. "Danny? What's going on? What happened?" she asked the air, which gave her no answers.

The lawyer tried to keep herself together, thinking that she might be overreacting. After all, Danny could have had an early lesson. No, that would not explain why she took her beat-up guitar case, but there was probably an explanation there. Sure, there was probably a logical, reasonable explanation for it all and, no, Danny was not gone and never coming back. Why did her heart not believe that, though?

Nicole sighed as she went about her morning in a mechanical manner while wondering where her girlfriend disappeared to. She frowned as she realized that she did not have any way to get into contact with Danny either to know if she was overreacting or to find out why Danny left. She mentally scolded herself for never getting her girlfriend a cell phone when she had the chance. It just never seemed important until now.

She was not sure how she made it to work or how she got through it. Everything seemed like a blur as she prayed that Danny would call, but that never happened. She did not eat lunch that day and merely tried to will time to speed up, so she could get home. When she got home, things did not get better.

Everything was just as she left it and there was no sign that Danny had been there all day. There was also no sign that Danny was going to return. Nicole's stomach flopped and her heart dissolved as it felt like bitter acid flooded her system. It felt like her soul was split in half and was being shredded.

"Danny..." Nicole sniffled as tears filled her eyes. She was about to break down and cry, but the ringing of the phone stopped her for just a moment. She did not move from where she was standing and let the machine pick up for her.

"Nick, I'll make this quick," Dane's voice sounded distressed and hard. "I'm happy that you didn't answer it. Guess you're not home yet."

"Danny!" Nicole rushed to the phone. "Danny, I'm here!"

"Nick?" *Damn it!* This would have been so much easier if Nicole had not answered the phone.

"Danny, baby, where are you? Tell me you're coming home!" Nicole pled, tears leaking from her eyes. The tears slowly slid down her cheeks, falling like lost drops of rain.

"Nick, I'm sorry, but I've been lying to you all this time, misrepresenting myself to you. I'm not coming back and I know you're better for it. You might not think it, but you are."

"Danny, please!"

"Do me a favor and keep eating and don't go back to Tyler. You're worth so much more than that. I know there's a prince or princess out there that's perfect for you and will treat you like you deserve."

"You're perfect for me!"

"I wish I was, angel. I really wish I was. You don't know what kind of person I can be, though. You don't know what type of bastard I am. You're better off without me. I promise you that. Goodbye, chem."

"Danny!" A beeping dial tone was her response. "Danny!"

The tears suddenly fell like a torrid hurricane followed by gasps and wails that could have easily rivaled thunder. Dropping to her knees, her tears flooded down her cheeks and pooled into her carpet. The cries shook her body as they came from her gut, heart, and soul. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if trying to keep herself from literally falling apart. Danny was gone and she was alone.

"Richard, where the fuck is the Evans file?" Nicole demanded as she stormed out of her office to scream at her assistant for the fifth time since arriving to work...twenty minutes ago.

Her attitude certainly caught her assistant by surprise. Up until today, he wondered how she was a lawyer of any kind and working at such a prestigious firm. He heard about what her previous assistants were able to get away with and he had not been able to dredge up an ounce of respect for her, especially when seeing how she let the whole firm use her. There were even times when he stared at her with utter disgust and other times when he dared to look at her for what he thought she really was, a pretty face, banging body, and a nice ass.

Now, he was careful about looking at her the wrong way, lest she castrate him with the fountain pen in her hand. He heard people muttering, "what's Nicole's problem?" and he hoped that one of them got an answer before she ate him and vomited him up. She was looking for the smallest excuse to tear into his ass and fire him.

"Well?" she pressed with a glare that reminded him very much of her mother. He gulped and his heart sped up while he forced himself not to squirm under her hard gaze.

"I'll have it to you in a minute, ma'am." That was the first time that he had ever called her "ma'am." Before that day, he had the nerve to call her "Nicole" as if they had been long time friends. She never bothered to correct him because she knew that one compliant from him would have her father breathing down her neck.

"You'd better." The glint in her eyes told him that he had exactly sixty seconds to fetch what she required or it was curtains for him.

Nicole returned to her office, or the bowels of Hell as it was coming to be known for the past couple of days. Nicole had been on a tear, being in the worst mood that anyone had ever seen; some of them thought it could possibly be the worst mood in the history of the world. It was beyond anyone could comprehend since Nicole was just about the most tame and sweetest woman they had ever seen, let alone met.

"She's being a total bitch," someone muttered, referring to Nicole. Too bad the statement was made with one of Nicole's friends in earshot.

"Hey, shut the fuck up about Nicole. She had a few off days and now you're labeling her a bitch? I bet you'll smile in her fucking face when you need some legal help, won't you? Fucking bastards, you'd kiss her fucking ass to do your fucking work, wouldn't you?!" Mina snapped as she exited her office. She did not even know who she was talking to, but she figured it was a good message to just about anybody in the crowded hallway that was going to talk about her friend while Nicole was obviously going through something.

The people in the wide and frequently busy halls of the firm all looked down, making them all look guilty, and then they went about their business, not wanting it to seem like they were the ones that spoke harshly about Nicole. Mina scowled at everyone until they were out of her sight. She then ducked back into her office, waiting for the next moment where she would have to reprimand the many assholes that she worked with. *Why the hell is such a prestigious firm populated with dickheads?!*

Mina was planning to talk to Nicole...as soon as she was certain that she could get close enough to auburn-haired woman and not lose an arm. She had tried to approach Nicole yesterday, but the frightening warning glare that screamed "back off!" kept her at bay...and stopped her heart for a few more seconds than she liked. She was just going to have to wait until it was safe to tread water and Nicole's attitude was not something akin to a bull shark.

That attitude built for a few days before it seemed to reach its zenith. Nicole did not blow up on anyone to show that the attitude was at its height. She just quietly dismissed any and everyone that came into her office, including her assistant. Her father even tried to go into the office, for business reasons of course, and she dismissed him like he was any other person. He was so taken aback by the chilling demeanor that he did not put up a fight and just backed out of the room.

The day after that, Nicole came in subdued. She had been crying the night before, listening to the message that the voicemail recorded of her and Danny. The reality set in that Danny really was not coming back. She was not gone just to sort herself out after Tyler ruined their world by

calling their parents; Nicole knew Tyler was somehow to blame for Danny's parents suddenly showing up and making her a mess. Danny was honestly gone, thinking that it was best for Nicole. Every time the thought came to Nicole's mind, she cried and she had wept all last night.

Nicole dragged her body into work, not too sure how she managed to get there...again. She trudged to her office, not bothering to greet anyone, which had become normal for her the past week. A few people that she went by notice the change in her demeanor and the change in her appearance. The flames of Hell no longer seemed to be pouring off of her with intense heat. Instead, it seemed like it was raining on her, putting out her fire and covering her with dark, heavy grey clouds. No one mentioned her puffy, red eyes or flushed face; they just let her go by, not wanting to chance bringing demon-Nicole back.

She dropped into her chair behind her desk and stared down at the dark wood. It barely took a couple of minutes before more tears gathered and fell. She sniffled, but did not bother to wipe away the tears. She knew it would be a waste of time.

"Danny..." Nicole sobbed and quickly covered her mouth. The last thing she wanted was someone running into the office to see what was wrong with her.

Her body shook as sobs burst through, coming straight from the gut. Her hand over her mouth was hardly doing anything to stifle the noise, moans bouncing off the walls and assaulting her ears. People outside did hear, but they were not in the mood to feel her wrath if "bitchy Nicole" decided to make a return if they checked on her.

It took her almost twenty minutes to get herself together and that was only because she ran out of tears ten minutes into the weeping. Once she ran out of tears, her body and spirit still ached, throbbing constantly. She took deep breaths to calm herself down, having to tuck her head between her knees for a little while after that. Then she was ready to work-well, as ready as she was going to be that day anyway.

The next day, Nicole entered work just as somber as before and quite disheveled...for her anyway. Her hair and clothes were not perfect like always; her shirt was not ironed and her hair was frizzed just a little. Her colleagues watched her as she went by, but no one said anything to her. She marched to her office and flopped down at her desk, trying to hold in the urge to weep. Just when she thought the dam was going to burst, the door to her office flew open.

"Go away, Daddy," Nicole grumbled.

"Look, Nikki-" Raymond was going to attempt some words of comfort, but his daughter did not allow him that.

"I said go away, Daddy! I have work to do," Nicole huffed while making a show of going through her briefcase and pulling out files.

"Nikki..." His voice was weak and then withered in his throat when she glared at him. He gulped.

"I'm only going to ask you one more time," she warned him. The fiery look in her eyes-it would have made a lion run for cover.

Raymond did not press his luck. He exited the office while wondering what in the world was wrong with Nicole. He had never seen her in such a condition as she was now. He truly had never witnessed her in the bitchy state that she was in before either. He was morbidly curious and terribly concerned about what was happening with his daughter. He went to the one person he was sure would be able to get answers because he knew that she was just as concerned as he and Kate were.

"Mina," Raymond said while softly rapping at her door, even though he entered before being given permission.

"Yes, sir?" Mina inquired, knowing who it was without bothering to look up from her computer.

"Do you know what's wrong with Nikki lately?" he asked curiously.

"Well, considering the fact that the last time I asked her what was wrong, she told me to go to Hell with gasoline drawers, no, sir, I do not. I think it might have something to do with Danny, though," Mina answered.

"Danny?" Raymond blinked in surprise by the mention of the name. He had not heard anything about Tyler's cousin in almost two weeks.

"Ever since Nicole's been in her funk, she hasn't eaten lunch, which is something Danny would never allow if they were all right. She also hasn't said anything about Danny since getting in her mood. Clara's been bugging Nicole's assistant and according to him no one by the name of Danny has called, which is just plain weird. I guess they had a little fight," Mina reasoned. It certainly would explain Nicole's mood since Danny seemed to keep Nicole balanced as far as her friends could tell. Although, she did think that referring to it as a "little fight" was not doing it justice considering the way Nicole had been acting.

"You think so? Do you know about Nicole and Danny?" Raymond asked curiously.

"I know they're roommates. Danny's been pretty good for Nicole. She's helped Nicole a lot. I can't wait to meet her one day." Mina smiled, very pleased that someone was finally good to her friend.

"Then you don't know they were dating?"

"Dating?" This got Mina's attention enough for her to turn her eyes away from her computer. She searched Raymond's face to make sure that he was telling the truth and had not just misinterpreted something, like she had done.

"They're dating."

Mina grinned, which confused Raymond. "That's great! Danny takes such great care of Nicole and I could see that Nicole cared a lot about Danny, even though she denied it. I'm glad she recognized it."

"So...you think it's a good thing?" he asked just to be sure.

"Very much. Nicole seems to be at her happiest when talking with Danny. It's wonderful to see," Mina proclaimed sincerely.

"But, isn't Danny into all sorts of horrible things?"

"Well, to hear Tyler tell it, yes. To hear Nicole tell it, Danny is tamer than toy dog and much less annoying-more than we can say about Tyler. Now, I would think that Tyler knows his cousin since they're family and all, but Nicole's been living with Danny all these months. I guess it boils down to who do you believe. I believe Nicole. I've seen her make bad decisions when it comes to relationships, but she's never looked so happy when talking about someone she's in a relationship with," the mocha-skinned attorney explained with a proud smile.

Raymond nodded. "I suppose..." He could not really concede the matter, even though she had a point. It was just that he had met some of the women that Nicole dated in the past and it seemed like a long line of mistakes. Of course, she was not much better when it came to dating men, even though he and Kate thought that Tyler might have been the one. But, Nicole and her friends seemed to see something in Tyler that made them want to run from him more than anything else.

"You liked her best with Tyler, right?" Mina asked, even though she knew the answer to that.

"He could have made her happy."

"Tell that to Nicole and watch her face turn bright red with anger. Tyler didn't give a damn about Nicole and he wasn't even trying to pay her any attention until after she dumped his ass. All he was about was having Nicole do every damn thing for him while tearing her down. She was his trophy. Danny is good for Nicole because their relationship is nothing like what Nicole had with Tyler. Danny gives Nicole strength. Talk to Nicole before you pass judgment, especially if you're going by what Tyler said. I know the guys around here might not think so, but we ladies find him to be a bit of a slime-ball," Mina informed him.

Raymond's jaw tensed a little and he shifted on his feet. "And why's that?"

"Aside for the fact that he's hit on every woman on this level at least once and much of that happened while he was dating Nicole?" she asked with an arched eyebrow and a slightly smug look on her face. She knew that she had him and she was glad that she did. She was all too aware that Nicole's parents rarely listened to Nicole, but someone needed to let them know when they were damned wrong.

Raymond decided not to ask any more questions or he thought that he might pay Tyler a visit next...and Tyler would not like the nature of the visit. He decided to get started on his own work,

mostly because he was not sure on what to do next. Mina turned her attention back to her computer, but she did not resume typing as Raymond left the office.

"Nicole is dating Danny? So why the moods from Hell? She should be happy," Mina thought with a confused wrinkle in her forehead.

She figured that it was time for her own investigation. She abandoned her work for the moment and walked the short distance to Nicole's office. She paused at the door, her brow wrinkled even more as she heard sniffing coming from behind the door. She knocked softly and waited patiently for a response, giving Nicole plenty of time to straighten herself out.

"Come in," Nicole said.

