

The Blind Side of Love

(Draft #1)

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1

The young man stared intently at the water, daring it to take life. Daring it to explain why his life had suddenly taken such a violent turn. His longish blonde hair curled then straightened in the wind. His blue-green eyes shone with unshed tears. He kept his hands tucked away into the pockets of his torn jeans, fists tightening in frustration and anger.

The lake, in response, glimmered mutely in the afternoon sunlight. If it had answers, they were well hidden within its murky waters.

Kiara stood by, watching over him, as was her duty. Her wings spread out behind her in silent resignation. If there was anything she could do to help him, she didn't know it.

The boy took one last look at the water and then walked away, passing by Kiara without seeing her.

The angel sighed to herself, casting ice blue eyes downward in regret and sadness. "Sometimes it sucks to be a guardian," she whispered.

"And cut!" the director yelled. "Great job, Julianne. That's a wrap everyone."

The set of *Guardian* suddenly came to life as a parade of anxious crewmembers began the daily routine of dismantling and assembling scenery. The once peaceful lake scene became a maelstrom of noise and activity.

Julianne Franqui stormed off the set, shedding the angel wings from her back in one fluid motion. She tossed them to the nearest person in her path. "Get the straps fixed," she commanded. "They were digging into my shoulder the whole time."

"Right away, Ms. Franqui," the lady replied, hurrying off to carry out the order.

Once inside her trailer, Julianne sighed loudly. "Another day of no end," she muttered to the empty room.

A knock at the door interrupted her two seconds of peace. "Come in!" she yelled impatiently.

Julianne's assistant, Karen Vaccaro, stood nervously in the doorway. In her hand she carried a stack of envelopes. "Your mail, Ms. Franqui."

Julianne glanced wearily at the bundle of correspondence. "Send them all a picture and a letter of appreciation," she replied dismissively.

"Don't you want to read any of them?" Karen asked.

Impatiently, Julianne glared at her assistant. "When do I ever?"

Karen nodded and made a note on her clipboard. "Don't forget you have that interview in New York this weekend. And MTV called again. Twice. They want you to make a guest appearance as co-host to an episode of—" she checked her notes "—TRL?" She looked over at Julianne. "What should I tell them?"



"I'll be in New York anyway," Julianne considered. "I can fit it in. Tell them I'll do it. But I'm not signing autographs afterwards."

"Very well," Karen said, writing something down.

"Is that all?" Julianne asked, her tone unmasking her impatience.

If it wasn't, it now was. "Yes, that's all." Karen shut the door behind her as she left.

Julianne shook her head and turned her attention to the mirror before her. Her eyes reflected the lassitude she felt. Her long, dark brown hair ran down her back in a single braid, which she proceeded to loosen.

"Knock, knock," a male voice called from the now open door.

Julianne turned around, a smile parting her lips. "Adrian," she greeted. "I'm glad it's you."

"Terrorizing the little people again?" he guessed, shutting the door. He leaned his muscular frame against the table where the mirror rested.

"It's a give and take situation," Julianne replied easily, shaking her head to free the remaining strands of hair from their restraints. Now that Adrian was there, she felt ten times better.

"They give, you take?"

Julianne smiled. "Something like that." She began removing her make-up. "Hey, what are you doing this weekend?"

Adrian considered long and hard. "Doing something with you?" he asked.

"New York City, baby," she announced. "I have some publicity stuff to take care of, but afterwards I'll don a wig and some sunglasses and we can escape into the great unknown."

"I love it when you're spontaneous," he said with a smile. "So what was Karen mumbling about? Something about fan mail and you not signing autographs?"

The actress rolled her eyes. "She wants me to sit here and read all the mail I get. She probably wants me to reply to them too. Please. I don't have time for that."

Adrian studied Julianne silently for a moment. His blue eyes searched Julianne's azure ones for a reason behind the words. "Your fans love you," he said finally.

"They don't know me," Julianne replied, staring at her reflection. "They love Kiara. They'd love her regardless of the actress behind the role."

"Do you really believe that?"

Julianne finished removing the last traces of Kiara from her face. Now only herself remained. "It's just the simple truth, my dear Adrian," she explained, fastening her silver anklet in place. It was the one possession she was never without. She glanced up at her best friend. "One of these days, the show will end. My moment in the sun will pass. And I'll walk around with the



rest of you mere mortals, wondering what on earth ever happened to Julianne Franqui. And I'll be the only one who cares."

2

Kris Milano took a sip from her cappuccino grande, her hazel eyes focused on the computer screen before her. She was going to finish writing this essay tonight if it killed her. Starbucks was in full swing. The caffeine-addicted masses continued to pour through the doors in need of a fix and Kris observed it all from her place on the couch. Her laptop stared up at her from its place on her lap, and Kris glanced at it despairingly. Why they were forcing her to take an English class was beyond her. All she cared about was art. Who cared about Shakespeare? He was dead already. But art ... art lived forever.

She didn't dwell on the fact that most people considered Shakespeare to be art. That was beside the point and didn't aid in her procrastination in the slightest.

"How's it coming along?" Leigh Radlin, Kris's best friend and roommate, asked. She was dressed in her Starbucks uniform, complete with the green apron and all. She carried a wet rag in one hand and a bottle of blue cleaning liquid in the other. She proceeded to wipe up the nearest table to Kris.

Kris shook her head, not bothering to remind the red-head that she'd already cleaned that table. Twice. "I'll read you what I have so far," Kris said. She cleared her throat in an exaggerated fashion. "In Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ..."

Leigh was waiting for her to continue. "Yeah," she urged.

"That's it."

"You've been sitting there for four hours," Leigh stated. "What on earth have you been doing all that time?"

"I was thinking of color schemes for my latest painting," Kris admitted. "I can't decide whether to give the sunset a sense of heat ... or a sense of cool detachment. Maybe I'll do both. Oh, plus there's this really cool photograph that I recently developed. I'm thinking of doing a kind of collage with it. Maybe even ..." She paused in her babbling to note the look on Leigh's face. "Yeah, okay. The essay." Resigned, she turned back to the computer screen.

* * *

Two hours later found Kris in the same exact place. The cappuccino had since been replaced by a caramel mocha and an over-priced piece of cake. She was certain that one or the other, or perhaps even both, would be the cause of that night's insomnia spell.

Leigh plopped down beside Kris with a long sigh. "I thought I'd never get out of here."

"You're still here," Kris pointed out.

"Yes, you're right." She glanced at her best friend curiously. "So did you manage to write at least a full sentence?" Leigh teased.

"Two, in fact," Kris replied proudly. "Time for a break," she said. "Let's go."



Leaving Starbucks behind, they headed down the busy streets of Time Square where a large crowd of screaming people were gathered below the windows of MTV Studios. They screamed and shouted, holding up banners and signs.

"Time to feed the sponge-minions," Kris commented dryly, glancing across the street at the madness gathered. "I guess The Backstreet Boys must be back in town."

Leigh shook her head, distracted by the posters hanging on the outside of Virgin Records. "It's that chick from that show you hate," Leigh said. "You wanna catch a movie, or do you have to get back to the essay?"

"No I'll watch something with you," Kris answered, glad to have a reason to procrastinate. It was only Friday, after all. She still had until Monday to turn it in. The essay could wait. She glanced again across the street. "Julianne Franqui?"

"That'd be the one," Leigh confirmed.

"She's such a snob," Kris muttered, turning to face her roommate. "Did you see her on Leno last week? She could at least pretend not to be stuck up."

"She's talented, famous and beautiful," Leigh replied with a shrug.

"Well she doesn't have to rub it in everyone's face," Kris replied. "She's an actress, she could at least *pretend* to be a decent human being."

Leigh glanced at her best friend. "I hope when it's me up in the silver screen you're not quite as judgmental."

Kris laughed. "I'll be your number one fan."

Leigh held up her bookbag in front of her. "I would like to thank the Academy for this prestigious award. The director, the cast and crew of *So-and-So*, and my best friend ... uh ... Hold on, I had her name written down somewhere."

"Ouch," Kris said, clutching at her heart. "After all I've done for you. I've sat through one horrible play after the other."

"Horrible?" Leigh complained, her offence obvious. She appeared to consider. "Alright, I'll grant you that the one about the drug-addicted nun wasn't all that wonderful. But the one where I played a pseudo-intellectual rapper with a flair for home decor was quite original."

"The Martha Stewart musical?"

"Martha Stewart is not a rapper," Leigh argued. "I took my role very seriously. I wish you wouldn't mock me so."

Kris had to laugh. "It was horrible."

"Okay, yeah it was pretty bad." Leigh shrugged. "Maybe if I get into Tisch."

"Did you apply?"

"What's the point? I can't afford NYU. But at least there's Starbucks."



"Amen," Kris agreed.

* * *

Later that night, Kris sat with her laptop open and her feet propped up on the coffee table before her. Leigh was seated next to her on the couch, television remote in hand armed and ready to take on the world. Or the little world inside the TV set, anyway.

The TV flickered with the change of channels. Leigh was a professional channel surfer. She had the trophies to prove it. "There's nothing on," she mumbled.

"Well, maybe if you stopped on something long enough to give it a chance," Kris suggested, knowing it was a lost cause. For as long as they'd been roommates—two years to be exact—the ritual had been the same. Kris looked down at the monitor and focused on the email she was writing.

Leigh leaned over to see what Kris was up to. "Writing to Nathan?" she asked.

"No," Kris replied, moving the laptop so that Leigh couldn't see what she'd written. "Excuse me, you nosy woman."

Leigh returned to her original position. "Fine. But if you're cheating on your boyfriend I want to know about it."

"If you must know, I'm writing an email to my dad."

"Oh," Leigh said, looking disappointed. "Here I had my hopes up."

"I don't understand why you don't like Nathan," Kris said. "He's a nice guy."

"He bores me to tears," Leigh explained in an exasperated manner. "All he talks about is his car. And if he's not talking about his car, he's talking about how he can't wait for law school and how he's going to be rich and powerful someday. Blah blah blah. Get a life, I say!"

Kris smiled. "He's just proud that he got into Harvard."

"And I'm proud that I got into Starbucks," she countered, "but I don't go around bragging about it. Coffee, my dear, is a way of life. Law school is ..." She shrugged, continuing the search for the perfect channel. "And anyway, what are you doing with a high school kid? You're a college woman now."

"He's only a couple of years younger," Kris argued. "We've been together forever."

"Forever being the operative word," Leigh replied. "Now that Nathan's leaving for school, don't you think you guys ought to give it a rest? It's not like your relationship is all fireworks and stuff."

Kris frowned. "There are fireworks."



"Right. You barely call him. You barely talk about him. When he's here it's like the two of you are a couple of buddies instead of boyfriend-girlfriend. You haven't even slept with him."

"Not until after we're married," Kris explained. "Do you know what would happen if my mom found out I was having pre-marital sex?"

"Which brings me to my next point," Leigh stated. "You're twenty-years old. Shouldn't you stop caring so much about what your parents say?"

Kris shrugged. "It doesn't work that way in my family. And anyway, I don't do everything they say. They wanted me to live with them while I was in college and I refused."

"Because I stepped up and argued with them! You were ready to give in."

Kris had no argument. It was true. But she couldn't go against her parents' wishes. They were her parents after all. They raised her, clothed her, fed her and paid for her education with the little money they had. The least she could do was obey their wishes.

"And anyway, you don't love him."

Kris stared at her best friend in shock. "What?"

"I know you, Kristina," Leigh said seriously. "You're just with him cause your parents are in love with him. Not because you are."

Now she was offended. "I'm completely in love with Nathan."

"Whatever," Leigh replied.

Deciding to drop the subject, Kris returned to her e-mail. Her father now lived in San Francisco, so she rarely saw him. But they kept in contact through the computer. Once in a while, she even caught him online. After sending the letter, Kris put the laptop away and sat back to watch the parade of channels. To her surprise, Leigh finally stopped at something.

"Look it's your best friend," she teased.

Kris rolled her eyes. "You can change it whenever you're ready." She made a grab for the remote.

Leigh held it out of her reach. "Hold on, I wanna see what she has to say."

Kris sat back in resignation.

"So Julianne," the host on TV was saying, "I hear that you've landed yourself a boyfriend. Tell us about him."

"He's my best friend," Julianne replied. "And the most wonderful man I've ever met."

"Any wedding bells in the near future?" asked the host.

Julianne laughed. "I wouldn't count on that quite yet."

The host moved on to a different topic and Kris noticed that Julianne appeared to relax. "I guess she doesn't like talking about her personal life," she said.



"I'd imagine," Leigh said with a shrug. "Anything she says will be plastered all over tomorrow's headlines."

Kris had to admit that was true. She returned her attention to the television set.

"Any movies on the way for you?"

Julianne nodded. "There's one coming out soon. It's based on the TV show, *Guardian*." There was a roar of applause from the audience.

"Where you play an angel?"

"Right. I play a guardian angel named Kiara."

"So you'll be playing the same part in the movie?"

"Yes," Julianne verified.

"How does it feel playing an angel?"

Julianne considered. "It's interesting," she said. "Kiara is the embodiment of everything that is good. It makes me feel a little closer to God."

"Oh please," Kris muttered. "Closer to God, my ass. It's a TV show."

"Shhh, this is the best part," Leigh said.

"I brought a clip," Julianne announced, to the crowd's pleasure.

Leigh laughed gleefully. "I love it."

Kris glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. "You are so odd."

Leigh shut off the television and stood in front of the couch. "That is the first thing they teach you in acting class," she informed her. "Once you've got the clip line down, fame and fortune is at your grasp."

"Don't you already have to be famous to have a clip to show?" Kris wondered.

"Hush," Leigh told her. "I've been practicing." She coughed to clear her throat, and took on a dramatic air. In a very grave tone she said, "I brought a clip."

Kris watched this in amusement.

"Or," Leigh said, smiling brightly until she couldn't expose anymore teeth. She adopted a horribly fake southern accent. "Howdy, I brought a clip for ya'll."

"I thought you were from Brooklyn?"

Leigh considered. "Well, I've been thinking about my public persona, and I think I may go for the southern belle thing. What do you think?"

"I think you're insane."



"Glorious news," Leigh replied, plopping back down on the couch with a proud grin. "The mark of any true artiste."

"I take offense to that," Kris said with a smile.

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by the ringing telephone. Leigh reached over to the coffee table where the portable phone rested. "New York City morgue," she said into the phone. "You kill 'em, we chill 'em. Oh, hi Mrs. Milano. Yeah, she's right here."

Kris took the receiver. "*Bendición, mami,*" she greeted her mother in Spanish. "*¿Como andas?*"

"*Bien, Kristina,*" Sari Milano replied. "*William viene mañana. Quiere decirnos algo así que pasa por acá.*"

Kris covered the receiver for a moment. "William's gonna be at mom's tomorrow. Wanna come with me?"

"To see your dreamy step-brother?" Leigh asked. "But of course. What is it about Puerto Rican men?" she suddenly wondered.

"Leigh's coming, too," she informed her mom, ignoring her best friend's last comment. "*Esta bien,*" Sari allowed. "Everything okay with you? How's school?"

"I have an essay due on Monday," she answered.

"*Y como va?*"

"Oh it's coming along wonderfully," Kris lied.

"*Bueno, pues nos vemos pronto. Cuídate. Te quiero mucho, recuerda.*"

"I love you too, mom. See you soon." Kris hung up the phone and regarded her roommate. "William hasn't been by in a while. I wonder what's up. Mom said he wants to tell us something."

Leigh considered. "Maybe he found the woman of his dreams. He's probably getting married. There go all my chances at true love." She sighed over-dramatically.

Kris laughed. "Maybe. But somehow I don't think so."

3

"It makes you feel closer to God?" Adrian asked sardonically, unable to keep quiet any longer. "What was that all about?"

Julianne stared out the window of the limousine, watching New York City pass by in a flash of pretty bright lights. "Was it really that bad?"

"No," Adrian allowed. "I'm sure Dr. Laura just added you to her list of famous people to contact in case of emergency."

Julianne sighed, feeling depressed all of a sudden.

"But I'm glad that I'm the greatest man you've ever met," he commented proudly.



Julianne glanced at him. "Don't let it go to your head," she told him. "Your competition isn't very impressive."

"I'll take what I can get," Adrian said with a smile. "I think your image as a God-fearing heterosexual was established quite well. You should be proud."

"Proud of what?" Julianne wondered. "That my acting abilities stand even without a script? It's all an act. My life, my image. Sometimes I get so wound up in all the lies I don't know what the truth is anymore."

Adrian touched her leg. "At least you have me to remind you," he said.

This brought a smile to her face. "My one and only salvation."

"I think pretending to be your boyfriend will be good for my career," he said teasingly. "What do you think?"

"I think you're a wonderful screenwriter and director," she replied honestly. "And if you'd let me, I'd produce your films in an instance."

Adrian shrugged. "That's cheating, my dear," he replied.

"That's Hollywood, my darling. It's all about who you know. Talent comes later."

The limo rolled to a stop in front of the Plaza. "Time to evade the masses," Julianne said with a sigh, noticing the crowd already gathered. "How do they always know where I'm going to be?"

"Magic," Adrian replied.

* * *

Hidden away in the safety of the penthouse she was sharing with Adrian, Julianne found herself out on the balcony. Enjoying the cool breath of spring on her hair and the view of Central Park below.

"You're going to catch your death out here," Adrian said, shivering beside her. "Come back inside."

"Later."

"Something you want to talk about?"

"Adrian, tell me something. If all the world's a stage, how come I feel like I'm the only one performing?" Julianne wondered.

Adrian considered the questions for a moment, then shrugged. "Because you're self-centered and egotistical."

Julianne laughed, then sobered. "Do you really think so?"



"No. But I think you've done a marvelous job of convincing everyone that you are. Yourself included."

"A God-fearing, heterosexual, self-centered and egotistical bitch." Julianne mulled this over. "It's a good image to have."

"Even if it's the complete opposite of what you are?" Adrian asked seriously.

"It's safer that way," Julianne replied.

"Safer for whom?"

"Me."

Adrian kissed her cheek. "I'm going to bed."

"Sleep well," she told him, her gaze fixed on the view beyond the balcony railing.

"Night," Adrian called.

Julianne remained outside for a while, pondering over her life's meaning. She chuckled bitterly. What meaning, she thought sadly. For an instance, she contemplated jumping. She wondered briefly what the headlines would say. "The Angel Takes Flight, Landing Proves Fatal." They'd have a ball with the whole angel concept, no doubt.

Stepping away from the railing, she walked back into the room, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. She lay down on the couch, closing her eyes, knowing that in spite of her exhaustion, sleep would never come.

4

"Hey, aren't you that chick from that TV show?"

Julianne narrowed her eyes, which were currently hidden from view by the dark sunglasses she sported. "Don't even think about it, Adrian," she warned. "I will kill you."

Adrian grinned. "My mistake," he apologized, leaning back on his arms. "I thought you were somebody else for a moment." He looked around at the crowds of people walking by. Washington Square Park was bursting with energy as entertainers claimed their rightful spots and began their routines. There were acrobats and painters and singers and dancers. It seemed all of New York was out enjoying the beautiful weather.

Julianne's identity was well concealed behind larger-than-life sunglasses and a short blonde wig. She was dressed casually in jeans and a New York Mets tee shirt. "It's nice out here," she said, from her spot around the fountain. It felt good to be out basking in the anonymity of large crowds in a large city. So far no one had given her a second glance. "Maybe I'll move to New York after the show's over."

Adrian's attention was elsewhere.

"And have a threesome with some elephants from outer space," Julianne continued casually.



"Huh?" Adrian glanced back. "Sorry. I was just .. um ..."

"Checking out the local white meat?" Julianne guessed.

"It's what's for dinner," Adrian replied with a grin.

Julianne rolled her eyes though he couldn't see them. "That's gross."

"There's nothing gross about the union of a man and a woman," Adrian replied. "Or even a man and two women. Or three..."

Julianne laughed. "You can barely handle yourself, what are you gonna do with three women?"

Adrian appeared offended. "My dear, innocent girl. There are a great many things you don't know about me. I am a stud after all."

Julianne simply smiled, unable to argue. Adrian was gorgeous and he knew it. She was certain that Hollywood would snatch him up in no-time if he'd only consider acting as an option. But he was set on being a director and a screenwriter and Julianne admired his persistence. But most of all, she admired his determination of succeeding on his own. There weren't that many Hollywood hopefuls out there who, being best friends with someone with their foot already in the door, would've turned down a little help.

"I feel like buying something," she stated absently, her eyes darting around the different artists. She considered buying a necklace or something simple, but then a picture caught her eye. It was a charcoal sketch of a solitary figure standing amidst a crowd, her gaze fixed on a distant object. "Adrian, go buy me that." She motioned with her head at the image she'd been looking at.

"Go buy it yourself," Adrian replied. "I'm not your slave."
Julianne glanced at him. "Please."

"Fine," Adrian relented. He looked in the general direction she'd motioned at. "The one with the thing?"

Julianne laughed. "Yeah, exactly. The one with the thing."

"Okay." Adrian headed off, mumbling something about being pussy-whipped.

Julianne watched to make sure he'd selected the correct picture. Then she arched a brow as the conversation between Adrian and the girl behind the table dragged on a few moments longer than necessary.

When he returned to his spot, he wore a bright smile on his face. "Here's your picture, your highness," he said, handing it over.

"Hitting on the artist were you?" Julianne asked, glancing down at the picture in genuine admiration. It's as if it had been drawn with her in mind.

Adrian shook his head and sat down. "That's not the artist," he explained. "That's the artist's friend. The artist's very *cute* friend who just gave me her number." He held up a business card for emphasis. Proudly, he turned the card over to show where the girl had scribbled her digits.



"Very swift operation," Julianne told him. "I'm impressed."

"You too could one day be this smooth," Adrian assured her. "Just stick with me."

"Hey," Julianne complained, slightly offended. "I could land a date in two seconds flat."

Adrian arched a dark brow as he regarded his best friend with a dubious look. "And when, may I ask, was the last time you got laid?"

"That," Julianne responded, rising to her feet, "is none of your business."

Adrian stood too, enjoying the fact that he was winning this argument. "That long, huh?"

Julianne began to walk away, not wanting to partake in this conversation any longer. She could find somebody to sleep with. There were plenty of people who would sleep with her. Millions of them, actually. "There are some things more important than sex," she informed Adrian once he'd caught up to her.

"Hey, Julianne, you know I'm just teasing, right?" he asked, suddenly serious. "I know it's tough for you."

"I know." But it still bothered her. It wasn't about sex ... she didn't really care about that. It was everything else. It was finding someone who would love her for her. Not for the media attention or the money or the glamour or who she pretended to be.

Adrian sighed. "You're not going to find anyone to love if you don't let anyone get close to you."

Julianne didn't glance at him. "I let you get close to me."

He smiled. "Yes, but much to my dismay, I don't seem to be your type."

"And therein lies the rub," she replied.

5

"I hate Shakespeare," Kris muttered, pushing a strand of light brown hair behind her ears. The one strand she'd dyed blue was fading. Perhaps it was time to change colors. Red, maybe green.. "If he were alive, I would kill him myself."

"I'm sure that's illegal," Leigh told her, as the elevator came to a stop on the 12th floor. They started walking toward the apartment. "And anyway, I don't see why you're in such a lousy mood. I sold two of your paintings today. And most importantly, William is home."

Kris smiled as they reached their destination. "You're right. Today is a good day. I'm not going to let a stupid essay ruin that." She knocked loudly.

As the door opened, her smile widened.

William Serrano swept his step-sister into his arms and hugged her tightly. He kissed her cheek a few times before letting her go. "*¡Llego la fea!*" he announced.



Kris slapped his arm. "I am not ugly," she argued.

William glanced at Leigh and winked. "*No, no. Leigh no es fea. Pero tú...*" He received another slap from Kris.

Mrs. Milano came over a moment later, a smile lighting her face. Her brown eyes lit up at the sight of her daughter. "Kristina," she greeted, kissing her cheek.

"Hi, *mami*," Kris said.

"Leigh, welcome." Sari Milano turned to her step-son. "Stop speaking in Spanish in front of the guest. It's rude." To the girls, she said, "Carlos and Dimitri went to the store for some ice. They'll be back soon." She turned to lead them toward the living room. "Come, sit. I bring you something to drink."

Kris sat down as instructed and gazed around the apartment. It was small by anybody's standards. The living room barely fit the couch she was sitting on. But it was home. Paintings and framed pictures from Puerto Rico decorated the walls. Along with masks of *vejigantes*, from Carlos's native town of Loiza. Kris had never been to the island, but Carlos and William spoke of it all the time. They'd moved to New York shortly before Carlos and Kris's mother had married.

Once their mother had disappeared into the kitchen, Kris turned to her brother. "So, what's this big news you've got for us?" she whispered.

William's sunny disposition turned dark. "You'll find out a little later," he said, his distress obvious.

Kris was sure that whatever it was, it wouldn't be good.

Sensing the tension in the air, Leigh decided to speak. "So, William, what are you doing these days?"

He turned kind brown eyes on Leigh. "I'm trying to get into computer programming," he answered. "But it's hard to land a good paying job around here without a good education. And school is expensive."

Mrs. Milano returned with a tray, handing each a cup of orange juice. "Sorry, it's the only cold thing in the house until Carlos returns with the ice."

They each accepted the drinks and thanked her.

"How's the art business?" William asked Kris.

Kris brightened. "I sold a couple of things today," she answered. "It's a beautiful day so a lot of people were out."

"There is no money in the arts," her mother stated with a shake of her head. It hadn't been the first time she'd said so, but like all the other times, the comment fell on deaf ears.

"Well, Kris is really talented," Leigh responded. "You should see how people stop to look at her work." She smiled at her best friend. "She'll have her own gallery one of these days."

Kris smiled back at her, flattered.



Sari shook her head. "Well, I'm just glad Kris has Nathan to take care of her," she said, smiling at her daughter.

William cleared his throat. "Well, I'm pretty certain Kris is capable of taking care of herself," he said.

"Well of course she is," Sari agreed. "But every woman needs a man to take care of her in this world. And vice versa."

William dropped his gaze.

Kris appreciated everyone's efforts, but did they realize that she was sitting right there, thereby hindering the need to speak about her as though she weren't?

Before she had a chance to say anything, the door opened and Carlos Serrano entered, carrying a bag of ice over one shoulder and a few full bags in his left hand. Like William, he was tall with dark hair and eyes, and his naturally tanned skin burned even darker from long hours in the sun.

Dimitri, Kris's sixteen-year-old brother, entered behind his step-father. He carried a couple of bottles of Coca-Cola, meticulously balanced in one hand, while another bag of ice rested on his opposite shoulder. Dimitri looked a lot like Kris, though perhaps a bit more like his father than his mother. Puberty hadn't yet fixed his lanky form, so his stance was rather awkward, but he concealed it well within the outstretched boundaries of his over-sized clothes. A black bandana hid his brown hair from view.

William rose at once to help his father and brother.

"*Pon el hielo en el freezer*," Carlos instructed his son. He then noticed Kris and walked over to greet her. Dimitri and William disappeared into the kitchen to put everything away. "*Bella*," he said, leaning down to kiss his daughter's cheek.

Kris smiled. At least someone thought she was beautiful. "Hi dad," she said.

"Hello, Leigh," he said, kissing her cheek as well. "How's life selling coffee?"

"It's quite the marvel, Mr. S," she answered. "It takes a special kind of person to brew the stuff just right."

"I'm certain it does," Mr. Serrano replied, moving over to greet his wife. "Kris, how's school?"

"Did you finish that paper?" Mrs. Milano added.

Kris shifted in her seat. "Uh, almost," she replied, hoping she was a better liar than she was a writer. "Gotta love Shakespeare." *Die, die, die ...*

To her relief, William and Dimitri returned to the living room, carrying chairs from the kitchen so they would have somewhere to sit.

Dimitri nodded at his sister. "Sup, sis."

Kris glanced over at him with a questioning brow. "Hey, Notorious Dork. What's with the wannabe ghetto clothes?"



He gave her a dirty look in reply.

She stuck her tongue out at him, unsure of what it was about siblings that made one's maturity levels drop.

Carlos turned to his son. "So, William, what's the big news, huh? You have us all here now."

William swallowed as the spotlight was cast on him. "Uhh..."

"He probably got some chick pregnant," Dimitri commented.

"No..." William said, looking down at his cup of juice.

"You're moving?" Kris guessed.

William shook his head.

Leigh jumped in. "Joining the army?"

"Getting married?" Dimitri asked.

"I'm gay," William said, glancing up.

The room fell deathly silent, as each member of the family absorbed the information. The cup fell from Sari Milano's hand, spilling the remainder of her juice across the ivory carpet. And like a flag dropping at the start of a race, there was an eruption of shouting.

Kris sank down in her couch, not yet able to muster up a response. William... gay? How could that be? He was so ... not gay-like. Granted, she couldn't remember ever seeing him hung up on a girl, but she'd only lived with him for a year. Now that he'd moved out, she had no idea what he was up to. Well, clearly.

For her part, Leigh appeared to be in a catatonic state. Kris attempted to bring Leigh back by waving her hand in front of her face but to no avail. Her best friend continued to stare into space with a distant expression.

Dimitri stormed out of the apartment, muttering something about being in the same room with a "*maricón*." Carlos was fuming and turning strange shades of red and purple, the likes of which Kris had never seen before. Her mother was half-crying, half-praying.

And William was sitting in the same place, not looking at anything. He didn't appear to be listening to his father's ranting about morality. William tightened his jaw, then rose to his feet, towering over his father. Without a word, he exited the apartment and slammed the door shut behind him.

"*¡Maldito sea!*" Carlos cursed. He left the living room in a huff and disappeared down the hall. The slamming of the bedroom door echoed through the small apartment.

Sari stood also, straightening the length of her skirt. She excused herself and retreated down the hall as well.

Kris wondered what on earth had just happened to her family. Here one minute. Gone the next. She considered running after William. But what would she say if she caught up to him?



She sighed. So much for this being a good day.

6

"So, are you going to call?" Julianne wondered, from her place on the couch. After a fruitful day of sightseeing, the two of them had returned to the penthouse exhausted from all the walking. Although Adrian had insisted several times that they take a taxi, Julianne felt that such an action would belittle the experience. Besides, it wasn't often that she got to walk outside without instantly being recognized.

After a nice long bath, and a change of clothes, Julianne had retired to the couch, where she now sat with her laptop open on her outstretched legs. She glanced over at Adrian who was busy with his own laptop, typing away at something. They were sharing the couch, but Julianne claimed most of it, forcing Adrian to use the coffee table to rest his legs. "Hello," she called. "Are you going to call her?"

"Call who?" he asked, not pausing in his typing. Blue eyes narrowed deep in concentration at whatever it was he was writing.

"The girl."

"What girl?"

Julianne nudged him with her foot, in the hopes that a little physical contact would drag him out of whatever world he now resided in.

"Huh?" Adrian asked, finally looking up.

"Are you going to call that girl whose number you got today?" she asked, spelling it all out for him in order to avoid any more blank stares.

Adrian waved the comment away with his hand and returned to writing. "I think I'll move here with you," he informed her. "New York inspires me. I just started a new screenplay."

"What about the screenplay you started last week?" Julianne asked.

"It will have to wait," Adrian replied. "I'm on fire with this one."

Julianne watched him for a moment, listening to the soothing sound of his fingers on the keypad. When she grew certain that her best friend wasn't going to pay her anymore mind, she returned to the matter at hand.

She currently had three different conversations going with three different people whom she didn't know. The important part however, was that they didn't know *her*. The one girl from Canada thought that Julianne was a forty-year-old man from Peru. The guy from Maine, though she was a stripper and was offering to pay for her to fly in for a personal show. And the girl from Texas was under the impression that Julianne was a farmer in Alabama.

The internet was so much fun.



"Hey, how much was that drawing?" Julianne asked.

"Like ten dollars," Adrian replied.

Julianne looked up. "That's it?"

"What do you mean 'that's it'? Those were my last ten bucks," he complained. "We're not all millionaires, you know."

Julianne dug into her pocket and withdrew a ten dollar bill. "I thought it would be more expensive," she replied. "You know I don't carry much cash around."

Adrian accepted the money. "Where's my tip?"

Julianne considered. "Alright. Here's a tip. Get off your lazy butt and call that girl."

"And why?"

"Oh, I don't know," Julianne answered. "Maybe because she's probably expecting you to? Has it occurred to you that if she gave you her phone number it's because she wants you to call her?"

Adrian thought about it. "You think?"

"Men," Julianne huffed, returning to her chat.

Adrian withdrew the card with the girl's number on it and flung it at Julianne, hitting her on the forehead. The card bounced off and landed on the keyboard. "Why don't you call her?" Adrian suggested.

"Ha, ha," Julianne responded dryly, removing the card from its location of obstruction. She tossed it back at him. "You're the one who was all boastful about getting her number."

"And get it I did."

Julianne shook her head. "I really don't get you people. You get a number. You call it."

"Why are you making such a big deal about this?" Adrian asked. He turned to study his best friend. "Could it perhaps have to do with the mysterious artist behind the drawing. Hmmm?"

"Please," Julianne said, with a roll of her eyes. "I'm merely looking out for the hearts of young women everywhere."

Adrian nodded. "Right," he agreed. "Much like when you get fan mail. You read it. You reply to it."

"That's completely different," Julianne argued.

"How so?"

"It just is."

Adrian turned to better regard the actress. "I'll make you a deal, Miss High and Mighty. I'll call this number right now," he proposed, holding up the card, "if you agree to read and reply to at least ten fan mails a week."

Julianne considered. "Two."



"Five."

"Three."

"Deal," Adrian replied, offering his hand.

They shook on it.

Julianne reached over and handed him the phone. "Start dialing."

* * *

"Why is he gay?" Leigh whined, banging her head against the kitchen table. "He's too hot to be gay."

Kris shrugged. "The hot ones usually are gay. Rupert Everett ... Ricky Martin .. Elton John..."

"Ricky Martin is not gay," Leigh argued.

"You keep telling yourself that," Kris said, patting her best friend's arm.

Leigh opened her mouth to respond. Then frowned. "Wait a second, Elton John is not hot."

"I'm sure there are people who think so," Kris replied. "And anyway, I couldn't think of any one else."

Leigh sighed, suddenly remembering the original topic. "So how are you handling all of this?"

"There's not much to handle," Kris answered with a shrug. "I don't really get it, but I'm not going to turn my back on him or anything. I just feel bad for the rest of the family. They're not going to give him an easy time of it."

"Sucks," Leigh commented. "They should really give him a break. It's really not the end of the world."

"They're not going to see it that way. Carlos is pissed because he thinks he raised his son to be a sissy. And mom thinks that William is going straight to hell. Dimitri ... I don't know. He's probably just scared that his friends will find out and start teasing him about it."

"And William?" Leigh prompted.

Kris frowned. "I don't know..."

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by the ringing telephone, which Kris proceeded to pick up. "Yeah?" she said.

"Hi there," a male voice responded. "Remember me? We spoke earlier?"
Kris sent a questioning glance to Leigh. "We did?"

"Yes, you gave me your number."

"I did?"



A pause. "Maybe I have the wrong number."

"Probably."

"Sorry about that."

"No problem."

"Bye."

"Bye." Kris hung up the phone.

"Well?" Leigh asked expectantly.

"Wrong number," Kris explained. "So, anyway, what do you think I should do about William? Should I go see him? Call him? Write him an anonymous letter?"

Leigh laughed. "'Dear William, I'm just writing you an anonymous letter to let you know that I'm totally okay with you being gay...'"

"Okay, maybe I'll give him a call tomorrow," Kris said. "Or do you think I should drop by his apartment? I'm not sure what to say to him though."

Leigh considered. "Well, you could say exactly what you would say to him if you didn't know he was gay. I'm pretty certain the two of you had conversations prior to this announcement."

Kris let out an exasperated sigh. "You're right. I don't know why I'm making this into such a big deal."

"Well, you know, it is a major deal. Now instead of you not knowing what girls he's sleeping with, you'll not know what guys he's sleeping with. Major change in your life. Let me call your shrink."

"Funny," Kris replied. "I'll call him tomorrow. Just to see how he's doing."

Leigh nodded in approval. "Fabulous idea."

* * *

Adrian hung up the phone. "Well, there you go," he told Julianne. "I called. She must've given me a fake number."

Julianne stared at him. "Did it occur to you to ask for her?"

Adrian considered. "Well... no..." He shrugged. "But anyway, the deal was for me to call. There was nowhere in the contract stating I had to actually talk to her."

"You suck," Julianne informed him.

Adrian tossed back the card. "Enjoy your fan mail. I'm going to take a shower."



Julianne watched him walk away, then turned to the business card in her hand. It was white, simple. On the front, it read: "Kris Milano. Original Artwork: paintings, charcoal, oil, & pencil sketches. E-mail: kmilano@starplace.com." It also had her address and phone number. *How very trusting.*

She stared at the email address for a while, deciding on a course of action. Just a quick note, she resolved, opening her mailbox. She noted the urgent message from her agent, but ignored it, clicking the 'write mail' button instead.

Subject: your art

Message:

Julianne stared at the blinking cursor, unsure of what to write.

Message:

Dear Ms. Milano,

I bought a sketch of yours earlier. The figure in the picture reflected so much of how I feel sometimes, that it was as if it had been drawn with me in mind. I wondered if you have a gallery here in New York where I may perhaps view some more of your work?

Sincerely,

Julianne paused. Sincerely, whom? She glanced around the apartment in search of a name to finish off the email with. Finally, she decided.

Sincerely,
J.R. Franks

Nobody knew her real last name, anyway. She read over the email, and deciding it was inconspicuous enough, sent it on its way.

7

Kris sat at her kitchen table, late the next day. She had spent the entire weekend avoiding the dreaded essay and now she had no other choice but to focus.

"Focus," she told herself, staring at the computer screen. "There were fairies ... and a guy with a donkey on his head." She shook her head. "Shakespeare must've been on something." She flipped through the play in her hands. "Titania was cool. Maybe I can talk about her. Queen of the fairies and all. Heh. That sounds funny. Queen of the fairies." She paused to consider. "I need to stop talking to myself."



She got as far as writing, "Titania, Queen of the Fairies," when the phone rang, interrupting her productivity.

Secretly relieved for the interruption, she grabbed the receiver from its spot on the wall. "Hello."

"Hi, beautiful."

Kris smiled slightly. "Hey, Nathan."

"I missed you this weekend," he said. "Do you want to do something tonight?"

Kris stared at her computer. "I wish I could, but I have this essay I've been putting off for two weeks. It's due tomorrow."

"Oh," he said, disappointment in his tone. "How about I meet you after your class tomorrow? We can get something to eat."

Kris considered her Monday schedule. "I suppose I can fit you in," she replied, smiling. "I want to talk to you about something, anyway."

Nathan paused. "Is it about us?"

"No, not at all," she answered quickly. "Family stuff."

"Speaking of which," Nathan began, "I spoke to your father earlier today. We're having dinner at your parents' on Friday."

Kris was suddenly annoyed. Why did they always think they could plan her life? What if she had something important to do on Friday? Did it ever occur to them to ask first? "Okay," she said, not wishing to start an argument. "Oh, hey, I sold three works the other day."

"That's good, baby," Nathan replied. "Anyway, I gotta go. I'm adding a killer stereo system to the 'stang. Dimitri's gonna die when he sees it."

Kris tried to ignore the pang of disappointment that shot through her. It wasn't the first time that Nathan had dismissed her accomplishments. She knew that he thought painting was a waste of time. "Like my brother doesn't worship you enough already," she joked.

Nathan laughed. "Yeah, well ... but I worship you."

Kris forced a smile she didn't feel. "I should get back to my essay," she said, not stopping to wonder why it was that she suddenly preferred writing her essay to talking to her boyfriend. "I'll see you tomorrow, though."

"See you then, babe," Nathan answered. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied.

After hanging up the phone, she sighed. She was depressed and she wasn't sure why. She eyed the computer screen resignedly. Maybe she should just give up on school. She didn't need to be a Visual Arts major in order to be an artist. The way things were going, she'd be married to



Nathan soon enough anyway and then she wouldn't have to worry about money. He was going to be a big-time lawyer, after all. With a big-time car. And a big-time life.

And a college-dropout for a wife.

She closed the essay window and clicked on her internet connection. Perhaps her father had written her back. He usually made her feel better. She'd often considered moving out to California. But she couldn't just up and leave her mother and brother behind. And Carlos. And William. And Leigh. Oh, and Nathan, of course.

Two new messages.

She smiled as she noticed her father had written back. Anxiously, she clicked on the letter.

How's my baby girl doing? I trust you finished your essay by now, but knowing you, it'll be Sunday night and you'll still not have a topic picked. LOL. Right? Well I'm sure you'll figure something out. Because you're brilliant (just like your father).

Work's been keeping me busy. Just got back from the construction site a short while ago. We're rebuilding an old chapel. But you don't care about that.

I'll let you get back to your homework

**I love you,
Dad**

Kris smiled, feeling slightly better. She wrote him back a note asking how he knew her so well, and telling him to be careful at work. Then she moved on to the next message in her inbox. She didn't recognize the address.

The e-mailed opened on the screen and she scanned the contents, expecting it to be junk mail. She was surprised to find it wasn't. So she read it again.

"Well this is a first," she said, stunned. Whatever sadness she'd felt moments before was suddenly replaced by elation. Somebody really liked her work! Nobody had ever written her before. They'd bought her stuff and said it was pretty, but to take the time to actually write to her? Wow.

Kris straightened up in her chair, pushing her hair behind her ears. She chewed on the inside of her lip, while debating what to reply.

Dear J. R.,

I'm delighted that you enjoyed my work. I'm pleased that it spoke to you. May I ask which it was? I could give you a better idea of what I was thinking when I created it, if you're interested. I'm afraid I don't have my work in a gallery, but thank you for asking. Maybe someday, if all my dreams come true.



Thank you for your letter. It was an unexpected yet welcome surprise. It not only allowed me ten extra minutes of procrastination, but it also cheered up my otherwise depressing day.

**Sincerely,
Kris Milano**

She read the email over a couple of times, hoping it didn't sound too dorky. She debated on whether or not to delete the second paragraph. After much debating, she finally decided to leave it in. It was the truth, after all.

Email sent, she reopened the file to her pseudo-essay. But she couldn't concentrate on Shakespeare now. She was too excited at the prospect of receiving her first fan mail.

She laughed to herself as the concept sank in. "Somewhere out there, I have a fan."

8

The garden was in full bloom, much to Julianne's delight. She'd hired a gardener to take care of all of her flowers, since she personally had no interest in the art. She didn't really know the names of the flowers either, she just loved the way that looking at them made her feel; peaceful, calm.

Water gave her a similar feeling, so it was no wonder that her house overlooked the sea. It wasn't an overly large house, far cheaper than she could've afforded, even by Los Angeles standards. But she liked the simplicity of it: two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a garden in the backyard, and a beautiful view. All things considered, it was the perfect home, for her, anyway.

Out in the yard, where she currently sat with her feet propped up on another chair and her laptop firmly in place, she was content. She could hear the ocean roaring in the distance, Mozart playing from the stereo inside the house; after a long day at the set, she was finally at peace.

Settling further into the cushions of her chair, she took a sip of the iced tea on the table beside her. Blue eyes narrowed in concentration at the contents on the screen. Satisfied with what she'd read, she clicked 'upload'. With that, her latest poem was thrown into cyberspace. Nobody knew it was hers. And if she were lucky, nobody would ever find out.

Out of sheer curiosity, Julianne typed her name into an Internet search engine. A list of corresponding websites appeared before her, and she stared at it in silent contemplation. It never ceased to amaze her that other people took time out of their daily lives to build homepages in her honor.

She picked a random one, and clicked the link, briefly thinking of John Malkovich jumping into his own portal in the movie *Being John Malkovich*. It was one of her favorite movies. The sheer brilliance and madness of the film both amused her and inspired her. But as she waited for the page to load, she was suddenly fearful that she'd be tossed into a netherworld where only look-alikes of her existed.

Snapping out of it, she turned to the now loaded site. A picture of herself from a photo shoot she couldn't remember doing stared back at her. There were links to more photos, to a biography, to rumors, to *Guardian* fan fiction, and to more links.



"Let's see what I've been up to lately," she said, smiling as she clicked on "rumors."

Another page presented itself, and she scanned the contents. "Julianne admitted that she is in fact seeing a certain someone, and our best guest is that Julianne's finally given her heart away to the indie film writer and director, Adrian Cruz. The two of them were spotted making out on a secluded beach in Spain last month." She started laughing.

"Our sources inform us, that Julianne may be quitting the show *Guardian* to pursue her religious faith. Apparently, playing an angel has opened her eyes to religion and the ways of God. She's scheduled to leave at the end of this season for a sabbatical in Africa."

She shook her head, beyond amused at the stupid things people came up with. "I'd get better sources if I were you."

Leaving the rumors page behind, she returned to the main page. She noticed a poll at the bottom corner. "Julianne Franqui, hot-stuff, mega bitch, or both? Take a moment to place your vote."

Julianne considered. "I'll have to go with 'mega bitch' for five hundred, Alex," she said, casting her vote. A few seconds later, the results were in front of her. "Both" was at 86% with "mega bitch" trailing behind at 10% and finally "hot stuff" at the end of the line, with 4%.

Sighing, she exited the website. It had been a few days since she'd checked her mail, so she aimed the mouse in that direction. She'd been ignoring her agent for weeks now. It was time to face the music.

She had two urgent messages from him waiting for her. The first said something about a movie contract. The second was a request for a prompt reply. There had been three messages on her machine from him when she'd returned from New York.

Deciding it was best to stop ignoring him, she sent him an email telling him to stop by whenever. Business taken care of, she switched email accounts.

To her delight, there was an response from the artist. Julianne had framed the picture she'd bought in New York. It now hung on her wall across from her bed, where she could admire it in the privacy of her room.

Julianne turned back to the e-mail.

Dear J. R.,

I'm delighted that you enjoyed my work. I'm pleased that it spoke to you. May I ask which it was? I could give you a better idea of what I was thinking when I created it, if you're interested. I'm afraid I don't have a gallery, but thank you for asking. Maybe someday, if all my dreams come true.

Thank you for your letter. It was an unexpected yet welcome surprise. It not only allowed me ten extra minutes of procrastination, but it also cheered up my otherwise depressing day.

**Sincerely,
Kris Milano**



The actress found herself smiling at the prospect of brightening somebody's day. Glancing at the flowers, she took a moment to decide what to write.

Dear Kris (may I call you that?),

I would love to know what led you to create such a fascinating piece of art. The picture was one of a figure standing in a crowd, with her gaze focused on something in the distance. It currently hangs in my bedroom so that I may admire it every night. I believe it's the only picture in my house that I picked out myself. I'm not big on decorating and I fear it's painfully obvious from the moment one steps into my home. But luckily, not that many people do.

It's not very often that I get to cheer up someone's day or even help them procrastinate, so I'm glad that I could give something back to the artistic community. If I can be of service in the future, please let me know. :o)

Take care, J.R.

Satisfied with her response, Julianne hit 'send.' Suddenly in good spirits, she shut off the computer and headed into the house. Maybe she'd go for a jog along the beach.

9

"What do you think?" Nathan asked excitedly. His short brown hair was spiked up with enough hair spray and mousse to make the ozone layer cringe. His green eyes were focused on the stereo system of his new Mustang.

Kris stared at the piece of equipment, wondering what the big deal was. It played music just like his old one did. "It's nice," she said, forcing some enthusiasm into the words.

"Nice?" Nathan questioned, glancing at his girlfriend. "What are you talking about, nice? Can you hear the bass on this baby? It's sweet!" He turned up the music, and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel along with the tune.

Kris sank down into the passenger seat, turning her attention to the view outside the window. They were headed up to see her parents. In New York City traffic it was going to take a year to get there, but Nathan had insisted on taking the car. He was anxious to show it off to Carlos and Dimitri.

Nathan had cancelled their date for Monday. Something last minute had come up and he'd been unable to meet her after class. Kris had been secretly relieved. After spending all of Sunday night working on the Shakespeare essay she'd been beyond exhausted. She'd gone directly home to take a nap.

She was not looking forward to this dinner at her parents'. Inevitably, the subject of William would be either purposely avoided or blown out of proportion. Kris suddenly felt guilty. It had been nearly a week since the incident, and she still hadn't called William. She wasn't entirely sure why. Kris was certainly not homophobic. And the fact that William was gay didn't really bother her.

So why was she avoiding him?



Unable to come up with an answer, Kris decided to think about something else. Her art, for instance. She was in the process of creating a collage of pictures she'd taken. It was her tribute to New York and contained pictures of the City in all of its glory. From the beauty to the sadness. It was all there. Her entire range of existence, cut up and blended into a whole.

Her thoughts drifted suddenly to the person who'd emailed her, and wondered if they'd written her back. She made a mental note to check her e-mail once she got home.

Nathan suddenly turned off the stereo. "I'm sorry about Monday," he said. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Kris hesitated. "It was nothing," she lied.

"You sure?" Nathan asked.

"Positive," Kris replied, smiling at him. "So how's school going?"

Nathan grinned. "It's going well," he replied. "I'm happy to be graduating. High school drags on forever, don't you think?"

"I don't remember back that far," Kris teased.

"Oh shut up," Nathan said with a laugh. "You're not that much older than me. But anyway, things are winding down. Senior activities are coming up. Speaking of which, start thinking about a prom dress."

Kris wasn't sure she felt like going through the whole prom ordeal again. She'd hated her own. But she owed it to Nathan to go with him. "I'll tell mom tonight," she replied. "I'm sure she'll want to go shopping with me."

Nathan nodded in approval, turning the music back on.

Kris focused on the world outside her window, and returned to the land of her thoughts.

* * *

Dinner started out as a pleasant and relatively peaceful affair, though Kris could feel the underlying tension between each member of her family. So far, no one had mentioned William and Kris was secretly grateful.

She dumped some rice on her plate, and passed the bowl along.

Sari eyed her daughter quietly for a moment. "Kristina," she started, "you're only going to eat white rice? I made all of this other food." She gestured to the remaining plates of food on the center of the table.

"I know," Kris replied. "But they've got meat. And I've told you I don't eat meat anymore."

"You can't not eat meat," her mother insisted. "You're going to get unhealthy. A person needs to eat meat." She turned to her husband. "Carlos, talk some sense into her."



"Your mother's right, Kris," Carlos agreed. "Even if you just eat a little bit. You have to eat some."

Kris rolled her eyes, taking a bite of her rice. She wasn't going to budge on this topic.

Giving up, Sari turned to her daughter's boyfriend. "So, Nathan," she said, passing him a bowl of chicken and rice, "how does it feel getting into Harvard?"

Nathan smiled. "I'm very excited," he responded, helping himself. "My parents are proud too. I got a good scholarship so Dad's glad he won't have to shed the big bucks."

"I bet it's going to be hard for the two of you," Sari replied, glancing between Nathan and Kris. "Being apart all of that time after growing up together."

Nathan nodded. "We'll manage it somehow, though." He winked at Kris. "Who knows, maybe if Kris does well in school, she can transfer."

Kris glanced sharply at her boyfriend. Transfer?

Carlos spoke up. "Maybe you can convince her to study something worthwhile," he said. "Get her head down from the clouds."

"Well, with all due respect, sir, I support Kris' decision to be an artist," Nathan said, much to Kris's surprise. "After I graduate, I'll be making enough money so that she won't have to worry about working. She can stay home and do her little paintings and take care of our kids." He smiled brightly at Kris as though it was the most stupendous idea.

Kris was suddenly depressed. She didn't want to stay home and do "little paintings" while taking care of children. She wasn't even sure she wanted kids. She was too young for kids. She was too young for marriage. And she was way too young to be discussing such matters with her delusional boyfriend and her deranged family. Or rather, sitting by quietly while the rest of them discussed her future with each other.

Carlos waved his fork at the two of them. "Have you two discussed marriage yet?"

Kris opened her mouth to answer, but Nathan cut her off.

"Not yet," he said. "But it's certainly an issue to consider before my departure. I want to make sure I leave everything settled."

Carlos nodded and returned to his food.

"So where's Will?" Nathan asked casually, stuffing his mouth with Mrs. Serrano's famous *arroz con pollo*. "I wanted to show him the new goodies on the car."

Looks were exchanged between the family. Kris just sank down further in the chair, sending a silent prayer to God to keep the family under control.

Carlos cleared his throat, his gaze focused on the food he was eating. "We are not speaking about him today."

Nathan glanced up, his fork hovering mid-way to his mouth. He sent a questioning glance to Kris, who shrugged.



Dimitri snorted. "Turns out he's a fag."

"Dimitri!" his mother yelled.

"Well it's true," Dimitri argued, glancing at Nathan. "The great and wonderful William is a friend of Dorothy's."

"Enough!" Carlos roared, slamming his hand on the table. The silverware on the table clanked together, making Kris jump at the sudden noise. "This is not a subject to be discussed at the dinner table."

Everyone returned quietly to their meal.

Kris was fuming. What was there to discuss? William's gay. The end. What else could there possibly be left to say that didn't involve William's presences. Angrily, she speared a piece of chicken.

She wasn't even angry at her family. She was angry at herself and her inability to stand up for herself. Why couldn't she tell them what she was thinking? Why did she have to be such a coward?

* * *

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nathan yelled, slamming his hands on the steering wheel. "I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself by bringing up the subject."

"I'm sorry," Kris replied, gazing out the window.

Nathan shook his head angrily. "You made me look like an idiot tonight, Kris," he complained. "Carlos must've been so pissed at me for bringing up the subject."

"This may come as a shock, but the world does not revolve around you," she snapped.

Nathan glared at her. "What?"

"What do you mean, what?" Kris asked, her anger from earlier surging. "What was all that talk about marriage and kids? We've never discussed that. And I'm *not* transferring to Harvard."

"You could get in," Nathan said with a shrug. "Affirmative action and all that."

"What?!" Kris yelled. She wished they weren't currently in a car.

Nathan sighed, glancing at Kris. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that."

"You didn't mean it, or you didn't mean to say it out loud?" Kris asked.

"I didn't mean it," Nathan stated. "You know how I feel about you and your family."

"Pull over," Kris demanded.

Nathan looked at her. "What?"

"Pull the fuck over, Nathan, I'm not kidding."



"Kris, calm down, okay?" he pleaded. "I said I was sorry."

