

The chill spring wind raced through the morning, grabbing a hold of Nicole's dark, curly hair, making it stand on end as it were desperately trying to escape the confines of her scalp. Had the thought occurred to her and she'd been in the mood, she would have laughed out loud. As it was she was in no mood to laugh and the idea didn't cross her mind. Instead she was standing on the metal guard of the foot bridge that spanned the river, desperately racking her brain for a reason why she shouldn't do what she had gotten up there to do.

Nicole had bad days before but this was now the undisputed champ. Less than twenty-four hours ago she had been at work, minding her own business when her phone rang.

"Nicole Duffeck." She answered distractedly.

"Hello, is this Nicole Duffeck?" A polite, professional voice inquired from the other end.

Nicole tried to suppress a sigh but was only partially successful. "Yes." She answered.

"Hello Nicole, my name is Dr. Amelia Lanhor; I'm one of the attending physicians at the Milwaukee Veteran's Hospital." The voice had gotten a little gentler since it realized it had reached its intended recipient, however the warmth in her voice did nothing to stave off the chill that suddenly found its way into the pit of Nicole's stomach. "Mhmm." Nicole managed to supply, the shuffling of the files on her desk entirely forgotten.

"As you know your father has been receiving treatments at the hospital for his cancer..."

"How is he?" Nicole cut in, oblivious to the fact that in most conventional situations that would be considered rude.

Following Nicole's lead, the voice stopped being overly polite and warm and decided to cut to the chase. "In the best of circumstances the radiation and chemo treatments are trying. Unfortunately your father was not in the greatest physical shape..." a strange buzzing noise filled Nicole's ears, which would account for her thinking she misheard the voice. "I'm sorry." The voice concluded

"My Dad can't be dead. He's in the hospital, there are doctors and nurses and defibrillators..."

"The heart attack was very sudden and very strong. He passed away almost instantly."

Nicole tried to say something that would change the facts; that would make the doctor admit that there may have been some mistake and that her father may yet be alive. "He can't be dead." Nicole said softly. "I saw him two days ago; he didn't look like he was going to die..." She let her voice trail off. He didn't look healthy. He looked tired, gray and stick-thin.

The good doctor's voice continued on; sensing that Nicole had started to grasp the futility of arguing with a doctor about whether someone was alive or not.

"Thank you, but I have to go now." Nicole said rather lamely. Not waiting for the voice to respond Nicole returned the phone back to its cradle and marched numbly over to her supervisor's desk. Without waiting for her to look up Nicole blurted "Kris, my Dad just died; I think I should go home."

By the time the words had registered in Kris's brain Nicole was already heading back to her desk. She couldn't bear to have to explain, not when she still desperately needed to hear that it wasn't true.

Normally, walking out of the building and through the parking ramp without remembering having done so would have scared the life out of Nicole. Today however she not only didn't remember leaving the building, she didn't remember much more of the thirty-minute drive home than about five minutes worth. One resounding thought kept crashing into reality, clouding everything else around her so she could focus on nothing else. Dad's dead. I just saw him last week and he looked fine. Skinny and tired but fine; He had been eating Jell-O. Oh God, Dad's dead. After this thought ran through her mind her brain seemed to disengage again. Perhaps too over stimulated to function it collapsed in on itself.

After the abyss of the drive home Nicole pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex. A momentary flicker of something sprung up in her mind when she noticed that her husband's car was in its parking space--he should have been at work. But the thought was drowned by a sudden and terrifyingly powerful need to see him. She needed to put her head on his shoulder, to bury her face in his smell and hear him tell her over and over that it was going to be ok, that he'd make it ok.

The tears that she had been too dazed and numb to shed earlier sprung to the ready as she mounted the flight of stairs to her second floor apartment. As she opened the door she heard a strange, very female, very surprised voice state. "What the hell? Who's coming in?"

Oh this can't be good. Nicole thought dumbly.

A strong metallic taste rose in the back of her mouth as Jason came out of the bedroom pulling a shirt over his head, followed by a woman Nicole didn't get a good look at but who at least had the decency to get out of the apartment quickly without trying to say anything to either of them.

Again her hearing seemed to be impeded by that strange buzzing noise so she could only catch snippets of Jason's words like "you weren't there for me sexually" then there would be this huge gap where his mouth was obviously moving but her ears weren't catching his words so that when she did start processing again the words "I want this to work..." could have meant anything.

Nicole's mouth thawed quickly causing both of them to jump at her sudden yelling. She shouted things at him that she would never have said before but that at the time she felt were entirely justified. She was so caught up in her verbal assault of him that she didn't notice what was about to happen. Suddenly a bright light burst into her line of vision and her next realization was that she was inexplicably on the floor, nose deep in carpet. Jason was standing over her screaming but she couldn't make out the words. She knew he had gone back into the bedroom because her eyes were able to follow the heels of his feet until they disappeared through the doorframe.

"You can cry all you god damn well want too, I'm leaving; sick of this shit." Jason yelled, stepping over her and toting two garbage bags, presumably full of his clothes. "I'll be back for the rest of my stuff later."

It was dark when she finally got up off the floor; a good three hours having passed since she first wound up there. Nicole knew that she had probably just suffered a nervous breakdown of some kind but she didn't care. Her brain was numb; she didn't want to be around anyone, she didn't want to think. She wanted the rest of her body to become numb too so she wouldn't have to feel anything. No pain, no sadness. She just wanted to be numb.

She drove around for a while not knowing where she was going and with no agenda until she came across the park and decided she was safer not driving. Nicole sat on the park bench for hours, not crying, not thinking. It wasn't until the sun began to peek over the horizon that the first cognitive thought she'd had in hours entered her mind: She enjoyed this cold, this unfeeling; it didn't feel bad or good; actually it didn't feel at all. She wanted this. She stood up slowly, feeling her bones and muscles protest at having to move after they had been immobile for so long in the cold. Nicole didn't care. This would be the last time. She stood and walked over to the guardrail of the bridge and climbed onto the bottom rung. Her hands ran over the roughened paint which had bubbled and peeled after years of weathering and vandalism. She knew she would be hurting a lot of people, or at the very least pissing them off but she didn't care. She knew it was selfish and cruel, especially since her father had just died but at least she wasn't fooling herself into thinking she was doing the world a favor. A tear rolled down her cheek, stinging the already tender and bruised skin, burning it back to life after it was chilled by the long hours of night air. The wind picked up again, causing dried leaves to skitter across the pavement and the water's glassy surface to ripple with tiny waves. Nicole looked up to the sky and spoke a few words out loud to the world she was about to leave, a few birds and a passing airplane her only witness.

Vapor Trail, that what that white trail is behind the airplane. I wonder if everyone is sleeping, probably not the flight attendants. I wonder where it's been, where it's going. Maybe it's going to Europe; I always wanted to go to England. I've never even flown before.

Suddenly it hit her: She wanted something more than this. She looked down and nearly fell over the rail. Shaking and crying and colder than she'd ever been in her entire life and more afraid than she had ever felt she stumbled back to her car, realizing the only reason why she was alive was because of an airplane full of strangers.

If you are wondering it was a flight from Idaho to Wisconsin.

Terrified and still dazed Nicole drove slowly to the police department, an eerie hollow feeling, the kind you get when you see the sunrise from the wrong side, filling the pit of her stomach.

The bright fluorescent lights glared harshly on her eyes and she mutely walked up to the burly officer seated at the reception desk. Oddly enough Nicole felt a sense of comradory toward the officer who looked just as confused and lost as she felt.

“Can I help you miss?” He asked looking as if he wanted to run and find someone to back him up.

“I’m not sure really. My husband hit me last night; I don’t know where he is now...I left a few hours ago but he had left before that. I haven’t been home all night; I went to the park...” Nicole let her voice trail off, not knowing what she should do next.

“Janice, can you come here a moment please?” The officer asked imploringly. Moments later a woman a little older then Nicole appeared. There was a moment where the male officer whispered to the female officer before the latter moved forward looking kindly at Nicole.

“Hi Nicole, I’m Janice. Could you follow me please? I want to take care of those bruises and talk to you a little about what happened.”

Like an obedient child happy for some structure, Nicole followed Janice towards a small room near the back of the station. “First off, would you mind if I take some pictures of your injuries?” Nicole nodded mutely, turning her head when asked and raising her shirt sleeve as directed. “Do you know if you have any other marks?” Janice asked.

“Not that I know of.” Nicole mumbled.

“Alright, well just to be sure can I ask you to raise your shirt and turn around? Thank you very much. Last thing, could you lower your slacks so I can check your legs?” Feeling as if she had no humility left to spare Nicole did as she was asked. Curious she looked down as she saw Janice raise the camera again to shooting position.

“What is it?” Nicole asked plainly.

“You have a bruise on your thigh. Any idea how it got there?”

“No.” Nicole said shaking her head and staring at huge purple bruise on her upper thigh then shifted her glance to the second picture that showed her upper arm covered in a ghastly bruise. “Maybe it happened at the park or something...”

Janice nodded thoughtfully before replying “Why don’t you tell me how this all came about. Start from the beginning of your day if you don’t mind. I do want you to be aware that what you are giving me is a statement. This will be used to prosecute your husband.”

“Do you know where he is?” Nicole asked, an insane desire to see him grabbing a hold of her brain. Every time something bad happened the first person Nicole could think of was Jason. Some childish mechanism in her brain was trained to believe that he could fix anything. If her car broke down he would rescue her, if she had a bad day at work he would rant with her, if she got into a fight with someone he would take her side. Now she wanted him to tell her this wasn’t real, to make it alright.

“I can check with booking and see if they have any information.”

“Booking.” Nicole repeated the word, conjuring an image in her mind of Jason being brought in wearing a black and white stripped jumper. Tears flooded out of her, sobs so wretched she felt her ribs were going to collapse with sheer agony.

Janice must have had a lot of experience with these types of situations as she sat by quietly; waiting for the worst of it to pass as she gently patted Nicole’s hand.

“I know this is difficult and there’s nothing I can say to make this any easier. I can’t explain why this happened...the only thing I can do is ask you to tell me what happened. That’s going to hurt like hell and you can hate me for it if you want, I deserve it.” Janice said empathetically.

Nicole gave a watery smile. “Ok. My day started out like every other day; I was running late to get to work...” For an hour she related the tale of the tragic day. When she began she thought Janice was being nice and trying to lighten the mood by saying Nicole could hate her if she wanted. By the end, after having to fill in details to areas of the story she would rather gloss over for the hundredth time she felt she was pretty close to hating the female officer.

“Thanks, I know that wasn’t easy. Just keep in mind that it’s common for people to not remember everything about a traumatizing occurrence. Take my card and if you remember

anything else give me a call. Don't be surprised if it takes a few days, we deal with this sort of thing pretty often; no one will think you are making things up. Honestly I'd be more skeptical if you were able to remember everything."

"The pictures; the bruises. I don't know...do you think he hit me more than once?" Nicole asked feeling, if at all possible, worse.

"I can't answer that." Janice replied kindly. "But it's been a long night; is there anyone I can call for you? A family member or a friend?"

"Yea, Renee. She's both." Nicole replied, writing down Renee's home phone number and cell phone number for Janice.

Just as Janice was leaving a plump early forties looking woman appeared in the door. "Hi Nicole, my name is Shelly and I'm from the victim's support program at Family Services, how are you feeling?"

"I don't really feel like talking about my feelings right now." Nicole replied not looking at the woman. She felt raw, like everything in her that felt anything had been sand blasted and the slightest nudge or question or pitying look would feel like torture.

"I understand. I just wanted to let you know that there are a lot of support groups and therapist and other resources we'd like you to take advantage of. What you went through is difficult and changing. It would be to your best interest to talk to a professional about it." Shelly said holding out a couple of pamphlets.

Nicole looked down at the pamphlet on the top; the picture on the outside was of a woman squatting against a wall, her arms wrapped around her knees. At first glance the picture looked dark and depressing as the colors were shadowed. Upon further inspection Nicole realized the dark colors were because there was a shadow of a man looming large above the woman, his posture aggressive. Tears began to sting her eyes and blur the words at the bottom: "Love shouldn't hurt."

Shelly hovered around the open door, seemingly unaffected by Nicole's silence until Janice returned. Vaguely Nicole realized that they were making sure she wasn't left alone. Oh well, it's not like she hadn't done anything to deserve being monitored for erratic behavior.

Minutes later Janice returned with a file in her hands and two uniformed officers at her sides. Panic rose in Nicole at the thought that the officers were there to arrest her. Her eyes darted from one's face, to his hands then to the other's hands, expecting to see them reach for their handcuffs or guns.

"Hi Nicole, I'm officer Williams. I wanted to let ya' know that Jason came in last night and gave his statement. He's in holding right now waiting to go before the judge. If you don't mind I need to ask you a few more questions; I know you already gave a statement to Janice but I need to clear up some details."

Nicole nodded mutely and stared at the table top wishing she could crawl underneath it and go to sleep.

Officer Williams smiled kindly "Long night, hu?" Nicole nodded again. "I'll make this quick; I know Ms. Brunner is on her way here to take you home." True to his word Officer Williams only asked Nicole a few questions and after only five minutes thanked her for her time and said good bye.

Nicole walked out of the interview room, her body so sore she thought she'd never feel anything but this ache for the rest of her life.

"Thank GOD!" A woman cried. Suddenly before Nicole had a chance to register anything more than red hair and a blue fleece jacket she found herself compressed in an embrace that could have brought Hitler to his knees. "Sweetie I was so worried about you. I got a call from Jason...Oh God..." Nicole closed her eyes and forgot everything else but the feeling of being held and safe again. Funny how even as an adult it's our mother's we turn back to for comfort.

"Sweet heart, I know you've been through a lot and I know you've had a very hard time of things but do you really have to leave?" Nicole was sitting at the kitchen table Renee's house. Years ago Nicole had given Renee the title of 'common law Mom' Since Renee couldn't really adopt her but acted so much like a mother for so long it seemed only fitting. Now, like a typical mother would, she was trying to convince Nicole to not leave.

"The inheritance from Dad's estate will be enough for me to live on for at least a year...Not that I intend to stay for that long!" Nicole hurried to say after noticing the look of terror on Renee's face.

"I know a change of scenery would do some good, by why England? Why not Door County or Main? Or anyplace that is still in North America?" Renee's hazy eyes were large and pleading and uncharacteristically threatening tears.

"It's sort of a reaffirmation of life. I want to start over and prove to myself that I can do something this big without Jason. I want to know I can stand alone." Nicole replied quietly, looking down at the old scratched table top. "Besides, Grandma and Grandpa have been complaining for years that I never went to see them, so this will be like killing two birds with one stone."

Renee sighed and looked depressed. She wouldn't argue against Nicole going to see her family, but she wouldn't like it either.

"You know, you could always come with me? Grandma and Grandpa would love to see you, they've always liked you and I know they wouldn't mind your staying there."

Renee laughed an honest laugh for the first time since The Night. "Could you imagine trying to get Pete on an airplane? None the less one that will be flying over the ocean? He'd divorce me first." Renee said brushing her straight hair off her face, causing it to stand wildly on end. Despite having been married for nearly a decade, there were still things Renee couldn't get Pete to do; the big one being anything to do with water in greater amounts than a bath tub. Pete was adamant that he had no buoyancy thus he would sink like a very hairy rock and die. The second being that he would never fly on an airplane since he was convinced that, due to Murphy's Law, the plane would have some emergency that would require a water landing and he would end up drowning.

The two women spent a few blissful moments laughing at Pete's expense before Renee sobered up and looked seriously at Nicole. "So what's happening with the case anyway?"

"Well, since Jason confessed right away to the police and pleaded guilty to the charges in court the only thing that's left is the sentencing..."

"I hope he gets the electric chair, or a firing squad, or better yet--death by stoning!!!"

"I really don't think they are going to give him the death penalty for domestic abuse."

Nicole said wryly, trying not to notice how weird the words 'Jason' and 'domestic abuse' felt in her mouth.

"Well they should." Renee replied ruefully. "So since I can't change your mind you have to agree to a few simple things. The first is that you keep in touch. I know phone calls are going to cost a boat load so you don't have to call all the time, just once in a while would be nice so I can hear your voice. I do expect a lot of emails and letters; otherwise there'll be hell to pay. Oh, and if you can, bring back Sean Connery.

Nicole laughed at this request "I don't think they have those in the airport gift shops but if I can find him I definitely will. Wait a second, what would Pete say?"

"Nothing, I would kick him out before Sean got here of course." Renee replied seriously.

"Nice one Mom."

"Oh I am going to miss you!" Renee cried, pulling Nicole into a strong-armed bear hug.

Nicole was about to say something but it got lost in Renee's shoulder and her own sudden swell of emotions.

The next day, sick of everything beneficial and good for her she called her best friend Jamie and coerced her to go out for a 'special coffee'. They spent three happy hours sitting in the coffee bar sipping cappuccinos spiked with brandy and smoking too many cigarettes.

"You know, the funniest thing about you is you never smoke unless you're drinking."

Jamie said languidly pulling a long drag off her own cigarette with all the flair of French woman in Paris.

"Well, if one is going to be self-destructive may as well have it all out at once rather than allow it to drip incessantly and become a long term habit." Nicole replied.

"Speaking of bad habits, did I tell you Scott and I are talking about having a baby?"

"No! That's great! You'd make a wonderful mother." Nicole cheered.

"Yea, I think I'm ready for it too. I love how you left Scott out of that though." Jamie said smiling evilly.

"I told you when you got engaged I won't say anything negative about him, so don't push it." Nicole replied.

"Just tell me why you don't like him and I promise I will never bring it up again." Jamie pleaded.

"You are such a liar! You'll harp on it for months if not years. And besides, if I do say anything bad about him then you'll always feel as if you have to defend him when we talk about him and I won't be able to make jokes about him because you'll think I'm being serious and then what would we talk about?"

The two friends had this conversation about once a month since Jamie announced her engagement to Scott four years ago.

"He's not a bad guy, you know. He makes me happy and I can trust him; well about as much as anyone can trust a guy." Jamie said laughing.

"I know. I think it's just one of those personality things. It's not that he's ever done or not done anything to make me dislike him, it's just that our personalities don't seem to mesh so well." Nicole replied stirring her coffee to ensure an even disbursement of alcohol and caffeine.

"See and I thought you two would have hit it off wonderfully, you are so much alike."

"First of all there's no need to insult me. I don't think he and I are alike at all, secondly, if that were the case, which it's not, but if it were then that would probably be why we don't get along. We remind each other too much of our own selves. But if it makes you feel better I know that you will make sure he's a great Dad to your baby." Nicole added.

"Praise indeed!" Jamie cheered raising her glass in a toast to Nicole. "So when do you leave for England?"

"Next week Monday. I've got everything done that can be done, everyone that needs to know has been notified and all the arrangements have been made for when I get there. All's that's left is the flight."

"You've gotta promise me one thing though. Write to me a lot and I don't mean just emails. I want real postcards and letters and stuff with stamps from England."

"I will but only if you promise to let me know right away when I'm going to be an aunt." Nicole replied.

The two friends spent the rest of the afternoon in down town Appleton window shopping at the incredibly overpriced specialty shops, day dreaming about what they would buy if they were millionaires.

They had reached the parking ramp and were standing in front of Jamie's car, holding off the moment of truth where they would have to admit that for the first time in ten years they'd be more than a twenty minute drive away from each other.

"This is right you know; you going to England? You've wanted to do this since the seventh grade when you read *Sense and Sensibility*. And I promise I won't be jealous or anything as long as you promise to send good long letters and tons of pictures."

"I promise."

"Alright, I'll see you later ok?" Jamie said grabbing Nicole in a quick hug before she hurried to her driver's side door to leave.

The flight out of Austen Strauble was uneventful, thankfully, but very different from what she expected. In the movies the time between boarding to take off happened within about three minutes. In reality it took much, much longer. First there was the obligatory 2 hr wait to get on the plane due to heightened security. Nicole didn't mind this though; the tragedy and horror of nine-eleven was an eye-opener for the nation and if waiting for two hours meant she wasn't going to end up having to call her friends on a cell phone for the last time as her plane hurtled toward an open field for a crash landing then so be it. The small inconvenience was worth it. After boarding there was about five minute's wait while nothing happened. Passengers put their carry-ons in the overhead storage and flight attendants walked around aimlessly but that was it. Then the engines turned on. Twenty minutes later the pilot came on and said that they were preparing for take off. (What the hell was the twenty minutes prior for?) Finally the plane began to drive very slowly around the airport. It was like grandpa driving around the parking lot of the grocery store for ten minutes looking for a good parking spot.

Suddenly and without warning the plane began to taxi down the runway, slowly at first then gaining speed until she was pressed so hard into her seat she was sure she was leaving an imprint on the other side.

Again the movies got it wrong. They showed the g-force lasting no more than about thirty seconds. In real life it took about ten minutes as the plane continued to gain speed and reach cruising altitude. Nicole was chewing her gum so hard and fast to keep her ears from popping she was sure her jaw was a blur. While she was adjusting her white knuckled death grip on the armrest she was sure she over heard a flight attendant mention to one of her colleagues 'This must be her first time flying.' Sounding as if she were amused. Nicole decided she didn't like her. After forty five minutes of no incidents Nicole dared to take a calming breath and looked out her window. Due to the altitude and the non-descript New England landscape there wasn't much to see, which actually helped to her ease her mind more. Until the plane fell out from underneath her.

"Is the plane supposed to do that?" Nicole bleated to everyone and no one in particular.

"Do what?" The flight attendant asked calmly. Of course it had to be the amused one.

Had Nicole not been busy finding God at that moment she would have attempted to incinerate the horrible woman with a fiery glare. Five minutes later the pilot announced they would be beginning the final decent. Nicole was so relieved she nearly cried out for joy.

The hour long flight from Wisconsin to New York ended without incident; no flaming balls of shrapnel or screaming death, and no spontaneously combusting stewardesses; it was as much as Nicole could have hoped for. As transatlantic flights from central United States haven't evolved enough to capacitate a straight, non stop flight Nicole had to sit in JFK for a two hour lay over to wait for a connecting flight to London Heathrow.

Though the flight itself had past with no real trouble Nicole was paranoid that she may get lost in JFK and miss her connecting flight, so instead she grabbed a cup of coffee and set herself on a hard plastic chair just before the departure gate for her last flight.

As the minutes ticked by, (she knew this because she kept checking her watch, determined to know she wasn't late) apprehension started to mount an attack on her courage. Nicole tried to think of the flight from Green Bay to New York as sort of a warm up flight but that warm up flight didn't take place over an ocean. Suddenly the world seemed a whole lot bigger and stranger and she was small and alone. Her heart began to race and she could taste copper in the back of her mouth as her head filled with a strange buzzing feeling. She couldn't do this. It was a different country, a different continent and she had to fly over an ocean. What the hell had she been thinking? This wasn't her, this was a stranger that acted stupidly and rashly and she had had enough. She stood up and gathered her carry on bag then headed towards the airline desk intending to change her ticket to a domestic one headed back to Green Bay.

As she passed the Border's book store her reflection caught her eye causing her to stop dead in her tracks. Even though the bruising had long since gone away and even excusing the fact that she was suffering from jet lag she looked terrible. Her eyes were wide and suspicious looking, giving her the air of a person who was ready to run screaming if someone said 'boo' to her. She had lost a lot of weight and was dangerously close to looking skinny-gross. To complete the image she was wearing a black t-shirt that was at least two sizes too big and a pair of worn faded jeans that had seen better days.

This wasn't her. Nicole wasn't they type of woman to spend hours in front of a mirror, primping herself to Magazine perfection, however she did take care to look acceptable when she was out in public, not to mention maintain her health. Since The Night she knew she had slacked off but hadn't realized how badly until she caught sight of her own reflection, so foreign looking and intensified more by the unfamiliar surroundings.

Pissed off at herself for allowing things to have gotten this bad in her head she stomped back to her seat like a storm trooper and sat down so resolutely that she hurt her butt. What Jason had done changed her life; she could no longer proudly proclaim that she and her relationships were normal but it was still her life and she'd be damned if he was going to take that away too.

With vast amounts of relief Nicole stood up and joined the line of passengers boarding the flight after the airport rep announced they could begin loading on. Trembling slightly she

fingered the strap of her back pack, trying to squash the feeling of homesickness that threatened her. No, it wouldn't be easy, but it wouldn't be bad either, nothing could be as bad as what she was leaving.

This take off was a little less unnerving as she now knew a little more of what to expect. Had the flight attendants known her from the first flight they would have appreciated how much less like she was acting like a first time flier.

Nicole was looking out the window at what she thought had to be the sky as it was such a vast expanse of blue when a male flight attendant walked by and looked out too. His spoke with a soft Jamaican accent, almost totally American now. "The ocean is beautiful isn't it?" He asked.

"That's the ocean?" Nicole asked amazed.

"Yea, see the little white lines there? Those are white caps of the waves." Smiling he pointed out the window past Nicole and toward the rolling ocean below. Upon closer inspection Nicole realized he was right, the white lines were too thin to be cloud wisps. With no intention of being rude she started out the window, completely forgetting the kind flight attendant.

Smiling the flight attendant turned and walked away, pleased that he was able to give one woman who looked as if she needed it a great moment in her day.

Two hours later Nicole got off the plane and nearly had a panic attack. Heathrow was ENORMOUS. The terminal itself was over four stories high, there were more gates than Nicole cared to think about and, though the structure was very open looking with white floors, chrome and steel designs and lots of glass windows, a hundred million people bustling around with 200 million suitcases made it feel claustrophobically small. Dizzy with terror at the thought of being lost she nearly cried for joy when she finally managed to find a porter.

"Sir, sorry to bother you but could direct me to baggage claims?"

"For what gate? Number 56a? Follow me." He said in a brisk Yorkshire accent and took off at high speeds. From a few paces behind him and nursing a stitch in her side Nicole could have sworn she recognized him as one of the top finishers of the Boston Marathon.

Without checking to make sure she had managed to follow him, the porter bustled past bag claim and on to whatever it was he was hurrying to.

Nicole stood by the baggage carousel and waited in apprehensive tension for her bags to make their appearance. After all, hadn't entire movies been based on people losing their luggage or grabbing the wrong person's?

By some brilliant stroke of luck her bags made it over the ocean too and were listlessly riding around the baggage conveyor belt, seemingly oblivious to the thousands of miles they had just traversed.

Fifteen minutes after the joyful realization that her clothes and other personal effects had made the international voyage with her, Nicole had them stacked on a cart and began the perilous task of finding her way through the throngs of people to the exit.

The escape from Heathrow proved to be as nerve wracking as the actual act of getting there via jet plane. Hordes of business people of all shapes, sizes and genders bustled to and from unknown origins to unknown destinations. Nicole could pick them out quite easily from the other people that were dressed in suits and the business people tended to be oblivious to their surroundings as they barreled towards their objective, brief case clutched firmly in one hand and cell phone pressed to their ear with the other. Nicole had to stop suddenly so often, lest she hit one of those that she was sure her suitcases were going to dive off the cart at any given moment. At long last she spotted the long wall covered in doors that opened to outside. Relieved she took a deep breath of foreign air, momentarily unconcerned by the 'humming' and other rude sounds that emitted from people behind her that were trying to make their own, less dramatic escape.

"See I told you we'd find her easier if we met her out front!" A low wheezy voice grumbled from the curb. Nicole looked up in time to see a small plumpish woman with short white hair that had been curled with hot rollers, dressed in white slacks and a heavy green sweater roll her eyes skyward as her tall male companion gloated over being correct.

"Fine, you're right, now go get her bags." The woman snapped. Nicole couldn't help but smile. After sixty-two years of marriage her grandparents had apparently learned how to argue and harp on one another while staying madly in love.

Or maybe they learned how love one another while arguing and harping madly...Nicole mused.

“Hi Nan.” Nicole said walking up to her grandmother for a hug. Grandma was infamous in the family for three things; her Irish-Australian accent, her high calorie cooking, and her rib cracking hugs. Nicole found her self in the latter.

“Oh dear I have missed you!” Grandma cried pulling away to look at Nicole. “We are so sorry to hear about everything that had happened! Granted your father was sick but still for him to pass so suddenly...” Nicole knew she was just being nice. It was no secret that her maternal grandparents never approved of their youngest daughter marrying Christopher.

“You haven’t been eating have you? I’m going to have to get some meat on those bones if you expect to make it through this English weather!”

“Hi sweetie.” Grandpa rasped catching Nicole in a quick one-armed hug, Nicole’s cheek brushing against the scratchy wool of his brown sweater. “Are those all your bags?” He asked indicating the trolley full of luggage.”

“Yea but I can get them.” Nicole replied hurriedly, catching a bag by the handle. She was unable to feel comfortable allowing an eighty year old man carry her suitcases; it seemed cruel.

Grandpa didn’t see it that way. He grabbed the same suitcase by the handle and gave Nicole one withering look before taking off to the car, paying no attention to the fact that Nicole hadn’t let go of the handle. Not wanting to have her arm dislocated from the socket she let go of the handle and took a step back. Grandpa, sensing victory, returned to the trolley and began to load the rest of the cases into the car, whistling a low tune. Nicole tried to not draw attention to the fact that she, a mid twenties healthy woman was standing idly by while her bald, liver spot decorated grandfather was heaving her luggage off her cart and into the trunk of a sedan. She felt like a heel.

“Let’s see, we got your room set up, it’s on the second floor and we’re on the first so you will have your privacy from us old bats.” Grandma said lightly, watching grandpa lift a duffel bag in the car.

“Grandma, I really wouldn’t mind staying in the guest house.”

“But you’re not a guest, you’re family. So you will stay in the house with us.” She said with such finality Nicole thought it best not to pursue the subject.

After Grandpa had loaded up the trunk they piled into the dark blue car and headed out of the airport and towards the green of the countryside.

Along the country roads were small stone walls surrounding pastures, lush green hedgerows and deep green moors speckled with purple heathers, blue cornflowers and yellow pansies. Nicole had to restrain herself from pressing her nose against the glass and drooling over the beige interior. It was surreal to be there, like waking up and discovering that your dreams weren’t dreams but the real thing.

“We’ll show you how to drive the car, get you used to driving on the other side of the road.” Grandma was saying.

“Alright, thanks.” Nicole replied, feeling a bit guilty that she hadn’t heard anything before that.

“Oh and I got you a job, well at least the consideration for a job.”

Nicole froze. “A what now?” She asked; her attention fully fixed on her grandmother.

“A job working as an office assistant.”

“Grandma, I have a degree in Paralegalism; I’m NALA certified...”

“Honey, I know and I’m so incredibly proud of you, but that doesn’t mean beans over here. The certifications don’t carry over to our side of the pond.”

Nicole felt as if she had been slapped in the face. She had spent six years of her life getting to this point in her career, accumulating enough of an education to become a strong attribute to any law firm that was lucky enough to hire her. Now to hear that it had been for, at least from this perspective, was distressing.

“Besides honey, the job offer is in a law office. But since you are not certified over here that limits the amount of work you can do. Gavin, the gentleman who owns the office, offered to interview you with the condition that you understand it wouldn’t be as glamorous as what you were doing back home.”

Nicole perked up a little at the words ‘law office.’ Maybe this would translate as a good experience she could take home. She imagined re-writing her resume to reflect that she worked internationally for another attorney.

"What kind of person is Gavin?" Nicole asked still thinking on her resume.

"Oh well, he's incredibly intelligent, very generous; he's always throwing charity benefits for the community. Oh what else..."

"Cranky." Grandpa offered approvingly.

"He's not cranky, he just likes his privacy, and when it comes to living here privacy is a precious commodity indeed!"

"Is he a recluse?" Nicole asked warily.

"He's not a recluse, he works with clients, and he goes to the office..."

"Gay?"

"No!" Grandma sounded scandalized. "Not that there's anything wrong with that." She added quickly.

Nicole was enjoying herself, "Does he like to dress up in fringed drapes and sing songs from 'Rocky Horror Picture Show?'"

"Lord, child I don't know where you come up with these things." Grandma said giggling. "He's a respectable man who just doesn't like other people getting their noses into his business. He's very passionate about his career and about helping those less fortunate and beyond that I don't think he sees a reason to divulge every detail of his personal life to the entire British Isle."