Mina stepped inside and quietly shut the door behind her. She took a moment to study her friend from across the room and decided that she did not like what she saw. Nicole's face was flushed, a dull red, from crying. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy, more than likely from weeping. Her clothes were usually always pressed sharply, but now hung off of her as if they had been bunched up before she crawled into them.

"Sweetie, you look like a hot mess. What's wrong? Danny actually let you leave the house like that?" Mina inquired as she took a step forward.

The glare that Mina received at those words halted her in midstride. She was almost certain that her blood frozen in her veins and her heart dared not beat, lest it make a sound that displeased the angriest woman in the world at the moment. Apparently, teasing was not the way to go, Mina silently noted.

"Sweetie, did you and Danny have a fight? Is that why you've been in such a foul mood?" Mina asked in a low, concerned tone as she inched her way toward her distressed colleague.

Nicole whimpered and before she could stop it, tears were falling from her eyes like casualties in war. She quickly hid her face; she never cried-at least not in front of anyone. Mina made a sympathetic coo while plucking a tissue from Nicole desk and handing it to the weeping woman.

"Nicole, sweetie, tell me what happened?" Mina requested in a soft, touching tone.

"She left me!" Nicole bawled, having spoke those words out loud for the first time since Danny's departure. It had been dying to get out, but she had not wanted to acknowledge it.

"Who left you? Danny?" Mina was now at Nicole's side and she gently wrapped her arms around the crying female. Nicole continued to hide her face, bawling into her tissues now.

"Yes..." she squeaked.

"You mean she moved out?" Mina was trying to take it lightly, not wanting to hit Nicole with anything heavy lest she cry even harder. She doubted that such heavy-duty weeping came from Danny just moving out, but she hoped that was the case.

"She didn't just move out! She left me! Ran off in the middle of the night and then called me with some cheap fucking explanation!" Nicole roared, her voice muffled by her tissues.

Mina tightened her hug ever so slightly, silently telling Nicole that she was there. "Calm down. I'm sure she had a reason. Though I never met her, I know from your stories that she cared a lot about you, Nicole. I doubt she just left for no reason."

"She said she was misrepresenting herself, like she was lying to me. What the hell? No one could pretend to be that sweet! She didn't want anything from me! She wasn't pretending..." Nicole had to stop to breathe for a few seconds.

"I know this isn't a good time to ask, but are you sure she didn't want anything? This is Tyler's cousin," Mina said. She was slowly, but surely getting pissed at Danny for leaving her friend in such a state and now her relation to Tyler was working against her very much.

"Don't compare her to that dipshit! I'm sure this is all his fault! He found out I was seeing Danny and the first thing he did was run to my parents and tell them all those lies about her! They wanted me to kick her out! And I'm sure he had something to do with her parents showing up too!"

Mina's brow wrinkled in thought. Tyler was a slimy bastard; she was more than sure of that. He had been pining for Nicole since he lost her, so it was possible that he did something, especially if he thought that it would somehow get Nicole back in his arms. She could not see how he could get Danny to leave, though.

"Are you sure your parents didn't get to her at some point when you weren't home?" Mina asked.

"No! She left the very day my parents confronted me with all of this shit. Her parents showed up and did something to her...maybe. I don't know! I don't know what I'm going to do..." Nicole began crying hard again, not even bothering to wipe her face now.

"It'll be okay," Mina promised while rubbing Nicole's back.

The auburn-haired woman continued to bawl. Mina was not able to get anymore information out of her friend, but she was there as Nicole cried on and off again for the next hour. She was able to talk Nicole into going out for lunch. They took Clara with them and Nicole took a very tiny step toward normalcy.

Tyler smiled to himself on his way to work, taking the long way to the office. The long way involved driving past Nicole's house and noticing that a certain rusty bicycle was not on the

porch. He had heard whispers that Nicole had a falling out with her "roommate" and since the bike was gone early in the morning, he supposed it was true. He was happy on so many levels to know that Dane was no longer around *his* sweet Nicole.

Even though he was late for work, the smile on his face did not vanish. He had plans for today and nothing was going to stop him for going through with them. First, he was going to get a little work done before putting his plans into motion.

He set himself up at his computer and before he even started doing anything, he started thinking about his cousin. Everyone knew that Dane was no good, worthless, shiftless, and would easily take advantage of anyone, especially an innocent young woman like Nicole. He knew that he needed to save Nicole from his wicked cousin and he had gone with more than just contacting Nicole's parents. He was glad that he called Dane's parents. He felt like a hero, saving Nicole from an evil witch.

His uncle had called him a few days after they spoke to Dane, letting him know that Dane had been thoroughly reprimanded for her distasteful behavior in seducing his "fiancée." He was not sure what to make of that considering the things that he had to add to that news, namely Nicole's foul mood followed by her strange seclusion. He knew better than to approach her while she was like that, so he just tried to find out what happened with his rogue of a cousin beyond the fact that her parents had given her a stern talking to.

Dane was not very likely to listen to her parents, Tyler knew that just from growing up around her. He did know that his uncle knew how to talk to Dane, though. His uncle Russell knew how to put Dane in her place, which was why Tyler called him in the first place. His thoughts were confirmed now that he knew that Dane was not at Nicole's house any longer.

Tyler's smile broadened, thinking about how his cousin was gone from his life. "More trouble than she's worth. I don't see why Uncle Russell didn't fight for Aunt Christine to give Dane away or something," he said to the air.

He spent several minutes cursing Dane out in his head before work consumed his mind for a little while. He focused on his own matters until it was nearly lunchtime. It was then that he pulled himself from his desk and confidently left his office. He strolled with his shoulders squared and a secure pep in his step, going down the decorated hall, having to turn a corner before coming to the corridor that house his destination. He knocked on the dark door and entered before he got an answer.

"Come..." Nicole ate her final word when she saw the door opening and the last person that she wanted to see entering her office. "Tyler, what the hell do you want?" she demanded as a deep frown cut across her soft face.

Tyler smiled, despite the almost tangible hostility coming from his former girlfriend. "I was about to go grab a bite to eat. I wanted to know if you wanted to join me." He figured by now after sometime alone, she would love company and he was glad to be that company.

"Not if you were the last man on Earth," Nicole stated bluntly while turning her attention back to her work. Her tone and obvious disinterest did nothing to his cocky grin.

"Don't be that way, babe. I figured you would have cooled off by now. I mean, it's been almost seven months. I know you missed me."

"In your fucking imagination, Tyler. I don't miss you and I don't want to have lunch with you. I want you to leave me the hell alone and stay out of my life." Nicole's eyes then opened and settled on him as if a light bulb went off in her head. "Far out of my life, which includes talking to my damn parents. What right did you have to tell them that I was dating Danny?" she demanded to know while climbing to her feet. She wanted him to look into her eyes and see her fury up close and personal.

"I was just looking out for you," he countered, bordering on outraged and fearful because of the way that she was stalking over to him. He thought that she might actually devour him whole. She was shorter than he was, but her presence right now seemed to fill the whole room and felt crushing to him.

"You don't have any right to look out for me. I don't know if it was your damn pride or the fact that you really think that Danny is dangerous, but you don't have any right to stick your big nose in my business. This is my life to live and if being with Danny was a mistake, it was mine to make. You don't have any fucking business crying to my parents about anything," Nicole said in a calm, tense tone that made the man before her gulp.

A lone bead of sweat traversed the length of Tyler's face, a chill following it. "But, Dane would've done horrible things to you. She already managed to seduce you..."

"She didn't seduce me. I am madly, head-over-heels in love with Danny and that happened through her actions, the way that she treated me, and how she respects me. We had a decent, fulfilling relationship before we became a couple and after. Now, you've freaked my parents out. They think that Danny's some kind of sex-maniac-criminal."

"She is! You don't know Dane the way I do."

Nicole folded her arms across her chest. "Then enlighten me, Tyler. Name instances with examples that you know of from personal experience that makes Danny a bad person," she challenged him in a firm tone with a level glare in her eye.

"If I knew we were going to be having a trial I would have prepared, counselor," Tyler snapped.

"If I knew you were going to fuck up my life more so than you already did, I would've told my parents not to believe any of the bullshit coming from your mouth. Are you the reason Danny's parents showed up too?" Nicole demanded to know. She was bit surprised that she said that because she had not really thought too much on the timing, but now that she was looking at Tyler, her brain was working again, reminding her just how much she detested him, and how underhanded he could be.

Tyler frowned. "What do you care? You should be happy I got that plight out of your life before she hurt you like she's done other girls. You think that 'Danny' is so great and precious? Well, let me tell you something about Dane. Dane is a hardheaded punk who likes to be seen with her arm around a different woman every time you see her. She gets drunk in the middle of the day. She shows up to places high as a fucking kite, not bothering to consider what type of place she's going or what type of drugs she's taking. She a nasty viper, who has been known to abuse her girlfriends-"

"You damn liar," Nicole hissed, outrage pouring off of her like a tangible gas. *How dare he ruin Danny's good name with his bullshit!*

"You think so? 'Danny' never told you about the lawsuit her daddy had to make go away? She beat the living shit out one of her girlfriends. And that was just one that was willing to come forward. I can only imagine the ones that were too scared."

"You're lying," Nicole stated and she turned her chin up in defiance. She was not going to believe a word out of his mouth, especially not about Danny. She knew all too well how Tyler had no conscience when it came to lying to her face about something.

"You think so? Why don't you ask your precious 'Danny'? I'm sure she'll tell you the truth." Tyler rolled his eyes.

"She's been more truthful and upfront with me for the half-year that I've known her than you have in the whole two, almost three years I've known you," Nicole countered with just as much attitude.

"Fine, take Dane's side. See what it gets you. Just know Nicole, if you mess around too long, I'm going to be gone," Tyler stated as if that was a threat.

"Good. That's what I've wanted since I threw you out of my house all of those months ago."

"I'm serious." Despite all of his posturing, he was not making any moves toward the door to walk out of her life...or at least out of her office.

"Bye, Tyler."

"How the hell can you pick her over me?! Dane doesn't have a steady job and she's homeless! She takes fucking advantage of everyone that she comes across! She's a horrible human being that it takes mind altering drugs to seem likeable!"

"You might think of her that way, but I don't. Danny is just better than you, Tyler, simple as that. Before I was even dating her, she was better than you to me. She was just better," Nicole explained as if it was the simplest thing in the world. Her voice was calm and her demeanor was commanding, which was something he was not used to and it was making him even angrier.

"You think she's better because she turned you into a faggot?" his tone was hateful and that last word twisted out of his mouth without shame or decency.

Nicole entire body tightened, as if he had struck her with that word. Her hand went to a thick metal pen holder on her desk without her realizing it. "I think she's better because she wouldn't ask me something like that. I think she's better because she knows the world doesn't revolve around her. Now, step out of my office and never come back in," she commanded in a dead serious tone with her hand tightening on the pen-holder.

"Oh, did I say something touchy?" He dared to give her a haughty look, as if such behavior was going to help him get back with her.

"No, just something hateful, something I could expect from a small-minded asshole like you. So, once again, get the hell out of my office and never come back in. Don't call my parents for anything that isn't work related either," she ordered. "Now, get the fuck out before I throw this fucking thing at you!" She shifted the pen-holder before picking it up and flipping it in her palm.

Tyler did not falter and continued to look at as arrogant as before. "Your father didn't seem to mind the tip. I'm sure if I have any other news, he would be happy hear it."

"I'm sure he would be happy to know that you called his daughter a faggot too. I'll remember to tell him that at dinner one day. Maybe if you ever come up for partner, I'll mention it." She smiled at him, looking like some unholy, avenging demon. "Now, unless you want to have surgery on that big fucking head of yours, I would suggest you leave." She tossed the pen-holder up a couple of inches.

Tyler's throat seized up, preventing him from uttering another comeback. She managed to back him out of the office thanks to his shock; he took a step back whenever she stepped to him. The moment that he was across the threshold, she slammed the door in his face.

"Fucking jackass. He thinks that I'm going to get back together with him? If anybody in his family is on controlled substances, it's him," she thought with a huff as she made her way back to her desk. She slid her pen-holder across the desk, not caring where it landed.

She tried not to let Tyler's words trouble her as she settled in to finish some of her work, but she could not help it. The few things that he said made her recall how Danny said that she was misrepresenting herself to Nicole. *Were the things Tyler brought up part of that?*

Before she could dwell on those things, Mina and Clara entered the office to drag her off to lunch. She did not put on any struggle on what was quickly becoming their routine now that she did not bring her own lunch. The first couple of times they did it and she did not want to go, Mina laid a good guilt trip on her, surprisingly enough using Danny to do it. *Sometimes, Mina is just too damn persuasive.*

"So, I saw Tyler coming out of your office looking like you had killed, skinned, fried, and eaten his puppy right in front of his face. What the hell was he bugging you about?" Mina asked

curiously as the trio sat down inside a small café. The weather outside was too chilly now for them to eat comfortably outside.

"The slimy bastard was actually asking me out to lunch. Can you believe he thought that I was going to go out with him?" Nicole said in disbelief. She sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes. She actually looked insulted that he asked her.

"He's been pining for you since you left him," Clara sighed and shook her head.

"The fucker's been giving you all the attention in the world after you left him. That was the best decision you ever made might I add. I wonder what made him think that you would go out with him now, though," Mina commented, mouth turned upward in thought.

"I think he knows that Danny left me. Somehow, he knows. I think he's the one that sent her parents to her too. I mean, how else would they know that she was at my house? They don't know me and Danny never spoke to them," Nicole reasoned.