"If you don't stop this car right now, I'm going to jump out. And if I get run over and live to tell about it, I will tell Carlos that you refused to stop."

Nathan pulled over. "Let's talk about this," he said.

But Kris was already out the door. She slammed it closed and ran down the sidewalk toward the nearest subway station, disappearing from view.

10

"Karen!" Julianne called, jogging after her assistant. She was still in her full Kiara getup, angel wings and all.

Karen turned around, her surprise clearly evident on her face. "Yes, Miss Franqui?"

"Do you still have all that mail?" Julianne asked, brushing a feather from her shoulder.

"Ah, well you've received some more since the last time," Karen explained. "But I figured you wouldn't want to know about it."

Julianne considered and nodded. "Grab three random letters from the stack, and leave them on my dressing table. Do that every week."

Karen arched both eyebrows. "Uh, yes, Miss."

Julianne turned around and headed out to her trailer to change. "Thank God it's Friday," she muttered to her reflection. Removing her wings and the rest of her angelic getup, she slipped into some jeans and a navy blue tee shirt. She was in the process of fastening her anklet when there was a knock on the door.

"Enter," Julianne called.

Karen walked in. "Three letters," she said, fanning them out in her hand so Julianne could count them. "Ms. Loeb wants to see you," the assistant added, placing the envelopes on the table.

Julianne sighed. "Thanks, Karen," she said, rising to her feet. She grabbed her laptop case, her bookbag, and the letters and exited the trailer, heading toward the director's office. Finding the door open, she walked in.

Gina Loeb, the director of *Guardian: A Second Chance*, sat at her desk. "Take a seat, Julianne."

Julianne complied, placing the fan mail on top of the laptop on the floor beside her. "What's up?" She couldn't fathom why Gina would want to see her. She hadn't messed up any lines. She'd been on time. And she'd nailed all of her scenes.

"Some people are coming down to the set next week," Gina began. "They want to do a short interview with you."



Julianne shrugged her shoulders. "So what's the problem?"

"No problem," Gina replied. "Just giving you a head's up. Nice work today, by the way."

"Thanks," Julianne answered, rising to her feet. "Anything else?"

"Have a good weekend," Gina said.

"You too." The actress picked up her stuff and headed out the door toward her Rav4. Once inside, she turned the ignition and sat back with a sigh. It was Friday night and she was feeling anxious. Adrian was off shooting his new independent film. Something about a palm tree and a tomato. She never did understand those artistic type things.

And that was the extent of her friends.

As if on cue, her cell phone started ringing. She dug into the front pocket of the laptop case and withdrew the ringing object. "Franqui," she said.

"Don't you call home anymore?"

Julianne rolled her eyes at the sound of her mother's voice. She didn't want to deal with this now. "I called."

"When?"

Julianne racked her brain. "A couple of weeks ago," she responded, wishing she'd receive another call so she'd have a reason to get off the phone with her mother.

Susan Frank sighed loudly. "Well your sister wants you to come see her play on Sunday."

"Oh, that's this weekend?" Julianne asked, wanting to bang her head against the steering wheel.

"You promised her."

Julianne nodded. "I'll be there. What time?"

"The play is at seven. You'll join us for dinner afterwards?"

Do I have a choice? "I'll be there," she answered.

"See you then." *Click.*

Julianne stared at the phone for a moment before tossing it aside. "I love you, too, Mom. I'm doing fine, Mom." Angrily, she threw the car into reverse, and pulled out of the studio's parking lot.

Speeding up, she decided to visit the only other person in the world who she could talk to.

* * *



"Hey, Nana," Julianne said, sitting down on the grass. She dropped her bookbag beside her. "I know it's been a while since I've been by here, but you know how it is when you're a big star." She laughed and reached out to brush a leaf from the top of her grandmother's tombstone.

Julianne placed a bouquet of roses where the leaf had been. She looked around the cemetery and sighed. "Kinda creepy here at night," she noted. "So what can I tell you that you don't already know?" She considered. "I'm finishing off one movie and I have a few more deals lined up. You always told me I'd be famous someday. I wish you could see me now.

"Truth is," she continued. "I'm not handling all of this very well. I'm so scared of people seeing who I really am, that I can barely recognize my own self anymore. I wish you were here. You always seemed to know what to say to make me feel better." She picked a blade of grass and started playing with it.

"I bought this picture in New York about a week ago," she said. "It's got this woman standing in the middle of a crowd, but she's looking at something that's on the outside. Something far away. And the people in the crowd are all looking at her, but she doesn't see them." She paused. "That's me. Standing in a crowd of people, but looking at the distance.

"Everything seemed so clear when you were here. You could make me laugh with just a word. It's been so long since I've truly laughed. You know that laughter? Where you just can't stop, and for those few seconds everything in life feels okay. That's what I long for.

"Weird, huh? I used to tell you of my dreams of being famous. 'When I'm a big actress, I'll have a mansion in Hollywood, and servants and all the money in the world. You'll live in the guest house and I'll have my chauffeur drive you around.'" Julianne shook her head at the memory. "It's a nice fantasy. I just wish I had someone to share it with."

Julianne withdrew the fan letters from her back pocket. "In the mean time, I'll share it with you." She grabbed one envelope and put the other two aside. She tore it open and grabbed the folded paper inside. Out loud, she read, "'Dear Julianne, You are really hot. I have posters of you all over my walls and ceiling. I have every single episode of *Guardian* on tape. I told my mom that I was going to marry you some day, but she told me that I was probably too young for you. Do you think twelve is too young? I don't. I told her that some day I was gonna have all your children. Your #1 fan and future husband, Patrick Gordon.'"

Julianne found herself laughing. "That was kind of cute, huh?" she asked, grabbing her bookbag. Inside she found her poetry notebook and a pen. Turning to a fresh page, she began to write.

Dear Patrick,

I'm honored that you think me worthy of being your bride. Perhaps if you send me your picture, I can put it on my wall and then we'll be even. I'm afraid that twelve is a bit too young at the present moment, but who knows, maybe in six years if you're still interested you can give me a call. I'll be almost thirty then. Think thirty is too old?

Love,
Julianne Franqui

She ripped the page from the notebook and tucked it into a fresh envelope. Addressing it back to Patrick, she smiled. "That'll make his day." She smiled at the tombstone. "This isn't too bad."



Julianne opened the second letter and began to read. "Dear Kiara, My name is Jennifer and I am ten years old. My little brother, Derek, is your biggest fan. He has a picture of you next to his bed. He's been really sick for the past year. Mom and Dad don't like to talk about it because it makes them sad. Derek says that you can help him because you're an angel. Please help him. Your friend, Jennifer."

She frowned at the letter and put it back in the envelope without responding. Without a word, she opened the last letter. "Dear Ms. Franqui, I never thought I'd find myself writing to somebody famous. I doubt if you're even reading this, considering your busy schedule and all. But I have nothing to lose, right? I just wanted to say that I think you're beautiful. But that mostly, I love the way you are during interviews. You are honest and upfront and I respect that. Thank you for being yourself. Sincerely, Chloe Rice."

Julianne finished reading and sighed, putting everything back in the bookbag. She stood to leave. "I love you, Nana," she whispered to the air. Then turned on her heel and headed back to the car.

11

"Where the hell have you been?" Leigh cried. "I've been worried sick!"

Kris stepped into the apartment after hours of wandering around New York City. "I took a walk," she responded, throwing her jacket on the couch.

"Well Nathan was going insane," Leigh informed her. "He called like twenty times. Then he stopped by. Then he went out looking for you. Then he came by again. Then he left. So I'd suggest you call him. And you should probably call your parents too because they called here five times. Carlos is going bizirk."

Kris rolled her eyes and collapsed on the couch. After all of that walking, the last thing she needed was to face the people she'd been running from. All she wanted was peace. Why couldn't she have that? Just some time to herself. No family. No boyfriends. No essays to write. Just her and her art. "You call them," she said. "As soon as I gather enough energy, I'm going to take a shower. And then I'm going to bed."

Leigh stared at her best friend for a long moment. "Kris, what happened?"

"Nothing," Kris replied. "Dinner was just great. My boyfriend is just great. Sweetheart to the max. I'm beyond in love with him. So much so that I'm transferring to Harvard so that we can be near each other. Then we can commence our life together. I'll stay home with the kids while he goes out and lives out his dreams. Sounds perfect. I can't wait."

Leigh sat down on the coffee table, regarding her friend cautiously. "Are you alright?"

Kris sat up with a start. "Alright? No. I'm not alright. I don't want to go to Harvard. And I really don't want to have kids right now. Or even get married, for that matter."

"So don't."

"Don't," Kris repeated softly, as if the possibility hadn't occurred to her. "That's exactly what I'm going to do! I'm going to do none of those things." She stood and headed toward her room.



"So what are you going to do?" Leigh called after her.

"I'm going to take a shower," Kris replied. "Because that's what I want to do."

"Right," Leigh said, totally confused by her friend's outburst.

A few moments later, Kris returned, wearing her bathrobe. "You know what pisses me off? It's that they didn't ask. Never have they once backed me up on anything. You'd think my mom would want to have some of my artwork hanging around the apartment, but does she? No! And Nathan? Do you think he gives a damn about how I spend my time? No! All he cares about is his car. And his .. his law school. And his .. his ... his car!" She ran back into the room and slammed the door.

Two seconds later, she opened it again. "And why was he yelling at me for not telling him about William? It's my family! Why does he care? And why does everything have to be about him? Just cause he's the *man*? I don't think so! Fuck him and his penis!" She stormed into the bathroom.

Leigh stared at the closed door. "She's finally lost it."

* * *

Later that night, after she'd managed to calm down, Kris sat at the kitchen table with the computer in front of her. Her outburst had made her feel better. The shower had helped as well. She'd called Nathan and assured him that she was fine. She'd called her parents and assured *them* she was fine. And that, no, she didn't need to see a psychiatrist. And that, no, it had nothing to do with William being gay.

But now, at least she was at peace. Leigh had gone to bed. The apartment was quiet. For the moment, life was relatively good. Relieved, and in better spirits, she signed on to the internet to check her mail.

One message.

Dear Kris (may I call you that?),

I would love to know what led you to create such a fascinating piece of art. The picture was one of a figure standing in a crowd, with her gaze focused on something in the distance. It currently hangs in my bedroom so that I may admire it every night. I believe it's the only picture in my house that I picked out myself. I'm not big on decorating and I fear it's painfully obvious from the moment one steps into my home. But luckily, not that many people do.

It's not very often that I get to cheer up someone's day or even help them procrastinate, so I'm glad that I could give something back to the artistic community. If I can be of service in the future, please let me know. :o)

Take care, J.R.

Smiling, Kris hit reply.



Dear J.R.,

That was my favorite piece, actually. I was thinking of making it into a collection. Color paintings and maybe clay figurines. They'll decorate my apartment, at least.

I must admit, I'm a bit thrilled by your interest. Sometimes it's very disillusioning to be an artist. You never really know if people appreciate it. Once in a while, they'll pass by and smile in approval. But most of the time they pass by without casting a second glance. That's when I start to doubt if it's really worth it. I start wondering if perhaps my parents are right and I should focus my life on something concrete instead.

But then I receive an email from you and all of my doubts dissipate and my inspiration returns.

I'm sorry if I'm carry on.

About the drawing. I guess the reason I like it is that when I started it, I didn't really know what I was drawing. I usually have a set pattern in mind and then I put it down on paper or canvas. But that one just came to me. I started to draw something and suddenly it took form. Sorry, that's not a very interesting story. :)

Anyway, thank you for once again cheering me up. It hasn't been a good week and your emails have been very much appreciated.

**Thanks,
Kris**

PS: Yes, you may call me that :)

12

To Julianne's great dismay, Sunday arrived. So she found herself sitting in a crowded auditorium, watching a bunch of bumbling idiots destroy what should've been a wonderful play. Her beloved sister was among them; playing Juliet, no less.

"Oh Romeo, Romeo ..."

Kill me. Kill me now, Julianne pleaded silently. Her poetry notebook lay open on her lap and she was scribbling random lines of poetry in the dark; she only wished she'd thought to bring her laptop. She could've found someone to chat with and help pass the time.

If God were indeed merciful, he'd take pity on her now and strike her down. She cast her eyes heavenly, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did.

I'm in hell. She glanced on stage. *And my sister is the Devil.*

Finally, an eternity later, the curtain went down and the house lights came on. The cast came out for their curtain call, and Julianne clapped along with the rest of the enthusiastic audience. As the crowd dispersed, Julianne made her way to the front of the auditorium to meet up with the rest of her family.



People recognized her as she passed by them, and she forced smiles in their direction, hoping that no one would walk up and start talking to her. Just in case they were considering it, she made sure to wear her most unapproachable look. Thankfully, it worked.

"Oh you showed up," Jan noted, still standing atop the stage so she could look down at everyone else.

Julianne looked up at her sister. "Promised I would." She kissed her mother's cheek and then her father's. "Mom, Dad," she greeted casually.

"Wasn't she wonderful?" Susan Frank asked, smiling proudly at her youngest daughter. "One of these days she's gonna give you a run for your money."

Julianne tried not to laugh at the idea. "I live in fear," she replied dryly.

Jan rolled her eyes. "You're just jealous, Jules. Cause even if you are a big deal actress, you'll never be as beautiful as me."

"Jan, control yourself," Timothy Frank said, speaking up for the first time. "Go change. We've got reservations for nine."

Jan headed off to the dressing room to change, leaving Julianne to battle the lesser-demons.

"What is this you're wearing?" Susan asked in obvious distaste.

Julianne looked down at herself. Just to piss off her mother, she'd decided on a long-sleeved cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A black leather vest, black jeans, and black boots. "Don't you like it?" she asked innocently.

Susan let out a long breath. "You look like one of those beatnik poets."

"Why thank you, mother," Julianne replied with a bright smile. "That's the biggest compliment you've given me yet."

Timothy cleared his throat. "So, Julianne, how's the movie coming along?"

"Pretty well, Dad," Julianne replied. "The budget for the film is a lot bigger than for the TV show so we've got some pretty cool special effects underway. The director, Gina Loeb, is excellent. I really love the different dimensions she's brought to Kiara's character."

"How much did you get paid?" Susan asked.

Julianne sighed at her mother. Why was it all about money with her? "Four million," she answered.

Susan frowned. "That's it?"

"What do you mean, 'that's it?'" Julianne asked, trying not to yell. "How much do *you* make?"

"Julianne," Timothy warned.

Julianne bit her tongue to keep from lashing out at her mother. What nerve!



The three of them stood there in silence until Jan returned from the dressing room. "All set," she announced, jumping down from the stage. "Where are we going for dinner?"

"Someplace cheap," Julianne answered. "Because apparently, I'm poor." She started walking toward the exit doors, leaving her family behind. She needed to be away from them for a few minutes, if only to collect herself. There was no way she was going to survive dinner without losing her temper. Not if her mother kept testing her patience like that.

Out in the parking lot, she leaned against her Rav4. She focused on breathing. It was supposed to be a calming thing, but it resulted in making her dizzy.

Her father was the one to approach her finally. "Meet us at Ramone's," he instructed. "Do you need directions?"

"Nope," she responded. "See you there." She jumped into the car and sped off, anxious to put some distance between them.

* * *

The restaurant was a ritzy affair. Julianne's father made a lot of money, and her mother wasn't afraid to use it. Ramone's was well-known for serving the stars of Hollywood. Anybody who was anybody was sure to make an appearance on any given day.

Julianne knew that the only reason she'd been invited along on this little adventure down dysfunctional family lane, was because her mother hoped that if Julianne was there, then any stray reporters would cast their cameras their way.

They didn't let her down. A reporter snapped a few shots of them entering the restaurant. Susan and Jan enjoyed the attention, or rather, enjoyed pretending they didn't. People in the restaurant glanced in Julianne's direction as she passed, pointing and muttering.

Julianne ignored everyone. She merely followed the maître'd to what he claimed was "the best table in the house" and took a seat. As her family joined her, she disappeared behind the large menu. With any luck, they'd forget she was there.

"I am honored to be serving you again, Ms. Franqui," the waiter said, with a slight bow. "If I may recommend anything, let me know. Tonight's menu is superb."

Julianne nodded. "I'll just have my usual, thanks," she told him.

He nodded and wrote down the order, then took the menu from Julianne. The rest of the family requested a moment to decide.

With her shield of protection gone, Julianne faced the firing squad.

"Come here often?" Jan asked, glancing at her sister.

"No," Julianne replied.

Susan took a sip from the cup of water in front of her. "You're sure in a mood tonight. What's going on? You look a bit drained."



"I'm perfectly fine, mother," Julianne replied. "Probably just PMS."

Susan chose to ignore the comment. "So how's Adrian doing? You should've invited him tonight."

"Is it true the two of you are together now?" Jan added.

Julianne regarded her two least favorite women in the world. "Adrian is in San Francisco, working on a new film. And yes, we're very much together." She should've denied it, of course, but the look of disappointment in her sister's face made it all worth it. Julianne knew that Jan had been in love with Adrian for ages.

The sixteen-year-old sighed. "Someday he'll be mine."

"Right." It was all Julianne could do not to laugh out loud at the idea.

Susan smiled. "That would be such a beautiful wedding," she mused. "The two of you would make gorgeous children, no doubt."

Jan made a face. "There goes my appetite."

Mine too, Julianne agreed. Having sex with Adrian would be ... "Ew," she muttered, shuddering at the thought.

Everyone looked at her.

Julianne froze. "Um, I thought I saw a hair in my cup," she lied. "But it was just the reflection of the light."

"Where do you think you'd like to get married?" Susan asked, still on the topic.

"We're not getting married," Julianne said. "I've got my career. Adrian's got his. We're just ..."

"Having sex?" Susan guessed, with a shake of the head.

"Gross," Jan mumbled.

"We're not having sex," Julianne replied, feeling incredibly embarrassed for no good reason.

Jan glanced at her in surprise. "Are you serious?"

Kill me. Kill me now. Please. Someone. Anyone. Help. "I'm not going to discuss this," Julianne said as defiantly as possible.

Jan sat back in her chair and let out a short laugh. "But he's so hot! Are you crazy? I'd be on him like a—"

"Jan!" Both Susan and Timothy chorused.

Julianne sank down in her chair, covering her face with one hand. This was going to be a very long dinner.

* * *



Three hours later, Julianne collapsed on her bed. It had been the longest day of her entire life. Between her mother and her sister, she was going to need a few more hours of therapy a week. It was a good thing that Adrian came cheap or she'd be broke by now.

Pulling herself together, she got up and got ready for bed. She slipped on a pair of Garfield boxers and a white tank-top, then grabbed her laptop and climbed into bed. "Ah, heaven," she sighed. She hooked up the phone line to the computer and started it up.

First things first, she decided, reaching over the edge of the bed to grab her poetry notebook. It was time to upload the poems of the day to her super duper secret website. She didn't know if anyone actually read them, but she liked to have them out there, nonetheless. Between acting and writing poetry, Julianne felt complete. Well, more so than she otherwise felt, anyway. Perhaps complete was a poor choice of words.

She typed up her latest poem, pleased with what she'd written. With a click of a button, it became public property. Anyone who wanted it, could take it. She didn't really give a damn.

Moving on, she opened her mailbox. One message.

Dear J.R.,

That was my favorite piece, actually. I was thinking of making it into a collection. Color paintings and maybe clay figurines. They'll decorate my apartment, at least.

I must admit, I'm a bit thrilled by your interest. Sometimes it's very disillusioning to be an artist. You never really know if people appreciate it. Once in a while, they'll pass by and smile in approval. But most of the time they pass by without casting a second glance. That's when I start to doubt if it's really worth it. I start wondering if perhaps my parents are right and I should focus my life on something concrete instead.

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Anyway, thank you for once again cheering me up. It hasn't been a good week and your emails have been very much appreciated.

**Thanks,
Kris**

PS: Yes, you may call me that :)

Julianne grinned and hit reply.



Dear Kris,

If you go forth with the collection, I would like to place my order to buy it from you. Doesn't matter how much it costs. I'll pay anything :o)

I can understand how you feel about your art. It's tough to bare your soul to the world day in and day out, and feel yourself rejected. And I find it admirable that you persist on doing so. But trust me when I say, that it's better to be rejected for being who you are, than accepted for being somebody you're not.

I find it interesting that we'd both see ourselves in the same picture. Like we're both standing at the wrong sides of a two-way mirror and we can only see ourselves. Maybe if we turn it over, we can see each other.

Julianne frowned at the third paragraph. "That sounds like I'm coming on to her." Quickly, she deleted it and started a new one in its place.

You must be having a really rough week for my emails to be cheering you up so much. If you ever need to talk about anything, well, I'm available.

Take care, J.R.

Frowning, Julianne let the arrow hover over the send button. When had she become so nosy? And why did she care?

She highlighted the last paragraph, but hesitated in deleting it. "Fuck it, I've got nothing to lose," she decided, hitting send before she had a chance to change her mind.

13

Kris decided it was time to face the music. So that Sunday she got on the subway and headed uptown to Queens. William's apartment was in a relatively nice neighborhood. He shared it with some guy named Mark, whom Kris had never really met.

At the front steps, she hesitated before pushing the button that would announce her arrival. William wasn't expecting her, and she hoped he wasn't busy.

"Yeah?" came a voice through the intercom.

Kris didn't recognize it as her brother's so she guessed it was Mark. "Uh, hi. My name is Kris Milano. I'm here to see William."

There was a pause and then a beeping noise announcing the door was unlocked. She stepped inside, making sure to shut the door behind her. William's apartment was on the second floor, so she headed in that direction.



William was waiting for her when Kris walked up. "Kris," he said, sounding surprised. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Am I interrupting?" Kris asked, worried she'd come at a bad time.

"No, no," William assured her, stepping aside. "Come in."

The apartment was small. One bedroom, one bathroom, one kitchen that doubled as a living room. Kris found herself wondering where William's roommate slept, though she was starting to get the idea.

Kris stared at the wall for a moment as she noticed one of her paintings framed and proudly displayed. She remembered that painting. She'd given it to William when he'd moved out. It was of the family on one side and William on the other, with the moon at top center, uniting the two. "You still have that," she said, surprised.

William smiled beside her. "Of course," he responded, "It's gonna be worth millions some day."

Kris grinned at her brother.

Mark appeared in front of her a moment later. He smiled as he offered his hand. "Mark Welch," he said, smiling brightly.

Kris shook his hand and smiled back. "Nice to meet you." He wasn't exactly what she'd expected. For one, he wasn't Puerto Rican. More like the all-American type. Blonde hair, blue eyes, surfer boy tan. And he didn't really seem gay at all. Then again, neither did William.

"Want anything to drink?" Mark offered.

"No thanks," Kris replied.

William led her to the living room/kitchen and offered her a seat on the ratty old couch he'd found on the sidewalk somewhere.

Kris watch the two guys sit down at the kitchen table in front of her. They stared at her expectantly and she decided it would be best for her to begin. "I came to see how you were doing," she said to William. "We haven't really talked since ... you know." She wasn't entirely sure what to call it.

William shrugged. "I've been fine," he responded. "It's not like I wasn't expecting that kind of reaction." He watched her for a moment. "How are they doing with it?"

Kris shook her head. "It's now a taboo subject," she replied. "Nathan brought you up at dinner on Friday and Carlos snapped. They're definitely not coping well."

"And you?" William asked.

Kris hesitated, glancing at Mark. She felt a bit odd having this conversation with her brother's roommate in the room.

Mark seemed to sense this because he rose. "Perhaps, I'll go take a walk and let the two of you talk."

William held up his hand to stop him. "No, stay. Please."



Mark sat back down, casting apologetic eyes on Kris.

"I love you, William," Kris finally replied, smiling slightly. "I don't care if you're gay. I was just shocked, you know? It was probably the last thing I thought you'd say. But Leigh helped me regain my senses on the subject. You broke her heart, by the way."

William laughed, obviously relieved. "I'm sure she'll get over it."

Kris looked over at Mark. "So, Mark, where do you sleep?" she asked, trying to keep a straight face.

Mark looked totally shocked by the question. He opened his mouth to respond but nothing came out. He just looked helplessly at William.

"With me," William replied hesitantly.

Kris did her best not to laugh. They both looked kind of cute all blushing and nervous-like. "I see," she said. "I'm gonna have to tell Carlos."

William's eyes widened.

Kris finally started laughing, feeling better than she had in a while. This wasn't so bad.

"I hate you," William said, laughing along.

Kris smiled at her brother. "You love me," she told him. "So how long have you two been together?" Finally, the mysteries of her brother's life revealed. She couldn't remember the last time she'd known about any of his relationships. For a while, she'd thought that William was asexual. Ironically, it never occurred to her that he may be gay.

Mark spoke up. "Two and a half years," he answered, proudly.

Wow. That must've been tough hiding it all that time. Kris suddenly felt bad for her brother. Two and a half years was a long time to keep something like this a secret. It couldn't have been easy for him.

"So, what happened on Friday?" William asked suddenly. "Leigh called. She wanted to know if I'd seen you."

Kris sat back on the couch with a sigh. "Nathan was pissing me off," she responded. "Carlos, too. I just needed to get away for a few hours."

"Why were they pissing you off?" William wondered.

"Because they want to rule my life," Kris responded simply. "Nathan was talking about me transferring to Harvard and getting married and having kids. And Carlos was all for the idea."

Mark shook his head. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing," Kris admitted. "I blew up at Leigh later."



William leaned forward. "Kris, you don't have to do what they tell you," he told her. "They're not going to be happy unless you do exactly what they want, but you don't have to forsake your happiness for theirs. They've lived their lives already. You live yours."

Kris smiled at her brother. "Thank you," she said. "I just wish I was as brave as you."

Mark laughed. "Him? Brave? Please. You should've seen him run out of the apartment the other day cause there was a little mouse in the bathroom."

"You were scared of a little mouse?" Kris teased. "You? Mr. I'm-So-Manly?"

William glared at Mark. "You're in big trouble."

Mark stuck out his tongue. "I'm so scared."

Kris smiled. She liked Mark already. He reminded her of a little kid, even though he had to be close to William's age. Kris estimated he was about twenty-five or twenty-six. Though he looked more like twenty. The Winnie-the-Pooh tee shirt didn't help.

"So, how's business?" William asked. "Sell anything else since the last time?"

Kris shook her head. "I sat out there yesterday for a few hours but it looked like it was going to rain, so I packed everything up." She brightened. "Oh, but I received my first fan mail."

William appeared interested. "Do tell."

"This person, J.R.," she explained. "I'm not sure if it's a guy or a girl though. I should ask. Well, anyway they wanted to know if I had a gallery of my work." She laughed. "We've been emailing back and forth for the past week or so."

William clapped slightly. "Good work."

Kris beamed. "Why thank you."

"How are things with you and Nathan?"

Kris's smile disappeared. "They're okay."

"That doesn't sound good," Mark commented.

Kris sighed. "Is it a bad sign when you can't wait for your boyfriend to move away?" she asked needlessly.

William and Mark exchanged a look.

"I'm sure we're just going through a dry spell," she continued. "I'm sure things will work out." Though she wasn't entirely sure she wanted them to work out.

* * *

Dear Kris,

If you go forth with the collection, I would like to place my order to buy it from you.



Doesn't matter how much it costs. I'll pay anything :o)

I can understand how you feel about your art. It's tough to bear your soul to the world day in and day out, and feel yourself rejected. And I find it admirable that you persist on doing so. But trust me when I say, that it's better to be rejected for being who you are, than accepted for being somebody you're not. You must be having a really rough week for my emails to be cheering you up so much. If you ever need to talk about anything, well, I'm available.

Take care, J.R.

Dear J.R.,

Are you serious about buying the collection? I'll start on it, if you are.

Thank you for what you said, regarding my art. I guess you're right about it being better to be accepted for being myself, but more often than not, that's not the way things turn out. I wish I could be brave enough to change my life around and live it the way I want to. But I'm not sure I'm strong enough to do that. Sometimes being accepted for who you're not is better ... at least you're accepted.

**Take care,
Kris**

PS: What does J.R. stand for?

14

The hosts of the show introduced themselves, smiling so brightly, Julianne was sure their faces were frozen in that position. They made small talk with the actress while their crew set up the backdrop and the lighting.

Julianne fussed with the microphone tucked on the collar of her shirt. It kept scratching against her throat. Or at least, that's what she complained to the people doing the interview. It appeared to throw them off. Like they didn't know how to handle the situation. It amused her.

At long last, everything was set up and Julianne sent a silent prayer for the torture to end as quickly and painlessly as possible.

The guy behind the camera counted off and then the little red light came on. Julianne transformed herself into her publicity persona.

"I'm Michael Jacobs."

"And I'm Susana Clark. We're here with Julianne Franqui, star of the smash-hit show, *Guardian*. Glad you could join us, Julianne."

Julianne smiled. "Happy to be here, Susana."



Michael leaned forward. "So, Julianne, we're here on the set of *Guardian*. But this isn't for the show, correct?"

Did they really think the audience was that stupid? "No, Michael, you're correct. This is actually the set for *Guardian: A Second Chance*, which should be hitting theaters early next fall."

"Let's talk about your character for a moment," said Susana. "Tell us about Kiara."

"Kiara is a guardian angel, who is trying to make up for the life she lived while she was human. She tries to redeem herself by helping others on earth."

"If she was so bad," Michael began, "How did she manage to become an angel?"

"Well," Julianne explained, "She got killed while saving somebody else's life. The boy that she saved prayed for her soul. So God made her an angel. She wanders around Earth, helping people in distress."

"So how does she achieve redemption?"

Julianne smiled. "That's kind of what the movie is about. She is reunited with the boy whose life she saved. And once again his life is in jeopardy. She's got to find a way to help him. If she succeeds, she gets the choice of continuing her life as a Guardian or returning to Earth as a human. Second chance at life, that sort of thing."

Michael nodded. "So does she achieve it?"

Julianne laughed. "Guess you'll have to watch the movie to find out."

Susana laughed as well. "So basically the show will continue with the outcome of the movie?" she asked. "If Kiara continues as an angel, she continues as an angel on the show. If she returns as a human, the show changes to her life as a human being?"

"That's correct. The movie will premiere before the TV Show, so it won't spoil the ending of the movie." She laughed. "That's provided you go see the movie before the season premiere."

Susana nodded. "Is it much different working on a film than on the show?"

Julianne considered the question. "Well, the movie has a different director. For the show, we pretty much had somebody different every episode. But Gina Loeb, the director for *A Second Chance*, is excellent. It's nice to have that consistency. It's also nice to work with a bigger crew and a bigger budget. Everything's kind of the same, just on a larger scale."

Michael smiled. "Well, thank you for joining us, Julianne. We wish you luck with the movie. It sounds like it's going to be a hit."

Susana turned to the camera. "Thank you for joining us on this exclusive interview here on the set of *Guardian: A Second Chance*, coming to a theater near you this fall. I'm Susana Clark with Entertainment TV. Have a good night."

"Aaaaaand you're clear."

Julianne removed the microphone from her collar and handed it to one of the crew people.

Susana smiled at her. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Julianne," she said, extending her freshly manicured hand.



"Likewise," Julianne replied, shaking the woman's hand. She shook Michael's too for safe measure. Then as politely as possible, excused herself and ran off to the trailer.

Once safe, she collapsed on the couch. Free at last. Sitting up, she grabbed the laptop. It had been days since she'd checked her mail and she wanted to know if Kris had responded.

She wasn't disappointed. She read the email a few times, debating on how to respond.

Dear Kris,

I definitely want to buy the collection. Definitely!

I understand what you mean about not being brave enough to change your life around. I have a similar problem. I guess with me, it's that I feel that when people look at me, they don't see who I really am. I've perfected the art of being somebody else to the point that my entire persona is just a lie. I just want to be myself.

Though I suppose to do that, I'd have to figure out who that is first. It's gotten to the point that when I look in the mirror, I see a jaded reflection. Just billions of tiny fragments reflecting different parts of me. I long to see the whole picture.

But that's life, right? I guess you take what you can get, and then move on.

But you know, change doesn't have to mean an entire revolution. Just one tiny step can make so much good without shattering any protective barriers. Maybe if you do something that makes you happy every day, the unhappy aspects of life won't seem so meaningful. They say it's the little things that matter, right?

**Take care,
Julia Raye**

Julianne stared at her name. It had been years since she'd written it. How strange, that complete honesty should start to feel like a lie.

As she sent the email, Julianne wondered what reality was anymore. "This is what I get for watching *The Matrix* too many times," she muttered.

15

Dear Julia (may I call you that?),

I'll get working on the art pieces ASAP. Thank you! You don't understand how happy it makes me to know you love my work.

Thank you for telling me your name. I kept wondering if you were a boy or a girl. It's good to finally have a clearer picture of whom it is I've been emailing. Do you have a boyfriend? How old are you? What would be your ideal date? What do you do for fun? Your favorite color? Forgive me if I ask too many questions. I'm not used to writing



to people I don't know. The only other person I e-mail is my dad in California. Where do you live?

There I go again. I'll shut up.

Take care,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

Feel free to call me Julia. It's been a while since anyone has. It's a bit odd, but I suppose I can get used to it. It's my name after all :o).

But anyway. I'm twenty-three. Single. My favorite color is blue. My ideal date would involve a romantic stroll down the beach at sunset and a candlelit dinner. Okay, just kidding. Actually, I'm not sure what my ideal date would be. I've never really been on one. Sad, isn't it? I think that if I were to find the person of my dreams, it wouldn't matter what we did, as long as we did it together.

Wow, that's so corny! But I suppose it's true. I'm a hopeless romantic, I guess. For fun, I write poetry. It's my escape from the tediousness of reality. And I live in Los Angeles.

Did I get them all? Your turn. And my turn to be nosy. What is your favorite flower? Your favorite book? When was the last time you stayed up to watch the sunrise? When was the last time you laughed?

Take care,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

I'm twenty. I have a boyfriend named Nathan, who's eighteen and leaving for Harvard Law School in the fall. He's really a nice guy when he wants to be. But he seems to not want to be one lately. I'm guessing he's just nervous about going off to college. And probably feeling insecure about our relationship and the distance. I'm sure he'll come around once he gets settled.

My favorite color is green. Forest green, actually. It reminds me of nature. I'm a big nature freak. My room is covered with posters of waterfalls and lakes and trees. That sort of thing. I recently became vegetarian, which pissed off my mom to no end. But I'm sticking to it. Tofu here I come.

I love roses. I know, everyone loves roses. But they're just so beautiful and poetic. Nathan gave me a rose when we first got together. And one of the thorns cut my finger. He was all apologetic but I thought it was the most amazing thing. Beautiful and dangerous. I like that combination. That doesn't mean I have a thing for bad boys, though. Just flowers. LOL. Okay, wait. Perhaps I should rephrase that. Ah, forget it. I think you know what I meant.



I'm not sure what I would like to do on a date. I'd like to go away, somewhere beautiful. Not that New York isn't. It is. But I'd like to go someplace that looks new and untouched. Maybe I'll run away and get lost in the Amazon.

I can't say I'm big on reading. I can't think of what my favorite book would be. The last thing I read was Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I had to write this essay for class. It was a nightmare.

The sunrise I haven't seen in years. Maybe I never have. Do you do that? Watch the sun rise? You *are* a poet. I'd never even think to do that.

My roommate and best friend, Leigh, makes me laugh constantly. She's an aspiring actress though I think she'd be better off as a stand-up comic. I'm grateful to her, my life would be kind of bleak otherwise.

Take care,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

I try to watch the sun set at least once a week. My house is by the beach, so I sit out on the sand and watch it set. It makes me feel calm. I long for peace and silence. Life gets really noisy sometimes, don't you think? Maybe it's just me.

I'm sorry to learn that you are not a Shakespeare fan. He's my favorite. I have all of his works. I've read them several times over. I started out as a Comparative Literature major in college, but I dropped out to pursue other interests. Books and poetry are my passion. Literature as whole in fact. If you ever have another essay to write, I'll be happy to help you.

The last book that I read was *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro. I enjoyed it a lot.

Do you have any pets? I've been thinking of getting one. I've never really had one so I was thinking I'd start with something small. Like a goldfish. Then I can work my way up to a gerbil or something. I'm not sure I could handle jumping right into a relationship with a cat. Those last a while, I think.

Oh, another one of my passions is cooking. I rarely have time for it though. But I could watch the Food Network twenty-four hours a day. The Iron Chef, The Naked Chef, Bobby Flay ... Ah, heaven.

Take care,
Julia



Leigh walked out of her room at four-thirty in the morning, to find her best friend sitting on the couch. She yawned and stared at Kris silently. "What are you doing?" she asked finally.

Kris glanced up from the book she was reading. "Oh, good morning," she said. "There's coffee in the machine."

"Thanks," Leigh responded, not moving from the spot she occupied. "But what are you doing?"

Kris held up the book. "I'm reading."

"At four-thirty?"

Kris shrugged. "I decided to stay up and watch the sun rise," she replied casually.

Leigh blinked a few times, suddenly certain that between her bed and the living room she'd somehow stepped into an alternate universe. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"I need coffee," Leigh muttered, heading toward the kitchen. "It's too early for this madness."

While Leigh prepared herself a cup of coffee, Kris returned to the book. She wasn't entirely certain what had possessed her to buy *The Remains of the Day*. But as she'd passed by a bookstore on her way to classes earlier that day, she'd seen the novel clearly displayed on the window of the small shop. Kris had taken it as a sign.

Not to mention, of course, that she was extremely curious about her new friend. They'd been exchanging emails for a few weeks now, but somehow Kris felt that it wasn't enough. She wanted to know more.

Like why Julia enjoyed this book so much, for instance. Kris had managed to get through half of it. She'd expected some kind of action or plot. But it was just some English butler talking about how much he loved to serve his master. And something about a trip somewhere. Kris wasn't sure.

Leigh sat down beside Kris a few minutes later. She gulped down half the cup and sighed in relief. "So what's going on?" Leigh asked. "I mean, the fact that you're staying up to see the sunrise is bizarre enough. But you're actually reading a book, Kris. As in, voluntarily. As in, you're creeping me out."

Kris rolled her eyes. "I'm trying to be more literary."

Leigh nodded. "You've lost your mind, haven't you?" she guessed. "The breakdown a few weeks ago was the start of your sanity's steady decline."

"Actually, I feel kind of good," Kris said, putting the book aside. "When was the last time you looked at the sunrise, Leigh?"

"Oh, I'd say about every single day on my way to work."

Kris smiled and nodded. "Yes, but did you really stop to look at it? Did you think, 'Wow, look at that wonderful spectacle. A true miracle in its own right.'"



Leigh downed the rest of her coffee and stared at Kris. "You joined a cult, didn't you? One of those freaky Heaven's Gate type of deals? Mass suicides, long robes, brain washing, that sort of thing?"

Kris sighed, grabbing the novel. "Nevermind."

Leigh put her palm to Kris's forehead. "No fever," she said. "Stick out your tongue."

Kris swatted Leigh's hand away. "Don't you have to go to work?"

"Maybe I should call in sick."

"But you're not sick."

Leigh stood and headed for the kitchen to rinse out the cup. "But you clearly are. What is going on with you? First you run out on Nathan, an action that I would've supported wholeheartedly had I not been worried out of my mind. Then for the past few weeks you've been like ... airy."

"Airy?" Kris repeated, glancing over her shoulder toward the kitchen.

Leigh grabbed her backpack from the back of one of the chairs. "Yes, airy," she said, slipping it on.

"I'm pleased to learn that I've been well-ventilated."

Leigh rolled her eyes. "Okay fine, perhaps airy is the wrong choice of words. But that doesn't exempt you from this strange behavior. I'm not sure how I feel about you watching sunrises all of a sudden. And like ... reading."

Kris chuckled. "Is overreacting lesson number two in acting class?" she wondered.

"Yep," Leigh answered. "How am I doing?"

"I'd give you two thumbs up," Kris assured her. "You're gonna be late."

Leigh nodded, grabbing her keys from the counter. "Right. I'm off to feed legal addictive stimulants to the anxious masses. See ya tonight."

Kris waved, and turned her attention back to the book. But she couldn't concentrate. Rising from the couch, she walked over to the balcony where the sky was beginning to lighten. How strange that such a random activity should suddenly make her feel so free.

Perhaps Leigh was right, she was acting strange. But she felt so much better. Lately she'd had confidence and an increasing sense of self.

And she wasn't entirely sure why.

* * *

Dear Julia,



This may sound a bit odd, but I stayed up today to watch the sunrise. Leigh probably thinks I've lost my mind. Actually, she *does* think I've lost my mind. But you know, it was so beautiful. I couldn't see much with all of the buildings in my way. I'm sure it would be even more breathtaking from the shore. Still, it made me think about my life's direction. Or lack, thereof.

I mean, life is so defined by what career one chooses. It's not even about having a job and money. It's all about an identity. A doctor. An artist. A lawyer. It's kind of depressing, that we all become these words that don't even conjure up a complete picture of who we are. We just kind of become these stereotypes. Rich doctors. Starving artists. Bloodsucking lawyers.

I took a picture of a bird yesterday. I didn't know why at the time, but I think subconsciously, I was jealous. Jealous that a supposedly lesser creature should be freer than I. But I think that's what makes animals more majestic. They have innate freedom. Humans love to confine each other into smaller and smaller boxes. And all we can do is punch holes and hope air passes through.

I'm probably making no sense. And I think now I'm starting to sound like you. :)

Today (once I go to bed and wake up again, that is), I'm going to a museum. I like to walk through and look at all the paintings and let them fill me with peacefulness and hope for the future. Kinda like you and your sunsets. Cause you're right, the world gets very noisy sometimes. You have to press the mute button once in a while.

**Your friend,
Kris**

17

Adrian ran a hand through his dark hair in frustration. "Can we leave now?" he asked for the umpteenth time since they'd arrived.

Julianne simply grinned, walking over to look at another picture. "Where's your sense of culture, Adrian?" she asked. She motioned to a painting of an undecipherable nature. "I mean, art is ..." She searched for the right adjective.

"Incredibly boring," Adrian finished for her. "Why are we here, anyway? I thought we were going to see a movie."

Julianne shook her head, disappointed by her best friend's attitude. "We can see a movie later. That's all we do, anyway. Watch movies, make movies. I mean, we need to expand our view point." She moved on.

Adrian trailed behind her. "I think the fame is finally starting to gnaw at your senses. After you finish filming *Guardian*, I think we should get away. *Far* away."

Julianne perked up as she turned. "I couldn't agree with you more."

"Now see, that's what I like to hear," Adrian replied with an easy smile. "Where do you want to go? Egypt? Greece?"

"New York!" Julianne responded quickly.



Adrian blinked a few times. "But we were just *in* New York."

Julianne considered. "But there's so much to do!" she argued. "Museums to visit ... parks to walk through ..." *People to stalk*. She frowned at the thought. *I'm losing it*. Still frowning, she started walking by several displays.

"She's lost it," Adrian muttered, jogging to catch up. "Jules, is there something going on? Something you want to talk about perhaps?"

Julianne shook her head. "No, let's go catch that movie," she answered, heading toward the exit. What had possessed her to visit a museum, anyway? She instantly recalled Kris's email about going to a museum that day. *Well it's not like I'm gonna run into her here. What the hell is wrong with me?* "What do you want to see?" she asked, once they'd reached her car.

Adrian stared into Julianne's blue eyes with a mixture of curiosity and utter confusion. She was acting strangely. Something was up. "Whatever," he replied casually, getting into the passenger side of the Rav4. "So, what's been going on with you the past couple of weeks?"

Julianne shrugged nonchalantly. She started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot, not entirely sure where to go. She figured she'd stop at the first movie theater she saw. "Nothing. Acting, eating, sleeping. The usual. How's the movie coming along?"

"Excellent," he replied, excitedly. "I really feel I have a chance of winning at Sundance."

Julianne smiled over at him. "That's great, Adrian. I can't wait to see it."

Adrian nodded, pleased with himself. Someday he would be right up there with Julianne picking up an Academy Award. And if he wasn't, well hell, at least she was rising to the top. "So anything else going on?" he asked.

"Well, I've been emailing with this person," she answered, her eyes focused on the road. She was hesitant about bringing up the subject, if only because she knew that Adrian would make a big deal about it. But keeping it secret made it seem like even more of a big deal, and it wasn't.

Now we're getting somewhere, thought Adrian. "And does 'this person' have a name?" he asked.

Julianne glanced at him quickly and smiled. "Her name is Kris," she told him. "And before you get your hopes up, she's got a boyfriend."

"Damn," he said. "Can't you find me a single one?"

"Funny."

Adrian considered this new information. "So, she's got a boyfriend. Where is she from? How did you meet her?"

Julianne hesitated. "I got her email from the business card you tossed at me. I wanted to tell her how much I liked her drawing. Then we just kept emailing. She's really nice."

Ah-*hah*! Bingo. Of course Julianne would pick a straight girl who lives on the other side of the country. Talk about playing it safe. "I'm glad you've got a new friend," he replied. He stifled a sigh. For some reason, he had an impending sense of doom.



* * *

Dear Kris,

I hope you found the solace you sought today, amidst the endless rows of paintings and sculptures. I'm glad you enjoyed the sunrise. I missed it when I was in New York. Maybe on my next trip.

I know what you mean about being defined by one's career. It's like you aren't even yourself anymore. You're so-and-so, the architect or whatever profession you decide (or fall into). Kind of depressing. Now you've bummed me out :o)

So tell me something that nobody knows about you.

**Your friend,
Julia**

* * *

Kiara touched her fingers to the water, watching the ripples closely as if waiting for something magical to occur. But the liquid stilled momentarily and the angel looked away.

Sighing, she glanced at the one who held her future in his hands. "Cody," she whispered.

He turned suddenly, looking about, certain he'd heard his name. His eyes narrowed. "Who's there?"

The silence of the night answered him. He stepped away from the water's edge. He visited the lake frequently now. It made him feel closer to those he'd lost. He opened his mouth, then started laughing. "Sorry, I forgot my next line."

"Cut!" Gina Loeb yelled, and not for the first time. "Max, for the billionth time, you don't have a line there."

Julianne rolled her eyes. Why they'd cast Max Trouy was beyond her. He was nice looking and all but the boy couldn't act if his life depended on it. They'd gone through ten takes of the same exact scene and Julianne was exasperated.

Max nodded. "Sorry," he apologized.

Gina sighed, going through some of her notes for the scene. She looked up. "Let's break for lunch," she announced.

Julianne sent a silent prayer of appreciation to whomever was listening and headed to her trailer. Three envelopes awaited her arrival. She hadn't read any more of her fan mails since the first three she'd opened. They all rested in her drawer now, collecting dust. The three new ones joined the others.

She slipped out of her wings and collapsed on the couch with a sigh. "What a day. And it's not even half over." She grabbed her laptop. "Please cheer me up, Kris," she pleaded with the screen as she waited for her e-mail to load. A slow smile crept across her lips as she saw the new message in her inbox.



Dear Julia,

Something that nobody knows about me? I hope this doesn't come back and bite me in the butt. If I start getting notes saying, "I know what you did last summer," I'm coming after you. ;)

Let me think. Okay I'll tell you. Nobody knows this. Not even Leigh. But I cheated on Nathan a few months ago. It was really stupid. I was at this party at the dorms in NYU and there was this guy there. And I think I had a little too much to drink cause he started looking really good, even though I see him now and wonder what the hell I was thinking. Anyway, I made out with him. I never told anyone!! I feel so horrible about it, too. I don't know what happened. Nathan and I had gotten into a fight and I just felt really depressed

But that's no excuse. Maybe someday I'll stop feeling guilty about it, but that's doubtful.

What's something nobody knows about *you*? Now that I've bared my soul to you :) Oh! And what do you look for in a guy? I'm curious.

Your friend,
Kris

Julianne frowned at the last paragraph. *I could answer truthfully and kill two birds with one stone. Or I could lie.* She thought it over. Kris didn't know who she was so it didn't matter if she knew anything personal about her. On the other hand, if Kris found out, she could let it slip out to the media. But who'd believe her? She's got the emails... But who'd believe her? You can always tell Nathan that his girlfriend cheated on him.

She sighed, staring at the blank reply box.

A knock at the door interrupted her decision-making. "Yeah?" she called.

"Your lunch, Ms. Franqui," one of the crew's gophers said awkwardly. He stood at the doorway holding a paper bag and a bottle of water.

Julianne nodded to the table at her right. "Just put it there." She glanced back down at the computer screen.

The guy obeyed her wishes and left without another word.

Alone once more, Julianne chewed on her lip. *You've been honest with her so far, if you start lying now, what's the point of keeping the friendship?*

Dear Kris,

I promise you won't receive any creepy notes—at least not from me. I don't think you should feel so guilty about what happened with the other guy. Those things happen. Besides, you're young ...



Julianne stopped writing and frowned. "What the hell am I? Her mother?" She deleted the last two sentences and continued.

I also promise not to tell anyone about your little secret. Even if CNN knocks down my door and tortures me for hours on end, I will not divulge any information pertaining to your little rendezvous at the NYU dorms. :o)

But seriously, thank you for trusting me with the information. I'm sure it's due in part to the fact that we don't know each other, so you feel safe. But by the same token, you *don't* know me. For all you know, I could be Nathan in disguise. Hey, don't worry, I'm not. ;o)

As for me, well ... I've got a secret. But one person does know about it, so I suppose that nulls the whole 'nobody knows' aspect of the request. Still, I think it's something you should know.

Julianne stared at the screen, uncertain of how to proceed. "What do I write exactly?" she wondered out loud. "I'm gay? I'm a lesbian? I'm a homosexual? Flaming dyke?" She slapped her forehead. "Why is it so hard to come out?"

She took a deep breath.

I like women.

"A lot," she added to herself.

Guys, not so much. At least not sexually. My best friend is a guy and I love him to death. He's just .. not my type. So I guess that answers your question as to what I look for in a guy.

I hope the news doesn't freak you out ...

**Your friend,
Julia**

Her finger hovered over the 'enter' button. *What do I have to lose? It's not like we're best friends or anything...*

Still, she hesitated.

"You are a coward," she said to herself. And before she could change her mind, hit send.

18

"Oh wow."



Leigh glanced away from the television set. "News from your dad?"

Kris looked away from Julia's email and shook her head. "No, um, this girl I've been emailing with for a few weeks. She's gay."

"What else is new?" Leigh said with a shrug, her attention back on the TV. "It's like this wellkept secret that's slowly seeping out to the masses. Like a tidal wave. A big gay tidal wave, ready to convert anything in its path."

Kris laughed at her roommate's comment. "Right," she replied, turning back to the computer. How strange that she'd spent twenty years of her life not knowing a single gay person and all of a sudden, they were everywhere. "Guess that pretty much evens out my range of friends."

"You need a bisexual now," Leigh commented. "You've got the hot gay boy, the mysterious cyber lesbian, and the straight girl. Still missing one."

"Want to be bi?" Kris offered.

Leigh considered. "You know, I would be, but I think my character works best as a straight girl, don't you think?"

"This being the Brooklyn straight girl with the Southern accent?"

Leigh grinned. "I'm changing my name to Mary Sue. Or Billie Jo."

Kris laughed. "You need some serious therapy." Returning to the matter at hand, she hit reply.

Dear Julia,

I'm glad to know that my secret is safe with you. And thank you for your revelation. I admit it wasn't one I was expecting, but I feel honored that you would reveal something that you've only told one other person.

My step-brother just came out a few weeks ago. The family didn't take it well. They've pretty much disowned him. The last time I went to my parents' apartment, they'd taken down all of the pictures he was in. I wish they would understand, but religion has deep roots in my culture. It's pretty much a lost cause.

Anyway, I didn't mean to go off on a tangent. I'll rephrase my original question. What do you look for in a *girl*?

I got my essay back on Friday. The one on Shakespeare. I got a C. Thankfully, it was the last one of the semester. Finals are coming up soon. And no more English classes for me! But I would've loved your help had I met you sooner. I would've liked a B on that paper. Oh well.

So, Miss Poet, what is your favorite poem?

Your friend,
Kris

* * *



"I wonder what she looks like," Kris said thoughtfully, staring off toward nowhere in particular. She was parked at her usual spot in the shade, her artwork proudly on display. So far no one had stopped to buy anything, but that was okay. It was early yet.

Leigh let out a long yawn and stretched. "Who?" she asked finally, absently flipping through the pages of her magazine.

Kris watched this display for a moment, then shook her head. "Julia," she finally replied, looking away. She stared at a blindfolded guy juggling cans of soda for a couple of seconds, before returning her gaze to Leigh. "The girl in California."

"Ask her for a picture," Leigh suggested. "How did you meet this chick, anyway? You'd never mentioned her before."

Kris suddenly realized something. "You met her!" she exclaimed excitedly. "She bought that drawing from you. You know, that day a few weeks back when I left you in charge of selling stuff?"

Leigh stopped to think back. She shook her head and smiled. "That wasn't a girl. It was a guy. A really, really *hot* guy." She frowned suddenly. "You know, I even gave him my number but he never called." She froze, suddenly looking panicked. "Wait, what if that *was* her. She said she was a lesbian. Maybe she's just really butch! Oh shit!! Oh my God, I think I may be gay."

Kris blinked a few times, suddenly confused. Leigh gave Julia her number? She frowned, thinking back. "A guy called once," Kris said suddenly, remembering instantly. "I thought it was wrong number! It was during the whole mess with William, I didn't think to ask who he was calling."

Leigh paused in her panicking. "Are you sure it was a guy?"

"Well it sounded like one," Kris replied. That couldn't have been a woman, could it? She shook her head. "Who knows anymore." Ah well, as long as she was being open-minded. "So what did he/she look like?"

"Like a really hot guy!" Leigh whined, banging her head on the table. She stopped. "Oh wait, wait. I just remembered something. When he walked away from me, he went up to a girl and handed her the drawing." She nodded, suddenly looking relieved. "So that was probably that chick you're talking about. Which means, I did in fact give my number to a guy." She sighed with relief.

Kris considered this new information. "Well, then what did the girl look like?"

Leigh scrunched up her face in deep concentration. "Uh, I don't remember," she said apologetically. "I think she had blonde hair. I was too busy checking out the guy's butt."

"What is it with people and butts?" Kris wondered. "It's a butt."

Leigh sighed. "It's more than just a butt, my dear Kristina. It's ... Well, they're pretty okay? Especially when they're nice and tight. Yum."