"Yea well if he's dancing around in a Buffalo Bill outfit when I go for my interview I'll give him privacy. When is the interview to be for anyway?"

"You have to call him to set that up, unless you want me to take you over to the office and introduce you?"

"No, that's OK. I don't think I would appear to be very professional or useful if I had to have my Nana take me to meet a potential boss."

"Alright then." Nan replied sounding a bit disappointed.

After another fifteen minutes of driving they pulled up to the house. Nicole felt her heart flutter as she took in the two-story structure which was quaint in a stone cottage kind of way. The lawn was gently manicured and a weeping willow graced the front yard; healthy green ivy clung to the walls of the house but were kept trimmed back so as not to interfere with the natural wood stained shutters or obstruct the spotlessly clean windows. Nicole was able to catch a glimpse of the pond in the back yard, which was free from weeds, probably more due to the weather than anything her grandparents had done to it. Beyond the small pond was a tiny guesthouse, which actually looked like a converted carriage house. The driveway was gravel and as they drove over it Nicole could hear the plink-plink of pebbles bouncing off the under carriage of the car.

The sound caused a wave of nostalgia to rush over her. Memories from Nicole's youth when she would go to her aunt and uncles house in Lake Geneva to spend weeks of summer vacation on their farm flowed into her mind, filling her with the remembrance of rope swings, hay lofts, and apples off the tree.

"Here we are!" Grandma cheered after the car stopped.

Nicole didn't even offer to take the luggage up to the house for fear of what her grandfather would do. Obviously he didn't miss the gesture since he smiled smugly at her as he grabbed the suitcases from the trunk. *'The boot', they call it the boot here in merry ol' England.'* Nicole thought to herself. She couldn't help but smile. Though the ambiance was similar in so many ways to her child hood in Wisconsin the reality was that this was not 1985 nor was it Wisconsin; her being here something huge.

Following behind Nan and Pops she took in the minute details of her surroundings much in the same way a child takes in Christmas decorations. She marveled with delight at the large flat stones that were used to form the steps going up to the front door and that the same type of stones, only in larger round forms, had been used to make the outer walls of the house for the first story. The second story was constructed of vertical wood that blended smoothly in with the first stories' stonework. The whole thing was capped off with a high peaked roof that was shingled in gray tiles, like something out of a movie.

Nan gave Nicole the grand tour, after which Nicole went up and unpacked. Grandpa insisted that she use the wardrobe, closets, even the back of the chair to put her clothes away. "You're going to be living here, may as well *live* here." He said winking.

Nicole surveyed her room with an appreciative eye. The room was larger than what her master bedroom was in her old apartment. There were three huge windows, two that overlooked the back yard with its pond and barn and one that looked out the side yard and part of the road that connected to the driveway. The walls were a cream white with scroll work in the corners near the roof. The bed was a queen size four poster with a mattress so soft it was like a dream. The pillows were huge down filled things and it was all covered with a lilac comforter that weighed just shy of a ton and was warm enough to bake a potato. The wardrobe was a large mahogany beast with a cupboard on top and four drawers underneath that sat directly across from the mock walk in closet. The crowning piece was the mahogany desk that sat across from her bed. It was complete with a chair and pigeon holes for stuffing bills and correspondences in. Nicole was thrilled she hadn't fought to stay in the guest house, which she was told later was in fact a converted carriage house.

After the unpacking was finished Nicole opened both of the windows, reveling in the damp chill air that swept in off the English landscape. (She wanted to think "Countryside but the truth was that the area her grandparents lived in was more like a rural suburb than the countryside.) Drinking in the fresh air, the view from both the windows and walking slowly around the room, trailing her slender pale fingers over the furniture she found herself overcome with the truth of what she had done. Grateful that there were no neighbors she danced in circles, jumping up and down and wiggled her hips chanting "I'm in ENGLAND!"

Having taken a moment to catch her breath and collect herself before she headed back downstairs to see what Nan was doing.

"Oh, finished moving?" Nan asked kindly.

"Yea, all done."

"Great. Here's Gavin's phone number, you may as well give him a call now so it's out of the way. Plus he'll be leaving the office soon." Nan added at Nicole's hesitation to take the little slip of paper. Nicole had barely taken in the beautiful contrast that the hard wood floor and heavy oak dining table made to the modern looking refrigerator and gas stove before Nan began to set her tasks.

"You're sure about this? I mean about me working for him? I don't want to be a shit about this..."

"Language dear, you're an adult but you're my granddaughter first." Nan cut it.

"Sorry. I don't want to be a pain about this but by the way you two described him..."

Nicole took a deep breath, the elation she had felt moments before seemed to have run back up to her bedroom, leaving her to feel the same trepidation that nearly caused her to return home from JFK.

Grandma whipped her hands on her apron and walked over to Nicole. "It's true, he is a bit of a crank but that's just his way. You needn't be afraid of him; he puts his trousers on one leg at a time."

Nicole attempted a smile but it crumpled under the weight of her guilt. "I'm sorry to behave like this. I feel like one of those sobbing women from a day time talk show." Nicole said whipping at her eye.

"You are not one of those women. You are my granddaughter and a beautiful woman and very brave. But you've better get a move on helping me get these sandwiches made; my girlfriends are coming over for a bridge game and if there isn't any food there will be hell to pay."

"So what do they think about me staying here?" Nicole asked mainly to change the subject.

"Oh they think it's lovely that you've come to spend some time with your crazy old Nan." Grandma replied with her back turned.

"You didn't tell them about Jason?" Nicole asked quietly.

Nan turned around to look at Nicole. "Dear, you told me you wanted to come here to get a fresh start, clear your head. I thought that would be kind of hard to do with a gaggle of old birds crooning and patting you." Nan replied.

Nicole crossed the room and put her arms around the old woman. "I love you Nan."

"I love you too." She replied patting the younger woman's back. "Now make that phone call then come give me a hand!"

The phone call wasn't what Nicole expected. First off she didn't actually speak to Gavin, she spoke to his secretary; a nasally woman named Anne. Secondly Anne told her that Gavin wanted her to start a week from Monday for what he called the Trial Run. Anne didn't know what it was and he didn't tell her but if Nicole agreed then she was to be there on Monday at 8:00 am sharp, Gavin hated tardiness.

The more she heard about this Gavin guy the creepier it got. Well maybe not creepy so much as...tense. How was it possible that a man she's never met seemed to put her on eggshells?

Either way the two weeks off were put to great use. After she had cured her jet lag her grandparents got her used to driving on the wrong side of the road..." We Americans invented the car therefore we drive on the correct side and you lot drive on the wrong side." Nicole said in defense to yet another correction her grandfather was giving her.

"That may be the case but in this country if you drive like that you'll either get a ticket or a wreck." He replied. "The majority rules here too."

They also spent a good couple of hours trying to teach Nicole the local currency. It was not nearly as bad as the driving lessons but still pretty frustrating.

On Monday she was let loose on the country armed with a map, cell phone, money, and a camera, determined to absorb as much of the local landmarks and culture as was humanly possible. Grandpa said she was acting like a tourist but still whispered in her ear to make sure to not miss Big Ben at noon. "God awful racket but still..."

She toured London, never getting tired of the brownstone buildings, the accents of the London business people, the music, the punks, the funny sounding car horns and the different foods. She did however tire of getting lost.

"Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me how to get to Great Russell Street?" Nicole was in Soho and was desperately trying to find her way to the British Museum and was totally lost, again. Normally she didn't stop strangers, especially strange men, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

The strange man she stopped was of the good looking variety. He had hair that was neither long nor short, neither was it kept nor shaggy. Best of all it looked like it was unintentional. Guys who tried to look ruffled and worn and spent an hour a day trying to achieve that "I don't care." Look." Had become a dime a dozen and their lack of uniqueness screamed immaturity. He looked up from his coffee and smiled. *'Wow that was nice'*. Nicole thought suddenly very thankful that she had stopped wearing the too big t-shirt and raggy jeans in exchange for a button down magenta blouse and nearly new Calvin Kline's. His teeth were white and straight and his smile reached from his mouth to his eyes so easily it looked like it made the trip often.

"Hm, be careful going that way; it's hell for round-about." The man replied gravely Nicole grinned back. "Hard to avoid it when that's where the museum is."

"Ah, I see your predicament. Have you a pen and paper then? Thanks. Don't worry; I'll spare you my rudimentary abilities at drawing. Take Regent Street, it'll fork a little ways up, you want the left hand one. Follow it until it runs into Shaftesbury Ave; follow that until it intersects with Charming Cross Rd. You want to turn left onto Charming and follow it until you cross New Oxford St. Great Russell will be the first street on your right." He smiled as he handed her back the pen and paper.

"You realize I'm new here right? Is there an easier way to get there, even if it takes longer?" Nicole asked looking nervously at the directions.

"Sorry, downtown London is notorious for being horribly planned, fraught with round-about, one way streets, and other traps that are sprung on unsuspecting victims. Best suggestion would be for you to take the tube or the bus."

Nicole laughed. "I'd end up on a bus to Prague or the train that crosses the Channel. Thanks for the directions; I'm sure I'll be able to get there." Nicole said as she turned to leave.

"So how long does Britain have the pleasure of hosting you?" the gentleman asked.

In what she hoped wasn't too simpering of a tone Nicole replied, "I'm not sure. I haven't really planned too far ahead."

Again with that smile! "That's not the sort of thing a tourist normally says."

"I'm not a normal tourist." Nicole quipped back. What the hell was she doing!

This time he laughed, it was a boyish laugh, light and fun with a hint of mischief. "I can see that."

Nicole grinned and cursed her blood for rising to her head and making her blush. "Thanks again for the directions." She said.

He smiled at her for a moment longer then replied slowly. "You're welcome."

Nicole paid very little attention to her surroundings as she walked to the British Museum. For all she knew she was walking on clouds rather than pavement.

Still heady from her chance encounter with the handsome British guy Nicole did what any sensible person in her position would do: She called her best friend.

"Oh my God!" Jamie squealed as Nicole's voice came through. "How are you? I feel like I haven't seen you for months!"

"Sweetie it's hasn't even been one month yet." Nicole replied, grinning like a Cheshire cat anyway.

"So, how's England? Is it everything you thought it would be?" Jamie asked ignoring Nicole's friendly admonishments.

"Bits of it are yea, like London, it looks the way you see in movies, at least downtown does. There are parts of it that look kind of slummy, like some of New York or Milwaukee."

"I suppose, any big city is going to have that. But you like it for the most part?"

"Right now I do; of course, it's still sort of like being on vacation. Plus some of the locals are worth having a nice long look at

"This is silly." Nicole blurted out. "I'm spending gobs of money so the two of us can listen to each other breath. Tell me about you and Scott? Am I to be an Aunt yet?"

There was a moment of breathy giggles before Jamie finally cracked, "Maybe."

"What!" Nicole shrieked down the phone. "You let me blubber on about something as inconsequential as my sordid non-love life and you had this to tell me! You hag!"

"Calm down! It's not for sure yet." Jamie laughed giddily

"Tell me!" Nicole said nearly decapitating herself with the phone cord as she tried to sit up in bed.

Jamie laughed a bit more as Nicole cursed at the phone line, "I've been feeling pretty tired lately and my nipples are tender so I bought an at home pregnancy test but..."

"But what? Did it come back positive but it's a cheap one so you're worried it's not right or did it come back negative and it's a cheap one..."

"No, nothing like that." Jamie cut in

Nicole wracked her brain for a moment trying to think of what the problem may be but came up with nothing. "So..."

"I dropped it." Jamie replied quietly.

"What? What did you drop?" Nicole asked feeling utterly lost in the conversation.

"The stick. I dropped it." Jamie answered vaguely.

"Are we talking about the pregnancy test?" Nicole asked trying to figure out what relevancy a tree branch had in the grand scheme of procreation."

"Yea, there's a little white stick you've got to, you know, pee on."

"Right, yea, I've seen the commercials." Nicole said, happy to be back in on the conversation.

"Well, I peed on it, and then I dropped it." Jamie said.

"Where did you drop it?" Nicole asked, worried that she was going to lose the conversation again.

"The toilet." Jamie replied mulishly.

Nicole knew her friend didn't find this as funny as she did but that didn't stop her from laughing so hard she dropped the phone and had to gasp frantic 'hello's' into the mouth piece to ensure she hadn't completely lost the connection.

"Shut up, it's not that funny." Jamie chastised though she too was laughing.

Nicole tried to wipe the tears from her cheeks and eyes in vain, her sides splitting with mirth. "No, I'm sure it's actually funnier than what I'm giving it credit for but still, you know, time and space difference..." Nicole wheezed. "So, did you get it back?" Which caused the two friends to become engulfed in peals of laughter again.

"See, I never got to float stuff down the street gutters after it rained, this was me trying to capture that lost piece of my child hood." Jamie chortled.

"Get a head start and try to catch it at the sewer drain" Nicole responded, light headed with lack of breath.

"What is going on in here?" Nan asked, poking her head around Nicole's door. "It sounds like your coming through the ceiling!"

"Jamie misread the directions on the home pregnancy test." Nicole said, laughing harder then ever. Nan just rolled her eyes and left, closing the door firmly behind her.

The rest of the week passed without incident. Nicole trekked around London, stopping at open air markets, places of interests, and other sites that locals over grade school age wouldn't be caught dead at. She visited the Tower of London and swore she saw a ghostly sentry pass the raised portcullis before vanishing; though if she were honest with herself it was probably the shadow of a passer by. On her grandfather's advice she stood before Big Ben at noon and nearly went deaf. Another day she went to Buckingham Palace and the Parliament and, though she wasn't fluent in the local politics, she got a pretty good gist that things were run with the same feeling as in the United States: The government was there to give the people what they needed and wanted and though they were elected by the people, the very same voters often complained about how poor a job the officials were doing with running the country.

Another day took her to the White Chapel district where Jack the Ripper had terrorized ladies of the night over a century ago. As she acted like an amateur sleuth and tried to solve the mystery of whodunit, she knew she probably looked like the A-typical tourist but didn't care; she was having the time of her life. Each place she stopped she made it a point to visit the gift shop and pickup post cards for her friends and family.

The night before she was to report to her new job she found it hard to fall asleep. Her body was tired but her mutinous brain wouldn't let her fall asleep. For what felt like hours she laid awake staring at the ceiling. At midnight she temporarily gave up the hope of sleep and sat at her desk writing letters and stuffing the post cards into envelopes. After sticking them in the post box at the end of the drive she walked back to the house filled with a ridiculous sense of accomplishment.

Maybe that's what I need: a sense of accomplishment. I need to work. She mused to herself as she crawled back into bed and pulled the comforter up to her ears. As she laid awake, thinking positive thoughts of what her new job may be like sleep finally came.

Nicole was having a beautiful dream; peaceful and relaxing but had no idea what she was dreaming about when suddenly a hideous noise cut in and pulled her viciously out. Desperate to return things to the tranquility of before she tried to search the dream for the source of the racket but ended up opening her eyes. "Shut up." She commanded the alarm clock. Paying no attention to her it continued to bleat the hideous electronic noise. Frustrated she reached her arm out of the warm comfort of her quilt and smacked it, once to make it stop and then again just because. While she was stretching her eyes caught something shinning and glinting. On the floor next to the night stand was a beautiful brown leather shoulder bag, like a feminine brief case. She smiled, knowing it was a gift from her grandparents. Then reality crashed in. "Oh lord, the crazy guy." In her fantasies last night she had intentionally omitted the supervising attorney, which in part is probably what made the daydreams so pleasant.

"You're in desperate need of church if that's the way you address God." Nan chided as she poked her head into Nicole's room. "When you're ready come down for breakfast, I made you something good."

"Nan you didn't have to do that." Nicole said even as her stomach growled at the smell of eggs and bacon that had followed Nan in.

"None of that now; you can't have a bad day if you've had a good breakfast." Nan replied.

Nicole smiled. "Mom used to say that too. She'd make a big breakfast on the first day of school or when one of us kids started a new job."

Nan smiled too, looking for a moment like she was lost in nostalgia before shaking herself. "You'd best get a move on or you're going to be late!" before she bustled out the door.

Nicole showered quickly then ran down to eat.

After breakfast she stood for a moment at the door of the kitchen, checking that all of her things were in place in her new brief case.

"Have a great first day!" Nan said cheerfully as she kissed Nicole goodbye.

"I'm sure I will. I like the idea of new jobs; they're like clean slates. No one knows me, I don't know anyone else, there's no office politics yet or bad days to be reminded of. It's great!"

Pops grunted from somewhere behind his newspaper but remained silent. Taking it that he wished her well Nicole kissed the top of his head then walked out the front door.

At seven forty five she pulled up in front of the gray five story office building and walked briskly across the green marble floor of the entrance hall to the bank of elevators. As she was riding she checked her hair and make up in the stainless steel doors intent on making a good first impression, after all her future resume hung in the balance.

Exiting the lift she approached the receptionist's desk. "Hi, I'm here to interview for the assistant's job?" She announced to the mousy woman behind the desk.

"With Mr. Malon?" The woman inquired.

"Yes." Nicole was getting nervous. She felt like she was being sized up for her coffin.

"Thank-you Anne, I can take it from here." A smooth masculine voice announced from behind Nicole. She spun, nearly tripping over her own feet. "Oh." Nicole said lamely. He was good looking, though not in a conventional way. His brown hair was long enough in the back to brush the collar of his crisp white shirt, yet neatly kept on the sides and front but managed to not look like a mullet. His eyes were a vivid green with crow's feet around the corners, his mouth was thin and accented by laugh lines and his nose was perhaps a bit too long for his face. Alone these features were not GQ but for some reason when combined they made a very pleasant visage. Maybe it was his voice. It was very calm and elegant but sure without sounding arrogant. And the tone! It was just beautiful.

"Nicole? I'm Gavin Malon." Suddenly Nicole was compelled to laugh, images of this man wearing a dress and sitting in a rocking chair flooded her mind. "If you'll follow me, we can begin." He began to walk down the hall, leaving Nicole little choice but to follow as she bit her tongue.

He entered a small room at the end of the hallway and gestured for her to enter. *Funny how quickly adrenal glands can start spewing adrenaline out.* Nicole thought as her mind started to race and her legs urged her to turn and run out of the room. She didn't like the idea of being in a small room with this man alone, or any man for that matter.

She must have stood there too long because he finally said "I can't show you what I want you to work on in here if you are standing in the hallway." He said a little impatiently.

Nicole gave herself a mental shake and walked into the room. To his credit Gavin left the door wide open.

"You have no experience with law in the United Kingdom, and, as you may already be aware, it's not very similar to the American judicial system. Our law sources, procedures, and so forth are dramatically different. But your grandparents are good friends of mine so here we are." He sighed, sounding as if he wished it weren't so.

Nicole was beginning to feel less threatened by him and more annoyed. She hated being treated like a burdensome child even if it was evident he was older and more successful than her.

"You have one week to organize these files." He said sweeping his arm to encompass the entire room in his declaration. "I would like you to group them by category then by file name. You will have to open the file to see what type of case it was but the file name is on the outside tab and consists of the first two initials of the plaintiff's last name, the date, then the first two initials of the defendant's last name.

Nicole's jaw nearly unhinged. There were at least a thousand boxes and all of them were stuffed full of manila file folders. It would take a month to get through all of them!

Nicole turned; ready to say how impractical this request was when she saw his face. He was standing with his arms folded across his chest and his eyebrows raised. He looked like he was ready to swat away any arguments and exuded the authority to do so. Nicole changed her mind, not wanting to disappoint her grandparents. "Alright." She said chipperly.

How could she have ever thought that this nook was a room? It was claustrophobically small, crammed full with boxes of files and stuffy despite the vents. After three hours of sorting through dust covered cartons she started to hate her job. Annoyed that her attempts to look conservative and professional were being undone as her hair had come out of the braid she had put it in and was tickling her face and her white shirt had dust bunnies on it.

"Oi, you the new intern?" A female voice asked from somewhere near the door. Nicole slid the millionth file into place and looked up. "I'm the new assistant, actually." She replied wearily, brushing her hands on her gray twill skirt.

"Ah, you're a foreigner. That explains it." The woman said as she walked into the room. She didn't make it far; the maze of boxes deterred her but was in enough of Nicole's line of sight for her to notice that the woman was approximately as tall as Nicole, about five foot four; with long braided hair and skin that was a deep mocha color. Her eyes were so dark they could pass for black and she was a bit on the plump side though not enough so to be considered over weight.

"What?" Nicole asked unsure if she was being insulted or not.

The woman grinned. "Nothing against you personally, love. It's just that we figured the only way Malon could get someone to be his assistant was if he got some unsuspecting college student or he imported one."

"Don't mind her, she's just cranky, like usual." A tall red head edged past the shorter woman to stand where Nicole could see her. "I'm Margaret and this is Sashi." The woman introduced herself and her companion to Nicole extending her hand.

Gingerly Nicole picked her way out of the box cluster and whipped her hand on her pants before shaking the other woman's hand. "Nicole, it's nice to meet you."

"So the Evil Perfectionist strikes again eh?" Sashi asked eyeing the mess Nicole stood in. "Did he give you a week?"

Nicole started, surprised that gossip flew so fast in this office. "Yea, he did."

"Don't worry about it; you won't get through it." Sashi said picking a piece of lint off her sleeve. "Care to go to lunch with us?"

Nicole's mind was frozen on the apparent obliviousness of her situation. Either her goggled eyes or open mouth gave away her terror because Margaret was quick to interject. "Gavin sets impossible tasks to all of his assistant. He figures it's more effective then doing a traditional sit down interview."

"That and he's a sadist who likes to torture people." Sashi added cheerfully.

Margaret rolled her eyes. "He isn't a sadist, more like he's a perfectionist. He says that anyone can sit in an interview and say that they are persistent and will see a project through to the end no mater how hopeless it seems and have a good disposition about it but when it comes to it and they find themselves in such a position they fall apart. By setting them an impossible task right off the bat you find out if they are going to quit, be cranky, or suck it up and deal as best they can despite the odds obviously being set against them."

"And he's sadistic, or have you forgotten what he did to Robert Jansen?" Sashi questioned. Margaret was quiet but looked like she was caught between a rock and a hard place.

"What happened to Robert Jansen?" Nicole finally asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

"He and Gavin had been working on a really big case; Robert went to lunch and came back like fifteen minutes late. Gavin got mad and asked Robert what had taken so long. Poor Robert showed Gavin the fish and chips box and said the diner was slow. Gavin grabbed the box and chucked it across the office, covered Robert in fish bits and coleslaw.

Nicole looked aghast. "Did Mr. Jansen quit?"

"Nah, Gavin apologized and made up for it." Sashi said looking bored. "So how about lunch? We'll three be working together so we may as well make nice!"

Nicole looked around once more to the forest of papers and corrugated boxes before nodding appreciatively to Sashi.

"Don't worry, it'll still be here and so will you. Even the slave master allots time for lunch."

The three women trooped off to a small café around the corner from the firm and settled into a booth in the back corner and pursued the menu.

"So you've met Gavin already?" Margaret asked after they placed their drink orders.

"Yea." Nicole answered.

"Don't let the pleasant exterior fool you, he's a glacier beneath his Gucci."

"Sashi, the only reason you so adamantly dislike him is because he told you off for flirting with John Kettleworth's son." Margaret said as she glared at Sashi.

Nicole smiled inwardly. Margaret was, in a word, gorgeous. She was incredibly tall, easily close to six feet and to best accentuate her height she was willowy with fine facial features and long red hair. Yet contrary to the stereotype Hollywood would like you to believe she seemed to be very kind and intelligent.

"Don't you have a boyfriend?" Nicole asked curiously.

"Yes I do. Do you want to see a picture?" Sashi asked conversationally. She pulled out a wallet and showed Nicole a picture of a good-looking man with dark brooding eyes and black hair that almost hung in his eyes.

"So is that why Gavin didn't want you flirting with the client's son?" She asked handing the photo back.

"Gavin wouldn't care if I flirted with the entire Chatsworth football team. No he's just a stodgy old..."

"Kettleworth is a huge client of ours and Malon doesn't approve of mixing employees with his clients." Margaret cut in. "He spent years building a good client base and an unshakeable reputation as being honest and ethical so he's really adamant about behaving professionally and not doing anything that will jeopardize his business."

Sashi snorted. "You could do with a good flirt-n-shag yourself! But I know you won't." Sashi leaned towards Nicole conspiratorially and mock said in a theatrical whisper. "She's still in love with her ex. They broke up like two months ago and she hasn't jumped back on the horse yet."

"I am not still in love with him; I just don't feel the need to 'flirt-n-shag' with any wanker who comes along!"

Sashi winked at Nicole in a "Sure you don't" way.

"Sashi likes to stir up trouble wherever she goes; she seems to think it breaks up the monotony better than reading a book." Margaret said glaring at Sashi through her dark lashes.

"Oh you only think that because you'd rather read about everyone else's lives in a book rather than take a chance and live your own. You know though, combined we'd make the perfect woman." Sashi replied.

Amazed that neither woman took the others criticism as an insult Nicole asked, "How long have you two been friends?"

"What now, three years?" Sashi asked looking at Margaret.

"Right about that, yea. I started at Malon Inc about a week or so after she did and I think we found comrodory in each other. You know; we neither knew what we were doing or who anyone was in the pecking order. It was nice to blunder through things together. And that sort of bond doesn't go away even if one of us is a git."

"Shouldn't talk about yourself that way, it's no wonder you've got a low self esteem!" Sashi reprimanded. "So have you met anyone yet that you fancy?" Sashi asked turning to Nicole.

"No, not really; though I've only been here for a couple of weeks."

"Ah, well I suppose, you've got time." Sashi admitted as she bent back over her plate and picked out the onions from her gyro.

Nicole suddenly felt defensive; who was this woman to act as if she, Nicole, was wasting her own time? And it wasn't even that; it was also how she managed to make Nicole feel as if she wasn't interesting or cool or sophisticated. It was like being in school again and discovering that the kids you were friends with last year were now in the cool clique and you weren't.

"What have you been doing with your time since you've been here?" Margaret asked kindly.

"Sight seeing, getting lost, and generally acting like an American tourist." Nicole replied smiling, hoping a seemingly flippant disregard for the status quo of coolness would bolster her image in the other woman's eyes.

"See now that's my idea of a good time, minus the getting lost part. I would much rather go out and see the sights rather than spend my free time in a smelly, crowded night club."

"And there in lies the difference." Sashi celebrated. "I'd rather see the sights in the night club instead of the ones in some crowded smelly street."

Margaret shook her head in defeat and was apparently satisfied with that. "Well ladies, time is ticking. We should get back before Gavin flips his lid."

Nicole allowed herself an inward groan, lamenting the chore that awaited her return.

"There is a bright side to all of this, love." Sashi offered "After a week it'll be over; one way or another."

"It was awful." She declared when her grandmother asked her how her first day went. "But I have some nice co-workers so at least the place has that going for it."

"See now, it wasn't all bad." Her Grandmother offered as she set out ingredients, pots and pans to make dinner with.

Nicole smiled. Despite the knowledge that an admission would denote immaturity Nicole took comfort in her Nan's words and felt better for it.

The rest of the week went by in a monotony of files and case numbers with the only silver lining in her otherwise cloudy career was that she continued to go to lunch with Margaret and Sashi on a daily basis.

It was at one of these lunch escapes that Sashi breached the dreaded question. "So what's a nice little American, such as you, doing in a place like this?"

"You know, desire to see the world, broaden my horizons, get a tan." Nicole replied lightly.

"Aha, methinks I've unearthed a mystery!" Sashi proclaimed pouncing on the prospect with all the vim and alacrity of a jungle cat jumping on a rodent. "Broken heart? Felony? Or better yet: Both?"

Nicole laughed out loud, "Nothing that romantic, sorry. I recently came into some money, enough to buy a plane ticket over here. My grandparents are great and offered to let me live with them while I'm here. The whole thing was an offer too good to refuse."

Sashi and Margaret were both looking at her as if they know there were great holes in her story. Margaret was too polite to mention it out loud; however Sashi only saw it as a better reason to pursue the subject.

"So you get a fairly large sum of money from an undisclosed source and decide to drop everything you've known your whole life and jump across the big blue ocean for an undecided amount of time, with no job in the ready?"

"That's about the size of it." Nicole replied, beginning to feel uncomfortable. Having very little experience with someone so adamant about unearthing secrets she could scarcely guess how long this line of questioning would last. Luckily Margaret came to her rescue.

"Sashi, you wouldn't be so interested in this if she told you everything right away. Enjoy the suspense!"

Nicole smiled gratefully at Margaret before looking back down to her menu.

"Nick and I got into a fight last night." Sashi remarked as if she were idly mentioning a book she had just read.

"Now what about?" Margaret asked as if this were nothing out of the ordinary.

"He told me I would make a good mother and I asked if that meant he thinks I should get fat. He said no so I asked if he meant that I was already fat and should do something to explain why. He got huffy and said if I couldn't take a compliment he wouldn't pay me then anymore."

"So what'd you say?" Margaret asked

"I told him it was a stupid compliment and if he couldn't think of anything nicer to say then he shouldn't say anything at all."

"Sashi!" Margaret cried looking scandalized. "He was being nice to you and you said something that mean! What is the matter with you?"

"He's trying to rope me into this motherly, nanny, role and I don't like it. If he wants me to be domesticated then he should buy me a cow bell."

Nicole tried to stifle a laugh behind an embellished cough before saying. "So you don't want to be a cow?"

"No." Sashi replied seriously. "It's like that poor woman from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the Marquise de Merteuil: At about the time she discovered how much fun she as a woman could have she gets shunted off in marital shackles. It's the same with me. My parents made me go to an all girl's Catholic school, I couldn't even date until I was seventeen and then I had to be home

by nine. Now I'm finally my own woman, I can do what I want, and Nick's trying to impede that. It's down right tragic."

"Starving children all over the world and you find the fact that a man loves you enough to want to start a family with you a tragedy?" Margaret asked briskly.

"I donate every month to Amnesty International; I've paid my dues so I'm allowed to feel bad for myself."

"That kind of logic sort of makes me feel ashamed of my liberal preferences." Nicole addressed Margaret.

"Sashi's logic..." Margaret stated ruefully.

"So you're aware that Sashi and her logic are both still right." Sashi stated matter of factly.

"You're such a hypocrite." Margaret observed.

"Only when it suits me." Sashi acknowledged.

As the three women left the café Margaret realized she had forgotten to leave the tip, a revelation that made Sashi snort in disbelief. "Leave it to Margaret to feel responsible for saving the wait staff from poverty."

"You of all people should know that the tips are where most of these people make their money." Margaret replied.

"A horrible bit of my past that I was happy to have forgotten. Thanks for making me relive it." To Nicole's questioning gaze she answered. "My years at the university were paid for in large by scholarships and grant money but the rest had to be funded some how. My parents did the best they could but...well at some point everyone must learn to be responsible for themselves. I figured eighteen was the right age to start learning."

Nicole nodded, not sure if that was a jab at her living off her grandparents and father's money or not. Thankfully Sashi rescued her from the ambiguity. "About inside there." She began haltingly. "I wasn't trying to be a prying bitch or anything. I lived in this town my whole life and the most exotic thing I've seen is when my Mum and Dad took us to the carnival in Northhamphshire Square. I'm either jealous or trying to live vicariously through you. Maybe both."

Nicole stood agog for a moment, trying to take in the idea that the woman standing before her, who seemed to ooze worldly knowledge was jealous of her.

Friday came around and Nicole awoke with a sense of dread. She had put a very noticeable dent in the amount of files that needed to be sorted but was nowhere near being done. She resigned herself to the knowledge that she had done the best she could do and had to accept whatever judgment Gavin would pass.

Cautiously she entered the building, irrationally expecting security to be waiting for her with their burly arms folded across their chests, solemnly shaking their heads as she tried to gain admittance. Childish perhaps but at least expecting the absolute worst, no matter how improbable it was, always softened the blow when she received bad news.

As it was, there were no burly security guards waiting for her and no one attempted to stop her as she made her way to her file closet. She started to go through the files as she had done the previous four days on tenterhooks. Every time someone walked by the open door she thought it would be to tell her to go home, her services were no longer required. At lunch she announced her fears to her companions.