"He was probably trying to get them to take Danny home or something, so he could try to get to you again," Mina suggested.

"Whatever his plan was, if the outcome was to make me single again, it worked. I don't know what Danny's parents said to her, but it was enough to scare the shit out of her and have her leave me the same day they showed up," Nicole informed her friends.

"Well, I think we all know that parents know the best buttons to push...next to younger brothers anyway," Mina said, which earned her a couple of amused smiles. It was not secret that Mina hated her baby brother because he liked getting on her nerves, but he was quite the sweetheart to her friends.

"Danny's father was very rough with her. It wasn't so much pushing her buttons. He yanked her off the stairs and threw her to the ground. He made her hurt her already-injured wrist and she cut herself up too," Nicole reported, tone haunted with the memories of that day.

"Sounds like a piece of work, like his nephew," Clara commented, shaking her head and frowning in disapproval.

"Yeah, I can definitely see why Tyler is his favorite nephew. I wish everyone would just butt out of my life..." Nicole sniffled, but she forced herself not to cry. She wanted to believe that she was out of tears, but the hurt was not going away like it was supposed to. Going home to an empty house stung as much now as it did the first day she walked into the house, knowing Danny would not be there, and that was almost three weeks ago. It was like being hit by a truck every time she went home and every time she woke up.

"Don't cry, sweetie. We know how much Danny meant to you. If she loves you half as much as you love her, she'll come back after she realizes that she made a mistake," Mina tried to assure the tearful lawyer while reaching over to rub Nicole's shoulder.

"And if she never comes back? I don't know how I would get along like this for the rest of my life," Nicole said.

"You shouldn't think so negative," Clara chimed in. "If Danny doesn't come back, she's not the caring individual that you thought she was and you don't need another asshole Wolfe in your life."

Nicole wanted to laugh, she knew the comment was made so that she would laugh. She just could not muster the energy to do so. She did not want to hear how Danny was not what she thought she was or some other cliché like that. She just wanted her roommate, girlfriend, lover, and soul-mate back. She felt incomplete without Danny around and she could not imagine living with the feeling for the rest of her life.

Mina and Clara had mercy on Nicole, dragging the subject away from her lost love and her idiot ex-boyfriend. They had a pleasant lunch and returned to work in good spirits. Nicole stayed at work long after everyone else, hoping that the demand of her cases and files would keep her from thinking about Danny. Besides, she dreaded the thought of going back home to that empty house. But, she did have to go home eventually.

The night was cold, nipping at Nicole's exposed face as she walked to her car. The wind howled outside her car as she drove home in the chilly night. Winter was on its way, frosting over the outside like Nicole's soul and darkening her resolve with the shortening of the days.

She pulled onto her street and her headlights shined onto her front yard before she parked the car in the driveway. There was a shadowed lump on her dying grass. Nicole exited her car and kept a watchful eye on the lump while carefully approaching the mystery item.

A shiver that had nothing to do with the weather raced through Nicole as she got close enough to make out that the shadow was in the form of a body...and wheels. She gulped, not sure what to think since she never had to deal with a body on her front lawn. Upon closer inspection, it was a body and bicycle. A body that looked mighty familiar.

"Oh, my god, Danny!" Nicole gasped as she fell to taller woman's side.

Dane was lying on her stomach, spread out like she had fallen from the sky. The right side of her face was planted in the dirt. Her eyes were half-mast and nonsense gargling was coming from her dry throat.

"Danny, what happened?" Nicole cried, putting her hands out, but not touching Danny. What if she did something that hurt the musician more so than she already was!

"Huh?" Dane turned in the direction of the voice coming from above her. Her unfocused eyes could only see a strange blur before her. "Oh, an angel! I guess I finally died. Great!"

"That is not great! Don't you ever say anything like that! Now, what the hell is wrong with you?" Nicole demanded to know while finally taking hold of Danny to help her up. Anger kept the

lawyer's tears at bay, but her sorrow and relief wanted to escape her body. She refused those emotions for the moment.

"I dunno. I'm drunk...or high...or both, but definitely one of the two. Probably both, though," Dane answered with tired honesty, face still planted in the dirt.

Nicole had to bite back the pure rage that she felt race through her like white, hot lightening in hearing that Danny had been drinking and possibly getting high. She would address those issues later, after she got Danny off of the lawn and out of the cold. "Danny, I'm going to need your help if I'm going to pick you up." Nicole groaned as she strained to lift the larger musician.

"Don't waste time helping me, angel. Bury me where I lay..." Dane announced as if she was acting in a play.

"Shut up and get up," Nicole commanded in a hard tone that Dane had heard only a couple of times before. The thing was that it worked.

Dane groaned and coughed as she started climbing to her feet. Nicole did assist her in standing and as she stood, they could hear her joints popping even over the howl of the wind. Nicole dragged Dane's freezing, heavy body into the dark house, not sure what to make of what was going on. The blackness of the house seemed to swallow them and their problems as the door shut.

15: Salvation

Nicole did not bother to turn on the lights in the house as she entered with Dane. She just wanted to put Danny some place for the younger woman to rest. She could feel the weight on her-cold and wet-and she knew that Danny was close to passing out from the feel of things. There was no chance that they would make it upstairs, especially since Dane was barely lifting her feet as they walked. Nicole managed to get the musician to the living room sofa.

"Come on, Danny, rest yourself," Nicole said gently while easing the rundown woman onto the couch. Danny leaned when he back hit the cushions, half-sitting up and half-lying down.

"Nick..." Dane moaned, sounding like a drowning woman. She lurched as if she was trying to get up.

"Just rest now, Danny. We'll talk later, once you've rested," Nicole replied while softly showing against Dane's chest, finding the area damp and chilled. Part of it, Nicole was sure was due to the rain on the lawn and the frosty air, but another part of it, she knew was from the alcohol in Danny's system.

Dane took the prompt and fell back, lying down on the couch. Nicole bent down and lifted Danny's legs up, so that she was completely prone on the sofa. With that done, she then pushed

Dane back a little and eased the taller woman onto her side; Dane did not make a sound, not a groan, moan, or even a breath. Nicole stood there for a moment, hoping to hear Danny breathing and for a moment panic rose in her chest, but then wheezing, shallow breaths came from the reclined body. Nicole made sure that the musician was secure on the couch and then she went to turn on the light, wanting to see what she was working with because the chill on Danny was alarming.

When the room was illuminated, Nicole had to bite her lip when her eyes settled on Danny. The musician was dressed in shorts, despite the cold weather, and the shorts had seen much better days. The garments were torn, tattered, and caked with dust and grime. They were showing off dusty, dirty, and marked up legs. Some of the wounds looked fresh and bright red from being irritated. Her socks were just as bad and appeared to be wet, meaning her feet were probably frosted over. Making things even worse, her injured knee looked like it might never see a good day again. It was swollen, which she could tell, even though Dane's whole leg was swollen, and it was bruised deeply and very dark. Nicole winced from imagining the pain that Danny must have been in.

Dane's chest was only slightly better because she had a long-sleeve shirt underneath her short-sleeve shirt. Unfortunately, both shirts were torn, holey, dirty, and drenched. There looked like there was some dried blood on it too, which made Nicole swallow hard. She hoped that those stains did not mean anything too deep. She especially hoped that the blood did not belong to Dane.

"Oh, Danny, what happened?" Nicole wondered aloud with concerned eyes. Her voice made it clear that she wanted to burst into tears, but she knew that would not do any good right now.

Dane started quivering and her teeth began chattering. "Cold..."

Nicole rushed into action, first going to strip off Danny's filthy and drenched clothing. Dane was in no shape to put up a fight, or to help in any way really. The musician was quickly and easily stripped of all of her clothes and she did not even seem to notice. Nicole dumped the dirty clothes on the floor and gave Dane the once-over as a quick checkup. Danny was much thinner than she had been weeks earlier and her body was checkered with scratches and bruises. One thing that was noticeably absent were any track marks, so Nicole figured that whatever Dane might possibly be high off of did not involve using a needle. She then took a moment to take Danny's temperature by feeling her forehead and her neck. She found that Danny was colder than she first assumed.

"Shit," the lawyer hissed in distress.

She made a dash for the linen closet and grabbed a thick blanket. She returned to Danny and covered the tall musician. She made sure the cover was over the entire length of Danny. Her heart rate sped up as Dane started coughing, so her next move was to make some tea. She wished that she kept cough syrup in the house, but she never had any use for it, so she never brought it. She hoped that the tea would do the trick.

"Danny, honey, I've got peppermint tea for you," Nicole said in a tender tone while placing the beverage on the coffee table. She gently shook Dane, just in case the younger woman was sleeping.

"Huh?" Dane groaned, wanting to open her eyes, but fairly certain that her headache was not going to let it happen. Nicole smiled just from the sound; it showed that Danny had not died on the couch.

"I have tea for you. I want you to drink it to help warm you up," the attorney informed the ill woman.

Dane was confused and sure that she needed to stop mixing legal and illegal substances. Everything seemed like a blur to her, past and present, sight and sound. Nothing made sense.

"Nick?" the name came out as a bewildered groan mixed with a cry from a person that clearly had no clue what was going on.

Nicole wanted to weep again. She could sense Danny's bemusement and she could almost picture the damage Danny had done to herself over the past few weeks. She had to take a deep breath before speaking to make sure she sounded composed and to make sure that she did not sob while talking.

"Yes, sweetheart. You're home. Now, I need you to drink this tea, baby. It'll warm you up and you definitely need to be warmer," she gently urged the younger woman, tapping her a little to see some movement from the musician.

Dane groaned her complaint, not sure if she would be able to move her mouth enough to drink anything. Even if she could drink it, she was not sure if she would be able to keep it down. Out of the few things she could remember at the moment, she was pretty sure that her stomach was allergic to food, unless it was a brownie packed with weed, and her belly rebelled against all drinks, unless it was alcoholic.

"Here, it's not that hot." Nicole put the mug to Dane's dry, cracked lips.

Another groan came from the musician, but she was lifting up to take the warm liquid into her body. She burst into a hacking cough after swallowing, feeling her throat seize when the drink slid down her throat. Nicole hurried up and put the cup down to pat Dane on the back. As soon as Dane stopped coughing, she waved for the cup to come back. Nicole obliged.

"Yeah, that's helping get the taste of ass out of my mouth," Dane muttered. It sounded like she was talking with a mouth full of rocks. She made sure to focus her dull eyes on the floor.

"Ass?" Nicole echoed and she hoped that was not meant literally. She might never kiss Dane again.

"It's too bland to compare to garbage, but just as nasty. My mouth is so fucking disgusting. Throwing up would be an improvement," Dane remarked in a low, scratchy tone. She was trying to force out a smile, but it was not coming. She just looked like she was in intense agony, which she was.

"Are you good to talk? Do you want something to eat?" Nicole asked in a rush. She wanted to move in any and every direction in order to bring some comfort to Dane and help her in some way. Underneath the panic, she did remember her own pain, but right now, Dane was at the forefront of her mind and would continue to be until she was sure that Danny was all right.

"Let me finish the tea, please," the younger woman requested in a tiny voice.

Nicole nodded and retrieved the mug. She put it back to Dane's lips. The cup was taken by a shaky bronze hand, but Nicole made sure to keep a grip on it when she noticed some of the tea spilling out. She smiled at Dane, whose eyes were still half-lidded and locked on the cup that she seemed to be having a problem holding. The musician seemed to be more focused on the tea than anything else, which was fine by Nicole.

"Do you want more?" Nicole asked when Dane was done with her beverage. "Should I make you some soup? Do you think you could eat?" the caregiver inquired quickly, but in a tender tone.

"No, but didn't think I could drink either," Dane answered honestly. Her voice was clearing up, not longer sounding like she was holding stones in her mouth. But, her voice was still very small.

"Well, let's try to get some soup in you. You need to warm up. Do you want another blanket? Make sure you lay down."

Dane shook her head to answer the question and then did exactly as Nicole told her. Nicole gathered that Dane just did not have any argument in her, which was why she mechanically followed orders. That was fine with Nicole because it meant that she would be able to care for Danny without worrying about the musician acting like everything was fine. It was also a clue of how bad off Dane really was since Dane typically always made it seem like she was all right, even it was clear that she was in pain.

She was able to feed Danny some soup, but Dane was not able to finish the whole bowl. Dane fell asleep right after eating, which was fine by Nicole. She put a pillow under Dane's head and another blanket on top of musician to make sure she was warm. She then set herself up for some sleep, camping out on the living room floor in her pajamas. She wanted to be close by if Danny woke up needing something, or worse- tried to sneak out again.

Dane's eyes shot open as her bladder demanded that it be emptied. She sat up, trying her best to ignore the headache ringing in her ears and the pounding in her head that felt like a sledgehammer was being smashed against her forehead. Her entire body was throbbing in agony,

but she had been ignoring that for days in order to make it through the day. She groaned and then almost tripped over something that she guessed was a fallen board or something.

She was about to curse and kick the board when she realized a few things. The first thing was that she was warm and the second thing was that she was naked. She blinked and then squinted, trying to take in her darkened surroundings, hoping that something looked familiar or that she could recall where she was. She attempted to remember what happened.

"Nick..." Dane whispered. She remembered hearing Nicole's voice. It was then that her eyes realized that she was in Nicole's living room.

She did wonder if she was in the living room, what was she bumping into on the floor? She looked down and could make a form that she was sure she would know, even if she was blind. A small smile settled onto her weary face.