"Gross, Leigh," Kris replied. "That's nasty. You just said yum to a butt."

"Firm and luscious..."



Kris held up her hand. "You *will* desist."

Leigh laughed. "So the guy called and you thought it was a wrong number? Damn. That could've been the beginning of something beautiful." She shrugged. "Oh well, maybe next time. He's friends with your fiend?"

Kris thought back to some of Julia's emails. "She did tell me her best friend was a straight guy. That's probably who she was with." She was kind of sad in a way. Of all the times she'd left Leigh alone at the table. She could've met Julia in person. "So, she's blonde. Is that it?"

"I really don't remember," Leigh replied. "It was a long time ago. Had I known it was important, I would've committed her to memory." She grinned suddenly at something in the magazine. "We're taking this quiz. It will reveal if Nathan and you are indeed meant for one another."

Kris glanced over. "What is that, *Seventeen*?" she asked.

"Hush," Leigh replied. "Question one. When you and your boyfriend are out on a romantic stroll, what's usually running through your mind? A) I can't believe he's so romantic, he's definitely the one for me. B) Wow! Look at that cute guy over there, or C) I wonder what's on TV tonight?"

Kris rolled her eyes. "Is this really necessary?"

"Of course it is," Leigh answered. "Now pick one."

Kris sighed, and thought it over. It was definitely not A, but definitely not B either. She could remember several times when her thoughts had drifted to other topics. "I guess C," she said.

Leigh nodded and made a mark on the page. "Mmhmm. Moving on. Question two. In bed, my boyfriend is A) The Energizer bunny B) Limp Bizkit, or C) Han Solo." Leigh giggled. "Guess we know the answer to that one."

Kris rolled her eyes again. "How many questions are there?"

"Just five, calm down." She cleared her throat. "Question three. Whenever my boyfriend is not near me, I feel: A) Like the world is going to end. B) Glad that he's not around so I can scope out some other hot bods, or C) Fine. I have a lot of other stuff to keep me busy."

Kris sighed. "C." *I'm starting to see a pattern here.*

Leigh continued. "Question four. When we are together, my boyfriend: A) Always listens and cares about the things I have to say. B) Talks way too much! I'd rather be thinking about the cute guy in math class, or C) Thinks the world revolves around him."

"Definitely C," Kris answered.

"One more. Question five. Over all, I feel that: A) I'm completely in love, he is absolutely perfect! B) There are plenty of other fish in the sea, or C) I deserve much better than this." Leigh stared at Kris expectantly.

Kris frowned, not wishing to answer. *Nathan may not be perfect, but he's all I've got.*



Leigh rolled her eyes. "Your results are mostly C's, which means the following: You are obviously settling for something less than you deserve! Dump this loser before Mr. Right passes you by." Leigh looked up with a satisfied smile. "See?"

"Right. My life decided for me through the professional and accurate analysis of a teeny bopper questionnaire."

Leigh shrugged. "Be that way," she said. "But you can do so much better than Nathan. He's a total ass."

"Oh and I suppose your life is just brimming with perfect guys?"

"You just gotta keep looking," Leigh replied.

Kris looked back at the juggler from before. "And if you don't find him, then what?"

Leigh laughed. "Then you move in with your best friend."

19

Julianne paced nervously in front of the computer. She'd managed to somehow avoid checking her email for a week, but her patience was starting to wear thin. She was scared of Kris's reaction. *What if she starts insulting me? What if she's so disgusted she didn't even respond? She sighed sadly. What if she stops being my friend.*

The devil on her shoulder spoke up. *And why do you care if she never talks to you again? You were doing perfectly fine before she ever came along. It's not like you're going to lose anything by never speaking to her again.*

But Julianne knew that wasn't true. Besides Adrian and her grandmother, she'd never found somebody else she could open up to. Even when she chatted online, it was always one-time conversations. They never amounted to anything. She lied to them all, anyway. But Kris ... Kris was different.

Julianne let out a deep breath and stopped in front of the laptop. She moved the arrow on the screen until she was confronted with her inbox. Both to her relief and dread, there was an email from Kris.

Just open it, she thought. Get it over with.

She counted to five and then clicked on the email. She read it over. Once. Twice. She blinked a few times and smiled. "She doesn't care!!" she yelled happily. She started dancing around the living room, nearly tripping on the rug.

Returning to the computer, she hit reply. Julianne couldn't believe how relieved she felt.

"Or how incredibly dorky I am," she added, shaking her head. But she didn't particularly care, cause she was happy. "I'm sure *Entertainment Tonight* would've paid top dollar for a copy of that performance."

Reining in her excitement, she began to type.



Dear Kris,

I'm relieved that my sexuality doesn't present a problem. I admit I was a bit nervous about telling you.

"Ha, try petrified," Julianne commented.

I'm sorry about your family's reaction to your step-brother's news. It must have been really hard for him coming out to them. But it's really nice that you're there for him. I'm sure it means a great deal to him to know that he's got your love and support. I know how important it's been to have Adrian's, and he's not even family. I'm pretty certain that mine would react in much the same manner as yours did, though for different reasons.

I come from an upper middle class family and they (my mother and sister especially) are the kind of people that make everything about what every one else thinks. If they were to find out about me ... well, the world would end at my household. I don't even think they're homophobic, per se. Just too focused on their social standing to think for themselves.

Now who's going off on a tangent? :o) But you spoke of your culture... what culture are you referring to? Every time I read one of your emails I realize how very little I know about you.

My favorite poem. You couldn't ask me something simple? ;o) I have so many I love. But I suppose I can pick one for you. I'd have to go with "The Indian Serenade" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. I'm particularly fond of the first stanza. I am a sucker for romance poetry, though I'm sure you could guess that by now. :o)

So who's your favorite artist?

Your friend,
Julia

* * *

"I brought a couple of scripts to glance over," Eric Moura said, handing them over to an impatient Julianne.

Her agent had shown up at her house early the next morning to discuss some of her upcoming roles. She looked at the first screenplay and then the other.

"They're filming around the same time," Eric continued. "Shortly after the release of *Guardian*, so you'll have to pick one or the other."

Julianne flipped through one of the scripts, not particularly reading anything. "So which one do you think would be best?"

Eric sighed, running a hand through his disheveled brown hair. He pushed his glasses up with one finger. "Frankly, I'm not sure. One is an excellent role, but it may be a bit more controversial than the other."

Julianne glanced up. "What do you mean?"



"The character's a lesbian," Eric responded hesitantly.

Julianne stared at him. "Absolutely not, Eric," she replied at once.

"I figured you might say that," he said, looking a bit disappointed. "But it's an excellent script and the character is truly remarkable. Definitely Oscar bound."

"Lesbians don't win Oscars in Hollywood," Julianne informed him, tossing both scripts aside. "What's the other role?"

"A robot," he answered.

Julianne sighed. "That's it? That's all you've gotten me? A lesbian and a robot? What kind of crap is that?"

Eric shook his head. "They're both good roles," he said on his own behalf. "Though I feel that the lesbian role may only help you grow artistically."

"Grow? No, it will not help me *grow*. It will only box me into a category I will never escape from. I play an *angel* for crying out loud. No one's going to want to see me get it on with another woman!"

"Hollywood's evolving," Eric tried again.

"Screw Hollywood's evolution, Eric!" Julianne yelled. "I will not fall into this bullshit trap!"

Eric Moura sighed again and shrugged his shoulders. He was used to dealing with Julianne's temper. It was legendary. She must have been in a good mood today. "Well, on to the good news," he said, removing some paperwork from his briefcase. "*Guardian* wants to renew your contract for two more seasons. Do you accept?"

"Gladly," Julianne answered, though she was fuming still from the original topic. A lesbian?! She couldn't play a lesbian! She may as well start prancing around wearing an "Out and Proud" tee shirt.

"Great." He handed the papers over. "You can go over the details with your lawyers. I've already faxed them a copy." He rose to his feet. "If I get you any better offers, I'll contact you. In the mean time, think it over, Julianne. At least read the scripts."

Julianne walked the man to the door, flipping through the papers in her hand. "Yeah, whatever," she muttered, and slammed the door shut behind him.

She headed back to the living room and picked up one of the scripts. She guessed the one entitled *A Robot's Diary* wasn't the one about the lesbian. So, she stared at the other's title page. *Summer's End*, written by Amy Robins. Julianne opened it to the first page, where she noted that the character of Tori Doyle was highlighted in yellow.

Julianne shook her head and went to close the screenplay, but paused as she noticed the setting. *New York City ... Kris ...* She frowned and threw the script across the living room. It crashed noisily against the vertical blinds. Angrily, she stormed up to her room and slammed the door.

She would not play a lesbian. No way. No how.



20

Kris stared at herself in the mirror and cocked her head to the side. Her mother had selected the most atrocious dress in the entire evening gown department. It was aquamarine with like ... ruffles. And tackily-placed sequins in the form of a mermaid. *There is no way in hell I'm wearing this in public. It's bad enough I have to wear it outside this dressing room.*

Swallowing her pride, she stepped outside to face the critics.

Sari smiled and nodded in approval. "*Mira que linda te ves.* Very nice."

Leigh had a look of obvious distaste and kept shaking her head, mouthing, "No way."

Kris gazed down at herself, then back up at her mom. "I'm not sure how I feel bout this one, *mami*," she commented. "Perhaps something a bit more ... subtle."

Sari nodded. "We'll keep looking. We've got all afternoon to get you a nice prom dress."

Please God, make the world end right now. Kris returned to the dressing room to slip out of nightmare number seven and back into regular clothes. *I hate shopping. I loathe it with a passion. I think all malls should die.*

"Where to?" Kris asked, casually, her tone masking her utter despair. She didn't even want to go to Nathan's prom. It had been hellish enough when it had been her own graduating class. *I'm being selfish. Nathan was a real trooper about going to my prom.* Resigned to her inevitable fate, she followed her mother to another rack of dresses from the Miss Reject collection.

Sari held up a red gown, but a look at the price tag made her put it back. "Isn't there a sales rack somewhere around here?" She glanced around.

Kris kept herself from audibly sighing. That was issue number two. Her parents' had enough to pay with her school and apartment, not to mention their own rent and food and Dimitri's needs. They couldn't afford to blow three hundred dollars on a stupid prom dress.

"It's too bad you gave your old one away," Sari commented.

Kris just nodded.

Leigh held up a black velvet dress. "How about this one?"

"That one's nice," Kris said, walking over to inspect it. It was soft. Soft was good. And it was pretty sexy. Nathan would approve. She glanced at her mother.

Sari came over and took the dress in her hands. She held it up in front of Kris. "Go try it on. We'll keep looking."

Kris retreated to the dressing room once more. They'd been on their quest for at least three hours and Kris was ready to keel over. *Please fit. Please look nice. I just want to get out of here.*

She slipped out of her clothes and into the dress. Kris stared at herself critically. It was tight enough to hug her curves in all the right areas. And showed off the right amount of cleavage,



enough to make Nathan happy, but not enough to give Carlos a heart attack. She was particularly fond of the slit on the side, allowing a fair amount of leg to show. Thankfully, not enough to make her appear like a total slut. Overall, Kris was content. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ears and smiled. *Let's hope they like it ...*

Leigh whistled and clapped the moment she spotted Kris. "Now *that's* hot."

Sari twirled her finger, instructing Kris to spin around. Satisfied, she nodded and smiled. "Perfect."

Relieved, Kris went back inside to change. *Finally. We can go home now.* She put the dress back in the hanger and joined her mother and roommate. She handed the item over to Sari and watched her mother walk off to make the purchase.

"Nathan is going to die when he sees you," Leigh commented with a smile. "You look incredible in that."

Kris shrugged. "I'm just glad the search is over."

Leigh grinned. "Now it's off to find shoes."

* * *

Dear Julia,

I've been to Hell and back today. Shopping for prom dresses is *not* fun. But that wasn't even the worst of it. Dress shopping led to shoe shopping which led to make-up shopping and ended finally with underwear shopping. Why my mother insisted I buy new underwear is beyond me. It's not like Nathan is going to see it. Or anyone else for that matter.

So yeah, I have to go to Nathan's prom with him next week. I'm not looking forward to it. I've already been to mine and lived to tell about it. I'd feel guilty not going though, after Nathan went to mine. Still, I don't want to do that all over again. Nathan's getting a limousine with a few of his friends. And I hate his friends. They're so obnoxious and immature. They'll probably spend the night crushing beer bottles with their skulls in order to show off.

Can't wait.

I'm done venting now.

On to other non-so-relevant topics. I must admit that it took me a while to get used to the idea that William (my step-brother) is gay. It wasn't like I was disappointed in him or ashamed or anything of the sort. I suppose it was due mostly to the shock factor. William had always struck me as the man's man type of guy. Hehe. Guess I wasn't too far off. ;)

It was also due in part to the fact that I'd never met anyone gay before. I know it's kind of strange, me living in New York and all. I mean, I've *seen* gay people before. But I've never been friends with one. And to have William come out all of a sudden really threw me for a loop. But I'm over it now. I went to visit him and hung out with his boyfriend, Mark. They're both really cute together. And in spite of the family's reaction, he seems to be happy.

Oh, I forgot to mention I'm Puerto Rican. Well, half Puerto Rican, anyway. My mom was born there but she moved to New York when she was four. My (biological) father is Italian, but he was raised in America. He doesn't know much Italian and I'm ashamed to say I don't either. But



I speak pretty fluent Spanish, though English remains my first language. My mother's made sure that I learned it well. She kind of let it slide with my brother, Dimitri though. He understands the language but he doesn't like to speak it all that often.

There I go off again. I don't generally babble on so much, so I'm gonna assume it's your fault somehow. :)

My favorite artist is Salvador Dali. Ever hear of him? I think he's amazing.

Your friend,
Kris

After doing hitting send, she typed "The Indian Serenade" into an internet search engine, and pressed enter.

A moment later, she found the poem.

*I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low,
And the stars are shining bright
I arise from dreams of thee,
And a spirit in my feet Hath
led me--who knows how?
To thy chamber window, Sweet!*

*The wandering airs they faint
On the dark, the silent stream--
The champak odors fail
Like sweet thoughts in a dream;
The nightingale's complaint,
It dies upon her heart; As
I must on thine,
Oh, beloved as thou art!*

*O lift me from the grass!
I die! I faint! I fail!
Let thy love in kisses rain On
my lips and eyelids pale.
My cheek is cold and white, alas!
My heart beats loud and fast;-- Oh!
press it to thine own again, Where
it will break at last.*

Kris smiled at the words. *How sweet.* She suddenly remembered something and opened a fresh email. She addressed it to Julia.

You never told me what you look for in a girl. :)

She sent that on its way, and shut down the computer. *I arise from dreams of thee ...* She smiled at the thought.



21

"So what possessed you to email this girl, anyway?" Adrian asked, flipping over so he was now laying on his stomach.

Julianne glanced at him from her spot on the blanket. Why couldn't he just let her sunbathe in peace? And why did he insist on sunbathing in a thong? *Thank God he turned over.* "Because I really liked the drawing, and I wanted to know if she had more of her work on display." Short. Sweet. And more amazingly, true.

"If she had a gallery of some sort, she wouldn't be sitting at the park trying to make a quick buck," Adrian replied logically.

Julianne shrugged. "You never know."

"Do you know what she looks like?" he asked.

"Don't know, don't care," Julianne informed him, wishing he'd dropped the subject. *I should've never told him about Kris. Ugh.* She stared at the ocean and tried to relax. It was her one day off and she planned to enjoy it.

Adrian shrugged. "She could be really ugly."

"Don't care."

"Sure you don't. I bet you've got her all pictured in your head. What did she tell you she looked like?"

"She didn't." *Please drop this, Adrian, before I kill you.* "And I honestly couldn't care less. She's just a person I email occasionally."

Adrian shook his head and sat up.

Julianne looked away. "Will you please put on a pair of shorts or something?"

"Just trying to avoid tan lines," Adrian replied with a grin, but slipped on a pair of tan cargos. "Besides, I like to add a bit of testosterone to your life."

"Right, because my life is just overflowing with estrogen."

Adrian held up his finger. "Which brings me to my next point."

Julianne rolled her eyes. "Don't start."

"You can't keep hiding away, Julianne. As much as I'm going to enjoy being your on-screen romance, you're eventually going to have to face up to the truth. You can't spend the rest of your life in isolation."

"I like it this way, Adrian," she argued. "It's simple. Do you know how complicated my life would be if I got involved with someone right now? Secrecy and avoidance and lying and ..." She shrugged. "You can't have a relationship under those circumstances."



The Blind Side of Love



Ingrid Díaz

"You're just scared of getting hurt."

Julianne shrugged. "Aren't we all?"

"And if you fall in love?"

"I won't."

Adrian shook his head. "You never know..."

Julianne stared at her best friend defiantly. "I do know, my darling Adrian. Because I won't let myself fall in love."

Adrian grinned. "But you admit you're sexually frustrated?"

"Nope."

"No you don't admit it?"

"Sex is overrated."

"Says she who's never tried it."

Julianne smiled. "It works best that way. I won't miss what I never knew."

"You're gonna end up one of those old, bitter women," Adrian predicted. "You'll talk to your plants and give them cute names, like Fluffy."

She laughed. "You're a dumbass."

Adrian took it as a compliment. He stared out at the water for a long moment, then turned back to Julianne. "Does she know?"

"I told her."

"Does she know who you are?"

Julianne shook her head, feeling depressed all of a sudden.

"Is this a good idea, Julianne?" Adrian asked seriously.

Probably not ... She shrugged. "It's just email."

"I hope so," Adrian responded, but somehow didn't think so.

* * *

Dear Kris,

Well, while you were dress, make-up, shoe and underwear shopping, I was out by the beach working on my tan. I love California. ;o)



Adrian, unfortunately, has this thing about prancing around in a thong. I think he's subconsciously attempting to turn me straight, but little does he know that his performance has the opposite effect. Hehe. Actually, he's one of those muscular guys that girls always go for, so it's not like it's a completely horrifying sight. But ... you know ... gross.

As for my type. Um, well, truthfully I haven't really dated much so I can't say I have much basis for comparison. But I guess, I want what everyone else seems to want and can never find. I just want someone who will love me for who I am. I can't even set any standards for what she would be like, because by doing so I would be trivializing anyone's individuality. No one can be everything. But I long to find the one girl who is everything to *me*.

You must think I'm incredibly corny.

So you're half Puerto Rican? Adrian is part Puerto Rican. Or maybe it's Colombian? Cuban? I should know these things, but sadly I forget. He's a mixture of a few things but he doesn't speak any Spanish. Maybe you can teach me. I tried French in High School, but I didn't get much out of it, I'm afraid. :o)

Your friend,
Julia

Having finished the email, Julianne went in search of a chat room. It had been a while since she'd messed with anyone's head and was kind of in the mood. The lesbian chat room looked promising, except that it had fallen under the invasion of bored guys pretending to be lesbians.

Julianne could sympathize, for she was bored herself. *Too bad I can't chat with Kris.* She froze, suddenly getting an idea. She typed Kris's email address into the member search engine. *She wouldn't have a screen name ...* But two second's later. There it was.

KMilan05

Julianne's breath caught. *I wonder if she's online.*

She wasn't.

Oddly disappointed, Julianne decided to sign off.

22

Kris faced her reflection in her parents' bedroom mirror. Much to her utter dismay, the fateful night had come. And so there she was, with her hair up in an elegant French twist, her face all made-up, her feet properly clad, and most importantly, her body in the perfect dress.

"Nathan's here!" Carlos called from outside the door.

"Be right there!" Kris called back. She sighed at her reflection. *Just get it over with. It's just a few hours. You'll dance, you'll eat, and you'll go home. No problem.* Not feeling any better, she headed out to the living room.

Nathan's jaw dropped. "Whoa," was all he managed.



Kris forced a smile and turned to her mother for approval.

Sari was smiling proudly. "My baby's all grown up."

Carlos was staring at her critically. "That's all you're wearing?" he asked. "Does it come with a jacket?"

Sari slapped his arm. "She looks beautiful." She motioned for Nathan to stand beside Kris. "Now stay right there until I get the camera." She retreated to the bedroom.

Kris stood there awkwardly. Her feet were already killing her and she'd only walked two steps. *I'm so going to regret this in the morning.* She felt Nathan's warm breath on her ear.

"You look incredible," he whispered.

"Thanks," she answered. She glanced at the tuxedo he was wearing. It looked exactly the same as the one he'd worn to her prom. Guys were so lucky. "You don't look so shabby yourself."

Nathan grinned. "I'm going to be the envy of every guy there," he informed her. "And you the envy of every girl." He winked.

She smiled. *Could you be any more full of yourself?*

Sari returned with the camera a moment later, grinning widely. She handed it to Carlos. "Let's get a few shots of you together, and then some of Kris by herself."

Carlos stood in front of them, aiming the lens of the camera in their direction. "Smile," he instructed.

Kris acquiesced to her step-father's wishes if only to move the evening along. Beside her, Nathan displayed his own pearly whites, and a moment later, they were both blinded by a bright flash.

And another.

They got one of Nathan pinning the corsage to Kris's dress. And one of Nathan with his arm around Kris's waist. Then Carlos took a few of Kris by herself. A few of Kris with her mother. And finally, Sari snapped a shot of Kris and Carlos together.

Kris had the unsettling feeling that these new pictures would replace the ones of William and a sense of melancholy and sadness fell over her spirit.

"We better get going," Nathan announced. "The limo's waiting."

Carlos and Sari walked them both to the door and watched them from the doorway until they disappeared into the elevator.

"You should wear stuff like that more often," Nathan commented, running a hand through his hair as he watched the numbers atop the elevator doors. "Sometimes I forget how hot you are."

Gee..."Thanks." Kris avoided rolling her eyes somehow. *Don't be a bitch, Kris. He's just trying to be nice. It's not his fault he's not good with words.* She nodded slightly at the thought. *He's going to be a lawyer not a poet.* Kris suddenly found herself wondering what Julia would've said in a similar situation. *Certainly not that.*



The elevator doors inched open with painful effort and Kris and Nathan stepped out into the lobby where Nathan's best friend was waiting.

"Whoa mama!" whistled Ash Barclay, walking over to give Kris the once-over. "Damn, Kris, I haven't seen curves like those since—"

"Dude!" Nathan interrupted, smacking his best friend's arm. "Go drool over your own date."

Ash winked at Kris. "Bill and the rest of the ladies are waiting in the limo."

The white limousine was parked right outside the apartment building and Kris had to admit it was a pretty impressive sight. The chauffeur stood by and opened the door as they approached.

Kris stepped inside first, and was confronted with the loud cheering of the rest of the high school group. *I am getting too old for this.* She smiled and waved in greeting.

Bill Stines smiled at Kris. "Long time no see, Kris," he greeted, grabbing her hand to help her get settled. "How's college?"

Kris started to answer but Ash and Nathan jumped inside the vehicle shouting in excitement and Kris's voice was drowned in the noise.

"We are so going to rock tonight!" Ash exclaimed. "Check it ladies." He held up a bottle of champagne. "Courtesy of my parents' liquor cabinet." This received a high five from Nathan and a deep sigh from Kris.

This is going to be a long night. Kris's eyes darted from the annoying boys to the rest of the gang. Ash's date, Lindsey Evans, was busy applying another coat of make-up to her already made face, while Bill's date munched on a bag of peanuts. Kris smiled in her direction. She'd never met Perry Cooper before but if she was dating Bill then she was probably a decent enough human being. Of all of Nathan's friends, Kris liked Bill the best. He was polite and friendly and most importantly, not a jerk.

Perry smiled and offered some peanuts to Kris.

Kris shook her head and declined as politely as possible. She then turned to Bill. "College is going well," she replied. "I'll be done with finals next week."

"Must be nice getting to finish so early," Perry commented. "We don't finish until June. I can't wait for college."

Kris nodded. "Where are you going?"

"Duke," Perry replied proudly. "With Bill."

"Congratulations to you both," Kris said, grinning. *This isn't so bad. I can survive a night with these people.*

Ash passed her a champagne glass, filled to the top. "Pass that along, my dear," he instructed. "We are getting wasted tonight!"

Or not ...



* * *

Kris managed to avoid liquor all evening. She was far from being in the party mood and a glance around the large room made her feel more gloomy than excited.

Black and purple balloons decorated the large hotel ballroom. And the lights were dimmed enough so that you could almost pretend you were somewhere else entirely. But the decorated atmosphere did nothing for the incredibly annoying music blasting through the speakers, or the splitting headache searing through Kris's temples.

Nathan appeared at her side a moment later, holding a glass of water. "Sorry, I couldn't find you any Tylenol," he apologized.

"So what's the glass of water for?" Kris asked, feeling more weary than annoyed.

He shrugged and took a seat at the table. "In case you were thirsty. I thought girls always carried pills around for their .. feminine problems."

"Yes, well," Kris began patiently, "my 'feminine problem' isn't due for another week."

Nathan shrugged, his gaze wandering to the dance floor. He licked his lips and turned back to Kris. "Want to get out of here?" he asked.

"I would love to," Kris replied, hoping she didn't sound too excited. *Finally, I get to go home. The evening of hell has ended.*

Nathan stood and pulled out the chair for Kris. Taking her hand in his, he led her out into the hotel lobby.

"How are we getting home?" Kris asked. "Is the limo going to come back for everyone else?"

Nathan simply smiled, and Kris was getting the unnerving suspicion that they weren't heading home after all. She followed her boyfriend to the elevators and frowned as she watched him press the button.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Nathan replied smoothly. He smiled brightly at Kris. "Did I mention how beautiful you look tonight?"

Kris simply smiled. She was dying to get home and let her hair down. She had a nagging suspicion that the root of her headache could be traced back to the billions of bobby pins holding her hair together. *A shower. I would so love a shower right now.*

But as the elevator doors swooshed open in front of her, Kris realized her night was nowhere near over. And now she was getting worried. *Prom night and a hotel room. If I didn't know any better ...*

"I got us a room for the night," Nathan announced, grinning like an idiot. "Wait until you see it, Kris. You're going to die."



Kris had a sinking sensation at the pit of her stomach. *I wasn't counting on this. He never said anything about a hotel room. Why do I get the feeling that I'm trapped in the middle of a really bad after school special?* "Um, Nathan," she began, ready to voice her displeasure at this sudden and decidedly unwelcome turn of events.

"We're here," Nathan interrupted, as the doors opened before them.

Kris stepped out of the elevator and glanced around quickly. The hallway was bathed in a soft yellow light. The carpet stretched out endlessly in pale blue tones that instantly reminded Kris of the ocean.

Nathan grabbed her hand and started down the hallway, while Kris busied herself by looking at the framed pictures lining the walls. *I hope my artwork doesn't end up like this.* She cringed at the thought. But told herself to focus on the pressing matter at hand. *Maybe everyone's in the room. A post-prom party of sorts. We can hang out for a little while and then leave.*

Nathan stopped finally and withdrew the key from his pocket. "Close your eyes," he instructed.

Kris obeyed if only to humor him. A moment later, she felt herself get pulled gently and heard a door close behind her.

"What do you think?"

Kris opened her eyes and her gaze immediately flew to the lit candles strategically placed around the queen-size bed. *Oh ... shit.* "Nathan, what's this?" *Maybe he's decided to become a Satan worshipper. Maybe he just wants me as his virgin sacrifice.* She frowned. *Dear God, I hope not.*

Nathan smiled. "Do you like it?" he asked, his tone brimming with excitement. He ran over to the curtains and pulled them open. A beautiful view of New York greeted her from outside the sliding glass doors.

Her lips opened slightly, but no sound came out. If possible, her headache worsened as she took in the sight before her, and the obvious intention behind Nathan's actions began to fall into place.

"I know you said you wanted our first time to be special," Nathan said, walking over to take her hands. "So I went out of my way to make it so." His breath reeked of alcohol.

How much has he drunk? "Nathan," she tried, willing her mind to form a coherent sentence. "I'm truly flattered and ... and surprised. But ..."

Nathan started to frown. "But what Kris?" he asked, a bit impatiently. "Don't tell me you're not ready. We've been together for six years! How much more time do you need!?"

Kris couldn't think clearly. Her head was pounding and her thoughts were racing a mile a minute. She hadn't seen this coming. "You can't just plan our first time together without telling me," she explained. "The room is beautiful and the candles are a nice touch, Nathan, but the timing isn't right."

Nathan threw his hands up in frustration. "Timing?" he yelled. "I'm leaving for Massachusetts in a couple of weeks!"

Kris let out a sigh. She should've faked an illness to avoid this dreaded night. "I thought we were going to wait until we got married?"



Nathan's jaw dropped and then he started laughing bitterly. "Married? I thought you didn't want to get married yet, Kris? You don't want kids. You don't want marriage. And you clearly don't want me!"

"That's not true!" Kris argued.

"I have been really patient with you," Nathan continued.. "But I can't do this anymore. You either grow up, or we're finished. I am not going off to college still a virgin."

"What?!" Kris blew up. She couldn't believe her ears. He had been *patient* with her? What the hell was there to be patient about? "You asshole! I can't believe you just said that to me."

"You are twenty years old, Kristina," he replied. "You're not a child. Grow up."

Kris shook her head, too angry to speak. Her eyes threatened to water and she refused to let them. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "Go fuck yourself, Nathan." And with that she walked away, trying to ignore the angry curses her former boyfriend was now shouting at her back.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry. Damnit. She wiped away the tears with the back of her hand as she waited for the elevator.

Nathan stood in the doorway, a stream of curses flowing out of his mouth. He pounded his fist against the wall, and slammed the door to the hotel room closed.

To her relief, he didn't come after her.

* * *

"Oh Jesus, what happened to you?" Leigh asked, rising from the table.

Kris stumbled into the apartment an hour later. She'd started walking back from the hotel when it had started to pour. It took her forty minutes to find a cab. She was wet. She was freezing. Her make up was down to her ankles. Her dress was ruined. Her feet were killing her. And her headache continued to pound at her brain. Overall, it had been the worst night of her entire life.

"Kris," Leigh said, concern in her tone. "Baby, what happened?"

Kris limped to the nearest chair and sat down slowly. She kicked off her shoes with a whimper and sat back, closing her eyes. She was certain that if she opened her mouth to speak, she would never stop crying.

So she rose, silently, and walked into the bathroom. All she wanted was a shower. She wanted to get out of the dress that was now glued to her skin. She wanted to rub all the make up from her face, and release her hair from its bobby pin prison. And not think about Nathan.

That's all.

Her reflection startled her and she blinked sadly. She had streaks of mascara lining her face in a way that was almost grotesque. It was hard to believe that only a few hours prior she'd looked the complete opposite of how she felt now. She dropped her gaze from the mirror and slipped out of the dress.



"Kris," Leigh called from outside the door. "I'm going to make some hot chocolate, okay?"

Kris didn't answer. She started removing pins from her hair and she flinched in pain as her hair moved slightly. A few minutes later, she was fairly certain that she'd removed them all.

Under the flow of steaming water, Kris let the tears fall. How had everything gone so wrong? It was like a dream. A nightmare. Something exaggerated and surreal. Why had she never realized what a jerk Nathan could be? Or rather, why did she keep forgiving him every time he was.

She scrubbed her face clean. The hot water cleared her head and the headache began to ease away.

Stepping out of the shower, she wrapped herself in a towel and walked out of the bathroom. The sweet smell of hot chocolate assaulted her senses and she thanked God for Leigh.

She changed quickly, relieved to be back in her regular clothes. A pair of white basketball shorts and a tank top did the trick.

Leigh looked up as Kris returned to the kitchen. She pointed to a cup already on the table. "I even put little marshmallows in it," she said.

Kris smiled slightly and took a seat across from her best friend. "I think Nathan and I may have broke up," she said finally, her gaze fixed on the melting marshmallows in her cup. It amazed her how cold and distant she felt about it. "He wanted us to have sex tonight."

"Uh oh," Leigh mumbled. "What happened?"

Kris shrugged and looked up. "He got mad and told me to grow up."

"What an asshole."

"Is he? I mean, maybe it hasn't been fair of me to make him wait this long. Maybe—"

"Did those bobby pins mess with your head?" Leigh asked, shaking her head. "Listen to me, Kristina, you don't owe that jerk a thing. You said you wanted to do what *you* wanted to do. And if you don't want to sleep with him, then you don't. It's that simple."

Kris nodded. "You're right. Anyway, I told him to fuck himself and left. But then it started raining ..." She sighed. "I just want to forget all about tonight."

Leigh grinned. "Kris, I think we should celebrate. I think we should stay up all night and pig out and watch random movies until the crack of dawn. Hey, maybe we can even catch that sunrise."

Kris smiled, feeling slightly better. "That sounds really nice." *What am I going to tell my parents?* She pushed the thoughts from her mind and grabbed the telephone. "Let's order pizza. I'm starving." She was going to treat herself to a fun night. *To hell with Nathan.*

* * *

Dear Julia,



I don't feel much like reliving the events of last night, but suffice it to say that my relationship with Nathan has reached an end. I can't even say that I'm sad about it. I think I'm more upset about the way things ended than about the ending itself.

I mean, have you ever gotten mad at someone because they didn't want to sleep with you? Has someone ever gotten mad at you? It's such a stupid thing ... So I didn't want my first time with him to be on prom night. Geez, how cliché is that?! And then he wants *me* to grow up??

Sigh.

Okay, so perhaps I'm still a bit bitter about what happened. But I think I'm coping well. Leigh made me feel better. We ordered pizza and ate junk food until the wee hours of the morning. Leigh fell asleep before sunrise, but I stayed up to watch it again. Why do I keep doing this? I'm sure it's your fault somehow. :)

But anyway.

I know what you mean about finding the one person who is everything to you. I don't think Nathan ever was that person, and I suppose that was my mistake. How do you build a relationship with someone you're not even in love with? I think I did it mostly to please my parents. They're crazy about him. God, I don't even know what I'm going to tell them. If I tell them the truth, Carlos will go after Nathan with a shotgun. But what could I possibly say? Carlos and Nathan were discussing our marriage not too long ago, for crying out loud!

I'll deal with that later. I don't think I've heard the last from Nathan, anyway. Knowing him, he'll be by today with a bouquet of roses begging me to forgive him. Well, I'm not going to. Yeah, I know ... I'm trying to convince myself of that. But it's hard. I've never been without him.

So tell me, Julia, how come you've never really dated? You seem like a wonderful person. I'd bet a billion girls would kill to go out with you. Are you *that* picky? ;)

My dad emailed me. He wants to chat online tonight. I think he's just cheap and doesn't want to pay for the long distance phone call. Heh! I laugh about it, but it's probably true. Do you ever chat online? I only go on when my dad wants to meet me. I just don't get the point of striking conversation with strangers (present company excluded, of course).

I hope your tan is looking nice (just rub it in my face why don't ya!) ;)

Your friend,
Kris

23

Julianne was getting the sneaking suspicion that she was starting to lose her mind. Why else would she be lying in bed, flipping absently through her endless list of channels, glancing every two seconds at the computer screen to see if Kris had signed online. *This borders on obsession.*

She sighed, running a frustrated hand through her dark hair. After reading Kris's email an hour prior, Julianne had convinced herself to remain online. She wasn't entirely sure why she was doing this. And she didn't want to dwell on the logic either because if she started, she'd realize that she was in fact acting like a completely obsessed lunatic.



So it was best to move on.

The TV flickered in rhythm with the button she kept pushing. It was almost enough to lull her to sleep had she not been fully awake. She glanced at the computer screen where her screen saver was now in full performance.

Annoyed, she hit a random key and was about to return to the very exciting activity of channel surfing, when she noticed that Kmilan05 had signed on.

Julianne's heart sped up for reasons she did not want to question, and she blinked a few times, momentarily at a loss. *I can't talk to her.* She stared at the name on the screen. *So what exactly have you been waiting for?*

She considered her options carefully. *I could send her a message and pretend it's not me. Or I could admit I was stalking her and found her screen name.* Lovely choices. *Or I could turn off the computer and get on with my life.*

Julianne threw her head back against the pillows behind her. "Why do I insist on making things more complicated?" she whined. "Is my life not interesting enough??"

Sitting up, she grabbed the laptop and settled it in front of her. She continued to stare at Kris's name, half-hoping and half-fearing that it would disappear.

Julianne pondered what she could possibly say. She clicked on the name to see if Kris had a profile. She didn't. *Well, then I can't very well pretend I found her that way.* She opened a message box and typed in the screen name. *She's going to think you're such a loser. Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.*

Julianne closed the box.

"Just send her a message and see how it goes," she told herself. "You don't have to admit who you are. And then you won't feel like a total dumbass."

Nodding, she opened the message box again. She typed in, "Hi." Deleted it. Typed in, "Hello." Deleted it. Sighed. Hit herself in the forehead. And typed, "Are you busy?"

She didn't hit enter, though. *What if my screen name is too obvious?* Julianne rolled her eyes. "Only if she's psychic." She hesitated a moment longer and then hit enter. *Maybe she won't even respond.*

Julianne waited nervously, and suddenly, a message popped up. She swallowed. *I am the world's biggest dork.*

PoetnAngel: Are you busy?

KMilan05: Do I know you?

PoetnAngel: Do you always answer a question with a question?

KMilan05: Do you?

Julianne found herself chuckling in spite of herself.



PoetnAngel: Does it bother you?
KMilan05: should it?
PoetnAngel: Is it annoying you?
KMilan05: do you want it to?
PoetnAngel: Does this mean you're not busy?
KMilan05: who is this?

She stared at the question, knowing that if she kept avoiding the truth Kris was going to get annoyed and leave. *Just tell her. The worst that can happen is her thinking you're nuts, and she wouldn't be that far off.*

PoetnAngel: It's Julia.

There was a long pause and Julianne started to worry that she had in fact freaked Kris out. *Well, what did you expect? You email her out of the blue. You tell her you're a lesbian. And then you track down her screen name without her permission. Then you have the balls to send her a message.*

KMilan05: Julia! How did you find me??
PoetnAngel: Uh, would you believe your handle came to me in a dream?
KMilan05: lol. I would but somehow I doubt that's accurate. So?
PoetnAngel: Um. Okay. Well at the risk of sounding like a complete loser, I got bored and looked you up. Sorry :o(
KMilan05: wow! I didn't even know you could do that. What are you apologizing for? I don't mind. This is so weird getting to talk to you like this. Sorry if it's taking me a while to reply. I'm chatting with my Dad and I type pretty slow.
PoetnAngel: That's okay. How is everything? I got your email about Nathan. I'm sorry...
KMilan05: yeah well. He hasn't called or anything, which is weird. I guess he's pretty upset himself. How is everything with you?
PoetnAngel: Fine. I went jogging today and then I watched TV.
KMilan05: what is it you do for a living? You never told me.

Julianne froze. *Ummm...*

PoetnAngel: Oh, you know. A little of this, a little of that. Some acting ...
KMilan05: acting? Really! Leigh is an actress, too. I bet the two of you would get along great. So you do a lot of plays and stuff?
PoetnAngel: And stuff. Do you chat with your Dad often?
KMilan05: not really. Neither of us are big online people. Are you online a lot?
PoetnAngel: I wouldn't say "a lot" but, once in a while.
KMilan05: maybe I'll come on more often then :)

Julianne blinked a few times at Kris's response. "Huh, I guess she doesn't think I'm that much of a freak." She found herself smiling.



PoetnAngel: I'm glad that you don't mind me tracking you down.

KMilan05: Why would I mind? On the contrary! I'm happy you did. It's a lot easier talking to you this way. Don't you think?

PoetnAngel: Yes, I do. :o) So what did you do today?

KMilan05: I slept! A lot. lol. I stayed up all night, like I told you, and I was so tired. When I woke up, I went for a long walk, thought things over, and decided that life as a single woman feels good!! Don't you agree?

PoetnAngel: LOL. Actually, I don't really know what it feels like to not be a single woman.

KMilan05: Oh oh! So answer my question. How come you're still single? There have to be lots of cute girls in California.

PoetnAngel: I guess ... I don't feel comfortable being ... visible.

KMilan05: How long have you been "out"?

PoetnAngel: To myself? Long time. Since I was 12. To another person, about four years.

KMilan05: Since you were 12?? Wow, I didn't even know I was straight when I was 12. Hehe. So, you've never had a girlfriend?

PoetnAngel: Nope. Are you trying to depress me? ;o)

KMilan05: LOL. Sorry! Not at all. I just think it's amazing. I wish I could've stayed single all that time. It must give you a great sense of individuality and freedom.

Julianne laughed. "Yeah, maybe in another life."

KMilan05: But I bet it must be hard, being gay and all. Hey what do you look like?

PoetnAngel: Umm. Well, people say I look remarkably like Julianne Franqui. **KMilan05:** Wow, you must be beautiful!

She grinned. *Kris thinks I'm beautiful?*

PoetnAngel: You think she's beautiful?

KMilan05: Well, yeah. I'm pretty sure the entire world does. Dark hair, blue eyes. Killer combo right there.

PoetnAngel: Are you a fan?

KMilan05: LOL. Hardly. I can't stand her.

Julianne's grin faded into a frown. *Uh-oh. Houston, we've got a problem.*

PoetnAngel: Why's that?

KMilan05: She just seems fake somehow, you know? I don't know. I just don't like her. She seems stuck up and bitchy. Sorry, are you a fan?

Don't get defensive. She's right, and you know it. It's safer that way, right? That didn't make her feel any better.

PoetnAngel: I wouldn't say I'm a fan.

KMilan05: I like it when famous people seem down to earth, as opposed to floating above us. Cause I mean, if it weren't for the little people they wouldn't be anywhere. The least they could do is show some appreciation.



That stung. *Am I that transparent?* Julianne thought sadly. She thought of the pile of unread fan mails in her drawer and the thousands of others she hadn't bothered to read.

PoetnAngel: You're absolutely right. So, what would you do if you were rich and famous?
KMilan05: Ha! Um. Let's see. The first thing I would do is move my parents into a better apartment and make sure they were taken care of. And then I'd donate to all the charities I could think of. There's so much one can do given the resources. And if there was any money left, I'd open up a gallery. But only after I was certain I'd saved some trees. :) What would you do if you were rich and famous?

Sit here in awe of people like you.

* * *

"You wanted to see me, Ms. Franqui?" Karen asked hesitantly, standing awkwardly at the doorway of the trailer.

Julianne smiled at her assistant. She'd never thought to look at her before, but she decided it was probably time she started noticing people. Karen had to be around nineteen or twenty. *What the hell was she doing here?* "Come in," she said, in a tone she couldn't remember using before with anyone that wasn't Adrian.

The surprise in Karen's face was obvious. "Uh, okay." She stepped inside and carefully shut the door behind her.

Julianne was sure that Karen was nervous about this. *Am I really that intimidating?* "How long have you been working for me, Karen?" she asked.

The girl straightened out her glasses and thought back. Nervously she tucked light brown hair behind her ears. "Almost two years, Ms."

"Call me Julianne." She offered Karen a chair, noting the girl's nervousness appeared to escalate. "I'm not going to hurt you," she joked.

Karen sat down, a bit hesitantly, though she allowed herself a small smile. "Is something wrong, Ms.... Julianne?"

Julianne smiled. "Actually, everything's more than fine," she assured her young assistant. "Why are you working for me?"

Karen's jaw sagged. She stammered, momentarily caught offguard. "Well you hired me. And I get to learn a lot being here on the set. More than I could've learned at school."

Interesting. "So you're an actress?"

Karen chuckled slightly. "Oh no," she said, waving her hand dismissively as though the suggestion was ridiculous. "I'm a screenwriter."

Hmm... "Have you completed any screenplays?"

Karen stared at Julianne hesitantly. "I have a few," she replied.



"Have you ever shown them to Adrian?" Julianne wondered.

Karen's gray eyes went round and she looked a bit frightened. "Of course not! I would never cross the line like that!" She started to babble and Julianne had to struggle to keep up with the girl's ranting.

"Karen, calm down! I wasn't accusing you of anything," Julianne said. "I was merely asking because he's always looking for good screenplays to direct and if you showed him your work, perhaps the two of you could work something out."

Her assistant frowned slightly. "Why are you doing this?" she asked softly.

Julianne sighed. "Because I think I've been an asshole for long enough," she replied. "And it's time I did something about that."

24

"You seem awfully chipper this morning," Leigh commented, watching as her roommate stepped into the kitchen wearing a strange and unusual grin on her face. "The chat with your Dad go well?"

Kris paused, then smiled. "Oh yes. My chat with my Dad went *beautifully*." She leaned down to kiss Leigh's cheek. "Did you leave any coffee for me."

Fair brows rose upward. "Well yeah," she answered, "but I don't think caffeine is really the way to go for you this morning."

Kris chuckled and poured herself a cup. "So, I'm in a good mood today."

"Clearly," Leigh agreed, half turning in her chair. "Any particular reason?"

Kris considered the question as she punched numbers in the microwave. "Actually, I'm not sure," she replied. "I guess I just like being single."

"I'll drink to that." Leigh held up her own cup of coffee before taking a sip. "So what are you doing today?"

Kris yawned before answering. "Studying," she explained regretfully. But she instantly smiled as the beeping from the microwave announced that her caffeine fix was ready. "Ah, heaven." She pulled out a chair and sat down, feeling refreshed and happy.

"So what did Daddy dearest have to say?" Leigh wondered, studying her roommate intently. She kept her gaze fixed on Kris, though her view was momentarily eclipsed by the cup at her lips. Kris shrugged. "He told me that he really misses me. And that he hopes I can take a trip down to see him before the summer ends. And that he has someone he wants me to meet. A new lady friend, I would assume." She paused to drink her coffee. "That's about it."

"But you were online all night. I could hear you typing."

Kris obviously hadn't been expecting that comment because she froze momentarily, coffee cup midway to her lips. Then she relaxed and sat back. "I was chatting with Julia," she admitted.



It was obvious to Leigh that Kris wasn't aware of the ridiculous grin on her face. "Julia," she repeated. "The cyber lesbian?"

"The one and only," Kris confirmed.

"And praytell, what did cyber lesbian Julia have to say?" Leigh inquired curiously, leaning forward with her elbows on the table.

Kris just shrugged. "We just talked about random stuff," she answered casually. "And stop calling her that." Her dark brows narrowed slightly. "What? What is this look you're giving me?"

Leigh leaned back in her chair and shook her head. "I know what this is," she explained. "I took Psych in high school."

It was Kris's turn to look interested. "Won't you please share your analysis with me, Dr. Radlin?"

"You are doing that thing," Leigh said, pointing an accusing finger at Kris. "You know, where like ...you decide to switch teams for a while."

Kris rolled her eyes and stood, taking her cup of coffee with her. "How perceptive," she replied in mock surprise. "And articulate!"

Leigh stood as well, not quite prepared to relinquish the topic. "Nathan hurt you so you're swearing off men! That's what you're doing. You're going to break that poor lesbian's heart!"

"Over reacting again," Kris sing-songed on the way back to her room. She paused and turned. "Oh, did I mention she's an actress? Just like you." She grinned and entered her bedroom, shutting the door.

"I'm telling your mother that you dumped Nathan for a *cyber lesbian*!" threatened Leigh jokingly from the other side of the door.

Kris snickered. *Wouldn't that be something?* Shaking her head, and still in great spirits, she set about studying for her last exam of the semester.

* * *

Kris enjoyed the soothing sound of teethbrushing. It was comforting. It gave her a sense of cleanliness .. and ... comfort. She frowned. *I need to get more sleep.* Shaking her head, she regarded her reflection. *How sexy. Nothing like a purple toothbrush hanging out of a foamfilled mouth to make the fellas say, "Ooo lala."*

Still brushing, she stepped out of the bathroom. Her roommate was in her usual spot in front of the TV, flipping mindlessly through the plethora of channels. "It's like, we pay for cable and yet there's nothing on."

Kris rolled her eyes. Every night, same argument. "Hey let me ask you something," she said, though the state of her mouth prevented her from actually forming the words. It came out sounding something like, "Ey et ee ack oo ontin."

Leigh turned around with a puzzled look on her face. "Would you please rinse out your mouth before attempting to have a conversation with me? Or at least learn some sign language."



Kris held up her middle finger. *How's that for sign language? Biatch.* She returned to the bathroom and a moment later returned to the living room. Her mouth was now minty fresh. Life was good. She sat down and stared at her roommate for a moment. "Do you usually give out our number to strange guys?"

"Only the ones that ask for it," Leigh replied with a half smile. "Anyway, it's not like it's not on your card anyway."

Kris nodded. "So you gave that guy my card?"

"Which guy?"

Sometimes, Kris had the unnerving feeling that Leigh just enjoyed torturing her. But she refused to give in. "The guy with Julia..."

"Who's Julia?"

Kris held up her hands in a choking motion and strangled the air that should've been Leigh's neck. "Are you trying to drive me crazy?" she demanded.

"I'm bored, there's nothing on," Leigh replied. "You're all I have for entertainment." She grinned brightly. "Anyway, I gave him the card, but I wrote the number on the back."

Kris blinked a few times, as if the motion of her eyes opening and closing would somehow shed light on her roommate's sheer lack of logic. But it didn't. "The number is already *on* the card," she said, needlessly.

"Duh," Leigh said. "But I couldn't just be like, 'Hey stud, here's my best friend's business card. Call me sometime.'" She shook her head. "I felt that the action of writing down the number really added to the power of the moment."

"You. Are. A freak."

"I. Already. Knew that." Leigh stopped flipping channels. "I give up. I don't care what channel this is or what's on, I'm going to watch it."

Kris noted the commercials and shook her head. *Time to email Julia.* She grabbed the laptop from the coffee table, and propped her legs up in its place.

"Writing to your *giiiiir*friend?" Leigh teased.

"How old are you again?" Kris asked.

Leigh held up a finger and shook it back and forth. "Nuh-uh-uh. A true actress never reveals her real age. It's a fate worse than death. There's a Hollywood curse. That's how all these famous people end up on infomercials at three o'clock in the morning."

Kris held up her own finger mockingly and made circular motions next to her ear. "Cuckoo." She turned her attention to the laptop. "Besides, I know your age, you dumbass."

"Then I must kill you," Leigh deadpanned.

"Oooh, I'm shaking in my Birks," Kris replied.



Leigh glanced down at the sandals on Kris's feet. "Lesbian shoes," she noted, shaking her head. "The transformation has begun."

* * *

Dear Julia,

After a failed attempt at finding something fruitful to watch, my roommate decided to leave it up to chance. And fate decreed that we should both suffer at the hands of *Happy Days* reruns. I begged her to change the channel, but she's stubborn (and insane). If I have nightmares tonight involving the Fonze in any shape, way or form, I'm going to kill her.

So I spent the day studying for an Art History exam. I'll be done with classes tomorrow. I can't wait! Three months of freedom; three months of art. I'll finally have time to start on that collection, if you're still interested, though I wouldn't feel right selling it to you at this point. Consider it a gift. :)

Nathan still hasn't made an appearance, which is kind of weird and worries me a little. I mean, he's leaving for Harvard next week... the least he could do is say goodbye. Right? He can't be *that* angry with me. Well .. maybe he can.

He's got this internship thing, so he's got to leave early. It's strange. My parents adore him because he's going to be so successful. But I just don't see success as a requisite for love. I don't even care. As long as a person's happy, right? Maybe I'm just trying to convince myself that I'm not a complete loser. No, that's not true. I think I just envy the fact that when my parents look at him, I see pride and respect in their eyes. When they look at me, I just see disappointment and shame.

Oh, by the way, I had a lot of fun chatting with you last night. Maybe we can do it again sometime? After tomorrow I'll have all the time in the world, so let me know when it's good for you.

Your friend,
Kris

25

Julianne stared disdainfully at her public appearance schedule for the upcoming month. "This is going to be hell," she commented, and placed the piece of paper down on the table. Her blue eyes darted to the colorful fish swimming around the tank. The Oceana was her favorite place to eat. Not only did it serve the best seafood in town, but it provided a nice private atmosphere where Julianne could enjoy her meal without having to worry about the other patrons staring at her.

Instead of tables or booths, the Oceana provided small, individual "caves" tucked away into the lime rock wall partitions. There was even a small curtain to ensure further privacy. On the wall was a double-glass window with a small, private view of an aquarium tank. Colorful fish of all shapes and sizes swam around, passing by everyone's windows in their circular journey.

"I see that *Operation: Embrace Your Fans* has gotten nowhere," Adrian teased, grabbing the schedule. "Let's see here. Official *Guardian* convention. MTV Movie Awards." He paused. "Radio City Music Hall? New York. Well, I bet you're happy."



"Overjoyed," Julianne replied dryly.

Adrian stared at her for a moment, then back down at the schedule. "So what's the scoop? Are you presenting? Hosting? Receiving."

Julianne rolled her eyes. "Best Kiss."

"Nasty," Adrian replied, shaking his head in disapproval. "Which kiss is this? Wait. Let me guess, the all-tongue spit fest with Rye Philips?"

"Unfortunately," Julianne confirmed with a slight nod. "I think his tongue grazed my lung."

Adrian frowned. "Thank you for the imagery, Julianne. Remind me to keep you around whenever I need to go on a diet." He looked pointedly at his food.

"Hey, I'm the one that had to live through it," Julianne argued with a shudder. She covered her face with one hand. "Oh God, they'll probably want me to kiss him at the podium. Maybe I shouldn't go. I can give them one of those 'I'm off filming my next movie in Saskatchewan so I couldn't be there' excuses."

Adrian nodded. "Smooth."

"At least people think I'm a good kisser," Julianne said cheerfully, trying to find the silver lining. *Maybe even Kris will be impressed. Yeah, cause that's exactly what you need to do to impress the girl. Win an MTV Movie Award for kissing someone.*

"What's wrong?" Adrian asked. "All of a sudden you went from 'woo hoo!' to 'boo hoo.'"

"She hates me," Julianne confessed.

"Is this like an impromptu 'Guess Who' game?"

"Kris," Julianne clarified. "I asked her what she thought of Julianne Franqui and she said, 'She seems stuck up and bitchy.'"

Adrian whistled. "Harsh. *True*, but harsh." He shrugged. "But that's what you were going for, right? And I must say, you play the part so well."

"Thank you," Julianne replied flatly, her appetite quickly diminishing. She pushed around the shrimp on her plate. "I don't want her to think I'm stuck up and bitchy," she admitted softly.

"And what do you want her to think?" Adriana asked.