"If he really thought you were doing such a deplorable job, he'd have fired you before today." Margaret soothed.

"How would he know? He hasn't stopped by the office since Monday." Nicole moaned.

In an uncharacteristic show of sympathy Sashi reached over and patted Nicole's arm. "He'd know. He's probably stopped in after you've left to mark your progress. He's a sly son of a bitch."

Nicole couldn't help but laugh.

Promptly at five o'clock there was a knock on the door frame of the file room that caused Nicole to look up so quickly she gave herself a neck crick.

"How goes it?" Gavin asked somberly.

Trying to push the image of him standing by the door, staring at the second hand of his watch to make sure it was exactly five before he announced himself lest she laugh in his face; Nicole stood up and straightened her shirt.

"Pretty well; that's the group that's been sorted out and that is the group that I hadn't gotten to yet." She said indicating each group in turn.

Without looking at her Gavin walked over to the pile she indicated as being the one that was completed. "Did you read any of the files?" He asked, his tone not hinting at what the right answer would be.

"I read the captions to get an idea of what type of service was being requested." Nicole replied hoping she didn't sound nervous. Honestly it wasn't the fact that her job was hanging on this man's every word but that he was standing so close to her she could smell the lingering effects of his after shave; she didn't like the feeling of being trapped between him, a few dozen boxes and a wall. She tried to listen to what he was saying while concentrating on keeping her breathing even but managed to make herself dizzy in the process.

"So what type of service do we provide Mr. Fred Avery?" Gavin asked still not looking at her.

"Mostly basic things like a will and some simple contracts." Nicole said.

Gavin replaced the file he was holding and selected another. "And Ms. Joyce Cunningham?"

"Her's was a criminal defense case; a misdemeanor. I don't remember the charge though."

"Derrick Sheckkel?"

Nicole paused for a moment, she remembered seeing the disengagement letter but her mind drew blank after that, it was one of the first files she had sorted. "I don't recall." She answered, unintentionally using a popular phrase witnesses often used when on the stand. "I remember there was a disengagement letter, you declined to take his case but I don't remember what the case was."

Gavin nodded. "Fair enough. So now you've got an idea of the kinds of law we practice here and an idea of some of who some of our clients are, not to mention how we organize the hard copy archived files--" Gavin stopped when he heard Nicole gasp and turned a quizzical glance toward her. "We're a large firm, Ms. Duffeck; our files are scanned and stored on compact disc. I keep the hard copies as an extra back up and as a way of tormenting prospective employees." He said unsmilingly.

Nicole stared at him for a moment, trying to decide if she wanted to laugh or punch him in the head, ultimately deciding on the middle ground she nodded and waited for him to continue.

"In turn I also have a good idea of how well you can remember facts and names, how persistent you are and how honest you are. I expect you to be at the office at eight and work until five. There may be days when I require you to stay late. I don't expect it often but when a large case or an important client requires it I expect you to make all possible arrangements to accommodate that. In turn I will make all possible arrangements to accommodate any personal time off you may need. Paychecks are distributed every Monday and lunches are paid up to one hour, anything over that and I dock your pay. Your duties will be to file, maintain computer databases, file papers with the courts, and handle a variety of other tasks. Do you have any problems with that?" He asked.

Nicole finally managed to get her tongue unstuck from the roof of her mouth, though she quickly found herself wishing it had remained stuck. "So I'm not fired?"

He looked at her for a moment as if she was an alien and he couldn't quite make out what she was. "Technically I just hired you on today so it would have been impossible for me to fire you. A more accurate question would be to ask if you were hired." He responded smoothly.

Nicole paused and figured she had no dignity left to lose she asked, "Got it. Am I hired?"

Gavin chuckled and shook his head in a bemused sort of way. Nicole was so startled at this show of emotion that she jumped. Thankfully Gavin seemed not to notice as he was in the process of extricating a pen and scrap of paper from his pockets.

"Let's save some time here." After scribbling a few words on it he held the slip out to Nicole. Nicole was irritated when she flinched and tried to hide the action by thanking him. "You've got it in writing." And with that he turned and walked out.

Nicole looked down to the piece of paper and laughed out loud.

"04/05/06. I Gavin Malon formally hire Nicole Duffeck" scrawled on the bottom was his signature.

Completely forgetting that she managed to make an ass of herself twice in less than two minutes in front of her new boss she dashed elatedly out of the confines of the file room and found Sashi and told her the good news.

"You know what that means? We've got a reason to celebrate! Let's hit the pub."

"Since when do you need a reason to drink?" Margaret asked.

"I don't, but when one is so readily available I'd be a fool to ignore it." Sashi replied winking at Nicole. "Grab your coat so we can go and get an early start."

"Sure, just let me call Nan and let her know." Nicole said.

Margaret and Sashi waited at the elevators for her while Nicole rang Nan.

"Hi Nan, I got the job." Nicole said after her grandmother answered the phone.

"See, I told you it would be fine, he's not quite the ogre people make him out to be." Nan said sounding pleased.

None to convinced of the later part of Nan's statement Nicole ignored it and continued. "I just wanted to let you know Sashi, Margaret and I are going to the bar for a few."

"OK, have fun dear, just don't make too much of a racket when you come in, Pops will have a fit." Nan said sounding as if she weren't really too worried.

"I won't. Love you Nan." Nicole said before hanging up.

Normally telling her Nan that she loved her wouldn't embarrass Nicole if she were overheard but when she looked up she saw Gavin looking at her. Suddenly a flush crept into her cheeks.

"My grandmother." She offered lamely.

He nodded and walked away, not betraying anything.

Still burning from embarrassment she set off to find the other two.

In his office Gavin was rummaging through some papers thinking about nothing in particular except the memory of a guide book he had once read that was written by an Englishman. It advised that if you were sitting on an airplane next to an American be prepared to hear about their medical history, their family, their personal history and to get an invitation to the person's house for dinner. After listening to Nicole's side of the conversation with her grandmother he had to admit the man had a point. However it may be interesting to find out why she was so damn jittery. Even before she had begun associating with her fellow co-workers she seemed annoyingly twitchy around him.

Gavin sighed and slapped a file down. Oh well; respect takes a long time to earn, at least fear is an immediate way of keeping people in line while the respect thing builds.

Nicole stepped out of the car and took the opportunity as the last one out to savor the taste of the fresh air before entering the bar, which in contrast promised to be filled with second hand smoke and the alcohol laden humidity. Nicole had found that she developed a habit since her first arriving on the sidewalk outside of Heathrow. She caught herself stopping regularly to breathe the scents and sounds of England; a habit she would have been too embarrassed to explain to another living soul as she couldn't properly find the words herself.

Back home in the United States she used to savor the week that would precede fall, enjoying the tantalizing promise of autumn that was brought in like a whisper on the winds. The sensation was so faint and brief she often thought she was imagining it out of hope. Now here in England she savored the more constant changes; the moments before day succumbed to night, the change the atmosphere would take during one of the frequent rains. These things served as a bracing reminder that she was not in the States but somewhere entirely new.

"You coming love?" Sashi asked, her foot holding the door of the pub open to reveal the patrons, bar stools, and loud music that served as the innards of the establishment.

"Yea, I just couldn't remember if I turned off the light to the store room." Nicole lied, her mind still clinging to the question that had formed moments before Sashi pulled Nicole out of her musings.

Once inside the bar the three friends took to the chore of draining their respective glasses with the same zeal as the table full of University students they were seated next to.

"We've toasted our good fortune of having Nicole joining our ranks; we've drunk to the Queen, each other's health, the health of our families, the longevity of Great Britain, and for Nicole's benefit, the health of her president. I think we have run out of things to toast." Margaret declared.

"Good, now we can drink without having to sit and think first about why we are drinking." Sashi announced taking an impressive swig of her beer. "Besides, men get to drink until they're puking and it's expected! We shouldn't we!" Sashi said to the table at large.

"That's sexist and unfair." A man's voice said from behind Nicole. Startled Nicole looked up saw the man she had gotten directions from in Soho looking back at her, his eyes laughing and his lips turned up in a smile.

"Yea, it is sexist! Women should be allowed to drink like fish too!" Margaret raved drunkenly.

The man smiled at Nicole "Nice to see you again."

"Nice to see you too; how've you been?"

"Alright; haven't had any more tourists stop me for directions though so it's been kind of dull."

Nicole laughed a bit giddily before noticing the unabashed stares Sashi and Margaret had fixed on her.

"Oh, um, guys this is..." Nicole trailed off, suddenly remembering she had never gotten his name.

"Ryan. We met briefly when Nicole was sight seeing." Ryan supplied smiling at her.

"Ryan was nice enough to give me directions to the museum. Ryan this is Margaret and Sashi, two of the best legal assistants in Great Britain."

"Obviously you're already drunk. You're cut off. Though this explains why you like sight seeing and getting lost" Sashi declared happily as she popped the top off another beer and passed it to Nicole. "So, Ryan, what brings you here?" Sashi made no attempts to hide the glee in her voice nor did she seem to notice the deep crimson color that stained Nicole's face.

"Oh, you know, out for a night of male bashing, same as you fine ladies." Ryan replied kindly.

"You know what this is? It's fate." Sashi declared. "You and Nicole met by chance when she was a damsel in distress and now you get to see her in a better light. She just got hired at a very posh law firm you know."

"Well then congratulations are in order! Which law firm has the honor of employing you, if I may be so bold as to ask?" Ryan asked.

"Malon Inc." Nicole replied feeling, if possible, a bit more embarrassed at the situation she was finding herself in.

"Very posh indeed. Well I want interfere in your revelry any longer ladies, congratulations again Nicole."

"Oh, come on, there's no need for you to go. Sit down and have one with us. The more the merrier." Margaret said kicking an empty chair out from under the table.

"No that's alright, I don't want to intrude." Ryan said not moving.

"You wouldn't be intruding; besides, for not getting me lost the least I can do is buy you a drink." Nicole said hoping she didn't sound too timid.

For a moment Ryan didn't look as if he knew what he wanted to do. Suddenly feeling very self-conscious Nicole tried to think of something dismissive to say that would allow her to save face. Before she could though, Ryan pulled the proffered chair out a little further and sat down

"So Ryan, what is it that you do for a living?" Sashi asked, paying no heed to the bluntness of her question.

"At the moment, I drink without shame and enjoy the company of beautiful women. During the day, when I'm going incognito from my fancy persona I work in an advertising agency selling sales pitches."

"I'd imagine that could go one of two ways. Either you must be incredibly bored or terribly interested, which is it?" She asked stirring her drink with an olive.

"Well, that would depend on the account. Dog food for instance is incredibly exciting. No, really it is! There are a million things that need to be attended to: lining up vets to be on hand at the shoot, animal rights people have to be notified, dog handlers, trainers and medical personal need to be available and their needs have to be attended to as well as that of the animal's; never a dull moment. If it's a stint for a movie premier then you're talking absolute and unequivocal boredom. All we do is look at story boards, half the time we don't even get to see the movie before it premieres except for the clips they're considering airing for an ad on the telly."

"So you get paid gobs of money to sit and be bored to the bone by artsy-fartsy types? You poor sad man!" Sashi exclaimed.

"Thank you for your sympathy but it's not a total waste of time. The monotony leaves me a lot of time to day dream or to plan a whirl wind tour of the globe." Ryan replied smiling.

"Do you travel much?" Nicole asked hoping to derail Sashi before she could get into her swing.

"Quite a bit, yea. Mostly it's here in Britain but a few years ago I went to France and Germany."

"Is there a lot of difference between the two?" Nicole asked before her brain could warn her of the naivety of the question.

Ryan, it appeared, made the split second decision to take this question as a joke and laugh his response; "Aside from the French inhabiting France and the Germans inhabiting Germany no, not much. There is one town in France, just along the coast that really stands out..." Enraptured by the way his mouth moved, Nicole sat back and listened to Ryan's narration of the Coastal paradise, occasionally supplying non-descript noises of appreciation in place of any response that would further betray her lack of experience in these matters. Ryan seemed to not mind being the center of attention and flowed from the topic of the French provincial towns to the difference in cultures between France and the United Kingdom. "It's just fascinating how much more open and independent they are compared to us." Ryan said to the table at large.

"But surely all French people can't be that flamboyant." Nicole argued, again fearful that she was treading the embarrassing waters of uncouthness. "You were just in that one town which from the description sounded very touristy so it could really be that it was more of a party town than anything and not the basis for a normal French existence."

Ryan looked at her appraisingly for a moment and Nicole could only imagine that he was trying to decide how to best tell her she was a moron when Sashi interjected.

"Yea, like Daytona Beach or Milwaukee is in the US." The table laughed good naturedly and Nicole felt the pressure off her to hide her inadequacies as the subject took another turn, this time in the direction of movies. Here the table was mutually knowledgeable and though she didn't get to listen to Ryan speak as much as before Nicole enjoyed it none the less.

Near midnight Sashi announced she had to go home and tend to Nick's wounded ego, she figured the silent treatment she was administering after the spat they had a few days ago had gone on long enough. Margaret declared that she too had to get going as she had a family event to attend the following day. Nicole went to walk them to the door.

"I'm so sorry I spent so much time talking with him, are you guys upset?" She asked concerned.

"Not at all! When we went to the bathroom we decided to let you two be, see if maybe you could get a spark going." Margaret soothed.

"Go and enjoy him, we didn't ignore you two for nothing!" Sashi admonished pushing Nicole back towards the table. Laughing Nicole bade them good night and returned to Ryan who had been playing with a drink stirrer at the nearly empty table.

"Do you have any thing that would require you to leave?" He asked kindly.

"Actually no I don't; how about you?"

"Fortunately I'm free for the next twenty-four hours or so. Care to pass a few of those with me?" he asked with an unassuming smile.

"I'd be delighted."

Though the English days were already beginning to show the promising signs of a warm and humid summer the evenings were still cool and comfortable making it a pleasant decision that they should walk around down town with Ryan serving as a tour guide.

In a very good impression of a Hollywood British snob Ryan directed Nicole's attention to various landmarks; "And here-a, if you'd be so kind as to direct your attention to my left, you will note the Hu-Chung Family Chinese Restaurant, done in the neo-classic revivalist style." Nicole giggled. "Really though; has England proven to be what you were expecting?" He asked seriously.

"I don't think anything would have prepared me for this. Movies and TV shows show some of it but there's a lot more ambiance than can be brought out on film." Nicole replied dreamily.

"Really?" Ryan said looking around confused.

"What are you doing?" Nicole asked smiling as Ryan kicked an empty paper bag.

"Looking for the ambiance." Ryan said still searching furtively.

"Point taken: I'm being idyllic."

"I just don't want you to get the idea that England is some rare jewel. If you do then at some point you'll get disappointed and want to leave and where will that leave me?"

Nicole's heart stopped for a moment and her jaw seemed to suddenly be afflicted with some weird malady that caused it to clench in on its self, rendering it impossible for her to speak.

Oblivious to the rigid state that Nicole's body had currently entered into Ryan motioned towards a set of lights that spanned out horizontally over the water. "Counterproductive towards my recent warning there is the London Bridge. Would you care to stroll that way?"

"Sure." Nicole replied, hoping it came out sounding natural.

The couple chatted happily, the inane feeling Nicole had back in front of the Chinese restaurant seemed to have been left back there as she let Ryan lead her towards their destination.

Once on the grid iron Foot Bridge that spanned beneath the massive iron monolith Nicole was washed over with the guilty memory of her last memorable experience on a bridge. Ryan must have seen something on her face because he asked quietly "Are you OK?"

"Yea, just..." She knew she couldn't tell him. "Just getting kind of tired is all." She lied.

Ryan nodded and smiled. "Long day what with all the celebrating and soap-box preaching, no wonder!" he joked. "Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

"It was really nice running into you again." Nicole said kindly after they had reached the parking lot.

"I couldn't agree more. If you're not busy on Sunday maybe we can run into each other again at the market?" He asked.

"I'd love to." Nicole replied smiling.

"I'll see you Sunday." Without warning he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

As Nicole put the car into drive she had to admit to herself that it was chaste and cheesy and because of that she absolutely loved it. It was like something out of a Jane Austen novel.

The part that she didn't think had ever been written in an Austen novel was that as he leaned towards her Nicole felt like she wanted to hit him and run. *It was just nerves; after all, here's an attractive, intelligent man who's showing interest in me. I've been making an ass of myself all day; this is just par for the course.* Nicole thought as she drove along the lamp light streets. *And certainly there was nothing about him that should make me balk, he only kissed me on the cheek for God's sake, it's not like he proposed I go back to his place or anything.*

Nicole tried to think about other things but kept coming back to the feeling that was gently gnawing in the back of her mind. It was like when she was a child and realized late at night she had neglected to complete an assignment that was due the next day in school. *Guilt; just say the damn word, you feel guilty.*

Nicole woke Sunday morning and reveled in the perfection of it. Though her favorite season was autumn, spring ran a very close second. Today was one of those days that explained perfectly why that was. The air was cool and brisk but only so much so that jeans and a sweater would be enough to keep her warm. The sky was cloudless and the sun shown brightly which, according to Pops, was a rare thing for England this time of year.

"Have you got plans for today?" Nan asked as she poured a glass of orange juice.

"Yea, I'm going to meet a friend at the market." Nicole said smiling.

"Oh, which one? Margaret or Sashi?" Nan asked distractedly.

"Um, neither actually. His name is Ryan." Nicole said blushing as she pretended to be interested in yesterday's newspaper.

Nan looked up from her coupons and Pops peered around his paper. "Well that's a new one! Where did you meet this Ryan? At work?" Nan asked sounding as if she had found the juiciest bit of gossip.

"No, I met him a few weeks ago while I was sight seeing. He gave me directions. I didn't think anything of it then because we didn't exchange names or numbers but then we bumped into one another again at the pub on Friday." Nicole replied, sounding a little to giddy for her own liking.

"That's so sweet!" Nan replied clapping her hands. "You must tell me about your date when you get back."

"Nan it's not necessarily a date. Maybe he just wanted to hang out with someone and his friends are busy." Nicole answered.

"Posh. A bloke won't ask a woman to go to the market with him unless he fancies her." Pops supplied from behind the paper.

Nicole laughed as she rose from the table. "Alright, that's enough. You two can dissect this without me; I'm going to meet Ryan. I'll be back later." Wrapping her arms around Pop's shoulders and kissed his bald head then pecked Nan on the cheek before leaving.

Ryan was waiting for her when she approached the entrance to the square. *He always looks so good.* Nicole thought as she walked up to him.

He smiled easily as he saw her approach, causing Nicole to feel self conscious and giddy at the same time.

"Hi." She said shyly, wishing for all the world that she could be one of those carefree women who always seemed at ease with herself.

"Hey. Glad you could make it." He replied sounding for all the world like a man who was completely at ease with himself. "How's your weekend been?"

"Good; how was yours?"

"Better now." He answered grinning.

Nicole cursed her blushing cheeks again as she smiled at her shoes.

"Shall we?" Ryan asked indicating the entrance to the market place.

Nicole nodded, smiling and wished she could think of something interesting to say.

"It occurs to me that I acted quite ungentlemanly when last we met." Ryan began.

"Oh? How's that?" Nicole asked afraid he was going to say it had something to do with his having kissed her before they parted.

"I had spent the better part of the evening talking about myself and not nearly enough about you." Ryan replied mater-of-factly.

"Well, what would you like to know?" Nicole replied nervously.

"For starters, have you decided how long you are going to be in the United Kingdom?" Ryan asked as they strolled past carts displaying fruits, vegetables and hand made crafts.

"The jury is still out on that one but the job at the law firm does help feed the fantasy of making this a long term arrangement." Nicole replied.

Ryan responded with a non-committal grunt and was silent for a few moments before asking.

"How do you like it there anyway?"

"It's not that bad really, though I've only done filing so far. The people I've met have been great though so that makes me hopeful."

As they strolled through the square, which was teeming with people of all social classes and ethnic backgrounds the conversation took a natural flowing quality, covering work in general, friends, and other normal topics for two people who were first making an acquaintance.

Their meanderings had them pass tables which offered anything from old nick-knacks that looked as if they had come out of some grandparent's attic, hand painted landscapes that the artist himself or herself was personally there to sell, rugs of all colors and sizes and more food than could possibly be sold in one afternoon.

In the not too far off landscape a clock chimed the hour. Ryan started and looked at his own watch, as if to verify that the rest of the world was running on the same time he was. "Oh,

bollocks, that's the time? Look, I've got to dash; family thing. But we should really do this again soon." He said, his blue eyes resting on her brown ones earnestly.

"We should." Nicole answered honestly. She liked his smile and his eyes and why were they coming closer? Oh God he was going to kiss her! Nicole took a breath and steadied herself...and waited. After what felt like an hour, though in reality it was only a few seconds, she looked up and saw he was still a few inches from her.

"May I kiss you?" He asked softly.

Nicole's voice caught in her throat, her legs went numb and her hands started to shake. She was terrified of letting him get that close to her but terrified. "Yes." She croaked.

Ryan cocked an eyebrow and looked at her quizzically for a moment before speaking. "If you would rather I didn't...that is, I don't want to do anything that would make you uncomfortable."

Nicole smiled weakly, trying to will the irrational butterflies in her stomach to settle down so she could think. "You don't make me uncomfortable, it's just that it's been a while since I've been with someone, the last person I was with; our relationship ended badly."

Ryan regarded her for a moment then slowly leaned forward. When he was a breath from her away he spoke so quietly it was just above a whisper. "Tell me to stop and I will."

"I don't want you to." Nicole whispered back.

Nicole was in a daze on the drive home, her brain reeling as if she had just accomplished a dive from an airplane. She felt as if she were free from the confines she had imprisoned herself in since The Night, that somehow kissing Ryan allowed her to be a normal person again.

Nan was sitting in the living room, engrossed in her knitting when Nicole returned.

"So, how was your day?" She asked not looking up.

Nicole related the events of the afternoon but hesitated at the parting.

Setting aside her work Nan looked at Nicole. "Did you kiss him?" She asked unabashedly.

"Nan!" Nicole cried blushing.

"What? I want all the good details along with the boring stuff."

Nicole laughed and told her about the kiss. "It felt weird though, like I was free falling off a cliff. It wasn't the kiss it's self so much as..." Nicole sighed and looked imploringly at Nan.

Nan nodded sagely for a moment then spoke, "I can't explain what's going on in your head. The only thing I can do is give you some advice: Don't be afraid to move beyond your fears but don't move faster than your own morals allow. Your fear is there in an attempt to keep you safe from every possible pain; your morals are there to validate your fears. Do what you know is right and not a second before you morally feel comfortable."

"How did you get so smart?" Nicole asked appreciatively.

"I personally studied under Socrates." Nan replied picking up her knitting again.

Monday at work there was a memo on her desk from Gavin asking that as soon as she gets in she report to his office. Suddenly she fell from the cloud she had been floating on since Friday and hit the very real ground very hard. He was going to fire her. He changed his mind and decided he couldn't afford her or he didn't need her.

Tentatively she knocked on his door and entered after he advised to come in. He was sitting in a comfortable looking leather desk chair behind a modern styled desk that appeared to have been fashioned out of chrome and glass. Nicole stood patiently before him, waiting while he finished working on some tedious looking papers

After he pushed the file aside he looked up. "Good morning." He said sounding very business like.

"Morning." She replied

"In the future you will do well to bring a writing pad and pen when I ask you to meet with me." He said sliding a yellow legal pad and a pen towards her.

Like Pavlov's dog she didn't quite register what was happening, she just responded. She seized the pad and pen and positioned her self in a chair to take notes.

"If you recall I told you on Friday that your responsibilities with this firm will be many and varied. I understand that you may not be well established in these parts as far as directions go, therefore I will allow you the use of the full day to complete these tasks. Understand that normally

you will not be given such loose deadlines though. These files need to be taken down to the court house, file them on the first floor with the clerk there and bring back the receipt and our copy.” Gavin said sliding the recently abandoned file towards her. Nicole adjusted herself in the chair opposite Gavin’s desk and poised her newly acquired on her knee, jotting down notes as he continued to dictate her errands for the day.

“If you have any questions,” he concluded, “ask Margaret or Sashi.” Amused that Gavin’s idea of an easy day took a half an hour for him to relate, Nicole made her way out of the office, congratulating herself on having made it through one interview with Gavin where she didn’t wish she could crawl under a rock afterward. Oh how the mighty have fallen.

That day she became really good at multi-tasking. While she was waiting for the ancient woman at the court office to call her up she called the banquet hall and reserved the day Gavin requested. As she drove to her various locations she called the caterer and reserved them as well as provided the list of items that Gavin requested be on the menu for the party he was planning. Dry cleaning had to be picked up, clients had to be contacted with reminders, files had to be picked up and dropped off at various offices...by the end of the day she was exhausted but pleased. She had accomplished everything he had asked of her except putting some files and document proofs on Gavin’s desk. When she had finally located the requested items he had already left the office and his door was closed. She didn’t want to slide them under the door but she didn’t want to enter his office without permission either. Instead she decided to put them in her locking desk drawer and would deliver them first thing in the morning.

Smiling and humming to herself she left the office building with the sense that things were going to be great here.

The next day she arrived and found another note on her desk to go to Gavin’s office. She grabbed the files, a pad of paper and a pen and, feeling very secure, she went to his office. “Here are those files.” She said placing them on his desk.

“Thank you, but as I recall I requested that you bring them to me yesterday.” He replied looking her in the eye.

She wasn’t expecting a compliment but nor was she expecting a politely wrapped insult either. “Yes, you did,” Nicole cringed at the obvious statement “but you weren’t in your office yesterday when I got the files so I left them locked in my desk drawer until I could bring them to you this morning.” Her legs felt sort of weak and she wished she had taken a seat in the chair before handing over the file. Now if she sat down she was afraid it may be taken as a flippant gesture. So she stood and hoped like hell she could keep standing. So much for things being great here.

Gavin nodded. “My office door is unlocked. You’re my assistant thus you have every right to enter my office to leave items or messages when I’m not here.”

“OK.” Nicole said feeling like a child that just got reprimanded.

“Were you able to find your way around town yesterday?”

“Fairly well, yes.” Nicole replied trying to ignore the burning in her cheeks.

“Good; today will be more of the same. You did well with the documents at the court; if you’d be so kind as to do the same with these,” Gavin said sliding a file toward Nicole.

Nicole picked up the file and thumbed through it, stopping when she noticed a few moments had passed in silence. Looking up she saw Gavin regarding her quietly. “Is everything in order?” He asked cocking an eyebrow.

“Yes sir.”

“Very well then, I also need you to review this file and become familiar with it. If you have any questions please ask me, I will need your assistance with this. I expect you to be able to provide me with a memo about it by tomorrow morning.”

Nicole stood for a moment waiting for more instructions. When it seemed Gavin wasn’t going to say anything she asked, “Sorry, was that all?” Nicole asked unsure if it would have been painfully obvious to anyone else.

“Trust me, that will be enough to keep you occupied today.” Gavin replied.

With that ominous prediction Nicole stood and left the office.

Feeling as if she were stuck in an example of Nietzsche’s eternal return Nicole found herself back at the court house waiting for the same ancient woman to call her up to the front.

With little else to do with the free time she gazed at her surroundings, admiring the high vaulted ceilings which were decorated with neo-classical scenes and gold leafing when suddenly her mobile rang. Glancing at the caller ID before she opened the phone she cringed, instantly feeling guilty for sight seeing when she should have been working.

"This is Nicole" She answered trying to sound non-pulsed by her boss calling her.

"Are you busy?" Gavin asked. Before giving the question much thought Nicole answered.

"No, not really; do you need something?"

"I didn't assign you enough this morning?" Gavin asked sounding surprised.

"No... I mean, yes you did but no I'm not busy." Nicole felt her cheeks flush as she dug herself deeper and deeper into a verbal hole. "I'm at the court house in line for the clerk so I'm waiting to be busy." Nicole sighed almost audibly as she heard Gavin chuckle at the other end.

"I need another word for 'vaccine'."

"You called me so I could be your thesaurus?" Nicole asked skeptically.

"I'm driving right now so I thought this would be safer then flipping through a book."

"Oh and driving with one hand on your cell and the other on a notebook is better?" Nicole asked smiling.

"Thanks to modern technology my car is equipped with a hands free unit. Are you stalling because you don't know or because you like these little chats of ours?"

"Neither, I'm stalling because I can't remember how to spell 'inoculation' and I was thinking you didn't know either."

"You thought right. But since I can't write it down without risking a wreck or a lecture on driving safety I'll just have to remember it."

Laughing Nicole said "My number's up unless there was something else you needed?"

"No, that was it. Don't forget that synopsis for tomorrow morning." Gavin reminded her before disconnecting the call.

Nicole stood at the clerk's desk waiting for her copies to be returned to her when it struck her how she had spoken to Gavin moments ago. She'd known the man for less then two weeks and already she was getting cheeky with him, to borrow a native term. More then the fact that he allowed her to talk to him in such a way was the startling realization that she personally could do so. Merely an hour ago in his office she was standing on wobbly knees, hoping like hell gravity would take a look in the other direction in case they gave out. Now she was in full witty form, bantering good natured innuendos back and forth with the man himself.

So there is the answer, Nicole thought as she strolled out of the court house, *In order to have a normal relationship with a guy on any level all's I have to do is keep a distance of a phone line between us.* There's definitely a living to be had in that. Telemarketers must get paid since there seems to be enough of them around. And isn't the phone sex line a hot industry? Forgetting where she was Nicole snorted a laugh and had to quickly try to hide the rude sound behind a poorly effected guise of a sneeze.

Back at the office Nicole settled into her desk and organized the papers she had filed at the courts and outlined the briefing for the wrongful death suit Gavin had given her.

Normally Nicole found briefings to be boring but in this case she found herself startled, disturbed, angry, and depressed in turn as she read through the depositions, police reports and medical reports. Any one who works in a law office that represents people in any type of civil or worse yet, criminal matter can tell you it's a great opportunity to see the worst that humanity has to offer. The most striking part is that the people you think are the bad guys aren't always the bad guys and the one's that are supposed to be the good guys don't always live up to that expectation.

At ten to five Nicole noticed an unread e-mail waiting in her in box. Relieved to have an excuse to pull her attention away from the file she clicked the promising looking envelope feeling she would have been happy even if it was junk-mail at this point. The address line however was not from cheapskates.com or some other top of the line unsolicited .com company but actually from Ryan.

Tuesday 4:45pm

Sorry for messaging you at work, if this gets you in trouble, blame me. If you don't want to hear from me and delete this without responding I can at least while away my

remaining days under the delusion that this got lost in cyber space. I just wanted to know if you wanted to meet me for coffee. There is a little café around the corner.

Ryan

Nicole happily typed in a response feeling better about the day with the knowledge that there was some light at the end of the tunnel.

Nicole always hated meeting people at the destination location. She was terrified that she wouldn't find her party or that they were watching her as she was getting more and more agitated in trying to find them. Luckily Ryan had opted to seat himself at an outside table, saving her the excruciating suspense of looking like a lost moron.

Feeling school girl-proud she walked to his table and sat down, enjoying the looks of other women as they admired her companion's lazy-movie star good looks.

"How's the legal grind today?" He asked softly, making Nicole struggle against the desire to squirm pleasurably.

"Long hours of tedious monotony broken up by harsh realities of humanity at its worst. How's the advert business?"

"Not nearly as bad as all that; we're bidding on a large company's attempt to bring a fresher image to their product so the talk around the water cooler has become very hush-hush."

"Why, are you all afraid of corporate spies being planted in your midst?" Nicole asked humorously.

"No, nothing that elite. You see this is a very back-bitten business. Generally what happens is the person that comes up with the great idea to land this account will get a nice salary increase to match their promotion. So cards are held very close to the chest for fear that someone will head hunt your idea and present it as their own. It's very cloak and dagger."

"God, I thought stuff like that was sensationalized in movies and didn't really happen like that. How do you work with others when you can't trust them?" Nicole asked appalled.