"Definitely an angel," Dane decided.

She carefully stepped over Nicole and had to hold in a wince as she put her weight down on her lame leg. She willed herself to stay on her feet, even though her leg was begging to stop supporting her. She made her way to the downstairs bathroom and did her business. She took a moment to wash her face. She even managed a shower, but could only stand for a few minutes. She felt somewhat better now that she was clean and she then returned to the couch, going right back to sleep, still wrapped in her towel.

The next time Dane awoke, she could hear Nicole speaking in a low tone. She could not really make out what was being said, so she did not bother with trying to listen. She glanced around to check her surroundings, just to be sure that she was back at Nicole's place. A contented smile worked its way onto her mouth when she was sure that she was home. *Home...*

Before Dane's mind could start working and make her recall why she had left in the first place, her angel appeared before her. Worried emerald eyes fixed onto Dane and for a while Nicole could not speak. Dane could not speak either, so they had a long moment of silence.

"How do you feel?" Nicole asked in almost a whisper. Her voice was shaky and her bottom lip was trembling.

"Like shit, for everything..." Dane admitted, looking Nicole in the eye, so that the lawyer would know how sincere she was. Dane could hardly believe how much she had screwed up and she doubted that she would ever be able to forgive herself for it. She both hoped and feared that Nicole would forgive her.

Nicole was about to jump at the chance to talk about that statement and everything that it was supposed to cover, but she held off. Her first priority, she told herself, was to make sure that Danny was all right. Everything else could come after that.

"Do you need anything? I'm going to make you some oatmeal for breakfast with some apple juice, okay?" Nicole stated.

"Sounds good," Dane managed to croak out, turning her eyes to the floor and looking like her world was about to come to an end. "Can I have some headache stuff too?" *I want to ask for heartache stuff too, but she shouldn't provide me with that after I acted like such a fucking jackass.*

The redhead nodded. "Sure. Do you think you're okay to try to make upstairs to the bed? I think it might be better for you."

"I'm fine here, but I think I can make it up to the bed. Are you sure you want me there?" Dane asked, glancing up at Nicole with a curious glint in her eyes, like there was more to her question.

"Yes, I want you there," Nicole answered, both parts of the question. Her eyes spoke even louder than her words, backing up the declaration with honesty so blunt that it struck Dane like a bat.

The musician could not believe the response, even though she knew that she should have expected such a thing from an angel. She nodded to answer the question about making it upstairs and climbed to her feet, making sure to keep a hold on the blanket, somehow thinking that she might offend Nicole with her nakedness. Nicole did not say anything about the gesture and watched Dane limp heavily through the room.

"Danny, do you need help getting upstairs?" Nicole asked with concern, tilting her head to regard Danny's leg and to see if it managed to get worse during the night. She could guess what the response would be now that Danny was speaking, but she wanted to see just how bad the limb was.

"I'm fine. I think I fell on my leg or something. It's not that bad," Dane answered through gritted teeth. She was trying her best not to scream in pain with each step that she took. She did not even have the energy to put on a fake smile.

"I'll bring some ice for it too. Are you sure you can make it upstairs on your own?" the older woman pressed. She squinted her eyes, as if trying to examine Dane closely, and cocked her head to the side as she regarded Danny.

The musician forced out a charming smile and nodded while trying her best not to fall to the ground in an agonized heap. She shifted her eyes to the ground, not able to maintain eye contact with Nicole as the lawyer just stared at her, studying her as if she was a case. She marched to the stairs while Nicole made her way to the kitchen. It took Dane several long and excruciating minutes to get to the bedroom and she paused as she stood in the threshold while sweat dripped down her face.

"Danny, are you okay?" Nicole inquired, standing behind the taller woman with a tray in her hands.

"You shouldn't be helping me..." Dane answered in a low voice. She sounded a cross between confused and scared, even though intellectually, she knew that there was nothing to be afraid of and there was nothing perplexing about the situation. Logically speaking, though, and from what she knew about other human beings, Nicole should have left her to die on the lawn.

"Danny, I still love you, no matter what happened or what happens. Now, go lie down on *our* bed," Nicole gently ordered.

Just like last night, Dane could not disobey. She automatically did as she was told and settled down on the bed. Nicole placed the tray down next to the prone musician. She then went to one of the dresser drawers, pulling out some clothing.

"Do you want to get dressed?" Nicole asked while turning her attention back to Danny.

"Yes, please," Dane answered in a quiet voice.

Nicole handed the clothing to Dane and then turned away because she noticed how modest the younger woman was suddenly. Dane groaned as she tried to lift the shirt over her head, but she managed after a few tense seconds. She then slide the shorts on, careful of the tray beside her.

"You can look now," Dane said, eyeing the mattress.

Nicole turned around and walked over to the bed. She checked the tray and then sat down on the empty space at the foot on the bed. She eyed Danny, who continued to eye the mattress.

"You should eat," Nicole pressed in a soft tone.

Dane nodded in agreement and looked at the food. It was a bowl of oatmeal, apple juice, yogurt, and a diced apple waiting for her. She went for the apples first since there was some steam coming from the oatmeal. Nicole fidgeted while she watched Dane slowly eat and as the seconds ticked by her anxiety grew exponentially.

"Is it okay to talk now?" Nicole asked, unable to hold it in any longer. She needed answers; she craved an explanation.

"If you want..." Dane answered, eyes on her food.

"Can you look at me while we do talk?" Nicole requested with some hope in her voice. Her heart skipped a beat when grey eyes locked onto her form. She noticed how tired and dull the smoke-colored orbs were. "Are you really okay?" she begged to know.

"Better than I've been in days," Dane replied in a strong, sincere voice that was also very low and still somewhat scratchy.

Nicole swallowed hard because she believed Danny. "What did you do to yourself?" she asked while giving Dane's body the once-over. Since showering, the dirt was gone from Dane's form,

but scars remained. There were small cuts and nicks all over her arms, which was shown by the tank top that she was wearing. Her legs were the same, and her lame leg was very swollen and discolored-to the point that Nicole flinched when she saw it. She was amazed that injured limb looked even worse now that it was clean because it was clear just how bruised the body part was.

"It's bad..." Dane whispered when she saw where Nicole's eyes settled.

"As bad as it looks?" the attorney asked in a whisper of tone too. Her voice quivered as she posed the question, feeling so bad for Danny, even though this woman had hurt her so much. She just could not help feeling for Danny.

"Hurts a lot. I wasn't sure how much longer it would last. I just wanted it to bring me home..." Dane paused and choked back a sob. The storm in her eyes looked ready for a downpour, but she held it together. Everything hurt so much, but right now everything felt infinitely better. She wanted to focus on the present while she still had it instead of crying over the past and possibly mourning the future that she could have had.

The lawyer nodded absently. "Well, you're home now, Danny. I'm going to take care of you...if you let me." Her voice was still quiet, but strong with that promise.

Dane lost a little control from that vow. A tear rolled down a copper cheek. "I will." She made the promise in a breath, the words almost getting caught up in her emotionally tight throat.

"Good because I took off a day from work just to pamper you and nurse you back to health. Depending on how things go, I might take tomorrow too. Now, back to my question, what did you do to yourself? Last night, you said you were high or drunk or both. Are you using and drinking again, Danny?" Nicole inquired, eyes flashing with fury and concern.

Dane had the good manners to glance away and look ashamed. "I just...I just wanted it to stop hurting..." The sobs wanted to escape again, but she swallowed them down. It made her words shake and her mouth trembled while her heart clenched in her chest over and over again. She wondered if she might actually be having a heart attack.

"Wanted what to stop hurting?" Nicole asked while moving a little closer to the younger woman.

"I wanted the pain of being away from you to go away. For the first week, I was able to drown it out, ignore it, use music to cover it up..." Dane paused as her emotions tried once again to choke her up. Her entire jaw shook and the action seemed to signal a few tears that they should fall while she was trying to get herself together. She wiped the tears away before running her hand through her hair three times. Once she was certain the tears were gone, she continued. "But, damn it, by the second week, it felt like my whole life had fallen apart. This was worse than when I figured out I couldn't play my guitar the way I used to. I thought I died then, but this was truly the ninth level of Hell for me."

"So, you turn to drugs and alcohol?" Nicole huffed. She was about to go off, but she took a deep breath and told herself that Dane did not need a scolding right now. She needed love, care, and compassion. Her eyes softened and she traveled just a little bit closer to the musician.

A shaky dark hand ran through tangled ebony locks again and more tears silently fell. "I wanted something...something to make you go away. Something to forget how you felt in my arms..." She wiped her eyes again and hid her face in her hands for a moment. She then suddenly wrapped her arms around her body as if she was cold. "...Something to forget how you touched me and how it felt to touch you. Just something to forget. It used to work..." Her face scrunched up and it was clear that she was close to a breakdown. Her eyes frantically searched the air, looking for nothing at all and finding just that. She put both hands through her hair and then started pulling it.

Nicole acted quickly, reaching over and taking one of Dane's hands in her own. She regarded Danny with soft, tender eyes. "When you used before? When you were younger?"

The musician nodded like a child and then rubbed her eye with the heel of her hand in a very child-like manner. "Yes. It worked then, but then again, it really just gave me another outlet for my emotions. When I wasn't fucked up in some fashion, I could get my emotions out through my music. When I was fucked up, it let my emotions come out...or so I'm told... Hard to remember sometimes. The emotions were never nice. I was angry, all the time. This time, I wasn't angry. I was..." She trailed off, her eyes searching again, but now trying to find the right words.

"You were?" Nicole prompted, pressing Danny's hand just to remind the younger woman that she was still there.

"Sad." She found that short, simple word summed up her feelings best. Being on her own, away from Nicole was just sad. It was a perpetual type of sadness, despair that things would never get better and it ate away at all that was inside of her. She knew that only one thing could fill that void, the one thing that she had walked away from, that she felt she needed to stay away from. "I kept crying, Nick. Crying for you, for me, for us, for everything we were and everything we would never be. It killed me every second, every moment. It just kept killing me." She clutched her chest and then patted over her heart, showing what part of her was in real pain. She sounded like she was crying already, even though no tears were falling. "Then I just thought I wasn't fucked up enough, so I would do more drugs or drink more, but I just kept crying, kept being sad. No amount of liquor or weed could stop the tears," Dane said, appearing as if she was on the verge of weeping again at any moment.

"Weed? Is that the drug you did?" Nicole asked curiously. She would actually feel relieved if that was all Danny did because she thought that would be much easier to kick than if Danny had gone back to cocaine.

Dane licked her chapped lips. "I couldn't touch anything else, no matter how sad I got. I just...couldn't." *I couldn't disappoint you like that.*

"I'm glad for that. You didn't totally ruin your time sober." She wanted to be supportive right now, so she let it go for the moment, but she did plan to talk to Danny later on about drinking and smoking. She wanted Danny to cut those things out if they were going to be abused, or a problem, or cause trouble in their relationship.

Dane let out a hallow laugh and shook her head, disappointed in herself. "Funny thing is, I left here because I was scared that I would start using again, that I would get angry with you sometime."

"But, you weren't angry when you were high this time."

A dark hand went through ebony hair before settling to massage a copper forehead. "It wasn't something I planned on, but now that I think about it, I just never really have a reason to be angry with you over anything. Being apart from you is just endless sorrow, bottomless sadness. I don't want to be apart from you anymore. I hadn't wanted it since the night I left."

"Yet you managed to stay away for three fucking weeks," Nicole finally snapped, her emotions showing a little now. Her eyes flared with anger and her jaw tensed.

Grey eyes looked off to the left. "I know. You should be pissed at me for what I did, but I thought it would be better for you. Last night, I gave in under a fog of a four-day bender with almost no sleep. The sorrow was just too much and my mind forced my body to go where the suffering would end. The only thing I remember from yesterday was thinking, 'I wanna go home.' I had to go home." A couple of tears flowed down her face as she thought about just how badly she wanted to go home last night and how frightened she was, thinking that she might not have a home anymore.

"It took you that long to realize how much you wanted to be with me?" Nicole demanded to know, tears welling up in her eyes now. "That long?!" She reached up and grabbed Danny by the chin, forcing the musician to look at her. Dane flinched seeing the depth of agony that was in those usually lively emerald orbs. She was so ashamed to know that she was the one that put the hurt there, but she dared not look away.

More tears came from Dane's eyes, burning their way down her cheeks and brushing across Nicole's fingers. Dane tried to talk, but the first thing that came out of her mouth was a guttural sob. It took her a few seconds to gather herself and try again, with better results. "I knew I wanted to be with you from before we even kissed. I stayed away, thinking it would be best for you. I wanted to spare you having to deal with me when I finally fell. I told you, I've been misrepresenting myself to you. Eventually, the old Dane was going to come back! She would have hurt you!"

Olive-toned fingers clutched Dane's face to the point of pain and Nicole's usually soft, gentle voice came out as a booming yell. "You already hurt me! When you left, it hurt! It hurts all the way down to my core! I hurt in places I didn't know existed!" Nicole then flung Dane's face away from her and used the hand to hold her chest. "I hurt all over, everyday, all the time because you're gone!"

"It was for the best-" Dane did not get a chance to finish that line.

The fires of Hell roared in Nicole's green eyes. "No, it wasn't! We're both a mess! Look at you! Look at your damn leg! I've cried for a week straight and been working as late as possible to avoid having to think about you, to avoid coming home to an empty house! What the hell are you so afraid of, Danny?"