Julianne sat back, against the colorful cushions behind her. "I don't want her to *think* anything. I want her to *know*." Her gaze landed on the fish tank. "It's frustrating to be so totally honest with a person and still feel like I'm lying. I mean, there's no way I can be 100% sincere."

"So you tell her you're really Julianne Franqui," Adrian said. "What's the worst that can happen?"

Julianne stared at her best friend incredulously. "Let's see. Well, she will probably not even believe me, which would consequently lead to her thinking I'm a complete loon. End of friendship. Or, if by some miracle, she does believe me, she could think that I'm just playing a



big prank on her for kicks. Because, after all, Julianne Franqui is stuck up and bitchy. End of friendship. Or she could like, forward all my emails to some news reporters, who would undoubtedly trace them back to me somehow. And then, not only would I be out, but I'd *still* lose her friendship."

Adrian nodded, picking up his iced tea. "So what you're saying, in a nutshell, is that the worst possible scenario at this point, is that you lose her friendship?"

Blue eyes blinked a few times in surprise. *Is that what I just said?*

"Interesting," Adrian commented, pressing the glass to his lips. "And this entire relationship doesn't concern you at all?"

Julianne narrowed her eyes slightly at the implication. "She's straight."

"But *you're* not," Adrian countered. "In all of the years that I've known you, you have *never*, not *once*, shown any interest, romantic or otherwise, for another human being. And all of a sudden you're concerned with what some girl in New York thinks about you?"

Julianne dropped her gaze. "She's special."

"She must be," Adrian said. "She's got you all wrapped around her little finger and neither of you know it."

"Hey, that's not true," Julianne argued.

Adrian leaned forward. "Do you want me to be your date at the awards?" he asked.

Julianne was completely thrown by the sudden change of topic. *Is he trying to drive me mad?* "Of course, I do," she replied. "I can't show up alone."

Adrian nodded. "So let me ask you something, Julianne. Up until this point, I haven't made any public appearances with you. But that camera is going to undoubtedly fall on me at some point during that program."

"Your point?" Julianne was starting to get impatient.

Adrian shook his head and caught Julianne's gaze. "How did you get Kris's email address in the first place?"

"The card," Julianne answered, still at a loss.

"And who gave me the card?"

Julianne froze. "Shit," was the only thing she could think to say.

* * *

Dear Kris,

How was your final? I think I'll go out on a limb and take a guess that the Art History exam wasn't quite as tedious as that Shakespeare paper. ;o)



I'm sorry about Nathan. But from the little you've told me about him, it sounds to me as though you're better off without him. Why be with someone who obviously doesn't appreciate you? You can do so much better than that, Kris. You're too wonderful a person to let anyone mistreat you. You deserve so much more than that.

Take it from a lesbian who's never even had a date. :o)

Anyway, on to a different topic. I would never *dream* of not paying for your art work, so don't even think about giving it to me for free. I'm an avid shopper and would feel completely cheated if you were to rob me of the pleasure of purchasing it. I'm adamant about this so don't bother arguing.

I'd love to chat with you again. Just let me know when is good for you and I'll be there.

Until then ...

Your friend,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

The exam went really well, actually. It was one of my favorite classes and I'm going to miss it a lot, but I'm even happier that school is out. I may get a job at Starbucks with Leigh. I really need to help my parents out with the rent this summer. They can't support me forever. It's bad enough that they pay my rent all school year. I feel so bad about that.

Speaking of feeling guilty, I couldn't take your money! Maybe we can come up with some kind of compromise that won't take away from your shopping ideals, but won't compromise my integrity as your friend, either.

So, what kind of acting do you do? Leigh keeps getting cast in these weird experimental plays that were surely written and directed while under the influence of something strong. She really wants to get into film though. What little money she can spare, she puts away for her big move to L.A. Hey, maybe someday the two of you will be neighbors.

Like I said, with school out, I'm always free. Until I get a job, that is. In the meantime, I'm yours whenever. How about Saturday? Six o'clock, your time? Let me know.

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

KMilan05: You sure are punctual

PoetnAngel: Only when I have good reason to be :o)

KMilan05: You've got a hot date online, or something?

PoetnAngel: Something like that. What's your excuse?

KMilan05: Just meeting some girl. It's part of my Adopt-a-Lesbian volunteer program

PoetnAngel: LOL. How are you?

KMilan05: Pretty good. Yourself?



PoetnAngel: Eh. I had to go pick out dresses today. Not a fun endeavor.

KMilan05: Dresses, huh? What's the big occasion?

PoetnAngel: Oh nothing very important. I have a few places to be in the upcoming weeks and I must look halfway decent.

KMilan05: I see. Are you always so vague?

"Only when I'm trying not to lie," Julianne said, shaking her head. She ran a frustrated hand through her hair and glanced around the bedroom. So far her day had been a nightmare. She loathed arguing with her fashion designer. But she was too lazy to fire him and get a new one. *I should've just gone to Target and picked something out. It would've saved me the headache. Not to mention the money.*

PoetnAngel: I like to be mysterious.

KMilan05: Consider yourself successful. What else did you do today?

PoetnAngel: Um. I had a picnic on the beach.

KMilan05: By yourself?

PoetnAngel: Well the sand and the water kept me company.

KMilan05: Don't you get lonely?

PoetnAngel: Nah. I'm used to it. Besides, it's better that way. Life is a lot simpler when you're by yourself.

KMilan05: Simple yet boring.

PoetnAngel: Hey! My life is plenty exciting.

KMilan05: Oh yeah? Shopping for dresses and having a picnic by yourself?

PoetnAngel: Hmph. What did *you* do today?

KMilan05: Uh. I went white water rafting this morning. Then I took a jet to Paris where I was wined and dined by gorgeous celebrities. Then I went bungee jumping off the Eiffel Tower. I'm really quite exhausted.

PoetnAngel: Wow. I guess you're right. My life is pretty boring.

KMilan05: I told you. You ought to listen to me more often.

PoetnAngel: So what's your advice for making my life more interesting?

KMilan05: Well, I suppose you can start by going out on a date.

PoetnAngel: With?

KMilan05: The first girl you see tomorrow.

PoetnAngel: And what if she's straight?

KMilan05: Then I suppose you're going to have to be very charming.

PoetnAngel: I see. So, if some random yet very charming girl came up to you and asked you out on a date, you would say yes?

KMilan05: I'm not sure. What does this random yet very charming girl look like?

Julianne cocked her head to the side as she studied the conversation on the screen of her computer. *Is she flirting with me? Am I flirting with her? "Why are women so damn impossible to comprehend?"*

PoetnAngel: Well, she's tall.

KMilan05: Tall is good.

PoetnAngel: Yeah? So you like tall?

KMilan05: Well I've never really thought about it. But I suppose I'd like someone taller than me.

PoetnAngel: And how tall are you?

KMilan05: I am 5'4" and a half.



PoetnAngel: When you take pride in that half an inch you know you're short

KMilan05: Hey! Not funny. How tall are you? **PoetnAngel:** I'm 4'5"

KMilan05: Liar!

PoetnAngel: How do you know? I could very well be that short. You could have just hurt my feelings.

KMilan05: Did I?

PoetnAngel: No.

KMilan05: Are you?

PoetnAngel: No.

KMilan05: Well?

PoetnAngel: I'm 5'10" and a half.

KMilan05: Should I believe you? **PoetnAngel:**

Probably not.

KMilan05: Ugh! So you're lying?

PoetnAngel: Nope :o)

KMilan05: You're really that tall?

PoetnAngel: Ah-huh. Milk, it does a body good.

KMilan05: Maybe I should've tried that. So tell me more about this random yet charming girl

Julianne frowned. *I think she's definitely flirting.*

* * *

Kris covered her face with her hands. *What am I doing?? She's going to think I'm flirting with her. She paused to glance at the conversation. Maybe because I am flirting with her. Maybe Leigh is right. I'm doing one of those ... things with the switching and the batting. And ... ugh. I'm losing my mind.*

PoetnAngel: Well what else do you want to know?

KMilan05: How does she feel about short Nuyorican women?

PoetnAngel: Oh, she doesn't like them much. She prefers taller women.

KMilan05: Really?

PoetnAngel: Yeah, with blonde hair and blue eyes.

KMilan05: So then why would she ask me out?

PoetnAngel: Oh well, she forgot to put in her contacts that day.

Kris found herself laughing. *Why haven't you gone out with anyone, Julia Raye? I'm willing to bet it's not from lack of offers.*

KMilan05: So do you prefer blondes with blue eyes too?

PoetnAngel: Really doesn't matter to me.

KMilan05: Alright, well, the last woman you checked out, what did she look like?

PoetnAngel: My waitress the other day. She had short, spiky brown hair. And a nose ring.

KMilan05: So you like the punk type?

PoetnAngel: I like every type ;o) What about you? The last guy you checked out, what did he look like?

"Hmm," Kris considered the question. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd checked anyone out. It made her feel guilty, like she was cheating on Nathan. Maybe it was time to start looking.

KMilan05: Ask me again in a few days. I haven't gotten that far in singlehood.

PoetnAngel: You're one of those really monogamous people, aren't you?

KMilan05: Guilty as charged. Would you ever cheat on someone?



PoetnAngel: Nah. I prefer my life as simple and with as little drama as possible.

KMilan05: Boring, you mean?

PoetnAngel: Well, I can't compete with you and your bungee jumping **KMilan05:**

You're right. Your life could never be as exciting as mine.

PoetnAngel: Precisely, so I shouldn't even bother

KMilan05: Right, no need to get your hopes up **PoetnAngel:**

So what did you *really* do today?

KMilan05: LOL. You mean, you didn't buy the white water rafting story?

PoetnAngel: Not even a little bit.

KMilan05: Damn. Well, I watched TV and then I visited Leigh at work. I picked up an application. I filled it out. Then I watched some more TV. That's about it.

PoetnAngel: That's what you did today? And you criticize my picnic on the beach?

KMilan05: LOL. Well, I suppose when you put it *that* way...

Kris glanced up from the computer as she heard the lock on the door click open. A moment later, Leigh stepped inside the apartment, a puddle of water instantly forming at her feet.

"I hate the rain," she announced, pushing clumps of matted-down red hair away from her face. "I hate it a lot." She slipped out of her shoes and tip-toed across the kitchen, glancing quickly at Kris. "Speaking to your cyber lover?"

Kris chose to ignore the comment. "You're going to soak the carpet," she warned.

"I'll just take my clothes off in here." She paused and smiled knowingly. "You'd like that wouldn't you?" She patted Kris's head. "Fine. But I'm not doing a striptease for you."

"Thank God," Kris replied with a shudder. She ignored a now stripping Leigh, and returned her attention to the conversation with Julia.

PoetnAngel: Glad you agree that my life isn't that boring

KMilan05: I never really said I agreed. Sorry for the delay, my roommate just got home and now she's stripping in the kitchen. She's a bit unbalanced... **PoetnAngel:** Do you guys strip in the kitchen often?

KMilan05: Yeah, it's an old New York City tradition. Every time you step into an apartment you have to take your clothes off.

PoetnAngel: Funny, I must have missed that in the brochure

KMilan05: That's what you get for not reading the fine print

PoetnAngel: LOL. Hey, I don't suppose you watch the MTV Movie Awards?

KMilan05: Leigh watches them religiously. She claims she's gonna be up there some day so she must prepare herself spiritually. She even lights candles around the TV when the Academy Awards are on. Why?

PoetnAngel: Oh... just curious. I just saw a commercial for them.

"How long have you been talking to her?" Leigh asked, returning from her bedroom. She was now wearing shorts and a tee shirt. Her hair was wrapped up in a bright blue towel.

"None of your business, Marge," Kris responded.

Leigh leaned over behind Kris, reading the conversation on the computer screen. "Unbalanced?" she asked with mock outrage. "I am perfectly balanced. I should've been a trapeze artist."

Kris chose not to comment on that particular point.



"And I do *not* light candles around the TV," she argued, slapping Kris's arm. "The shrine is in my bedroom."

"Do you mind?" Kris asked meaningfully.

"What, you need privacy to talk to her?" Leigh asked. "If you're going to have cyber sex, take it into the bedroom. And don't forget to use protection."

"Not funny," Kris replied. "Go watch TV."

Leigh threw her nose in the air and stormed off. "You are so not fun."

26

Julianne found herself on stage with five hundred pairs of eyes focused in her direction. She gripped the microphone tighter and forced herself to breathe. *This is neither the time nor place to get stage fright.* "Hello everyone," she greeted the crowd, that was still applauding and cheering her entrance. She did her best to smile through the storm of bright flashes clicking away in her direction. *Just breathe. Breathing is good. Breathing will keep you from passing out. Passing out is bad.*

As the crowd quieted, Julianne spoke again. "I'm really happy to be here with you guys. This is my first time doing one of these shindigs so please be gentle."

A few people whistled, which Julianne found oddly encouraging. "When I took the part of Kiara, I never imagined that the show would gather such a healthy following. I definitely never expected to be standing here right now in front of all of you. And boy is there a lot of you." *Did I say that out loud?* "I'm really not sure what to talk about so I'll just let you guys ask me some questions." *Why am I so lame? I was definitely not made for public speaking.*

Hundreds of arms shot up in the air.

Oh shit. I must have been out of my mind when I agreed to do this. She pointed to a random person, who stood and addressed her nervously. *Are all my fans little boys?* she wondered. *Maybe if Kiara got a girlfriend we could spice things up a little.*

The boy smiled dreamily up at the stage. "You're beautiful," he informed her..

Julianne found herself blushing in spite of herself. *Way to be tough, Franqui.* "Thank you," she replied. "You're not so bad yourself."

His jaw hung open as he plopped back down in his seat.

Well that was easy. She watched the sea of arms shoot upward again. This time she selected a woman, who sported a *Guardian* tee shirt. Julianne was mildly surprised. She didn't even know they had those.

The woman, who didn't appear to be much older than Julianne herself, coughed nervously. "Could you give us a hint as to what we can expect from the film? Will it be a lot different from the TV show?"

Julianne blinked a few times. The woman had spoken so quickly that Julianne hadn't understood a blessed word. She smiled. "I understood the word film in there somewhere."



The crowd laughed good-naturedly and the woman blushed to the roots of her light hair. She repeated both questions, slowly this time, and sat down.

Julianne felt like giggling for some reason. This was kind of fun. Who knew she could make women blush so easily? *And she's kind of cute.* She instantly remembered that there were expectant eyes focused on her every move. "Let's see. You can expect much better special effects." The audience clapped at this. "Kiara may find a love interest." At this point there was a low murmur in the crowd. "And there's a *very* surprise ending." She was pleased when the murmuring grew louder.

"It'll be different from the TV show," she continued, "in various ways. Our budget is bigger so the costumes are really nice. Kiara's wings actually move and stuff which is pretty cool." *Way to be articulate.* "Also, we don't have to worry as much about censorship so we've taken a few liberties." *Boring, heterosexual liberties but liberties nonetheless.* "I think it'll all fit nicely with the series once it resumes in the fall."

Julianne braced herself for the next series of questions. The next hour passed by faster than she would've imagined possible. She'd been the last on the roster of cast members scheduled to speak at the convention, so once she was done, she was quickly ushered behind a table where the autograph signing session would begin.

If anything, this was even scarier than facing the five hundred people from the stage. Now she actually had to interact with them on an individual basis. Julianne's stomach churned at the thought.

Someone from the convention committee stood on stage and gave everyone instructions on how to go about getting their autographs.

"You look slightly ill," Max Trouy informed her from his spot beside her. "You okay?"

Julianne forced a smile in his direction. *Horrible actor, but relatively nice guy.* "Just a little nervous," she replied.

"They're just fans," Max reminded her, shrugging his shoulders in a dismissive fashion.

Just fans. Just fans. Julianne repeated the words in her mind, hoping they'd offer her some comfort.

As the line assembled, Julianne couldn't help but wish that by some miracle, Kris would be in the crowd. That somehow she'd be able to recognize her. *I'm totally losing my mind.* But thinking about Kris made her feel slightly better.

An anxious fan handed Julianne a glossy 8x10 picture of Kiara. "You are the best angel ever," the little girl said.

Julianne found herself smiling as she scribbled her signature on the photograph. "Well, thank you very much," she said, glancing up. "What's your name?"

"Erin," the girl said happily.

Julianne quickly wrote, "To Erin," above the signature. "Thanks for coming to see me, Erin," she said and handed the picture back to the girl.

Erin bit her lip nervously for a moment. "Um, can I have a hug?"



Julianne blinked in surprise. "S-sure," she stammered. *Why am I such a bumbling idiot?* She tried to cover her nervousness with a smile.

The girl ran around the table and threw her arms around Julianne. "This is the best day of my life," Erin declared excitedly into Julianne's ear.

It's a good thing you're still young, kid. Julianne found herself chuckling.

Erin ended the hug and ran off to show her mom the signature, leaving Julianne slightly stunned. *Well, that was a first.* She cleared her throat and turned to the next awaiting fan. This time it was a hairy middle aged man, wearing a torn Kiss tee shirt.

Don't even think about asking for a hug, buddy. Julianne narrowed her eyes slightly in warning.

After an hour, Julianne's hand began to cramp up, but she refused to stop. She didn't think it would be fair for the people still waiting in line to have to go home empty handed just because her butt was numb and her hand was permanently molded to the Sharpie. She opened her hand and closed it painfully a few times while she waited for the next person to appear.

"I didn't mean to speak so fast before."

Julianne glanced up and into a pair of beautiful brown eyes. She found herself momentarily at a loss for words. *She's even cuter up close. What was that Kris said? Something about charm?* She smiled. "That's alright. It's not often I get to make women blush so easily," she found herself saying. *Charming does not equal blatant flirting, you eeeeeediot!*

In response, the woman blushed furiously once again in a way that Julianne found incredibly adorable. Hastily, she handed Julianne the photograph she carried.

Julianne was surprised to see that it wasn't one of her in character. *Interesting.* "Who should I make this out to?"

"Sam," the woman said quickly, "antha."

Julianne's brows disappeared into her hairline.

Sam giggled nervously. "Samantha," she explained. "Sorry. You can just make it out to Sam."

Well, at least she's too nervous to notice how nervous I am. Julianne ignored the temptation to write, "Wanna go out sometime?" on the picture. Instead, she scribbled, "To Sam Antha. Thanks for watching the show. Sincerely, Julianne Franqui." *There. That's platonic enough.* She handed the picture back with a grin. "Enjoy."

Sam smiled. "Thank you," she squeaked and walked off.

Julianne watched her walk away and grinned slightly. *I should do these convention things more often.*

* * *



Adrian watched as Julianne paced around the living room. It's what she generally did when she was in the middle of some kind of crisis, so he was used to it. Julianne was *always* in the middle of a crisis, even though she was the only one who saw it that way.

For his part, Adrian attempted to watch TV, but the Phillips flat screen kept getting blocked every now and then by the back and forth movements of his best friend. "Julianne," he said, softly. "STOP!"

Julianne complied, but managed to do so right in front of the TV. "What?" she demanded. "I'm not doing anything to you!"

"Would you mind pacing somewhere else?" Adrian requested, waving his arm in a frantic pattern which he hoped would indicate his wishes for her to move. "I'm *trying* to appreciate this hot piece of ass right here." He motioned to the very fine woman on television, who remained partly obstructed by a different hot piece of ass that was unfortunately way out of his league.

Julianne took a dramatic step to her left. She glanced quickly at the woman to whom Adrian was referring to and shook her head. "You have the weirdest taste in women," she commented.

Adrian considered the woman on television. "Do you think those are real?"

"I'm not going to discuss breasts with you, Adrian."

"Breasts?" Adrian asked, feigning insult. "I was referring to her ears."

Julianne stepped in front of the TV once again, and hit the power button. The woman with the incredibly huge ... ears ... disappeared in a flash. "I need a favor," she announced, turning around to face her best friend.

"Why does my stomach hurt every time you tell me that?" Adrian asked, sinking slightly into the black velvet couch. He regarded his best friend with trepidation. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

Julianne smiled. He was going to hate it, but that didn't mean he wouldn't do it. "I think I've got a solution to our little award problem," she said.

"*Our* little award problem?" he asked. "You mean, *your* little award problem."

Julianne ignored him. "Now, the plan is really quite simple."

"The plan," Adrian repeated slowly. "I don't like the word 'plan' coming from your mouth. That means you've been thinking and I don't like it when you think, Julianne."

"Like I said," she continued, resuming her pacing, "it's very simple. All we need is a wig and like a new nose and maybe a new chin. And some contacts." She stopped to survey his reaction.

"New nose?" Nope, he didn't like where this was going at all.

Julianne rushed over to sit by his side. "Look, this will be really good for you. If people out there think you're my boyfriend, what is that going to do to your sex life? You can't go around cheating on me after I declared to the world that you were the most wonderful man I knew. What would that say about my taste in men?"



Adrian stopped to consider that last question. Surely, there was a snappy comeback for that one. Damn if he could figure it out. He was slightly distracted by Julianne's perfume. Why did she have to smell so damn nice all the time?

"So, I'm really doing you a favor by trying to conceal your identity," Julianne went on. "You can continue to lead your own life. And Kris's friend won't be able to recognize you. We kill two birds with one stone." She flashed him her most charming smile.

Adrian smiled back. "You're cute," he informed her. "But you're *insane* if you think I'm letting you talk me into this ...this ... You know what? There are no words for what this is."

Julianne's smile faded. *Damn!* Time for Plan B. She crawled over him and straddled his lap. "Pleeeeeeease," she begged, hugging him.

"Oh, come on!" Adrian complained, although it came out sounding more like whining. "That's not fair, Julianne, you know I can't think when you do that."

Julianne pulled back so she could look at his face. "I will owe you *big* time," she offered, her blue eyes pleading with his.

What was that she smelled like? Vanilla and something. Adrian decided he hated lesbians. "I hate you."

"Pretty please?" she tried again, pouting slightly.
"I hate you *a lot*."

"Just name it and it's yours," she said, unfazed by his declaration. "Anything."

Anything, huh? That could be interesting. After all, she did have a point. He couldn't go cruising for chicks if they all knew who he was. "I am not getting plastic surgery for you."

Julianne laughed, knowing she'd won. "No plastic surgery. I'll just get one of the girls from the make-up and special effects department." She used his chest to push herself up. "Been working out?" she asked.

"Why do you tease me?" he asked. "Don't you realize it's evil?"

Julianne grinned. "Yup. I'm getting some water," she announced, and headed toward the kitchen. Mission accomplished.

Adrian turned over in the couch so he could look at her. "Hey, I could be totally in love with you and you could be like totally playing with my feelings," he argued.

"But you're not," Julianne called back.

"I'd sleep with you in a millisecond," he informed her seriously.

Julianne reappeared from the kitchen, carrying a bottle of water. "You would sleep with most women in a millisecond, Adrian," she retorted, joining him on the couch.

"True," he admitted. "Remind me again why we're doing this?"



She sighed, tucking a few wisps of dark brown hair behind her ears. "I don't want her to find out this way," she explained. "If Leigh recognizes you as Julianne Franqui's boyfriend ..."

"She might not remember what I look like," he offered.

Julianne snorted. "Right."

"Well, who's going to believe her?" Adrian asked. "She's the only one who saw me."

Julianne considered this for a moment then shook her head. "Yeah, but I admitted to Kris that I looked like Julianne Franqui. It would seem kind of weird that we would both look like the same people."

"I thought you didn't like to complicate your life, Julianne," Adrian said. "It seems to me like you're going through a *whole* lot of trouble just to keep this one girl's *friend* from suspecting something."

"Are you're saying I'm acting a bit crazy?"

"Like a certifiable lunatic," Adrian confirmed.

"I don't want to risk this, Adrian," she argued. "If there is any chance at all that Kris might suspect *anything* well ..."

"I thought it was just email?"

Julianne allowed herself a smile. "Well, we've upgraded to online chatting." She grinned. "She's so funny. I swear I could talk to her fore..." She quickly shut her trap. Adrian's brows shot upward. "Yes...?" he encouraged.

She coughed and began drinking water to keep herself from speaking any further.

"You are so screwed." He patted her knee sympathetically.

I know...

27

Dear Julia,

Starbucks accepted my application. Guess I'll be making coffee for the next few months. How do you like yours? Or do you even like coffee? I love coffee, although not to the extent that Leigh loves coffee. She's a bit addicted, I'm afraid. I just like a nice cup in the morning. Yum. It's the only way to start the day. Don't you think?

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,



The Blind Side of Love



Ingrid Díaz

I generally have Coke for breakfast. I don't know why it is that I never got into coffee, but I guess I'm more of a soda girl myself. Sometimes, I drink Sprite in the mornings, which I think makes no sense as far as caffeine goes, but somehow it gets me through the day. Maybe I'm just addicted to sugar.

Your friend,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

I hate cockroaches. I know that's completely random, but there was this really big one in the apartment today and I ran out screaming. Hey, don't laugh at me. It was big and like gross looking. With huuuuuuuge antennae and like ...

Anyway.

Your friend, Kris.

* * *

Dear Kris,

A cockroach huh? And it was huge you say? I'm glad that Leigh was able to take care of the evil monster. Who knows what would've happened otherwise? It could've multiplied in size and eaten you alive! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!!!!!!

Your friend,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

Shut up.

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

I was kidding about the cockroach. Actually, I'm not very fond of them myself. But I absolutely *loathe* spiders. Big ones, small ones ... Yuck!

Your friend,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,



I have a pet spider named Harriette you can come say hi to. I'll let you pet her if you're nice.

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

You do not have a spider.

* * *

Yes I do.

* * *

Do not.

* * *

Do too.

* * *

Do not. Do not. Do not!!!

* * *

You did say you were twenty-three right? ;) Hey, do you want to chat tomorrow night? Leigh has to work late so I'll be bored out of my mind and could use some company. What do you say?

* * *

Ugh! I wish I could :o(But I have a prior engagement I'm afraid I can't weasel out of. Rain check?

28

"I can not believe I let you talk me into this," Adrian mumbled, staring at his reflection in the handheld mirror. He had to admit that the lady Julianne had hired for the task had done an excellent job of making him look completely hideous. His nose had been elongated in a Cerano de Bergerac fashion. Well, perhaps not that exaggerated but it was still pretty bad. His blue eyes were concealed behind a pair of brown contact lenses. And to top off the look, he also sported a shoulder-length blonde wig. He lowered the mirror to look at his *former* best friend. "I look like a freak."

Julianne coughed to keep her laughter at bay. Adrian's make-over had been a complete success. She'd never really intended to have her best friend looking like a male Barbra Streisand, but somehow it had turned out that way. He didn't look ugly, per se, just ... different. The wig wasn't helping any. *Oh who am I kidding? He looks completely ridiculous.*



From the window of the limousine, Julianne watched New York City float by in a series of muted conversations and passersby's unknown destinations. *Yeah, I wouldn't mind living here some day.* She settled deeper into the leather confines of the seat and focused on the outside world beyond the safety of her limo. Unconsciously, she looked at every body she could, wondering if any of them were Kris. *She could be anyone.*

"Thank you for doing this," she said at last, her gaze drifting away from the busy metropolis to lock with Adrian's hesitant brown eyes.

"I really hope this girl is worth all of this trouble," Adrian stated, attempting to scratch at his nose through the latex extensions. Failing, he gave up. "What happens if I sneeze and the nose goes flying across the crowd."

Julianne laughed at the thought. "Then don't sneeze," she instructed, though her tone was light. The lady had assured her that nothing short of a hurricane would rip that sucker off. "Do I look okay?" she asked, changing the subject suddenly. She gazed down at her outfit. In spite of having paid way too much money for a dress, she'd opted for the more casual look of black jeans and blue tank top with the word 'tease' printed in black. After all, this wasn't the Academy Awards, she might as well be comfortable.

"Julianne, you could wear a potato sack and make it look gorgeous," Adrian answered. "You look hot and you know it."

Yeah, but what would Kris think? Julianne found herself wondering. Lately, everything went back to Kris, and it was starting to get annoying. *I don't even know her! She could be a fiftyyear-old man for all I know.* She smoothed back the loose tresses of hair and took a deep breath. *I will not think about Kris. I will not think about Kris.*

"You're thinking about Kris aren't you?" Adrian guessed.

Startled, Julianne glanced at him. "I am not," she lied. "I was thinking about ... er ... my speech."

"Let's hear it then," Adrian said, not believing a word of it. Julianne was so easily read when her defenses were down.

I should've probably prepared one, huh? She cleared her throat. "I want to thank all the fans for this prestigious award. It was fun kissing this hunk of a man next to me. His lips were silky smooth and his facial hair didn't scratch me at all. Which is why I enjoyed kissing him. Like I enjoy kissing all men. Hubba hubba, viva le heterosexuality. Amen."

Adrian clapped. "I dare you to repeat that verbatim at the podium," he teased. "Double dare you, in fact."

"Ha," Julianne said flatly.

Adrian raised the mirror to his face once again and moved his head from side to side to study every angle. "I'm definitely not getting any tonight," he mumbled regretfully. "You are so going to pay for this."

"Take checks?" Julianne joked.

"Oh no," Adrian replied, putting the mirror aside so he could look at Julianne without distraction. "You owe me a massage."



"Massage?"

"For starters."

Oh brother. "Well, alright, but can't I just hire one of those Swedish girls to give it to you? You'd have a much better chance of getting properly groped by one of them."

Adrian considered this. "Your treat?"

"All the way," Julianne assured him.

"Deal," Adrian said with a nod. "But we're still not even."

Damn. Julianne watched as their destination came into full view. *It's show time.*

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Adrian said again. "I swear, you're like the lesbian version of Lucy Ricardo."

Julianne grinned at the compliment. "Guess I'll start calling you Ethel from now on."

* * *

So far, so good. Julianne stared up at the stage where the latest teen craze band was performing. Beside her, Adrian, a.k.a. Fernando Croa, continued to sniffle. "Does it itch?" Julianne whispered.

"I think some of the latex few up my nose," Adrian whispered back. "Having fun?"

Julianne shrugged. "These things are always amusing," she responded. *Not as amusing as you, however.* They'd been stopped on the red carpet by one of the MTV veejays who had inquired if Adrian was jealous of the kiss between Julianne and Rye Philips. Adrian in response had hacked a few times, then adopted a horribly fake Spanish accent and said, "I no spickle de English." Julianne had nearly coughed up a lung trying to keep from laughing.

"Do you know what you're going to say?" Adrian asked.

"I'll just improvise," Julianne responded. She glanced around the audience quickly. "I haven't seen Rye around. Maybe he couldn't make it."

"I heard he's filming something in Saskatchewan," Adrian joked.

"I could only be so lucky." Julianne's attention returned to the stage as the dance number ended and the crowd erupted into applause. She clapped with more enthusiasm than she felt.

Beside her, Adrian shifted in his seat. "When you lean over to kiss me on your way up to the stage, be mindful of the nose factor," he warned.

Julianne grinned slightly. "What makes you think I'm going to kiss you?"

"Because people always kiss the person they're with on the way up to accept an award," Adrian responded. "It's tradition. Besides, I'm your boyfriend and you want me badly."

The applause continued as a voice over the speakers announced the next two presenters. "From the TV show, *Making It*, please welcome Douglass Price and Jane Feinman." The two actors



walked up to the see-through podium on the side of the stage and smiled warmly as the audience continued to cheer.

"What is a good movie without a that special kiss?" Jane asked as the noise simmered down to a low roar.

Julianne took a deep breath. "Here we go," she muttered.

"And what's a good award presentation without a special kiss?" The guy closed his eyes and puckered up, only to get slapped lightly by the smaller woman beside him.

"I told you not in public," Jane responded, as the audience laughed. "We're here to celebrate that magical moment when our favorite characters on the silver screen share that memorable kiss."

Douglass rubbed his face and nodded. "Oh right," he said. "And the nominees for best kiss are..."

The large screens on either side of the stage came to life as a deep voice announced, "Kim Strayer and Paul James in *Images of You*."

The two actors in question appeared on the screen. The woman was staring into a mirror where her reflection switched from herself to one of a guy. "Peter?" she asked hesitantly. The guy popped out from the mirror and embraced the young woman in a passionate kiss.

The clip ended and another replaced it. "Billy Lee and Pepper Elles in *Gordon's Laundry Basket*." The audience cheered for this one.

Julianne snickered. "*Gordon's Laundry Basket*?" She nudged Adrian. "Sounds like something you would write."

Adrian scratched his cheek with his middle finger.

"Rye Philips and Julianne Franqui in *Blanket of Darkness*."

Julianne cringed at the image of herself and Rye Philips kissing with abandon. *Gross. Gross. Gross. Of all the things to nominate me for.*

The clip ended and everyone's attention drew back to Jane and Douglass. "And the winner is ..."

Julianne held her breath. *Please don't let me freeze when I get up there. The last thing I need is for Kris to watch this and think I'm a complete idiot.* She paused. *I will not think of Kris. I will not think of Kris. I will not ...*

"Rye Philips and Julianne Franqui!" Jane announced as the crowd went wild.

Julianne feigned surprise and excitement as any good actress would. To humor Adrian, she leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the lips before rising to her feet and walking up on the stage. *God there's a lot of people here,* she realized as she got a good view of the audience.

She took the award from Douglass, who whispered congratulations in her ear. She smiled and thanked him, then took her spot behind the podium. *Guess Rye couldn't make it after all. Darn.* The audience quieted down in anticipation of her speech. *Okay, now, remember that Kris is*



going to be watching this. Oh God, like there's anything I can say in acceptance of this particular award that will not make me sound like a total dumbass.

Julianne stared at the popcorn statue thing and cleared her throat. "Well, there's not much you can say after winning an award such as this," she joked, "except thank you. It's always an honor to be recognized for being a good kisser."

Kris. She closed her eyes and opened them again. "At first, I thought it was kind of silly to receive an award for kissing someone on screen. I kind of laughed off the nomination when I first received it. But then, I started thinking about how I feel every time I get caught up in someone else's onscreen romance and how I can't wait for that moment when they finally express their love. I mean, that's what we're all searching for, right? Love?"

Julianne paused for a moment, then continued. "I believe that as actors the only thing we can really hope for is that our performance somehow touches the viewers in some way, and motivates them to believe in the magic of possibility; and the promise of love. I'd like to pretend that this award means I've achieved something of the sort. Either that, or a lot of girls thought Rye Phillips was really cute." She laughed. "But whatever your reasons for voting, I thank you."

29

Kris stared at the computer screen and sat back in the chair. She was trying to pretend she wasn't disappointed by the fact that Julia couldn't meet her online that night, but it wasn't working very well. *Prior commitment? Hmm.*

It had been an extremely uneventful day. Nathan still hadn't made an appearance and he was due to leave in two days. Her parents hadn't called and she wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not. *No news is good news, right?* She wasn't so sure about that. Not in her family.

Leigh was at work and wouldn't be home for hours. Kris had been looking forward to an online chat with Julia all day, but apparently she'd have to fend for herself.

Dear Julia,

Rain check? Sure. Let me know when you're available next and I'll join you then. It's too bad you couldn't join me tonight. I'm really quite bored. But that's alright. I look forward to hearing all about your 'prior commitment'. If you want to talk about it, that is. Is this one of the events you had to buy a dress for? I'm sure inquisitive tonight.

Anyway, since you're not around to entertain me, I'm going to go find entertainment elsewhere. I hope to hear from you soon.

Your friend,
Kris

Kris shut down the computer and stared around the empty apartment. *What to do? What to do? Visit Leigh? Nah, I already did that twice today. I really need to get a life. Um, watch TV? Nothing good on Fridays.* She tapped her finger against her chin and glanced out through the double doors that led to the small balcony. It had been a while since she'd ventured out into the city. Well, not counting both times she'd walked out on Nathan. *Let's take a walk.*



She grabbed her sketch pad and pencil and headed out into the great unknown.

* * *

Kris hadn't lied when she'd told Julianne that she was a nature freak. She loved everything about the Earth, from the trees and flowers to the animals. Cockroaches were an exception of course, but she didn't really count them as animals. They were more like pesky little ... Well...

Anyway, one of Kris's favorite hang outs was Central Park. Whenever she had time, she would take residence in one of the many benches scattered about the place and sketch away. It was also a good place to take pictures, but that night she'd forgotten her camera so she'd just have to capture the moments by hand.

Several hours later, she found herself in Bethesda Terrace, overlooking the Lake and wooded shores of the Ramble. On her sketchpad was a rough outline of Emma Stebbins' sculpture, *Angel of Waters*. The metal piece featured an angel hovering in the air and descending onto the troubled waters of the fountain in the hopes of bestowing the gift of healing.

Poet and Angel, Kris thought, sketching the wings of the angel on the pad. *Maybe she likes angels. I wonder if she came here while she was in New York. Why was she in New York, anyway?* Kris sighed, looking up and over the railings of the terrace. Below, tourists snapped away at the Fountain, the flashes from the cameras bathing the sculpture in ethereal light. *Why do I feel like I know nothing about you?*

Kris tucked the sketchpad under her arm and made her way down the grand staircase. She traced her fingers along the sandstone panels on her way down. It was such a peaceful place, in spite of all the tourist activity. Several people on Roller blades zoomed by her, nearly knocking her off-balance. *Jesus!* She froze in place as the stampede passed by, then continued on her way.

A sudden noise caught her attention and she turned in time to watch a guy tumbling to the ground. "Oh, fuck!" he mumbled as he landed with a large thump.

Kris blinked a few times then jogged over to the fallen man. "Are you okay?" she asked. She noted he wore Roller blades as well and guessed he was part of the pack that had just recently passed by.

The guy glanced up, blue eyes looking a bit dazed. "Yeah, I must have hit a rock or something," he explained, pushing himself up into a sitting position.

Kris noticed the large scrap on the side of his arm and knelt down to inspect it, placing the notebook she carried on the ground beside her. "You should probably get that checked," she told him. It was bleeding pretty badly and she didn't want him to get an infection. "I can help you get to a hospital if you want."

A brow inched upward as soft blue eyes contemplated her suggestion for a moment. "Are you usually this nice to strangers?" he asked, looking at his own scrape for a moment. He flinched as he saw the magnitude of the cut.

Kris smiled and did a quick survey. It appeared his left arm had broken his fall. There didn't appear to be any more major scratches anywhere. "Just the ones that decide to bleed in my presence," she responded.

Satisfied that the guy was going to live, she sat back a few inches. It felt a bit awkward sitting so close to a complete stranger. There was no denying that the guy was extremely handsome,



but that didn't mean he wasn't a serial killer. *Leigh would probably be drooling all over this guy.* She paused to consider that thought for a moment. *So why am I not drooling? Should I be? Isn't that what single girls do?* She decided that train of thought was far too laden to deal with at the present moment.

"That's a nice sketch," the guy commented, turning his head so he could get a better view of it. Suddenly self-conscious, Kris blushed slightly and shrugged. "I was just wasting time," she said. "But thank you." She glanced at the sculpture a few yards away. "It's beautiful, don't you think? I doubt I could do it justice."

"Is that what people usually do in New York?" he asked. "Waste time?"

Kris grinned. "I suppose," she answered. "I take it you're a tourist?"

He shrugged broad shoulders. "I wouldn't call myself a tourist," he said.

Kris nodded. "Here on business?" she guessed

"You could say that," he responded with a slight grin. "I should probably go wash this off." He motioned to his arm as if it wasn't already obvious and pulled himself to his feet, balancing on the blades with ease.

Kris grabbed her sketchbook and rose as well, looking up at him. "You sure you don't want to go to a hospital or something?"

"Nah," he responded easily. "My hotel is ..." He waved his hand in the general direction behind him. "Over there somewhere."

Kris smiled. "Well, alright, if you're sure," she said. "Watch out for those pesky rocks."

"You bet." He flashed her a bright smile and with a quick wave skated away.

Kris watched him disappear into the darkness and turned her attention back to the Fountain. She held up the drawing up next to the actual statue and compared. *Not bad.* She closed the pad and sighed, glancing quickly at the time. *Leigh should be home by now.*

She glanced up at the sculpture for a few more minutes and then headed back toward home.

30

When Julianne awoke the next morning, she was instantly rewarded with the soothing sounds of groaning. She blinked in confusion, looking around the large hotel room. She listened closely. "Ow, damnit!"

Julianne frowned and threw the covers off her body and rolled out of bed. She walked out of the room, and glanced over the railing to the first floor of the penthouse, where she found Adrian attempting to do push-ups. Julianne rolled her eyes and headed into the bathroom. *Why does he insist on exercising so much? Could he possibly get any bulkier?* She finished brushing her teeth and descended the stairs.

"C'mon, c'mon, fucker!" Adrian growled as he fell flat on his chest.



Julianne stood by her best friend, watching the display with amusement. "Having trouble?" she asked innocently.

Adrian glanced up at her from his place on the floor and sighed. "Good morning," he mumbled. He groaned again as he sat up and glanced at his arm. "Damn thing."

Julianne noticed the cut on his arm for the first time and she kneeled beside him with concern. "What the hell happened to you?" she asked, inspecting the injury.

"I fell," he admitted, whining slightly. He pouted. "Kiss it better?"

"Ah, no thanks," Julianne answered, patting his head. She stood and headed to the kitchen to grab a soda. "That's what you get for Roller blading at night. I told you not to go out there."

Adrian joined her in the kitchen a moment later and leaned against the counter. "You know I have to get at least a mile in every day," he told her. "And since we had to catch that early flight yesterday ..." He let the rest hang in the air. "Besides, it was a beautiful night."

"For tripping?" Julianne grinned as she popped open the Coca-Cola can and took a much needed sip. "You're lucky you didn't break anything."

"There was a rock," Adrian argued.

Julianne made a pouting face and walked over to pinch Adrian's cheek. "Aww, wittle wock giving Adrian some twoble?" She slapped his face lightly and walked over to the couch. "So what are you doing today?"

Adrian rubbed his cheek and turned around. "Well, I'm going for a jog," he answered. "Then I'm hoping to come home to that nice massage someone promised me."

Julianne turned and pointed toward the phone. "Their number's over there. Just give them a call and they'll be more than happy to come up here and molest you. Just make sure I'm not home when they get here." She made a show of shuddering.

Adrian appeared in front of her a moment later. A gray sleeveless tee shirt and black track pants were his outfit of choice that morning. It's what he generally wore in the mornings on his way out to exercise. How she'd landed such a health conscious lunatic for a best friend, Julianne wasn't sure. But there he was, in all his muscled glory, staring down at her with a look of unadulterated curiosity. "And what are *you* doing today?" he asked.

The cold can was beginning to numb her fingers, so Julianne put it down before regarding her friend. "I thought I'd take a walk," she said. "Sightsee a little. What do you think? Should I be a redhead, a brunette, or a blonde today?"

"I think you should shave your head." He nodded solemnly, and made a buzzing sound. "No one will recognize you then, trust me."

"Mmm," Julianne responded. "I'll consider that."

"Good. Anyway, I'm off. Have fun doing ... whatever." He waved and started toward the door.

Julianne turned around. "Watch out for those rocks!"

"Haha. I already heard that one. Try something more original next time." And then he disappeared out the door.



Julianne stared at the closed door for a few moments. "What the hell is he talking about?" she wondered. Then she shrugged and started toward the stairs. There were important things to do today. And she'd better get a move on before she lost all her nerve.

* * *

Clad in her undercover gear, Julianne headed out into the awaiting streets of New York City. Figuring she'd been a blonde on her last outing, she opted for the redhead look this time around. Large sunglasses masked a grand portion of her face, and big baggy clothes concealed her body.

No one stared or gawked at her as she passed, and Julianne sighed with relief. She sometimes forgot how nice it was to go somewhere and not have everyone immediately recognize her. Fame was exciting for all of about fifteen minutes before it became a complete burden one could never shake off. Granted, it had its perks every now and again. But sometimes .. just sometimes ... Julianne wished that she could walk down a busy street and not have to worry that the wind might pick up her wig or that someone might somehow recognize her through the disguise.

Julianne glanced all around at the people, wondering what they really thought of her. Wondering what they would think if they knew who she really was. Wondering, even, if they really cared to know. Every time she did an interview she couldn't help but wonder if people really cared to know the answer to the questions they were asking. Why did people want to know who made her dress? Or why did they care if she drank Pepsi or Coke? In the grand scheme of things, did any of these things really matter?

Did she matter?

She dug her hands into her pockets and continued to walk through the crowded city, feeling, as she always did, somehow disconnected from everything. *I bet most people walking here wish they knew what it was like to be featured on one of those billboards up there. Fame .. fortune .. if only they could have a taste. And here I am, hiding among them, wishing I fit in.*

"Spare some change?"

Julianne was suddenly snapped out of her thoughts by a man standing next to her. He held up a slightly ripped cup, the state of which matched his attire quite adroitly. His brown eyes stared pleadingly into hers. "Change?" he repeated.

Kris's words suddenly filtered through Julianne's consciousness. *There's so much one can do, given the resources.* Julianne stared at the man, wondering how many times she'd walked by someone like him and not spared a second glance. "I don't have any change," she said apologetically. She pulled out her wallet and hoped she had something in there. She never carried any cash with her. A lousy twenty stared up at her. She pulled it out and handed it to the man. "It's all I have on me," she explained.

The man's eyes widened as big as saucers and a big smile lit up his face. "Thank you," he said, staring at the bill in his hand as though it were gold. "God bless you."

Julianne grinned, feeling happy all of a sudden. "What's your name?" she found herself asking.

"James," he said.



She smiled warmly and offered her hand. "I'm Julia," she informed him, wondering why she'd opted for her real name. "Do you want to have lunch with me?" she asked, surprising herself yet again.

James nodded weakly and stared at her as if he feared she'd disappear.

"C'mon, James," Julianne urged. "Pick your poison. My treat."

* * *

Julianne couldn't remember the last time she'd had McDonald's. Actually, she wasn't even sure she'd ever had it, but it's what James had selected and who was she to argue?

James dug into his food with relentless abandon and Julianne tried not to stare. Instead, she looked down at the hamburger haphazardly wrapped in yellow paper. *People eat this?* She carefully unwrapped it and looked at it silently. She had the sudden urge to poke it. So she turned to the French fries instead. Those didn't look quite as scary.

"You are very kind," James said suddenly, through a mouthful of food.

Kind. Julianne thought about that word for a moment. Was she doing this out of kindness? Or was it pity? Or even guilt? Why did anyone do anything, really? "I just wanted some company," she found herself saying.

"Beautiful girl like you?" James asked, brown eyes studying her intently. "I find that hard to believe."

Julianne removed the sunglasses from her face. She doubted very much James would know who she was, or that he'd even care. "Beauty doesn't necessarily ensure company," she responded. "And money doesn't ensure happiness, either."

"Just a roof over your head and food on the table," James responded, though his tone was light. "Everything else is just a matter of chance."

Julianne bit her lip, feeling suddenly foolish for discussing her petty problems with a homeless man. *God, I have to be the most self-centered person on Earth.* "So, James, tell me about yourself."

James eyed her untouched hamburger.

"Want?" Julianne offered.

He accepted the offer without delay and bit into the burger happily.

Julianne grabbed a handful of fries and popped them into her mouth. Not bad. She could get used to those suckers.

For the next hour or so, James told Julianne all about how his mother had kicked him out of the house when he was sixteen. He'd been on the streets since then, trying to fend for himself. He'd tried selling drugs but had gotten too caught up in his own addiction to actually make a profit. Finally, he'd gotten out of the habit. Stayed clean since, except he now turned to the bottle every once in a while. It helped him deal with the cold winter months and the lonely summer days.



Julianne listened to the tale silently, wondering how she would have dealt in a similar situation. *I would've died. Literally.* Respect and admiration replaced her original pity for the man.

Before they parted ways, Julianne scribbled her work number on a piece of paper. "Call me," she told him. "If you ever need anything."

James clutched the piece of paper in his hand and smiled at her through watery brown eyes. "You are a special person," he told her. "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*," she said, meaning the words in so many levels she couldn't even count them all. She hugged him. "Take care of yourself, James."

As she walked away, resuming her journey toward her original destination, she briefly wondered if James would ever actually call her. Or if the twenty dollars would simply be spent on the occasional bottle that kept him warm and hopeful through the many endless nights.

* * *

Washington Square Park was a zoo of activity that somehow managed to make Julianne even more nervous than she already was. She walked by people reading and people talking and people making out. With every step her heart beat wilder and wilder until she thought it might explode out of her chest.

She took a seat at the edge of the fountain, and took a deep breath. *She's probably not even here. Don't be such a loser.* Julianne forced her gaze to wander around the busy area. There was a mime climbing an invisible rope. A few yards away from him, were three guys doing stunts. A crowd of people had gathered around them, so Julianne couldn't see what they were doing very well, but every now and then their antics were rewarded with enthusiastic cheers.

And then she caught sight of the table, tucked away in a nice shaded area. Several paintings were out on display. Julianne's heart threatened to leap out of her throat. She dared to glance behind the table, where she saw the girl whose number Adrian had gotten. *That must be Leigh.*

Julianne took a moment to study her. *She's really pretty.* Long red hair framed a youthful-looking face. In the distance, her eyes looked brown, but Julianne was wearing sunglasses so she couldn't swear that was accurate.

Both to Julianne's disappointment and relief, Leigh appeared to be alone once again. *Does Kris ever bother to sell her own stuff?*

She debated long and hard whether she should approach the table or not. But the notion alone sent her heart into a mega marathon that Julianne feared would end in a massive heart attack.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to swallow her fears and take a chance. She rose to her feet, feeling proud of that small accomplishment. *Baby steps. C'mon, you're a famous movie star and you can't even walk a few yards to look at a painting?* That didn't do much to ease the panic settling over her, but she somehow forced her hesitant limbs forward.

Halfway to her destination, she froze dead on her tracks.

Leigh wasn't alone anymore. There was another girl standing beside her.

Julianne blinked, knowing full well that she was staring. *Is that her?*



The girl was attempting to balance a couple of hotdogs, a bottle of water, a bag of pretzels and a can of soda, and nearly dropped all five items on Leigh's head. Leigh accepted the two hotdogs and soda, while her companion kept the bag and water for herself. She dropped both items on the table and took a seat.

Oh God...If that's Kris, I'm in serious trouble. Julianne was fearful that she would pass out at any moment. She'd expected Kris to be cute, maybe even semi good-looking. But this was something entirely different. The first thing Julianne noticed was the eyes. And she had to lower her sunglasses slightly so she could decipher their actual color, and still she couldn't really tell. They were brown and green and gold all mixed into one. Kind, warm and inviting. They lit up as she laughed.

Long, silky light brown hair with blondish highlights, which Julianne guessed were courtesy of the sun, framed her beautiful face. *So she's gorgeous. That's okay. You're okay. Just breathe. In. Out. Good.*

I'm so screwed.

Inching forward, she managed to get closer to the table, though now she wasn't entirely certain that she'd make it all the way there. *What the hell would I say? I can't very well introduce myself as Julia.*

In what felt like slow motion, she somehow managed to reach her destination. One moment she was thousands of miles away, and the next instant she was right there. Caught in a landslide of memories consisting of random emails and online conversations. They all boiled down to this moment. She had to say something witty. Something that would blow Kris away. Something like ... "Hi."

Leigh glanced up from her hotdog.

"Are you interested in anything?" Kris asked, smiling in a way that Julianne found disarming.

The English language abandoned Julianne at that instant, and she was left with only one method of communication. Pointing. So she pointed at a random item on the table, which ended up being a pencil sketch of an angel. *Figures.*

Kris stared at the picture for a moment and troubled eyes rose to meet with Julianne's. "Sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to have that one out on display." She glanced at Leigh and gave her a undecipherable look, one that Julianne guessed was of meaningful displeasure.

Julianne quickly glanced around the table. "That's okay," she said quickly, maybe too quickly. She felt herself blush. *I am a such a dork.* "Um, how about that one?" She pointed to a painting of the sunrise. *Sunrise?* "Did you, uh, stay up to paint that?"

Kris shrugged and grinned slightly. "Does it look like I did?" she asked.

Trick question. Trick question. Think before you speak. "Well," Julianne began, studying the painting carefully, "I'm not one to question your artistic methods, but I'd say it looks realistic enough to be a photograph. Although, I'm not sure any film is good enough to capture the vibrancy of those colors." Her gaze returned hesitantly to Kris's, as she awaited a reaction.

To her surprise, Kris blushed. "Thank you," she said, "that's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. Are you an artist?"



"Ah, no," Julianne replied. "I can just appreciate a good sunrise when I see one. How much?"

"Fifteen," Kris answered.

Julianne was about to reach for her wallet, when she remembered it was empty. *Fuck!!* "Uh, I don't suppose you take credit cards?" she asked lamely. *Because you can give her Julianne Franqui's credit card and she won't notice.*

Kris shook her head. "Sorry," she said. "I don't have one of those machine things."

Julianne couldn't remember ever being more embarrassed. *I'm a frickin millionaire and I don't even have fifteen dollars?!*

Kris seemed to sense Julianne's distress because she spoke up. "Tell you what," she said, reaching behind her to look for something. She turned back around holding one of her cards. "Take the painting. You can mail me the money later."

Julianne accepted the card, an exact replica of the one she carried in her wallet. "You'd really trust me to do that?" she asked.

"Sure," she responded, flashing her that killer smile again. "You can't go wrong trusting someone who likes sunrises."

Julianne felt like crying at the simple statement. "Thank you," she said. "You'll have your money by tomorrow," she promised, taking the painting.

"Enjoy," Kris called after her.

When she was far enough away, Julianne looked down at the painting. She smiled at the bright mix of colors on the canvas, so representative of the artist who had put them there. *Now that is kindness.*

31

"What the hell was that?" Leigh demanded, wiping ketchup from the side of her mouth. She stared at Kris with a look of obvious disapproval.

Kris glanced at her in confusion. "What?"

Leigh used the remainder of her hotdog to point in the direction of their one and only "costumer" of the day. "You just gave your painting away to a total stranger," she said. "Do you honestly think she's going to mail you the money?"

"Doesn't matter," Kris replied, her gaze unconsciously returning to the stranger a few yards away. "She liked my painting."

Leigh shook her head. "You spent like forever on that piece. Why would you just give it away? And fifteen dollars? I thought you were going to sell it for thirty?"

Kris laughed, opening the bag of pretzels she'd purchased from a vendor. Like the fifteen dollar difference would've done that much to impact her standard of living. Besides, art wasn't about making money. It was about self-expression and making other people feel .. something ... anything. Besides, the young woman had seemed .. nice.