"We're a big firm with a lot of secure clients for the younger members to cut their teeth on. Plus most of the time companies will stick with their agency unless they really feel the need to shake things up or they're under new management with a different idea of how the company should be seen. Things like this don't happen too often and when they do it's basically just an unspoken rule that it's not personal; it's business."

"It still sounds pretty cold." Nicole said stirring the foam in her newly arrived cappuccino.

"No more so then large law firms can be. Most partners climb their way to the top over the backs of their colleagues, using any ammo they can to throw their competition into a shadier light so they themselves look better by comparison.

"Just because it's a practice that spans professions doesn't mean it's right." Nicole responded.

For a moment there was silence then Nicole felt something brush her fingers. Looking up she saw Ryan gently lacing his fingers in hers. "I didn't mean to upset you. I actually asked you here so I could forget about work and enjoy your company. Do you mind if we switch topics?"

"No, let's. Read any good books lately?" Nicole asked trying to rationalize the uneasy feeling she had about him touching her to the notion that it was strange holding hands with someone who wasn't Jason.

Ryan laughed; "Not really, mostly just company manifestos. You?"

"No;" Nicole lied not wanting to admit that she had just finished reading *Sense and Sensibility* for the three hundredth time "Mostly just client files."

"We're a pair to beat a full house aren't we?" Ryan asked laughing.

"Apparently. So if weren't working to save the world from dull, stereotypical ads, what would you be doing?"

"Oh, is this that 'if you had a million pounds question?'" Ryan asked.

"No this is that 'people on average change careers seven times during their life' question." Nicole quipped.

"Ah ha; that was my next guess. Well, I would probably be in some white collar business. See, I like the challenge, the excitement that comes with doing something really well; the months of build up finally coming to something really noteworthy are addictive."

"You would make a brilliant wedding planner." Nicole decided.

"I would, hu? Well how about yourself?"

"No, not at all, the stress of temper tantrums would be enough to put me off people completely. I would turn into Ms. Havasham in a matter of hours."

"It would certainly be a tragedy if you were turned off of marriage because of your job." Ryan replied.

Nicole laughed before responding. "I'm at a place in my life where marriage isn't really a forerunner for my attention. I'd prefer to re-evaluate who I am before I define myself by another." Nicole stopped herself short having almost said "again" She couldn't tell if Ryan was squinting at her because of what she had just said or because the sun setting behind her was getting in his eyes.

Ryan summoned the waiter for the bill and paid for it without making any bravado about picking up the tab and even offered to walk Nicole back to her car.

"Thank you for this, it was a nice surprise." Nicole said as she stood by her car fumbling with the idea of kissing him.

"I'm glad I could come to your rescue." Ryan replied.

Inexplicably nervous Nicole stood on her tiptoes and kissed him once gently but a little quicker than the situation may have warranted.

When she stood back she saw Ryan smiling at her. "Have a good night." He said kindly. "You too."

Gavin walked out of the office building and into the car park wishing he was dead. Well maybe not wishing but definitely feeling as if it were the case. It wasn't enough that his clients needed baby sitting, pushing, prodding, nagging, and some times threatening to get them to do what they should do in order to protect themselves but that he had to do it in such a way that wouldn't land him on the wrong side of a grievance report. Days like this made him wonder if he wouldn't have been better of going into the family business of sheep ranching. Granted the money wasn't quite as good and there was no where near as much prestige but at least he wouldn't lose sleep over sheep's sordid affairs.

As he rounded one of the pile on's he thought he saw someone familiar out of the corner of his eye. Thinking he was tired and seeing things he stopped momentarily and looked again. Nicole had left the office nearly an hour ago yet she was just at her car now. As she leaned forward to kiss her male companion Gavin turned his head. His employees sordid affairs were thankfully none of his business and damned if he would let it become anything other than that.

Later that evening Nicole was sitting at the large writing desk in her bedroom, tapping a pen against her teeth as a sort of bass line for the crickets and other nocturnal animals that were serenading her outside the bedroom window. Nicole looked down again at the piece of paper and sighed. What a pity to have to waste something like nice, white paper on something as sinister as a letter to her ex. It would be nicer to use it for a paper air plane.

Thursday evening while Nicole was sitting at the dinner table with Nan and pops the topic turned towards Nicole's job.

"How're you liking working for Mr. Malon?" Pops asked after swallowing a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"It's not that bad really. He's not so much cranky as picky. He likes things done a certain way and assumes everyone knows what way that is; if you don't then he gets sort of short."

"I suppose he's just set in his ways. He built that firm himself and probably just figures that if it's worked this well and this long why stray." Nan offered judiciously.

Pops grunted and shook out the paper. "Must you read that thing at the table?" Nan asked as she scooped more beans onto his plate.

"You ask me that every evening and every evening I tell you yes." Pops replied not looking at her.

Nicole smiled and cut off a piece of roast. "Anything good going on in the world?"

"No. That president of yours is still wreaking havoc with his megalomania, same as always. Man is a close contender for Margaret Thatcher's role as most hated leader." Pops replied pleasantly.

Nan tut-tutted him from her end of the table but otherwise remained silent. She was from the school of thought that decreed religion and politics should not be discussed at the dinner table.

That; Nicole thought and she's old and wise enough to know when to pick her battles.

"I must say it's a pleasant turn of events that's brought you home on time two days in a row." Nan remarked to Nicole. "Things going OK with you and your bloke?"

"Yea, I guess so. It's still pretty early on in things so it would be a little bit of over kill if we saw each other every day."

"What was that play mother? 'Bout the girl that married the man that logically was right for her but she really loved the other less perfect chap?"

"Lord there must be hundreds like that, you must be more specific." Nan replied

"You know;" Pops returned impatiently "One bloke was really powerful and the other was sort of a knave..."

"Are you talking about Lady Gwenyvere and King Arthur?" Nan asked.

"Yep, those are the ones." Pops declared triumphantly before returning to his paper.

"Are you insinuating that maybe Ryan and I aren't right for each other?" Nicole asked.

"How should I know? I never met the man have I?" Pops answered from behind a picture of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"You got a phone call." Gavin said one day standing in front of her desk.

Nicole looked up from the file she was transcribing. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

In response he handed her a message; she thought it odd he looked at her hand the way he did but dismissed it until she saw the message on the little slip of paper.

Call your husband, Jason. was scrawled on it in Gavin's handwriting.

"He called here?" Nicole asked aghast.

"He did. I am not your message taker, though, so I would appreciate you advising your spouse or any others who may wish to contact you to use your personal line or better yet, to call you on your personal time. If you wish to avoid them, understand that is not this office's problem." His tone was icy and without waiting for her to respond she turned and walked away.

Nicole was dumbfounded. Why in the hell would Jason want to call her at work? How did he find out where she was employed? As she was heading for the lift she came across Gavin who, upon seeing her checked his watch.

"I realize it's a bit earlier than my normal lunch hour but I need to take an early lunch."

Nicole replied before he could ask.

Gavin didn't look pleased but only replied. "Do not exceed one hour."

Promising to return within the allotted time she continued to walk briskly to the bank of elevators and across the lobby to the sunlight grassy park across the street; A thousand ideas and feeling rushed through Nicole. She wanted desperately to pretend that what happened wasn't real. She wanted to go back to him so she could feel normal again, so they could pickup where they left off.

Her unrealistic hopes were dashed as she looked around though. She couldn't pretend nothing had happened. She was in the England for God's sake, surrounded by British people and English landmarks. She wasn't here on vacation; she was here, as Gavin had put it, to avoid her spouse.

Nicole checked the time on her cell phone's LED screen and after some thought decided it shouldn't be too late in the evening in the US for her to call.

"Hello?" Jason's voice answered on the second ring.

"Hi Jason, this is Nicole."

A brief silence then, "Oh, hey. What did you write me for?"

Rather than being put off by his cold tone Nicole felt better, had he sounded apologetic she thought she would have lost her nerve.

"I wanted to know what happened that night." She replied simply.

She heard him sigh, the only indication in the ensuing dead air that let her know he hadn't hung up on her. "It's in the police report; I can send you a copy if you want."

"I already have one;" she lied "I want to hear from you what happened."

"You came home, you caught me with another woman, I tried to explain, you started screaming at me and I lost it." He said quickly.

"Why were you with someone else though? What happened with us? I thought we were alright."

"You had your career, your Dad was sick, you were hardly ever at home and when you were always tired and depressed. It was like you were the one that was sick. The only things we ever talked about were your Dad's being sick or what was happening with your job, it's like I was only there to hear about you."

Nicole was stunned into silence. "So the fact that I was upset about my Dad having cancer should have been second to you wanting to tell me about your day?"

"Look, I'm not going to argue with you about this, it's over. Was there anything else?"

Nicole could see that there was no resolving this with him; even the bits that she did glean from the conversation weren't going to make her feel any better. "No, thanks for talking to me though."

"Bye." He said before the line went dead.

Feeling no better than she did before she called Nicole returned to the office a full thirty minutes earlier than what she was required to. She knew she had enough time to grab something to eat but had lost her appetite.

Gavin watched as Nicole settled back in at her desk; she appeared to be in no better of a mood than when she had left which caused him some concern. This early in a new appointment was not the time for an associate to start flaking on him and, so resolved to nip this in the bud before it became an issue, he walked toward her.

"I trust that your personal issues have been handled?" He asked coolly.

"They are, yes. The defendant for the Rimstein case sent a letter advising that he has retained an attorney so I think it should be noted that we cannot contact him anymore; the particulars of the attorney are there. Janice from bookkeeping sent an email saying she needs to know what your projection is for the number of people you expect to show up for the charity ball, I've got that here. Lastly I need your signature on this complaint so I can file it tomorrow before the deadline lapses."

"Copy the letter and put one in the Rimstein file, in the front. Add twenty blanks to the list you have for the charity and copy me in on the email." He said as he signed the document she had slid towards him.

As he walked away Gavin found his thoughts were still lingering back at Nicole's desk; how she seemed resolved to prove she could work despite whatever it was that was obviously bothering her. Maybe he wouldn't have to fire her after all. Good thing too, he hated the paperwork that it would require. But on the other hand she obviously had something going on in her life that he wasn't too keen about. The bloke she kissed in the car park obviously wasn't Jason, nor was she apparently much inclined to show she was married, hence the absence of a ring.

He knew it was wrong to pass judgment on a person for their personal life choices but you could tell a lot about someone's character by what was in their background. And Nicole's was, at best, shifty. Contrary to that though, he had to admit that after a handful of days she had proven she was a quick learner, eagerly absorbing both knowledge and constructive criticism.

"I can't fire her for being unfaithful." Gavin said out loud to himself, "I can't trust her and I can't shunt her off to a different department because she's proven to be quite valuable here." He sighed and rolled his head back on his shoulders then chuckled. Earl Tappero would have told him that he just described the problem voters have with politicians.

As the weeks passed The Nasty Wrongful Death Suit's trial date was looming larger and larger on the horizon it's effects of were beginning to be felt by everyone in the office. Gavin was seen less and less frequently and the times he was seen were enough to send the floor into a renewed sense of frenzy. Margaret had the terrible misfortune of being seated in a desk that was in close enough proximity for Gavin to yell to her from his office. At any given moment, though the man himself wouldn't be seen, his voice could be heard sending Margaret into flap like a pheasant whose been chased out of hiding by a hunting dog.

Nicole had just stood to find Margaret and offer a hand when she saw Gavin standing at Margaret's desk apparently looking for her as well.

"I think she stepped out for some air. Is there something I can help you with?" Nicole asked timidly; weeks of working with him still haven't dispelled the tendency her nerves had to jangle with apprehension when he was near.

Gavin looked down at her and regarded her for a moment before replying. "If possible I need you to work late tonight. I know its Friday but this is important. I was going to ask Margaret but since she's off hiding..."

"Yea, I can stay. What do you need me to do?" Nicole interrupted, not wanting to hear him insult Margaret for no good reason.

"Everything." He replied seriously.

He wasn't kidding. That evening after she bade her co-workers a good weekend she holed herself up with Gavin in his office and running a multitude of odd jobs and errands. In this new capacity she was a gopher, a secretary, a paralegal and an object locator. (How it's possible to lose something so thoroughly in an office so small remains a mystery.)

Gavin, in an uncharacteristic show of lightheartedness was laughing. "We've only been at this for an hour and I've already managed to lose my bloody cassette player."

"It'd be easier to look for it if I wasn't afraid of messing up the order of these papers."

Nicole replied grinning. "I'm pretty sure I've looked under this stack twice..."

"Here, hand me the papers; I'll keep them in order, you search the table." Alan offered moving to gain a better position near the table.

Nicole was startled at the sudden closeness of Gavin to herself and made an awkward, half jump-half step back, causing her to bump into a chair that was currently holding Gavin's discarded suit coat. Gavin looked up from the table, startled at Nicole's reaction.

Nicole, embarrassed at her silliness, scanned the floor in the hopes of being able to pass her actions off as having been caused by some offending object on the floor. Thankfully she saw the elusive tape recorder under the chair she had nearly toppled and dove for it before he could ask anything.

"Here, must have been in your coat or something." Nicole explained a little too loudly for her own ears.

Gavin smiled patronizingly; "Lucky that."

Nicole returned to police report she had been scrutinizing, keeping one eye on Gavin as he fumbled with the ear buds and tape deck; the masochist in her was wondering if he was going to shoot her one of those looks strangers gave the mentally disturbed in public places when the afflicted would make a sudden yelp or screech an unwarranted string of profanities.

After a couple of minutes with no looks of disgust or pity noted Nicole turned her full attention to the police report, happy to have dodged that humiliating bullet.

Gavin could have sworn Nicole had been watching him, though this could have been his imagination, though he was willing to assume that his imagination had no greater part in this idea then it did in Nicole's jumping like a scalded cat fifteen minutes previous. Oh well. Gavin thought, concluding that Nicole was terrified of him because of the stories she had, no doubt, heard told of him around the water cooler.

Nicole finally put the police report down and looked directly at Gavin, stating; "You're going to think me either a terrible person or completely desensitized to human suffering due to years of American TV but I'm starving. Would you mind if I ordered some take-out?"

"Not at all. On the contrary if you are going to order from the little Chinese place down the road would you be so kind as to get an order of chicken chow mein?"

"Not at all." Nicole said smiling.

At half past eight and Nicole they were both sitting on the floor of Gavin's office, having long abandoned the table due to its lack of space. Papers spread all around them and half eaten cartons of Chinese food littered the table and chairs. Gavin looked uncharacteristically disheveled, his normally strictly tamed hair had the look of having fingers repeatedly run through it, his shirt had come untucked and his tie had been discarded some hours before. Nicole was getting tired and knew she was beginning to miss steps, something that didn't go without notice as Gavin, who was similarly getting tired, had gone from being easy going to easily annoyed.

"Where's the McCromc file?" Gavin asked looking around the floor and desks.

"It's in the filing cabinet." Nicole said not looking up from the document she was pursuing.

"What is it doing in there? Didn't I say I there might be something in there that could help with this bloody mess?" Gavin asked, his voice sounding incredibly annoyed like he was explaining something very simple to someone who was acting very dense.

Nicole was tired, her brain hurt, her back ached and her legs were cramped. She took a deep breath, and stood up, intending to fetch the file without comment when Gavin's voice stopped her.

"If you intend to continue to work here I suggest you stop treating it like a free ride and start acting like a professional. You're grandparents may be willing to let you live off of them but I have no intentions of supporting such apathy." He said venomously.

Nicole turned on him, her vow of silence forgotten in the heat of her indignity. "Let's get something straight: is it my grandparent's kindness you have a problem with or my inability to be a mind reader?"

She knew she made a mistake as soon as the last word left her lips. Despite the easiness of the working situation earlier in the evening this was still the same man that was reputed to have the power to reduce interns to sniveling, sobbing masses of fabric and cheap watches with a single, withering look.

His eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth hardened to a grimace, like he was contemplating something really foul. "I disapprove of people who run away from a problem and pretend they are doing it for noble reasons." Gavin said icily.

Nicole felt as if she had been slapped in the face. She could guess how he came to that assumption, the phone call from her husband after the revelation that the American 'fancied a British bloke.' And all but still, he didn't know the truth, nor did she feel he was entitled to know. She clamped her lips shut and walked out the door.

Gavin was sure she just quit on him and was searching through his rolodex for the phone number of an intern that may be willing to come in when Nicole returned and dropped the file on his desk without saying a word. Not waiting for him to say anything she returned to her work. She could feel his eyes staring heavily at the side of her head that was exposed to him but chose to ignore it. "*Let him be the ass and make the first move to fire me.*" She thought vehemently, sending a fresh wave of anger through her nerves. After a few moments of silence in which Nicole stubbornly kept her head bent over the coroner's diagram, Alan wordlessly returned to his work. Two hours later, yawning and rubbing her eyes she stood up.

"I'm exhausted and I can't see straight. I'm going to take this home and work on it tomorrow if that's alright."

"That's fine." Gavin said not looking up.

After the door clicked shut, announcing her departure he finally looked up. Working with her was like being around three people at the same time. Over the phone she was intelligent and confident when speaking with him; around her friends she was prone to laughing and giggling like any of them until, of course a file was dropped on her desk. Then she was like one of those trained mice that ran a maze when the bell was rung, focused only on the task no matter what else was going on around her. And then in person, one on one when she knew he was near she reacted like he was an electric fence, giving him a wide berth and jumping high enough to expose air beneath her shoes. Unless of course she was pissed off, then she was unrecognizable. No one liked having his or her personal flaws flung into the open and criticized, or their character being insulted so he could understand a person reacting the way she reacted. But she returned. Most wouldn't have. Most would have quit rather than return to possibly face more abuse. Which conflicts with almost everything else he knew about her, unless it's the rat in a maze thing... He sighed and returned his attention once more to the task at hand. Sifting through the legal jargon, code numbers, case histories and local laws was tedious but at least it made sense to him. The law was black and white, with little gray area for interpretation or confusion. Human interaction was nowhere near as base, unfortunately.

The next afternoon Nicole came down from her room. She had been relaxing having finally finished the tedious complexity of the work she brought home. There was a break earlier in

the day that she didn't count as it had to do with Jason's arrest and conviction. Her lawyer had sent a copy of the police records and the Polaroid's like she had requested as well as a letter stating that Jason had called him to know that since Nicole took the security deposit for the apartment he wasn't going to reimburse her for the storage fees for his things. Her lawyer advised she could fight this but Nicole didn't care. It was a small price to pay to have him out of her life, not to mention her inheritance and wages were more than enough to keep her out of the poor house.

"Yes, I know which one you're talking about, Nicole was nose deep in it most of the evening and this morning. I think she was prepared to do the jig when she finally finished it." Nan's voice said. Nicole was confused for a moment until she heard Gavin's chuckle.

"It is promising to be a pain of a case. If you don't mind I'll just grab the file and be out of your way."

"Oh, you're never any bother, Gavin." Nan replied over the phone that started ringing. "Go ahead. Hello?" She said into the receiver.

Nicole descended the last of the stairs and walked into the kitchen. Her motives, she told herself, were to prove to Gavin that she wasn't upset by his comments from last night though there was a small voice in her head that argued she wanted to prove to him that he couldn't bully her.

The moment she entered the room his head snapped up from the folder he was looking in. She knew in an instant the reason for the look on his face.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea..." He let his voice trail off, the apologetic look frozen to his face.

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks and anger at his assumption that she wanted his apology mixed together to form some white-hot emotion she couldn't quite describe.

Her eyes locked dead on his and held there for a moment in a silent glare before she spoke. "You knew what I was before you saw the photos, don't let them change anything." She said. He stood for a moment, still with the 'I feel so sorry for you' look on his face before she crossed the kitchen floor and took the file from his hand. Before he could say anything patronizing again she turned and went back up the stairs.

Nicole tossed the folder on her desk not bothering to spare a glance at the Polaroid's she stuffed back in behind the police officer's diagram. She knew the pictures all too well. Some showed the bruises on her thigh, the mysterious one's she couldn't recall at the time of the report, some showed her face where Jason had given her the initial blow, and other's showed her arm lacerated by the impact of his toe nails when he kicked her with his foot. The diagram, which was crinkled on the edge where Gavin had apparently held it, mirrored on the unisex model where each of the bruises were inflicted on Nicole.

Fuming Nicole paced around the room, raging internally at illogical things. "How dare he look at my private file? What right did he have? What the hell was he even doing here? Like his fucking work couldn't wait until I got in with it on Monday. Christ he could have at least called and warned someone. It's not like he's too poor to have a telephone at his place! Shit he probably lives at that damn office and lord knows there are plenty of phones there." Nicole stopped and looked at herself in the mirror. "Damn." She mumbled watching herself visibly deflate from her rage.

"Poor bloke had no idea what hit him, did he?" Nan asked from the doorway. Nicole looked over her reflection's shoulder and saw Nan leaning against the door jam.

Nicole sputtered helplessly for a moment, trying to find the words that had so unceasingly spewed forth before in vain. Finally she sighed and threw her hands up in the air. "He shouldn't have jumped to the conclusion that I was here to cheat on Jason; that I take advantage of people and he shouldn't have looked at the stuff in that file." Nicole complained.

"People, especially lawyers, jump to conclusions if the facts don't seem to match the circumstances, it's human nature and its training; I'm not saying it's fair!" Nan interjected quickly as Nicole opened her mouth to retort. "But it's the way things are. You can't expect people to give up everything they know about life and human interaction for you just because you are the exception to the rule."

Nicole stood for a moment, allowing the irrational part of her mind to scream that it wasn't fair and it shouldn't have happened while the logical side reasoned it was just as Nan had said, the way of life.

"So you think I was wrong in the way I handled it?" Nicole asked, not accusingly.

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying you're intelligent and so is Gavin." Nan replied ambiguously.

Back at the office, while he should have been working on his case Gavin was staring off into space, trying to make sense of what had happened back at Nicole's house. He had seen pictures of victim's of assault and spousal abuse, he knew it existed and though he could never understand it he didn't fool himself into thinking it happened to 'other people'. He knew why she was mad at him too, and felt she had every right. What he couldn't understand was why this shook him so much. He sighed heavily for the second time in twenty-four hours and delved back into his research.

Monday Nicole arrived to work as usual and though there was no note on her desk asking her to be in Gavin's office she went anyway and knocked on the door quickly before she lost her nerve.

"Come in." Came Gavin's command as it always did. She wasn't sure what she was expecting, maybe a blast of icy air or a dragon like breathing of fire but definitely not for him to act so normal. As she put her hand on the doorknob she realized she was being stupid, he didn't know it was her.

When he didn't look up she announced herself. "Good morning."

At the sound of her voice he looked up quickly, startled almost. "Good morning." He sounded wary; Nicole wondered if he was contemplating calling security as she stood before his desk, mercilessly wringing the life out of the cover of the notebook she had brought with her. "I wanted to apologize for the way I spoke to you the other day. Given the circumstances I would probably have made the same conclusion you did. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that and I do apologize." She blurted quickly as she looked him in the eye, hoping she didn't look like she was trying to hypnotize him. After a long silence she opened her mouth to repeat her plea, taking his silence to mean that he hadn't been able to catch her high-speed apology. She nearly jumped when he started to laugh.

Noticing her startled reaction Gavin said, in more subdued tones, "Forgive me; this is hardly a laughing matter. I just didn't expect you to come in here and apologize to me." Nicole smiled as he continued. "You had every right to be upset with me, it was not my place to make those kinds of assumptions, nor was it any concern of mine why you were here."

"Thank-you." Nicole replied still feeling apprehensive, though now it was more because she was in Gavin's office with the door closed then fear of losing her job. "Um, so that's out of the way, was there anything you needed done today?"

"Yes, but we won't get much done if you maim everything you hold." Gavin said softly as he stood and moved around his desk. He pushed the papers aside and perched himself on the edge, allowing his long legs to stretch in front of him.

Nicole looked down and abruptly stopped twisting the notebook. Embarrassed she started at the cover, tracing the crease lines she had ruthlessly put into it. "I wasn't keeping quite about what had happened because I'm ashamed because I'm not..." She sighed and looked around the room, Gavin remaining respectfully silent. "I just don't want people to try and judge the situation." Nicole stopped, not knowing how much to say to clarify her intentions. Finally her eyes rested on him again. He nodded silently, looking as if he understood what she said so she continued, relieved she didn't have to bear anymore of her soul. "The second is that I would prefer to keep it that way. Besides you my Grandparents are the only ones who know the full reason why I'm here and I like that."

"Understood." He said plainly.

Nicole smiled at him gratefully, unsure of how much he understood but figuring it was best to quit while she was ahead, or at least had the impression she was ahead. "Got a list for me?" She asked clearing her throat.

Gavin nodded and returned to his normal seat and set about dictating to her the tasks he needed her to complete that day. Nicole was momentarily worried that he was going to take it easy on her, baby her now he knew her previous situation, forgetting that she had, at least in her

opinion, proven that she was more than capable. That fear was assuaged as he rattled off a complicated and tedious 'To Do' list

In Nicole's fantasy world what she and Gavin had gone through would have made Gavin see the error of his ways. He would have realized how he treats other people has a huge impact on their day to day lives and he would change.

Unfortunately there was a great gapping chasm between Nicole's fantasy and the reality that was the office. The day returned to the kind of normalcy that had besieged the office since The Nasty Wrongful Death Suit was landed on them, complete with Gavin giving Margaret a chore then coming back and yelling at her for working on something that could have been handled later and assign her a new task. Every time Nicole heard him yelling her stomach would clench a little tighter.

Nicole had worked in large firms before and could only assume he wasn't trying to be an ogre but that panic and stress causes people to become the worst version of themselves.

After having suffered this way for longer than most normal people would have found themselves capable of quiet, good natured Margaret finally had enough. Gavin had just yelled at her for bringing him the medical dictionary he had asked for before having told her he needed the weather reports for the day in question.

"God damn it! Everyone seems to think that I'm so well put together; that I don't have bad days or get stressed out! Well I do! But I can't talk about it or scream or verbally abuse other people because no one wants to hear that I have problems! God forbid because if I do then the whole bloody world falls apart!" And with that she flung the weather reports at Gavin's feet and stormed out towards the break room.

Gavin could feel his temper rise but before he could follow after Margaret to tell her off Nicole was in front of him gently holding his arm. In a whisper so low that he could just barely hear her she said; "If you say something to her now you are going to regret it and then you'll have to say you're sorry and I will have to deal with you feeling guilty and I don't want that kind of responsibility."

He wasn't sure if he was more shocked by the fact that she was risking incurring his wrath or the fact that she was standing there so calmly touching him. In the few moments of silence that lapsed while he tried to regain his mental footing she started to speak again. "I have some things that don't need to be done for a while yet. Why don't I get with you and you tell me what you need. Between Margaret and I, I'm sure we can get this taken care of."

Gavin looked Nicole in the eye for the first time since she approached him in his fit of annoyance and took a small step back. Her eyes were wide and she looked like she would rather be anywhere but there standing in front of him. Mollified he snatched a blank notepad off the nearby desk and said; "When you get a minute then, but make it quick." And walked off.

Nicole's legs felt somewhat wobbly and she was breathing as if she had run a marathon but she did as she was asked and followed Gavin to his office after collecting the forgotten weather reports off the floor.

No sooner had she settled down in the familiar chair across his desk then there was a shy tap at the door. Gavin sighed and looked up "Come in."

Timidly Margaret poked her head in the door. "Uh, oh, sorry. I uh, wanted to...but if you're busy I can..."

Nicole tried to shoot Gavin a pleading look but he was looking at Margaret and didn't seem to notice. However most of his frustration from earlier had apparently burnt off out on the floor so instead of finishing his tirade of earlier he merely indicated one of the vacant chairs.

"This is the type of case that can kill a firm or solidify it. I need you two to make this your only priority. I need you to be available when I need you and able to read my mind and do everything at once. If you can't then you need to get someone to work with you. Employ the whole bloody office if needs be. Is that clear?"

Not much of an improvement but at least it's there. Nicole thought as she nodded wordlessly.

That evening Nicole had the house to herself as Nan and Pop had made plans with some friends to go out to dinner. Nicole called Ryan but was disappointed when she only got to talk to his answering machine. Resolved that she would be spending the evening with the BBC and a

bag of popcorn with only the remote as company she threw on a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and one of the few t-shirts that survived her wardrobe purge and snuggled in on the couch.

Getting into British comedy is a lot like getting into the shower in the morning. At first it's kind of uncomfortable because the bathroom is cold, you're still too tired to stand up right and the water is never the right temperature despite having done the hand test before getting in. After about five or ten minutes, though, you find the shower to be incredibly enjoyable and rue having to get out again. The dry and sometimes very obscure humor of the UK was equally difficult to enjoy at first but after having abandoned all remembrances of American comedy Nicole found she was quite able to immerse herself in the Isles version of slap stick entertainment. Then, thankfully, the telephone rang.

"How bored are you?" Gavin's voice responded to her greeting.

"Um," Nicole hesitated as she guiltily switched off the television; "Could you maybe give me a hint as to what the right answer is?"

Gavin chuckled as he answered "The right answer would be 'incredibly bored and I was just sitting her praying my git of a boss would call, begging me to do some menial task because at least that would break up the monotony some.'"

"Wow, I can call you a git?" Nicole asked

"No."

"Oh."

"But about the rest?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"I've run into a problem with my opening statement and I was hoping to run it past you."

Gavin said business like.

Nicole was stunned for a moment with the idea that he valued her opinion that much before he broke into her good feelings "I need an opinion of a common type person, someone who may have the same knowledge of the average jury member."

"Oh, alright. Umm, did you want to do this over the phone?"

"Unless you had a better idea that didn't involve me having to put my trousers on." Gavin replied.

Nicole rolled her eyes at the well timed example of British humor. "Alright. How long is it? Like ten minutes or an hour?"

"It's about fifteen minutes but there's a lot of gesticulating and air punching that will lose it's meaning over the phone." Gavin replied. Nicole couldn't help but laugh.

"Alright well, I'll have to imagine it then. Do me a favor and read it through once like you would to the jury so I can get the over all idea then go line by line by line.

"Yes M'am." There was a brief moment of muffled noise then the distant sound of Gavin clearing his throat before he began.

Nicole closed her eyes, trying to get the full image of what he was saying without being able to see his body language and with trying to make sense of some of the off the wall British terms that peppered the speech. At the end there was a moment of silence before Gavin spoke again.

"So..."

"It was really, really good. There were certain points you alluded to that stand out in my head; they raise flags that make me want to hear how you can claim that...do you know what I mean?"

"I do. Which points are you looking for?" Gavin asked.

"You said something like "The defendant's history of harassing and threatening my client is an unavoidable indication of his intentions all along." I want to know what proof you have that the defendant had made threats against the plaintiff's well being. Also throughout you painted the defendant as being a blue collar version of Adolph Hitler. I'm hoping you will present more facts to prove he's done worse then just what he's being brought into court for with this."

"You don't think that murdering someone is enough to make a person unlikable?" Gavin asked skeptically.

"No, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that you have to prove for this jury that the defendant acted willfully and that through those actions he caused someone to lose their life. If

you can't prove that he did this intentionally this time then you have to let his past history indicate that it's more probable than not that he would have done this intentionally."

Nicole could hear Gavin sigh on the other end. "I've known our client for fifteen years. His family has been acquainted with mine for generations. I know this isn't something he would fabricate for quick riches."

"It seems almost lecherous to suggest this but what about using that humanity in part of your case? It won't do much to prove the facts of the case but it will lend credence to your client."

"You're right, it does seem lecherous to fillet my client and leave him wide open in the middle of a courtroom so a jury can poke at his personal qualities and decide if they are valid or not." Gavin replied darkly.

"Yet you are willing to do that with the defendant? The jury is going to see you going out of your way to air everything about that guy and yet guard your client's personal life, habits, traits, everything...that's going to make them think he has something to hide." There was silence on the other end where all Nicole could hear was the distant sound of Gavin's radio and the whir of traffic on the road outside her window. "Mr. Molan?"

"I'm here."

"What did you think of me when Jason called the office? Obviously the news that I was dating someone here had gotten around so..."

"Is this a question you really want an answer for?"

"I was using it to make my point." Nicole replied.

"Well played." Gavin seceded.