Dane swallowed hard. "...I don't want to hurt you..." she whimpered, looking and sounding like a frightened child. It was the sound and expression that gave Nicole a moment's pause. The lawyer was able to tone things down inside of herself, remembering that she was not the only person in the room that was hurt.

"Are you talking about possibly hitting me?" Nicole asked quietly.

Dane took a deep breath and raised her hand like she was going to put it through her hair. Instead, she brought it down to rest in her lap while staying focused on Nicole. "Tyler talked to you, didn't he? I bet he told you I almost killed one of my girlfriends or some bullshit like that."

"You know I never believe Tyler, so you tell me what happened. What're you so scared of?" Nicole pressed, reaching out a hand and touching Danny's good leg.

There was a moment of comfortable silence between them. Yes, both of their hearts were pumping so fast that the feelings strained their chests and hurt their ribs, but there was something about the trusting contact-Nicole being able to touch Dane's injured body-that mended some intangible force between them. Suddenly, Dane slowly nodded and moved her mouth around, preparing to speak.

Her voice was quiet, but steady and strong as she confessed. "...I did hit a girl once. She wasn't really my girlfriend. We slept together a few times, but to me that didn't make us girlfriends. We were arguing. I don't even remember what the hell we were arguing over, but she called me a monkey, that much I remember. I told you when I was high or drunk back then, I was angry. I don't even think she meant it in the way I took it, but my mind didn't have the time to process that. I just heard 'monkey' and punched her as hard as I could. I gave her a black eye. I was such a fucking asshole and I never want to be that way with you."

Nicole nodded. "Have you ever hit anyone since?"

Dane shook her head, looking much like a child again. "That one time was enough. Don't they say if it happens once, it'll happen again?"

"Did it ever happen again with you?" Nicole asked.

Dane shook her head and it would not have surprised Nicole if she answered, " No, ma'am" from the way she looked. Danny's actually response was not too far from that. "Uh-uh," she said.

"You haven't hit another woman. How old were you when this happened?"

Dane shrugged. "I dunno. Seventeen?"

"You haven't hit another woman in almost ten years. Not just a lover, but a woman in general?"

Another head shake. "Haven't hit a woman since."

"Did you think the girl was using a racial slur against you?" the redhead inquired.

Dane nodded again and felt the need to explain herself. "...In my family, ever since I can remember, they whisper that about me as I go by. 'The monkey,' 'the savage,' 'the...'" she growled, just thinking about it was enough to boil her blood. The memory of it made her so tense that a vein in her neck popped up while her eyes were a firestorm of anger, showing more than just depression for the first time that night.

Nicole began rubbing and caressing the limb under her hand. "Oh, Danny. Do they really say that?" she asked with an empathy that Danny certainly was not used to when it came to the subject.

"And worse. So, when she said it, I snapped. I don't want to snap on you," Dane said in a pleading tone. Her tears were back, streaming again, but there was a different sort of look in her eyes now. There was passion and fear; she so did not want to hurt Nicole, but she could not trust herself to not do that. The last thing in the world that she wanted was to somehow hurt Nicole in any manner, especially physically.

It was Nicole's turn to nod and she reached out to grab onto Dane's hand. She made sure to look into those troubled grey eyes as she spoke from the heart. "I have faith in you, Danny. I don't think you'll snap on me, especially if you stay away from any drugs. You were high at the time you hit this girl?"

"High as a kite on coke and drunk off my ass, but that's no excuse. I shouldn't have hit that girl."

"No, you shouldn't have, but you do understand that. Now, I have faith in you to not snap on me. You need to have faith in yourself to believe you won't snap. You also have to believe that I would never call you a monkey, especially not in the way that your family seems to mean it. I would never use any sort of racial slur against you," Nicole assured the younger woman.

"I didn't think you would!" Dane said very quickly, wanting to throw her arms up, but the movement would be too much. Besides, that action would have severed her connection with Nicole, who was still holding onto the musician's hand.

There were a couple of seconds of silence. "Danny...could I ask you a personal question?" Nicole sounded shy, unsure if it was a polite thing that she wanted to ask.

"Of course."

"Are you adopted?" Nicole asked.

"Adopted?" Dane blinked in confusion and then she remembered that Nicole had seen her parents. "Oh! No, those are my birth parents. You see, my mother, as quiet as it's kept, is actually mulatto. Her parents died when she was a baby and her mother's parents raised her, trying to cover up her father's side of things. They're an old money family and they looked at it as scandalous that their daughter had a baby with a black man. So, my mother doesn't really acknowledge her father." Dane shrugged to show that she thought it was a silly thing to do.

"I didn't know people still did things like that in this day and age," Nicole admitted, not caring about how naive she looked in front of Danny since she knew that the musician would not judge her.

Dane nodded. "They're weird and racist as hell if you haven't guessed. With my mom, it helps that you can't tell she's mixed. It gives her a way of denying things and deny she does." She snorted and rolled her eyes, thinking about her mother's behavior. "It wasn't an issue until I was born. You can imagine why." She smiled and got a chuckle out of Nicole.

"You took after your grandfather when it came to skin tone," Nicole guessed.

"I'm the only one in my family that looks like this. Instead of acknowledging that my mother is mulatto, my father preferred to accuse her of sleeping around. He wanted a paternity test, which he got, and it told him that I was his daughter. Instead of believing the test, he wanted another one, which said the same thing. So, now he basically accuses the tests of being liars and my mother's a liar for saying that I'm his kid," Dane explained as best she could.

"You look like him," Nicole accidentally blurted out. She hoped that she did not offend the musician.

Dane laughed. "I know I do, but he claims he doesn't see it. He's one of the main people that call me monkey when I'm not around and has been since I was little. Hell, when I was little, I thought that was one of my many nicknames and it took me a while to learn different. When they came here, he was being his usual condescending self, saying I stole you from Tyler. Hell, he was under the impression that you were Tyler's fiancée." She rolled her eyes.

"Tyler called them. He called my parents too. He was trying to start trouble and he succeeded."

Dane locked eyes with Nicole. "He been bothering you?" she inquired with a scowl.

"He thought that we would get back together and he was trying to get me back, but I told him where to go. Did your parents remind you of this past thing? Is that what made you run away?" Nicole inquired, eyes begging to know.

The younger woman nodded. "My father did. He made it seem much worse than it was, but I expected that. He always does that. He only heard about it because Bryan, my former best friend, told him about it. Bryan's told him a lot of things about me that my dad twists for his own sick mind. I let him get to me, though. Whenever I let my father get to me, he plants a little bomb in my head, leaving me to think on it long and hard until it explodes. This one exploded with fear

that I could hurt you one day, that I could turn back into the angry punk who hit that girl. But, if you're going to take the chance, I will too."

Danny looked shy and was not sure what to say now. Everything seemed to be on pause as she waited for Nicole's response, which took seconds that seemed like centuries to Dane. Suddenly, a bright smile lit up from the room and it was from Nicole. This brought a monster grin to Dane's face.

"I'm glad for that. You should have faith in yourself. Now, eat up while I get something for your leg." Nicole lightly patted Dane's aforementioned appendage while continuing to smile.

Dane was too happy to argue. She turned her attention to the oatmeal while trying not to let her mind wander to the fact that she was getting a second chance, despite how stupid she acted. Nicole smiled more when she saw that Danny was still being compliant, so she reached over and caressed Danny's cheek for a moment before getting up to get things for Dane's leg.

They existed in a comfortable quiet as Dane ate and Nicole rubbed her leg down. Dane winced a bit as Nicole massaged the sore limb with some sort of balm. Once she was done rubbing the leg down, she put ice on the scarred knee, keeping a couple of baggies of ice on the knee with ace bandages. By then, Dane was done with all of her food. Nicole moved the tray to the side and then settled in the space that the tray had been occupying. Dane wasted no time putting her arms around the lawyer and pulling her closer, causing both of them to sigh.

"I missed this so much," Dane whispered and she kissed the side of Nicole's head.

"I did too. Where have you been staying since you left the house?" Nicole asked curiously while curling into Dane, being mindful not to put too much pressure on the injured woman.

"The street mostly, condemned buildings, park benches, little crawl spaces, and places like that. Cut myself on a lot of shit while I was out there. I didn't feel up to bothering anyone for a place to stay for a few days. I used to wander around from family member to family member. They really don't like me, but they let me stay because they think it'll get them on my parents' good side." Dane shot her lover a crooked, mischievous smile.

"You mean they think it'll get them into you parents' wallets?" Nicole guessed.

"Yup, my mom is from old money and my dad is actually a very successful lawyer in defending very rich assholes. My relatives are nice to me to a certain extent, thinking it'll help with my parents. I doubt it helps, but it's something I'm not above taking advantage of for a couple of days, if only to grab a shower and a free meal."

Nicole nodded in understanding. "I've dated people like that."

"I'm sure Tyler was one of those people. I'm not gonna be like that," Dane promised in a strong voice.

"I never thought you were. You're one of the only people that I'm certain likes me just for who I am, not because I have money, not because I'm pretty, not because I'm smart, and not because I'll bend over backwards to try to please you. That's why I love you, Danny," Nicole explained, staring deeply into smoke-colored eyes. She thought it was good to remind Danny that she was in love with the musician.

"I love you too, Nick. I'm sorry I hurt you by leaving. I'll never leave again, unless you tell me you want me to," Dane vowed while caressing Nicole's side and arm.

Nicole smiled and curled in closer to Danny, sharing their body warmth and mending their broken hearts. She placed her hands around Danny's waist, setting her palm against the musician's abdomen. She gave a little squeeze to Danny, showing her approval of that idea.

"Honey," Nicole said with a little pout on her face.

"Yes?" Dane was settling in, ready to close her eyes and just enjoy the closeness between them, but the lawyer was about to knock her slightly off balance.

"You haven't been eating well. The little round part of you is gone," Nicole teased, an amused grin on her face. She drew a circle around Danny's completely flat stomach. She really did miss the little pouch that Danny managed when she was living at the house.

"You know, most people would like that her girlfriend has abs."

"And I'm sure you like mine, but you don't have abs, honey. You're just thin. Still, I like it," Nicole assured her love, continuing to draw her circles around Dane's bellybutton. Her fingers wandered close to the musician's tattoo, but stayed in the area of her navel.

Dane smiled. "You just love me for my body."

"Aw, you found me out," Nicole riposted. She was close to grinning, happy to have back their banter, happy to just have Danny back.

Dane suddenly yawned. "Do you think you're up for a nap?"

"As long as I can stay right where I am, I could sleep forever."

They fell asleep with smiles on their faces. Nicole awoke first and watched Danny in her sleep. She could not help settling as close as possible to the musician and caressing her, just to feel her and know that she was really there. Eventually, she managed to tear herself away from Danny to go make a light lunch. She also checked on the younger woman's leg before waking her up. She smiled a bit, thinking that the limb looked better already, but it would definitely need more ice.

"Danny, baby, lunch," Nicole whispered while gently shaking the musician awake. She also made it a point to rub Dane's head, just in case Danny had gotten back into the habit of waking up in a total panic.

"Hmm..." Dane turned in the direction of the sweet sounding voice speaking to her and also leaned forward to get more of that delicious petting. She smiled before opening her eyes. "I thought it was a dream that I was back here," she muttered through a yawn.

Nicole smiled and kissed her girlfriend's cheek. "It's no dream, honey. I'm glad you're back. Now, I want you to eat."

Dane nodded and turned her attention to see what was for lunch. Grilled cheese, tomato soup, and more apple juice. Dane attacked the apple juice first, taking a big gulp. She was glad that her stomach was finally keeping things down; she suspected having real food made things a lot easier on her poor stomach. Nicole joined her, having a sandwich of her own.

"So, you said that Tyler told your parents about us. What did they think?" Dane asked, more trying to make conversation than anything else.

"Considering the fact that Tyler made you sound like a raving maniac, they weren't happy to know I was in a relationship with you. They also think I lied about you being just my roommate. I don't care what they think, though." Nicole locked eyes with Danny and the musician was happy to see those emerald eyes shining at her with sincerity. "Danny, I love you, enough to not care what my parents think of you," the attorney stated soundly, putting down her sandwich. She then placed her hands on Dane's forearms and kept her eyes on the copper-tone face.

Dane grinned, having a feeling that she looked like a complete idiot and she did. But, Nicole was happy that Danny was her idiot. She smiled back, which only made Dane smile more.

"Danny...do you think you might want to meet my parents and maybe my friends?" Nicole requested in a shy voice. She wanted them to see the Danny that she saw, so her parents could stop worrying and her friends could see how her taste finally improved.

Dane's mouth dropped open and she almost dropped her sandwich. "You want me to meet your parents?" she asked in disbelief, her mouth shaking and her words doing the same.

Nicole balked, thinking that she might have just put too much in her recovering lover. "If you want to! I don't want to put any pressure on you. I just think that if they meet you, they'll relax a little. Tyler scared them really bad about what type of person you are. I want them to see he's just a dirty rotten liar," she reasoned.

"I guess if you think I'm parent-meeting material, I'll do it. I don't want them doubting your judgment just because Tyler's a dipshit. When do you want me to meet them?"

"Soon. First, I want you to get better and then I want to talk them a bit before hand. Then, I'll bring them over here for dinner. We'll have home-court advantage," Nicole remarked with an amused smile.

"If that's what you want, angel. I'm here for you. I just hope I don't embarrass you."