It was such a beautiful day. People were out, the weather was warm without being disgustingly hot. A nice breeze was blowing through the air. People were happy and doing their thing.

"Why are you smiling?" Leigh asked suspiciously.

Kris simply shrugged and offered her friend a pretzel. They were good. Crunchy and satisfying. "It's just a beautiful day. Maybe I'll just give away all of my paintings." She quickly glanced at the sketch of the *Angel of Waters* and made a grab for it. "Except this one." She tucked the paper away safely in her backpack.

"That's another thing," Leigh said, motioning with the can of Pepsi in her hand. "What is *up* with that drawing? What was that look you gave me before?"

"It's supposed to be a gift," Kris replied patiently.

"For...?"

Why did Leigh have to be so inquisitive? Kris gazed at her best friend and chewed on her lower lip hesitantly. *She's going to think it's stupid.* "Julia."

Leigh stopped chewing for a moment as light brown eyes darted to Kris's. She swallowed. "Julia," she repeated. "Online Julia?"

Kris rushed in to explain. "See, her screen name is PoetnAngel so I figured she probably likes angels. She's never said she does, but I can assume. Anyway, I thought I'd send her the sketch of the angel. Maybe she'll like it."

Leigh nodded slowly. "Don't you think you're getting a little *too* friendly with the lesbian?" she asked. "She might start to get the wrong idea. I mean, all-night online conversations, unsolicited gifts ..." She paused. "Unless she's getting the *right* idea." She nudged Kris and winked.

Kris rolled her eyes. "It's not like that at all. You don't know her."

"Neither do you," Leigh pointed out, finishing the last of her hotdog. "She could be like ... a big fat ugly ... like old guy. With an eye patch and a beer belly. And he likes to burp the alphabet in public and prance around his apartment in the nude."

Kris chuckled. She couldn't imagine Julia doing any of those things. "She's a *girl*. And she's twenty-three. And she's a poet and an actress."

"So she claims," Leigh argued. "You don't know any of these things for sure. Has she sent you a picture of herself yet?"

Kris considered. "Well, no. But I haven't sent one of myself either. She has no idea what I look like. For all she knows, *I* could be the old fat guy with the eye patch."

* * *

"She's gorgeous," Julianne whined, falling back on the couch with a muffled thud. She pulled one of the couch cushions over her face groaned into it. Then she tossed it aside. "She has the most beautiful eyes in the world. And like her smile .. oh wow... and her voice. It's like .. like honey .. or something else that's sweet and ..." She trailed off and started groaning again.



"Mm, oh yeah, right there," Adrian moaned blissfully from the massage table. "Lower ... loweraaaaah..."

"And she gave me the painting," Julianne continued. "Just like that. Why would she do that? Maybe she felt a connection between us, you know? Like some kind of pull ..." She considered and shook her head. "Or maybe she's just like the sweetest person in the whole world. And I'm the asshole that's lying to her."

Continuous moaning was the reply.

Julianne glanced over the top of the couch and narrowed her eyes. Adrian was sprawled on the massage table wearing nothing but a towel while a perky blonde worked at his muscles. "Are you listening to me?" she demanded.

No answer.

"Adrian?"

Sleepy blue eyes focused in her direction. "Oh hey, Jules. I didn't realize you were home."

Julianne threw the couch cushion in his direction. She missed and hit the masseuse instead. *Oops.*

Annoyed green eyes narrowed, as the blonde woman leaned down to retrieve the object. "Lose something?" she asked, holding up the couch cushion.

Julianne smiled sweetly. "Would you mind just bashing him over the head with it?" she asked.

"Hey, hey, no need for violence," Adrian interjected.

"Your hour's up," the masseuse announced, tossing the cushion back to Julianne, who managed to catch it in spite of the fact that her sport skills were somewhat more than lacking.

Adrian reluctantly rolled off the massage table, careful to keep the towel wrapped around his waist. "I am one happy, happy camper," he commented. "Julianne, whatever you were going to pay this woman, double it."

Julianne rolled her eyes. "Did you hear anything I said?"

"When?"

"Before."

Adrian arched a brow. "You were talking?" he asked. He shrugged and seemed to notice the painting for the first time. It was leaning against the back of the couch a couple of feet from where he stood. "What's that?"

Behind him, the masseuse folded up the table and made herself scarce. Adrian was momentarily distracted by the woman's departure.

Julianne rolled her eyes again and replaced the couch cushion before standing. "That, is a painting," she informed him. She walked up beside him so she too could gaze at the object.



Adrian gave her an undecipherable look and knelt down to inspect the canvas. He shook his head and traced an idle finger through the bottom right corner. "K. Milano?" he glanced over his shoulder. "What did you do?"

She let out a long sigh and leaned against the back of the couch. "I met her, Adrian," she said. "I mean, she didn't know it was me. Either me's. But I knew it was her."

"And?"

"Wow," Julianne breathed.

Adrian stood, nodding. "So you went up to her and bought another art piece?" he guessed. "Wig ... sunglasses...?"

Julianne shrugged.

Adrian scratched the back of his head and stared at his best friend. "So this girl thinks you're three different people?" He paused to reconsider. "No. No. She doesn't *know* you're three different people." He threw his hands up in exasperation. "How have you not developed multiple personalities by now?" Azure eyes narrowed slightly. "Or have you?"

She let out a long sigh and let herself fall backwards, her legs dangling over the top of the couch. She stared at an upside down view of the entertainment center and groaned. "Why did she have to be beautiful?" she wondered. "She couldn't be ugly. No. Of course not, that would've been too simple."

Adrian appeared beside her a moment later and sat down. He looked down at her for a long moment before grinning. "Beautiful? And straight, you say?"

"Don't even *think* about it," Julianne warned.

"Why not? Cause she's yours?"

Julianne opened her mouth to respond, but instantly shut it. She rolled over, careful not to hit Adrian's head with her legs, and managed to get herself into a sitting position. "She's not *mine*," she responded softly.

"You just want her to be?"

Julianne frowned and shook her head. "It doesn't really matter. It would never work."

"Cause you're Julianne Franqui?"

"Among other things. Not to mention that she's *straight*."

"Plus she has no idea who you are."

She sighed again. "And it's just an online thing."

"So clearly, nothing could ever come of this," Adrian agreed.



"Right," Julianne told him, though her voice was flat. How depressing was this? She shook her head and stood to retrieve the painting. She rested it against the coffee table so they could both look at it. "It's pretty, isn't it?" she asked, reclaiming her spot on the couch.

"It's a sunrise."

"And sunrises are pretty." She glanced up at him. "She gave it to me. Free. Told me to mail her the money later, though I don't think she expects me to."

Adrian snorted. "That's some business she's got going there."

Julianne's gaze settled back on the painting. "She asked for fifteen dollars." She cocked her head to the side and considered the brilliant use of color. "But I hardly think that's a fair price."

Adrian nodded. "Maybe five dollars."

She elbowed his stomach. Hard. "Don't be a jerk."

Adrian rubbed his injury and sighed. "What are you plotting now, Lucy?"

Julianne smiled. "I just think this painting is worth a lot more than that."

He caught her gaze and arched a brow. "How much more?"

"A lot."

* * *

"I'm coming!" Kris yelled, walking out of her bedroom en route to the front door. "Knock a little louder why don't you?" she mumbled grumpily. The loud knocking on the door had dragged her out of a most wonderful dream. There had been a unicorn and a forest and a beautiful sunrise. And fairies. Fairies were pretty. She should look into getting a fairy. She yawned. *I need coffee.*

Knock!!!!

Jesus Christ. "I'm coming!" she yelled again, as she threw the door open. She blinked a few times. "Nathan?"

He smirked as he took in her attire. "Cute pajamas," he said. He held up a small bundle of envelopes. "Check your mail often?"

Kris frowned and grabbed the correspondence from his grasp. "What are you doing checking my mail?" she asked.

He appeared hurt, though not enough to look convincing. "May I come in?"

Kris left the door open and retreated into the kitchen. *Coffee. I need coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.* She threw the envelopes on the kitchen table and headed for the coffeemaker. It was empty. *Mental note: Kill Leigh.*

Nathan made himself at home by heading straight for the refrigerator. He pulled out a carton of orange juice and poured himself a cup. "Did I wake you?"



Kris glanced quickly at the time on the microwave. "Well, it's eight o'clock in the morning," she responded icily. She managed to get the coffeemaker started and turned around to face her boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. Well, whatever he was. She leaned back against the counter and watched him gulp down the entire cup of juice in one long swallow. *Did he always make that annoying gulping noise?*

Nathan sat down as he poured himself another cup. "I just finished moving all my stuff into a van. I'm dying."

"All packed?"

He nodded, finishing up the rest of the juice. He aimed for the garbage can, shot, missed. He shrugged and looked over at Kris. "Yeah, I'm leaving tomorrow," he informed her. "But I wanted to make sure everything was ready to go by then."

Kris's gaze was focused on the leaking carton of orange juice dripping on her kitchen floor. *Coffee!!* She dragged her gaze over to Nathan. "That's nice," she said. "Why are you here?"

Nathan frowned slightly and sat back on the chair. "Well, I wanted you to know that I felt really bad about what happened on prom night," he said. "It was wrong of me to plan something so important without your consent."

Kris let him continue.

So he did. "And I've been doing a lot of thinking," he said, suddenly turning serious. "And I acted like a jerk that night."

No arguments there. Kris decided they were in for a long chat, so she pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I feared you may have gone to your parents to complain," Nathan continued, "so I went to speak to Carlos a few days ago."

Kris froze. "You what?!"

Nathan held up his hand to quiet her. "I realized when I got there that you hadn't told them anything, and I appreciate you wanting to protect me, but I was an irresponsible jerk and I had to come clean. So, I sat Carlos down and we had a long conversation. Man to man."

Kris didn't like where this was going at all.

Nathan nodded. "We agreed it was time."

"Time." She repeated the word as if she'd never heard it before. "Time for what?"

Nathan cleared his throat, and the next moment he was down on one knee, holding a velvet box in one hand. With the other, he flipped it open. "Will you marry me?"



Julianne tapped her fingers against the desk. Her gaze wandered down to the bottom drawer. She tapped her fingers again. And again. Until finally, she gave up trying to avoid the inevitable and yanked it open. Her unread fan mail stared up at her. She reached down and grabbed all the envelopes and dumped them on top of the desk's surface.

Standing up, she hovered over the pile and spread them all out so she could get a better look at them. Then she reached into her backpack and withdrew her poetry notebook. Inside, was the letter she'd been avoiding for weeks. She pulled it out, and stared at the return address. *Jennifer Graham*. "Ann Arbor, Michigan."

Biting her lip, she sat back down and pulled out the letter. She read it over a few times. *What am I supposed to do about this?* she wondered, feeling frustrated.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. "Come in."

Karen appeared in the doorway, carrying a paper bag and a Styrofoam cup. "Lunch," she announced, holding up the items in her hands.

"Thanks," Julianne said. "Just drop it somewhere." She read the letter a second time, mauling over her options. "Karen, help me out for a moment." She waited until her assistant had found a place for the food and turned her undivided attention Julianne's way. "Say you were this famous actress. And you got a letter from a little girl asking you to help her sick brother. What would you do?"

Karen stared at Julianne in surprise for a moment. She looked around as she considered the question. "Well, I'm not a famous actress so I can't really say," she said. "But, from a fan's standpoint, if I were sick, it would make me feel a billion times better to know that the person I idolized cared about my well-being."

Julianne thought about that for a moment. "Thanks. Did you have lunch yet?"

Karen shook her head. "I was gonna go get it now."

"Want to join me?" Julianne asked. "You don't have to just cause I pay you," she added with a smile. "But I'm kinda tired of eating alone."

Karen tried to hide her surprise, but failed. "S-sure. I'll be right back."

Julianne smiled at her assistant's discomfort and watched her leave. Alone again, she turned back to the matter at hand. *Make him feel like I care about his well-being. Send flowers? With a card? 'Get Well Soon'. How lame.* She shook her head and put the letter down.

She moved over to the couch and pulled the coffee table closer. Karen had selected a chicken salad sandwich, potato chips, and soda. "My favorite," she said happily, placing the contents of the bag on the table.

Karen returned a few moments later with her own lunch and sat down across from Julianne hesitantly. She kept her gaze lowered the entire time.

"Are you scared of me, Karen?" Julianne asked, studying her assistant's behavior with undisguised amusement.

Reluctantly, Karen looked up. "Would you settle for intimidated as hell?" she asked.



Julianne laughed and picked up her sandwich. "I guess I haven't given you the easiest time, have I."

Karen shrugged uneasily. "I'm fairly certain you'd be intimidating either way."

A dark brow arched upward at the statement, but she decided not to comment. Instead, she bit into the sandwich with delight. *I wonder if Kris likes these. Nope. Scratch that, she's vegetarian. Too bad.* "How'd you know I liked these?" she found herself asking.

"Keen observation?" Karen smiled.

Julianne smiled. "What made you want to work for me, anyway?"

Karen blushed and looked down at her food. "Just thought it would be a good opportunity."

Julianne studied Karen for a moment. *Why does she keep blushing so much?*

Karen picked at her food for a moment. "I was a fan of yours," she admitted, blushing even more. "That movie you did several years ago, *Borderline Crazy*, was excellent. I mean you were excellent."

Julianne's brows furrowed. *I was excellent? Hmm.* "Thank you." Now she was at a loss for words. So, she finished off the rest of her sandwich in silence.

"I had this huge crush on you," Karen blurted out.

Julianne started choking.

If possible, Karen blushed even more. "Sorry!" she apologized quickly. "I'm an idiot. I can't believe I said that. Just forget I said that. Oh God." She covered her face with her hands.

Julianne finally managed to stop coughing, and stared at her assistant in complete and utter shock. "You had a crush on me?"

Karen peeked at Julianne through her fingers. "Just a little one," she admitted. "I'm sorry. My girlfriend says I need to learn when to keep my mouth shut. She's right."

Girlfriend? Karen's gay?? Julianne's mind reeled with this new information. "All this time I thought you had a crush on Adrian," she said, hoping to put the young girl at ease. "Guess not." She smiled.

Karen uncovered her face hesitantly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I just wasn't expecting that." *At all. I wonder what she'd say if I came out to her? Maybe I should wait until she's drinking something.* "So, you've got a girlfriend? Been together long?"

"About a year," Karen replied, and visibly relaxed. "We just moved in together last month."

Julianne smiled. *Must be nice.* "In love?"

"Very." Karen smiled brightly.



"That must be nice," Julianne found herself voicing.

Karen frowned slightly and she looked up at Julianne. "I thought you and Adrian were a hot item?" When Julianne hesitated, she quickly added, "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. That's none of my business. Open foot, insert mouth."

Julianne laughed. "Open foot, insert mouth, huh?"

Karen laughed and shook her head. "There I go again."

Should I tell her? Can I trust her? Before she could make a decision on the matter, there was a knock on the door.

Someone Julianne didn't recognize popped his head inside the trailer door. "Gina wants everyone back on the set in five minutes," he informed her.

"Be right there," Julianne replied. "Duty calls," she told Karen. "Thanks for lunch. Feel free to finish up." She didn't give Karen much of a chance to respond, because she rushed out of the trailer. *I can't believe I almost considered coming out to her. I must be losing my mind. Oh yeah. I'm definitely, definitely losing my mind. I think it's New York. I need to stop going there.*

Julianne stopped walking for a moment. *I wonder if Kris got my letter yet.*

* * *

Kris stared down at the shiny object gleaming at her from its velvet bedding. She blinked a few times as the words defined themselves in her mind and the meaning of the phrase broke through her sleepy, caffeine-deprived consciousness. "What?" she snapped, feeling more angry than surprised. "You want me to *marry* you?"

Nathan appeared taken aback by her reaction and he flinched. "I thought you said you wanted to get married?" he asked. "That night in the hotel room, you said you wanted to wait until after we were married."

Did I say that? God, it's too early for this. "Nathan, I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "You try to trick me into sleeping with you—"

The velvet box snapped shut. "Trick you?" Nathan demanded, rising to his full height. "*Trick* you?! I was *trying* to be sweet and romantic. I thought you'd appreciate the effort!"

"Well, I'm sorry, but I didn't want my first time with you to be on *prom* night! It was such a predictable scenario that it never even occurred to me. Then you disappear for like two weeks and now you want to *marry* me?!"

"Carlos said—"

Kris got up so suddenly, she knocked the chair over. "I don't *care* what Carlos says! This isn't about him! This isn't about my parents. This is about you and me, and the fact that you have been an inconsiderate jerk—"

"Inconsiderate?!" Nathan bellowed. "Do you know how much this ring cost me? That room? Those candles? Do you know how much planning I did so that our first time could be special? No... you're just too wrapped up in your own little world to give a damn about *my* feelings!"



"Just cause you were horny—"

"Just because *you're* a prude doesn't mean that *I* don't have needs," Nathan retorted. "How many guys do you think would've waited this long?!"

Kris walked away from him wanting to scream in frustration. "I am not dating other guys, Nathan. I am dating *you*." She noted the present tense of the words. "*Was* dating you."

"Was? Oh that's just fucking *great*, Kris! I come here to propose to you and you're going to break up with me? You ungrateful bitch! After all I've done—"

"Done? What the hell have you done for me, Nathan? You've had more of a relationship with Carlos than with me! Why don't you go propose to—" The slap that came next knocked the air out of her, and suddenly she was looking at the floor instead of at Nathan. This was followed by a stabbing pain at her jaw. She was so shocked she couldn't even move.

"Have a nice life, Kris," Nathan spat at her, then dropped the ring on the floor.

It bounced into her field of vision, staring back at her like an ominous creature. And then the front door slammed shut, echoing through the apartment like the final shot of war.

* * *

Leigh stumbled into the apartment a quarter past three. "You will *not* believe the day I've had," she called, dropping her backpack by the door. She walked as she talked, making her way toward the couch where Kris was sitting. "It was hell. I got into this huge fight this one guy who kept trying to pinch my ass. I mean, I know it's cute and all, but *man*, ever hear of look but don't touch?"

Kris made sure to sit all the way on the right side of the couch, so that Leigh wouldn't notice the huge bruise on her left cheek. Not that there was much point in hiding it.

Leigh lay down beside Kris, placing her legs on Kris's lap. "Rub my feet, will ya?" she teased. When there was no answer, she lifted her head. "Did I mention I'm home?"

Kris forced a smile. "Hi."

At this point, Leigh frowned and sat up. "What happened?" She studied Kris's face for a moment. "Why aren't you looking at me? I mean, not that your profile isn't beautiful, but some eye contact would be nice."

Kris sighed and turned her head in Leigh's direction.

Leigh gasped, rushing over to inspect the bruise. "Oh my God! What happened to you?"

"Would you believe I fell down the stairs?" Kris tried lamely.

Leigh's eyes narrowed as she thought about Kris's statement. Recognition crossed her face. "Nathan?" she asked. "He hit you?!" She stood up, unable to sit. She started pacing around the coffee table. "That rat bastard! I'll kill him."



Kris shook her head. "He's leaving tomorrow. Just let it be. It's over."

Leigh looked at her and sat back down. "You can't just let him get away with this!" She paused and suddenly looked very serious. "Kris, has he hit you before?"

Kris shook her head. "No," she said honestly. "We got into a huge fight today. It got ugly."

"Obviously," Leigh replied. She didn't like this. She didn't like this one bit. "Did he come to apologize for being a total asshole?"

Kris shrugged. "He came to propose."

Leigh's jaw sagged. "Say what?"

"Apparently he went to Carlos and *they* decided it was 'time'. Whatever that means."

Leigh tried to make sense of the information. "So you said no and he hit you?"

"No, I said no, and then we got into a huge fight. Some colorful words were exchanged. I suggested he go propose to Carlos, and *then* he hit me." Kris shook her head, wishing to forget everything. There were some days that were just not worth getting up for. "It doesn't matter. Let's just forget it."

"Forget it?" Leigh asked incredulously. "I can't forget it. It left a visual reminder, which is turning a lovely shade of purple as we speak. *Damn* him. If I ever lay eyes on him again I swear I'll kick his ass."

Kris smiled. "Cause he doesn't tower over you by like a foot," she joked. She grabbed Leigh's hand. "I'm okay."

Leigh simply frowned. "I don't like this, Kris. You shouldn't let him get away with it."

"And what should I do?" Kris asked.

"Hire a hit man," Leigh suggested. "And I'm not kidding, either." She touched Kris's cheek gently. "Does it hurt a lot?"

Kris shook her head. "Not really. I think it looks worse than it is."

"Let me get you some ice," Leigh said, and retreated to the kitchen to gather some ice cubes into a paper towel. On her way back, she noticed the small stack of envelopes on the table. She grabbed those as well. "Any interesting mail, or just the usual combination of bills and commercial junk?"

Kris shrugged, accepting the ice from Leigh. "Didn't bother looking, actually." She pressed the bundle to her cheek and winced at the coldness.

Leigh settled herself on the coffee table and started sorting through the envelopes in her hand. "Credit card. Credit card. Cable. Oh, here's something different." She held up the envelope and arched a brow. "It's addressed to you. No return address." She glanced questioningly at Kris.

Kris put the ice down and grabbed the letter. "That's weird," she said.



Leigh stared at her silently until she could bear it no longer. "Don't make me rip it open for you. C'mon, the suspense is killing me here."

Kris gave Leigh a dubious look but opened the letter. Inside was a folded piece of paper wrapped around a check. "'I believe we agreed on fifteen?'" Kris read from the paper. "'A deal's a deal. Thank you for the painting.'" Then she glanced at the check and her eyes went wide.

Leigh grabbed both items. Reread the letter on her own and then stared at the check. "Fifteen thousand dollars?!" she shrieked. "This can't be real. Do you think it's real? It can't be."

Kris snatched it back and looked at it again. "It looks real," she said. "But there's no name on it." She stared at Leigh. "What do we do with it?"

"Cash it?" Leigh suggested. "It can't possibly be real."

Kris stared at the paper in her hands and the five digit number carefully printed on its surface. "I can't do that. It's got to be some kind of mistake. A misprint of some sort." *Isn't it?*

* * *

Julianne finally got around to checking her email at one thirty in the morning. Their shooting schedule would be killer for the next couple of weeks. *But then it will be over. Two more weeks. Then freedom.* She sighed. *Until the cycle begins again.*

She glanced at the two scripts on her night stand. She hadn't bother to read either of them, and she was going to have to make a decision soon. *But not right now.*

Turning back to the computer, she read Kris's message and debated on what to respond. Then she started to type.

Dear Kris,

My prior commitment was an award ceremony of sorts. No big deal. I ended up not wearing the dress I'd bought for the occasion. I'm not big on dresses. Want it? :o)

Anyway, it's almost two in the morning and I just got home from work. Crazy, no? Ah, well. You get used to it after a while. It's going to be pretty crazy for the next couple of weeks, so I'm not sure I'll be able to make a date with you and keep it until after June first. But after that, I've got some vacation time, so maybe we can schedule something then? When do you start work?

Something pretty interesting happened today. This girl I work with came out to me. She even admitted she'd had a crush on me! How crazy is that? Definitely a first. She's got a girlfriend now, though. Not that I would consider anything with her were she single. I know you told me to ask out the first woman I saw, but I think I am way too shy to do something like that.

Adrian complains that I don't let many people get close to me and that's the problem. Maybe he's right. But sometimes, it's just better that way, you know? Keeps things simple.

But boring. :o)

Maybe I'm just a boring person. I'm bored right now, actually. I should probably be sleeping, seeing as I have to be up at five in the morning. But instead, I'm watching TV. You know what's a good channel? The TV Guide one. It's the perfect solution for a person who sucks at making decisions. Like me. Instead of picking one thing to watch, I watch nothing, yet feel like I'm



watching everything. I'm very tempted to call that Jamaican lady. Maybe she can tell me my future.

So I'm rambling.

When's your birthday? I hope I didn't miss it ...

I'm going to go to bed now, and put you out of your misery. :o)

Your friend,
Julia

Julianne finished the email and yawned, but didn't shut down the computer, or even sign offline. She had a decision to make, and she planned on making it before going to sleep.

Karen's words echoed through her mind. *If I were sick, it would make me feel a billion times better to know that the person I idolized cared about my well-being.*

"Okay, Franqui," she told herself. "If you were a fan, what would you want?" Her mind came up blank. *What would Kris do?* She considered this new angle for a moment. "Something kind ... unselfish ... and unexpected ..."

She glanced up at the painting of the sunrise, which hung beside the other on her wall. *There's so much one can do ...*

Julianne stared at the computer monitor for a second. *Show him you care about his wellbeing.* "Only one thing I can think of." She nodded, coming to a decision.

Ten minutes later, her plan was set into motion.

Satisfied, she turned off the computer. *Now to get some sleep ...*

33

Miniature golf, in Julianne's opinion, was a baffling activity. What was the point, really, of hitting a ball and trying to insert it into a hole, only to repeat the process. Pointless. Idiotic ...

"I love this game," Adrian commented, as his blue ball rolled right into the hole. With a satisfied smirk, he turned to Julianne. "Don't you?"

She made a grunting sound in response and positioned herself to hit her own ball. She aimed. She hit. She missed. *I hate this game.* She walked across the green carpet lawn thing and tried again.

"Good thing the place is empty," Adrian teased. "You'd make the ten o'clock news for sure, otherwise. 'Julianne Franqui, star of *Guardian*, was pummeled to death with a miniature golf club early Tuesday afternoon, after a group of exasperated players lost their patience. Sources inform us, that Miss Franqui averaged about twenty-three attempts per hole. It is no wonder that the angel has returned to heaven, where we can all hope she gets some lessons.'"



Julianne was not amused. "Are you quite through?"

"I could go on," Adrian said.

"I can't believe this is how I'm spending my lunch hour," Julianne muttered. She tried again. And again. And again.

"Maybe it'll be easier if you just put the ball in the hole yourself." Adrian suggested smugly.

Julianne narrowed her eyes at him, hoping she looked menacing. "Don't make me beat you," she threatened, holding up the putter for effect. "Cause I'll do it."

Adrian made a zipping motion across his lips and stood by patiently.

It took her a few tries—though certainly *not* twenty-three—before the red ball rolled into its intended destination.

Adrian clapped mockingly, and whistled. "You're a natural," he stated as they started walking to the next hole. "So, how's filming?"

Julianne considered the question while Adrian made a hole in one. She rolled her eyes. *Here we go again*. She tried not to think about making the shot, and just focused on answering Adrian's question. "Gina's making us put in some crazy hours so the movie can come out in time. Apparently some of the old stuff we shot wasn't good enough, so we had to re-shoot some scenes."

To her surprise, the ball went right into the hole. She stared at it in surprise. "Huh."

Adrian's jaw just hung open. Then he recovered. "Lucky shot."

"You're so good for my self-esteem," Julianne commented, following her supposed best friend to the next hole.

Adrian laughed. "Like you need anymore admiration. Although, it's kind of fun to boast about you to people. 'Did you know my best friend was just named one of the hottest people under twenty-five?' Of course they don't believe me ..." He shrugged, and prepared to take his shot. He frowned deeply when he missed. "What the hell?"

Julianne laughed at him. "Serves you right for being such a cocky bastard." She shook her head. "Anyway, I'm glad that the movie's going to be over soon. I get about a month of freedom before *Guardian* starts shooting again."

"Oh, I bet you're excited about that." Adrian asked, trying his shot again.

She snickered as he missed for the second time. "Need some help?" she asked innocently.

Adrian shot her a Look.

So Julianne decided to change the subject before Adrian's pummeling premonition came true. "So how did that tomato movie turn out?"



Adrian rolled his eyes and leaned against the club like a crutch. "It wasn't a tomato, Julianne," he explained calmly. "It was about an *apple*. It's a social commentary on how human existence is parallel to the life of a fruit."

"Riiiiight," Julianne responded, nodding as if it all made perfect sense. Which of course, it didn't. "I know I'm going to regret asking this, but exactly what is your vision here?"

Adrian brightened, as he always did when asked to talk about his work. "Imagine an apple tree," he began. "Lots of apples. Lots of *souls*. They fall ... into life. Like being born. They are welcomed to the world by strange hands. And they are forced into basket with more strangers. A family, if you will."

Julianne scratched her eyebrow.

"So, in the movie we follow the life of this particular apple's life," he explained. "And at the same time we follow the life of a baby .. and their lives follow the same pattern, but they never cross paths. The apple's seeds go on to reproduce more apple trees. The baby grows up into a man and has children. That sort of thing."

"You were stoned when you came up with that, weren't you?" Julianne guessed.

Adrian frowned and shook his head, getting ready to try his luck again with the ball. "Don't belittle my creativity, Julianne," he said. "I am a filmmaker. An artist. You seem to be fond of those lately." He winked and took his shot.

He made it.

Julianne sighed, placing her ball on the allotted spot.

Adrian studied her for a moment, waiting for some kind of comment, some kind of acknowledgement that he'd spoken. When none was forthcoming, he spoke again. "How's that going?"

Julianne focused on the hole. "How's what going?"

"Your unrequited love," Adrian prompted.

She glanced at him quickly and then took her shot. Naturally she missed. Sighing, she walked over to where the ball had landed. "It's not any kind of love," she stated. "And it's going fine, I guess. I haven't gotten anything new from her since Friday."

"And how does that make you feel?" Adrian teased.

Julianne simply shook her head and took another imperfect shot. *Damn*. "It makes me feel fine, Adrian," she informed him simply, her focus on the ball. "We're just friends." Gratefully, her next attempt was successful.

They moved on to the next one.

Adrian took his turn. "Just friends," he repeated. "Right. Because you go around giving fifteen thousand dollars to all of your friends."

Julianne glanced at him sharply. "It was for the painting."



"The *fifteen dollar* painting," Adrian emphasized. "Where the thousand came from, only your little demented mind knows."

"She deserves to be getting more for her work," Julianne argued. "She spends a lot of time and energy and puts all of her passion and emotion into it. That's worth a lot more than fifteen dollars."

Adrian considered this. "You're weird," he said finally. "But it's your money. Not like you can't afford it." He shrugged, made the shot, and moved aside.

"I don't understand why you have to make such a big deal about this," Julianne said.

"Because it *is* a big deal," Adrian replied. "You just don't see it cause you're stubborn and dense."

"I most certainly am not!" Julianne argued.

"See?" Adrian smirked. "I don't see why you get all bent out of shape when I bring Kris up."

Julianne opened her mouth to respond. Frowned. Then decided to focus her energies into the game. "I don't get all bent out of shape," she mumbled. She aimed. She fired. She sent the ball into the pond. It broke through the surface of the water and sank out of sight. "Damn it."

Adrian shook his head. "That's pent up sexual frustration right there."

"Ugh!" Julianne threw her club down and stomped on it. "I hate this stupid game!"

"Why don't I carry a camera when I'm with you?" Adrian asked, shaking his head at the display. "I'd make millions just catching you in compromising positions. Now if only you were doing that naked ..."

Julianne picked up the club and threw it at her best friend. She missed. It, too, landed in the pond.

Adrian watched as it landed in the water with a soft splash, then turned to Julianne. "Feel better?"

Julianne sighed and sat down on the ground.

"That time of the month?" Adrian guessed, sitting beside her friend. He made sure to keep his club out of her reach. "Want to get some chocolate?"

In spite of herself, Julianne laughed. "I hate you. So much." She leaned back on her arms and took a deep breath. "Hey, did you know Karen's a lesbian?"

Adrian nodded. "Yeah, her and her girlfriend, Rachel, just got an apartment together." Julianne stared at him. "How is it that you know this?"

"I believe it's called having a conversation," Adrian told her. "It works well. You should try it some time."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."



Julianne groaned. "Figures." She glanced over at the pond and motioned with her head. "Think they'll be mad?"

Adrian chuckled. "Are you kidding? They'll dive in there head first to retrieve it and then sell it on eBay for a million dollars. Would've been two million, but the water rubbed off the fingerprints so there's no actual proof that you touched it."

"Fans are weird," Julianne commented.

"Didn't you ever care about something?" Adrian wondered. "TV shows, actors, singers?"

Julianne thought about it for a few minutes. "I really liked the *Thundercats*. And *He-Man*." She looked down at a piece of something on the ground. "I wish I could talk to her more."

"So call her," Adrian suggested. "You've got her number."

Julianne snapped her head to look at him. "I can't do that ..." *Could I?* "She'd recognize my voice."

"Would that be Julianne Franqui's or Mysterious Painting Girl's?"

"Either, or." Julianne shrugged. "Besides, I'd never have the guts to do that." She glanced at her watch. "I'm due back at the set."

Adrian nodded and rose, offering Julianne a hand to help her up. "We're off then."

Julianne trailed after Adrian, thinking about his suggestion. *I couldn't really call her ...*

* * *

The ringing phone tore Kris away from her latest painting. She stared at the picture for a second before reaching across the length of the couch to retrieve the receiver. "Hello?"

"¿Que es esto?" Carlos yelled.

Kris flinched and pulled the phone away from her ear as the shouting continued. Carlos went on for a couple of minutes about something. He was speaking so fast that Kris was having a horrible time of following. Though, she was beginning to get the gist. *Damn you Nathan*. She sighed.

"*Explícame, Kristina. Porque yo estaba bajo la impresion de que tu querías un futuro con el.*"

Um. How to explain this. *The truth, Kris. Go with the truth.* "No lo amo, Papi," she admitted. *I don't think I've ever really loved him ...*

Carlos's tone softened, as she knew it would. Whenever she referred to him as "Dad" he turned to mush. "¿Y por que no lo dijiste antes?"

Kris considered the question. Why *hadn't* she said anything before? Fear of being alone? Fear of disappointing her parents? "No estoy segura," she told him.

Carlos sighed. "*Pasa por el apartamento después. Hablaremos de esto.*"



"Okay," Kris agreed, though she wasn't particularly thrilled about the thought of continuing the conversation face-to-face. "I'll come over tomorrow."

"Bien. Cuídate. Hasta entonces."

"Adios." Kris stared at the receiver before tossing it aside. *Damnit. I don't want to talk about this anymore.*

She sat back on the couch, her gaze drifting over the canvas on the easel before her. She'd decided that Julia deserved a better gift than a stupid little sketch. So she'd decided to paint it. So far so good. She wasn't entirely sure why she felt compelled to do this, but ... whatever. She wasn't going to dwell on it now.

Kris tucked back a few wisps of light hair, and blew out a long breath. She caught sight of the mystery check on top of the coffee table and a deep frown grazed her features. Biting her lip, she leaned forward and grasped the object, trying to make sense of its origin.

There was no name on it, besides her own. An account number scribbled in black ink. A messy signature. And \$15,000 clearly printed on the right.

I don't get it.

The young woman that Kris had given her painting to suddenly floated into Kris's consciousness. It had to be from her, but ...

"Fifteen *thousand*?" Kris shook her head. "She didn't even have fifteen dollars on her."

Leigh kept insisting they cash it or deposit it or do something with it besides stare at it in awe and confusion.

A second opinion was in order.

Nodding, Kris got up and over to the kitchen table where her laptop awaited. She read Julia's last email and hit 'reply.'

Dear Julia,

An award ceremony?? Why didn't you tell me? Congratulations! What did you win? What is it that you *do* exactly? You speak of colleagues and awards and crazy work hours But, I'm pretty clueless on the details here. Enlighten me, please :)

So, I have a bit of a ... hmm ... situation, I guess. Well, it's not really that, either. More like just a ... thing. Okay, see. I got this really weird check for like \$15,000, from someone I gave a painting to. I mean, I'm assuming it's from them. I don't know what I should do with it. I mean, if it's real then it's just way too much money. I couldn't keep it. I don't know ...

What would you do??

But anyway. On Nathan news. He finally showed up. Proposed. We got into this huge fight when I turned him down. And

Kris paused, unsure of how to proceed. *I shouldn't make a big deal about this.* She deleted the "and."



But he's out of my life now. Unfortunately, I still have to face my parents about the entire ordeal. That's not going to be fun. I wish I could just forget about it. Nathan left me the ring .. I don't know what I should do with it.

I'm not sure how to feel about the entire thing. Although I feel relieved, I'm also kind of ... depressed? I've been trying to drown myself in my artwork but the real world keeps interrupting. Guess it will get better with time ... right? Mm. I hope so.

Anyway, I know what you mean about the TV Guide channel. It's almost hypnotic. The streaming screen ... the mid-day commentaries ... late-night psychics. Who needs 300 channels? :)

It's too bad that girl you work with has a girlfriend, or I would've told you to go for it. Is she cute? C'mon, Julia, there has to be *someone* you're attracted to. Go back to that restaurant and ask out that girl with the spiky hair. You seemed fond of that one. ;)

I'm kidding, of course. Relationships are overrated. I think I'm just going to stay single forever. What do you think? Hey, we can be single together!

Well, I'm going to finish this painting before Leigh gets home. Then she'll start channel surfing and I'll never get anything done.

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

Julianne found herself staring at the phone. Her gaze would wander from the black receiver to the business card in her hand, and back again. She'd already memorized the phone number and she'd never even dialed it.

I can't call her.

She kept telling herself that, but the temptation to do otherwise kept her hand on the portable phone, her grip tightening around it as if afraid to let go.

Sighing, she glanced at the time on the microwave. By pure chance, Gina had been called away for something or other. Director's drama. Personal business. Who knew? The only thing that Julianne cared about was the fact that she was home at six o'clock in the evening with nothing to do but stare longingly at the phone in her hand.

I need to get a life. Desperately.

The phone chose that moment to start ringing. Startled, she dropped it. It crashed to the floor and stayed there.

Then rang again.

She stared at it for a second longer before picking up. "Franqui," she said, walking out of the kitchen and out to the living room, Kris's card still in her hand.

"Julianne, hi."



She rolled her eyes at the sound of her agent's voice. "Eric," she greeted.

"I wasn't expecting to reach you," he said. "Did you read over the scripts I gave you?"

She breathed and counted to ten. Patiently, she said, "No."

Eric sighed heavily at the other end of the line. "They want an answer by June first, Julianne. You're their first choice, but if you don't give me an answer soon, they've got plenty of other options."

Julianne chewed on her bottom lip. "Which role?" she asked.

He hesitated. "*Summer's End*," he answered finally. "Elizabeth Doyle."

She was starting to lose her patience. "I told you I'm not going to play a lesbian." How many times did she have to say something before people started listening?

"Are you saying you'd like to take the robot part?" he asked, a bit hopefully. It wasn't his first choice, but it was something.

Her first impulse was to throw the phone against the wall. She didn't want to play a robot. She didn't want to play a lesbian. And the entire topic was grating on her nerves. "Eric," she started, as calmly as she could muster, "I don't want either of those roles. Get me something worthwhile and then we'll talk about it."

"You have until June first to change your mind," Eric informed her. "Take care, Julianne."

Angrily, Julianne hung up without another word. *I need a new agent*, she decided, heading up the stairs to the bedroom. *A woman. A hot one, preferably. With ...* She paused mid-thought and dropped the phone on the bed. *I am not sexually frustrated.*

The two screenplays on the nightstand caught her eye and she stared at them. Crawling across the bedspread, she reached for the one Eric was having a conniption over. Once again, she stared at the title page. *Doesn't hurt to read it*, she decided. Sitting back against the pillows, she opened to the first page and began to read.

34

Leigh glanced up from the Classifieds section of the newspaper to see Kris walking into the apartment. "How did it go?" she asked, hoping to catch some kind of hint from Kris's features. Her best friend's face, however, revealed nothing.

Kris dropped down on one of the kitchen chairs, emotionally exhausted from the endless battle with her parents. That she was still alive and breathing was quite the miracle, seeing as she'd prayed to God during the entire trial to strike her dead on the spot; put her out of her misery. But she'd survived. To Leigh, she said, "They're heartbroken over the loss of their boyfriend." She dropped a an envelop on the table. "Prom pictures came back."

Leigh reached forward and grabbed them in a smooth swoop of the hand. She was relieved that Kris seemed in good spirits, in spite of the fact that her demeanor looked slightly sapped. Flipping through the pictures, she grinned. "You looked gorgeous in these." She glanced up quickly. "Not that you don't usually."



"Right."

"Hey, I mean it," Leigh assured her. "If I were a guy, I'd do you."

"Thank you, Leigh," Kris commented wryly. She glanced down at the newspaper on the table and a light brow shot upwards in question. "Since when do you care about the news?"

Leigh glanced down and shrugged. "I need another job," she admitted. "Starbucks isn't gonna cut it for rent this month." She finished glancing through the photos and put them aside.

Kris frowned slightly. "But you won't have any time to audition," she argued.

"Better than being homeless," Leigh replied lightly. She winked. "I'll find time for acting. I always do."

Kris wasn't so sure. Leigh hadn't been to a single audition in months, but she wasn't about to start an argument with her best friend about this. She could tell that Leigh wasn't happy about the prospect of working two jobs. Who would? "So, what are we ordering tonight?" she asked, wishing to change the subject.

"Chinese," Leigh responded. "I've got the menu right here." She reached under the newspaper and pulled out a paper. "I'm told they have the best pork fried rice in the state."

"Really," Kris said. "Of course, I'm a vegetarian so"

Leigh rolled her eyes and put the menu down. "So, what did your parents say exactly? Are they mad at you?"

Kris sat back in the chair as she considered. She thought back to the afternoon. There had been shouting. Her mother had cried. Her mother had prayed. Eventually, they'd all calmed down enough to have a civilized conversation. "They weren't so much mad, as disappointed, I think," she finally explained. "And I don't think they're as much disappointed, as worried. All this time they'd felt certain that I'd be taken care of. Now, we're back to square one. In their minds, anyway. Most of the arguing was about what I planned to do with my life now that I didn't have Nathan as a security blanket."

Leigh made a face. "Have they ever heard of the Feminist Movement?" she wondered, and Kris smiled. "So what did you guys settle on?"

"Mom is going to pray a lot," Kris replied. "And Carlos is hoping that I dumped Nathan for someone else. A doctor, maybe."

This elicited a laugh from Leigh. "You should've told them about your lesbian friend. Freak them out completely."

Kris snickered and got up to retrieve a can of soda from the fridge. *Which reminds me, I haven't checked my e-mail yet.* "What time are the awards?"

"The pre-thingie starts at seven," Leigh answered. "Awards are at eight. I bought a blank tape so I could record them."

Kris shook her head and took a sip from the Sprite. She'd been craving those lately and she wasn't sure why. She wasn't generally a big soda drinker. "You're so weird. I don't get what the big deal is."



"Just feeding on the envy," Leigh replied. "Instead of letting it consume me, I embrace it. That way I don't end up hating everyone famous." She smiled. "Besides, I'm already middle-aged in Hollywood years. I need to keep my mind off of that fact."

"By watching all the famous people rub their glamour in your face?"

With a dramatic sigh, Leigh replied, "It makes me feel a little closer to the stars."

"Freak," Kris mouthed and stood. "I'll be in my room," she announced. "Come get me when our date starts."

"Yes, my love." Leigh blew her a kiss.

Kris simply laughed as she walked into her bedroom. Once on the bed, she placed the can of soda on the night stand, and grabbed the computer. Making herself comfortable, she signed online and waited for her mailbox to load.

A smile passed her lips as she noticed that Julia had responded. She ignored the weird flutter in her heart that somehow accompanied all of Julia's emails. It was probably just early signs of future heart failure. Nothing to concern herself with.

Dear Kris,

The award I won was for a project I did about a year ago. Just a little acting gig I got. It was no big deal, like I said. Um, what do I do? Well, I work in a movie set. And you know, there's some crazy shooting hours sometimes.

But enough about me ...

Kris arched a brow. *Enough about you? There's never enough about you! That's the problem.* Shaking her head, she continued to read.

So about this mysterious check you got. I think you should just cash it. Obviously, the person who gave it to you felt that you deserved it for whatever reason. So, don't feel guilty about taking the money. I'm certain that she won't miss the money.

Kris frowned slightly. *She? Did I ever specify who gave it to me?* She shrugged. *I must have.*

I hope everything with your parents went okay. Don't let them get to you. I know it's hard, them being your parents and all. But sometimes you just have to do what feels right for you. Parents always want the best for their children. Well, most parents anyway. But they don't always see the whole picture.

I'm glad you're enjoying your freedom. I'm sure it will eventually lead you into the arms of someone who actually deserves you.

Um, I know this is going to sound a bit forward. And please feel free to say no. But I was wondering Can I call you sometime?



Your friend,
Julia

Kris found herself staring at the computer screen in shock for a few minutes. *Call me? She wants to call me?* There went that pounding heart thing again. She should probably start visiting a cardiologist and get this thing under control. A heart attack at twenty was certainly not the way to go.

She tapped the keys absently, not really typing anything, though every now and then a stray letter would appear on the screen. *What do I say? Do I want to talk to her on the phone? Will it be too weird? What would we even talk about?*

The cursor blinked impatiently, awaiting her command.

Dear Julia,

Congratulations on your award! I'm sure your parents must be very proud of you. What's the set of the movie? Anything I'd recognize? Hey, one of these days you're probably going to be all famous and I'll be able to say, "Oh I knew her way back when..." :) That's what I tell Leigh when she gets all weepy-eyed during the Academy Awards.

Speaking of which, tonight are the MTV ones. Leigh and I are ordering Chinese and settling in front of the TV for a night of star-gazing. I personally couldn't care less, but it's a big deal to Leigh and .. well, who am I to pass up Chinese food? Besides, it's kind of fun seeing all those famous people together. You get to make fun of them all at once and bask in the bitterness of petty jealousy. Fun. :)

So you think I should cash the check, really? That's so much money. I'd feel bad keeping it. Maybe I can do something really good with it. Hmm.....

I went to see my parents today. I think they're mostly just concerned for my financial stability in the future. Art doesn't really pay the bills, you know? I understand where they're coming from. It's just frustrating.

Feel free to call me whenever you want. :)

Your friend,
Kris

Kris stared at the response for a long moment before sending it. *Would she really call me?* She put the computer aside and sighed. *I wonder what her voice sounds like ...*

* * *

"Oof, what is she wearing?!" Leigh cried in horror, throwing popcorn at the TV screen. The Chinese food was long gone by then, but popcorn lived forever. Or at least, it did when they kept making more every twenty minutes. Most of it was on the ground in front of the television set. Leigh had a habit of expressing her excitement by throwing things.



I'm not cleaning that up, Kris decided, her gaze drifting down from the images flickering across the screen to the pile of stale popcorn on the ground. It wasn't that she was so much of a neat freak. But .. still. *Oh God, the cockroaches are going to have a feast. I'm going to kill her.* She slouched down on the couch and crossed her arms.

Leigh munched away on a handful of popcorn, watching the events on the screen with unwavering interest. "Now *he* is hot," she commented, motioning.

Kris simply yawned. She hoped this thing would be over soon. It somehow felt like they were getting longer with each passing year. *Maybe I'm just getting too old of this nonsense.* She glanced quickly at her best friend, who was leaning forward, trying to catch every word. "Want more soda?" she asked.

Leigh handed over an empty cup without looking away from the TV. "Damn commercials." More popcorn flew.

Kris retreated to the kitchen to pour the drinks and was surprised when Leigh joined her there a moment later. "Popcorn?" she guessed.

"Yup," Leigh replied heading straight for the microwave. "Almost out." She kept her gaze focused on the screen. "I think Best Kiss is next. It's the best part of the whole damn thing."

Good, that means it's almost over. "You have a scary obsession." Kris put away the bottle of soda and regarded her best friend. "Why do you care who makes out with whom?"

Leigh smiled. "I'm a romantic, so sue me," she answered with a shrug. "I'm taking notes from all the winners. It's a skill. The heads have to be aligned just right. And then there's the tongue action. If I want to be a good kisser, I have to learn from the *best*."

Kris wondered if Leigh actually meant half the ridiculous things that poured out of her mouth or if she just said them to elude a reaction." *Mental note: Never date an actor. They're nuts.* She headed back to the living room. "Your thing's back."

Leigh was at her side in an instant, a fresh bowl of popcorn nestled on her lap. "Here we go," she said excitedly.

As the announcers pretended to flirt with each other, Kris glanced worriedly at the phone. All night she'd been half expecting it to ring. She was growing increasingly more nervous about talking to Julia. *What would we talk about? We don't know each other...* Her attention snapped back to the television screen as she heard the name Julianne Franqui.

A clip of Julianne making out with some guy took up the whole screen for a moment.

"I hope they win," Leigh commented.

Kris glanced away from the TV as the clip ended. "Why?"

"Because he's *hot*!" Leigh turned back to the screen, ready to throw popcorn if Rye Philips didn't win the award.

"And the winner is Rye Philips and Julianne Franqui!"

The camera cut to a shot of Julianne in the audience, looking happy and surprised. She leaned over to kiss the guy next to her.



"Who the *hell* is that freak she's kissing?!" Leigh cried, throwing handfuls of popcorn. "Jesus *Christ* he's butt-ugly!" She started blinking excessively. "Dear God, I think I've gone blind!"

Kris cocked her head to the side. *That's the greatest man she's ever known? Wouldn't want to meet the worst one.* She grimaced slightly. "Julia told me she looks like her," she found herself commenting for absolutely no reason. She just liked saying her name. Julia. It was pretty.

"Right. She wishes," Leigh replied with a snort. "Women like her don't exist in real life. I mean look at that." She pointed to the screen, where Julianne was accepting the award. "Who makes jeans and a tee look that hot? It's not fair!" Popcorn rained in front of the television for a moment.

Kris stared at the image of Julianne Franqui on the screen. *You'd think she could do better than freak boy. That must say a lot about her personality.* "Here we go," she said, as she noticed the acceptance speech was about to commence. "This is where she boasts about how wonderful she is." She found herself leaning forward in anticipation. *Anticipation?* Selfconsciously, she sat back.

On the screen, Julianne glanced at the award for a moment. Then her face broke into a slight smile that caused Kris to narrow her eyes. *Why, she looks almost human.*

"Well, there's not much you can say after winning an award such as this," Julianne joked, "except thank you. It's always an honor to be recognized for being a good kisser."

Kris rolled her eyes. "See?"

Leigh glanced at her quickly. "I believe it's called a *joke*."

Kris stuck her tongue out, then she realized Julianne was still speaking.

"... kind of silly to receive an award for kissing someone on screen. I kind of laughed off the nomination when I first received it. But then, I started thinking about how I feel every time I get caught up in someone else's onscreen romance and how I can't wait for that moment when they finally express their love. I mean, that's what we're all searching for, right? Love?"

A light brow inched slowly upward.

"I believe that as actors the only thing we can really hope for is that our performance somehow touches the viewers in some way, and motivates them to believe in the magic of possibility; and the promise of love. I'd like to pretend that this award means I've achieved something of the sort. Either that, or a lot of girls thought Rye Philips was really cute." Julianne let out a small laugh. "But whatever your reasons for voting, I thank you."

Leigh whistled as she clapped. "Oh yeah, what a total bitch."

Kris was about to respond ...

....but the phone rang.

* * *



Julianne paced around her room nervously as she waited for someone to pick up. *Please don't be home. Please don't be home. Why am I doing this?*

"Hello?"

Julianne's mouth went dry. *What do I say?? Lord, I suck without a script.* "Uh, hi," she said, wishing to smack herself. *It's not too late. Hang up the phone and run.* "I-Is Kris there?" she continued. *Stammering. Excellent. Great first impression, dumbass.*

"This is her." A short pause. "Julia?"

Julianne was about to respond, but a voice in the background cut her off.

"Oh my God! Is that the lesbian?"

Dark brows furrowed together. She'd never been referred to as "the lesbian" before. There was a sudden noise, followed by a loud thud. Some muffled screaming. *What the hell?*

"Hi, Julia?" a different voice said. "I'm Leigh, Kris's best friend. She's in love with you. She wants your sexy bo—" Another loud thud. Followed by what sounded like dinosaurs screeching.

Julianne stared at the receiver for a moment, before putting it back on her ear. She decided to sit down for this. In spite of her nervousness, she was slightly amused. *She wants my sexy body, huh? Or maybe it wasn't body. Maybe it was bo...wling. No that wouldn't make any sense.*

"What a nice first impression," Kris's voice returned. "I'm so sorry about that. Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Julianne assured her. *Please don't let her recognize my voice. Please don't let me say something really stupid.* "So, is that how you guys generally answer the phone?"

Kris laughed. "Yes, we put on a performance each time the phone rings. Every time, a little something different."

Julianne smiled as she noticed the trace of a faint accent. It was so cute. *Oh, God, I'm in trouble here. Why do I insist on digging my own grave?* "Oh, so I guess that means you don't want my sexy body?" She closed her eyes as the words left her mouth. *Where the hell is that backspace key when you need it?* Hastily, she changed the subject, "So what are you up to. Did I interrupt anything?"

"Just watching the Movie Awards."

Damnit. I forgot she was going to be watching that. Stupid time difference. "I can let you get back to that," Julianne suggested.

"No!" Kris said quickly. "They're almost over."

Julianne was about to give away the ending, but snapped her mouth shut. *How would you explain how you know that? I wonder if she saw me?* She needed to find some kind of topic. "So how are your paintings coming along?"

"Oh I finished one yesterday, actually. Hey, do you like angels by any chance."



Julianne froze at the question. *Is some kind of code? Does she know?* "What makes you wonder if I like angels?"

"Your screen name."

Duh. "Oh, right. Yeah, um. I like angels." *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Dork.* "Why?"

Kris hesitated a moment. When she spoke, she sounded embarrassed. "I painted something for you," she admitted. "I want to send it to you but I don't have your address."

She painted something for me? "That's so sweet. No one's ever painted anything for me before. Then again, I don't have any other friends that are artists. Although, even if I did I doubt they'd go out of their way to paint something for ..." *I'm babbling and I can't stop.* "....me." She smacked her forehead several times. "Hi," she added lamely. *I need to be shot.*

Kris laughed, a sound that was rapidly becoming one of Julianne's favorite sounds. "Do you generally babble so much?"

"Only when I'm nervous," Julianne found herself admitting. "Then I become Super Dork." *Yes, good. Scare her off right from the beginning.*

Kris laughed again. "And what are your special powers?"

"I can go from zero to sixty words a second," Julianne explained, with mock pride.

"Impressive."

"I'll send you my autograph."

"Great! I'm sure it will be worth millions some day."