"And with that I'm going to hang up on you because I have a feeling you won't accept this late night chat as an excuse for being late."

"You continue to amaze me with your astuteness." Gavin quipped.

"Praise indeed, Caesar."

Sunday morning Nicole was listless and bored as she sat on her bed, flicking through channels with nothing interesting enough to grab her attention when an advertisement for palm pilots caught her eye. The announcer was going on about how important deadlines and to do lists would never go forgotten again with the Akimodo three thousand or something like then when it hit her. She had completely forgotten to abstract the medical expert's deposition! Like a marathon runner on speed, crack and adrenaline she ran around her room, grabbing car keys, a hair tie and shoes in record time before hauling ass down the stairs and hurtling herself at the front door.

"Devil got your butt?" Grandpa asked calmly from the arm chair.

"I gotta get to the office and finish something for the case before I get fired tomorrow!"

Nicole cried as she leapt off the porch and raced across the lawn to her car.

"Have fun." Grandpa replied turning the page of his newspaper.

Enjoying the privilege of being able to park on the street in front of the building Nicole slammed the parking brake on and scrambled out of the car, thanking the gods of corporate life that Sundays usually found most business types on the golf courses.

"Hi Stan." Nicole greeted the building's security guard as she drag raced across the lobby.

"Afternoon Ms. Duffeck; you're looking very casual today." He good naturedly replied taking in her jeans and t-shirt.

"Yea, weekend warrior attire." She returned. Could you get the elevator to take me to four?"

"Sure thing."

"First things first." Nicole announced as she tossed her bag on her chair, readying her work space to accommodate her lack of ambition.

A minute later Nicole did a celebratory dance around her desk as she heard the little 'ding' sound on her computer indicating that the download was successful. Happily she imported her music library into the online system from her ipod and cranked the volume as high as it could go before the music would get distorted. Oblivious to time now that she had Andrea Bocelli, Billy

Idol, Paul Motion, and James Hetfield to keep her company Nicole clacked energetically away at her keyboard.

As Aretha Franklin belted out the last few lines of *I Will Survive* before surrendering the computer-contained stage to Disturbed so they could regal her with *Stricken* Nicole was overcome by the feeling that she was being watched.

Feeling silly at her over active imagination she turned, prepared to see nothing but the empty desks scattered around the room of the nearly dark law office. Instead she jumped up and let out a yelp as she found Gavin standing behind her.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you. I thought that you were perhaps locked in a life or death struggle for control over the radio station with an unseen force."

Nicole was so concentrated on trying to gasp a sorry out from around her heart, which had lodged itself in her throat that she didn't notice the smile Gavin wore.

"No, no, I find it fascinating that you can listen to this and still appreciate finer music."

"What do you mean 'listen to this'?" Nicole asked, her fear all but forgotten in the heat of her passionate desire to defend the music she loved. "This is excellent music. It's the result of a natural evolution that has taken years to manifest."

"The vocalist sounds as if he's choking." Gavin retorted

Annoyed at Gavin's flippancy toward the music she loved she replied coolly "He has an amazing range and he sings with true passion and he uses his voice in the parts where you say he sounds like he's choking like an instrument."

"An instrument?"

"Yes, he uses it like a bass drum to keep the beat. It's a creative way of filling non lyrical moments as opposed to leaving it to a drum solo or a guitar riff."

"He'll be out of a job in five years."

"You know, just because you don't enjoy it doesn't mean..."

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm sure they have a very loyal fan base. What I meant was the lead singer is going to destroy his voice if he keeps singing with, ah, such passion." Gavin said laying a delicate emphasis on the word 'passion'.

"Not hardly; James Hetfield's been performing for over twenty years, singing with the same sort of gravely pitch...God, when Metallica originally started they were a garage speed metal band. Any way he never destroyed his voice because he had a great vocal coach and took care of himself. I would assume this gentleman would be the same way."

"And this fascinating paradox of musical preference, how did that come about?"

Nicole shrugged, before responding "Through the better part of the '80's and 90's I shared a room with my sister who's five years older than me so at an age that is incredibly impressionable I was exposed to all the great hair bands of the time: Guns-N-Roses, Motley Crue, Duran Duran...none of which ring a bell I suppose?"

"Not really but the names do lend something to the imagination. So the affinity for heavy metal was a result of sharing a room with an older sibling; how did you come to enjoy listening to Ave Maria?" Gavin asked with the same tone he had used when interrogating her after her trial week.

Nicole laughed, "I think its appreciation born from envy." At Gavin's quizzical look she continued. "When I was in grade school and middle school we had to take an instrument; I opted for the violin. It took about three years for me to come to the concrete decision that I had absolutely no musical talent whatsoever. But I couldn't get over how beautiful it was and I think the fact that I couldn't play or read it made it seem mysterious and unattainable."

"Mm, typical American dream? Wanting what you can't have?" Gavin asked moving away from the wall for the first time so he was near the corner of her desk. Normally this gesture would have made Nicole feel intimidated but in this instance the conversation having reached a level of debate that made her feel elevated above the mundane she took no notice.

"I dated a guy in high school who taught himself how to play guitar. I used to love to watch him play, especially when it was just the two of us in his house; no band, no stage lights... his eyes used to get this fire in them and his hands moved like they were going on their own. I knew how much time he spent practicing to get that good and I knew what it took to play guitar to some extent because of the base knowledge I had from my failed attempts at becoming an orchestral prodigy. Likewise I knew that he had something, some talent that not everyone could

tap into. Whatever he had, whatever any musician has that gives them the ability to convert blobs on paper into something so masterful..." Nicole let the thought drop there having abruptly come to back to reality, the one in which Gavin was staring at her. "Sorry; bit more then you needed to know, hu?" She asked feeling the blood creep into her cheeks.

"No, not at all. In fact it's refreshing to hear someone argue their case so well."

"So was that a jab at me or your peers?" Nicole asked embarrassedly.

Gavin looked slightly taken aback for a moment before replying: "Neither, actually it was a compliment for you. Thank you for pointing out that I may need to refine my talents somewhat."

Nicole tried to think of something gracious to say but found herself suddenly tongue tied. Gavin, however, did not seem to expect any further conversation as he strode back to his office, pausing only to casually mention, "If that is the abstract from the medical examiner..."

"Of course it's not, that's been done for days." Nicole replied theatrically.

Gavin shook his head and disappeared into his office.

In contrast to the weekend that preceded it, Monday was a nightmare. The date of The Nasty Wrongful Death trial was Tuesday and all the horrible last minute things that crop up were coming forth in abundance while the staff commenced their work with all the ire and short temperedness that possess stage actors the day before opening night.

Nicole was leaning awkwardly over Margaret's desk, grappling with a stubbornly non-compliant stapler. "How goes it?" Margaret asked calmly as Nicole attempted to curse the stupid thing off the face of the earth.

"Argh! I'm up to my eyeballs in it." Nicole replied, debating the benefits of either prying the jammed staple out of it's present position with her teeth or hurling staple and stapler against a near by wall.

"Mmm, the perils of the illustrious job of deposition stapling. Good thing you're wearing deodorant love, you're working up quite a sweat there." Sashi offered helpfully as she leaned against a pillar, sipping tea.

"Nicole, stop whatever the hell it is you're doing and email me the spread sheet corrections and God save your soul if you didn't do the corrections, I needed the sodding thing five minutes ago!"

"If you needed the stupid thing five minutes ago why didn't you ask me for it ten minutes ago?" Nicole bellowed to Gavin.

"Because ten minutes ago I didn't need it." He spat back

Nicole gritted her teeth and emailed over the spread sheet Gavin had demanded she send to him before she took her next breath then took a moment to close her eyes and wish she were on the beach in Cannes.

"Oh you've got guts haven't you?" Janet asked as she hurried over to Nicole's desk and plopped down an intimidating looking folder.

"I'm centering my chakras before they go berserk and strangle the tyrant." Nicole replied not looking up.

"I hope they're quick then because to my figuring you've got about another forty five seconds before Mt. Gucci erupts again." Janet warned.

"With fun like this, who needs concentration camps?" Nicole thought out loud.

"That better be some self-motivating mantra you're mumbling." Gavin warned as he stormed past her desk.

"Chicken soup for the homicidal soul." Nicole replied.

Gavin spun back around and snatched a vacant near by chair. Startled Nicole flinched and jumped back a little.

Gavin had seen her reaction and visibly relaxed a bit "Sorry," he mumbled "but I wanted to speak with you while I had it on my mind."

"Oh," Nicole said, concerned "what about?"

"The trial tomorrow; I know you put a lot of time and work into it and I appreciate it, you've done an outstanding job..."

"But..." Nicole prompted picking up his apologetic tone.

"I need someone who is fluent in British customs and rules to assist with it at trial. It's nothing personal against you, by any means. I just don't think you'll be able to pick up the innuendos of the witnesses or the jury."

Nicole could feel her insides shrink a little with each word he said. He never came out right and said she would be assisting him at trial but apparently they both had been operating under the same impression.

"Yea, no, I get it. Thanks for telling me before I showed up at the court house." She said trying to sound nonchalant and easy. "So who's going to the show?"

"Gibbons." Gavin replied.

Nicole wanted to scream at him. Gibbons had as much experience on this case as she had with fighting kangaroos. He had done nothing more than photocopy a few pages of the file where as she had spent countless hours researching issues and staying late just so all of her hard work could be pawed through by that oaf. "Alright; well, good luck!" She said hoping she sounded cheerful and optimistic.

"There's a good lass. Thanks for understanding."

Nicole shot him a forced smile. "Anytime." *Git.*

The office was on eggshells for the next few days, accepting bits of news as it came in from the court house as to the status of the trial. At any given time the news was optimistic, somber, despondent and apathetic. After three days of arguments the jury was given their instructions and was sent off to deliberate.

"The fact that they ended it on a Friday is a killer. If they take longer than three hours to debate this then we have to wait all weekend for the answer. I need a drink." Margaret declared after she hung up with Gavin.

"You're sounding a bit like Sashi." Nicole noted.

"Yea well, she tends to rub off like moss on a bear's arse."

"There's an image that deserves to be poked from my mind's eye with a fork." Nicole admitted. "Generally though the longer the deliberation the better, right?"

"Not always. It could be that our side didn't do a good enough job of sating our points; it could be that the other side did just as well as us, or any number of other combinations. A quick verdict could go anyway too." She forecasted ambiguously.

Lacking its usual Friday vigor the office members lagged around, seemingly in no hurry to abandon their posts for fear that someone at the courthouse would call and they would miss being on the ground floor of the news.

Finally at five minutes past five the phone rang and Sashi was nearly trampled as other near-by associates tried to reach for the phone past her.

"Back! Back you craven lunatics!" She cried brandishing a message skewer menacingly. "Malon Inc, this is Sashi...Oh, wotcher Gavin; what news?...Mmhmm....right...alright, I'll let everyone know. Have a good weekend." She replaced the handset and turned to the room at large before announcing flatly "No news yet, the jury are still out. Have a good weekend all."

The collective internal grown of the associates and staff was almost tangible as they all filed out of the office and rode the lifts to their respective autos. Nicole stayed behind to finish a document that wasn't due until next Friday because she didn't want to get stuck in the after work struggle to exit the car park. Just as she flipped her monitor off the phone rang again. "Hello, er, Malon Inc..."

"It's me, Gavin. I need a favor. Are you the only one there yet?" Gavin asked sounding distracted.

"Me and the cleaning crew so far as I know."

"Could you grab the red folder off my desk and have courier run it round to my place? Pay him out of the expense box and leave a note in there to remind me how much it was."

"I'm leaving work now myself, would you mind if I just ran it over on my way home? It'll save some money." Nicole offered

"I can afford the courier...either way, I don't care. Just make sure I get it tonight please." He asked sounding harried.

"I will."

"Right then, bye."

Nicole disconnected the call then dialed the number for the motor bike courier Gavin used frequently.

"You want a folder delivered where?" The wheezy man on the other line asked amusedly. "To Kingston Park Place." Nicole repeated feeling as she was being lead into a practical joke.

"For when?"

"Before eight tonight would be ideal."

"You realize, love, tha' this is Friday, don't you."

"I'm fully aware of the day, sir. I was not aware that you were a calendar though." Nicole replied bitinglly.

"Well then, my cheeky lass, you should be aware that everyone and their bloomin' dog needs their things delivered to them before eight tonight. Callin' in a' th' last minute makes yours the last priority. I can 'ave a man pick it up but I can't promise nothin' for the delivery time. Might 'ave to wait 'til tomorrow."

"Let me save you the trip then." Nicole snapped, hanging up on the man.

Nicole drove to Gavin's home having pulled the address out of his day planner and the directions off the internet map finder.

The house was an inviting looking structure, or at least had the possibility of being one had the gardens not been surrounded by the air of ones that had been neglected and the lawn a little better kempt.

Climbing the semi-circle shaped stone steps up to the front door she noted how there was an awkward feeling in her stomach, like the one she got as a child and she ran into her teacher in the grocery store. It was one thing to see a teacher or a boss at work and company/school related functions but another entirely to see them in their homes. It was a bit like seeing a penguin in the Sahara; it just didn't fit into her reality.

Nicole knocked on the door and stood back, not sure what she should expect to emerge from the other end. She nearly laughed when a thirty-something Portuguese woman who was holding a turkey-baster opened the door.

"Hi, I'm Mr. Malon's assistant. He needed this dropped off..." Nicole said holding the folder out in front of her.

"es in the study. I show you where." The woman replied not taking the folder. Nicole faltered for a moment, weighing out the benefits of being able to tell Sashi and Margaret that she had actually been in Gavin's lair with the feeling that by going in there was trespassing on his privacy.

"I don't touch the papers." The woman explained to Nicole. "You take them to him if he wants them."

So it wouldn't really be curiosity then, it would be following orders. Nicole decided as she followed the woman down through the entrance hall and through a wide, well lit hall way.

"In there." The woman said, pointing to a closed door in the middle of the hall.

"Oh, thank you." Nicole replied. *Couldn't do the decent thing and announce me or anything could you?* Nicole thought nervously. Gingerly she reached out and tapped the heavy wood panel of the door a few times. After a moment and without warning the door swung open. Gavin, who had a phone to his ear, looked startled for a moment when she saw her before indicating for her to come in. Nicole took the opportunity, when his back was turned, to examine him quickly. He was still wearing dress socks and gray slacks but had abandoned his dress shirt and was instead wearing only a white t-shirt.

"Can I ask you to hold for a minute? Thanks" Gavin said to the unknown person on the other line. He turned to Nicole and said "Can you wait a moment?"

"Yea, sure." Nicole replied holding the folder dumbly.

"Yes, I'm here." Gavin said to the phone again. Nicole attempted to be polite by looking anywhere but at him but thought maybe she looked like she was being nosy. Feeling more and more out of place she was relieved when Gavin walked out of the study, apparently to take the call in a more private area.

Unsure of what to do Nicole resumed her examination of the room and was immediately awestruck by the volumes of books that lined the walls. Some were obviously law books bound

with heavy faux leather and labeled with gold leafing. These she glanced at, having recognized a few from the more extensive law library that was kept at the firm. As she perused the shelves she came across some volumes that were definitely outside the realms of the legal profession. E Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our time*, sat next to Fredrick Douglas's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and William Faulkner's *Pylon*.

Enraptured by the treasures proudly displayed on the shelves Nicole became oblivious to her surroundings.

"Anything in particular catch your fancy?" Gavin's voice asked calmly.

Guiltily Nicole snatched back her hand that she had placed on the spine of Edgar Alan Poe Volume 1 and turned to see Gavin standing at the desk holding the folder she had abandoned in order to examine his collection.

"No...I mean...um, I wasn't trying to pry." Nicole stammered. "You have a very nice collection." She amended lamely.

Gavin smiled patronizingly at her. "Do you enjoy antiquated books or literature in general?"

Nicole watched as he set the folder down and perched himself on the edge of the desk, much as a professor would while quizzing a student on a paper that was just turned in.

Sheepishly Nicole replied, "Both, unfortunately though I don't really have the resources to pursue antique books but I find them fascinating."

"Curious isn't it? You can buy a reprint of Don Quixote, which would be in perfect condition, for a few pounds at any book store, but for the first edition, one would have to go to a specialist and pay hundreds of thousands and that purchase would have suffered water damage, fraying, discoloration or any manner of aging."

"I kind of wonder if it's because people are drawn to the ones that are closer to the source; obviously for a book to maintain such popularity and renown it's got to be great and having the original is the next best thing to meeting the author in person."

"So you think rare book collectors amass originals to feel closer to the creators? Much in the same way ancient civilizations built pyramids and towers to feel closer to their gods?"

Nicole felt suddenly very foolish and wished she could leave melt through the cracks in the hard wood floor but refused to abandon her position without a fight. "It's a valid theory since we are not as far removed from our predecessors as modern man would like to think. Many of the old traits are still buried in us; a point that sociologist, behaviorists and philanthropists now a days are granted gobs of research grant money to study."

Gavin looked at her with an amused expression for a moment before stating, "So you are an avid music lover, antiquarian book appreciator, paralegal and psychoanalyst? It's a wonder you're still able to stand, I'd be exhausted."

Nicole grinned, "You who runs a very successful law firm, probably attends orchestral concerts, and actually collects antique books?"

"And for all those reasons and more is why I have gray hair." Gavin replied.

Nicole laughed, "Oh really? Where?" To her amazement Gavin ran his fingers through the hair on the side of his head and leaned down next to her.

"See that? Right there."

Out of the corner of his eye Gavin could see Nicole's laughing face as she placed her hand on his shoulder and leaned in to examine the side of his head. Before his mind could go beyond the thought that she had nice eyes she laughed and declared "I think you're beginning to go senile because I don't see any gray hairs."

"Oh well there's a comforting thought." Gavin muttered as ran his fingers through his hair again to straighten it.

Nicole laughed again then asked "How did you become interested in old books?"

Gavin raised an eyebrow as he searched the shelves, finally finding what he wanted and pulled it down. "My grandfather's grandfather was in the Queen's Navy in the beginning of the 17th century and he would gather nautical atlases which were passed down through the generations of my family. When I graduated university he gave me one of them as a gift and I think that started it."

FIND AN OLD BOOK OF SEA MAPS

Nicole gazed at the old tome in awe, marveling over the workmanship that was given to the various prints. Waterways were depicted with small rocks to indicate areas of dangerous passage while ports were illustrated with happy looking ships bobbing peacefully in tranquil waters. The middle of the ocean showed tentacles of a giant squid and the banks of South America and Africa showed natives dressed in heathenistic clothing.

"I was amazed at how the author and illustrator gave precedence to certain areas without using words." Gavin commented as he slowly turned the pages, allowing Nicole time to pour over the diagrams and current flows. "For instance here, in Northern England a castle is drawn in such a way that if it were to scale it would have taken up three counties where as this one here," He pointed to a puny speck in the lower Irish Isle " Drawn with the same scale in mind could have fit in the first one's master bed chamber."

Nicole was about to reply when she heard the hall clock chime the hour.

"Oh, wow! I didn't mean to take up so much of your time." Nicole stated. With some degree of self control she tore her gaze from the open pages of the atlas and looked at Gavin. "The uh, the courier said they couldn't guarantee they'd be able to bring the folder to you today which is why I dropped it off. I should probably leave you to it."

"Thank you." Gavin replied closing the book carefully and returning it to its place on the shelf. "Drive carefully."

"Have a good night." Nicole called as she left.

Her hand was actually on the door knob of the front door when she remembered she wanted to ask him about his decision to remove her from the trial. She faltered for a moment, trying to decide if it was better to embarrass herself or just accept the fact that things are the way they are.

"Chicken shit." Nicole muttered to herself after deciding to be a coward and leave.

"Sorry, missed that." The housekeeper said, appearing out of thin air.

"Oh, not...I was talking to myself. 'She can sit.' "Nicole lied. "I just remembered that I forgot to ask Mr. Malon something so Sashi can sit and wait a bit longer before I go pick her up." Nicole said rounding off the fabrication nicely.

"Ok then." The housekeeper nodded, gesturing for Nicole to go back down the hall.

Damn! Nicole thought as she realized she was right back where she started.

The door to the study was still open, allowing Nicole to peer in and see if Gavin was back on the phone again. Before she even got to see him she figured he wasn't on the phone as she could plainly hear *Caruso* playing on the radio. Curious Nicole snuck an unannounced glance around the door and stopped, forgetting completely she was only going to sneak a quick look. Gavin was sitting in the chair that rested along the window, his face only showing a profile but enough of it for Nicole to know he had his eyes closed. His head was tilted back slightly and his lips were barely apart; he looked in raptures.

Nicole was amazed that this calm, peaceful man could be the same terrifying individual that roamed the aisles of Molan Inc. In the fading evening sun his face was light with a soft orange light that made him look younger than his years but took away none of the dashing good looks or strength that was becoming very familiar. As the orchestra reached the climax Gavin opened his eyes and saw Nicole in the doorway.

"Ms. Duffeck, I have the pleasure again so soon?" Gavin said as he stood. Nicole couldn't tell if the redness in his cheeks were due to embarrassment, the warmth of the sun or anger at her spying on him.

"I--, er, I wasn't, you know, trying to, um..." Nicole stuttered idiotically. Yea if that doesn't betray a guilty conscience.

"At least you missed the part where I conducted the orchestra." Gavin replied. Nicole laughed nervously. "Was there something you needed?" Gavin asked raising an eyebrow.

"Um, sort of; yea, I guess." Gavin waited patiently. *Good show, make an ass of yourself so he'll forget you were spying on him before.* Nicole thought. "I was just wondering-God it seems stupid now." Nicole started. Gavin was still looking at her expectantly so she continued "I was wondering why you didn't want me to assist at the trial. I mean, I know you said it was because Gibbons has more of a feel for British culture but I was wondering if maybe you were, you know, if there may have been other reasons why you didn't think I was up to it."

"Do you recall, when I hired you, I told you that because you were not licensed or experienced in the law of the United Kingdom that there would be certain things you could do and

things I didn't have confidence in you for?" Nicole nodded mutely so Gavin continued, "Gibbons has been with my firm for six years and was head hunted from another firm where he worked for three years, both of which were in this city. In contrast you've been in my firm for three months and in this city for three and a half."

"So, this has nothing to do with my arguing with you, yelling at you, or touching your books?"

"You touched my books after I told you that Gibbons was going to be assisting, or do you expect me to be a mind reader?"

"Well, no I just thought..."

"I was being witty, Ms. Duffeck."

"Oh."

"It comes down to simple tactics, something you must have observed in your US law firm. I think that it would be to our case's greater advantage to have someone at trial that's familiar with the lay of the land. Why does it bother you so much anyway? There's no more pay or prestige in assisting at trial."

Nicole shrugged, "I practically bled for this case, I lived it for weeks now and I wanted to see it through."

"Is this a matter of pride?" Gavin said walking over to the radio and turning it down.

"No; well not entirely. The majority of it is that I made this, I found the facts and the clauses and the stipulations and if it doesn't hold up in court, if it falls, I should be the one there to either fix it or take the blame for it."

"Margaret put more hours into this case than you have and she's not here arguing to be the one to assist." Gavin said flipping open the red file she had brought him. "Do you think she feels less responsibility for this case than you?"

"I don't know, I haven't asked her."

"Then would you feel better if I had someone assist who had put in as many hours in as you or Margaret?" Gavin asked looking at the file." Nicole walked towards him and stood nearly at his elbow, trying to catch his eye and divert his attention away from the file so she could watch his facial expressions. Now that she got started she wanted it finished.

"I'm not questioning your choice or doubting that it's right, sir, I only wanted to know if I could have done something better." She said looking up at him.

Gavin looked down, surprised she was standing so close to him, not to mention actively seeking criticism of her work.

Gavin turned slightly so he could face her directly and replied, "I've been less than patient with you and everyone that was on this case, and others; yet you've still put forth all the effort and dedication any reasonable attorney would have been pleased with. The mere fact that you're standing here asking why I am not giving you more work to do solidifies my idea that hiring you was going to benefit my firm greatly. There's nothing you could have done better and no mistake was made on your part. Gibbons is a local and I think that will appeal to the jury and the court. That's all."

Nicole's mind was buzzing with the words that she had just heard. Gavin was quick to criticize, berate, yell, but not so much with the making of the compliments. "Thank you." She managed, hoping her voice didn't squeak.

"You're welcome. Shall I walk you out?"

"No, thanks, I've been through there enough to know my way." Nicole replied smiling.

"Very well; have a good evening." Gavin said, smiling back.

"Good evening love; how was work?" Nan greeted Nicole.

"Alright; the jury is still out on the case though so..."

"Well, just have faith in the truth; I'm sure it will all come out in the end." Nan offered optimistically. "Ryan called by the way; wanted you to give him a call back."

Happy for the distraction Nicole grabbed the phone and punched in Ryan's number.

"Hey, you called?"

"Yea, just wanted to know if maybe you wanted to go catch a movie or something tomorrow." Ryan replied sounding as if only some of his attention was actually on the phone call.

"Yea, sounds good." After they had clarified the specifics Nicole asked, "So, how's work?"

"It's alright. Things have slowed down some which is good and bad."

"Did that company decide to go with your firm?" Nicole asked remembering the energy he had spoken with before and hoping maybe talking about it would make him come around.

"No, they thought that staying with the firm they were with would be the best thing to do for now, so that was a few hundred wasted man hours."

"Couldn't you take a few of your ideas and put a different brand to them?" Nicole asked naively.

Ryan sighed, "Not really because the first company saw all of them and if it gets around to other prospective clients that we recycle our ideas it'd be like professional suicide."

"Oh." Nicole replied stupidly.

"Look, I had a long week so I'm going to run for now but I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"Ok, sure. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Feeling as if something was amiss with things between her and Ryan Nicole decided it was time to evaluate her situation. Lacking a magic mirror that would allow her to see in her own head she did the next best thing and called home Saturday morning.

"Hey Diosa, how's your side of the pond?"

"Nikki! How the hell are ya?"

"I'm alright, how're things on your end?"

"Oh, same old same old. Tell me about England. I got your letters and stuff but it's not the same as hearing it from you."

Nicole spent a good twenty minutes describing the English life in detail to her Western counter part, sparing few details.

"So they really have spotted dick on the menus there?" Jamie concluded in awe. "I thought it was just something they said there to make us feel stupid."

"No it really is a food here. It's a desert made from currants which are the spots and dick which is the word 'dough' just corrupted. It's really good if you can get past the fact that it's made with mutton fat too."

"Well wonders never cease." Jamie murmured in amazement.

"So hon, I have a question for you and I need you to be brutally and unequivocally honest with me."

"Ooh, I love these. Fire."

"Okay. Do you think I'm distant and unapproachable?"

"What in work or personal life."

"Relationship wise. You see there's this guy..."

"Ryan? The hunky advertising exec?"

"That's the one. Anyway I think things are starting to dissolve between us." Nicole explained how Ryan was trying to get her to commit to something and since her tap dancing routine in response to his direct questioning he'd been more and more aloof.

"Did you tell him about The Night?" Jamie asked seriously.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. I don't want to be that person I guess. I don't want to be the victim or Jason's ex-wife or the idiot woman who let her husband use her for batting practice. I want to be me."

"I know what you're getting at honey but that 'you' doesn't exist any longer. You're not a victim, or a batting dummy but you are Jason's ex-wife and it is for reasons that are less savory then, say, mutual dislike. Ignoring it won't change it and hiding it; yes you are hiding it, "Jamie added hearing Nicole prepare to argue that choice of words. " And in so doing yes you are probably being unnecessarily distant and closed off; how could you not be."

Nicole was silent for a long time, mulling this over in her mind while Jamie, possessed of the inherent knowledge that all women have that states when one person slams another's psychological flaws full into their face they need a moment to consider the depth and honesty it has, allowed her the time to think.

"Question for you." Jamie finally asked.

"alright." Nicole mumbled, a bit warily.

"Do you like him? Aside from looks and financial status and all."

"I'm not sure."

“So do you think that your lack of candor with him is a symptom of your possible indifference or is it the cause?”

Nicole twisted the phone cord and pulled her feet up closer to her chest, thinking hard. “You don’t need to tell me, but you should at least know yourself.” Jamie said quietly.

“Hey handsome.” Nicole greeted Ryan outside the movie theatre.

“Hey yourself.” Ryan said, pecking Nicole on the cheek. “How’ve you been?”

“Pretty well, I might be an aunt.” Nicole said scanning the list of movies outside the theatre to make sure they were on time for their show.

“Really? I didn’t even know you had siblings.” Ryan replied, furrowing his brow.”

“Yea, I have a sister but she’s not the one who’s pregnant. Jamie’s a really good friend, so it would be an honorary aunt thing.” Nicole answered, noticing the look on his face. “Have I ever told you about her?”

“Nope.” Ryan replied looking at his shoes.

Nicole went on to describe Jamie and their years in school together, hoping to dispel the look of, dare she say it, disinterest, on his features.

“You know, I think that’s the most you’ve ever told me about yourself.” Ryan said after Nicole had finished.

“Yea, sorry, I just don’t think I’m that interesting, not compared to big corporate takeovers and super star studded premiers.” Nicole said by way of an apology.

Ryan snorted slightly but said nothing.

“Are you...is there something wrong?” Nicole asked finally.

“Nah, I think I’m just getting burnt out, too much work and what not. I’m thinking about taking a holiday to go visit some family in the north, take a couple of weeks and recharge my batteries.”

“Oh.” Nicole said, thinking she was getting the old heave-ho.

“Look, it’s not like that. Shit, I’m not dumping you. It’s just, you know...” Ryan said rubbing his eyes. “Work is stressful as hell and if I’m in the city I’m surrounded by it. Like there, that movie poster was done up by my agency, as was that one. And the company that manufactures those sweets is represented by us; I worked on the last commercial.”

“No, I get it, a soul searching sabbatical; very Zen.” Nicole replied lightly.

“Shall we?” Ryan asked indicating the theatre door. “Movie’s about to start.

As the theatre lights dimmed and the popcorn started to dance across the screen, pirouetting with the Goobers Nicole reached over and gently touched Ryan’s hand. In her peripheral vision she could see him start and turn his head, no doubt surprised that she was initiating contact. She felt his pinky lift, allowing her to slide her hand beneath his.

Melt, Ice Queen, melt. Nicole thought hopefully.

“We’ve fallen into a happy little rut haven’t we?” Nicole asked as she and Ryan walked along the street.

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked laughing.

“We have a date, you walk me to my car or to the door; it’s very nice.” Nicole commented looking up at the sky.

You know,” Ryan stopped walking and looked at Nicole, “We could change that.”

Nicole had stopped also and was looking at him, “How so?”

Ryan took a step toward her and then another, closing the distance between them. He brushed the hair off her face and kissed her cheek surreptitiously. “You could come with me to my flat.”

If at all possible the office was even more on tenterhooks Monday than they were on Friday. Gavin’s presence at the firm was seen and felt more than heard as any sightings of him were usually done in passing nods and hopeful ‘thumbs-ups’. The man himself seemed too distant to offer much of an intelligent response, instead offering the same non-committal nod for a signature request or a comment on the weather. Nicole made a point to use this opportunity to

smother attention on other case work that had gone slightly anemic in the presence of the Nasty Wrongful Death Suit.

"Oi, the woman of the hour." Nicole looked up to see Gibbons gesturing towards her with his tea cup. "If it weren't for this lass I don't think the case would have gone half so well. She's got this technique of organizing the trial notebook in such a way that a baboon could follow it like an expert."

"And the baboon would be you?" Sashi asked innocently from the teapot. Gibbons smiled "That's right love. But baboon or not I'm the one that got to go to the show."

"An organ grinder and his chimp. Lovely image." Sashi smiled and walked towards Nicole. "So dear, how was your weekend. Shag any good looking blokes." She shot a withering look that implied Gibbons was not in that particular category.

"No. I, uh...well no." Nicole replied hesitantly, knowing Gibbons was probably lapping up every word. Sashi too seemed to sense the interloper and took Nicole by the elbow, guiding her through the battlefield of the office.

"You mean to tell me you still haven't become intimately acquainted with Ryan?" Nicole looked towards Sashi and locked eyes with Gavin, who was looking at her fleetingly. Nicole flushed and looked away. "No, and maybe we could talk about this later? I'm pretty sure half the interns are going to be calling me 'frigid britches' amongst themselves.