"As long as you're your usual self, you'll be fine. You're a sweetheart, Danny. You know it and I know it. So, just be your usual self when they come over. After you meet my parents, then we'll work out how you can meet Mina and Clara."

Dane nodded. She was ready for anything as long as she could stay with Nicole. She now knew that Nicole was all she needed in life, all she had in this world, and she was going to keep Nicole no matter what. She was going to work to make the relationship last.

Nicole took a deep breath as she approached her father's office. She was packed up to go home, coat on and briefcase in hand. She was hoping to catch her father as he was leaving too, and she did. He almost walked over her as he was exiting his office.

"Daddy, watch out," Nicole warned him and he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Wow, Nikki, I'm glad you said something or I definitely would've gone right through you," Raymond remarked with a sheepish look on his face. He was also happy to hear his daughter saying something to him beyond making a request that he leave her general area.

"I noticed. Daddy, can I talk to you? I mean, seriously talk to you?" Nicole requested with determination cut into her face.

Raymond noticed the expression and wondered what was so serious, not that it truly mattered. He was just glad Nicole was speaking to him! "Sure, of course. Do you want to step into my office or would it be better if we did this some place out of the office?"

"Outside would be great."

Raymond nodded and they walked outside together. They strolled a short distance to a bar that most employees of the firm frequented after work. They found a table in the back, sitting down and waving off a waiter as he came to take their order. They ignored the crowd and no one bothered them; it was the smart thing to do.

"What do you want to talk about, Nikki?" Raymond asked.

"I want to talk about Danny. I know you believe every foul thing that Tyler said and more, and I don't want you to. I love Danny and she makes me very happy," Nicole began, but her father was quick to interrupt, jumping in before she could make her point.

"Nikki, you haven't know this Dane or Danny or whatever the hell her name is long enough to know you love her-" It was Nicole's turn to cut him off now, slicing into his speech before he tried to downplay her feelings or make it sound like she did not know what she wanted or what was best for her.

Nicole frowned as she spoke sharply. "That's where you're wrong, Daddy." Her face was fierce and she tapped her finger hard on the table for him to get she meant it. "I know I love her and I know I want to spend my life with her, and I'm going to do that regardless of what you and Mommy think of her. She is a very sweet person and she's nothing like Tyler said. Tyler is a manipulative liar, even for a lawyer," she quipped before leaning all the way back in her seat, waiting for his next move.

"Nikki, think this through. Tyler should know his cousin well-" He started an old argument that had been used before only to be cut off again. He flinched from the way she cut into his speech, almost like she physically cut him.

"Should, but doesn't. Why are you so willing to take his word over mine? Do you trust him so much more than me?" she demanded with a hard look in her eyes.

Raymond shook his head. "Nikki, it's not like that-"

"Do you not want me to be happy?" It was not really a question and the tight look on her face, as if she was accusing him of condemning her.

"Of course I want you to be happy!" That was the honest truth and they both knew that. Still, his eyes begged her to believe him. He leaned forward across the table, as if being closer would help.

"Then starting with this, you have to let me make my own decisions and you have to trust me." She paused and he gave an almost mindless nod. He was following everything that she said, though. He did not want her to mistake his concern for anything more than it was and he never wanted her to question his feelings for her. She smiled at him a little, to ease some of the raw, worried tension out of his body before she continued. "Danny is nothing like Tyler said. Yes, she has a past, but very few people don't have one." Her entire face softened and her eyes lit up at the thought of her lover. "But, Danny is kind, sweet, and gentle. She makes me breakfast every morning and dinner every night, and this was before we started dating. I didn't lie to you either. Danny started out as my roommate, by accident too. She showed up one day, looking for Tyler, and then when I kicked Tyler out, he failed to take his cousin with him," Nicole explained.

Raymond arched an eyebrow. "He left her in your house?" he asked, bewildered. *How do you just leave your cousin in the house of a person she doesn't know? And how the hell do you just leave the woman you claim you love with someone you claim is dangerous?!*

"Yes. She thought it was his house and she was coming for a visit. He didn't take her with him when he left, didn't explain anything to her. That's the kind of person Tyler is," Nicole insisted, sounding and looking disgusted as she thought Tyler.

"Tyler doesn't seem so irresponsible. How did she end up staying with you, though? Why didn't she just go back home?" Raymond pressed, not understanding how any of this happened.

Nicole waved his question off and spoke to her father in an eerily calm tone, as if showing she had complete control of the conversation. "That's not relevant to the argument. Right now, I just need you to know that Danny makes me happy. I want you to get to know her, through her and not her jackass of a cousin, before you pass judgment on her. She really is a wonderful person." She paused again and smiled so brightly, looking almost like a totally different person and it took her father aback. Her eyes lit up again and as she spoke, her voice was filled with a joy that he never heard from her before. "Before I met her, I didn't know what happiness truly was, Daddy. Not this constant, wonderful light feeling that flows through me everyday just because of her. I can't give it up." She shook her head and her face was tight again, making her seriousness clear. "I went without her for the last few weeks and it was Hell. I refuse to go through it again."

He squinted and his eyes searched her face, trying to find answers to so many questions. "These last few weeks? You were so miserable because she was gone?"

"Yes, Danny left me and the house after that incident with her parents. I can't go through that again, Daddy," she stated soundly while shaking her head. "Not for you, not for Mommy, not for anyone. I need Danny in my life. It's either something that you accept or you'll just have to learn to ignore it," she informed him in a tone that made it clear there were no other choices. She was not going to be dictated to anymore, especially not when it came to her love life.

Raymond sighed and nodded to show that he understood. He could just tell there was no room for an argument with her-she sounded so much like her mother, he thought-but, he did share his opinion. "I know you have to feel strongly about her if you're willing to go through all of this. I suppose I could try for you, Nikki. Still, I think that Tyler would know his cousin better than you would."

"I don't understand what makes you think that. Just because they're family doesn't mean they're close," Nicole pointed out, tapping heavily on the table with her index finger. Of course, before meeting Danny and seeing how her parents treated her, Nicole would have thought her reasoning was ridiculous, so she knew that her father would find it a bit shocking.

Raymond's forehead wrinkled in confusion. He was not thinking about what he saw from Dane's father when he was at Nicole's house. He was thinking about examples in his family right now, which was why he was still confused. "I guess you're right. I don't see how a person could not know his cousin, especially if they're about the same age."

She knew where her father's mind was. "Daddy, not every family is close like the ones you and Mommy were raised in. Not every family is like ours. You were there and you saw what type of man Danny's father is to her. Does that look like a close family?"

The frown that cut across his face would have frightened away small children. "You're right..." he conceded. He wanted to say more, but he did not know Nicole's stance on Dane's family and he did not want to offend her considering how much bite she had in her because of his stance on Dane before.

"Daddy, even if Tyler did know Danny well, he doesn't like her and he's been telling outrageous lies about her because of that. It doesn't help that he thinks she stole me from him, which I can assure you was not the case. I was done with Tyler long before Danny walked into the picture."

"Why?" Raymond leaned forward slightly and a curious look overtook his features. "Why were you done with Tyler? Your mother and I thought that he was going to be the one for you."

Nicole scoffed loudly and rolled her eyes, which flashed with indignation. "You wanted him to be the one for me. Mommy definitely just wants any man I date to be the one, but that's not the case. You don't know Tyler like I do. You only interact with him at work and you don't even see him much there since you're working and on a different floor anyway, but I get to see him on a personal level and it's not a pretty sight. He's underhanded and shifty. Hell, he was actually stealing from me while we were dating," she stated. Usually, she would not have told such worrying news to her overprotective father, but she wanted him to understand why Tyler was gone and never, ever coming back into her life.

"Stealing from you?" While his voice was incredulous, his subconscious made his face hard and his emerald eyes narrowed.

She scowled because it sounded like he did not believe her...again! "Yes, stealing from me. He denies it and I can't prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt, but if there are only two people in a house and money is missing and I know I didn't do anything with it, it has to be the other person. I think he was doing it just to be a cheap jackass. He wasn't stealing large amounts, although I'm sure it added up over time. I was with him for a year, after all," she said, trying not to think about what Tyler did do with all of those small sums that he disappeared from her house over the months they had been dating. She could not help sounding disgusted by him and his actions and the fact that she had to explain what happened to her father because he did not seem to believe her.

Raymond was silent and blinked a few times, trying to get over his shock. He replayed what she said over and over in his head and it sounded pretty logical to him. He could not see why she would ever make such a thing up, but the sheer stupidity of Tyler's action was hard to wrap his mind around, which explained his question. "Are you sure?"

Nicole huffed. "Yes, I'm sure. Money was missing every time I had him over. He's not a nice person, Daddy. Just believe me on that." Emerald eyes pled desperately for understanding. "Believe me on something..." she begged, losing some of her composure because of the hurt that came from her parents always second-guessing her and making it seem like they did not trust her.

Raymond was nodding before he realized it, but when he did, he continued nodding. "I believe you, Nikki. I'm sorry you didn't feel safe saying something sooner." He reached across the table and took her hand, squeezing her smaller hand in a reassuring manner.

She squeezed his hand back, feeling his sincerity. "I'm grown, Daddy. I don't need to tell you and Mommy everything about me now. I could handle Tyler just fine on my own, but then he started going behind my back and talking to you two. There's no reason for him to do that."

"He said he was concerned," Raymond argued, even though now that he stopped and processed what happened, he silently admitted that it was very juvenile for Tyler to call them rather than talk to Nicole.

"Of course he said that because he couldn't very well tell you guys the truth. Instead, he has to play like he's doing the good deed for the day. Daddy, if you can, I want you and Mommy to meet Danny. You can see for yourself what type of person she is and you can judge her from that."

"You know, it'll be hard to convince your mother to do that. She liked Tyler a lot and she never wants to meet your girlfriends," Raymond reminded Nicole, not that she needed he reminder. They both paused and cringed at several memories that hit them about times when Nicole brought home girlfriends. She recalled how her mother hid the night of her prom instead of coming out to take pictures because Nicole was escorting another girl to the dance.

"Will you talk to her?" Nicole begged. "Danny has already agreed and she's already planning a menu on what to cook. Come by Friday night and just see, please!"

A large hand scratched a squared jaw. "I'll try my best, Nikki, but I don't know if I can talk your mother in to this agreement."

Nicole smiled. "I'm sure you could if you put your mind to it."

Raymond chuckled a bit, but he was going to try. He could see just how much Danny meant to Nicole through her eyes alone, but to hear her speak-her voice laced with passion-about Danny, told him even more. He had to meet Danny and he had better like her because she was there to stay; he could tell that much. He was going to have to get his wife to understand that and accept it as much as she could. *Damn, I've got to work a miracle there!* And then, he made a mental note to check on Tyler at work, see what the younger man was really doing with his time.

"Are you sure this is good enough?" Dane asked while tugging nervously on her plain black, short sleeve shirt.

"You look fine, honey," Nicole assured the musician while smoothing out her own clothing. She decided to wear a dress because she knew that her mother liked seeing her in such attire. She hoped that wearing a dress would get her points with her mother. To appease her mother even more, it was a dress that they had brought on their last shopping trip together, celebrating one of Nicole's victories in court. It was a white and yellow sundress that was designed to look like curves in sand.

"And you're sure they'll be fine with salmon?" Dane inquired, mentally going over the things that she *could have* made.

"The way you make it, yes, they'll be perfectly happy with salmon."

"Should I have brought different shoes?" Dane glanced down at her black leather loafers, which were partially covered by her khakis.

"Baby, you're fine!" Nicole tried to assure her nervous girlfriend for the umpteenth time, smiling as she spoke. She knew that Danny was anxious because she had never met anyone's parents before, but she thought that Danny was taking things way too seriously.

"I want to make a good first impression!" Dane actually whined. *I want these people to like me!*

"You'll be fine." At that, the bell rang, so they both knew that Danny had to be fine or they were both in trouble. They both knew that if Nicole's parents did not like Danny, Nicole would never hear the end of it.

The couple rushed to the door; of course, Dane limped heavily as she moved because her leg and knee were still healing. They took a moment to compose themselves and run one last check on things before Nicole opened the door. Dane was surprised that she did not faint as soon as she laid eyes on Nicole's parents. She was happy that she managed to stay on her feet as Nicole motioned for her parents to come in.

"Mom, Dad, I'm so happy that you decided to come. I'd like to introduce you to my soul-mate, Danny Wolfe." Nicole took Dane's hand in her own. "And, Danny, I would like you to meet my mother and father, Kate and Raymond Cardell." She made a sweeping motion toward her parents with her free hand.

"Kathleen," Kate corrected her daughter, eyes locked on Dane just so the musician knew the hostile vibes coming from her in monstrously powerful, venomous waves was directed right at Danny.

Dane glanced right over the resentment. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I've heard a lot about you." She reached out and shook Kate's hand, even though the hand was not even offered. Kate pulled away quickly as soon as she realized she was being touched, which did not faze Dane at all. She then turned her attention to Raymond, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Now, is it Danny or Dane?" Raymond asked, sounding polite enough while giving Danny a firm handshake. He was impressed with her grip.

"It's Danny to those who are near and dear to me and Dane to everyone else," the musician replied.

"Danny it is then," Raymond declared with a smile, which brought a smile to Nicole's face. Kate glared at her husband, which he ignored.

"Good to know, sir," Danny replied with a smile of her own. *One down, one to go.*

"Let's go to table since dinner's totally ready. Danny put a lot of effort into the salmon tonight, so the least we can do is eat it while it's hot," Nicole quipped.