Julianne froze. *Damnit. Say something witty!!* "Do you like cheese?" she blurted. *Oh. My. God.*

"I don't know," Kris responded. "Is this something that's very important to you? Very dear to your heart? I wouldn't want to offend you on our first phone conversation."

Julianne settled against the pillows on her bed, and turned off the TV. *Damn those 'Behold the Power of Cheese' commercials.* "I'm afraid I won't be able to proceed with this friendship until you've answered the question."

"I see," Kris replied, obviously playing along. "In that case, I must admit that I am not a big fan of cheese. On crackers, maybe. Cheese sandwiches are good."

"You *are* the weakest link. Goo-bye."

Kris was laughing. "I hate that show."

"Regis?"

"Nope."

"Alex?"



"Yes! I love *Jeopardy*."

Julianne smiled. "Then I guess we can be friends. *Wheel of Fortune*?"

"Of course. But I suck at it. *The Price Is Right*?"

"Oooh, I totally suck at that one. You know I can *never* guess any prices right? I always think they're cheaper or more expensive than they actually are."

Kris seemed to consider. "Does that mean that if I send you an eraser for Christmas, you'll think it was a really expensive gift?"

"I'd probably try to exchange it for a Ferrari." Julianne found herself grinning at the sound of Kris's laughter. *I could listen to her voice forever*. She decided not to dwell on that thought for very long, or else she'd start to panic.

* * *

Kris couldn't remember the last time she'd had this much fun talking on the phone. *And with a total stranger, no less. Weird*. She'd been so nervous about the entire idea, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember why. *She's so ... So what? ... Easy to talk to ...*

All that talking had made her thirsty, so she ventured out of her room in search of hydration. Leigh was still on the couch, per usual. She glanced up as Kris passed by. A reddish brow rose at the fact that Kris was *still* on the phone. She thought it best not to comment. Kris had already kicked her ass once that night, no need for an encore performance.

"So what happened with Nathan?" Julia was asking.

Kris paused mid-step to the kitchen. "Nathan? Just what I said in the email. We got into a fight. He left."

So much for not commenting. Leigh muted the television. "Did you tell her he hit you?" she demanded.

Kris glared at Leigh and made all kind of "shut the hell up" motions, none of which deterred Leigh.

On the phone, Kris heard, "What was that?"

"Nothing," she told Julia. "Leigh is just being stupid again." She cast a meaningful glance in Leigh's direction. Which was easily accomplished, seeing as Leigh was now standing directly in front of her.

Without warning, Leigh grabbed the receiver, and turned her back to Kris. "Nathan hit her. Smacked her in the face and *then* left." She passed the phone back to Kris, and frowned. "Don't look at me like that. It's not healthy for you to protect him." She turned on her heel and returned to her throne.

Kris sighed.

"He what?!" Julia actually sounded pissed.



Leigh will die. "We both lost our tempers," she explained. "It's not something he was in the habit of doing, or anything. It was just a bad situation."

"Are you okay?"

Kris found herself smiling. *She's so sweet.* "Yeah, I'm fine. No permanent damage done. I'm just glad it's over." She searched the contents of her refrigerator at the same time as she searched the contents of her mind for something to say. Finally, she decided on some grape juice. But she still needed to change the subject. "So, tell me what it's like working on a film set."

Julia seemed to hesitate. "What do you want to know," she asked finally.

"Anything," Kris replied. "What's your usual day like."

Again there was that weird pause. Kris frowned slightly as she returned to her room, glass of juice in hand. *What are you hiding, Julia?*

"Well, I arrive at the set," Julia began. "And then I go through the whole ordeal of make-up—"

Kris brightened. "So you're *in* the movie?"

Again with the pausing. "Yeah, sort of. It's a really small part. Like an extra."

"That's so cool! What's it called? When does it come out?" Kris was so excited that she knocked some juice onto her shirt. *Damnit.* She tried to wipe it away but it was going to leave a stain. Good thing it was an old shirt.

"It's called .. uh," Julia paused. "It's called *Summer's Diary*."

"That sounds interesting," Kris said, making herself comfortable in bed. "What's it about?"

"It's about, um, this girl named Summer. And she has this diary. And these robots steal it. So she has to get it back."

Must be one of those really weird indie films, Kris decided. "And what's your part?"

"I'm one of the aliens in the background. You know, like, in a crowd."

"Aliens?"

Pause. "Yeah. Alien ... robots. Alien robots."

Kris considered. Alien robots could be cool ... "So, why do they want Summer's diary?" Maybe there was some kind of twisted plot. She liked those. Like the kind on Mystery Science Theater 3000. That was a good show. But she hoped Julia's film wouldn't end up on it. Never mind that the show was over.

"Well ... Summer has this whole like equipment thing for communicating with space. And somehow she manages to understand all the alien signals. And she writes down all the conversations and stuff that she hears in the diary. But this one day, she over hears this top secret conversation between these two alien robots. And they get wind of it. So they go after her and steal her diary. But, you know, she wants it back cause she's got personal stuff in there ..."



"Like what boys she likes?" Kris asked, and smiled.

"Uh, yeah," Julia verified. "She's got this crush on this guy named Bobby Taylor and has all sorts of embarrassing stories."

Kris started laughing. "That sounds like a horrible movie."

Julia laughed too. "It is. It's the worst movie ever."

"Can't wait to see it," Kris replied. And she really couldn't. She'd probably add it to her list of favorites just because Julia was in it. She glanced quickly at the time and gasped slightly in surprise. They'd been on the phone for two hours. "This call is going to cost you a fortune."

"Ah, that doesn't matter."

"I really hope you're not planning on getting rich through *Summer's Diary*," she teased.

Julia started laughing. "Not nice!"

"Maybe I can send you those \$15,000. I think you're going to need them if you make a habit of placing long-distance calls all the time." And the silence returned. *Weird. Every time I mention her job or money she gets all uncomfortable. I really hope she's not a drug dealer or something.*

"I'm pretty sure I can manage," Julia finally responded. "Besides, you deserve that money. Your paintings are beautiful."

Kris blushed slightly. "Thanks. I'll start on that collection you wanted tomorrow."

"No pressure," Julia replied. "Take your time ... but hurry up."

She smiled, suddenly at a loss for words.

"I should probably let you go," Julia said suddenly, and Kris found herself feeling ... disappointed? "It's late over there."

Kris was about to argue that midnight wasn't late at all, but then she realized that Julia was probably just looking for a nice way of getting off the phone. "Alright. Oh, about your address..."

"I'll email it to you," Julia responded. "I love surprises."

Kris smiled again. She'd been smiling so much that her jaw was beginning to hurt. "I'm glad you called."

"Are you?"

Kris's smile got even wider at the question. Julia sounded so ... *Cute? That can't be right.* "Yes, I am. Maybe next time I'll call you."

"Deal." There was a slight pause, followed by, "Well, good night."

"Good night," Kris answered. And she waited a few moments for the click at the other end. She frowned slightly when she didn't hear it. "Still there?"



"Huh? Oh. Sorry." Julia laughed nervously. "I'm going now. Uh, bye."

Kris grinned as the phone went dead. She stared at the receiver for a moment. *Okay, maybe cute is the word...*

* * *

"I am the biggest dork ever," Julianne cried, banging her head against the arm of the couch.

"I could've told you that," Adrian responded absently, his attention on the computer screen of his laptop. He'd been staring at the thing since he'd arrived, much to Julianne's dismay. She was ready to throw the thing out the window. She could always buy him a new one later.

Julianne glanced at him. "Aren't best friends supposed to be supportive? Shouldn't you be comforting me instead of insulting me?"

"Girl and gay male best friends do that sort of thing," Adrian informed her. "My job is strictly to insult you and encourage you to get laid."

"Well could you pretend to be gay for a sec?"

Adrian glanced up and grinned, developing a sudden lisp. "Why of course sweetheart." He batted his eyelashes. "Darling shirt you're wearing. What color is that? Taupe?"

"Very cute, Big Gay Adrian. I need your help."

He groaned.

"I want you to make a movie for me about alien robots and I need you to make me an extra."

Adrian blinked. "Say what?"

"Adrian," she whined, banging her head again. "I am a dumbass."

"Uh-huh."

"I told her I was an extra in this movie called *Summer's Diary* about these alien robots that steal this girl's diary because she knows how to speak Alienish and so she's got to get it back so they don't find out about the huge crush she's got on Bobby Taylor." She took a breath after finishing her little verbal marathon.

Adrian stared at her silently.

Then he started laughing hysterically.

Julianne let out a groan and slumped down in the couch.

He wiped away invisible tears and got his laughing under control. "*That's* what you came up with? And you dare make fun of my apple movie?"

She nodded lamely, covering her face with her hands.



"And you ... want to *film* this?"

"Well, I need proof!"

"You have lost your mind," Adrian stated. He shook his head and returned his attention to the computer.

Julianne stared at him. He looked so entertained. "What are you doing?" she demanded, impatiently.

Adrian snickered. "I made the greatest discovery today."

"Internet porn?" Julianne guessed.

"Better," he answered, an evil glint in his eyes. "*Guardian* fan fiction."

Julianne rolled her eyes. "You don't even like the show, why would you care about the fan stories?" Sometimes, he just made no sense at all.

Adrian stared at her. "You've never actually read any of these have you?"

"No, but I get the basic gist," she said, a bit defensively. "They make up their own episodes and stuff. How thrilling."

Adrian cleared his throat, and turned back to the story he was reading. He began reading out loud. "And Kiara slowly slipped off the remainder of her robe, leaving her naked. Her large, glistening breasts—"

"What?!" Julianne closed the space between them and started reading over his shoulder.

"What the hell is that?"

"Fan fiction," Adrian replied innocently. "I've found so many interesting things about you. Do you really have a tattoo of Buddy Jesus on your butt?"

Julianne was outraged. "A tattoo? They wrote Kiara with a *tattoo*? She's an angel!"

Adrian nodded. "A horny one apparently."

Julianne grabbed the laptop and started reading, her face contorting in different expressions as she read. "This is just disgusting."

Adrian was beyond amused. "So, do you really get multiple orgasms?"

She glared at him. "I wouldn't know."

Adrian snorted in reply. "Riiiiight." He winked and gave her a little nudge with his elbow.

Julianne stared at him blankly. Then she frowned as comprehension cleared through her foggy consciousness. "I am *not* discussing *that* with you."

"Oh, so you do?" Adrian asked curiously. He turned around in the couch so he was facing her directly. "You can tell me. We're both adults here."



Julianne ignored him turning back to the screen. She started looking through the other stories listed. "So, is it all like this? Sex stuff?"

"Just the interesting ones." He studied her quietly for a moment. "There's some lesbian ones, if you're interested."

She glanced up at once. "What?"

"Some people seem to think Kiara makes a good lesbian lover." He shrugged, and smiled. "She's a very naughty angel."

Julianne returned the computer to its owner. "It scares me that this is how you spend your free time."

Adrian's face brightened and he started laughing. "Oh, I'm so going to write one!"

"No you're not," Julianne insisted. *He wouldn't do that ... would he? Oh God.*

Adrian tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Let's see, who can Kiara have sex with. Ooh, a sexy little artist in New York, perhaps?"

"You're a sick, twisted individual."

"Thanks," Adrian replied, a devious and definitely scary smile playing at the corner of his lips. Julianne could almost imagine the horns protruding from his skull. He put the computer aside. "So, besides making up a ridiculous movie plot, what did you and Kris talk about?"

What did we talk about? Julianne wondered, all thoughts of kinky fan fiction dissipating into nothingness. "What *didn't* we talk about," she replied. "I thought it would be weird and awkward, talking to her on the phone. And I guess I was a bit nervous at first, but she's just so easy to talk to. We were joking around like we'd known each other forever."

Adrian nodded, pretending to consider long and hard what he was about to say next. "And how does that make you feel?"

Julianne narrowed her eyes. "Is that your new favorite question?"

"Well, you've never really answered it," Adrian replied, shrugging slightly. "Tell me how you really feel, and I'll quit being a prick about it."

How I feel? He makes it sound like a simple request. "I don't know what I feel, Adrian," she told him. "There's a part of me that's all giddy and happy. I mean, you're basically the only person I even talk to. It's nice having someone else ... But then, there's my conscience ringing warning bells in my brain at all times. I don't want to lie to her," she added softly.

"You've gotten yourself into quite the quicksand predicament," Adrian said, shaking his head. "It's only going to get worse if you keep lying to her."

"But I can't tell her the truth," Julianne argued. "Everything will change ... She won't see me the same."

"Then maybe you'll just have to show that you're the same," Adrian suggested.



Julianne's brows furrowed. "Like how?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I am not Mr. Know-It-All. I just give random suggestions and pray you make sense of them. Just do some kind of integration thing."

Integration? Ugh. This women thing is too complicated. I had the right idea staying single all those years. She frowned slightly. *Not that I'm not single now ...* She decided to give this some more thought later. Much later. "You're not really going to write *Guardian* fan fiction, are you?"

Adrian simply grinned.

My life couldn't possibly get any worse...

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"I got your new publicity schedule," Karen announced, trademark clipboard under her arm. She leaned against the make-up counter and waited for the actress to respond.

Julianne yawned while her make-up lady finished making her beautiful and angelic. "Tell me it's a blank sheet of paper," she said flatly, glancing straight ahead at her reflection. It always amazed her how a little make-up could transform her into such an innocent, unassuming-looking creature. An innocent, unassuming creature that was about to have sex for the first time. *I am so not looking forward to shooting this scene.*

"Sorry," Karen apologized, flipping through the pages. "I'd have to say you're be booked until *Guardian* starts shooting again. And then you're booked all over again."

Julianne simply mumbled under her breath. She wasn't in a good mood that morning. She'd barely slept. Not with murderous thoughts racing through her mind all night. She wasn't entirely sure how she would go about killing Nathan, but she was certain she wouldn't spend much time in jail because of it. *O.J. got off. And I'm much cuter than he is.*

Then there was the movie issue. She was torn in all sorts of directions with that particular problem. She'd read the script and realized after finishing it, that she shouldn't have. Because now she wanted the role. *Damn it. I could so nail that character.* "Totally," she added out loud, much to the confusion of those around her. "Are we done here?" she snapped at the make-up woman whose name she'd never quite gotten.

"All done."

Julianne got off the chair and started walking toward the set, perfectly aware that Karen was trailing behind her. "I don't want to do this next scene," she found herself admitting when her assistant caught up to her.

Karen looked up at the actress and shrugged helplessly. "At least he's ...cute?" she offered.

Julianne thought it best not to comment.

"Are you going to the cast party later?" Karen asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure yet," Julianne replied. *Depends if I manage to get through this scene without having a conniption.*



She reached her destination a moment later and found Max already there, talking to Gina. The rest of the crew ran around, setting up the lighting for the scene. Julianne glanced at what was to be Cody's apartment. Nothing out of the ordinary. Couch, entertainment center, kitchen, et cetera. The next set over was Cody's bedroom. *The setting of my demise.*

"Julianne," Gina greeted. "Come over a sec?"

Julianne approached the director, nodding briefly at Max. She couldn't quite meet his gaze. Even though she'd done this before, every time seemed to make her more nervous than the last. Maybe it was the fact that she had never *really* done that before. *Guess that's why they call it acting.* She focused her attention on Gina, and for the next twenty minutes went over the last details of the scene. Blocking, pacing and so on and so forth.

"This is it guys," Gina said, smiling a bit sadly. "Last day of filming."

Julianne glanced down at her costume. It felt odd playing Kiara without wings. *Guess I'll have to get used to it. I'm human now.* She paused as she corrected herself. *She's human now.* She'd been playing the character so long sometimes she forgot whom was whom. *I'm sure they have doctors for this kind of thing.*

"Places everyone!" Gina called.

Julianne walked over behind the prop door to Cody's apartment. She took a few deep breaths. *Kiss him. Move into the bedroom. Fake orgasm. I can do this.* She was suddenly bathed in light.

"Roll camera."

Here we go. Julianne cleared her mind of all personal thoughts. It was now Kiara standing there. There were no cameras, no director ...

"Action."

Kiara knocked on the door, hesitantly. Once. Then twice. She was nervous. She stared at the door as if afraid to look away.

It opened to reveal a surprised Cody. "K-Kiara?" he stuttered, opening the door further.

The former angel stepped into the apartment, looking around without really seeing anything. She was too scared to notice any particular details. All that mattered was that she was back. She looked down, letting her loose hair cover part of her face. She wasn't yet used to not having it in a braid. Slowly, she pushed it away and stared at her love. "Surprised?" she asked.

"I thought you were ..." He let the sentence trail off, unable to speak the word.

Kiara smiled, blue eyes shining. She stepped closer to him and trailed a finger down his cheek. "I couldn't die. I was an angel," she said, hoping he'd grasp the loaded meaning of the words.

Cody's eyes grew round as he stared at her. "Was?"

Kiara twirled around. "No wings, see?" She giggled and ran up to hug him. As soon as she felt his body against hers she closed her eyes. "I have waited so long to touch you."



Cody's arms wrapped around her lithe body. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again. To thank you for—"

Julianne forced herself to stay in character, but whenever anyone else was touching her, she had trouble maintaining her focus. Especially when kissing was involved. And it was about to be involved right .. now. Julianne moved her face, bringing her lips closer to Max's. Thoughts of Kris drifted into her mind. She felt her heart racing as she imagined it was Kris she was about to kiss. She felt warm breath against her lips and she moaned.

Moaned?

"Cut!"

Julianne pulled back, completely startled. She felt a blush creep up her neck. *That didn't just happen.* She could hear several crew members laughing.

Gina cleared her throat from somewhere in the darkness beyond the bright lights. And then she walked into view, a bemused expression on her face. "Julianne, while I appreciate your enthusiasm in kissing Maxwell, I think it would work better if you waited until you're actually kissing him to, you know, moan." Gina winked at her and then disappeared into the blanket of darkness that separated fantasy from reality.

Make-up rushed in behind Gina to powder away any signs of humiliation from Julianne's face. The actress couldn't remember the last time she'd been so embarrassed. The smug look on Max's face wasn't helping any. *I'm never going to live this down,* she thought miserably.

* * *

"She just *gave* it to you?" William asked incredulously, staring down at the check in his hand.

Kris nodded from her spot on the couch. She'd decided to get a third opinion, while trying not to dwell on the fact that she appeared to be incapable of making decisions on her own. *I should probably work on that. But this is big!* She settled troubled eyes on her brother's. "What should I do?"

"Are you kidding?" William asked. "Keep it! You know what you could do with all this money?"

Several things crossed Kris's mind. "I don't know, William. Everyone keeps telling me to take the money, but ... it feels weird."

William sat down on the couch beside his sister and handed back the check. "Listen, Kris, it's business. She bought something from you. You said fifteen, she gave you fifteen. There's no need to feel guilty. She wouldn't have paid this amount of money if she didn't think it was worth it."

Kris chewed nervously on her lip. It made sense. Still, it seemed ... so strange. "I guess I can open up an account in the bank," she allowed. "Keep it there for emergencies. Or, you know, give it all away to charity. That's what I should do, right? Give it away? It feels so wrong keeping it."

"You're not going to get anywhere with that attitude," William chastised playfully. "Not in New York." He paused to consider. "You said Leigh was going to get a second job because she couldn't pay for rent. Maybe you can put the money toward helping her so she can focus on her acting career instead of spending all her time making coffee."



Kris brightened at the suggestion. *Why didn't I think of that?* "William, that's brilliant!" she hugged her brother. "I can pay rent for like half the year and then she can go to all the auditions she wants and not have to worry about a thing."

William smiled. "And you can get some art supplies," he added. "And now you don't have to get a summer job. Sari and Dad don't have to worry about your rent for a while." He paused as he looked down. "You should tell them, Kris. They'll be so proud of you."

Kris frowned at her brother's sudden mood change and her heart broke at the thought of William in pain. "Have you talked to them?"

"I tried to call," he answered sadly. "They always hang up."

She sighed and rested her head on his broad shoulder. "I wish I could talk some sense into them."

William hugged her. "Thank you, Kris," he said warmly. "You don't know how much it means to me to have your support."

Kris smiled. "And you always will," she promised. She sat up and stared at the check. "Wanna come to the bank with me?"

"I'd be honored." William stood and offered his hand to Kris to help her up.

"Hey, maybe we can go on a shopping spree," Kris suggested excitedly. She couldn't remember the last time she'd honestly gone shopping. The prom dress extravaganza didn't count. That was simply torture masquerading as shopping to lure in the innocents.

"Did someone say shopping?" Mark walked into the kitchen, looking like a little boy on Christmas Day.

Kris grinned at her brother's boyfriend. He was too cute for words. He played the butch role really well until someone said key words like "shopping" or "Madonna," then he turned into Jack. "Interested?" she asked casually.

Mark walked over and put an arm around Kris's shoulder. "Did I mention how much I *love* shopping?" he asked. "Because I totally love shopping. What do you need? I'm sure I know just the place. Or! We could just go everywhere!"

Kris glanced at William, who shrugged. "Well, I have this f-friend..." She had the unsettling feeling that she was going to start babbling. "And I'm planning to send this package with ... stuff. And I wanted to get some more .. uh, stuff. For the package." She closed her mouth in order to stop the onset of dorkyness that was undoubtedly going to pour from her lips if she kept talking.

William and Mark exchanged glances. "And does this 'friend' have a name?" Mark inquired. "Is he cute?" He winked at William. "Not that I care."

Kris laughed. "It's a she. Her name is Julia." She glanced at William. "She's the one that sent me that email about my painting."

William arched a brow. "And what kind of 'stuff' do you want to get her?"



"I don't know," Kris said, suddenly embarrassed. This was all so out of the blue. She hadn't expected to suggest shopping. And what 'stuff' *am* I talking about?

Mark shrugged and grabbed Kris's hand, leading the way to the front door. "Leave it all to me. I'll find your friend *lots* of stuff."

Kris grinned. *This oughta be fun.*

* * *

Somehow she'd gotten through much of the first parts of the scene. There hadn't been any more incidents with the kiss. Now came the actual hard part. First of all, Kiara wouldn't be slutty enough to jump into bed with a guy two seconds after she'd been turned human. An angel should know better. And second of all, this whole angel-turned-human angle wasn't working for Julianne. *Maybe I'll win a Golden Globe or something for my accurate portrayal of a horny angel.*

"Places!" Gina called.

Julianne got into character as she stood at the foot of the prop bed. Max had been giving her annoying looks ever since the moaning incident and Julianne was going to have to kick his ass if he kept leering at her like that. Luckily, by the time Gina yelled, "Action," it was Cody standing in front of her.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Cody asked, hesitation and desire battling in his mind.

"We can wait..."

Kiara slowly unbuttoned her shirt. "We *have* been waiting," she said slowly. "Too long."

Cody swallowed and closed the distance between them, taking over the job of removing the shirt. His lips claimed Kiara's in a searing kiss.

Julianne tried to tune everything out. She tried to think of pretty flowers, or lines of poetry, or beautiful sunsets. Anything to keep her mind off the fact that she was growing increasingly more naked as the moments passed and there were way too many eyes focused in her direction. Not to mention the cameras.

She waited until they were on the bed to reach for Cody's shirt. And once they were under the covers, Julianne relaxed slightly. Now she didn't feel quite so exposed. *Okay, this is almost over. Moan a lot. Fake orgasm. No problem. Just think of Kris, that worked really nicely last time.*

Max's lips nipped at her throat as he moved on top of her. "You're supposed to call out my name," he whispered in her ear.

Oh, right. "Oh, Kris," she moaned. Then froze. As did Max. *Fuck!!*

"Cut!"

Max rolled off of her, and they both turned to the approaching director.

"Julianne, the character's name is Cody, not Chris," Gina reminded her.

"Oh, right," Julianne apologized, wondering if there was a hole she could crawl into and hide away until all of this embarrassment passed.

Max smirked. "So, who's this Chris guy?" he teased, settling back on top of her. "Boyfriend?"



Julianne groaned and closed her eyes. She decided that thinking about Kris and acting didn't go together at all. From now on, she'd focus on "Fernando Croa". Definitely no unexpected moaning or embarrassing name calling would ensue then.

* * *

Kris stared at the kitchen table and the items thereon. It had been a very long, yet productive day. She'd opened up an account at the bank, she'd gone shopping with Mark and William, and she'd gotten gifts galore. Fifteen thousand dollars seemed more like a million to Kris. She couldn't remember ever having that much money all at once. Luckily, William had managed to restrain her.

She carefully placed all the objects in the box, making sure the painting was secured within the bubble wrap.

"I hope she likes them," she said to herself. As an afterthought, she'd decided to add a picture of herself. But she couldn't decide between one of her alone or one of her and Nathan. In the end, she stuck both of them in the box and taped everything up.

As promised, Julia had emailed her home address earlier, so Kris copied the information onto the brown box with a permanent black marker.

"Ooh, a package," Leigh said, walking into the kitchen. "Who's it from? Is it from that rich lady?"

Kris smiled. "No, it's to Julia," she answered. "I'm sending her that painting. And some other stuff."

Leigh approached the kitchen table and stared critically at the box. "What kind of stuff?" She tried to lift it. "This is heavy."

"Just stuff," Kris answered casually. "Things she mentioned liking and things I thought she'd like."

"And, uh, why exactly are you doing this?" Leigh crossed her arms against her chest and leaned back against the table, brown eyes slightly narrowed.

"She's my friend," Kris replied easily. "I like to get things for my friends."

"So what did you get me?" Leigh demanded. "Or have I been replaced?"

Kris tried not to laugh. "Are you jealous?"

Leigh shrugged, looking down. "Well, kinda. I mean, all of a sudden you're like obsessed with this girl you've never even met and doing paintings for her and talking to her on the phone for hours on end ..."

Kris walked over to hug her best friend. "No one could ever replace you," she said solemnly. "I promise."

Leigh hugged her back. "So what did you get me?" she joked.

Kris pulled back and grinned, reaching into her pocket to withdraw a piece of paper. "Ta-da!" She handed it over.

Leigh frowned. "You got me a receipt? Gee, I don't know what to say."

"Read it, you dork."



Leigh's eyes widened. "You paid the rent?"

"For six months," Kris informed her, smiling brightly. "Now you don't have to worry about getting that second job. In fact, you can quit Starbucks all together and focus on getting an acting gig."

Leigh shrieked and jumped on Kris, hugging her so tightly that Kris couldn't breathe. "I can't believe you did this. Thank you!"

Kris laughed, elated by Leigh's reaction. Whoever said that money couldn't bring happiness obviously had too much of it.

"Where did you..." Leigh pulled away from the hug and stared at Kris. "The check?"

A slight nod confirmed Leigh's suspicions.

"So it was real?"

Kris grinned. "Clearly."

Leigh shrieked again. "How much is left?"

"About seven thousand, what with rent and all." Kris shrugged. "I'm gonna give some of it away."

Leigh rolled her eyes. "Of course you are. Don't you ever get tired of being so ..." She searched the air for the perfect word. "... saintly?"

"Saintly?" Kris inquired with a sardonic smile. "Right."

Leigh crossed in front of Kris on her way out of the kitchen. "I'm off."

"To?" Kris asked, following her friend toward the front door.

"To have a talk with my manager, of course," Leigh responded with a wink. "Life is very good today. Now watch me get run over by a cab on the way back."

"Pessimist."

"Less disappointments that way," Leigh answered with a bright smile. She stepped out into the hallway and paused. "If I'm not back in three hours, check the local hospital."

"Not funny." Kris leaned against the door.

"Not trying to be." Leigh started walking away.

Kris watched her for a second, then made up her mind. "Wait up," she called. "If anyone's gonna get run over around here it's gonna be me." She reached into her pocket and withdrew the key. "What makes you think you're going to get run over and not me?" Leigh wondered from a few feet away.

Kris started walking toward her best friend and shook her head. "Just waiting for all of this good fortune to bite me in the ass."



"Who's the pessimist now?"

* * *

"Let me get this straight," Adrian said, trying very hard not to laugh. "You moaned *before* you kissed him?"

Julianne was going to kill Karen. She was going to kill Karen and then kill her some more. Then she was going to kill Adrian for surprising her on the set.

"I *knew* I should've shown up earlier." He snapped his finger and shook his head, stretching his legs along the length of Julianne's couch. "And what was the part about you calling someone else's name?"

Julianne sighed loudly and plopped down on the arm of the couch. "What do you do, *pay* her to dispel embarrassing information about me?"

Adrian frowned. "Pay her? She's not like a gossip whore, Julianne. No, she does it for free." He smirked. "So, whose name did you call? Mine?"

"Yes, Adrian," Julianne said, nodding slowly. "Somewhere between keeping the covers over Max's butt and concentrating on making my very fake orgasm believable, I realized that I was head over heels in love with you and had to announce it to the entire crew."

"It was the thong, wasn't it?" Adrian grinned proudly. "Knew it was only a matter of time. That baby never fails me."

Julianne reached down and tossed Adrian's legs over the side of the couch, making room for herself. "Scoot," she added.

Adrian sat up and reached into the one of the pockets of his cargo shorts. "I have something that will cheer you right up," he assured her, pulling out a folded piece of paper.

Julianne eyed him curiously. "What's that?"

Adrian held up one finger to quiet her. "'Kiara Goes to New York', by Adrian Cruz."

"You didn't," Julianne stated, snatching the paper from his grasp. She looked it over and groaned. "*Why* do you insist on torturing me?" She frowned as she scanned through the paragraphs. "Since when am I a D cup?"

Adrian grabbed the paper back. He smacked his own forehead. "Sorry, I meant to type double-D."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"That's why they call it *fiction*, Julianne. Lighten up. Besides, this is Kiara, not you."

Julianne sank down in the couch, covering her face. "Who do you think they *picture* when they read that stuff?"

"You," Adrian replied easily. "With super large breasts. I'm doing you a favor. Here, let me read you my favorite part. I assure you, this is excellent literature. I think I may even submit it to



some kind of literature contest. I think one of the fan sites was having one." He cleared his throat. "And as Kris's tongue slid between her—"

Julianne snatched the paper away. "I am so disturbed by the fact that you wrote this that it's not even funny." She crumpled it up. "Sick!"

Adrian grinned contentedly. "That was fun. I didn't realize your face could turn all those different shades of red. Although, it's more purplish right now."

She tossed the paper ball in his direction and hit him square in the forehead. It bounced off and landed under the coffee table. "Remind me to invest in a new best friend. You're fired."

"Ouch." Adrian feigned pain to his chest and he fell to the ground.

Julianne watched him with a bored expression. "I'm mad at you."

"No you're not," Adrian called from the floor. "You adore me because I add panache to your otherwise boring lifestyle." He returned to his spot on the couch. "Besides, I know that somewhere deep, deep down, beyond the humiliation and embarrassment, you're very amused."

A dark brow rose in question. "Is that so?"

Adrian nodded. "Very amused."

Well, it was kinda funny, she allowed. But only kinda. She shook her head and turned to face him. "I have a problem and I need you to do me a favor."

"Uh-oh."

Julianne shook her head quickly. "No, this is business-related," she assured him, rising to retrieve the screenplay from its spot on the kitchen counter. She returned promptly to the living room and handed it over. "I need you to read this and tell me why I shouldn't do it. Not why I *should* do it. But why I shouldn't. Just convince me to not consider it."

Adrian was confused. He stared down at the title page and flipped through the pages. "*Summer's End*, huh?" he said. "Sounds corny already." He glanced up. "Why exactly is there a problem?"

"You'll see," Julianne replied. "I need to give Eric an answer by Friday."

Adrian paused for a moment. "If you don't want to do this, why are you considering it?"

"Well, *that's* why it's a problem."

36

Dear Julia,

You'll be pleased to learn that a package is well on its way to your house. I decided to add a couple more things to the mix, just so you wouldn't just get a boring painting. Thank you for trusting me with your address. I promise not to stalk you if I'm ever in California. :) Oh! And I ended up opening an account with that check. I spent about half of it on rent. Now Leigh won't have to worry about getting that second job. She talked things over with her



manager and she was downgraded into a part-timer. For some reason she loves it there, big freak that she is. Still, I'm happy that she'll get a chance to pursue her acting dreams now that she doesn't have to worry about making rent for a while.

And I guess that means I won't have to get that summer job after all. Hey, I can spend the whole time painting! Too bad the money won't last forever. It sure beats making coffee for a living.

I went shopping with William and his boyfriend, Mark, a couple of days ago. Mark is so funny. I bought him a bunch of random stuff. William kept joking that Mark was going to dump him for me if I kept spoiling him that way, but I couldn't help it! I love buying things for people I love. William had to restrain me from hitting the cash register every two seconds. Guess I got a bit too excited with the prospect of having money. :)

A while ago you asked me when my birthday was, and I don't think I answered. It's on September 5th. You didn't miss it :) When is yours?

Oh, I was wondering if I could have your number? In case I felt like calling you some time. It's only fair :) But, I respect it if you'd rather not give it to me. I won't be too offended. ;)

Okay, I've rambled long enough. I'm off!

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

"I brought movies," Kris announced, stepping inside the apartment and shutting the door with her foot. She walked inside to find Leigh on the couch, leaning over a newspaper. "I hope those are the personals and not the classifieds."

Leigh didn't glance up. "Entertainment section. I'm trying to see if there's any auditions advertised anywhere. I should really see about getting an agent."

"No time like the present," Kris said cheerfully. She held up the bag she carried. "Did I mention I brought movies?"

Brown eyes drifted over to the bag and lit up. "What did you get?"

"Gay movies," Kris answered.

Leigh blinked several times. "Come again?"

"I'm curious to see what all the fuss is all about. I mean, first William, then Julia. Let's see how the other half lives. Or you know, the other ten percent or whatever it is these days."

"Gay movies?" Leigh asked. "But we're not gay."

Kris frowned. "Well, they see straight movies all the time, and they're not straight. Seems fair to me." She grinned. "Besides, it'll be interesting."

Leigh shrugged and sat back. "Can't argue with that logic. What are we watching?"



Kris looked through the small selection, emptying the bag. "Uh, I've got *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls In Love, But I'm A Cheerleader, Trick, Get Real, and If These Walls Could Talk 2.*" She glanced up. "We can do this alphabetically."

"Five movies?"

"We have nothing better to do," Kris replied defensively. "Besides, I couldn't decide."

Leigh laughed. "I better call for pizza."

* * *

"I don't get it," Adrian began, the second Julianne opened the door. "Why would you ever consider *not* doing this film?" He stepped inside the house and waited Julianne to respond.

The actress shut the door and narrowed her eyes. "What part of 'convince me not to do it' didn't you grasp, Adrian?" She started walking across the foyer en route to the living room.

Adrian followed suit. There was no way he was going to let this go without an argument. "This is an excellent script, Julianne," he told her.

"I know it is!"

"Then what the hell is the problem?" Adrian asked impatiently.

Julianne whirled around. "You know perfectly well what the problem is!"

"Do you know how many actresses would kill for a role like this?" Adrian demanded. "You asked for my opinion, Julianne, and as a screenwriter and as a director and a lover of all that is film, I am telling you that it would be a *huge* mistake to pass this one up."

"I didn't ask for your professional opinion, Adrian," Julianne argued. "I asked you to keep me from doing something I'd grow to regret."

"What do you think I'm doing?" he yelled.

Julianne glared at him, anger replacing frustration. "You are the one person in this world I was hoping would understand."

Adrian hesitated and dropped the screen play on the couch beside him. He turned blue eyes on those of his best friend and sighed. "This is a role of a lifetime, Julianne. This is your big chance to prove that you're better than they think you are."

"That's not the problem, Adrian," Julianne replied. "You know that's not the issue here."

Adrian ran an exasperated hand through his hair. "For the past few years, I have watched you masterfully avoid any contact with the gay and lesbian community. You have half the world believing you're homophobic and the other half praising you for your conservative ways. That is *not* who you are, Julianne. You need to face your fears or they're going to be what kills your career. Sometimes it's not about the roles that you play, but about the roles you *don't* play."

Julianne let out a long sigh, her eyes lowering. If only it were so simple.



"What are you so afraid of?" Adrian questioned. "It's mostly straight actresses that play gay roles anyway. Nobody is going to question your sexuality."

"That's the problem," Julianne snapped. "They're going to assume that I'm straight. They're going to pelt me with questions like, 'Oh, how did it feel to kiss a woman?' or 'As a heterosexual, how did it feel to play a lesbian role? Was it hard? Did you have to do research?' And I'm going to have to suck it up and smile and lie and pile on more bullshit to the ever increasing mountain of *crap* that constitutes my life."

Adrian crossed his arms. "Well it hasn't seemed to faze you up to this point."

"Damnit, Adrian!" Julianne screamed, totally exasperated. "I do not need this in my life. I do not need to kick open a Pandora's box of questions and assumptions and allegations!"

"Then why the hell did you ask me to read the script?" Adrian retorted. "If you've already made up your mind not to take this role, why did you ask me to read it?"

Julianne stared at him, suddenly at a loss for words. Finally, she shrugged, trying to calm herself down. "I was hoping you'd find a way to make me feel better about not taking it."

"No." Adrian shook his head. "I know you, Julianne. When you've made up your mind about something, you don't give a damn what anybody else thinks. You wanted me to give you a reason to take it. And that's what I'm trying to do. As your best friend."

Julianne sighed.

Adrian leaned against the couch and let out a long breath. "When was the last time you were happy, Julianne? I mean, honestly. Because, I have been right beside you through all of your great accomplishments and not once have I ever seen you truly content."

"You've created this alternate persona of yourself so that nobody realizes just how miserable you are, or more importantly, *why*. So please explain to me what you'd be risking by coming clean about who you are?"

"Privacy," Julianne replied easily.

Adrian arched a brow.

Julianne walked over to the couch and sat down at the other end, forcing Adrian to turn around. "I come out, and everything will become about my sexuality. If someone happens to snap a picture of me walking with some woman, people will jump to the conclusion that that's my new girlfriend. Anything I do, say, and wear will become something that suddenly reflects an entire community of people that will look to me to set a good example."

She shook her head sadly. "I don't think I'm emotionally prepared to become the next lesbian poster girl. And quite frankly, I don't want to be. I haven't worked my butt off all of these years for my name to be synonymous with lesbianism. The second I say, 'I'm gay,' that's all the world will see."

"Only if that's all you let them see," Adrian responded. "So what if they think 'lesbian' when they look at you? They think 'stuck up bitch' now, and that doesn't seem to upset you."

Julianne smiled slightly.



"Being a lesbian isn't *all* that you are. Doesn't matter what they think, Julianne. You know better. *I* know better." He shrugged. "But I'm not trying to convince you to come out. I'm trying to convince you to give this role a chance."

When Julianne didn't respond, Adrian continued. "I remember you once saying that your moment in the sun would inevitably pass. That you would walk down the street and nobody would care about who you once were. And why should they? You haven't done anything worth caring about."

Julianne frowned at him.

"Hey, it's true," Adrian argued. "No one makes a difference by playing it safe. I know being forgotten is your biggest fear. So tell me, *Julia*, what do *you* wish to be remembered for?"

37

"I just don't get why the old lady had to die," Leigh whined through her tears. "And why did those people have to be so mean?"

Kris held up the box of tissues. Leigh had a tendency to get over-emotional during sad movies. Actually, she got over-emotional over most movies.

Leigh grabbed a couple and blew her nose loudly. "Hey, isn't that the chick from *Dawson's Creek*?"

Kris turned her attention to the new segment of *Walls 2* and shrugged. "I don't know. You're the TV expert."

Leigh narrowed her eyes at the screen and nodded. "Yeah, I think that's her. Just different hair. Is she gay?"

"I'll ask her next time I see her," Kris replied dryly. She put down the box of tissues and settled back against the couch. So far they'd gotten through two of the movies and had enjoyed them both. The first one about the cheerleader had been interesting. Odd, but interesting. And Kris had enjoyed the British jargon exchanged during *Get Real*. The plot had been good too.

Leigh scowled. "Ew, bitches. Shouldn't feminists be a little more .. I don't know, womanfriendly?"

"Well actually, there was this whole thing in the 70's between the Radical Feminists and the lesbians because the Radicals weren't meeting the needs of lesbians. So the lesbians broke off and started the Lesbian Feminist movement."

Leigh turned her head slowly and stared at Kris.

"What? I took a class," Kris explained. "There's a whole bunch of feminist branches. Socialist and Marxist and ..." She realized Leigh didn't care so she decided to shut up and just watch the movie.

A few minutes later, Leigh piped up. "Ew, *again*!" she commented, making motions at the TV. "Now the lesbians are being mean toward the poor little butchie. That's not nice."

Kris just shook her head.



Leigh stood. "This calls for popcorn."

"Fine, but you're cleaning it up!" Kris called over her shoulder. Leigh was already in the kitchen searching through the cabinets. She shrugged and turned back to the screen. "Want me to pause this for you?" she asked, reaching for the remote. She searched for the pause button on the clicker as she spoke. "You're going to miss—" *Oh ... my.* Kris blinked. Leigh ran back into the living room. "What am I miss—" She stopped abruptly. "And we have sex." She jumped over the top of the couch and landed next to Kris. Popping sounds echoed in the background. "I've always wondered what girls do exactly. That other lesbian movie didn't teach me jack."

Kris was blushing for some reason.

"Are you okay?" Leigh asked. "You look a bit flushed. I forget you're Miss Innocent. Want me to fast forward this so that your virginity isn't marred by these naughty displays of affection?"

The beeping microwave interrupted Kris's response, and she jumped to her feet. "I'll get it," she announced in a high pitched tone. Then she walked away quickly so that Leigh couldn't comment. *Losing my mind. I am. I am.* She retrieved the popcorn from the microwave, nearly burning her fingers. "Yeouch." She waved her hand at her side trying to shake off the mild pain. Then returned to the living room.

"Thanks," Leigh said, accepting the bag. She nodded toward the screen. "I think I get it. Lots of fondling and caressing."

Kris felt herself blush even more, but sat down beside her friend. "What'd I miss?"

"A vibrator and that's about it," Leigh summed up, digging into the popcorn and munching away. "I love this stuff."

"Lesbian sex?"

"No," Leigh responded slowly. "The popcorn."

"Then why does most of it end up on the floor?" Kris wondered.

"That's entirely not my fault," Leigh argued. "Some things just require popcorn throwage."

"Throwage?"

"New term." She nodded toward the screen. "We're missing this. I thought you wanted to expand your horizons."

Kris frowned. "I do. My horizons are very expanded."

"Sick."

Kris reached over to grab a handful of popcorn and threw it at Leigh. "I don't even want to know what you meant by that."

Leigh grinned, but chose not to comment.



They both managed to remain silent during the remainder of the segment. Once it ended, however, Leigh spoke up. "Well at least that one wasn't depressing."

Kris nodded, watching the opening credits for the third and last part. "I think this one's supposed to be funny."

"I just want to see Ellen and Sharon as a couple," Leigh commented. "Never thought I'd see that pairing."

Kris rolled her eyes, and crossed her arms, leaning her head back against the couch. About fifteen minutes later, Leigh cheered. "Bring on the sex!" she yelled, she threw popcorn up like confetti.

"You're getting way too into this," Kris noted.

"Huh huh, they're gonna do it, huh huh," Leigh said in her best Butt-Head impression.

"You've lost your mind." Kris giggled anyway and focused her attention on the screen. She felt her breath catch. *Oh.. whoa...* She swallowed, recognizing the fact that the unfolding action on the screen was making her a bit ...

"Caressing, fondling and rolling around," Leigh said with a nod. "Got it."

"I'll leave you to your lesbian sex," Kris said suddenly, standing quickly. "I'm gonna hit the shower."

Leigh snickered. "Cold shower?" she teased, as Kris walked away.

Kris froze, an odd panic settling over her. "Of course not!" she snapped. Then realized that Leigh had just been teasing her. As always. She fought to regain her composure. "I have to save some for my vibrator later."

Leigh giggled and threw a handful of popcorn at her. "Good one."

* * *

Julianne decided to extend the pacing arena to the entire house. She'd already visited her bedroom three times in the endless cycle of indecision that threatened to drive her over the brink of insanity. That's if it hadn't already.

"How do I want to be remembered?" Julianne wondered out loud. "Damn you, Adrian, and your cryptic advice." She mumbled and stared down at the telephone in her hand. She refused to go to sleep until she made a decision about this movie. Never mind that the not knowing wasn't going to let her sleep. Although, she wasn't entirely certain either decision would work well as a sleeping pill.

She stopped walking. "I don't need to do this movie. Plenty of other offers are going to fall on my lap the moment *Guardian* hits theaters." She nodded and started dialing. Somewhere around the sixth number, she hung up and resumed pacing. "But will they be as good at this one?"

"And so what if I do this movie. I don't have to do any interviews I don't want to do. I can just pretend I'm really busy. Which I usually am. Then it'll all blow over and I can return to my normal life."



She sighed. "Yeah, right."

By her fourth trip through her bedroom, she stopped. "Okay, let's just leave it up to fate," she decided, grabbing a quarter from the night stand. "Heads I do the movie, tails I don't." She flipped the coin in the air, caught it, and slapped it against the back of her left hand.

Heads.

Julianne paused. "Let's go best out of three." She repeated the procedure .. and ...

Heads.

"Damn it." She threw the quarter across the room, and tapped the receiver against her forehead. "Think."

Finally, she started dialing. She waited until someone picked up.

"Leigh and Kris's house of pleasure. Leigh speaking, how may I spank you?"

Julianne frowned slightly. She cleared her throat. "Um, hi. Is Kris home?"

"She's in the shower. All the lesbian porn got her a little .. you know. Can I take a message?"

Lesbian porn? "Uh, no that's okay. Thanks any—"

"Oh wait," Leigh interrupted. "She's out. One sec."

"Hello?" Kris said suddenly.

Julianne found herself totally at a loss. Why was she calling Kris about this? "Lesbian porn?" she found herself asking.

"Julia? Lesbian..." Kris paused, then spoke away from the receiver. "Leigh, I'm going to *kill* you!!"

"You might want to do so after you get out of that towel," Leigh called back from somewhere in the background. "After all these gay movies we've been watching, I might get the wrong idea."

Julianne scratched her eyebrow thoughtfully. *Gay movies? Wait, she just said Kris is in a towel. Why am I focusing on the movies?* She got a mental image and closed her eyes. *That's why.*

Kris grunted into the phone. "She lives to embarrass me," she explained apologetically. "Don't listen to a word she says. She grew up on a strict diet of paint chips and glue." There was the sound of a door closing. "So what can I do for you?"

Julianne suddenly had no idea what to say. She couldn't very well explain her dilemma. Could she? *Just dig on deeper, Franqui.* "I just wanted to know how you were doing."

"Oh, I'm fine," Kris replied. "Did you get my email?"

She sat down at the edge of her bed. "Don't think so, I haven't gotten much of a chance to jump online."

"Work keeping you busy?"



Julianne considered the question. "Kind of." She chewed on her bottom lip, debating on how much to say. "I have this ... problem."

"Hold that thought," Kris said. "I'm kinda naked and dripping all over the carpet. Gimme a sec."

The phone slipped from Julianne's grasp at the visuals she got from that particular statement, and ended up doing a juggling act with the receiver trying to get a firm hold on the thing. Finally, she got it back to her ear.

"Hello?" Kris was saying.

"Sorry, I ... I mean .. the .. uh ... " She paused for two seconds. "I'll hold," she managed finally, covering her face with her free hand. *It should be against the law for me to communicate with other people.*

Kris laughed. "Okay, one sec."

Julianne attempted to organize her thoughts while she waited, but failed miserably. She was pretty certain Kris's comment had fried her last remaining neuron. No way was she going to fall asleep with that visual in her head.

"Okay, I'm all yours. What's the problem?"

"Oh, right," Julianne said, trying not to focus too much on the 'all yours' comment, or how nice it sounded. "Okay, say you have to decide something and one alternative is the cowards' way out, and the other is the brave thing to do. Only, the brave thing may have dire consequences. Which would you pick?"

"Hmm," Kris considered. "What kind of 'dire consequences' are you talking about?"

"I'm not sure," Julianne replied. "I tend to be quite paranoid."

Kris laughed at that. "Well, um, I guess it would depend on the importance of whatever it is you're trying to decide on. Would the brave thing to do complicate your life?"

"Um, I'd have to go with ... definitely."

"Hmm, well I know how much you value simplicity." She hesitated a moment, then asked, "Is this about asking out a girl, or something?"

Julianne considered this. "Yes!" she said quickly.

"Oh."

Oh? "See, there's this really hot girl," Julianne continued, trying to form some kind of metaphor. "And she's perfect. I mean, everything that I've been looking for. The only problem is that ..." *That what?* "... she's very ... out." *Does that make sense? Ah fuck it, it's better than the story about the alien robots.* "So, if I ask her out and she says yes, everyone will know that I'm gay."

"And you're worried about... your job?" Kris wondered.

Julianne brightened. "Yes! Exactly. I'm worried about my job."

"Oh, well, can't you just keep her away from the work place?"



"Well, we work together," Julianne lied.

"So if you work together, and everyone knows *she's* gay, why would they have a problem with you being gay?"

Julianne lost track of the metaphor somewhere. But, whatever. "Well, I'm more worried that it will hinder my ... advancements in the field."

"Like, you won't get good roles if everyone knows you're gay?" Kris guessed.

Maybe we didn't lose track of it after all. "Yes."

"But would asking her out make you happy?" Kris asked.

"I think so," Julianne replied.

"Then that's the important thing," Kris said confidently. "You should always do things that make you happy. There's no point in passing up happiness just cause you're scared of something that may not even happen."

Julianne considered this. That kind of made ... sense ... in a simplistic sort of way. "Thank you," she said with a smile that Kris couldn't see.

"Did I help?"

"Enormously," Julianne confirmed. She was pretty certain that Adrian had made a similar point earlier in the day, but Kris just made things sound ... nicer. She lay back on the bed and grinned, a strange weight lifted off her shoulders. She'd call Eric as soon as she got off the phone with Kris. But in the meantime, there were more important issues to be discussed. "So, what was this about lesbian porn?"

38

"Good morning," Kris greeted her roommate upon entering the kitchen.

Leigh didn't glance up as she mumbled a distracted, "Morning."

Kris noticed that Leigh was busy scribbling away on a spiral notebook. "Am I interrupting your 'dear diary' moment?"

Leigh muttered something that Kris didn't quite catch.

"Right," Kris agreed. "And in English, that would translate to . . .?"

Brown eyes lifted from the paper to meet with curious green ones. "I'm making a list of career options in case the acting thing doesn't work out," she explained, looking down sadly. "I mean I should be realistic about it."

Unsure of how to respond, Kris turned her attention to the coffee machine. Leigh occasionally went through phases of doubt and self-questioning. Kris understood the feelings all too well, but also understood the drive, which is why she was not all that worried that Leigh would lose her motivation and give up for good. Cup of coffee in hand, she sat down at the table. "What do you have so far?"



Leigh sat up straighter and cleared her throat. "Number one: work at Starbucks for the rest of my life," she read off, then sighed and glanced up. "That's it."

"What's the rest of that stuff there?" Kris questioned, motioning to rest of the list on the notebook.

"Groceries," Leigh answered, sitting back as if defeated. "I got distracted."

Kris smiled but covered it up with the mug at her lips. "Maybe you shouldn't give up on the acting thing, then," she suggested.

"I need an agent," Leigh said suddenly. "That would really help me out."

Kris simply nodded.

Leigh fell silent for a few minutes, staring thoughtfully at the kitchen table. Finally, she glanced up, and hesitantly asked, "Your friend works in Hollywood, right?"

"Video?"

"California," Leigh explained, somewhat needlessly, she felt. "The lesbian," she added for safe measure.

Kris stared across the table at her best friend, unsure of where the subject was headed. "Yeah ..." she confirmed slowly. "Why?"

Leigh's eyes lit up hopefully. "Maybe she knows how I can go about getting a good agent," she said. "Like, maybe she can suggest someone."

"I don't know if—"

"Please," Leigh interrupted. "Just ask her. Worst that can happen is she says she doesn't know anyone, and I'm right back where I am now." Her brown eyes searched Kris's. "Please."

Kris frowned, torn between wanting to help Leigh and fearing that Julia would think she was using her. A glance over at Leigh's hopeful face tipped the balance. "Okay. I'll bring it up next time I talk to her," she agreed. "But I can't promise anything," she added quickly.

Leigh rushed over to envelop Kris in a hug. "Thank you thank you thank you! You don't know how much this means to me."

"I can't promise anything," Kris said again, but allowed herself a smile as she hugged Leigh back. Her friend's enthusiasm was contagious. *Guess I will be calling Julia later.*

Julianne was not used to receiving packages that were not marked with studio names on them. She also was not used to receiving packages addressed under her real name. For these reasons—and others that she couldn't quite get a conscious handle on—she sat staring at the unopened box with a mixture of excitement and fear that overwhelmed her in a way that cardboard never had before.

"Just open it," she said aloud. Blue eyes crinkled in concentration as she contemplated the brown-ness and square-ness of the object. "It's not like she's gonna pop out of it." She leaned



forward in the couch and pulled the box down from the coffee table and onto the carpet. The name Kris Milano stared up at her in black permanent marker, and Julianne found herself tracing her finger along the outline of the letters. "So much for living simply," she voiced with a sigh.

Her fingers began peeling the edges of the tape, but the ringing of the telephone quickly interrupted her actions. She grabbed the receiver from the table next to the couch. "Franqui," she breathed impatiently.

"Um, hi, is...Uh, Julia?"

Julianne froze at the sound of Kris's voice. *Shit.* "Hi! Sorry, I was waiting for my . . . uh, my ..." She looked around the living room looking for a quick lie. Finding none, she said the first thing that came to mind. "... pool man, Frankie. He's supposed to call me about ... chlorine products." She sank down on the couch and closed her eyes, shaking her head at her own stupidity. "How are you?"

"Good," Kris replied. "You?"

Mortified beyond redemption. "Good," she answered instead.

"If you're busy waiting for a call ..."

"No!" Julianne said quickly. "That's what call waiting is for. Um, what can I do for you?"

"I didn't know you had a pool," Kris said instead of answering.

Neither did I. Guess I'll put building a pool on my list of things to do. "It's one of those little plastic ones," she found herself saying, realizing too late that every time she opened her mouth around Kris her IQ dropped a hundred points.

"And you need chlorine for that?"

"Can't be too careful," Julianne replied, because she didn't sound like enough of a moron already. "Stagnant water and all; could attract bugs."