"Better to be frigid britches than britches of the pong." Sashi muttered. Nicole laughed, "Pong? As in the video game Pong?"

"No, love, pong as in stink pong. You really are a Yank sometimes aren't you?" She asked regarding Nicole affectionately.

"I suppose; Yank meaning American right?" to which Sashi merely rolled her eyes theatrically. "So, say you step in dog mess and walk into the office, I would say you're pongy?" Nicole asked enjoying the change of subject.

"No, you would say I pong. Pongy isn't a word." "Like pong is." Nicole replied. "You knew one variation of it so obviously it is a word." Sashi retorted "Yea but as a noun, not an adjective."

"Either way, the question is not to pong or not to pong the question is to shag or not to shag. Or rather why you are in the 'to not shag' frame of mind."

"Something, I'm sure we should be discussing over lunch." Margaret, who had thankfully just appeared next to Nicole, declared solemnly.

"Thank-you!" Nicole exclaimed, relieved to have an ally, at last. "Oh no, you're not off the hook that easy. I want the details too; starting from what it is you two are talking about." Margaret advised, slinging her purse over her shoulder and jangling her keys ominously.

"Come on, come on, off with you then!" Sashi cried with enough thespian inflection to attract the larger majority of the office to their trio as Nicole, flanked on either side by Sashi and Margaret, trooped off to the bank of elevators.

Once outside the office Nicole reached into her own hand bag and produced a pack of cigarettes, nervously shaking one free and lighting it without a glance at her friends.

"Fags? I thought you only smoked with beer?" Margaret noted. "A last request before you two frog march me to the gallows." Nicole muttered around the butt.

"Too right you are!" Sashi cried, imitating a very stiff master at arms. "My but aren't we in high spirits today!" Nicole commented, hoping to pull some of the attention off herself and direct it on the spotlight-loving Sashi. "Mmm, Nick and I are getting along famously, for now at least. Which by the way is a wonderful segway into your drama." Sashi said as she plucked away Nicole's cigarette and pulled a drag.

Nicole sighed and watched as a pebble she kicked skittered ahead of her down the wide sidewalk where it bounced off of a freestanding dustbin with a perky "pling!"

"You see," Sashi began addressing Margaret, "Nicole was given a very nice offer of accompanying her bloke to his flat for the evening for some rough and tumble 'tween the sheets; an offer which our fair companion had rejected."

“And you of course want to know why.” Margaret said sounding none too surprised at this.

“It’s my God given right.” Sashi said.

“Nicole,” Margaret said loudly enough to be heard over whatever it was Sashi was going on about, “I’m not asking to pry, and I’m sure neither is Sashi,” the latter part of this Margaret said while staring darkly at Sashi. “You know about Sashi and Nick having problems, and you know my boyfriend and I broke up a while ago; you were nice enough to listen to the both of us and try to help us, we just want to do the same for you.”

Nicole started ahead, wondering if refusing to talk about it would blow things drastically out of proportion or, worse yet, would cause her to lose the two people who, besides her grandparents, have been the nicest and most understanding she’d met in England. The truth was, upon examination, that she was embarrassed. As a young, mid-twenties woman with no mental or physical problems she should have been desperate for a panty-peal; instead at the first hint of sex she turned into an ice cube and nearly ran a marathon to put distance between herself and the gorgeous instigator. Oh well, if she was to be freak she may as well be a confessed one.

“I was married when I moved here...” Nicole began, pausing briefly to allow Sashi to gasp and Margaret to choke “We separated just before I actually left but the divorce only recently became final.”

“This is like that amputated appendage thing, isn’t it?” Sashi asked agog, a statement that prompted a very dirty look from Sashi and a resolve in Nicole to keep her mouth shut for the remainder of the lunch.

Noticing the response her inquiry elicited Sashi was quick to explain, “No, not like that; I’m being serious. “Look, when someone loses a leg or an arm they continue to act as if it’s there for long periods afterwards because they still haven’t gotten used to life without it. Some even go so far as to attempt to scratch an itch on the missing limb. And it’s the same here. The divorce is still so recent that your still subconsciously thinking you are married to him and doing anything intimate with another man would seem like infidelity.”

Margaret and Nicole were both rendered speechless by the sudden display of insightfulness Sashi had just produced and stared at the bemused woman in awe. “Sashi, you just very well be a genius!” Margaret exclaimed.

Ignoring the back handed compliment Sashi continued, “Does that fit, Nikki?”

Nicole mulled the thought over in her mind for moment, trying it on for size as one might a shoe before responding. “Yea, in theory. I mean I didn’t sleep with Ryan and the divorce was pretty recent so, yea, proximity wise it’s probable.”

“Why’d you and Jason get divorced?” Margaret asked holding open the door for the tiny café they had come to frequent.

Nicole stopped dead in tracks, her mind caught off guards by the unexpected question. In fairness she should have known this was going to be asked, no one can say ‘I just got divorced’ and not have someone ask them why.

“If you don’t want to talk about it...” Margaret began, obviously seeing something in Nicole’s face that indicated unease.

Nicole shook her head and moved in the door, allowing another patron the ability to get out of the café, but not before shooting Nicole and impolite look for barring the passage.

“It’s alright, it’s not a big deal. Probably not as big of a deal as I’ve been making it.” Nicole replied. “We grew apart, according to him. Maybe I was too distant to notice.” She shrugged then continued. “He began seeing someone else-“

“That bastard!” Sashi said vehemently, causing some of the staff to jump and look in their direction. Margaret waved to them in an apologetic way, “Do you mind?” She asked Sashi

“What? He is a bastard.” Sashi replied unaware of her own lack of decorum. Margaret shook her head, exasperatedly, apparently exhausted already from banging her head against the Sashi wall. “Any bloke willing to cheat on his wife deserves to be called every name in the book before getting bludgeoned violently with it.”

“I suppose a threat like that would be enough to keep Nick faithful, hu?” Nicole asked, smiling at the image.

“Absolutely. So what did Ryan say when you turned down his offer?” Sashi asked

“Oh, uh--not much. He just looked funny for a moment like he couldn't quite make out what I said. You know that look people sometimes give another person when they weren't paying attention to the whole sentence and now have to answer a question about it?”

“Yea, the look that says ‘I have no idea what you're talking about but I'm too polite to say so...’”

“That's the one!” Nicole agreed.

The women laughed for a while, trading jokes and anecdotes about situations similar to Nicole's involving said look.

“It's like those people who yell at the top of their voices when speaking to someone who speaks a foreign language.” Margaret said giggling. “As if it'll help the situation.

“Could you imagine giving ‘the look’ to Gavin?” Sashi speculated.

“I'd be afraid of getting sued for something.” Nicole said dramatically.

“Oh no, Sashi's converted you to her side?” Margaret asked gravely.

“No, I didn't mean it that way, I rather like Gavin.” Nicole said frankly, “But I can't imagine him taking kindly to being ignored.”

“I think if it was you who was ignoring him, you'd be able to get away with it.” Sashi said knowingly.

Startled Nicole stopped her fork just over salad. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh you know very well what I'm talking about.” Sashi replied pointedly “All those late night work sessions together, the tete-a-tete you had with him when he nearly publicly quartered Margaret; you've esteemed yourself in his eyes as the poster child for the Molan Firm.” Sashi said sounding pleased.

“Which, by the way I don't think I thanked you for coming to my rescue that day.”

Margaret added warmly.

Nicole smiled. “Any time. Though not really because I was terrified he was going to kill me then and there.”

“So, are you going to sleep with Ryan?” Sashi asked, whipping her mouth daintily.

“I don't know, maybe. Though I can't imagine him asking me again.”

“He's a man, he'll ask again. For god's sake a week after he broke up with me Collin had actually called at ten o'clock at night and asked if he could come over one last time. Besides, if you really want to you can always make the first move.” Margaret offered.

Upon returning to the office Nicole promptly ran into Gavin, “Any news?” she asked. A question as ambiguous as that usually brought about an incredulous look on his part before he'd walk away; leaving the questioner to figure out what they'd done wrong or if he'd even heard them in the first place. Today however the only warrant for a question like that was obvious.

“No, the jury is still out deliberating.” He replied wearily. “If you would be so kind as to do me a favor, though you are more than a glorified errand runner, I need to ask you to stop at the post office and pickup a few things from the firm's post office box.” He said pulling a small key off a key chain. “There's no rush, if you could bring the things in tomorrow that would be fine, just leave the lot on my desk.”

“Sure thing.” Nicole replied taking the key from him before returning to her desk.

Nicole hadn't noticed that in taking the key from Gavin her fingers had brushed lightly on his palm, but Gavin had. He rubbed his palms together roughly, thinking he was too old to be ticklish as the gooseflesh on his arms receded.

The next morning Nicole arrived at work just as Gavin was getting off the elevator. She looked at him confused and in response he told her the jury came back with a verdict and he was going to the court house. Dying to ask a thousand questions Nicole restrained herself, saying only, “Good luck.” As the elevator doors slid shut, hiding the wan smile that he bravely tried to adopt.

The office was in a buzz, though one that was both anticipatory and solemn at the same time. Very little work was done, and the work that was done was inconsequential and easily left mid-way through at a moment's notice. No one wanted to be unavoidably detained when the phone call came in.

An hour later the receptionist came out from behind her desk and called attention. A hush that would have done a funeral parlor proud descended on the audience as she gravely assessed

them all. In a reserved yet clearly audible voice she announced that Gavin called and said the jury found the defendant not liable. A stunned silence filled the office then was immediately followed by low murmurs. Their side had lost the case.

A half an hour later Gavin returned. Nicole tried to say she was sorry things went the way they did but she may as well have been trying to talk to a bus. He paid her no attention but instead stalked directly to his office and closed the door with such force the pictures on the outside wall rattled.

Nicole's nerves were equally rattled as she stared at his door, wondering what she should do next. Her own words, spoken to Gavin days earlier came back to her mind "I found the facts and the clauses and the stipulations and if it doesn't hold up in court, if it falls, I should be the one there to either fix it or take the blame for it." So resolved to make good on her word Nicole made a mental note to make a meeting with Gavin to discuss the case with him. The nerves in her hands and legs were buzzing with trepidation at this prospect but God damn if she was going to let this case die without a fight.

Nicole had worked through her lunch hour, waving off Sashi and Margaret who had come to ask her to join them again. "I'm right in the middle of this, sorry. Next time right?"

"Don't over work yourself love, no good'll come from beating a dead horse."

Nicole thanked her for the advice but paid it no heed. She ignored all the other 'To-do's' that were sent her way and focused on the information she had spread out in front of her, pouring over data she had looked over so many times that it was nearly committed to memory.

Shortly after lunch Gavin approached her desk. Though he could not help but notice what it was she was looking at he made no comment other than to say "I would like you to meet with me in the conference room please."

Nicole felt a rock fall from somewhere in her throat and land with a crashing thud in the pit of her stomach where it sat heavily, cutting off the circulation to her legs.

Upon entering the board room Nicole was surprised to see she wasn't the only one there. Besides her self Sashi, Margaret, Gibbons and about twenty other people were seated around the desk. Nervously Nicole sat down in an unoccupied seat, fearing she had been called in front of all of these people for a bit of public humiliation before she was terminated from her position at Molan Inc.

"For the benefit of those of you who have not been in the employ of Molan Inc for long let me please begin by explaining the purpose for today's meeting. My custom, at the conclusion of a large or important case is to gather together the associates and people who worked on it and go over the outcome. This is not a fault finding exercise and any opinion you have on the circumstances surrounding the verdict will be kept to yourselves until after the meeting has ended when you can come see me in private. This is not an open forum." He said addressing the room at large. "This was a very difficult case, with everyone giving everything they had and then some on this. I am asking for you to give me one more thing before we put this case to bed. Please write up a short abstract on the case or what you know of it and why you think the verdict went the way it did. It need not be longer than a page and I would appreciate if you could have it to me before the week's end. In the mean while I would like to again thank you all for your patience and understanding during the last few weeks."

The assembly seemed to respond to some invisible cue and began to stand up, mutter amongst themselves and make their way to the door. Though the collective room was somber and dull it was no comparison to the brooding darkness that seemed to have encapsulated Gavin. Nicole, under the guise of waiting politely for the queue to pass her, stood and watched him for a few moments. Part of her wanted to go and speak to him, to assure him he had done everything that could have been done. The other part knew it would sound patronizing and condescending, not to mention useless. Resolved to keep her silence Nicole fell in behind a mousy brunette and followed her out the door.

Gavin stood at the head of the conference table, barely noticing the people walking past him in order to return to work. He did however notice that Nicole seemed to have lagged behind and found that for some irrational reason he was hoping she would remain behind. He knew what she would say, "You gave it your best, better luck next time, etc." He also knew it wouldn't change

anything; his client lost- he lost, and no amount of euphemisms or unsupported optimism would change that. But he wanted to hear it any way because, after all, pretty lies are still pretty. When he raised his eyes from the papers he had been needlessly shuffling it was to see Nicole's heels disappearing through the door.

"Nicole, I would like to ask you for a favor. Do you have a moment?" Nicole looked at her watch; she was supposed to see Ryan tonight for the first time in two weeks.

"Yes, but I do have plans though for tonight." She replied hesitantly.

Gavin nodded. "It will take only a moment."

She followed him back to his office. "This is by no way an illicit proposition, it is work related. A client has sent me tickets to a show for tomorrow night and I would appear a cad if I turned them down or didn't attend. However I am unable to secure a companion for the evening, the woman who usually accompanies me to these functions had a last minute affair to attend to. You are in no way obligated to agree to this, it will not affect your job or my opinion of you. I would like to know if you would be free to accompany me." He concluded.

"So this wouldn't be a date?" Nicole asked, unable to resist the temptation, against her better judgment.

For the first time since she met him he looked flustered. "No." He replied not looking her in the eye.

Nicole kept herself from laughing, barely. "I'd be happy to accompany you. Will I be getting paid for this?"

"I think that may be construed as prostitution." Gavin quipped. Nicole did laugh this time. "However, if you insist, then yes."

"I don't. Would you like me to meet you there?"

"Even though this is not a date I will still pick you up." Gavin said sounding more at ease.

They made the arrangements and said their good byes. Nicole was driving home when the realization hit her. She didn't freak out when she was in his office. She didn't flinch or want to run or anything. Hu, chalk it up to whatever, maybe she was cured.

That evening Nicole told Ryan over dinner about the business arrangement she had made and, as she suspected he was good-natured about it and joked with her. "You know, this is how these office romances begin. The charming boss offers a seemingly innocent proposal and sweeps the attractive young secretary off her feet. Before you know it you are madly in love with him and him you."

"Given this much though have you?" Nicole asked

"No but those creeps in Hollywood or Los Angeles or wherever your American films are conceived have definitely given us Europeans the idea that you Yanks are all about that top end romance stuff."

"If Gavin has a romantic bone in his body modern science has yet to find it."

"So are you trying to tell me I have nothing to worry about?" Ryan asked looking serious.

Nicole shifted nervously in her seat at the sudden change in atmosphere. "Are you asking if I'm interested in my boss or if I'm interested in you?"

"I'm hoping you're interested in me." Ryan replied. "You haven't ever mentioned what your plans are as far as the future. You know, what continent you see yourself on ten years from now."

Nicole took a moment to study the arrangement of pasta on her plate before looking up at Ryan. "When I met you I had been in this country for about a week."

"And now it's been a bit longer then that and I still know very little about you." He pleaded

"There's not that much to know, really." Nicole lied. "I lived in Wisconsin up until I came here. I don't have any kids and I hate people that are mean to puppies." Inwardly she cringed, knowing full well she was being evasive in the same ways he had lectured Sashi of being.

Ryan smiled almost as one does when they are being lied to by a young child and are convinced they can catch the deceiver at it. "Alright then; how about: How long do you think you're going to be in England?"

"Ryan, I love it here; I can't deny that. But it's a big step to take. My whole life, everything I worked the past twenty five years on is back in the states. I don't know if I can leave that

permanently for a mediocre job and no living situation to call my own. My grandparents are wonderful but I can only hope for their hospitality for so long before they tire of me.”

“And that’s the thing. You have this life back in the states but you were willing to leave it for an undetermined amount of time and you won’t say why. I’m not trying to pry or anything but I’m kind of worried that you may be here on the lam or something.”

Nicole laughed, “I’m not a fugitive, and since the US and the UK have extradition laws it would be sort of a silly place to run to.”

“Mike Tyson did it.” Ryan returned warming slightly.

“He was trying to evade paying child support and was forced to in the end anyway; further proof that running here would be pointless.”

“If you are unwilling to tell me because you don’t trust me that’s fine, I just…” Ryan leaned back and rubbed his face with his fists “I need something to go on, Nicole. I want to know where I stand with you.”

Nicole’s heart ached though she noted in a clinical sort of way that it was more because she was upsetting someone she knew as opposed to hurting someone she loved or cared for deeply.

“I left home because I needed to find myself. As cheesy as that sounds, and yes I know it’s cheesy;” Nicole added catching his skeptical look, “and not for any reason like I don’t trust you but I don’t feel comfortable talking about it yet. It was deeply personal and painful and I haven’t worked through it all yet.”

“So as the cheesy plot lines go you can’t be sure where we stand until you work through your past?” Ryan asked kindly.

“Essentially, yes. I enjoy the time we spend together, I love being with you and I don’t want to lose that. But right now what we have is all I can offer you.” Nicole apologized.

“See, now that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Ryan asked grinning.

After dinner Ryan walked with Nicole through the garden park in the downtown area, laughing as she marveled over the elephant plants and hanging vines that decorated the paths.

It was a pleasant evening and Nicole felt good wandering aimlessly past the various plants and displays with Ryan holding her hand.

As the evening drew to a close Ryan drove her home.

“Thank you.” Nicole said softly from the passenger side.

“For what?” Ryan asked sounding surprised.

“You know, for a nice evening and for being you.”

Despite the romance of the evening, the moonlight that shown through the windshield and the subdued song that was playing out of the car’s stereo something still felt out of place when he kissed her. The kiss was nice, Nicole had to admit as she unlocked the front door and waved goodbye to Ryan as he drove off. She couldn’t put her finger on what was missing. It could be that Ryan was not Jason, or that she just hasn’t known him long enough to feel that sort of chemistry.

She looked around the dark home she shared with her grandparents. She could make out all the assorted knick-knacks and furniture by memory more then sight, she knew the turn of the hall way and the gentle decline the kitchen floor made from the foundation settling. She was familiar with the creaks and pops the house made as the pipes ran and the furnace switched on and off.

But just like Ryan wasn’t Jason this house wasn’t home. Nicole pulled her shoes off and sat on the couch in the dark living room, staring out the window and watching the silent street, lost in thought.

The next evening with some help from her Grandmother she got ready to meet Gavin. She dressed in the typical little black dress which was short enough to not be eligible as funeral wear but long enough to be acceptable to wear in front of her boss. Her hair was done up with piles of curls pinned to the top of her head, a feat which took close to an hour to accomplish but, with the help of a few stray curls and strands that were left to tickle the back her neck, she looked as if the style was natural and unforced. Her make-up was simple but in her grandmother’s expertise the little bit that was put on seemed to open her face, lighten it, and accentuate with out overpowering.

"Now, how about some perfume?" Nan said offering a clear bottle filled with yellowish looking liquid.

"I never touch the stuff, it gives me a headache." Nicole said laughing.

"Suit yourself." Nan replied dabbing a little of the scent to her own wrists. "Well then, my dear, I must declare you finished!"

Nicole looked at herself in the mirror and found she was pleased with the effects of the last hour's work.

When the black Rolls Royce pulled up in front of the house Pops elicited a long low whistle followed by a grunt that sounded like "Swanky." Then shuffled off to the den to watch the telly.

Nicole assumed the chauffeur would have honked the horn but when there was a knock at the door Nan opened it to find Gavin standing on the stoop, looking more debonair than ever.

"Good Evening." He greeted Nan.

"Good evening to you!" Nan replied. "Nicole's just about ready..." She stopped and turned to follow his gaze which had found Nicole standing just behind Nan. "Oh, never mind she is ready!" Nan stepped out of the way and wished Nicole a good time then went to find Pops.

Gavin tilted his head slightly to Nicole. "Good evening." He said smiling lightly.

"Hello." She knew she probably should have felt shy but the fact that he was her boss and this was a business arrangement dispelled any butterflies she would have felt while wearing a little dress like that and appearing glamorous, both of which were normally in total contrast to her preference of jeans and a t-shirt. He on the other hand looked naturally at ease with himself.

"Shall we?" He asked extending his arm to her.

Now she felt nervous. Not the kind of nervous she got before, not that he was going to hit her, yes she was finally able to label what kind of fear it was. It was the nervous fear that she was going to trip and fall flat on her face or burp or something stupid to make an ass of herself.

Gingerly she took his arm and allowed herself to be escorted to the car. She sat on the edge of her seat, not sure of what a proper person should do with themselves while they wait for their companion.

Shortly after her, though it felt like a life time, Gavin slid into the seat beside her. No sooner was his door closed than a male voice from the front asked "All set then?" to which Gavin nodded and the car began to glide down the gravel lane and out on the country road.

The silence stretched on for at least five very uncomfortable minutes while Nicole tried to think of something appropriate to talk about. She wondered if she should restrict her remarks to work, then thought it silly to talk about work when they weren't there. Then her mind went to the intelligence she had once received about Gavin, that he was a workaholic and thought maybe he would like to talk about it before her mind betrayed her and thought that maybe it wasn't fair to go off of gossip. Finally Gavin broke the silence himself saying "Please, don't take this as an impropriety but you look very beautiful."

Nicole laughed, unable to stop herself, "Thank you. You look very good in a tux."

Gavin smiled "I try."

Nice. Nicole thought. He wears tuxedos all the time, Nan told you he does a lot with charities. Christ he probably owns half a dozen. Out loud she said "I'm sorry; I should have told you before that I have never worked in the capacity of a professional escort before."

"Since that is the case allow me to take a few moments to brief you on what to expect. Since you were kind enough to agree to do this with the understanding that it is for business I will introduce you as my employee."

"Do you want me to call you Mr. Malon?" Nicole asked seriously.

"No, I think we can skip the formalities. You may call me Gavin if you don't mind."

"Not at all; by the way, when did that officially happen? My calling you Gavin?"

Gavin sat back in his seat for a moment and regarded the question. "You know I can't say for sure; maybe when you told me to sod off in your grandparent's house."

Nicole blushed but decided it would be redundant to apologize for something Gavin had obviously decided to let go.

"Also since this is a business affair I believe it would go without saying that these are influential people to my career and the well being of the firm..."

"I will treat them respect that is deserving of their position but you know, back home in the states it's illegal to prep a client before they go on the stand and buddy, you're really toeing the line here." Nicole accused light heartedly, the jitters she had experienced before having been dispelled by Gavin's easy nature.

"I suppose it could have been worse." Gavin said to no one in particular.

Puzzled Nicole looked at him then; after a few moments of silence had elapsed she asked "What are you talking about?"

"Your allusion, it could have been worse. Frankly I was expecting that if you felt compelled to make one it was going to be some cliché *Pretty Woman* quote."

"It wouldn't work, your hair's all wrong to be Richard Gere." Nicole replied mater-of-factly."

"Ah, but being as I am a solicitor it works because of my profession; clever."

Nicole felt her smile falter a bit as they pulled up in front of the theater, feelingly oddly disappointed that here comfortable conversation with Gavin be cut so short.

Chivalrously Gavin took Nicole's hand as she exited the limo *There seems to be a bit of a chill left in the air* He thought as a slight shiver made his skin tingle. Nicole smiled warmly at him when he placed her hand in the crook of her arm and escorted her in. They were barely inside when a wizened stooped old woman tottered over to them, dripping in jewelry.

"Gavin, dear boy, how have you been?" She asked in a high frail voice. Nicole stood quietly and respectfully to the side as they pursued the obligatory small talk befitting an occasion such as this before the older woman noticed Nicole was there.

"Oh, forgive me dear, I didn't see you there! Gavin where is Jennifer?"

"She couldn't make it this evening." Gavin replied kindly.

"That is a pity. Are you going to introduce me to your young companion then?"

"Mrs. Hinchin, this is my assistant Ms. Nicole Duffeck, Nicole, this lovely young lady is Evelyn Hinchin, a very generous contributor to many worthy causes.

"It's very nice to meet you Mrs. Hinchin." Nicole replied gently shaking hands with the smiling older woman.

"You're an American?"

"Yes."

"What brings you to this side of the pond?"

Nicole gave the schpeel of wanting to spend time with her grandparents and expand her career. "I was fortunate that my Grandmother is acquainted with someone kind enough to hire me on with no experience or credentials for legal work in the United Kingdom." She concluded.

"So do you enjoy working for Mr. Malon then?"

"Yes, very much so; he's a different sort of supervisor then I had in the United States but in no way less helpful, especially when explaining the difference of procedure between what's done here and what's done back home."

"You know, I hear all those stories about young people from the United States being disrespectful and arrogant but you're doing wonders to dispel that stereotype." She said tapping Nicole's arm approvingly with her play bill.

Nicole flicked a quick glance towards Gavin and saw him nod in approval. The old woman held them a few moments longer then departed to join her party.

After a few more run-ins with Gavin's acquaintances they made their way to the box seats and settled in for the show. "Thank you for attending to my acquaintances with such civility, you performed magnificently."

Nicole smilingly replied, "Shucks, 't was nuthin'."

As the lights lowered, and the crowd silenced as the orchestra tuned Nicole heard Gavin chortle before she lost all focus on anything other then the stage.

The first half of the performance was magnificent; the theater disappeared from her peripheral vision and her mind became unaware of nothing but the soliloquies and exclamations of the stage. The actors themselves dissolved, leaving behind the characters they were playing in their place and with this new return to life they loved, cried, schemed and lamented as passionately now as they must have the first time the play was performed. Had Nicole been able to remember that this was a play and that it must have been performed by these very actors at

least a hundred times before she would have been all the more impressed with the realism in which they portrayed their titles.

So engrossed was she in the story that when the curtain fell for intermission she felt as if she had woken from a dream only to find that she couldn't remember where she was.

"If you would excuse me for a moment, I desperately need to stretch my legs. Would you care for a drink?" Gavin asked, bringing Nicole to her senses.

Nicole politely declined, having decided to spend the intermission reading the play bill. She wondered if having never read the play or even hearing of it before tonight was a blessing or a deficit to appreciating it or any performance. Barely two minutes had passed since Gavin had left her before a man approached her forcing her to abandon her mental debate.

"I do not believe I have had the pleasure of meeting you before; I'm John Harbringer of Harbringer and Associates." The man greeted her with an extended hand a genial smile.

Accepting his hand Nicole introduced herself politely.

"So are you attending the show with Gavin Malon then?" He asked easily.

"I am yes; he was good enough to invite the evening." Nicole answered.

"Ah, I see; are you a friend of his or an employee?"

"An employee, I've been with his firm for about three months now. How is it that you know Mr. Malon?"

"Oh, Gavin and I go back a ways, we're both in the same business so our paths have happened to cross on occasion. What sort of work do you perform for him?" John asked conversationally.

"A little bit of everything; my position allows my importance to vary from that of an administrative assistant or a stapler, depending on the day."

"Sounds like you're getting a bit of a raw deal there." John replied empathetically.

Suddenly aware that what she said in humor may not be taken that way by one of Gavin's peers Nicole hurried to correct her mistake; "Oh no, not at all. What I meant was that the job allows a lot of variety; I'm always doing something different so it never gets dull or monotonous and the staff and benefits are really great."

"So you're intelligent and a multi-tasker. I doubt you're getting paid what you're worth there." John said with a used car salesman like grin.

Nicole laughed, more because she couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't rude to her companion. Thankfully she was saved from this crisis by the reappearance of Gavin.

"John." Gavin greeted the other man coldly.

"Gavin, good to see you. I was just getting acquainted with you new associate. Nicole, it was a pleasure meeting you; I hope we have a chance to speak again in the future. Enjoy the rest of the show."

Gavin settled into his seat and maintained a stony silence. Concerned she had made some unforgivable trespass Nicole swallowed her fear and asked, "Should I have not spoken to him?"

"Had I the choice I would have preferred you didn't." Gavin replied somberly.

"I'm sorry, it's just that since you told me some of your colleagues and peers would be here I thought...I didn't think much of Mr. Harbringer speaking with me."

"That was my mistake. Like any one else I have my professional enemies. John is obviously one of them."

"So he was talking to me to annoy you?"

"No he was talking to you as a head hunter." Gavin replied moodily.

"Why though? It's not like I'm a key player for your firm or anything? Essentially I'm expendable; you could easily replace me with the paperboy."

"That is not the point. The point is any associate he can steal from my firm is an inconvenience to me, thus a win in his favor."

Nicole couldn't figure out why but the fact that he didn't defend her usefulness, even though in this case there didn't appear to be much. Also there was that niggling feeling in the back of her mind that Gavin was now regretting having asked her to the theatre in the first place.

Sullen she allowed the conversation to lapse into nothingness, stealing a quick glance at Gavin once more to see what his facial expression might reveal but it was stony and impassive. She figured he was lost in thought and decided to let him be.

The lights flickered, signaling the end of intermission and she settled back into her seat to watch the rest of the show. The lights lowered and the orchestra cued up again. Just as the curtain was beginning to raise Gavin leaned over to her and whispered, "The paper boy is a useless prat; he'd hardly be able to do your job."

Nicole smiled and enjoyed the show.

"You looked as if you enjoyed that." Gavin said as they walked out to the car.

"I did!" Nicole exclaimed. "The way that unrequited love can cause a person to take such drastic measures; the obsessive nature of such a compelling emotion and the abhorrent shallowness of people in general, it's a timeless story. And the actors were amazing, I love how, even though Christine made a mistake partway through the third act she kept going like it didn't happen and how Mephisto was able to incorporate his next line to fit around it, it shows real versatility and wonderful...what?" Nicole asked as Gavin was laughing and shaking his head.

"I was just wondering if you are a seasoned play go'er or if this was your first."

Nicole blushed at her over the top review of the performance. "Sorry, it was my first." She replied much more soberly than her previous out pouring.

"Don't apologize; I'm glad you enjoyed it. It makes me feel better about not paying you for this." He said grinning at her. "Would you care to join me for something to eat?" He asked lightly.

"Definitely."

The drove to a quaint restaurant and ate dinner, discussing nothing and everything when Nicole asked. "So is Jennifer a friend of yours?"

Gavin was quiet for a moment; his eyes squinted as if he were weighing the question and the merits of answering it. Still looking in the distance he replied. "No, not really. She is my ex-wife's sister." Before she could ask more about it he continued. "I'm not ashamed of it, I just prefer to not talk about it." Nicole nodded and though they continued to fill the rest of their time at the dinner with conversation it didn't carry the same warmth as before.

The evening wrapped up and he took her home, bade her goodnight and pulled away. Nicole let herself in and went upstairs, still mulling over the thoughts that Gavin was emotional enough at one point to have had a wife and human enough to have wound up divorced. It was seriously intriguing.

Ryan called her on Sunday and asked how the play was; having gushed out most of her fervor last night the recap he was subjected to was more abridged and calmer.

"The things I learn. I didn't know you were a woman of culture." He said sounding amused.

"Honey, you ain't seen nothing yet." She replied playfully. "So are you busy today?"

"Yea, I've got this deal out of town that needs me to be there but as soon as I get back I'll give you a ring."

Feeling somewhat disappointed that she wouldn't see him in the known future Nicole let him say goodbye. Rather than wondering aimlessly through the house that day she decided to ring Margaret.

On Monday a mass email was sent out letting everyone at Malon Inc know there was going to be a benefit ball and they were all invited and, as when there is any social function on the horizon giving permission for people to make plans, secure dates, and get gussied up, an excited buzz fell over the floor and associates could be found emailing each other in a zealous frenzy to know what others were going to do by way of dress, escorts, etc. Groups of women would loiter in the break room or in the loo, going over their ideas and making comments of either a belittling nature aimed at those they didn't like or swooning over the prospect of being asked by one of the cuter associates of the opposite sex.