"You cooked?" Raymond asked Dane.

"She cooks almost every night," Nicole chimed in proudly.

"Nikki, why don't you take your mother to the table? I'd like a minute alone with Danny," Raymond said, glancing at the aforementioned woman.

"Daddy-" Nicole began sternly, but she did not get the chance to finish.

"It's all right, Nick. I'll be fine and if not, at least dinner's ready," Dane joked. She had a feeling that Raymond wanted to give her a lecture that only a father could...she had seen them on television. She had never been a part of one, though. She hoped that she did not screw it up since he seemed to like her, or at least he was trying to like her.

Nicole did not question Danny, knowing the inquisition that her father was going to do was going to happen no matter what. Better it happen sooner rather than later. So, Nicole led her mother away, even though Kate resisted a little, trying to stick around for the carnage. Raymond's smile faded as soon as he was alone with Dane, who gulped when she saw the severe change in his demeanor. *Maybe he doesn't like me and it was a damned good act when Nick was here.*

"Okay, Danny, let's get this straight, I want Nikki to be happy. She says that you make her happy and from what I can tell, she's actually right. What I don't want is for you to do something stupid and she ends up in that same state that she was in a few days ago. You obviously mean a lot to her, making you responsible for a lot. So, if I see my little girl unhappy, I'm holding you responsible," Raymond stated in a hard tone while pointing at the musician.

"Sounds very fair, sir," Dane concurred with a nod.

"Now, I don't think that you're the absolute darling that Nicole makes you out to be, but I doubt you could be the absolute demon that Tyler made you into either, not with the sparkle you put in Nikki's face. I just want to make sure we're clear on a few things. You're never to bring drugs anywhere near this house." No room for an argument there.

Dane's response was swift and decisive. "I promise."

"No hookers either."

"I have never and never plan to use hookers, sir," Dane said with a sobering sincerity.

"No strippers or other seedy characters."

"Done."

"You will try to live up to these expectations that Nikki has of you," he commanded.

"I will try my best, sir," she vowed in a strong tone.

"Now then, I'm going to give you a tentative, trial run," Raymond remarked, but nothing in his demeanor hinted that he was joking. "If in the end I feel like you're worth it, I'll talk to my wife and try to convince her. As you might guess, she's only here tonight to see Nikki."

Dane nodded. "I would appreciate that, sir, and I'm going to try my best to get you in my corner."

Raymond wanted so badly to come down on Danny, but the respectful manner that she had about her made it impossible for him. She seemed humbled before him; something that never happened with someone that Nicole was dating. There was no hint at all of typical annoying arrogance that usually oozed off Nicole's partners. He decided to end his speech there, not seeing the point in laying it on thick for Danny. He recalled that when Nicole was dating Tyler, he had not spoke to Tyler at all, just taking for granted that the young professional would take care of his daughter. He frowned while thinking about how wrong he had been; he just hoped that he was not wrong about Danny.

The pair walked off to join their ladies in the dining room. The couples sat on opposite sides of the rectangular table. Raymond and Kate took in the meal, which was already laid out on plates and in their places. The meal looked almost professionally done with salmon, pilaf rice, and mixed vegetables on the plate. There were hot dinner-rolls in the center of the table and Nicole poured a glass of wine for herself and her parents. Danny had apple juice.

"You cook really well, Danny. Where'd you learn to do it?" Raymond asked, hoping to break the ice.

"I mostly just follow the recipes in books. This is sort of a mix between me and Nicole's cooking. She told me what type of spices and stuff to use that weren't in the book," Dane explained with a shrug.

"Well, you do a good job. Doesn't she, Kate?" Raymond said.

"Nikki probably made the food," Kate assumed in a cold tone. From that answer they could all guess what type of night it was going to be, but Kate was not done yet. She had a follow-up question. "So, Dane, what type of work do you do and are you just after Nikki's money?"

Nicole groaned while Dane tried to figure out how to answer that question without making it seem like Kate was right. Raymond watched as Danny kept her cool under his wife's intense and hard questioning. It certainly was going to be a long night, but they had faith that they would survive.

16: Beginning

Nicole groaned and rolled over in bed, flopping on top of a very nude Dane. The musician moaned from the contact and her arms automatically went around her mate. Nicole snuggled closer to Danny, burrowing her face in Danny's neck, wanting to revel in the soft, sweet-smelling skin for as long as possible. She took a deep breath, which tickled Dane's flesh and made the taller woman laugh.

"Are you sniffing me?" Dane asked in a whisper of a tone, eyes opening partially to see a mass of auburn hair buried in her neck.

"Maybe..." Nicole replied while blatantly sniffing her human-mattress. She loved the way her girlfriend smelled. There was something about Danny's natural aroma that was so...her. To Nicole, Danny smelled just like she should, subtle, laidback, almost like a lazy summer afternoon with nothing about her being overpowering. It was intoxicating.

"You get stranger by the day." Although if asked, she would admit that she sniffed Nicole every now and then. She especially liked the way that Nicole smelled right after hot showers and she also enjoyed the way that Nicole smelled after they made love.

"I'm just trying to commit as much of you to memory as I can, so I can make it through the day. You do remember it's a long day for me, right?" the lawyer asked while allowing her fingertips to dance along Danny's side. She doubted that she would ever get enough of the feel of her girlfriend.

"Of course I remember. I never forget anything about you. You'll be all right, just like you were the last couple of times. It's me that has to make it through torturous hours alone in the quiet still of the house," Dane dramatically complained, giving Nicole a squeeze around the waist, which earned a giggle from the smaller woman.

"Please, you probably light off fireworks and have blockbuster parties when I'm not here to nag you about things."

Dane kissed the top of Nicole's head. "Since when do you nag me to do anything?"

"Oh, those trips where I had to drag you to the doctor's office kicking and screaming wasn't nagging? Good to know. I'm going to do it more often, then," Nicole remarked, knowing it would make her lover adorably nervous.

"You wouldn't dare! That physical therapist is evil!" Dane stated with heartfelt emotion that made her girlfriend want to laugh.

"Baby, she's not evil. She's helping you get your hand stronger and helping you with your leg and knee, so you should be happy about that instead of giving that woman such a hard time."

"Nope, don't wanna."

Nicole giggled at the childish response; it was made for the sole purpose of getting her to laugh. When all was quiet again, Nicole ran her hands up and down Dane's bare side. Dane halted the movement by placing her hands over Nicole's busy ones.

"Don't start something you can't finish. You have to get up in a few minutes," Dane warned the lawyer.

"I could call in sick," Nicole suggested with a sly smile.

"No, you're not going to call in sick. You have class tonight too, so you're going to have to leave the house eventually."

Nicole kissed Danny's neck; it was a long, wet kiss meant to seduce. "I don't have to go to class either."

Dane whimpered, but she managed to stay strong and pull away. "Yes, you do. School just started and it won't look good for you to miss a day so early. Besides, what if you really get sick or something? You can't miss a lot of days," she reminded her lover.

"You're right, honey." Nicole pouted. "I hate it when you're right."

"I know. That's why I don't make it a point to be right often. C'mon. You get in the shower and I'll start on breakfast. I'll make you an egg sandwich with sausage," Dane hummed, smiling because she knew that she had her girlfriend.

Nicole sighed. "Fine. You do drive a hard bargain."

"I know I do, but I'll make it up to you with lunch."

Nicole smiled and leaned up to give Danny a "proper" good morning kiss, showing her approval in the offer. Dane moaned loudly as Nicole took command of her mouth and controlled the kiss. Dane submitted to her lover's will for almost a minute before she pushed back, trying to take over. Nicole battled with Dane before the musician pulled away.

"No, no, no, we've got to get out of bed!" Dane chastised herself and her girlfriend. She knew that if they continued on as they were Nicole would be late for work.

"Party-popper," Nicole teased, but she was finally making moves to get out of bed.

Dane sighed and took a few deep breaths while watching Nicole cover her nude form with a nearby robe. The cloth teased Danny's senses by leaving very little to the imagination. *Damn, being responsible was hard.*

Dane was not able to get out of bed until Nicole was tucked away in the bathroom adjacent to the bedroom. She yawned and stretched, a few joints popping, and a couple of bones cracking to accompany the sound of the shower starting. Dane had scanned the room for her clothing,

finding her boxers near the closet, all the way across the room. She could not help chuckling while remembering how the underwear got there. She did not even bother looking for her tee-shirt and just fetched a new one from her dresser drawer. After sliding on the new tee-shirt, she grabbed a fresh pair of boxers to avoid tempting Nicole when she came down for breakfast.

Once she was dressed, Dane made her way downstairs while going through a mental checklist of what she needed to do that day. Since Nicole was going to be out late, having class that night, it would be the perfect night to do laundry. It would keep her occupied while she was alone in the house.

"God, this woman makes me happy to do her laundry. I've been bewitched!" Danny mentally joked. She hoped that the spell never wore off if that was the case.

She gathered the items that she was going to need for breakfast and also what she was going to need for Nicole's lunch. She packed the lunch first; it was leftovers from dinner, as it almost always was. She dropped two pudding cups, chocolate and vanilla, into the lunch bag while making a mental note to go shopping later on in the day. Iced tea was the beverage for the day and since Nicole was going to be out for most of the day thanks to graduate school, she put a fruit cup in there for the lawyer to snack.

With lunch packed, Dane started on breakfast. By the time she was done with the eggs, Nicole was in the kitchen and pouring them both some orange juice. They had breakfast together as always, talking about any and everything that came to mind. Dane walked Nicole to the door and sent her off after giving her a deep, loving kiss.

By the time Nicole was out of the driveway, Dane was already going about the house to pick up any dirty clothes that had somehow not made it to the hamper. She had a couple of hours to kill before she had to get to a music lesson and she figured clothes hunting would do just that. After that, she planned to do the grocery shopping. Once she was done with that, she would get to the laundry, and then she was not too sure what she was going to do with the rest of her time since Nicole was not going to be home until about nine-thirty at night.

A smile suddenly worked its way to her face as she got an idea of just what she should do. *"Nick'll kill me for sure,"* she thought, still smiling up a storm.

Nicole yawned and rubbed her eyes. She glanced at her clock, finding that it was time for most of the office employees to go home. She would have been running out the doors right with them, but there was no point to it. She had class in an hour and there was no point to her going home since it took her that long to get home with rush-hour traffic.

Raymond poked his head into Nicole's office. "Nikki, sweetheart, are you going home?"

"No, Daddy. I told you before that I have class on Mondays and Wednesdays," Nicole answered. She found that her parents had very selective memories now when it came to the days that she

had school. It let her know their opinions remained the same on her going back to school for her chemistry degree, but she did not care. She got the support that she needed and she was going to get that degree. After that, she was going to do her best to get the hell out of practicing law.

"Oh, right. It really doesn't make much sense for you to be taking classes again, Nikki. You've got the degrees you need," Raymond commented.

"Not the ones I want, though," she countered in a calm tone. She was beyond getting upset with her parents when they brought up the subject because she knew that they were not going to agree with her. There was no point to debate the issue, since it was not an issue to her because she was going to go to school.

Raymond frowned slightly and silently conceded the argument once again. He found that he had been conceding to his daughter quite a bit lately. It was not something that he enjoyed since he felt like he had always had such a good relationship with his daughter. It felt a little like their relationship was declining because Nicole was doing things that he and Kate disagreed with. They did not understand why her personality had shifted so much and they were having a hard time dealing with it; he was dealing with it way better than Kate was, though.

He eased her door shut and marched away from the door because he was not sure what else to say to Nicole. He did not know what to make of her wanting a chemistry degree when she already had a career as a lawyer; a career that she was brilliant at. He was trying to accept that it was something she wanted to do for herself, but he just did not understand it. He did not think it was as bad as Kate did because his wife at first took it as a personal betrayal, like Nicole betrayed them by stepping out of their shadow. Kate figured that Danny had managed to get Nicole to go back to school and was trying to turn Nicole against her parents. Raymond did not think that things were that deep, but it was hard to argue against her once she got an idea in her head.

Kate was sure that Nicole's change in personality was due to Dane and accused Danny of stealing Nicole from them. Now, Raymond would concede that Danny was probably the reason that Nicole was changing so much, but he was not willing to think of it as a completely bad thing like Kate was. He knew that Dane was good for Nicole's emotional wellbeing, but he still did not like disagreeing with Nicole so much over the graduate school issue.

Raymond shook the thoughts away, not wanting to waste time on something that he could not solve on his own. He had his briefcase in hand and his coat was already on. He was heading home for the night like most others in the firm. He made it to the main hall and saw there was a commotion rising in the lobby.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" Tyler's bellow could probably be heard through out the whole building.

Raymond made his way over to things, wondering what was causing Tyler to raise his voice to very inappropriate levels. Upon closer inspection, he saw that Tyler was yelling at Danny. A small crowd was watching the scene, wondering what was going on. Having an audience did not

seem to stop Tyler; in fact, he seemed to be happy that he could humiliate his cousin in front of so many people.

"We don't have handouts for bums!" Tyler continued on. He wanted everyone to know that Dane was a lowly person and he wanted them to look down on her, just like he did.

Dane eyed her cousin in a bored manner, not even bothering to yell back at him. Tyler's face was bright red from raising his voice. He did not even notice the crowd that gathered around were not on his side and looking down on Dane, but actually wondering if Tyler was about to make someone in the firm lose a client. Whatever Tyler was doing, it certainly was entertaining and they stayed there to keep watching.