Kris laughed. "That's funny."

Julianne laughed too. *She thinks I'm kidding, ha ha ... Help.* "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

Kris paused and Julianne waited patiently for an answer. Finally, Kris responded with, "Actually, I was calling to ask for a favor ..."

Interested, Julianne sat up. "Favor?"

"Yeah," Kris answered, sounding deeply embarrassed. "I feel really awkward asking this."

"Go ahead," Julianne encouraged gently. She could not imagine what Kris could possibly want from her, but she was certain that whatever it was would be granted immediately.

Kris took a deep breath. "Well, it's actually a favor for Leigh," she began, and then paused again. "Feel free to stop me and say no at any time..."

"Go on."



"Well, as you know she's an actress and she's trying really hard to catch a break, but she feels this would be made a lot easier with the aid of an agent, and I know you work in Hollywood so I thought maybe you knew some people. I-I don't mean like get her an agent or anything, just if you knew of anyone she could call, maybe. Or, you know, if you have any tips for getting one or . . . something."

Julianne fell silent for a moment. Not because she was offended by the proposition, but because she was pondering the best way to offer help without giving herself away. "Tell you what, I'll see what I can do and get back to you."

"Please don't go out of your way," Kris said quickly. "I really didn't mean to put you on the spot and it was probably really inconsiderate to call you up and ask you—"

"Kris," Julianne interrupted, laughing slightly. "It's okay. It's really no problem at all. I'll call you back tonight and let you know what I could find. Okay?"

"Okay," Kris answered, sounding a bit more relaxed. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," Julianne replied. "Talk to you tonight?"
"Talk to you then," Kris agreed. "Bye."

"Bye." Julianne clicked the 'off' button on the receiver and stared at it thoughtfully. Shrugging, she pressed the appropriate speed dial code and waited. "Eric? It's Julianne. I need a favor."

"So this is the source of your insanity," Adrian commented, staring at the picture in his hand. He winked. "Well, she's sure hot, I'll grant you that much, Jules." He flipped to the picture behind it and raised a brow. "Who's the stud?"

"That would be her ex-boyfriend," Julianne responded, not bothering to hide her disgust. "The asshole," she added for emphasis. "If I ever run into that jerk I swear I'll..."

Adrian leaned forward, suddenly interested in the conversation. "You'll what?"

"Kick his ass," Julianne replied matter-of-factly.

"How butch of you," Adrian teased, glancing back at the pictures. When he'd seen enough he placed them back on the coffee table and regarded his best friend with curiosity. "So, what are you going to do when she asks you for pictures of yourself?"

Julianne shrugged. "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"So, what else did she send?" Adrian asked, sliding the box closer. He peeked inside and withdrew a cookbook. He frowned at Julianne. "Cookbook?"

"I told her I like to cook," Julianne explained with a grin.

"Well at least that much is true," Adrian agreed, placing the book on the table beside the box.

"Hey, it's not like I lie to her about everything," Julianne argued, hurt by the implication.



"Don't even get me started on the killer clowns from outer space movie idea."

Julianne frowned. "They were alien robots."

"Not helping your cause any," Adrian replied. "And anyway, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. If you didn't feel guilty about lying to her you wouldn't be overcompensating with random acts of kindness."

"I don't—It's not because I feel guilty." Julianne couldn't meet Adrian's gaze. The truth was that she did feel guilty; how could she not? But that wasn't all. If guilt was all there was to the situation, Julianne would've put a stop to it a lot sooner. It was so much more than that. She just had no idea how to explain it.

Adrian stared at Julianne thoughtfully for a minute, and then retrieved the pictures from the table. He held one up in each hand. "Let's try a little test," he proposed. "Look at both of these pictures."

Julianne rolled her eyes but did as Adrian commanded. "Is there a point to this?" she asked.

"There's always a point to everything that I do, Julianne, you should know that by now," he replied. "Okay, so which of the two pictures is your favorite?"

"That's easy. The one where she's by herself."

"And why?"

"Because then I don't have to see that jerk's smiling face."

Adrian nodded. "And what if he wasn't a jerk? What if he was the nicest guy in the whole world and they were both totally in love. Which picture would be your favorite then?"

Julianne frowned at the question. What was Adrian trying to get at?

He shook his head and put the pictures down. "It's not that hard, Julianne. It's the same answer to both questions. Why do you think that is?"

"Since you're the one with the Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, why don't you tell me?" Julianne said.

"I don't need a Ph.D. in anything to understand the way you think, Julianne," Adrian replied.

"And the answer is that seeing her with someone else makes you jealous."

Julianne sighed. "Please don't start this again," she begged.

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because you know I'm right."

Julianne rose to her feet and began putting things back into the box. Finally, she sighed and stared at her best friend. "What do you want from me?"



"I want to make sure that you're not plunging blindly into something," he answered. "I've never seen you so hung up on anyone else before, Julianne, and it scares me. This girl has no idea who you are. If you end up falling for her, what are you going to do?"

Julianne picked up the box and started walking away without answering.

Once in her bedroom, Julianne shut the door and sat down at the edge of the bed, placing the box on the floor before her. She stared at the phone for a long moment before picking it up and dialing.

"Hello?"

Julianne sat up. "Kris?" she said. "It's Julia."

"Oh hey," Kris greeted. "I didn't think you were going to call."

"Surprise, then," Julianne joked. "Listen, I'm going to email you later with a phone number you can give Leigh. Tell her to get in touch with Eric Moura and set up an appointment to meet with him."

"Is he an agent?" Kris asked.

"One of the best," Julianne confirmed. "He's going to be in New York for a couple of days so make sure Leigh calls as soon as possible."

"Wow," Kris breathed. "Thank you so much, Julia. I owe you one."

"Don't worry about it," Julianne assured her. "And anyway, the package you sent me makes us even."

"Oh you got it?" Kris asked, sounded excited. "Did you like it?"

Julianne smiled. "I loved it, thank you," she said. "It was really sweet of you." She leaned forward and withdrew the photograph of Kris standing by herself. "And I really loved the painting. I'm going to hang it with the others."

"Others?"

Julianne froze momentarily, forgetting that Kris only knew of the one. "Well, I have other paintings," she lied. "Of other artists."

"Oh," Kris said. "Well, I'm glad you liked it. I'm sorry the photos of me were kind of corny. I don't really have any other recent ones."

"I think you are beautiful," Julianne found herself saying. She was momentarily embarrassed by her blunt honesty but decided it was true enough. "Sorry."

"For?"

"Being so brutally honest," Julianne replied.

Kris laughed. "I'll get over it somehow," she assured her. "And thank you."

"You're welcome."



"Now you owe me a picture of yourself," Kris said.

Julianne felt herself sigh. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good enough," Kris allowed.

"Anyway, I should go," Julianne said, feeling depressed all of a sudden. "I just wanted to tell you about Leigh and thank you for the package."

"Thank you so much for doing that for me, Julia," Kris replied. "You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"You're quite welcome," Julianne told her. "I'll talk to you later."

"Bye."

Julianne hung up the phone and fell back onto the bed, the picture still in her hand. She stared at Kris' smiling face and sighed. *What am I going to do?*

39

"Leigh!" Kris called from the kitchen. "You're going to be late!" When there was no reply, Kris frowned and started toward Leigh's bedroom. She knocked lightly on the door. "Leigh?"

The door opened so quickly that Kris almost lost her balance and fell into the room. "Sorry," Leigh apologized. "I'm having a crisis."

Kris looked around the room and arched an eyebrow. Clothes lay scattered all over the floor. "Did your closet sneeze?"

"Worse. I don't know what to wear," Leigh replied, panic in her voice. "I've never met with an agent before. What does one wear to these things? Can we call Julia real quick and ask her?"

"What you're wearing is fine," Kris assured her. "And besides, you don't have time for another change. You're supposed to be there in twenty minutes."

Leigh turned to the mirror. "You're right. It'd be even worse to miss the appointment completely. But what if I show up and he takes one look at my outfit and walks away."

"They aren't that rude."

"How do you know?" Leigh demanded. "It's all about looks. Should I show more cleavage? Men like cleavage, right?"

"Not if they're gay."

Leigh turned round eyes on Kris. "Is he gay? Am I showing too much cleavage? Maybe he'll think I'm a total slut. What if he's married and his wife comes in, thinks he's cheating on her with me, and then throws our drinks at us and storms off. And before the whole meeting has begun, it's ended with the man chasing after his wife, yelling, 'It's not what you think, honey, I swear! I've never seen her before in my life.'"



Kris felt Leigh's forehead. "Well, the good news is it's not a fever. The bad news is you've lost your mind." She grabbed Leigh's hand and dragged her out of the room. "Now, just be yourself; tone down the insanity; and try not to throw any popcorn at him if he says anything you disapprove of."

Leigh grabbed her purse from the kitchen table as Kris pushed her out the door. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Kris said as she managed to push Leigh into the hallway. "Now go get 'em."

Leigh threw her arms around Kris. "This might just change my life forever."

"Only if you decide to elope with him," Kris replied with a smile, hugging her friend back. She knew how much this meant to Leigh ... but what if nothing came of it.

Leigh finally pulled away and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm ready." She turned and started down the hall.

"Good luck!" Kris called again. When Leigh was in the elevator, Kris walked back into the apartment and leaned against the door. "Please God, let this go well," she prayed.

* * *

"So what did you tell Eric?" Adrian questioned, stuffing a big spoonful of ice cream into his mouth.

Julianne watched him attack the banana split for a moment, and then replied, "I told him that I needed him to meet with this girl and then refer her to one of his buddies if he didn't want to take her on."

"And he said?"

Julianne shrugged. "It was something to the effect of, 'Huh?'" She shrugged again and stole a bite of Adrian's ice cream. "I had to talk him into it but he agreed. Said he had to go to New York this weekend anyway so he'd fit it in."

"That's it?"

"Well, then I had to make him swear on his job as my agent that he wouldn't mention me at all during his meeting with Leigh. And that if she said anything about a Julia Frank, to pretend he had no idea who that was. I told him to make something up. He's an agent so I trust him to lie convincingly."

Adrian chuckled. "Did he wonder what it was all about?"

"Probably," Julianne answered. She smirked. "But he was probably too worried I'd change my mind about the movie if he pissed me off."

"Must feel good to have so much power," Adrian commented with a grin.

"I can only do so much though," she answered, her voice suddenly taking a worried tone. "It's all up to Leigh from now on."



"Do you think Eric will take her?"

Julianne sighed and stole another spoonful. "Here's to hoping."

"Won't it be weird for you, though? The two of you having the same agent?"

She shrugged. "Probably. But it would make Kris really happy." Julianne smiled at the thought.

Adrian watched her for a moment and shook his head. "Women," he whispered. "So, why didn't you just ask Eric to send one of his buddies over to meet Leigh?"

"Because, as much as he annoys me, Eric is one of the best," Julianne replied. "I wouldn't trust Leigh with anyone else. If Eric chooses to refer her elsewhere, then at least I know that I tried."

"Of course."

Julianne smiled. "Do you know what my favorite thing about Kris is?"

Adrian rolled his eyes. "Here we go," he muttered. "Um, let's see. Her eyes, her lips, the way she frowns...?"

"Hmm," Julianne considered. "I've never seen her frown, but she has amazing eyes. And her lips are—" She stopped herself and coughed. "It's her accent. It's this interesting blend of Spanish and English ... and something else."

"Amazing how you manage to make her sound like a brand of coffee," Adrian replied dryly.

"Do you believe in fate?" Julianne asked suddenly.

Adrian looked up at the sky. "Dear God, I promise to cancel my Playboy subscription if only you'll give me back my best friend. You know the one; tall, beautiful, didn't care much about other people. I liked her."

Julianne punched Adrian's arm. "I'm serious."

He frowned. "How do you know I wasn't?"

"Because there's no way you'd give up your Playboy subscription," she answered with a smile.

"Well, you've got me there," Adrian agreed. "Um, fate. Well, I think it was pretty amazing that of all the people you could choose to sit beside at an independent film festival, you went and sat beside me."

Julianne smiled. "That's true."

"And of all the films you could've insulted, you chose to insult mine."

Julianne scrunched up her nose. "I'm really sorry about that."

Adrian looked up thoughtfully. "What was it that you said? Oh yes, 'Whoever made this film should be committed.'"



"It was a film about how chickens make model citizens," Julianne argued.

"And I still stand by that argument," Adrian responded. "Regardless, if you hadn't insulted my movie, I might've asked you out for coffee instead of insulting *your* films; I might've never seen you again."

"So you do believe in fate?" Julianne asked.

"No. I simply like taking any opportunity I can find to remind you that you insulted me first."

"You don't believe in fate?" Julianne said, sounding disappointed.

"Fate is etaf spelled backwards."

"So?"

Adrian caught Julianne's gaze. "Etaf is a reminder that 'fate' is simply four random letters placed together for the solitary function of conveying an abstract concept."

"Do you pull this stuff right out of your butt or do you actually think about it beforehand?" Julianne wondered.

"A little of both."

"Well, I believe in fate," Julianne responded.

"And fate is going to lead you to your soul mate?" Adrian guessed.

"Allegedly."

"So your soul mate is a straight girl in New York who has absolutely no idea who you are?"

"Stranger things have happened," Julianne replied.

"Like?"

"You and I becoming friends."

Kris nervously flipped through the channels without stopping at any particular one. She'd been at the same activity since Leigh left for the interview. Her eyes blindly drifted with the channels before her but she didn't register any of the images displayed there.

Finally, she decided to stop at a random channel and pick up her laptop. She could always waste time by emailing Julia. That was always a productive pastime, far more productive than staring blankly at the television screen.

Kris got as far as writing, "Dear Julia," when she heard the door open. Email message forgotten, Kris jumped to her feet and rushed to greet Leigh. "How did it go?" was the first thing she said.

Leigh entered the apartment with a broad grin on her face. "You won't believe what just happened," she stated.



Kris made hand motions to convey her impatience. "Go on!"

"Patience is a virtue, ever hear of that?" Leigh joked, plopping down on one of the kitchen tables. She waited until Kris was seated down before continuing. "Okay, so I get to the little café place where Eric wanted to meet me."

"Eric?"

"That's what he told me to call him," Leigh explained proudly. "Two hours and we're already on first name terms."

"Wow," Kris replied. "So what happened?"

"Well," Leigh began once more, "I get there and I see this dorky looking man with glasses and messy hair looking totally impatient and annoyed. And I think, 'Oh shit, this is already not going well.' But I suck it up and walk over. I introduce myself to him and give him my headshot and resume; he doesn't even bother looking at my credentials. He's staring at the photo and at me. So far the only thing he's said to me is, 'Hi, I'm Eric Moura.' So, I'm sitting there trying to figure out if the man's insane or if I did something wrong. Maybe I wasn't supposed to give him my headshots or something."

"Anyway," Leigh continued, "I'm waiting for him to say something else when his cell phone starts ringing. He excuses himself and walks over to the back of the café. I can't hear a word he's saying but he's looking really frustrated at whomever he's talking to. And the weird thing is that I catch him glancing at me like every two seconds. Finally, he gets back to the table and apologizes for the interruption."

"Here's when things start getting interesting," Leigh announced, leaning slightly forward. "So, he asks me if I've ever done any film before and I'm thinking, 'why doesn't he just look at the back of the picture; it's all there.' I didn't want to be rude or anything, so I tell him that I've done a couple of low budget commercials for local shops, but that mostly I've just done theater work. So, he sits back, looking all pensive. I'm expecting him to start scratching his chin thoughtfully or something, but he doesn't."

"So, then he asks me if I have any nudity issues—"

"Just like that?" Kris asked, appalled.

"Just like that," Leigh confirmed. "I'll demonstrate." She cleared her throat and adopted a deep voice. "Do you have any nudity issues?" She chuckled. "I couldn't decide whether to answer the question or to slap him and walk out the door. I decide to just go with the flow of things. So I ask him what sort of nudity issues he's referring to and he goes, 'Do you have a problem being naked in a film and if so, how naked is too naked?'"

"Leigh, please don't tell me you got cast in a porn movie," Kris begged, suddenly feeling sick to her stomach.

Leigh started laughing. "I know, that's what I thought too. Just hear me out. So, I'm thinking, 'is he flirting with me? Does he want me to do pornography? What's going on here?' I tell him that I don't have any particular issues with nudity as long as it's a tasteful environment. I was trying to explain in as few words as possible that there is no way I would do porn. He starts laughing; like really laughing. I can't decide if he's laughing at what I've just said or if there's something tickling his bottom."



"He finally stops laughing and he smiles at me and says, 'they're looking for a red-haired girl, around your height and build for a movie that's shooting in the fall. Interested?'"

"Oh wow," Kris breathed.

"I know! But, I was still a little concerned about all the nudity questions so I ask him what the role entails. So he explains that there are a few roles open and that a sex scene is required for one of the parts. However, he says that if they cast me it probably won't be for that role. I guess he was just testing me to see how far I was willing to go."

"So what did you say?" Kris wondered.

"Well, he asked again if I was interested and I said something like, 'hell yes!' He gave me a sample scene and told me to memorize both parts. The audition is in a week."

Kris shrieked excitedly and hugged Leigh. "This is unbelievable!"

"I know!" Leigh replied hugging Kris back. "A week from now I could be on my way to becoming a movie star."

"Let's celebrate," Kris suggested.

"A wonderful idea, dah-ling," Leigh agreed happily. "But first, I want to call Julia personally and thank her like she's never been thanked before."

* * *

"Thank you so much, Miss Franqui," the man stated for the billionth time in two minutes. "You don't know how much this will mean to my daughter. She absolutely loves your show."

Julianne smiled at him and quickly scribbled her signature on the handkerchief the man was holding. "Tell your daughter I said thank you."

"Oh thank you, thank you," he stated before walking away.

"There's no way that man has a daughter," Jan commented. "He's probably going to go masturbate with that handkerchief."

"Jan!" Susan and Timothy Frank chorused.

Jan looked up from her plate of salad and shrugged. "It's true. He was all but drooling on her." Julianne shifted in her seat and attempted to focus on the food before her. She still didn't understand why her parents insisted she meet them for dinner. It was probably so her mother could keep up the façade that they were a happy little family. Julianne speared a piece of steak and stuffed it in her mouth.

"So, Julianne, how's your publicity schedule going?" her mother asked.

"I've done a couple of photo shoots and interviews so far," Julianne responded. "I'll be traveling to a few select cities in about a week. Fifty or so interviews a day; fun."



"You're so ungrateful," Jan told her, shaking her head in disgust. "When I'm a famous star I'm going to love doing interviews."

"I wish you all the best with that," Julianne replied casually.

Jan rolled her eyes and returned to her dinner.

"So what's your next project?" Timothy asked his daughter.

Well, at least the damn movie will be good for something. "I'm starring in another film," she replied. *Ask me what it's about. C'mon, ask me. Please. Please. Please.*

Susan leaned forward. "How much are you getting paid for that one?"

"A lot," was all Julianne said.

Jan's curiosity got the best of her. "So, what's this one about?"

Julianne almost smiled but covered it with a glass of water. "I play a young woman who—" Her cell phone interrupted the rest of the plot summary. "Excuse me," she said to her parents. "Franqui," she spoke into the phone.

"Hi Julianne, how are you doing?"

Julianne recognized Eric Moura's voice immediately. "Hi Eric," she greeted, glad for any interruption. "What can I do for you?"

"Naomi Mosier, the director of *Summer's End* asked me to get in contact with you," Eric explained. "She'd like you to be at the next auditioning session. They'd like you to help with the casting of Emma's role."

Julianne sighed. "Tell you what. You can call Karen and tell her where I need to be and when and if she says she can work it into my schedule, I'll do it. If she starts cursing you out, kindly explain that you were just kidding. Then, call Naomi Mosier back and tell her that Julianne Franqui's schedule will not permit her to be of assistance at this time."

"Julianne, it's very important that you're there," Eric insisted.

"Tell it to Karen," Julianne replied casually. "Goodbye Eric." She hung up before he had a chance to argue further. She put the cell phone down and shook her head. "In about five minutes my assistant is going to call me," Julianne predicted, though nobody around the table was paying much attention to her.

Four and a half minutes later, the cell phone rang. Julianne smiled. "See?" she asked her inattentive audience. "Hello Karen," Julianne said into the phone.

"Hi, Miss-Uh, I mean, Julianne," Karen greeted. "The only way I can fit in the audition is if you reschedule your interviews for Saturday."

Julianne considered. "Is rescheduling a big problem?"

"Well, you're due in Miami on Monday morning and you have interviews all day Sunday," Karen explained.



"Do I have any days off?"

"Not for another few weeks."

Julianne thought about it for a long moment and finally said, "Okay, call the Saturday people and see if you can fit some of the interviews in my Sunday schedule. Then whatever's left over, schedule for Monday morning. Call the Miami people and tell them I'll be late and promise them that I'll stay there until they've all gotten their interviews."

"You're going to go insane," Karen warned.

"I'm already insane, Karen," Julianne replied. "Call me back and let me know if things got settled okay."

"Will do," Karen agreed. "Bye."

"Must suck being you," Jan commented dryly when Julianne hung up the phone.

Julianne smiled and focused her full attention on the food before her. "It could be worse," she answered. "I could be you."

40

"It's too bad Adrian wasn't able to come this time around," Karen commented from her seat beside Julianne.

Julianne responded with a noncommittal grunt and focused on the view outside of the airplane window. There were too many other things going around in her mind for her to worry about Adrian. First and foremost, there was the issue of the audition. What if they wanted her to kiss a bunch of different girls?

Karen stared at the actress with concern. "Are you okay?" she asked gently. "Julianne?"

Julianne glanced over at her assistant and forced a smile. "Just don't like flying," she explained lamely and turned her gaze away.

"Are you nervous about making this movie?" Karen asked softly.

Frowning, Julianne turned back to Karen. "What do you mean?"

"You just get really tense whenever it comes up," Karen replied, attempting to sound casual.

Julianne paused, unsure of how to approach the subject.

Karen sighed. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I'm always ... I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Julianne assured her. "Karen, after two years you have a right to ask questions. I just don't always know the best way to answer them." She sighed. "And yes, I'm nervous about making this movie."



Karen simply nodded and looked away.

Julianne didn't know what else to say on the subject so she remained silent. Thoughts and worries beckoned her attention. There was more than just the movie. At the root of every insecurity and fear lay the one thing she was most concerned about: Kris. The fact that she had no idea what to do about the situation was a constant reminder of the hole she'd dug herself into.

"You know," Karen began, breaking Julianne out of her reverie, "I'm told I'm a good listener ... when I'm not talking, that is. So, if you ever want to talk about anything ... I promise not to run to the press with it. I'll sign another contract."

Julianne smiled at her assistant. "Thank you, Karen. I just might take you up on that one of these days."

Karen smiled brightly in return.

Julianne stared out of the window once more, watching the clouds in the distance. Without thinking she said, "Do you believe in fate?"

"Sometimes," Karen replied at once. "Why?"

"No reason," Julianne answered, her gaze still on the clouds beyond. "No reason at all."

"So, what is this movie about?" Sari Serrano asked passing the bowl of chicken in her hand over to Kris.

Kris passed it right along to Leigh without bothering to look at the contents.

Leigh grabbed the bowl and helped herself to fried chicken. "I'm not exactly sure," she answered. "They just gave me a couple of parts to memorize so I haven't read the whole script."

Kris nodded. "We've been trying to figure it out from the clues in the dialogue but it's pretty vague." She shrugged. "But we're pretty certain it takes place sometime in the early 1900's or so."

"Yeah, it's definitely not present-day stuff," Leigh agreed, her mouth full of rice and chicken.

Kris focused on eating her food for a moment, trying to get enough courage to say what she wanted to say. Finally, she opened her mouth. "So, I talked to William today."

Sari glanced up from her food; Carlos merely grunted.

Kris took the grunt as a sign to continue. "He's doing really well," she said as casually as she could muster. "He got a job."

"As what, a hair stylist?" Dimitri quipped.



Kris waited for one of her parents to chastise her brother. She was shocked when neither of them said anything. She glanced quickly at Leigh who shrugged. Angered, Kris said, "He got a job at a computer company in Manhattan. They're going to pay for him to get a business degree."

Silence.

Finally, her father spoke. "Sari could you pass the potatoes?"

Kris frowned. Hadn't they heard a word she'd said? Didn't they care? She was so shocked and angry that she couldn't even eat. A moment later, she felt Leigh's hand on her arm. She glanced quickly at her best friend who smiled slightly in support. Kris took a deep breath and attempted to focus on her dinner. *Time*, she told herself. *They just need more time.*

After a few minutes of silence, Carlos spoke again. "So, Leigh, what time is your audition tomorrow?"

"It's at nine in the morning," Leigh replied. "I'm not sure how long it will last. I was told to plan on being there all day."

"Nervous?" Sari asked gently.

"Very," Leigh confirmed. "I've never been so nervous in my life."

"You'll do fine, Leigh," Dimitri assured her. "Just picture them all naked."

Leigh laughed. "Thanks, D."

Kris rolled her eyes. She was annoyed at her brother and him being nice to Leigh wasn't going to make up for what he'd said about William. She sent him a look that she hoped conveyed that very thought. He merely shrugged at her and returned to his meal.

After dinner, Carlos and Dimitri left to rent a movie and the girls stayed to help Sari clean up in the kitchen.

"Have you heard from Nathan?" Sari asked.

Kris had been waiting for that inevitable question. "No," she replied. "And I doubt I will again."

Sari shook her head and handed Kris another dish to dry. "I don't know what you were thinking turning down that poor boy's proposal."

Kris didn't say anything.

"He's handsome, he's rich, and intelligent as anything," Sari stated. "What more do you want?"

"I just didn't love him," Kris explained. "He's all those things, but he ..." Kris stopped herself. The last thing she wanted was to open up a discussion on the events of prom night.

"He what?" Sari asked.

Kris glanced quickly at Leigh who was busy clearing the rest of the table. Leigh stopped working in anticipation of Kris's possible confession. "He just isn't what I want."



Leigh rolled her eyes and went back to what she'd been doing. Sari sighed. "Well, I sure hope you figure out what you want soon," she told her. "You can't spend the rest of your life breaking young men's hearts." She smiled slightly at her own comment.

Kris smiled too and focused on drying on the dish in her hand. It was true that Nathan wasn't what she wanted. But what did she want?

* * *

"Coffee or tea?" Naomi Mosier offered.

Julianne stifled a yawn. Karen was right: she *was* insane. It was only Saturday morning and already Julianne was ready to collapse from exhaustion. "Coffee, please," she answered. *And make it a double.*

Naomi Mosier repeated the order to her assistant and turned kind green eyes on Julianne. "I'm really glad that you could make it, Miss Franqui. I've been a fan of your work for some time."

"Thank you," Julianne said smiling in appreciation. So far, Julianne couldn't decide if she liked the woman or if she didn't like the woman. She was younger than Julianne had expected. Or maybe she just looked younger.

Naomi nodded, pushing a strand of short blond hair behind her ear. "You've read through the script, right?"

Julianne nodded.

"Okay, I'm just going to need your help casting the role of Emma," the director explained. "We've narrowed it down to a few girls and we have a couple coming in that we haven't met with before. I'm sure you've done this before."

Julianne nodded again.

"Any questions?" Naomi asked.

Julianne started to shake her head and then realize it would probably be best if she uttered a word. "No," was the word she uttered.

Naomi smiled. "Rough night?"

"Rough month," Julianne said, smiling back. "What scene are we doing?"

"I want to try a couple," Naomi answered. "The one where Emma and Elizabeth meet, and one further along in the script. Maybe the one where they first kiss, if that's okay with you?"

Julianne was certain she'd paled considerably in the past few seconds. "Fine," she said, although it sounded forced even to her own ears.

Naomi studied Julianne for a long moment and had opened her mouth to say something when the door opened.



"Coffee anyone?" Naomi's assistant, Jeremy Stills asked.

Gratefully, Julianne accepted the cup and took a long sip. Caffeine was a wonderful thing. When Jeremy had left once again, Naomi said, "Eric told me you were hesitant about taking this role."

Julianne looked over at the director.

"Any particular reason?" Naomi questioned.

Julianne finished the coffee and placed the cup on the desk. "I wasn't sure if it was a wise career move."

Naomi nodded. "So why did you take it?"

Julianne met the director's gaze. "I like a challenge," was her answer.

Pleased with the response, Naomi smiled. Julianne was beginning to warm up to that smile. "Ready?" she asked, standing.

"As I'll ever be," Julianne replied softly, standing as well. She followed the director out into the hallway.

Karen was talking on her cell phone and quickly got off when she saw Julianne. "Everything okay?" she asked, falling into step beside the actress.

Julianne nodded. "Just peachy."

"You look a little pale," Karen whispered.

"New York weather," Julianne explained. "I'll be okay; just waiting for the caffeine to kick in."

Karen smiled. "Let me know if you need a refill."

"Count on it," Julianne assured her assistant.

Naomi opened the door to a different room and Julianne stepped in behind the director. The room was set up with three rows of chairs at both sides of a middle aisle. One side was filled with similar-looking girls; the other consisted of a couple of business-type people and some casually dressed individuals. Everyone stopped talking the moment Naomi and Julianne stepped into the room.

Naomi led Julianne to the side of the room with the executive-types. "Julianne Franqui, meet Ed Barrington and Martha Jacobs, our esteemed producers."

Julianne smiled and shook their hands accordingly. "Nice to meet you," she said to both.

Naomi moved on to the more casually dressed of the lot. "This is Rhea McKee, my assistant director; and Jordan Silver, our casting director."

Pleasantries were once again exchanged.



A small murmur broke out on the other side of the room the moment Julianne Franqui was spotted.

"Take a seat, Julianne," Naomi told her.

Julianne let Karen sit first and then took the seat beside her. She figured she'd be getting up more frequently than Karen would.

Naomi walked to the front of the room and introduced herself to the small group of anxious actresses. "Today we'll be auditioning for the roles of Emma, Janna, and Kim," the director explained. "Those auditioning for Janna and Kim will play off of each other and probably switch off. Those auditioning for Emma will play off of Julianne Franqui."

Julianne could tell a number of the girls were staring over at her, but she kept her own gaze focused on Naomi.

"We're going to audition for the roles of Janna and Kim first," Naomi continued. "If I call your names please come up front. The rest of you may wait outside in the lobby until you are called. Any questions?"

Nobody raised her hand.

Julianne sighed. It was going to be a long day.

"Jean Hannon and Leigh Radlin," Naomi called.

Julianne froze. She felt the blood drain from her face. *It can't be.* She looked to the group of girls and saw Leigh making her way toward the front of the room. *Oh. My. God.*

"Are you okay?" Karen asked, suddenly concerned. "You look like you're about to pass out."

Julianne blinked a few times, then managed to gaze at Karen long enough to say, "Excuse me," before rushing out of the room. Once out in the hallway, she grabbed her cell phone and dialed.

"You've reached Eric Moura's office," the answering machine began, "please leave—"

Julianne hung up the phone and tried a different number. "Please pick up," she begged the ringing object.

"Talk to me," came Adrian's voice.

"Adrian," Julianne said. "I have a problem."

"What's up?"

"Guess who's auditioning for my movie," she said.

"Brad Pitt?" Adrian guessed. "Did you decide you're straight now?"

"Kris's best friend," Julianne informed him.

"The cute red-head?"

"That'd be the one," Julianne confirmed.



"Of all the times I can't go with you to New York," Adrian said. "I always miss the fun stuff. So, is she the one you have to make out with? Cause that'd be hot."

"Adrian!" Julianne whined. "What do I do?"

"Tsk-tsk, Julianne. Now, you know you can't depend on me to solve all of your problems."

"Ugh. You're fired as my best friend," she said, and hung up on him. Then she banged the phone against her forehead a couple of times and took a deep breath. *I just have to remain calm, see the audition through, and act like I have no idea who she is. I'm an actress. I can do this.* She took another deep breath and reentered the room.

Naomi was in the process of giving the two girls instructions. Julianne sat back down beside Karen.

"You okay?" Karen asked.

Julianne nodded. "Just remembered I had to make a call." She listened to Naomi for a moment and then leaned toward Karen. "Who's that girl with the red hair?"

"Leigh Radlin," Karen answered. "She hasn't really been in anything. That's really all I know right now."

"Hmm," Julianne commented, turning her attention back to the girls auditioning. She recognized the scene the moment the first line of dialogue was uttered. Julianne wouldn't have admitted it, but she'd read the script so many times she pretty much had the whole thing memorized.

It wasn't long before Julianne realized that Kris hadn't been biased in her opinion of Leigh's acting abilities. The girl was good, really good. A glance at the rest of the casting ensemble confirmed that she wasn't the only one who thought so. Mixed emotions played at the corner of Julianne's heart. *What have I gotten myself into,* she wondered.

When the scene ended, Naomi spoke up. "Thank you very much," she said. "Jean, good job. We'll be in touch with you. Leigh, we'd like to see you stay and play the role of Emma."

This could not possibly get any worse, Julianne thought. She almost considered faking a stomach ache, anything to get her out of this mess.

Naomi turned around to face her. "Ready?" she asked.

There are no words for how not ready I am. Julianne forced a confident smile and rose to her feet. *Dear God, please get me out of this,* she prayed as she approached the front of the room.

"I don't have this scene prepared," Leigh was saying.

Naomi nodded and handed her a couple of pages from the script. "Do your best," she said.

A cell phone rang somewhere in the room and Julianne prayed that it was hers. Unfortunately, it proved to be Naomi's. The director excused herself and left the room.



Julianne wasn't sure whether to return to her seat or remain standing. In the end, she opted for the latter. She stole a glance at Leigh, who was looking through the script with a look of utter trepidation. "Would you mind telling me what scene it is?" she found herself asking.

Leigh glanced up, looking confused by the question.

"Scene?" Julianne tried again.

"Oh," Leigh said and immediately handed the pages over to Julianne. "Sorry."

A quick survey of the dialogue confirmed Julianne's suspicions. *What did I do to deserve this?* She handed the pages back. "Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," Leigh said, and went back to reading the script. A moment later, she glanced up. "I didn't know this was a ... a ..."

"Lesbian movie?" Julianne provided.

Leigh nodded.

"If you want to run away I can tell them you were suddenly hit by the flu," Julianne said.

Leigh smiled. "I appreciate that," she said. "I think I'll tough it out, though."

"If it helps, you were really good in that first scene," Julianne found herself saying.

Leigh opened her mouth to say something, but Naomi chose that moment to walk back in. "Sorry," the director apologized. "Are we ready to continue?"

Julianne and Leigh both nodded.

"Alright," Naomi said, taking a seat. "This is the scene where Emma and Elizabeth first kiss. There are a lot of conflicting emotions going on in both of the characters, just try to remember that. Leigh, we know that you're playing this cold, so just do your best. Julianne, do you know the lines for this scene?"

Like the back of my hand. "Yes," she said instead.

Naomi gave her that smile again. "Good." She exchanged a few words with the assistant director and nodded. She then turned back to the front. "Questions? No? Okay ... action."

Julianne was instantly in character, though it felt strange. She'd never rehearsed this part with any one else before. "What are you doing here?"

"I got your note," Leigh replied, also in character. "I was afraid you would be gone by now."

Julianne made sure to avoid eye contact and remain silent.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner," Leigh apologized, walking closer. "I got ...delayed."

Julianne simply nodded, trying to control her emotions. She knew her character was angry but refused to show it. "What delayed you?" she finally asked.



Leigh paused mid-step. She didn't answer.

Julianne turned to face her with tears burning her eyes. "You're marrying him, aren't you?"

Leigh didn't glance away. "I have to," she answered softly. "You know that."

Julianne let a tear fall down her cheek. "It doesn't mean that I have to accept it," she replied, attempting to sound more confident than she felt.

"Liz," Leigh said, stepping closer and wiping away the tear.

Julianne moved away.

"Why did you want to see me?" Leigh questioned, taking a step back, her voice full of pain. When Julianne didn't answer, she stepped closer. "Liz?" When there was still no response Leigh stated, "I should go."

Julianne watched her walk away for a couple of seconds and said finally, "Emma, wait."

Leigh turned around slowly and Julianne quickly closed the gap between them. Before either of them had time to register what was happening, their lips were pressed together.

"Cut!" Naomi called from her seat.

Julianne instantly pulled away. She was certain that she was blushing to the roots of her hair.

"Excellent job," Naomi stated.

Julianne focused on the director, avoiding Leigh's gaze at all costs. She was pretty certain Leigh was equally embarrassed by the situation.

"Leigh, thank you for your time," Naomi was saying. "We'll be in touch with you."

Leigh thanked everyone, including Julianne, and made a hasty exit.

Julianne watched her leave with a mixture of disappointment and relief. She wasn't sure which was greater. She started toward her seat.

"What did you think?" Naomi asked Julianne as she passed.

"She's really good," Julianne replied honestly.

"She is," Naomi agreed. She turned her attention to the rest of her crew and discussed a few things with them before sending for the next two actresses.

Julianne sat down, feeling incredibly anxious and more than a little ill. Karen didn't say anything and Julianne was thankful. *I should have faked illness this morning, she decided. Nothing could have prepared me for kissing Kris's best friend.* She sighed and slid down slightly in the seat. *I'm never going to hear the end of this.*



Kris jumped up off the couch the second she heard the door unlock. "Well?" she demanded impatiently as soon as Leigh appeared in the doorway. Kris took note of Leigh's frazzled disposition and frowned slightly. "What happened?" she asked, gently this time.

Leigh stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind her. Instead of answering, she walked over to the kitchen table and sat down.

Kris quickly followed suit. "Did the audition not go well?" she asked softly, taking a seat at the table. She had already prepared speeches either way. A good friend is always ready for anything.

After a couple of minutes of sustained silence, Kris was about to speak again, when Leigh finally spoke up. "It went ... fine," she said. "Really well, actually."

Kris struggled with how to respond to the situation. She'd been prepared for an ecstatic Leigh with good news or a depressed Leigh with bad news. Kris wasn't entirely sure how to react to a depressed Leigh with good news. "Um, that's ... great?" she ventured uncertainly.

Leigh glanced over at her best friend. "Sorry, I think I'm still in shock," she responded.

"Did you get the part?" Kris asked, suddenly feeling excited.

"I don't know yet," Leigh answered. "I was the first to audition."

Kris was slightly disappointed and a little more confused. "Was it really cool?"

"I... um," Leigh began. "I had to kiss someone."

"Who?" Kris asked, starting to feel desperate. When Leigh didn't answer right away, Kris asked, "Is it someone I would recognize?"

Leigh nodded.

"So it's someone famous?" Kris asked, her excitement quickly returning.

"Oh yes," Leigh responded. "Very famous."

Kris contemplated the riddle for a moment, guessing that Leigh wasn't going to up and volunteer the information without a little guesswork first. She snapped her fingers. "Rye Phillips?"

Leigh stared at her with a mysterious smile on her face. "Close," she answered. "Very, very close."

Kris thought about it some more but couldn't come up with anybody else. "I give up," she said finally.

Leigh leaned forward. "I'll give you a hint," she offered. "It's someone who won the award for Best Kiss."

Kris frowned. "Wasn't that Rye Phillips?" she asked, suddenly very confused.

"Guess again."



Best Kiss? I'm sure that was Rye Phillips and ... She froze. "No way," Kris breathed, comprehension finally dawning on her.

"Uh-huh," Leigh confirmed, sitting back on the chair.

"Julianne Franqui?" Kris asked to make sure there were no misunderstandings in the matter.

"The one and only."

"You kissed Julianne Franqui?" Kris repeated.

Leigh nodded. "It's a lesbo flick," she informed Kris. "And guess who's the lead."

"You're kidding," Kris said, certain it had to be some kind of joke; a clever diversion to distract her from the fact that Leigh had gotten the part.

"Kris," Leigh said quite seriously. "I kissed Julianne Franqui. Technically, though, she kissed me."

"On the lips?"

"Yup."

Kris sat stunned for a long moment. "But there wasn't anything about a kiss in any of the scenes we rehearsed," she argued.

Leigh shrugged in reply. "The director decided to audition me for a different part."

"You swear you're not just pulling my leg," Kris said, still unsure whether or not to believe.

"I swear on my acting career that I kissed Julianne Franqui," Leigh replied, holding up her right hand as she spoke.

"Julianne Franqui's doing a lesbian movie?" Kris asked, unable to wrap her mind around the fact.

"It's an epidemic," Leigh said. "I told you. They're everywhere."

Kris frowned. "Do you think Julianne Franqui is gay?"

Leigh thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. "Probably not. They always cast straight girls to play those roles." She pointed to herself in order to illustrate her point. "Although, it probably would be best for her if she was. That thing she's dating is hideous."

Kris chuckled, then chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "So, what was it like?" she asked, unable to help herself.

"Kissing a girl or kissing Julianne?" Leigh asked.

"Both, I guess," Kris replied.

Leigh stared up thoughtfully. "Well, it all happened really fast," she answered. "And there's the fact that there were a bunch of people watching and I had to stay in character. And it's not like it was a make-out fest or anything." She shrugged. "It was interesting."



"Interesting?" Kris asked, not particularly satisfied with the answer.

"Well, it didn't turn me on or anything," Leigh replied, a little defensively. "On the other hand, I didn't want to throw up either." She frowned. "Do you think that means something?"

Kris shrugged.

"Hmm," Leigh replied thoughtfully.

"So what's the part?" Kris asked her.

Leigh sighed. "Let's just say I'll be kissing Julianne Franqui a lot more frequently if I get it."

Kris smirked. "Would that be so bad?"

Leigh considered the question. "Actually, I'd have like the second biggest role in the movie, so not really." She paused. "Do you think that means something?"

"Not unless you've suddenly got a crush on Julianne Franqui," Kris teased.

"Not really my type," Leigh replied after a moment of retrospection. "The director's assistant, though, now *he* was something. I think his name's Jeremy something or other. If I get one of the parts, I'm taking you to the set so you can see this guy's butt. It's hot."

"I look forward to it, really," Kris said, not particularly interested in Jeremy's butt. "So, what was she like?" she asked.

Leigh shrugged in reply. Then said, "I really didn't get much of a chance to interact with her. But she seemed really ..."

"Bitchy?" Kris supplied.

"Nervous," Leigh said instead. "And she wasn't bitchy at all. She asked me what scene we were doing and then she offered to cover for me if I decided to bolt. Then we did the scene together and I left." She grinned thoughtfully. "That's one thing, though. Acting with her was amazing. She's really intense."

"I'm really surprised that you're acting so calmly about all of this," Kris said.

"I told you, I'm in shock," Leigh explained. "Do you think any of this has actually hit me yet?"

Kris laughed. "Wow," she said after a moment. "I can't believe it."

"Neither can I," Leigh agreed. "And I was there."

"Do you think you got one of the parts?" Kris wondered.

"I guess we'll find out," Leigh replied.

"You kissed her?" Adrian yelled. "And I missed it??"



Julianne stared at the view beyond her balcony, only half-listening to what Adrian was saying. Behind her, Karen was watching television. Julianne made sure that her assistant wasn't listening before continuing. "This is starting to get complicated."

"Complicated? It's a fucking soap opera!"

Julianne sighed, leaning against the balcony railing. "I don't know what to do. What if Leigh gets the part?"

"Men and lesbians everywhere will get on their knees and praise God," Adrian answered.

"Not funny." Julianne was feeling sick. She'd been feeling sick since the audition. "I hadn't planned on this."

"On what, exactly?" Adrian asked.

Julianne sighed. "On none of it," she said. "I didn't mean for it to get so out of hand. I just wanted someone to talk to."

"Besides me?"

"I don't know, Adrian," Julianne answered, feeling confused and frustrated. "It's not like I was trying to replace you or anything. I just ... I don't know. I really don't know."

"She's a girl."

"So?"

Adrian sighed. "You wanted to talk to another girl," he said. "It's okay. I understand. It's not like I'm the most feminine thing on the planet." He paused. "Only, I don't really think this is about you wanting a female friend."

"What is it about then?"

"I don't know," Adrian answered. "They're your feelings. I'm just an observer."

"Right," Julianne replied, rolling her eyes. "What do you think I should do? Honestly."

"I think you should march right up to her apartment and tell her the truth," Adrian answered. "And if she can't accept it, then it's her loss."

Julianne turned her back to the view of New York City. She ran a hand through her hair and shook her head. "I can't do that. I can't just waltz up to her door and say, 'Hey I'm really Julia Frank, surprise!'"

"Why not?"

"Because!" Julianne answered. "She'll freak out. And ... and ..."

"And?"

"And it won't be the same," Julianne said finally. "If she knows who I really am her perception will be tainted forever. She won't see me as a normal person any more." She sighed. "I like



being a normal person in her eyes, Adrian. I like that she likes me in spite of the fact that I'm nobody special. I don't want to ruin that."

"But Julianne, you *are* somebody special," Adrian argued. "And it has nothing to do with your fame. If you hide who you really are from her, then she's never going to know how truly wonderful you are."

Julianne rolled her eyes. "Don't get corny with me, Adrian. You know as well as I do that fame changes everything. There is no way that I can get close to Kris as myself."

"So you're just going to keep lying to her?"

"I'm just going to have to learn to edit myself," Julianne replied. "And if it gets to be too much ... I'll have to end it somehow."

"You're heading down the road to heartbreak," Adrian warned.

Julianne paused to gather her thoughts. Finally, she closed her eyes. "I know."

42

Dear Julia,

I want to thank you again, for the billionth time for helping Leigh out. You wouldn't believe how much has happened since you got Leigh that agent. I can barely believe it myself. I know she called to thank you already ... but she's so excited that she'll probably call to thank you again. Anyway, the latest piece of good news arrived a little while ago. Leigh got one of the parts!!!! She's going to be playing the lead's sister. I can't decide whether she's relieved that she doesn't have to play a lesbian opposite Julianne Franqui ... or disappointed. I'm going to guess that it's a little bit of both.

I've never seen her so happy in my life, though. And it's all thanks to you. So, thank you, once again.

Anyway, I haven't really been painting a lot lately. I've been so wrapped up in Leigh's good fortune that I've forgotten all about art. Go figure. I'll get back to it starting tomorrow, though.

I guess I'll let you go now. I just wanted to thank you again. I owe you big time.

Your friend,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

Tell Leigh congratulations for me! I bet she's really excited. Oh, and don't worry about owing me anything. Maybe some day I'll need a kidney or something – then I'll come to you. In the mean time, I think you're safe from debt ;o)



I've decided to start exercising again. Who am I kidding? I've decided to start exercising – period. I don't think I've ever run a mile in my life. In high school, I would fake cramps any time we had to run. Unfortunately, the P.E. teacher started catching on after a while. She caught me in the locker room and said, "Frank! You're running tomorrow!" Luckily, I sprung my ankle on the way to school the next morning.

That's my longwinded way of explaining that I'm out of shape. Do you exercise? I think I'll invest in one of those total gym things. All those late-night infomercials are starting to get to me. I would like some abs of steel. Too bad you can't order those over the phone.

Well, I've officially lost my mind. Talk to you later :o)

Always,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

Why don't you go to the gym instead? I bet there are some really cute girls there waiting to be ogled. If you exercise at home, you're going to miss all the live action. Although, if you're really that pathetically out of shape, then perhaps it's better if you train in the privacy of your own home at first. You don't need to go out in public and make a fool of yourself. ;)

And why the sudden interest in bulking up? Hot date? :) You didn't strike me as the butch type ... heh...

Greetings and salutations,
Kris

* * *

Dear Smartass,

I'll have you know that I am a prime example of cool collectiveness in the face of attractive women. Why, what makes you think they wouldn't be ogling me? Women would fall at my feet. It is possible that I don't want to exercise in public because my doing so would be too distracting to the general public. Too much drool is bad for machinery ;o)

I am like a female Don Juan!

The offended,
Don Julia

* * *

Dear Don Julia,

I'd say you're closer to Don Quixote ;)

The amused,
Kris



The Blind Side of Love



Ingrid Díaz

* * *

Dear Kris,

Touché. I have clearly underestimated your wit. You win this round. But beware – I am a very sore loser ;o)

Anyway, you would be pleased to know that my gym-a-ma-gig arrived today. I was on it for a grand total of ...

... Five minutes and twelve seconds.

Shortly after that time, I grew terribly exhausted and decided to watch television (the Food Network if you must know). As a result, I decided to make a grandiose feast for my party of one. You're welcome to the leftovers. :o)

In other words, I burnt about two calories and consumed about 3,000 an hour later.

Good thing I'm not on a diet.

Your lazy friend,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

Five minutes and twelve seconds? That's ... impressive ;)

Actually, I can't really talk. I think the only reason I get any exercise around here is because I have to walk everywhere.

I've been keeping myself busy lately by painting ... helping Leigh memorize lines ... and painting. I can't believe it's already mid-July. I feel like I haven't done a thing this summer. Blah. And here I was chastising you over living a dull existence ;)
I had a dream last night. It was kind of weird, but I'll share it with you.

I was on this boat heading out to Canada. And there was a little man, wearing a blue top hat. He had on a tee shirt that said, "Booty call" on it. I kept trying to stay away from him for some reason ... but he kept following me, offering me cake. And I generally like cake, but his cake had a blue iguana on it. So, I jumped into the ocean and swam away from the little man and his blue iguana.

Then, I started to sink ... only, I realized a few seconds later that I could breathe under water. So, I decided to swim to the bottom of the ocean to see what was there. For some reason there was a lot of light at the bottom of the ocean because I could see a box lodged in the sand.

Anyway, I tried to open the box, but it was locked. And I couldn't open it no matter what I tried.

Then I woke up. And I was left with this feeling of disappointment. I really wanted to know what was inside of that box.

Your friend,



The Blind Side of Love



Ingrid Díaz

Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

Maybe you're searching for something – but you don't know what; that's why you couldn't open the box. Figure out what you want and I'm pretty sure it will open :o)

I'm sorry it's been a week since my last response. Things are pretty busy over on my side of the world.

But – I've been trying to exercise at least once a day. I managed to stay on the dreaded thing for over seven minutes today. It's an all-time record. I treated myself to ice cream as a reward ;o)

You'll probably ask, so I'll answer: Ben & Jerry's Half Baked. It's a perfect blend of chocolate, vanilla, and insanity. It's also guaranteed to go straight to your hips, butt, and thighs or your money back.

Good thing I've been working out. :o)

I'm also reading *The Color Purple* for the twentieth time. Have you read it?

Always,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

I'm afraid I have not read *The Color Purple*. I have, however, read *Harry Potter*. Good literature must not go unread. ;)

I liked your analysis of my dream. Leigh just told me that the iguana represented Nathan's horny penis and that the box was a metaphor for my repressed homosexuality.

I think she's just bitter that she doesn't get to make out with Julianne Franqui in the movie ;) And I think she's kind of nervous. Filming starts in a month.

Anyway, since I'm bored, and still no closer to unraveling the mystery that is you, I've got a series of questions for you:

1. Who was the first person you kissed?
2. What was your most embarrassing moment?
3. If you could take three things to a tropical island, what would they be?
4. Do you believe in soul mates?
5. What kind of underwear do you wear? (That was Leigh's question, by the way)
6. What is your favorite physical attribute in a girl?
7. What is your favorite Nick at Nite program?
8. Would you really never date a guy?

There, that should keep you busy for a while ;)



Your friend,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

You choose *Harry Potter* over Alice Walker? Tsk tsk. ;o) Actually, I haven't read Rowling's creation yet. I've been boycotting it since day one. :oP

I think I like Leigh's analysis of your dream better. :o)

And on to the answers:

1. The first person I kissed was Bobby Marcus. Actually, he just sort of slobbered all over my mouth ... I cried. I decided then and there I didn't enjoy kissing boys ;o)

2. Most embarrassing moment? It's so hard to pick just one. :o) I think I'd have to go with this time in middle school when I saw the most popular girl in school walking toward me. Jennifer Stratford was her name. Anyway, she approached the table I was sitting at, and asked me my name. I should add at this point that I had the biggest crush imaginable (for a 13 year old) on this girl.

Well, I told her my name and she asked if I wanted to join her club. I said sure. So, she led me to the girls' bathroom where she said the club met during lunch. There I met with about five other girls who told me that in order to join the club I had to take my clothes off and run across the cafeteria naked.

I would've said no, of course, except that Jennifer was smiling at me all sweet-like and I am a total dumbass (notice the present tense) when it comes to girls.

I stripped ... and I streaked ... and I got suspended. I had a hell of a time explaining that to my parents. ;o)

3. I would take a shovel, a q-tip, and a knife.

4. Soul mates ... hmm ... I think that there is beauty in everyone, and that if we search hard enough, we can find something worth loving in anyone we meet. Sometimes, we just get lucky enough to find many things worth loving in one person.

5. I wear bikini briefs ;o)

6. This is going to sound corny – but I really like girls with beautiful eyes.

7. *I Love Lucy*

8. Would I never date a guy? Never say never, I guess. But I'd say it's highly unlikely. Unless he's got nice breasts – oops, I meant eyes ;o)

I hope you're satisfied. Your turn to answer.

Always,
Julia



* * *

Dear Julia,

Nice eyes? Yeah ... right :)

And I'll make you a deal. You read Harry Potter and I'll read *The Color Purple*.

Answers:

1. Nathan was the first person I kissed. And except for that little slip-up at the NYU dorms, I've never kissed anyone else. I was drunk ... it doesn't count ;)
2. I tripped down the stairs at the subway and landed on top of a blind lady who proceeded to poke me with her stick. She started screaming, "Help! Help!" The police came ... thought I'd been trying to rob the woman. They called my parents. It wasn't pretty. But at least I was fully clothed during the entire ordeal ;)
3. I would take a blanket, a sketchpad, and colored pencils.
4. I think I would like to believe that there is someone for everyone. Sometimes I kind of doubt it, though.
5. Whatever's on sale at Victoria's Secret ;)
6. I like soft hair. I know that's pretty random but ... soft hair is nice.

7. *Facts of Life*

8. Guess I'll change the sex around. Would I ever date a girl? Um, no. I think my parents have enough to handle with just William. I don't feel like giving them a heart attack :)

Satisfied?

Hope you're well,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

After MUCH thought and consideration, I have agreed to the deal. In fact, I went out and bought *Harry Potter* today. It's still in the bag. I'll open it once you've purchased *The Color Purple* ;o)

You shop at Victoria's Secret? For some reason you didn't strike me as the VS type. Don't ask me what type I thought you were – I don't know. ;o)

I'm up to ten minutes on the machine of death. And it's only been two weeks! I'm sure you're very impressed.