The men were a little less outwardly frantic opting to roll their eyes at what they perceived to be the silliness that the females were displaying while secretly listening to hear if theirs was a name that passed as acceptable or deplorable.

"So, are we going to see you come in on Ryan's arm?" Sashi asked having firmly seated herself on the edge of Nicole's desk.

Nicole smiled "I hope so. It depends on what's going on with his job I suppose."

"You know, this whole scene bears a strong resemblance to that of your yanks Prom night." Sashi observed surreptitiously while examining her nails.

"And you know this how?" Nicole asked whimsically.

"Oh come on; entire movies have been made with proms as the central plot line or at least a part of the main plot if not the climax."

"Movies are misleading." Nicole replied.

"Sure they are. Well if one were to take movies as fact one would have to note that proms are often when young loves engage in performing the nasty for the first time."

"Oh very adult! And pray, what relevance does this hold on the revolution of the world?"

"Oh nothing really...except I am wondering if the night of our princess ball will be the night she beds down with her prince." Sashi answered.

"While I am well aware of the fact that the upcoming fundraiser has caused a lot of excitement amongst my esteemed employees I must beg you to please focus a respectable amount of attention on the tasks for which I pay you." Gavin said.

At the sudden sight of him Nicole blushed furiously, wondering how much of Sashi's prying he had overheard.

"Right you are!" Sashi proclaimed hopping off her perch and moving at a high rate of speed in an attempt to look the role of the model employee. Nicole made a mental note to murder her later, filing it under **B** for Benedict Arnold.

Ruefully Nicole was forced to turn her eyes from the now vanished Sashi to Gavin, who had not moved, unfortunately.

Due to poor calculation her eyes instantly met his, causing an uncomfortable squeamish feeling to take hold of her stomach. She watched as he opened his mouth in, what she assumed was preparation for a well deserved reprimand. She was surprised and unsure if his closing his lips together without saying anything and leaving was a good sign or not.

Deciding to take it as a good one for fear of what the other option meant she turned her attention full force to her work and didn't look up again until it was time to go home.

When Nicole got home she called Ryan and asked him if he would accompany her. There was a long silence before he finally spoke. "I don't think we should see each other anymore." He said.

Nicole was stunned. "What? Why?"

"I just don't think we want the same things. I'm looking for a serious relationship and I'm not getting from you that you are looking for that. We've been seeing each other for three months and you still seem so stand offish with me, you don't know how long you are going to be in England, I just don't see us going anywhere."

"Ryan, I know I've seemed standoffish with you and no I don't know how long I'm going to be in Europe, well, the last time we discussed our relationship you didn't seem to mind where things stood."

"I know, but you can't hold me for that for all of eternity..."

"Two weeks hardly constitutes an eternity." Nicole interjected heatedly. Calming herself she began again. "Look, I know I've been difficult, I know I've done some things, like not go with you to your place..."

Now it was Ryan's turn to interrupt her. "It's not the sex, Nicole. It's that I know you don't trust me, but I don't know why. You won't let me in."

Nicole sighed. Maybe it was time to let him know, after all, what did she have to lose. "I left the US and came here because I just got out of a bad relationship. No I don't know how long I'm going to be here, I don't know if this is where I want to live or if I'm going to go back to the states." She said intending it to be the beginning of her great soul-revelation.

"I can't base my life on that, Nicole. I'm sorry. I've been dating someone else and we just got engaged yesterday."

Nicole froze the rest of what she had been planning to say wilted and fell from her mind like quick dying flower petals. This couldn't be right. Did he just say he'd been dating someone else? "Another woman? How long?"

"We've been together for just over a year. She was going to school at Cambridge and just graduated." He was saying this so nonchalantly it was like he was explaining the weather.

"And you didn't tell me? Did you tell her?" Nicole was trying to control her voice so she wasn't yelling at him.

"No I didn't tell either of you. I didn't know what was going to happen. I knew I wanted to settle down; I was just waiting to find the right person. April is ready to get married and I love her. I'm sorry, I've gotta run." Ryan said before hanging up the phone.

Nicole sat staring at the phone for an indeterminate amount of time before deciding this was one of those things best dealt with in the solitude of her bedroom. After an hour of feeling wretchedly sorry for herself the phone rang. She had no assumption that it would be Ryan but she did hope it was someone that she could rope into her sorrow, after all: Misery loves company.

"Watcher, Nikki. What are you doing tonight?" Margaret greeted her.

"I'm planning on having a nervous breakdown. From about 5p tonight until 3a the day after tomorrow I will be rocking back and forth in the corner mumbling to myself and petting a slipper. Don't mind the drool though, that's just there for ambiance."

"Wow, sounds serious!" Her friend exclaimed empathetically. "Is this something you'd like to discuss over a pint or..."

"No, beer is good. Which pub?" Nicole agreed hurriedly.

In less than a minute the time and place was decided upon and, after hanging up with Margaret Nicole quickly dialed Sashi's number.

"Hello?"

"I need you and beer. Flanny's in a half an hour?"

"I missed you too!" Sashi replied and hung up. Nicole took this as a yes and got herself presentable.

This took some work, well actually a lot of work falling just short of shellacking. (all though she was pretty liberal with the concealer.)

Thirty minutes later Nicole arrived to the pub and promptly made her way to the nearest bartender to order her drink. In short order Sashi showed up with Nick whom she sent to play billiards with some other guys before he had a chance to be introduced. To the credit of his species survival instinct he agreed without complaint and was kept happy by drinking ale and scratching himself in public.

"So how's this for tea and sympathy?" Sashi asked handing Nicole a companion for her first drink.

"Brilliant." Nicole replied sitting down darkly at a high topped table.

"So what happened?" Sashi asked stirring a pink colored drink that looked oddly sinister.

"I don't want to have to relive the agony two more times so if you're ok with me being bitchy without explanation I'd rather just wait until..."

"Until she gets here?" Sashi asked nodding her head toward the door that Margaret just entered.

"Exactly."

"How far ahead of me is everyone?" Margaret asked setting down her purse.

"Just started. Run up to the bar and get your drink so she can tell us what the crisis is." Sashi instructed.

Margaret looked guiltily at Nicole for a moment before saying "Is it serious?"

Confused Nicole replied, "Depends on what your definition of 'serious' is. Either way I suppose serious is a relative term so..." Nicole stopped because Margaret was shaking her head.

"I mean, well, that is to say..." Margaret stammered.

"Oh man, don't tell me you have a crisis too!" Nicole bleated.

"No, nothing like that. It's just that, well, I didn't know that you were having a serious thing..."

"Why? What did you do?" Nicole accused

"Well, I um, I asked Rowan to join us." Margaret replied biting her lip.

"That zoo keeper you met the other week?"

Margaret nodded mutely

For the first time in what felt like days Nicole was overcome with laughter. "You really think I'm going to be mad at you for getting your funk on tonight?"

"Well..." Margaret replied abashedly.

"Bring 'em on!" Nicole exclaimed. Some where in the back of her mind a little part of her conscious that hadn't had a go at the booze now flooding her cerebral cortex whispered "You're half way drunk, maybe you...HICUP."

"Well if you're sure it's ok. Either way he isn't here yet and may not even show up so why don't you tell us what's going on?"

Nicole related the whole of the sad phone call to her sympathetic friends who, at proper moments either replied with 'what an arse,' or "the bollocks of that shite." And other colorful phrases that Nicole wished she could remember but for some reason couldn't.

"So here we are." Nicole sighed, leaning on the table and trying to figure out if it was the bottom of her fourth or fifth glass she was looking at. "I need another drink."

"Allow me. What are you drinking this evening?" Rowan had appeared behind Margaret and was looking as kind and tanned as ever.

"Rowan right? How's the Kimono Draggin'?" Nicole asked trying to sound intelligent.

"Silky and light. Coffee then?" Rowan replied. It took Nicole a moment to realize she had mispronounced the species name and, when the knowledge finally had reached her brain she didn't have enough intelligence left to care.

Instead she made her way clumsily to the bar and ordered another drink. As she waited for the bar keep to bring it to her she shook out a cigarette.

"Here, let me get that for you." Nicole turned to see Rowan standing next to her, holding a lit lighter. As Nicole puffed to ignite the tip of her smoke he spoke. "I'm sorry if I insulted you, I really didn't mean to."

"No, I'm good." Nicole answered wishing her throat wasn't so numb from the booze to keep her from feeling the smoke in her lungs.

"Margaret told me you were having a bit of guy trouble..."

Nicole smiled at Rowan. "You seem like a nice bloke and all so don't take this wrong. I hate men. You're all evil and rude. No amount of apologizing or insulting or drink buying is going to change that. I think you may be an exception to this stereotype but I don't want to be proven right at the moment so you can feel free to offend me all you want, at least until my hangover wears off." Nicole saluted him with her tumbler and waited for a response.

"Alright then. Well since that's settled I think I'll, um. Well I'll be over there." Rowan said indicating some non-existent point in space.

Nicole watched as Rowan walked off to join Margaret who seemed glad to have him back. Nicole tilted her head a little and caught a glimpse of Sashi and Nick leaning into each other, sharing a quick whisper and a tiny kiss before Nick took up his cue and returned to his game. Nicole sighed and turned her chair back to the bar.

A selfish person would be jealous and lonely where as a good humored decent friend would be happy that her friends were happy and in love. So what. I'm selfish. Nicole thought as she watched the trivia questions pop on and off the wall mounted TV screen.

"You know, the real problem wish the world ashe know it ish 'at noone's got time for nuthin anymore." Nicole said to a fellow drunk. Five minutes ago they were complete strangers. Now, a few too many later and a news segment of yet another murder taking place on the other side of town they were the best of friends and bosom philosophers.

"I know! Ish all 'bout gettin ta thish and gettin ta that fasser then the nest guy. And fer what?"

"What?"

"I dunno. Nuthin! We're all of us hurryin to nuthin." The drunk woman swayed a little. "I gotta pee."

"You do that. Take yer time." Nicole said standing, a move that proved to be ill advised as she stumbled, over corrected and pitched into another patron."

"How are you?"

Nicole jumped at the familiar voice. "Fine." She must have slurred because Gavin looked at her funny.

"About ready to go then?"

"Where?"

"Some place where you won't get arrested would be a start." That explained the funny look. He was disgusted by her acting like a lush. Nicole didn't want to go with him, she didn't want

to be lectured but she didn't want to force Margaret and her new friend to leave when the just started to look comfy. She tottered over to Margaret and asked her if she could speak to her for a minute. Margaret looked guilty as she followed Nicole to the other side.

"I'm sorry for ignoring you! I know you needed someone to talk to after Ryan acted like such a blackguard and I bailed on you to talk to Rowan..." She stopped gushing her apologies when Nicole raised a hand to halt her.

"I'm not upset with you. I just wanted to let you know Gavin is here." Nicole paused to hiccup.

"Why is he here?" Margaret asked throwing a furtive look over towards Gavin.

Nicole was silent for a moment. "Dunno. I didn't think to ask... Any way he offered to give me a ride home though. I wanted to know if you were OK with your guy or if you needed an excuse to bail." Nicole was trying to concentrate on bringing Margaret's heads back into focus and nearly fell over so she gave up.

"I can leave if you want..." She didn't sound like she wanted to go.

"Nope, just wanted to offer you an escape route if you needed it."

"Umm, no. I'm ok with him." Margaret said looking shy.

"Alright then, I'm going home then." Nicole said unevenly. Margaret offered to help her to the door but Nicole declined not wanting to look stupid. That would have been better though as she stumbled into an unoccupied table. Suddenly Gavin was at her elbow.

"Alright then, here we go." He said taking her around the waist and escorting her out the door.

"I'm fine." She said to no one in particular.

"It's not really you I'm worried about at this point as much as the tables and unsuspecting by standers." He assured her.

"You know, you're pretty good at this." Nicole said as he braced her uneven weight so she wouldn't tumble over.

"I needed a contingency plan if being a lawyer didn't work out. I spent many years of my college life practicing to be a bouncer."

Nicole tried to look at his face but discovered it was too far away and gave up. He helped her into the car and closed the door after making sure nothing of hers was going to get pinched by it. After climbing into the driver's side Nicole started her rant about how the English drive on the wrong side of the road. To his credit Allan feigned interest.

"Where are you taking me?" Nicole asked as she gazed blearily out the window.

"My house; I don't think it would be a very good idea to bring you to your grandparents right now." Gavin replied concentrating on the road. "Let me assure you my intentions are honest." He added.

Nicole started to giggle and couldn't stop.

"And the comedy in that is--?"

"You sound like the hero from a Jane Austen novel, complete with the accent and debonair... whatever." She concluded with a wave of her hand.

"I'll take that as a compliment." Gavin advised mater-of-factly.

"You do that." Nicole said which started another giggle fit.

It must have taken longer than what the ride felt like but to Nicole's perception they pulled up to Gavin's house in a matter of minutes.

"Coffee." Gavin announced once they were in the brightly lit kitchen.

"Chair." Nicole replied settling in at the kitchen table.

Gavin turned and looked at her over his shoulder and regarded her with a bemused look before turning back to the business of brewing coffee.

"Does this really work to sober someone up or is that an old wives tale?"

"I'm not sure. The caffeine should speed the alcohol through your system but if not at least it gives us something to do while we wait for you to either sober up or pass out." Gavin said.

"You're so thoughtful."

They sat and drank their coffee in silence for a few moments before Gavin broke the quiet. "So would you mind explaining why you decided to get falling down drunk tonight?"

"Maybe I'm a lush." Nicole said into her mug.

"I highly doubt that. You don't seem the type." Gavin replied smoothly.

"Is that so? What type do I seem like?"

"Like the type that would have a reason." He said refusing to be side tracked.

Nicole sighed. She didn't want him to know how deplorable she was, how insecure she felt or how obvious it was that she had no idea who she was or what she wanted to do with her life, now that her life was something that was apparently at the mercy of fate or apathy. On the other hand she wanted to hear it from someone else. Maybe it was masochism or maybe she just wanted someone to know. It was all very confusing and she felt she was still too drunk to make sense of it on her own.

"The guy I've been seeing here, Ryan, told me he got engaged to the woman he's been seeing for about a year." Nicole replied.

"I see. Did you know he was seeing her?"

"No! I'm not that low on self respect that I would date someone who isn't available."

Nicole retorted heatedly. In the process of making her point she made to stand but the floor wasn't cooperating with her.

"So he told you today?"

Settling back into her chair Nicole answered "Yea, I called and asked him if he wanted to go to that benefit next month. He told me he was looking for a more serious relationship then what I seemed to be wanting and his other girlfriend was looking for it too. So, that's where that is."

Nicole looked up and watched Gavin get up and walk over to the coffee maker and pour another cup. He didn't return but stood next to the counter sipping. Nicole took it as a hint and started to stand saying "I feel better, I should go." This turned out to be a bad idea as the buzz that had been receding regrouped and attacked her full force as she got to her feet.

"Easy, why don't you give it a few more minutes?" Gavin said as he caught her by the shoulders and steadied her so she wouldn't land spread eagle on the table top.

Maybe it was the booze, maybe it was that she felt emotionally drained and he was being nice to her, maybe it was the angle that Venus was making with the moon, whatever the reason it suddenly seemed like a good idea to Nicole to lean into him and bury her face in his chest.

Gavin stood frozen for a moment, his brain jarred to a sudden halt as he felt her fingers clutch at the fabric of his shirt along his ribs. He turned his head a bit to look down at her and inhaled, preparing to say something but forgot what it was he wanted to say as he smelled the scent of her hair. On their own volition his hands moved down, his arms folded around her back, holding her gently. He was afraid to breath, afraid to move, all's that processed in his brain was the feeling of her body shaking slightly with quiet sobs, the way her hair brushed his fingers, and the feeling of warmth her body created against his.

Gavin had no idea what was happening, resigned to whatever it was that he was feeling he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, hoping it would go away. As if in answer to his prayer Nicole pulled away from him, leaving the place where she had leaned on him feeling suddenly cold. His brain regained control of his arms again and used this opportunity to lower them and stuff his hands in his pockets quickly before they could do anything else stupid.

Hoping the worst was over he looked into her up turned face and had to fight the urge to pull her back into his embrace when he saw her tear stained face. He had a feeling that this, whatever was upsetting her, went beyond the way Ryan had treated her but he felt it wasn't his place to ask.

Nicole wiped her eyes on her shirt sleeve before saying. "I'm sorry, this is the last thing you need, I'm sure."

"It's alright." Gavin replied sounding stand offish.

"I should go before I make a bigger ass of myself then I've already done." Nicole said moving to grab her jacket.

"What makes you think you've made an ass of yourself?" Gavin asked in an attempt to stall her.

Nicole laughed a watery laugh. "I can't make a marriage work, I can't figure out what I'm doing with myself, I can't even figure out that a guy isn't really who I thought he was. I came here to get away from the stigma of being a victim and I keep putting myself into a position that not only proves I'm a victim but gives me new and exciting opportunities as one."

Gavin fought off the urge again to hold her and kept his voice level and low. "You're not a victim. You went through something no one should have to go through and it changed you. You're still the same person you were before only now your view of the world and what you want out of it has altered. And as far as setting yourself up to be victimized, that's just not true. You had bad luck with one man. I can't say it won't happen again but at least you had enough presence of mind to walk away from it and not try to hold on to something that wasn't right for you."

"How could a guy like you have gotten a divorce? She must have been insane." Nicole said honestly.

For a moment Gavin looked taken aback but regained his composure almost instantly. "Same old story, I suppose. I was busy at the office and didn't spend as much time with her as I should have. She felt I was taking her for granted, that I was more concerned with my professional life than my personal life. I kept telling her I was doing this to make our lives better for us, so we would be able to enjoy..." Gavin rolled his eyes. "Either way, she found someone that paid attention to her and left me a few months later."

"I'm sorry." Nicole said soberly.

Gavin shrugged and turned away to rinse out his coffee mug.

"My father died a few months ago. I got the call when I was at work. I went home early and found my husband cheating on me with another woman. I said some really nasty things to him, I don't even remember what it was but I know it pissed him off. He never hit me before; I always thought he was the kind of guy that was too good to do that. Turned out he wasn't."

Gavin moved to take his hands out of his pockets but seemed to think better of it and crammed them down deeper. "I'm sorry." He said kindly

Nicole shook her head "It's ok."

"No, it isn't. Whatever you said..." It was Gavin's turn to shake his head, "Whatever happened you didn't deserve to be treated that way."

A few moments passed where neither said anything to the other when finally Nicole broke it.

"Thanks for looking after me tonight; I think I'm good to go home now."

Gavin regarded her then nodded. The drive home was quiet, Nicole felt no need to share anymore with him than she already had and Gavin was lost in his own thoughts. It felt as if they were feeling the same thing, thinking the same thing, and they appreciated each other's feelings and in that left each other alone to feel as they would feel.

Twenty minutes later they drove down the gravel driveway and Nicole listened to the 'plink-plink' as the pebbles hit the undercarriage of the car, thinking how nice it was that no matter what at least that sound was always a given.

After parking the car Gavin got out and opened Nicole's door for her in a gesture that made Nicole both pleased and embarrassed. "Thank you."

"I assure you, Ms. Duffeck, my Jane Austin like manners are too deeply ingrained in me to be forgotten, no matter the hour."

Nicole laughed, "No, well yea that too but, well... Thank you for everything: the job, not firing me for yelling at you, listening to my drunken ramblings."

"You're welcome. I hope you feel better."

"I do." Nicole smiled at him "And now I'm going to go to bed and sleep until four in the afternoon."

Nicole let herself in the house and crept up the stairs to the dark sanctuary of her bedroom. Though she was exhausted, drained both mentally and physically, her brain seemed to be running in over drive. As she readied herself for bed, popping a few aspirin and downing an extra glass of water in hopes of staving off a massive hang over, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red a slightly puffy from crying, her hair was somewhat disheveled and her clothes looked like she had been wearing them all day. But she was standing straight, not hunched over like she was trying to protect herself from a blow. And though her eyes bore the unmistakable characteristics of a person who just got done bawling she couldn't find the haunted look she had seen in them a few months ago.

Though she didn't sleep until four that afternoon she made a valiant effort. Nicole got out of bed at one in the afternoon and stumbled downstairs stiff from sleeping so long and disorientated from waking up so late.

"What happened to you?" Pops asked from the kitchen table. Nan looked up inquiringly.

"I went out last night and had a few too many." Nicole replied settling in at the table next to Pops.

"Is something wrong?" Nan asked concerned.

Nicole went through the story of Ryan and explained that Gavin picked her up from the bar.

"I can't believe what a cad he's turned out to be! He seemed like such a nice young man." Nan exclaimed.

"That's alright." Nicole responded. "It just wasn't meant to be apparently."

Nan was silent for a few moments, apparently considering saying something but seemed to abandon the idea. She sighed then said. "I wonder what Gavin was doing at the pub. He usually doesn't go out and drink."

Nicole shrugged. She hadn't given that any thought; though now that she was thinking about the previous evening with Gavin she became a little concerned. She couldn't remember everything that happened, only a few snatches. She had the cloudy memory that made her think she hugged him and cried on his shirt. She shivered, hoping it was only an alcohol induced hallucination.

"Here," Pops said shoving a large mug of steaming coffee at her. "This'll get rid of whatever's left in your system. After you've finished that come out and help me in the yard."

"What good'll that do?" Nicole asked sipping her coffee while scowling at the idea of a loud, sharp bladed machine roaring past her sensitive ears.

"Teach you not to drink so darn much." Pops replied pushing back his chair.

The smell of freshly cut grass tickled Nicole's nose causing her to sneeze, an act that made her head feel as if her brain were acting as a battering ram on the inside of her cranium.

"When you were a kid you used to love the smell of the yard after I mowed it." Grandpa commented as Nicole wiped her nose on her sleeve for the hundredth time.

"Just because I can't see through my allergies doesn't mean I don't like it." Nicole answered.

Grandpa leaned on his rake and regarded her silently for a long few moments. Concerned she had offended him some how Nicole racked her brain for something to fill the silence.

"You know," Grandpa started, sparing her the dilemma, "You're father was a good man." Nicole was stunned into keeping her silence. Grandpa didn't seem to notice as he continued as if she was staring at him like a suffocating fish. "He was brilliant, no doubt about that. He knew things, things I didn't think a person without a PHD would know. But he was an idiot when it came to emotions." Now he turned and looked Nicole straight in the eye. "You know what I mean?" Mutely Nicole shook her head. Her brain was frozen as was her mouth; half because her Grandfather was speaking to her so candidly about the man she thought he hated and half because she didn't know what the right answer would be to such a statement. Grandparents were supposed to be old school and expect anyone younger than sixty to treat their elders with all the respect befitting a king.

Grandpa nodded and continued as if she agreed with him; "Yea, the man could explain quantum physics to a duck but if he had to try and understand why his wife was upset that he worked late hours...well he just didn't get it. He thought that she should understand that he was trying to make their lives better by bringing in more money so they could live more comfortably. He didn't understand that what she needed, what you both needed, was to have him there, not just his money."

"So, him cheating on her; where'd that come into play?" Nicole asked.

"Can't fight with someone constantly and not feel like there's something missing from the relationship, something that you want bad enough to go and find in some other woman's bed."

Nicole stared off into space for a long time while Pops went back to racking up the grass clippings.

"Pops, I don't get it. Am I the other woman or the one who pushed Ryan to be with the other woman?"

Pops turned and smiled at her, "Neither, that wasn't the point of the story. The point was that no matter how good a man is, no matter how wonderful the woman is, if the relationship's not right then it's just not right." Nicole smiled weakly and returned her attention to the deplorably small amount of work she had done. Pausing once again though she looked at Pops. "You and Nan fight almost constantly; how come you're still together?"

Pops leaned on his rake again and looked at her closely "What we do isn't fighting; we bicker and squabble and pick at each other but we don't fight. Your Nan knows I love and respect her and I know she loves and cherishes me. It's when those two things are questioned that problems happen."

"I don't think love like that exists anymore." Nicole moaned.

"Sure it does. You just have to be willing to wait for it." Pops said. As a signal to the end of the conversation he began whistling an upbeat sea shanty.

On Monday Gavin arrived to the office earlier than anyone else as he normally did and started going through his calendar for the day, making sure he knew what meetings and court dates needed his presence and what documents were getting close to being due. He also needed to decide what he was going to do about Nicole. She had done nothing wrong the other night except maybe drink too much, but who hadn't done that on occasion? She didn't make any indecent overtures toward him, she hadn't even gotten sick. So why did he want to her stop working for him?

The answer was there, he just had to stop blocking it out.

Gavin gazed out the window to the beautiful English morning that was breaking over the buildings, he watched a group of children, complete with school bags, walk up the street presumably towards school. Rubbing his eyes he willed himself to stop being distracted and pay attention to what his brain had been screaming at him since Friday night.

"I've fallen in love with her." He said out loud to the empty room.

This was terrible. Not only was he nearly half her age but he was her employer. He had an obligation to his company, the legacy he built with his own hands and his good reputation, to not allow personal matters jeopardize professionalism. He had a duty to himself to not damage his company's security.

She didn't do anything wrong though. It was him. He couldn't fire her because he had feelings for her.

His conclusion didn't make him feel any better, but at least he finally decided there was nothing he could do but ignore how he felt.

Just before eight there was a knock on his door. Apparently his insides didn't get the message from his brain that they were to ignore any emotions he had for Nicole because his heart did a flying somersault as she entered the office with a notepad and pen.

"Good morning." She said breezily as she settled into the chair in front of his desk. Gavin watched wordlessly as she smoothed her gray skirt over her knees and tried to remember what it was he had called her into his office for.

"Gavin?" She asked gently reminding him that he had been silent for too long.

Nicole left his office preoccupied herself. She was hoping to have gone back to work as if nothing had happened but it was obvious by his behavior that hope may not be possible.

Maybe I'm reading into this too much. Nicole thought to herself as Gavin walked by her desk without saying anything. It had been nearly two weeks since the drunken-sobbing-hug-debacle and things seemed to be strained between the two. Gavin, for one, seemed keen to keep distance between them. He still messaged her to come in his office to get a morning list of to-do's but other than that he was scarcely seen near her. When they were together there was no easy going banter, no half-hearted jokes or sly, witty remarks. Things had fallen back to the staunch professionalism that he had shown her in her Trial Week.

In her turn, Nicole attempted to meet him with equal professionalism, restricting her comments to those that were business related and giving him a wide berth when they passed each other in the corridors. She never wanted to be one of those women who defined herself by

her career but, as it was, her career was one of the few things in her life she felt she could control. It was something she did well and took pride in. She wanted to keep it that way and refused to let her personal life affect that. The realization that she needed to discuss the apparent elephant in the room with the elephant himself loomed large in front of her.

Near the end of business on Friday she found herself standing in front of Gavin's office; wondering if it was worth it, putting herself up for criticism like this. She decided to give the cosmos one last second to send her sign, good or bad. As the seconds ticked by and no catastrophe or wayward dove made it's self seen she took it that a lack of an answer was an affirmative response, tapped on the door and, without waiting for the inevitable "Come in" pushed her way in.

Gavin was sitting behind his desk, looking expectantly at the door. He seemed surprised to see it reveal Nicole.

"Ms Duffeck; to what do I owe this visit?" He asked calmly, though, had Nicole been a psychic she would have found that his mind was whirling, kicking up thoughts like a dust devil kicks up debris.

"I'm a selfish person." Nicole blurted out. Gavin stared at her, not sure of what to make of this declaration. "I feel that if I'm honest with you and keep you as well informed as possible the better you are able to assist me in getting through my day."

"If only our clients were as logically blessed as you." Gavin replied, not entirely jokingly.

Nicole smiled benignly and continued. "I value my job here and I appreciate that you put yourself on the line to give me this opportunity..."

"Before you continue I would like to know if I should be expecting the worst." Gavin cut across her. "Is it your intentions to submit your two week's notice?"

Nicole studied his face for a moment, wondering if that was what he wanted or not. Unfortunately his face was as unreadable as the stone images of Easter Island. "No, I don't want to quit." Nicole answered, noticing that Gavin's face seemed to visibly relax and a hint of...dare she say happiness? brightened his eyes. "I was concerned though that, because of what happened the night I found out about Ryan that our working relationship has become strained." She said, trying to keep the words from tumbling out at high speeds.

Gavin leaned forward in his chair, his fingers creating a triangle for him to rest his chin on as he studied the floor near her feet. Nicole didn't wait for him to respond but continued with the rest of her speech. "I know how much you love this company, how hard you've worked to make it what it is, and how much respect and loyalty you have for your clients. I can't pretend to have the same sense of personal investment in it as you do but I do have loyalties to my career and my future. Weather I remain at Malon Inc until I retire or I go on to something back in the States this job is going to be a factor in any of my future endeavors. How well I do or don't do here will effect whatever comes next and I don't want it to all be undone because I couldn't hold my liquor."

Gavin took a deep breath and stood. As he rounded his desk and assumed his regular perch on the edge Nicole inhaled, bracing herself for whatever he was about to say. "My opinion of you and my appreciation for the exemplary work you've done here hasn't changed. At no point have I ever doubted my decision to hire you." Gavin replied.

Nicole smiled, feeling as if a great weight had been removed from her chest. "Thank you."

Gavin nodded in response. "Before you leave there is one other mater we need to discuss."

Nicole paused, her hand on the door knob. "Is this going to be bad?" She asked, half kidding.

"That depends on your answer. Have you made arrangements for the charity ball?" Gavin replied gravely.

Nicole squirmed some. "No...with Ryan, you know, not going, I, um, well..." Nicole let the sentence trail off into oblivion.

"I see. While it is certainly not required for you to attend it would definitely be an excellent opportunity for you to mingle with those who are worth your career to mingle with.

Nicole nodded and replied "I thought I would look kind of lame showing up stag and all."

"While most do in fact use these events as opportunities to show off their hair, clothes, and significant others there are those of us who go merely to be entertained."

"You'll be going alone too?" Nicole asked before she could catch herself.

"As a matter of fact I will be. Perhaps we could set a new trend." Gavin said.

"Are you asking me to go alone?" Nicole teased.

"Are you accepting?" He questioned, not missing a beat.

Nicole smiled. "I'll see you there."

She entered the hall and mingled for a few moments with clients of the firm that she recognized, easing into the situation. She was speaking with an elderly man and laughed at a joke he had told her about the parliament when she saw Gavin across the room smiling at her. Kindly she excused herself from the gentleman and walked over to where Gavin was.

"Good evening." He said smiling at her.

"Good evening yourself!" Nicole grinned back. "You look even more impeccably handsome than usual." She said approvingly of his contemporary tuxedo.

"Thank you, I felt I may have been out done if I hadn't pulled out all the stops." Nicole laughed at his attempt at using American slang. Gavin grinned sheepishly and actually blushed. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yea, it's not that bad after all, thank you for talking me into coming."

"Thank you for allowing me to talk you into coming. I'm afraid I would have had a lot of explaining to do with the gentleman guests if you were absent. You seem to have built quite a repertoire with them."

"I've noticed that too. Apparently I have a talent for schmoozing old men." She agreed nodding towards the gentleman she had been speaking with prior to joining Gavin.

"I wouldn't brag about that too loudly; the women in this country still chase their husbands with rolling pins you know. I don't think they would think too much of catching the other woman a few times just for good measure."

They were approached by a few middle aged women who wanted to speak to them about current affairs. As the women were walking away Nicole overheard them saying that even though Nicole was younger than Gavin they made a cute couple.

Nicole cast a side long look at Gavin and saw him looking at his shoes.

"I think the neighbors are talking." Nicole whispered conspiratorially to Gavin.

"I think you're right. Shall we give them something to talk about?" He asked holding his hand out to her. His eyes were shining with mischief and a devilish grin was on his lips.

Without hesitation she placed her hand in his and allowed herself to be escorted to the dance floor as a slow festive song began to play from the orchestra.

Nicole placed her hand lightly on his shoulder as he held her other hand gently. She noted with irrational pleasure that his hands were strong and warm but held her smaller hand gently. He moved with easy grace, making her forget she barely knew how to dance at all.