"Tyler," Raymond called in a calm voice.

"What!" the irritated attorney demanded to know and then he turned to see who was talking to him. His expression immediately sobered.

"I think you need to take that attitude outside," Raymond ordered. He was about to inform the young lawyer that he was already on thin ice, but he figured that he would keep that on hand in case Tyler really wanted to act out.

Tyler frowned. "Why should I go outside? Dane doesn't belong here and doesn't have any business being here." He pointed at his cousin with the same regard that he would point to an object.

"Danny's fine here and has plenty of business here. I think the person that doesn't have any business here at the moment is you, so go home," Raymond stated in a calm tone.

A feather could have knocked Tyler over at that point. He looked back and forth between Dane and Raymond. He sputtered, trying his best to say something, but finding it utterly impossible. Once words failed him, he stormed off in a huff.

"Throws a temper tantrum just as well as his uncle does," Dane remarked, eyes on Raymond instead of watching her cousin leave.

"You here to surprise my daughter?" Raymond asked curiously, suppressing a smile. He could not remember a girlfriend or boyfriend surprising Nicole, so it helped Danny gain some points in his eyes, but he was also upset with her. The reason he was upset had not lost Dane any points yet, though.

"I'm trying. I thought bigmouth might blow the whole thing," the musician quipped with a half-smile.

"I'm sure he was trying. Has Nikki said anything about him bothering her?" Raymond inquired. He heard things around the office about Tyler now that he was listening out for them and he did not like what he heard. He did not like the few things that he observed when he watched the

younger man every now and then either. After the display moments ago, he was going to talk to Tyler tomorrow about his conduct while he was inside the firm because Tyler did not seem to know what it meant to be professional. If he was going to continue on as he was, he was going to end up out of a job.

Dane ran a hand through her hair. "She talks to me about Tyler as much as she talks to you about him."

He nodded. "That sounds like Nikki. Danny, can I talk to you for a few minutes before you go see her?"

She shrugged and followed behind Raymond as he returned to his office; they had to go up a few floors in the building. There were a few whispers as they walked by people to the elevator and then to his office. Dane had been up to the firm once before not too long ago, but she had remained in the lobby, waiting for Nicole to come to her. It had not been enough time for people to get a good look at her, but it did start the rumor mill for whatever reason. Nicole told Dane that she suspected the rumors were started because Tyler was going around telling people that Nicole was a "dyke" and bedding a homeless woman, so when Dane came up there, people were able to see "the homeless woman" for a moment and that was enough to get them to start swapping stories. Now that Dane was up there again, people were able to get a better look at her and start talking again.

"Close the door behind you," Raymond instructed Dane as they entered his office.

She silently nodded and closed the door as soon as she crossed the threshold of the office. She glanced around for a quick moment, taking in the dark woods that decorated his office. It was rich, like she expected of Raymond. She could only imagine how decedent Kathleen's office looked.

"Danny, did you know about Nicole going back to school?" Raymond inquired with a puzzled expression on his face. He did not mean to look like that, but he just could not figure out why Nicole was going back to school and every time he thought about it, it confused him.

"Yeah, we talked about it," Dane admitted with a lazy shrug. Of course she knew, they lived in the same house and Nicole had already attended two weeks of class!

Raymond could tell Nicole going back to school was not a big deal to Danny, which he could not understand either. He scratched his forehead a little, as if that was going to help clear matters up for him. When that did not work, he decided to continue on with the discussion.

"Well, she never said anything to me or her mother. This isn't good, Danny. It's going to cut into her time at the firm, her time with you," he pointed out. He thought that might get Danny caring about Nicole's strange decision. If Nicole was not working as much, then she was not going to be able to support Danny as much, and he knew that Nicole was the one supporting the couple. He also thought that Danny might care because she would not be able to spend as much time with Nicole, which could be bad for their relationship. He figured once that was on the table, Danny

might decide to talk to Nicole and get her to stop entertaining the silly idea of going back to school for a degree she did not need and wasting her time.

Dane shrugged again. "It's what'll make her happy. I'm willing to sacrifice a little time if it'll make her happy."

"Why is she doing this? She already has a damn good job," he stated with a firm expression on his face.

Dane frowned and regarded him as if he was small. "Yes, it's a good job as far as money goes, but it makes her miserable. She hates it here. She hates what she does and she hates a lot of the people she's forced to interact with. She deserves to be happy."

Tension pulled at Raymond's features and clouded his eyes. "She has been happy. She's good at this job."

Dane made a very perplexed face. "Being good a job doesn't mean it makes her happy. It just means that she takes pride in her work. Have you *asked* her what would make her happy?" she inquired curiously. She was not trying to start a fight or even be a smart-aleck.

"I know my daughter," he stated soundly.

She shrugged. "Uh...No disrespect, sir, but you really need to talk to Nick. I mean *talk* to her, not dictate things to her or tell her what to do, but actually talk to her. I think you'll understand her a bit better if you did just that."

Raymond was quiet for a while, taking in her words. He was not ready to give up just yet and decided to go at Dane from a different angle to try to get her on his side. "Does she think she can support the both of you by up and leaving a promising career?"

Dane was not too sure how to answer that one. She did not like how he was attempting to manipulate her either, bringing her relationship with Nicole into something that bothered him. She supposed that she needed to put a stop to that before he ended up bringing his wife into the matter and then getting double-teamed by her girlfriend's parents. They had tried with limited success; the "success" part worried Dane because the two tried to double-team her before without much success, but they had done it plenty of times with Nicole. They bullied Nicole into things that she really did not want to do; she had seen it and heard tales about it. It was that sort of behavior that they used when they were trying to strong arm Nicole into kicking Danny out of the house, which Dane was very happy to say that it did not work.

"Well, she wants to do science and she should do what she loves. That's what I always tell her and I mean it," Danny stated.

Raymond eyed the musician suspiciously. "How long did it take you to talk her into this, Danny?"

She scratched the end of her nose while thinking about it. "Basically since I moved in. She's miserable with this type of work. It's not for her and she doesn't want to do it. She should do what makes her happy, not something that's expected of her."

"And you know her so well?" Raymond snapped, looking Dane right in the eye and glaring sharply at her.

She made sure to keep her composure, not even thinking about taking the bait of getting into an argument with him. She just stated what she felt were facts. "I know she's not happy with working here. Yes, she does her work, and other people's work, and she does it well with very little complaints. Do you know why she complains so little here? Because she comes home and doesn't shut up about the shit she takes here for at least an hour, and it's an hour if it was a good day. Hell, if you guys dump new stuff on her while she's already swamped and she has to help these so-called lawyers around here, she might not shut up about until I put dinner in front of her. She barely knew how to relax when I first moved in with her and she didn't know how to vent very well either. She vents now, and she's able to put the stress down. And do you know what she does after that? She unwinds with a chemistry book. She's a chemistry nerd, pure and simple. She. Likes. Chemistry." Dane pointed out as plainly as she possibly could in a very deliberate manner.

"Oh, so now you know everything about her?" he huffed, glaring at this woman, who did indeed seem to know a lot about his daughter.

Dane sighed and ran her hand through her hair. "Raymond, I'm not going to argue with you about Nick. This is what she wants and that's why she's doing it. You're not going to use me to talk her out of it either. I want her to go and I don't give a damn what it costs me as long as it makes her happy. You should know that by now."

Raymond growled, the noise rumbling deep in his massive chest. He glared even harder at Danny, who was quite unfazed by the stare. Little did he know, but she had to put up with far worse looks on Saturdays when Nicole forced her to go to physical therapy.

Suddenly, Raymond laughed and threw his arm around Danny's shoulders. A half-smirk worked its way onto her face; apparently, she was out of trouble for now. He found it impossible to be upset with her since she was so insistent that she wanted his daughter to be happy and she showed that she was telling the truth every time he saw her.

"You know, Danny, this is one of the many things I like about you. You stick to what you think is best for Nikki and you never let us talk you out of what you think is best for her. Now, Kate is going to kick your ass the next time she sees you, though," Raymond proclaimed with a laugh.

"Doesn't she always? I'm pretty sure she owns the property rights to my ass," Dane remarked with a small, amused smile.

"She will after this. She was hoping I could get you to talk to Nikki. We want her to follow in our footsteps, Kate especially," Raymond said, shaking his head a little.

"I know you guys do, but you have to realize that her going to school has nothing to do with you. She's not rebelling or anything like that. She's not trying to hurt your feelings either. She's just doing something for herself for once. She deserves this. She *needs* this. If you talk to her about her classes, you see the way her eyes light up, then you'll know. She needs this," Dane tried her best to explain and to get him to understand.

"I know, Danny. I know, but I had to try. Kate is going to be on a tear until she gets used to this. I'll be using you as a shield," Raymond quipped with a friendly smile. He was trying to relax about the school thing now that he talked to Danny and figured that it was going to happen whether he liked it or not.

She smiled back at him. "The hell you will. I'll be hiding two states over thank you very much."

"Smart move. Well, I'll let you go. Oh, Danny."

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't let Nikki take on too much in school and don't let her walk away from this job until she's fully secure with another one."

Dane nodded. "I will, Raymond. I know how much you guys worry. Do you think that you guys could ease up on the case load?"

Raymond breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. "I will do that. I don't want her to get overwhelmed. I'll also talk to people about bugging her for her help."

Dane grinned, happy to hear that he was actually paying attention to the things that she was saying before. "Thank you for that, sir. She'll really appreciate that and so will I."

"All right. Now, do you know how to get to Nicole's office?" he asked curiously.

Dane shook her head as a response. He gave her directions and they said their farewells. Raymond smiled a little as Dane exited the office. He had warmed up to Danny since meeting her, noticing the effect that she had on Nicole. He wished that she talked Nicole out of going back to school, but considering Danny's passion for it, he could guess how much it meant to Nicole. He supposed that he and Kate were just going to have to learn to accept that Nicole really wanted to be a chemist and they had pushed their desires on her; that thought was going to take a while to get used to.

Dane quickly put the conversation with Raymond out of her mind, knowing she would live a repeat of it for months to come, even though it was clear that he was listening to her. She had more important things on her mind than how she had upset Raymond and Kate by convincing their daughter to go get her chemistry degree. She had to go down a floor and then she navigated the long halls of the firm before she found her lover's office. As she drew closer to the door, she wondered if she should knock or just walk right in to really drive home the surprise. Her good

manners won out and she knocked when she got to the door. She was greeted with an annoyed groan.

"Yes?" Nicole's voice called.

"Somebody order a stripper?" Dane asked as she opened the door, seeing Nicole at her desk and emerald eyes pouring over a pile of documents.

"Danny?" Nicole was out of her seat in a flash and wrapping her girlfriend in a hug that made it seem like they were apart for days instead of hours. "What're you doing here?" she asked in a quiet, but amazed tone.

"I came to see the sexiest, most brilliant woman on the planet," Dane answered with a charming grin.

"And you stopped by to see me first?" Nicole teased.

Dane laughed a little and then leaned down to place a deep kiss on willing lips. "Only to see you, chem. Only to see you," she promised.

"You are just too sweet for your own good, honey. Now, to what do I owe the pleasure? I hope like hell you didn't ride your bike all this way just to surprise me at the office," Nicole said, voice bordering on scolding.

Dane knew that she had to do damage control quickly. "No! I didn't ride my bike. Crow picked me from my last lesson and drove me here. I wanted to have an early dinner with you before you went to class."

Nicole could not contain the grin on her face. "Aw, that's so nice, honey. I would love to have an early dinner with you. Are you going to hang out with Crow afterwards?"

"I had to make that deal in order to get her to drive me here," Dane replied with a light laugh.

The lawyer chuckled. "She still doesn't think too highly of me, huh?"

"Nope, but her opinion doesn't matter. I think you're just swell," Dane remarked. "She's promised to try, if I ever bring you around anyway. She's not a bad person or a bad friend, but she's not used to the new me yet." It was nice that Crow was trying to adjust, though. It was what made Dane realize that Crow was a decent person and friend, unlike most of the other people she knew.

"You mean, the Danny that exclusively dates someone with a degree and a career and has a permanent home to return to every night without drugs being involved?" Nicole teased.

"Yeah, that Danny. The Danny that wants to take you to dinner before it's too late."

"Should I pick you up after class?" Nicole asked.

"I'd like that. I'll call you and let you know where I am around nine, okay?"

"Sounds good. Remind me to get you a cell phone sometime soon so I can call you when you're out."

Dane smiled. "You trying to put a leash on the Great Dane?"

"You know it, big dog. I want everyone to know who you belong to."

"Trust me, there's no doubt about that one." Dane leaned down and kissed Nicole again with just as much passion as always. The lawyer felt her knees go weak, like they did every time her girlfriend kissed her.

They managed to break apart for the few moments that Nicole needed to put her work away. Dane fetched her girlfriend's coat and eased it onto Nicole's shoulders. They then exited the office, Dane's arm around Nicole's waist. They smiled each other and locked eyes, emerald on grey promising love, devotion, and happiness.

The end.

Once again, please, let me know what you think of the story: starving.lunatic@gmail.com

I made an attempt at drawing Nicole: <http://starvinglunatic.deviantart.com/art/Nicole-outline-129066863>

[And an attempt at drawing Dane: http://starvinglunatic.deviantart.com/art/Dane-outline2-129068266](http://starvinglunatic.deviantart.com/art/Dane-outline2-129068266)

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