Though there was distance between their bodies she could have sworn she could feel his presence on hers.

Oh this isn't good. Nicole thought to herself as she looked up at him and felt her stomach tingle. Desperately she racked her brain for something to say, certain that the continued silence would lead to him guessing that she was finding herself increasingly more attracted to him.

Maybe it was inevitable. He was good looking and wealthy to be sure, yet more than that he was kind, thoughtful, intelligent and easy to be with.

"Is there something on your mind?" Gavin asked kindly.

See! She was quiet too long. Groping her brain for something to say that wouldn't sound stupid or incriminating she quickly came up with a question. "Actually, yea; that night you picked me up from the pub, what were you doing there? Nan said you aren't much of a bar fly..."

Gavin regarded her for a moment, seemingly struggling with how best to answer the question. Finally he replied "The man you were seeing, Ryan, his father is an acquaintance of mine. I had spoken to him that day and he told me Ryan had gotten engaged the day before to his girlfriend. I was concerned about how you may react to it so I called your grandmother who told me you had gone to the pub with Sashi and Margaret."

"You knew?" Nicole had stopped dancing and was standing stock still in front of him, her hands now clenched at her side in fists.

"That Ryan was seeing someone else? Yes..." Gavin's face had assumed the stony, unreadable quality Nicole had suddenly come to dislike.

“And you didn’t tell me? You just let me continue on like some ignorant ass? Tell me did you get some sick perverted pleasure out of waiting to see me get dumped?”

Gavin had the decency to look appalled at first then regained his composure. “I didn’t know you were unaware of his other girlfriend...”

“I don’t believe this. You still thought, even after seeing the pictures from the D.A’s office that I’m a...”

“I didn’t assume anything.” Gavin cut in looking angry.

Rather than losing her nerve under the fiery glare and menacing tone of his voice Nicole stepped closer to him so she was mere inches away, close enough to smell his cologne. “What was the point, then of checking in on me? Did you want to see if I was with him that night? Or did you think that maybe he dumped me and I would be an easy lay?”

Gavin’s demeanor quickly changed from angry to livid, his voice lowering still more to a dangerously quiet tone. “If you recall that night I brought you back to my place and didn’t touch you. If you recall you were the one that threw yourself at me. Had I any intentions I would have been in a perfect position to take advantage of you, though at that point I don’t think it would have taken any coaxing.”

Nicole was appalled and stood silent for a moment in disbelief. Tongue tied she turned to walk away then stopped and faced Gavin again. “You know, I think I’m getting a pretty good idea why your wife left you.” She spat contemptuously. Not waiting for a response she walked out of the hall as quickly as she could without looking back.

Nicole got back home in record time and went upstairs without saying anything to her grandparents. She peeled her dress off and donned a pair of jeans and a sweater and paced her room throwing angry glares at the dress that now lay across her bed as if it had been the one that had insulted her.

There was a knock on her door. “Nan, I really don’t want to talk to anyone right now.” Nicole said to the closed door. Despite her proclamation the door opened, but instead of Nan it was Margaret and Sashi.

“We saw you tear out of the ball as if your heels were on fire; what’s going on?” Margaret asked settling on the bed next to the discarded dress.

“Nothing; I don’t want to talk about it right now.” Nicole replied vehemently.

“Did Gavin say something? I saw you two dancing together...” Sashi asked from the door frame.

“Did you guys know that Ryan was seeing someone else?” Nicole accused.

“No, not until you told us.” Margaret replied looking shocked. “Why?”

“Apparently Gavin did and didn’t tell me. He figured I knew and didn’t care; we got into an argument, I told him off and left.”

“You’re kidding!” Sashi stated now settling next to Margaret as if she were readying herself for a must-see show.

“No, I’m not; the son of a bitch.” Nicole spat.

“Well, I was actually talking about you telling Gavin off. Love, you’re lucky if he doesn’t sack you.”

“Well I’m sure that Gavin had a reason for not saying anything, how did he find out in the first place?” Margaret asked gently, ignoring Sashi.

“Because he’s a business friend with Ryan’s dad.” Nicole answered.

Sashi and Margaret exchanged knowing looks.

“What?” Nicole asked harshly.

“When you first started we told you how protective Gavin was of his company, he won’t do anything to risk it or his reputation.” Sashi said plainly.

“How would it have damaged his reputation if he told me his friend’s son was a pig?” Nicole asked getting angrier by the second.

“Like that.” Margaret said. “If Gavin told you then you would have gone to Ryan and bitched him out, probably bringing Gavin’s name in as to how you found out he was cheating on his girlfriend. Ryan would have told his father, his father would have started a smear campaign against Gavin, getting everyone’s support on Ryan’s side by feeding bull shit lines like ‘boys will be boys’ or claiming Gavin was hot for you or Ryan jilted you and you were just trying to get even

with him. Either way, Gavin would have been drug in to it and his reputation would have been compromised. People would think he's either treacherous or that he's a gossip."

"It's not just that; though it's still not excusable. It's that he figured I probably knew and didn't care! That I'm some hussy that goes around sleeping with other people's men or cheating on my own."

"Why would he think you were cheating on someone?" Sashi asked leaning forward. Nicole sighed heavily; may as well be out with all of it. "I left the US because my husband was cheating on me. When I found out we got into a huge fight and he beat me up. I flipped and thought I could do with a change of venue. Nan and Pops let me come stay with them. Not long after I started at Malon Inc Gavin heard about Ryan and I, then Jason, my ex called and referred to himself as my husband. Right after that he found out about why I really moved here but...I dunno..."

"Oh my God, Nicole I'm so sorry, why didn't you tell us? We're your friends!" Margaret oozed standing and wrapping her arms around Nicole.

"I didn't say anything because I didn't..." She stopped talking in mid sentence, struck dumb by her own fallacious argument.

"...didn't want your reputation compromised?" Sashi offered helpfully.

Nicole nodded mutely. "Something like that. Shit, I think I've made a mess of this."

"It's not so much that you made a mess of this so much as a made a pig's ear of yourself." Sashi said leaning back with her arms folded across her chest.

"Don't be so hard about it, Sash, you'd have done the same thing." Margaret chastised.

"Which is why I have every right to set her straight: I'm speaking from experience." Sashi retorted.

"What are you going to do?" Margaret asked Nicole.

"I'm not apologizing, not entirely anyway." She replied glumly. "He knew about Jason..." Nicole shook her head.

"What?" Margaret's head snapped up.

"The weekend I helped him with the trial, he came across my file, the one with the police photos in it. He knew what I went through with Jason." Nicole stammered, wondering why her cheeks were flushing so profusely at this revelation.

"I'm confused. The man is just your boss. Sure he should have acted like a human being but, well, I mean, it's Gavin, right? Which brings us back to the bit of him being a sadistic workaholic whose madly in love with his company and sees anything else as either secondary or something that's in the way of the all encompassing Malon inc." Sashi observed.

"I dunno." Nicole replied looking at the carpet sheepishly. "I guess I just hoped or thought..." Nicole let the thought trail, admonishing herself for not being able to complete a sentence like an adult.

"Oh!" Margaret exclaimed, her hand over her mouth. "Nicole, are you...do you—" Sashi's head had snapped up, apparently aware that the saga had not yet ended. "What? What did I miss?" She asked hopefully.

Ignoring Sashi Margaret started fixedly at Nicole as if she were growing wings and a tail. "Nicole, what are your feelings for Gavin."

"Gavin!" Hooted Sashi. "What would it mater what she feels---Oh!" Sashi said looking agog at Nicole. "You fancy Gavin? You are in a right state!"

Margaret grabbed a pillow and chucked it at Sashi which hit its intended target on the side of her head though did nothing to remove the scandalized look on her face.

"Look, both of you; my feelings at this point, whatever they may be, are completely irrelevant. For one he thinks I'm a promiscuous tramp, and for another there is no way he feels anything remotely similar towards me."

"Why would you think that?" Margaret soothed.

Nicole rolled her eyes and stared at Margaret, sure her friend was just patronizing her wounded heart. "He's older then I am, wealthy, more accomplished, and intelligent--in short he's out of my league."

"I hate baseball metaphors." Sashi interjected.

Noticing she was out of ammunition Margaret chose to ignore this save shooting the other woman a withering look that went completely ignored. "You never know, maybe he is

attracted to you and just never said anything because he figured you were attached. The only way to find out is to ask him."

"Since when have you been a champion for passions other than lust?" Margaret asked skeptically.

"Hey, I love a good love story as much as the next woman." Sashi answered defensively. "Just because I don't go around mooning over hearts, roses and the like doesn't mean I'm without feminine emotions, you cow." Sashi answered sounding hurt.

"So what do you propose I do about this?" Nicole asked more out of masochistic curiosity than anything.

"Tell him." Sashi answered plainly. "Go round to his place, open your heart to him in all its gooey glory and let him decide what to do with it. If he feels the same then great; if not then at least you can say you tried and not sit stewing over what might have been until you're an old woman with an ulcer and a dirty conscience full of regret."

"What if I'm not fired though and I do go and tell him I love him and he changes his mind and decides I'm a detriment to the firm? He fires me and I lose the bloke and the job." Nicole argued back.

"First off he'd be a right cad if he fired you because you were attracted to him. Secondly if you tell him plainly that it won't affect your performance I'm sure that, given your previous work history, he would feel obligated to give you the benefit of the doubt. Tell him you have feelings for him and if he doesn't feel the same way you will continue to work for him with no further discussion on the matter. If he finds it impossible over time for you two to be able to work compatibly then he has every right to discharge you." Margaret explained.

Nicole stopped pacing and sat next to Sashi on the bed. After a few long minutes of silence Nicole asked quietly. "What do you think my chances are?"

Sashi put her arm around Nicole in an uncharacteristic show of compassion and said soothingly. "I really don't know mate. With a bloke like Gavin who keeps himself so reserved it's anyone's guess but at this point there're only two options: Keep your mouth shut and always wonder or take a leap and risk falling flat on your face."

"Sweetie," Nicole jumped at the sound of her Nan's voice. "I told you when you first moved hear that Gavin's a great man; very kind and generous; not quite the ogre that people make him out to be. Granted he is very business orientated but he's also a human being. If you tell him how you feel then he will be understanding, even if he's doesn't reciprocate."

"Nan! How long were you standing there?" Nicole.

"Long enough to know what I'm talking about." She replied. "Your friends are mostly right. There's the chance that it won't be what you want to hear but if we all went through life acting only when it would cause us to receive the outcome we wanted we would have very dull empty lives indeed!"

The four women passed a few more minutes in silence before Margaret broke it this time. "So, what are you going to do?"

Nicole looked down at the floor and shook her head solemnly. "I'm going to tell him."

"Tell who what?" Asked Pops, who had just appeared in the hallway.

"Your granddaughter has feelings for Gavin Malon." Nan said mater-of-factly.

"You're just coming to that now? Lands woman I've had that idea for months now; 's way she didn't go to far with that Ryan bloke. Where've you been?" He asked and shuffled off.

Deciding it best to not waste time Nicole set off to Gavin's estate the next afternoon. She had dressed carefully, hoping she looked as if she put some consideration into her appearance to but still not come across like she was desperate; too bad her nerves couldn't be calmed by nice clothes. Her heart was hammering in her chest, her mouth felt dry and her hands were trembling as she pulled in the long winding drive that would take her to Gavin's front door.

As she put the car in park she noted that the light in the living room was showing through the windows, a sure indication that someone was home. Steeling herself she opened the car door and made her way to the front door, reciting her speech in her mind.

Her heart was pumping so hard she could hear the blood rush in her ears as she timidly knocked on the door. For a fleeting moment she hoped he didn't hear her or that he wasn't home so she could make her retreat unseen.

Damn Nicole thought as she heard the door being opened. *No such luck.*

"Ms. Duffeck, what brings you by this afternoon?" Gavin asked, his voice betraying nothing.

Oh God he was good looking. As he opened the door she found herself staring at his feet before she had the common sense to raise her eyes, taking in his burgundy colored dress shirt, which was, uncharacteristically, not tucked. The top three buttons were undone, allowing her to glimpse the smooth, unblemished skin of his upper chest and neck. Nicole noted irrationally that he didn't get much sun, as his skin was pale and free from the signs of tanning, fake or otherwise. Finally, after what may have been an imprudently long silence on her part she moved her eyes to his face, which was looking into hers with patient expectation.

Her well-rehearsed speech abandoned her at the last moment, leaving her to stutter idiotically in front of him. "I, um, I wanted to, well, apologize for the way I was, the way I acted the other night, you know." Oh yea, that'll win him over!!! "Err, the night of the ball. I think, I mean I know I probably should have waited, or maybe, you know, chosen a better place." Nicole sighed heavily and tried to regain some sense of composure. She made the mistake of looking him in the eye and nearly lost all of her nerve as she saw him squinting at her as if he were regarding some difficult enigma.

Finally she decided enough was enough. "With everything you know about me, and the months we've had to build a working relationship, I thought you should have had enough respect for me to let me know what kind of a man Ryan was." Nicole dropped her gaze for a moment, but only for a moment before forcing herself to look him straight in the eye. "I also think that I acted inappropriately, I shouldn't have brought that up in such a public setting; I allowed my personal feelings to get in the way of my better judgment and for that I am sorry. If you do see fit to discharge me I fully understand and wouldn't hold it against you." At this last part Gavin laughed and looked away. Before he could agree or disagree with it Nicole hurried on to get out the last, most personal reason for her showing up.

"Before you decide anything though I wanted to say one more thing: I..." Nicole stopped short as a fair complected, brown haired woman appeared behind Gavin and placed her hand lightly on his arm in a too familiar fashion.

"Gavin, so sorry to interrupt but where do you keep the corkscrew?" She said gesturing with a bottle of red wine for emphasis.

"Ah," Nicole said taking a step back. "Sorry, I didn't know you were... I'll um; I'll leave you to it." She said lamely.

As she was hurrying down the porch stairs she heard Gavin murmur to his female companion, "I'll be right back. The bottle opener is in the drawer next to the sink."

Gavin caught up to Nicole as she was opening the driver side door and, to ensure he had her attention, put his hand on the frame, preventing it from opening. Nicole gazed at the long thin fingers and admitted defeat.

"What did you need to tell me?" He asked his tone even and calm.

"Nothing of importance really, it can wait."

Gavin sighed and pulled himself up to his full height, an act that made him look masculine and impressive, at least to Nicole's overactive mind. "If there is some issue that needs to be addressed, I would rather have it out now so it's not hanging over us. I imagine that a lack of communication on both our parts has provided fertile grounds for arguments that could have otherwise been avoided."

Nicole glanced back to the house and saw the woman rummaging in the kitchen, presumably in search of the elusive corkscrew. "It really doesn't have precedence over work or anything. It can wait until after the weekend. Enjoy your visit." Nicole said flatly.

Gavin studied her face for a moment before he removed his hand from her door and allowed her entry.

The last time Nicole had found herself driving around aimlessly her life had been turned upside down by a series of events she had, overtime, come to understand were not her fault. Now as she drove around the countryside of a completely different country on a continent that lay across an ocean from the original she found herself wondering how much of this go around was her own doing.

He had a girlfriend, or maybe they were just romantically involved with each other; regardless, it meant that her feelings were pointless.

She thought about how she trusted him, laughed with him, the way he appreciated her. For all these reasons she had become attracted to him. When she felt she was at her worst point in life he had seen enough of who she really was to treat her like a person. When she was around him, speaking with him, working with him, she felt like the old her, the one that wasn't afraid to speak her mind and be heard, the one that would argue the benefits of Opera and Rap, the one that wasn't afraid to trust.

Admittedly there were times he'd spoken to her like an underling, times when he could have done with more discretion in his choice of words, but she herself was guilty of this too and couldn't hold it against him.

She had pulled over to the side of the road and was sitting on the hood of the car watching the sun set when her cell phone rang. She had thought to let the call go to voice mail when she noticed the name on the screen was her Grandmother. Knowing her Nan hated cell phones and would avoid using them except in emergencies she reached over and pressed the on button.

"Hi Nan?"

"Sweetie, where are you?" Nan asked sounding concerned.

Meadway, why what's wrong?"

"Jamie's husband Scott called; the baby was born premature and is in intensive care. Jamie isn't doing so well either."

"I'll be home in a few minutes." Nicole said hurrying back to her car.

As she drove she punched in numbers and held her breath

"Hello." Came the muffled voice.

"Scott, this is Nikki. How are you?" Nicole asked concernedly.

A deep heavy sigh preceded his answer. "Tired; I don't know. Scared?" Nicole heard him sigh again and felt her heart go out to him. "The baby's in an incubator; he's being monitored around the clock. Jamie's in intensive care. They think they've stopped the bleeding but..." His voice trailed off and in its wake left the sound of his futility. "How are you?" He asked.

"I'm alright. Look, things are really slow at work." She lied "I can take some time off and come back home for a while, just to hang out until things calm down a bit."

"You don't have to do that; I know tickets aren't cheap." His words were polite but his voice sounded hopeful.

"Don't worry; I'll catch the next flight out. I'll call you when I get in." Nicole answered. Next she called the airline and booked a flight for Tuesday morning. Scott was right the tickets weren't cheap, especially not at such short notice, but all things considered it was the least of her concerns.

When she got back to her grandparents house she told them what was happening and what she planned to do.

"Oh, I hope she's ok!" Nan exclaimed wringing her hands. "Did Scott tell you anything more?"

"No, he sounded tired and beat; I didn't want to keep him on the phone too long." Nicole replied as she opened her suitcase. "I was worried I might say something wrong. You know like if the baby was a boy or a girl and what they named them. I didn't know if I should say congratulations or not..." Nicole let the thought drop off.

Nan stood by in silence for a moment then entered the room and helped Nicole pack in silence.

Nicole spent most of Monday finishing things up. She called the office and after being told that Gavin was in court left the message that she was called back to the States suddenly for a family emergency and would be away indeterminately. She promised to write or call when more information was available and expressed her deepest sorrow for only being able to give incredibly short notice.

Tuesday morning at dawn her Grandparents drove her to Heathrow.

"You come here after something terrible happens and leave because something terrible happens. You must have the worst impression of England now." Nan said teary eyed.

"Not at all Nan! I loved being here with all of you and all of this."

Nicole stared out the window as the plane soared over the Atlantic again. This time her nerves knew what to expect and only jangled slightly at take off. Though she was exhausted her mind relentlessly scanned thought after thought, refusing to let her sleep.

As arranged, Scott met Nicole at the airport and, upon threat of bodily harm, took her directly to the hospital.

Jamie was shockingly pale and her skin looked too tight for her body but she is sitting up, well propped up against pillows.

"Hi sweetie!" Jamie said sounding weak but excited.

"Hi Hon, how are you?"

Jamie rolled her eyes. "You know same old same old. How about yourself?"

"Just ducky. So how long until you can get out of here? I think we need a few rounds to celebrate the new *bambino!*"

Jamie chuckled before the pain in her stomach caught up to her, causing her to take a quick breath and close her eyes to control the sudden pang.

Much more somberly Nicole questioned. "Are you going to be Ok?"

"Yea, I'll be fine, don't worry about me." Jamie replied. Nicole's stomach clenched in apprehension as she noticed her friend's pallor had gone even paler than it had been before. After a few more breaths Jamie had regained enough of herself to.

"Gabriel is doing fine though. The doctors say he's eating well and can leave in about two weeks. They want to keep him until his weight is."

"Jamie that's great!" Nicole remarked unable to contain her joy.

They spent a few happy minutes discussing Jamie's plans for the baby's room and the clothes they had already bought for him when the nurse came in. Nicole took her leave, not wanting to make Jamie any more uncomfortable than she already was.

"I'll swing by the nursery and let Gab know you're doing Ok. If you want I can stop by tomorrow for a visit." Nicole offered.

"That'd be great. I'll do my make up and everything." Jamie joked.

The following day as promised, Nicole returned and, at Jamie's overwhelming insistence told her about the sights she'd seen and the people she had met, leaving out the bad parts like Ryan being engaged to another woman and Gavin's actions there after.

"It sounds like a fairy tale; I'd love to go there some day." Jamie said wistfully.

"Well, next time I go you can tag along, bring the boys with you even. Nan and Pops would love having the baby running around, gives them someone to spoil."

"So are you going to move back there?" Jamie finally asked.

Nicole thought for a moment before saying. "No, I don't think so. I love the people and the work and the atmosphere and everything but this is home."

"You're such a liar." Jamie replied.

"What are you talking about?" Nicole asked startled.

"First of all you left parts out of your story, I know about that Ryan guy and I know that you fell in love with your boss but that you freaked out on him and never told him you loved him and that's why you freaked out. Don't look so surprised, your Nan e-mailed Renee and she called me and told me all this before I went into labor with Gab. Why wouldn't you tell me this?" Jamie asked sounding somewhat hurt.

Nicole shrugged. "I didn't want to bother you with it."

"That's not fair. You deal with everyone else's problems you try to deal with your own but there's a point when you have to hand over some stuff to other people otherwise it's going to kill you." Jamie said softly but sternly. "When your Dad got sick you tried single handedly to make sure he was taken care of, you visited him every weekend and handled his affairs for him because he asked you to. But he didn't ask you to do it alone. When you got hurt by Jason you didn't call anyone, you just went off on your own until you snapped and ended up at Renee's house. I love you but you've always been this way: You feel this need to be strong for everyone and not let anyone see that you have a crack in your armor. Do you think we'd lose respect for you or see you in a dimmer light? Because that's not the case."

"Jamie, you are in the hospital with a..."

"Don't, Ok? Just stop right there. You are not going to change the subject. Focus on what I'm telling you, Nikki."

"Alright; I do it because I want everyone to be happy and because if I take care of it then I have some sense of control, like I have some control over the outcome, like I can nudge fate into doing what should be done."

"You know that's not possible; no one can control everything all the time." Jamie soothed.

"Yea, I figured that one out." Nicole replied dejectedly.

"So first things first: What are we going to do about Gavin?"

Nicole laughed and nearly fell over. "We? You, my dear, are lying in a hospital bed and your son is in NICU. We aren't going to do anything. You are going to lie there until you get better. After that then we'll see." Nicole replied.

"I can help you even from this bed. Get a pen and paper." Nicole felt such a wash of nostalgia at those five words she nearly got dizzy but obeyed nonetheless.

When she had settled back in her seat Jamie began to dictate a letter.

"Dear Gavin, I love you. I'm sorry I acted like a prat..."

"I'm a what now?" Nicole asked laughing.

"You spent all that time in the UK and you didn't pickup any of the slang?" Jamie asked incredulously.

"Yea, I picked it up, I just thought you sounded funny." Nicole replied grinning.

"Shut up and write." Jamie ordered.

"Look, I get the idea. I'll write him a letter and explain everything; if you want I'll even let you mail it out." Nicole said stuffing the notebook and pen away. "Though I don't think it will do much good."

"Don't be so pessimistic sweetie. For all you know he is sitting there wishing you would call him or something so he can tell you he misses you too." If she allowed herself to say so out loud she would have told Jamie that was exactly what she was hoping for.

"You should know though that the last time I saw him he was with another woman."

"What!" Jamie cried nearly climbing out of bed. "What is with you and these unavailable men? What happened?"

Nicole told Jamie everything about the last meeting, this time omitting nothing.

Jamie sat quietly for a moment, thinking before she finally said, "Maybe she isn't his girlfriend, maybe she's just a friend or a relative. Did she look like him at all?"

"I don't know, I didn't really pay much attention to her aside from her being female and holding a bottle of wine." Nicole said remorsefully.

"So there's all the more reason to write him. The beauty of doing it through a letter is for one you can't stick your foot in your mouth and for another if he doesn't feel the same about you then he can just through the letter away and you never hear from him again."

"If he never writes me back then I'll always wonder if he get the letter or if it got lost in the mail or something." Nicole moaned.

"You could send it certified, or through a courier. Then you'll know he got it." Jamie offered.

"Nothing says true love like a tracking number hu?" Nicole answered laughing.

"Are you going to do it?" Jamie asked soberly.

"Of course."

Nicole was staying with Renee while she decided what she wanted to do. After she got back from visiting at the hospital she sat at a desk with a pen at the ready over a piece of paper, thinking about what she wanted to say. After an hour of staring into space she finally began to just blurt everything paying no attention to flow or rhythm or even grammar. The thoughts that had been racing around in her head, bouncing off the walls of her cranium finally took shape in the form of words and sentences. The first letter completely unsophisticated, honest, desperate and sappy; it was definitely in need of some revision. After three hours Nicole sat back and surveyed her creation. The letter was about a page and a half in length and sounded honest and heartfelt but yet maintained some dignity.

Pleased and resolute she sealed the letter and dropped it in the mailbox.

Ten days after Nicole had sent the letter Jamie and Gabriel were discharged from the hospital, both having received clean bills of health. Wanting to give them a worthwhile welcome home present Nicole had spent the previous twenty-four hours cleaning their house from top to bottom, leaving only the baby room untouched.

"She kept gushing about how she wanted to decorate it and how she would like to organize it when I had been visiting her, I don't think we should take that away from her." Nicole told Scott as she closed the door to the baby's room.

"Good point. She was telling me the other day that she's worried they haven't had anytime to bond. She's afraid he won't know who she is or be comforted by her when she does hold him. Maybe this will help her feel better." He replied seriously.

Nicole smiled before saying. "She's worrying about not being able to bond with a person that she carried for eight months? Mothers are so weird."

The home coming party was small and subdued due to the fragility of Mom and baby but was festive none the less. Jamie was in tears over the thoughtfulness of the gesture of a clean house and incredibly pleased that the only things that had been done to the baby's room was the assembling of the furniture.

"You even left the sheets and clothes in the bag!" She cried gleefully, extracting the crib sheets from the dry cleaning bag they were being stored in.

A full three weeks had elapsed since Nicole had sent out the letter. She sighed knowing full well what it meant. Though she didn't send it certified or with a courier she knew it had been received and knew that the lack of response was a resounding answer to her question. She resigned herself to the idea that she had no job to return to in England and no place of her own to move to there and decided to stay in the United States.

Nicole was outside working in the barn throwing hay bales down to the lower level when a movement from the open door caught her eye. Thinking it was the dog she yelled out. "Move away from there you silly old beast or I'll bean you with a hay bale!"

"My apologies; I didn't see a 'No Loitering' sign posted in the vicinity." The voice returned. Nicole was so startled by this response she had to catch onto a beam lest she fall over the side and into the mow below.

Straightening she looked towards the direction of the voice and squinted against the dust infused sunlight where she saw the outline of a man leaning in the door way of the barn, his hands resting casually in his pants pockets. Nicole couldn't make out his face but knew who it was from the voice and posture.

"One minute, let me get down from here." She mumbled as she fruitlessly tried to brush hay and dust from her clothes and hair.

"Is this a bad time?" The voice called.

"No, I saw something moving down here and thought it was the dog. I was just getting some chores done. All things considered I think I owe you one for interrupting it." Nicole said brushing her hands off after she descended the old wooden ladder. Looking up she saw that Gavin had moved just inside the barn so the sun was no longer at his back, giving her the benefit of seeing his face unobstructed. His jaw was shadowed by the beginnings of a five o'clock shadow and his clothes looked rumpled as if he had been wearing them for a few days. "Hi." she said meekly standing a few feet away from him. *What a time to wonder if my antiperspirant is working.* Nicole thought lamely.

"Hello." Gavin murmured back taking a few steps forward so they were standing only a few inches from one another. He slowly reached a hand towards her and plucked a piece of straw from her hair without saying a word. The act made Nicole's skin tingle and her breath catch in her throat.

"W--, what brings you to Wisconsin?" She asked quietly.

Gavin lowered his hand and reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a piece of paper which he extended to her before answering. "You did."

Nicole's hand was trembling as she took the letter he showed her. "This is the letter I sent you." She said staring at her hand writing.

"It is." Nicole looked up and saw his eyes were transfixed on her. "The woman that was at my place when you came by is my ex sister in law; she had stopped over so I could help her draw up her will and the power of attorney for my nephew."

"Oh." Nicole said her mind racing. Before she could continue Gavin was speaking again.

"I should have told you how I feel about you; I just didn't think it would come to any good though, what with the age difference and my apparently looking like a dog."

Nicole burst out laughing and noticed that Gavin too was smiling widely.

"I missed you." She finally managed to say after the peals of laughter subsided.

"Why did you come back to the States then?" The smile was now gone, his eyes looking...sad?

"My friend had a baby and there were complications; no one really knew what to expect so I thought it best if I came back, you know, for support or whatever." She concluded

"Are they alright?" Gavin asked sounding genuinely concerned. Nicole's heart swelled with the thought that he was compassionate towards her friend, even though he had never met her before.

"Yea, they both got to go home two days ago. Gabriel, her son, is still at a higher risk for colds and ear infections and what not but that will go away over time as he gains weight. Jaime has to take it easy for a while so she doesn't over exert herself and end up back in the hospital but her husband is a good guy, he'll make sure she doesn't exhaust herself.

"This brings me back to the part where I asked you why you were here..."

"Which I answered."

"Right, you said you came here because of me, then you told me you should have said how you felt before, which insinuates you have strong feelings for me but I'd rather no assume anything."

"I think we've done something like this before." Gavin said smiling. "May I have that back please?" He asked indicating the letter Nicole held in her hands. After a moment of scribbling on the back of the paper he handed it back to her. '12/24/06 I am in love with you. Will you marry me? Signed Gavin Malon'

Her world reeled, her knees threatened to give out underneath her and her head felt as if it were going to explode with a thousand thoughts and questions, each of which was shattering into a thousand more thoughts as they ricocheted off of the narrow confines of her skull.

He's here; he's here for me. He wants to be with me...Am I ready for this? Am I ready at all?

"Gavin...I don't know what to say..." She choked out. Her lips trembled, she didn't want to lose him again, not when she just found she had him to lose but...but what? She looked up and saw his face tighten, his eyes harden, as if he were steeling himself against her rejection.

"If this isn't right just tell me." He implored, his voice barely above a whisper.

"It's not that." Nicole sighed and closed her eyes. "I can't tell you how selfish this is. I want to be with you, I really do..."

"But?" He urged.

"I don't know if it would be fair to you."

He looked at the floor and shook his head. "If you're going to ask me if we can be friends I may do myself a harm." He warned

Nicole laughed. "God, Gavin; I'm in love with you, I don't think I would ever be satisfied if we were "just friends." But right now...there's so much about me I'm not sure of yet." Nicole paused, trying to find the right words.

"Like what?" He asked after the silence had stretched on.

"Like who I really am. I know I keep falling back on this but my relationship with Jason and the way it ended; I'm still trying to figure out who I am without him, who I want to be." She looked down at the barn floor, littered with years of loose hay and dust; her eyes began to fill with tears.

"Are you asking me to wait for you?" Gavin asked, his voice not betraying anything.

Unable to face him Nicole continued to study the floor. "I know I can't ask you to do that, as much as I would love to say yes." She replied, feeling as if she were breaking her own heart.

"I know who you are, and if I have to wait for a year, "He took a step towards her, "five years," Another step, "twenty years," There was hardly a sliver of floor between them now," for

you to be sure you know who that is too," Gavin's gaze flicked from her eyes to her mouth, to her hair, and back to her eyes, "then let me wait."

At a loss for words she stumbled forward and felt his arms close around her. At first all he did was hold her in his arms, reveling in the feeling of her body against his, the smell of her hair and the sensation of the moment.

After a small eternity Nicole felt Gavin's hand caressing her cheek, slowly and delicately with such tenderness she was afraid to move for fear that it would break the spell. Taking a chance she opened her eyes and raised them to look into his face. His eyes were warm, his lips smiling slightly and his head was tilted a little to one side.

"Gavin, I want to kiss you." Nicole said, her voice no more than a whisper.

With a gentleness Nicole never thought possible he leaned over and brushed his lips slowly across hers, raising her chin lightly with his fingers as he stroked the line of her jaw tenderly. Bursts of energy raced through Nicole, making her nerves sing with pleasure as she kissed him back, deeply and passionately. Breathing heavily he pulled back for a moment and regarded her unabashedly. His mind was blissfully disengaged, only able to focus blissfully on the woman before him.