But on to more important matters: What do you want for your birthday? September is right around the corner. I've only got three more weeks of available shopping time, so you'd better tell me fast :o)



The Blind Side of Love



Ingrid Díaz

So, what have you been up to lately?

Always,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

I went to the Strand and picked up a copy of The Color Purple. Ready? Set? Read!

Hmm... I don't know how to take your Victoria's Secret comment. And yes, I do shop there occasionally. They have lovely undies for a gal in need of such things. Besides, Leigh used to work there and I got to use her discount ;)

Well, at least you've managed to remain persistent about exercising. I would've probably given up by now :)

I spent the weekend at William's apartment. It was kind of crowded, though, being that his apartment is the size of a shoebox (not that mine is much bigger, but still). I had a lot of fun hanging out with William and Mark. They're so cute together. It kind of makes me miss having someone, you know?

Do you ever get lonely? I didn't think it was possible to be surrounded by so many people and still manage feel alone. And yet, I do. I don't know why that is.

On related news, Nathan called me out of the blue yesterday. He wanted to inform me that he's dating some girl at Harvard now. In other words, he wanted to thank me for refusing his proposal. Oh well, as long as he's happy.

But anyway ... enough about that.

Leigh is doing really well with her lines and everything. I'm really impressed by her acting ability. Before, I had to watch her perform in these psychotic plays ... and somehow she still managed to amaze me. Yet, seeing her in this new role has really opened my eyes to how truly talented she is. I pray this is her big break. She deserves it.

As for me, I managed to sell one painting on Saturday! I'm really excited about that. I was kind of losing hope there for a while. :)

My parents are doing pretty well. Still not talking to or about William. No progress on that front. I really wish they'd just accept him ...
My biological father called and asked if I wanted to visit him for a couple of weeks, but I refused. I want to be around to help Leigh rehearse, and I don't really feel much like travelling.

I think that's a pretty decent summary of my life at the moment :)

Oh, I don't want anything for my birthday. But thanks for remembering ... :) So, what's going on with you?

Love,
Kris



* * *

Dear Kris,

I'll tell you what I think when I've finished *Harry Potter*. In the mean time, I hope you're enjoying *The Color Purple*. :o)

I'm sorry to hear that you're feeling lonely. It's bound to happen though. After being with someone for so long it's gotta be rough being single. And yes, I do get lonely a lot. But there's always Adrian, and infomercials, and my work-out machine, and ... you :o) So, I'm not a lost cause yet.

Are you upset about Nathan? That's probably a stupid question – you seemed kind of down. Do you want to talk about it? I have absolutely no experience when it comes to broken hearts and even less about dealing with ex-boyfriends – but I'm always happy to lend a friendly ear.

Not a lot has been happening with me. I've been pretty busy with work and everything, which is why it's been taking me a couple of days to get back to you between emails. I'm sorry about that.

I went to dinner with my parents last night. My mother insists I eat with the family once a week or so. I managed to escape them last week but I was stuck last night. In short, it was hell as usual. My sister could not possibly be more stuck up than she is. I'm fairly certain that one of us is adopted. I hope it's me.

Sometimes, I wish I were brave enough to come out to them. I think it would be worth it to see the shock on my mother's face. But, then I think it over and I realize that I don't want to let my parents in on something so personal. They don't deserve to know me that well.

Sorry for the rant. :o)

I've been watching cartoons for about two hours now. I think I'm in love with SpongeBob. So, I've changed my mind about not dating a guy. I'll date SpongeBob. See, and he has nice eyes – I told you :o)

I considered Bob the Builder, but I think he's too macho for me.

I think it's time I went to bed. ;o) I take it you're not going to tell me what you want for your birthday – fine! I'll have to guess on my own. Trust me, you're not going to get away without a present. Sorry :oP

Love,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

I hate to admit it but I'm kind of enjoying *The Color Purple*. It's a lot better than that butler book you recommended before. ;) I won't officially admit that I like TCP, though, until you admit you love *Harry Potter*. C'mon, I know you do. Fess up.



I don't know how I feel about Nathan. I can't deny the fact that it bothers me but at the same time, I'm not sure what bothers me about it exactly. Maybe it's the fact that he's got someone and I don't. I'll get over it.

Feel free to rant whenever you want. It's what I'm here for. Well, that and making fun of you. It's a nice balance, don't you think?

SpongeBob, huh? I don't know, Julia, I doubt you're his type. How would you even make that relationship work? He's under the sea ... you're in California. That's quite the long distance relationship. Why don't you go for someone more local?

Oh, I've got a story for you. I was on the subway today and I ran into this guy from my Art History class. We started talking about the final and about the teacher and before I knew it, I'd totally missed my stop. I felt like such a dork. On the plus side, he asked for my number. So, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing after all :)

Guess I'll go take a shower and curl up in bed with Alice Walker. Hmm ... that sounded far more sexual than I intended it. ;)

Love,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

Well, see, now I'm torn. If I admit I like *Harry Potter*, it might go to your head. You'll start dancing around, screaming, "I told you so!" We can't have that. On the other hand, if I deny it, not only would you be sad and disappointed, but I'd also be lying. Consider that my answer ;o)

You're right. Dating SpongeBob may present a geographical dilemma. However, I can't quite give him up like that. First of all, he's got fabulous eyes. Next, he's very passionate about his job. I love passionate people. And finally, he loves the ocean – and so do I. As you can see, SpongeBob and I are meant for each other. Distance is just a technicality.

That was very smooth, missing your stop on the subway. ;o) So, who is this mystery guy? Did he call?

I'm ashamed to admit that I haven't actually worked out in over a week. Isn't that sad? I've been so busy that by the time I get home I usually just collapse. In fact, I'm collapsing the second I press 'send' on this email message.

Which will be right about ...

* * *

Dear Julia,

Ha! I knew you'd love *Harry Potter*. Just to spite you, I'm going to dance around and yell, "I told you so!" anyway. HAHAAAA! :p

If you insist on pursuing SpongeBob, I'm going to have no choice but to support your decision. I just hope he doesn't break your heart.



Alright, so Anthony called me last night and asked me to go for a walk in Central Park with him. I agreed because it sounded kind of romantic. He'll be here in about twenty minutes, but I wanted to email you before I went to let you know what I was up to. I'm really excited about going out with him. I've never really gone out on a date before.

Okay, I should finish getting ready. I'm nervous. Very nervous. Wish me luck :)

Love,
Kris

* * *

Dear Kris,

Just for that, I'm not going to read book #2. So HA! ;o)

I hope you had a fun time on your date with Anthony. Hopefully you didn't trip over any blind ladies. Hehe. I look forward to hearing all the details.

On my end, I've not been up to much. I did manage to exercise today. I was on it for about two minutes when the phone rang. I didn't feel much like working out after the phone conversation so I took a shower instead.

Exciting, isn't it?

I'll end this now before I bore you to tears. :o)

Love,
Julia

* * *

Dear Julia,

You won't be able to resist book 2. Just you wait ;p

I'm really sorry that it's been over a week since I responded. I've been kind of busy. Anthony and I have been hanging out a lot lately. Our first date went really well. We walked through the park and then he took me to dinner. He's really sweet. A lot different from Nathan, who was always boasting about himself. Anthony is really humble ... I like that about him.

It's kind of a relief not being with someone who has a lot of money. Nathan was always bragging about being rich, and he was always throwing it in my face. I hated feeling like he was doing me a favor by dating me. Like I was a charity case or something.

Anthony, on the other hand, is working his way through college and has a couple of scholarships aiding him along. He's an art major as well. I saw some of his work, it's truly amazing. Tomorrow he's taking me to an art museum I hadn't heard of. He wants to show me his favorite piece. I can't wait to see it.

It's weird how these things happen, huh? One second I'm on the subway heading in the wrong direction and the next I'm dating a really sweet guy. Go figure.



How are things on your end?

Love,
Kris

43

"Julianne," Adrian said, waving his fork in the air in front of his best friend's face. "Jules!" he called louder.

Julianne's eyes focused on Adrian suddenly. "What?" she snapped.

"Look, I realize that I'm not a total expert in the way of female troubles," he began, "but I am pretty sure that a woman does not PMS for two weeks."

"What are you talking about?"

Adrian put his fork down and regarded Julianne with an impatient look. "You've been an absolute pain in my ass for the past two weeks," he stated. "You've been irritable, shorttempered and a total bitch. I know you're leaving for New York in a week, but that's no reason to be so unbearable."

Julianne didn't flinch. "I just have a lot of things on my mind," she answered.

Adrian retrieved his fork and shook his head as he attempted to spear some of his pasta. "Nope," he said. "Ain't buying it. You always have a lot of things on your mind. This is something far more serious than that."

Julianne rolled her eyes and continued to push food around her plate. She didn't have much of an appetite. She didn't have much of anything lately.

"Does it have something to do with Kris?" Adrian ventured to ask. The look on Julianne's face answered the question for him.

Julianne dropped her utensil and sat back with a sigh. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You haven't mentioned her in two weeks, Julianne," Adrian pointed out. "You'd spent the past two months talking of nothing else." His voice softened. "What happened?"

Julianne's lips tightened into a line. Ever since Anthony had popped into the picture ... Kris hadn't been the same. She'd go days without responding to emails. And when she did respond, all she would talk about was Anthony. *Anthony is so sweet. Anthony is so wonderful.* She rolled her eyes at the thought. "Nothing happened," she answered finally.

"It's truly amazing what a great actress you are, considering the fact that you can't lie for shit," Adrian responded.

Julianne struggled to keep a calm composure. "I told you nothing happened. So, just finish your meal and drop it."



"I can't drop it, Julianne," Adrian responded, sounding angry, but not as angry as he felt. "I hate that you shut me out whenever something's wrong. It's frustrating!" Julianne refused to meet his gaze. She concentrated on the pattern on the mantel, trying to decide whether to get up and walk away or remain seated. In the end, she stayed where she was.

Adrian stood instead. "I'll walk back," he informed her, dropping his napkin on the table. "Thanks for lunch." He shook his head and walked away.

Julianne stared at his retreating back and reached into her pocket for her wallet. Life just couldn't get any suckier than this.

* * *

"What are you up to?" Leigh inquired, plopping beside her best friend on the couch.

Kris glanced away from the computer monitor for a moment. "Checking email," she answered.

"Heard from Julia yet?" Leigh asked.

Kris shook her head sadly. "Nope," she answered. "It's been almost two weeks. I'm worried."

"Call her."

Kris glanced at Leigh. "You think I should?" She'd actually been considering the idea for the past few days, but she hadn't had enough courage to go through with it.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm sure she's just been real busy," Leigh told her. "Or maybe her internet connection died, or something."

Kris frowned uncertainly. "Wouldn't she have called me?"

Leigh shrugged. "Call her," she answered. "It'll make you feel better."

Kris nodded and put the laptop away. "I'll call her tonight," she resolved.

"Going to see Anthony?"

"No," Kris answered. "He's got to work tonight." She settled back against the couch cushions, feeling depressed and not knowing why exactly. "What's on TV tonight?"

Leigh studied her friend with concern. "I don't know," she said, turning on the television set. She started flipping through the channels at her usual pace. "Everything with Anthony okay?" she asked. She knew that something was bothering Kris, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Yeah," Kris said, smiling slightly. "I like him a lot."

Well, it's not Anthony, Leigh decided. "How are your parents doing?" she asked, wondering if it had something to do with them.

"Good. I told them about Anthony. Mom's excited. Carlos didn't seem to disapprove. I think it's a little early to be bringing him by the house, but so far so good."



Leigh nodded mutely, her gaze on the channels. "And William?" she tried.

Kris glanced quickly at Leigh. "Why the sudden interest in everyone I know?" she asked, humor in her voice.

"Just trying to catch up on the current events," Leigh responded. "You've been kind of busy with Anthony. I haven't seen much of you."

"I'm sorry," Kris answered. She took a deep breath. "William is great. I've never seen him happier."

Leigh chewed on her lip thoughtfully, trying to figure out the cause of Kris's gloominess. Eventually, she gave up. It was probably the weather. It had been raining in New York for the past couple of days. It was bound to bring a girl down. On the television, an image caught her eye and she stopped.

"You're obsessed," Kris mentioned good-naturedly, noting that Leigh had stopped at a Julianne Franqui interview.

"It's not my fault she's everywhere," Leigh commented. "I read somewhere she was doing forty interviews a day. But I think her publicity tour is over, though, cause *Guardian* is filming already."

Kris arched an eyebrow. "What are you, her manager?"

Leigh grinned. "Nope, just been doing some research on my co-star," she answered. "I've got to know who I'll be working with," she added.

"Right." Kris shook her head in amusement and focused on Julianne Franqui's voice. After a couple of minutes, she asked, "Does she really look like that?"

Leigh nodded. "Oh yeah," she confirmed. "The woman is gorgeous, no doubt about that."

"Maybe she sold her soul to Satan," Kris suggested.

Leigh laughed. "Probably." She shrugged. "Maybe she's just lucky." She nodded toward the screen. "I think this is the *John Ken Show*. It's live. He's relentless."

Intrigued, Kris focused on the interview in progress.

"Tell us about this new movie you're doing," the host was saying. "*Summer's End* is it?"

Leigh cheered. "Can you believe I'm in that movie?" she asked.

Kris laughed. "Not really."

On the screen, Julianne looked both annoyed and uncomfortable. "Yeah, it's called *Summer's End*," she confirmed. "It's about a woman who's trying to piece together another woman's history."

"And which of the two women do you play?" John Ken inquired.



"I play Elizabeth Doyle," Julianne answered. "The first woman, Summer, moves into a new house and finds an attic full of old letters and pictures and such. She's a writer and decides to write a story based on the things she finds. The things appear to belong to a woman named Elizabeth who used to live there. Anyway, I play the younger version; Summer's conception of Elizabeth as a young woman."

John Ken nodded, although he didn't seem to be listening. "And I hear that you play a lesbian," he said suddenly.

Julianne appeared even more uncomfortable than before. She cast a glance at someone offcamera. "That's correct," she finally answered, though her voice was forced.

"And how does it feel to play a homosexual character after playing an angel for so long?" John Ken inquired.

Julianne's eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think this will affect the fanbase you've accumulated until now?" Ken continued.

"You'll have to ask them that," Julianne replied coldly.

John Ken flinched ever so slightly. "Does it make you uncomfortable to discuss the sexuality of your character?"

"No," Julianne replied calmly, her voice taking on a dangerous edge.

John Ken shifted in his seat and continued. "Taking on such a role is going to lead many people to question your own sexual preference. Does that bother you?"

Julianne cocked her head to the side. "Does what bother me exactly?"

"People questioning your sexuality," Ken clarified.

"Should it?" Julianne posed.

John Ken glanced off camera for a quick moment and shifted his gaze back to Julianne. "It would bother some people," he replied. "You wouldn't mind people assuming that you're a lesbian?"

Julianne shrugged. "I'm used to assumptions," she said. "This is Hollywood. I would be shocked if nobody thought I was gay."

"And are you a lesbian, Julianne?" John Ken asked quite bluntly.

Julianne smiled sweetly. "You know, I wasn't before, but now that I've met you I'm definitely considering it."

There was a sudden cut to commercials.

Leigh started laughing.

Kris smiled in spite of herself. She stood. "I think I'm going to give Julia a call now," she announced.



Leigh glanced up at her best friend. "Say hi to her for me."

"Will do," Kris assured her. And retreated to her bedroom to make the call.

* * *

Julianne was still fuming when she walked into her house. John Ken. Ugh! That asshole was lucky she hadn't run into him backstage or there would've been bloodshed. "Bloodshed!" she swore to the empty living room.

Deafening silence echoed back at her.

Julianne sighed and glanced at the answering machine. A peak at the message screen announced a grand total of twelve messages. "The tape probably ran out," she figured. "Good."

Her finger hesitated over the 'play' button. "I hate my life," she voiced before pressing the button.

"A lesbian, Julianne?!" her mother's voice resounded. "You're playing a lesbian? How am I supposed to show my face at the country club after tonight? And what do you mean you're 'considering it'? Are you trying to give your poor mother a heart attack? Do you ever think about other people, Julianne? Call me back. We need to talk about how we're going to handle this." Julianne rolled her eyes and collapsed on the couch with a long sigh. "And it begins," she muttered.

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

"Julianne, it's Adrian. Listen, I know we haven't really talked since that day I left you at the restaurant. And I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just left you there. I was pissed off at you. Anyway, I saw the interview and I wanted to call and see how you were doing. I bet you're pissed off and I'm certain your mom beat me to this phone call which means you're probably even more pissed off. Call me. Let's talk, okay? I miss you."

Julianne stared at the answering machine, wishing more than anything that Adrian was there.

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

"Julianne, it's Karen. You stormed out of the set and I wanted to see if you were okay. If it makes any difference, I thought you were brilliant. That jerk didn't know what hit him. Ha! Call me if you want, or I'll see you tomorrow morning. Take care."

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

"It's your mother again. Call me right now."

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

"Julia," came Kris's uncertain voice.

Julianne sat up in an instant at the sound of Kris's voice. Her heart hammered in her chest.



"I'm calling because I haven't heard from you in a really long time," Kris continued. "And I wanted to know if you were okay. I'm worried about you. Please email me or call me so that I know you're alright. I miss you."

Julianne played the message back a second time. And then a third. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the couch cushions. She was only half-listening to all the messages that followed.

It was true that she'd been avoiding Kris for the past week and five days. But who was counting? She just couldn't bear anymore emails containing the name 'Anthony' in them. At some point in the preceding months Julianne had gotten it into her head that Kris was at least semi-interested in her. Granted, the two had never met. And true, Kris wasn't exactly gay. Still, there was a lingering hope. And the hope kept Julianne going. Even if Kris wasn't hers .. at least she wasn't anybody else's.

Until now.

Julianne opened her eyes and grabbed the phone from the table beside the couch. She needed to talk to Adrian about this. Her move to New York was quickly approaching and there was no way she would survive that adventure without Adrian on her side. She dialed the number, in spite of the fact that it was on her speed dial.

"Hey," she said, when Adrian picked up.

"I was worried that you'd ignore the message," Adrian admitted.

Julianne took a deep breath. "She's dating someone," she blurted.

"Kris?" Adrian guessed.

"Yeah," Julianne said. "His name is Anthony. And apparently he's perfect."

Adrian chuckled slightly. "This is the reason you've been Queen Bitch for the past three weeks?"

Julianne considered. "PMS was involved at some point," she replied. "But pretty much, yeah."

"Have you been ignoring Kris along with the rest of the world?"

"Ahuh," she confirmed. "She just left a message on my machine asking if I was okay."

"Are you going to call her back?" Adrian inquired.

Julianne considered the question, in spite of the fact that she already knew the answer to it. She couldn't deny Kris anything. Especially not a phone call. "Yes."

"It was bound to happen, Julianne," Adrian said after a moment. "You can't punish her for your jealousy."

Julianne sighed. "I know," she answered. "I know. I just don't know if I can deal with it. Everytime I hear the name Anthony I want to punch my fist through the wall." She shook her head. "And the fact that I'll be acting with her best friend in less than a week is not going to make things any easier."

"I know," Adrian agreed.



Julianne stared thoughtfully at the wall. "I didn't think it would feel like this, Adrian," she told him. "I knew that I didn't want her dating anyone else. I figured it was because I really liked having her as a friend and didn't want to share her attention. But everytime I think about her kissing someone else ... ugh. It makes me physically ill. I think people on the set are starting to think I am pregnant. All that morning sickness."

Adrian laughed. "You're not the first person to go through this," he told her. "You'll be okay. You might meet the girl of your dreams in New York and then you won't care who Kris is dating. Sometimes some things just aren't meant to be."

Julianne considered Adrian's comment. "Maybe," she allowed.

"You can't keep ignoring her. Unless you plan on never talking to her again and I think that would be a pretty shitty thing of you to do."

"I know," Julianne agreed. "I'll call her."

"What are you going to tell her?"

"I have no idea," Julianne admitted. She paused. Apologizing had never been one of her strong suits. Regardless ... "I'm really sorry for acting like such a jerk."

"Apology accepted," Adrian informed her. "Do you have an apartment in New York yet?"

Julianne nodded, then said, "Yeah, I had Karen set things up for me. It's a penthouse apartment overlooking some buildings." She laughed. "I saw a couple of pictures. It looks fine."
"Cool," Adrian said. "How'd your mom like the interview?"

Julianne groaned and sank down on the couch. "God, I don't want to have to deal with her anymore," she said. "She's worried about showing her face at the country club."

Adrian simply laughed. "Imagine if you'd come out."

"I practically did according to her," Julianne replied, but laughed anyway. Somehow she felt better. "I should go call her," she said suddenly.

"Your mom?"

"Kris."

"Let me know how it goes," he told her. "I'll run by the set tomorrow, okay? Lunch?"

"It's a date," Julianne assured him. "Thank you, Adrian."

"Any time, Julianne. Any time."

* * *

Kris lay in bed, finishing the last few pages of *The Color Purple*. It had been over a week since she'd cracked the novel open. She couldn't explain why, but the thought of Julia these days filled her with more sadness than she could express. If only she knew why there weren't any emails. If only she knew if there would ever be more again. It was the not-knowing that was killing her.



Unable to concentrate, she closed the book and turned on her back. Dali's *Metamorphoses of Narcissus* stared down at her from the ceiling. Unconsciously, she glanced at the phone, willing it to ring. When it didn't, she let out a long breath and focused again on the print above her bed. "Please call me," she whispered.

As if on cue, the phone started to ring. For a moment, Kris didn't believe it was actually ringing. Her heart sped up as she reached for the receiver. "Hello?" she said, hoping it didn't sound as desperate as it felt.

"Hey, Kris."

Disappointment consumed her for a moment, but it was quickly replaced by something else. "Anthony," she greeted, hoping there wasn't a trace of sadness in her voice. "How was work? You got off early."

"Sure did. It was boring as usual," he answered. "Nothing like making floral arrangements for hours on end; in the rain, no less. How was your day?"

Kris ran a quick survey of the day's events through her mind. "I painted and I watched TV with Leigh for about fifteen minutes. That's about it."

Anthony laughed. "Sounds like fun," he said. "Do you want to do something tonight? I thought maybe we could catch a late showing of something."

Kris hesitated. What if Julia called while she was gone? She glanced at the time. If she hadn't called by now, it probably meant she wasn't going to. Still, she hesitated. Then finally said, "Sure."

"Great," Anthony said, sounding excited. "I'll be there to pick you up in about twenty minutes."

"See you then," she answered. Kris shut off the phone, and stared at the receiver in her hand. When nothing happened, she sighed and replaced it on the base. "So much for that." She shook her head sadly and rose to get ready.

* * *

In spite of the fact that Julianne had gotten off the phone with Adrian with the full intention of calling Kris, an hour later she was still pacing around the living room, receiver in hand. She had no idea how to explain her three week absence without lying.

"Hey, Kris," she rehearsed. "I'm sorry I haven't emailed you. My computer got stolen." She considered that and shook her head. "I don't want to lie anymore." She sighed and sat down on the couch.

She took a deep breath. "Kris," she tried again, "I have a small crush on you and got freaked out over Anthony. I think I'm over it now." She rolled her eyes. "I can't say that."

Julianne stared at the receiver and found herself turning it on. "No lies," she decided. "If she finds out I like her, then so be it." She hoped she could maintain that level of conviction. Her heart sped up as she dialed the number to Kris's apartment.

One ring ...

Two ...



"Hello?"

Julianne felt her heart stop and she swallowed. "Miss me?" she found herself asking.

There was a short pause. "Julia," Kris breathed. "I thought I'd never hear from you again."

"I'm sorry," Julianne apologized, hoping she sounded sincere.

Somewhere in the background, Julianne heard a male voice. "Be right there," Kris said to somebody else. To Julia, she said, "You caught me on my way out the door."

Julianne tried to ignore the ache in her heart. "I just wanted to let you know I'm okay," she said.

"Thank you," Kris said. There was an awkward lull in the conversation. "I have to go," she said after a few of seconds. "I'm really sorry. Anthony's waiting for me."

"Okay," Julianne answered. "Have fun."

"I will," Kris responded. "I'll talk to you later?"

"Yes," Julianne found herself saying.

"I'll email you tonight," Kris promised. "Thanks for calling."

"You're welcome," Julianne said. "Bye," she whispered after the line had gone dead. She turned the phone off and tossed it across the room. She heard it crash against something and smash it to pieces. Probably a vase. She didn't care. Frustrated, she ran a hand through her hair and grabbed the remote.

Absently, she flipped through the channels until she encountered her image on the screen. "Great," she whispered, watching a replay of the interview earlier.

"On today's *John Ken Show*," the announcer was saying, "Ken found himself biting off more than he could chew as he attempted to make actress Julianne Franqui lose her cool."

Julianne shook her head as she watched herself tell John Ken that after meeting him she was considering lesbianism. "They're going to be quoting me for the rest of my life," she realized.

The host of the show chuckled. "Sources told our producers that the phones were ringing nonstop at the *John Ken Show* studio this evening. Seems like the young Miss Franqui made quite the impression. On related news ..."

Julianne switched the channel and settled for a *SpongeBob Squarepants* rerun. Melancholy settled over her like a mantle, and she turned off the cartoon. She leaned her head back against the cushions and closed her eyes. "New York, here I come," she said sadly.

44

Kris finished reading the last words on the last page of the script to *Summer's End*. "Wow," she whispered, debating whether or not to read it over again. Being that the movie was due to start filming the following morning, Kris decided it was about time she read the full script. She'd



helped Leigh rehearse some of the scenes, but they hadn't really helped her understand the full story.

She glanced down at the plain cover, wondering what it would be like to see Julianne Franqui in the role of Elizabeth. Kris had pictured Julianne as Elizabeth all the way through. It was hard not to.

She took a deep breath and put the script away. The clock on her alarm announced that it was almost one in the morning. Kris could make out the muffled mutterings of the television emanating from the living room. "Guess she can't sleep," she realized, rising from her bed. She made sure to take the script with her as she walked out of the room.

Leigh was channel surfing as usual, but there was distinct look of worry on her face.

Kris approached cautiously and sat down beside her friend. "Nervous?" she asked.

"Terrified," Leigh confirmed, momentarily pausing in the rhythm of the button-pushing. She took notice of the script in Kris's hand. "Did you read it?"

"This is going to be a really good movie," Kris admitted. "I didn't think it was so ... powerful." Leigh nodded. "I thought the same thing when I first read it. I still can't believe I'm going to be in it."

Kris smiled. "You deserve it," she said honestly. "I've always had faith in you."

"Even when I was doing those awful plays?" Leigh asked with a grin.

"Even then," Kris assured her.

Leigh simply smiled, her gaze on the television screen.

Kris allowed the companionable silence to fall between them and turned her attention to the TV. Leigh didn't seem to be looking for anything in particular, and Kris didn't really mind. She just wanted to be there in case Leigh wanted to talk about anything.

A moment later, Leigh handed Kris the remote. "I should probably go to sleep," she announced. "I doubt I'll manage it, but I should at least try."

Accepting the object, Kris nodded. "Sweet dreams." She watched as Leigh walked into her bedroom and closed the door. With nothing else to do, Kris started flipping through the channels. She felt anxious and she wasn't entirely sure why. Or maybe it wasn't anxiety at all ... it was something else.

She was so happy and proud of Leigh. Still, there was an underlying feeling of worry that clouded her happiness. They had always discussed what would happen if one or the other became famous, and now that Leigh's dreams were so near fruition, Kris worried that she was about to lose her best friend forever. She had tried to explain her feelings to Anthony, but he'd told her she was being silly; that Leigh would always be there for her.

Would she? Kris wasn't so sure anymore. The thought scared her ... terrified her. She had the uneasy feeling that after tomorrow, everything would change. What bothered her most was not knowing if things were about to change for the better, or the worse.

Maybe both.



* * *

Julianne found herself walking through the streets of New York that same night. Her new apartment offered little comfort. It felt cold; empty. A lot of things had felt that way lately.

She'd resumed her emailing sessions with Kris. Occasionally, there was even an email devoid of Anthony-praises. Julianne treasured those. Clung to them for hope. False hope, but hope nonetheless.

People passed her as she walked. She didn't notice them, and they didn't notice her. Solitude shielded her identity. Although she'd dressed down, she hadn't made an effort to disguise herself. It didn't matter anymore.

Unconsciously – or perhaps consciously, if she admitted the truth to herself – she made it to the last place she'd expected to end up that night. With a strange mixture of sadness and curiosity, she stared up at the drab-looking building. It was such a sharp contrast to her own. She couldn't imagine living Kris's life. It was as foreign to her as hers was to Kris.

This would never work, she realized sadly. Love was not enough to close the gap between their worlds.

Yet, Julianne couldn't leave. Not yet.

She leaned against the wall of a building across the street from Kris's. A tune from *My Fair Lady* suddenly emerged from her subconscious. How did it go? *Oh, the towering feeling ... just to know somehow you are near ... the overpowering feeling ... that any second you may suddenly appear ... people stop and stare, they don't bother me, for there is nowhere else on earth that I would rather be ... Let the time go by, I won't care if I can be here on the street where you live ...*

Julianne nodded to herself, now certain that she had lost her mind.

She stared up at the row of windows, wondering which, if any, belonged to Kris's apartment. It would be so easy to appear at Kris's doorstep. It would be so easy to admit the truth.

Sighing, she forced herself away from the wall behind her. With one last glance at Kris's building, she started toward her own.

45

"You have to," Leigh pleaded the following morning. "Please."

Kris took a sip of the coffee in her hand and stared at her friend. "But what am I going to do there?" she wondered, not feeling at all comfortable with the idea of accompanying Leigh to the movie set. She'd feel so out of place there. Like a piece of scenery ... or a prop.

"You can watch!" Leigh responded, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "C'mon, I already cleared visitors with the director a while ago. Nobody will mind if you're there."

"But it's the first day," Kris answered, hesitant to comply with Leigh's request for a variety of reasons. "I'll feel really awkward."



Leigh frowned deeply. "I cannot get through this without you, Kris," she said, whining slightly. "I'll have a heart attack for sure. Please. I really need you there. You can leave whenever you want to if you feel uncomfortable."

Kris wished she had more of a backbone when it came to saying no to people. "Okay," she consented, finally. She wasn't happy about it, though, sure that she would feel completely ridiculous standing around with nothing to do. Maybe she'd sneak a notebook or something. Then she could sketch.

Leigh breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you," she said.

Kris nodded to Leigh's breakfast. The plate was still full. "Are you going to eat?"

"No way," Leigh responded, pushing the plate away. "My stomach is in a complete knot. I'm lucky I managed to swallow some coffee."

Nodding, Kris finished her own cup and placed the mug in the sink. "Are you sure I won't be disrupting anything?" she asked.

"I promise I cleared it," Leigh assured her. She stood from the kitchen table and grabbed Kris's hand. Leading Kris away from the kitchen and toward her room, Leigh said, "We need to get you dressed."

Kris allowed herself to be led. Once in the bedroom, Leigh let go of her hand and approached the closet. "What are you doing?" Kris asked.

"We need to get you an appropriate outfit," Leigh explained. She began looking through the articles of clothing hanging before her. "Nope ... nope ... maybe ... eh ... hell no ..."

Kris stood back and watched her friend in action. It took several minutes, but eventually Leigh settled on something and tossed the clothes at Kris.

"I'll clean up in the kitchen while you get ready," Leigh informed her, shutting the door behind her on the way out.

Kris stared at the closed door and then down at the clothes in her arms. "She's so weird," she muttered to herself. Shaking her head, she resigned herself to the inevitable.

* * *

Julianne sipped at the can of Sprite in her hand. It did nothing for her exhaustion, but it still tasted good. Being that she'd gotten absolutely no sleep the night before, she doubted if even caffeine was strong enough to get her through the day ahead.

A glance around the set confirmed that she was the first actress to arrive. There were a few people from the crew constructing what appeared to be a bedroom. Mostly, though, they just paraded back and forth in front of her, carrying equipment and carrying out orders from the assistant director.

Naomi Mosier sneaked up beside Julianne without the actress noticing. "You're here early," the director noted.



Startled, Julianne turned her head to face the blonde director. "I'm an early riser," she answered. *Especially when I don't go to sleep.*

Naomi smiled. "Apparently so." Before the director had a chance to comment further, she was called away on business matters.

Julianne watched her walk away, taken aback by the director's easy manner. "Untainted by Hollywood," she decided quietly. "Won't last." She resumed her survey of the surroundings and tried to ignore the fact that she was secretly anticipating Leigh's arrival.

Bored, and with nothing else to do but wait, Julianne reached into her bag and withdrew her most recent purchase: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. She smiled slightly at the cover. Kris had been right; there was no way she wouldn't read the second book. But she still refused to read the third. And the fourth was out of the question.

Smiling in amusement, she opened the book and began to read.

* * *

Kris made sure to stay close to Leigh the entire time. She was terrified and she wasn't even the one in the movie. How Leigh must've felt, Kris had no idea. In fact, she was way too nervous to think about it too deeply.

They arrived at the movie set, which looked more like an abandoned warehouse than anything else. Security wasn't particularly tight. In fact, Kris and Leigh walked in as though they owned the place. There was nobody to stop them.

The inside of the warehouse-turned-movie set was far livelier than the outside had been. Kris looked around in awe. A fake bedroom appeared to be the center of activity. There were people hanging lights; carrying cables and ladders and cans of paint. Everybody looked busy.

Except one person.

Kris squinted her eyes. "Is that her?" she whispered to Leigh, nodding toward the lonely figure sitting on the floor in a corner, totally wrapped up in a book.

"That's her," Leigh confirmed. "C'mon. Let's go talk to her."

Kris froze. "Are you serious?"

Leigh looked all around. "I don't see the director. Julianne probably knows what's going on," she explained logically.

"You're on a first name basis already?" Kris questioned curiously, trying to stall. She hadn't anticipated talking to Julianne Franqui. Standing in the corner looking bored, that she had planned on. Anything more complex than that was beyond her realm of comprehension.

Leigh didn't seem to be moving any closer to the actress. "She looks kind of busy," she said after a moment. "Maybe we should just wait for Naomi."

Kris couldn't have agreed more. "Who's Naomi?"

"The director," Leigh said, looking briefly at Kris. "I've told you her name a billion times."



Right. She knew that. "Sorry, just a little overwhelmed," Kris explained. She looked around again, trying to figure out who the director could be.

A moment later she got her answer. Naomi Mosier appeared in front of them, a smile on her face. "Nice to see you again, Leigh," the woman said, shaking Leigh's hand. She turned curious eyes on Kris. "I'm Naomi."

"Kris," she introduced herself. "Thanks for letting me on the set."

Naomi smiled easily. "Glad to have you," she answered. She glanced around for a moment. Nothing appeared to need her immediate attention. The chaos probably made perfect sense to her. She regarded Leigh. "I'm just waiting until everyone gets here. Then we can get started."

Leigh nodded.

The director smiled, nodded at Kris, and excused herself.

Kris was relieved that she hadn't gotten yelled at for trespassing on a closed set. The director seemed nice. Young, too.

"Let's get out of the way," Leigh suggested, leading Kris toward one of the side walls. The two of them leaned against the concrete and looked around.

Kris's gaze followed the director's every move. The blonde walked back and forth between people. Everyone seemed to want to talk to her about something. Some looked flustered, others relatively calm. Regardless of their state, the young director remained calm and mildmannered. Kris wondered what kind of person it took to remain so perfectly composed in the face of so much pressure.

Every now and then, Kris caught the director watching Julianne Franqui. For her part, the actress remained completely oblivious to her surroundings. Whatever book she was reading was holding her attention. The director would watch the actress and then return her attention to whomever she was speaking to.

In spite of herself, Kris was entertained watching the interaction of the filmmakers. "So who else is acting in this thing?" she found herself asking. It occurred to her that besides Julianne Franqui, Kris had no idea who else her best friend would be on screen with.

Leigh shrugged. "I have no idea," she responded. She nodded toward Julianne. "You'd think she'd be surrounded by people or something."

Kris glanced at the actress, whose nose remained buried in the book. Kris was having trouble wrapping her mind around the fact that the figure sitting a few feet away from her was the same one she'd seen so often on the television screen. It felt almost surreal. "I kind of figured she'd be ordering people around by now," she whispered.

Leigh shrugged.

"Can you see what she's reading?" Kris asked, trying to make out the cover of the book Julianne was holding. It looked familiar.

"I think it's *Harry Potter*," Leigh answered, amusement in her tone. "Guess she likes to keep to light reading."



Kris smiled. "I can't comment," she admitted. "I told Julia to read it. I said I would read *The Color Purple* if she did."

"You guys are weird," Leigh said with a chuckle. She glanced at Julianne again. "Should we go talk to her?"

"And say what?" Kris wondered.

"I don't know," Leigh said. "But I mean, we've already made it to first base. Talking shouldn't such a big deal."

Kris shrugged. "If you want to go talk to her, be my guest. I'm staying right where I am."

"But the two of you have something in common," Leigh pointed out.

"What could that possibly be?" Kris asked her.

Leigh grinned. "You both like *Harry Potter*."

* * *

Julianne stared intently at the book in her hands, but she wasn't reading the words on the page. She was concentrating on breathing. She was concentrating on not blacking out. She was concentrating on keeping her eyes glued to the book. The last thing she wanted was to meet Kris's wandering gaze.

What is she doing here? Julianne kept wondering. She wanted so badly to look up. She wanted so badly to run away. She didn't know what she wanted.

After a while, Julianne realized she wasn't doing a convincing job of pretending to read. She'd been staring at the picture of Dobby for the past ten minutes. She turned the page and tried to concentrate. But she hadn't actually read the words on the previous page. She debated on whether or not to go back. Would it look too obvious? Was Kris even looking at her?

Julianne almost looked up to see. She caught herself just in time. No looking. If you look you'll never stop staring. Then you'll probably start drooling or something equally embarrassing and ...

"Good book?"

Shit. Julianne paused for a second to curse under her breath and looked up to find Leigh staring down at her. Kris was standing a little behind Leigh, looking anywhere but at Julianne. It worked well because Julianne was looking anywhere but at Kris. Finally, Julianne met Leigh's eyes. "A friend recommended it," she found herself saying, her gaze dropping slightly.

"What a coincidence," Leigh said, turning slightly to glance at Kris. To Julianne she said, "I thought I'd come over and introduce myself. I don't usually kiss someone and then leave immediately afterwards." She paused for a second to consider her words. "Actually, I did do it once with this guy who was totally horrible at what he was doing. There was major droolage going on. It was really gross and I ... am babbling. Sorry." She stretched out her hand. "Leigh Radlin."



Julianne hesitated only a millisecond before shaking Leigh's hand. "Julianne Franqui," she said, though she had a feeling they already knew who she was. Unconsciously, she glanced at Kris. She tried to look away as quickly as possible but Leigh must have noticed.

Leigh motioned to Kris. "This is my best friend," she said by way of introduction. "She was kind enough to accompany me to this little shindig."

Julianne had no other choice but to gather what was left of her composure and regard Kris. Hazel eyes hesitantly met her gaze. Julianne would've given anything to stare into those eyes forever. "Do you generally go by the name of My Best Friend, or is there something else I should call you?" she asked, doing everything in her power to keep from drowning in Kris's eyes. Or at least fainting in Kris's presence.

Kris's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at Julianne's comment. A half smile played at the corner of her lips as she responded. "Most people call me Kris," she said. "Kris Milano."

Julianne considered introducing herself as Majorly Screwed. Cause that's what she was. No doubt about it. "Nice to meet you," she said instead.

"Mind if we join you?" Leigh asked, pointing to the ground beside Julianne.

The actress shook her head.

Leigh settled down beside Julianne, and Kris hesitantly followed suit. When the two were seated, Leigh regarded Julianne. "Do you know who else is in the film?" she asked curiously.

Julianne had to admit that she had no idea. She had been told several names by Eric at one point or another, but they hadn't quite registered in her brain. "Who are you playing?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

"Your sister," Leigh replied. "Kinda weird going from your lover to your sister."

Julianne found herself laughing. She'd never before felt such a strange mixture of ease, amusement and ... nausea. She had spoken to Leigh several times on the phone. She had spoken to Kris about a hundred times. And neither one had any idea. It made Julianne feel slightly isolated. But it didn't change the fact that in a non-too-distant world ... she considered these people her friends. "It's a good role," she said.

Leigh nodded. "It is," she agreed. "Yours is awesome, though. I bet you were all over it when you first read the script."

Memories of her fight with Adrian and her sleepless nights and her conversation Kris over the matter floated through her mind. "It's a good character," was what she answered. Anything else would've probably been a lie. Julianne glanced at Kris, not liking the fact that she was quiet. Julianne could think of a million and one things to say to the now silent artist. And any one of them would give her away.

Leigh caught Julianne's line of sight. "I kind of had to drag her here today," she explained to Julianne.

Julianne didn't answer. There were so many things running through her mind that she was having trouble concentrating on simple words. For one, she wasn't yet used to having Kris look at her. It was incredibly nerve-racking trying to figure out what kind of impression she was



making. There were so many things Julianne wanted to say. So many things she had to keep hidden. And it had only been five minutes since they'd met.

"Oh, my God!" Leigh exclaimed softly, pulling on Kris's arm. "There's Jeremy. He's the one I was telling you about."

Julianne looked to where Leigh was pointing to and noticed Naomi Mosier's assistant. She did her best to check him out, and as hard as she tried, she didn't get what the big deal was. So, she glanced at Kris instead, and was pleased to note that Kris didn't look particularly impressed either.

"He's ... cute," Kris said finally.

Julianne grinned to herself, pleased with Kris's answer. She tried not to think about the fact that Kris now had a boyfriend that she was probably swooning over.

"I'm going to go talk to him," Leigh announced.

Kris looked startled. "What?"

Julianne felt herself panic at the prospect of being left alone with Kris. Please don't leave. Please don't leave.

Leigh stood up. "I'll be right back," she said. She looked at Julianne. "Kris loves *Harry Potter*." With that, she walked away.

Julianne finally understood that this was a dream. Whether or not it was a nightmare, she couldn't quite decide.

* * *

Kris was ready to kill her best friend. She couldn't believe Leigh had just up and left her alone with Julianne Franqui. What was she supposed to say to her? Maybe they could just sit there in silence. If Kris didn't say anything perhaps Julianne would get bored and return to reading the book.

"Personally, I like Hermione best," she heard the actress comment.

It took Kris a moment to realize that she was referring to the book. "Dumbledore is my favorite," she found herself saying, not quite believing that she was discussing *Harry Potter* characters with Julianne Franqui. And yet ... she was.

"He kind of reminds me of Mr. Bennet," Julianne said.

Kris stared into a pair of azure eyes that radiated more intensity than any she'd ever encountered before. She could see where many would find Julianne Franqui intimidating. Yet, Kris just found her ...

"*Pride and Prejudice*," Julianne explained, before Kris had a chance to come up with a proper adjective. "He's Elizabeth's father. Same kind of fatherly sarcasm."

Kris arched a brow, unsure of how to respond. "I haven't read that," she found herself admitting.



"Good book," Julianne said. "Read it some time if you get bored." She paused. "I mean, if you want to. You don't have to, obviously."

There was something strangely familiar about Julianne Franqui that Kris couldn't put her finger on. It was probably the fact that she'd been watching her on interviews nonstop for the past two months. "Maybe I will," she answered. She tore her gaze away from the actress in order to search the crowd for Leigh. She found her a moment later, deep in conversation with the Jeremy guy.

"You know, if she wants me to recommend her as a good kisser ..."

Kris's gaze darted back to Julianne's face. The words registered in Kris's mind and a second later she found herself laughing. "Don't let her hear you say that, she'll take you up on it."

Julianne smiled.

The smile surprised Kris. She had seen it a billion times before on television, and yet it had never seemed quite as sincere as the one she was seeing now. It gave her a strange sense of satisfaction to know that she, Kristina Milano, had just made Julianne Franqui smile.

But she quickly reminded herself that she didn't care. Not one bit.

46

Julianne sat on the floor of her new apartment. The only thing she had bothered to unpack was her phone, which rested a few inches from her. Before her was the script to *Summer's End*, opened to one of the sections she was having trouble memorizing. The apartment was dark except for a couple of lit candles on the floor in front of her. Boxes formed several pillars around what would eventually become a living room. That's if Julianne decided to keep the apartment after the movie finished filming. Otherwise, she probably wouldn't bother unpacking anything. She'd get things on a need-to-find basis.

For the past hour and a half, Julianne had been trying to concentrate on the script, but all she could think about was Kris. Their conversation hadn't lasted very long. Leigh had returned, waving around Jeremy's number like a victory flag. Soon after, the rest of the cast had arrived and Naomi had rounded them up.

Julianne squinted at the words on the page, trying desperately to make sense of something. But nothing made sense anymore.

The ringing of the telephone dragged Julianne out of her stupor. "Hello?" she greeted. Ever since her slip-up with Kris, Julianne had decided that answering the phone as 'Franqui' wasn't a very bright idea. Not unless she expected Kris to believe that Julianne was always on the phone with her pool man.

"How's the Big Apple treating you?"

Julianne smiled upon hearing Adrian's voice. She hated to admit it, but she was lonely without him. "Well, you know me, parties every night."

Adrian laughed. "Sorry to interrupt," he teased. "Did I miss anything? Kiss any more cute girls?"



"There was the random stray lesbian here and there," Julianne responded. "But for the most part I've managed to behave myself."

"If only that were true."

"About behaving myself?"

"No. The random stray lesbians," Adrian clarified. "So what have you really been up to?"

Julianne glanced down at the script on the floor. Besides trying unsuccessfully to memorize it, she hadn't been up to much. "The usual," she said. "But um ...". Unable to find a smooth way of introducing the subject, she decided just to wing it. "I met Kris today."

There was a slight pause from Adrian's end, followed by, "Come again?"

"Leigh brought her to the set," Julianne explained. "And then left us alone while she went to flirt with the director's assistant."

"And...?"

"We talked about *Harry Potter*."

"That's it? Did you tell her that you're—"

"Yeah, right," Julianne interrupted. "I can't just blurt out something like that."

Adrian sighed. "Don't you think Fate is trying to tell you something?"

"Yes," Julianne agreed. "It's telling me that the internet is a horrible place to meet women."

"Or sometimes the right place."

Julianne liked her own interpretation of Fate better. Adrian's was ... complicated. "Whatever," is what she finally said.

Adrian took the hint. "So ... *Harry Potter*? I know you're a little new at this, Julianne, but if you need me to teach you some better pick-up lines, I'll be happy to comply."

"Actually, I'll probably need them," Julianne said, without humor in her voice. "The director wants us to go out and research lesbian life."

Laughter was the initial response. Followed soon after by, "What kind of *research* exactly?" "Not the kind you're thinking of," Julianne replied. She paused to consider what Naomi had said earlier. "Something about putting ourselves in their shoes."

Adrian snickered. "I'm sure that'll be really tough for you."

Julianne shrugged off the comment. "You know what, I really have no idea. I'm so detached from the rest of the world that I couldn't begin to tell you what being a lesbian is like."

"Sure you can," Adrian argued. "Well, a famous lesbian, anyway."

"I'm not a famous lesbian."



"Yes, you are. They just don't know it."

Julianne shook her head. "So what do you think I should do? Go to the library and read up on it? Go to a club or something? Both?" She considered her own questions. "I should probably do the library thing since the film is set in the 1920s. I don't think a lesbian bar will aid me with characterization."

"You should go anyway."

"Why?"

"Because you want to," Adrian replied.

Julianne rolled her eyes. "Like that won't be all over the news tomorrow: 'From Angel to Super Dyke ... the full story on Julianne Franqui's transformation.'"

Adrian began laughing hysterically. He managed to form the words, "Super dyke," before getting consumed by laughter once more.

"Okay, good night, Adrian," Julianne began. When nothing but laughter responded, she said, "Talk to you later." Then she clicked off the phone.

Her attention turned to the laptop computer still resting in its case. She had avoided her email all day long, but it had been eating away at her curiosity. What would Kris have to say about meeting her? Did she even want to know? Did Kris even write today? She stared at the black leather bag, torn between not wanting to know, and not wanting to wait another second to find out.

In the end, curiosity killed the cat.

She dragged the object over to where she was sitting, and waited for it to boot up. The email message she had been both dreading and anticipating was titled: "You won't believe the day I had ..."

"I bet I will," Julianne spoke to the computer screen. After a moment, she double-clicked.

Dear Julia,

This morning Leigh convinced me to go to the movie set with her. I really didn't want to go. Of course, I couldn't refuse her, though. I need to work on my assertiveness. ;)

Anyway, I went. Blah, blah, boring train ride. We get there and guess who is sitting in a corner reading Harry Potter? Julianne Franqui! Somehow, Leigh got it into her head that talking to Julianne Franqui was a good idea. I couldn't talk her out of it. So off she dragged me. Then! She had the nerve to leave me alone. I could've killed her.

So, I had no choice but to talk to the one actress I've hated since day one. And you know what's strange? I kind of don't hate her anymore. She told me to read *Pride and Prejudice* ... have you read that? How do I get involved with women who are always telling me to read something? Must be a gift. :)



Okay, so now that I've seen her up close and personal ... How much do you really look like her? ;) That is my subtle way of asking you for a picture :)

On to my next topic of conversation. Apparently, Leigh's director wants the main characters to go out and experience the lesbian lifestyle ... so of course, Leigh is dragging me along. She wants to go to ... Cat Mix? Something like that. I'm pretty sure it had something to do with a cat. I hope it wasn't that other word.

I'm kind of scared. But hey, if I spot any cute lesbians I'll be sure to give them your number ;) Just kidding. I'm fairly certain you'd kill me if I did that.

Do you really not like anyone? C'mon, Julia, fess up :)

I haven't told Anthony I'm going to a lesbian bar. I'm fairly certain he wouldn't approve, though. I think that's the one thing I don't like about him ... he seems a bit homophobic. I haven't even been able to tell him about William, yet. That's not a good sign, is it? Hm. Well, maybe I can bring him over to the open-minded side. It's worth a try.

Okay, I've gotta go get ready. What does one wear to these things? Ugh. Time to dig into the dark-side of the closet. I have time yet, though... Leigh doesn't wanna get there until midnight or so. I think I hear her tearing up her closet. I should go help her before she breaks something ...

Wish me luck tonight :)

Love,
Kris

Julianne stared at the email message she'd just read, unsure about how to feel about the words on the screen. Inadvertantly, she glanced at the time on the right hand corner of the screen. It was 11:20. "No," she said, quite firmly. "I am not going to do what I just thought of doing."

She found herself glancing at the time again. Much against her will, her mind began calculating the amount of time it would take her to reach the desired destination. "I am not going," she resolved. "It's a lovely idea, but no. Complications. Lots of complications. Monumental amounts of complications!" She sighed. "And I'm talking to myself again."

Julianne glanced around the dark, quiet, empty, and over-all depressing apartment. Resigned to another night of solitude, she closed the laptop computer and grabbed the script. "I will concentrate."

* * *

"Well," Kris began defensively, "I'll be twenty-one in three days." She leaned against the wall of the establishment she'd just ben turned from.

Leigh nodded. "We'll come back for your birthday," she decided.

"Nothing like hitting a lesbian bar on my twenty-first birthday," Kris commented dryly, although, she actually didn't mind. Not really. In fact, she was disappointed they hadn't been able to get in. Or rather, *she* hadn't been able to get in. Leigh had turned twenty-one the previous month.

Leigh looked around. "So what do you want to do now?" she asked.



Kris shrugged. "Why don't you go in for a bit?" she suggested. "It's your research assignment. I'll just hang out here."

"Outside?" Leigh asked dubiously. She looked all around. "It's dangerous."

Kris moved closer to the door. "I'm sure if I scream lots of lesbians will come to my aid and attention," she joked. She motioned again to the bar. "I'll wait for you. I brought a sketch pad, anyway. I won't be bored."

Leigh frowned, not particularly liking the idea. "It's really not that big of a deal if we come back in a few days," she said.

"Yeah, but by then the movie will be in full swing you'll have less time for such an outing," Kris argued. "Besides, we already made it all the way over here. Might as well take advantage."

Leigh hesitated, but didn't argue. "Alright," she said after a moment. "But you stay right by the door, and if you see anything weird you march right in there." She glanced up at the sign. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"It's for a good cause," Kris assured her.

Leigh nodded, encouraged by those words. "Acting, yes." She looked around again. If to make sure there were no suspicious-looking people around, or just no one she recognized, Kris wasn't sure. "Okay, I'm going in."

"I thought it was 'coming out'?" Kris smiled.

"Ha, ha," Leigh replied, reaching for the door. "I'll probably get freaked out in five minutes. I won't be long, I promise."

Kris waved her away. "Have fun."

And Leigh disappeared inside. Bored and alone, Kris leaned her head back against the wall behind her and looked out at the noisy night. There were a lot of people out; most appeared to be drunk. She made sure to stay right by the door, just in case. Nobody paid much attention to her though, and she was grateful for that.

It was true that she'd brought a small sketch pad with her. One never knew when they might need one. After a few minutes, she decided she'd die of boredom if she didn't start drawing something. So she whipped out the small notebook and began to draw. She doubted if lesbians would keep Leigh's attention too long.

* * *

Julianne cursed herself on the way out of her apartment. And on the way down the hall. And down in the elevator. She cursed herself on the way to the subway station. And on the subway. And she was still cursing herself when she spotted the bar.

Just going to walk right by it, she decided. Just going for a walk. It's a nice night. Nothing wrong with going for a walk.



Julianne was about to cross the street when she spotted the figure sitting a few yards away. So, she froze instead. *Turn around. She hasn't seen you. Go back to the apartment and soak yourself in cold water. In fact, just climb into the freezer, and stay there.*

But of course, she didn't listen to herself. Probably because her heart was hammering so hard that she couldn't hear anything. *Complications, complications*, her more logical side chanted. Logic wasn't with her that evening, unfortunately. There was a far more controlling part encouraging her to think of something to say.

A billion and one possibilities ran through Julianne's mind as she walked across the street. *Small city. Everywhere I go, there you are. Are you stalking me? All stupid. Then again, I'm clearly an idiot.*

About a yard away from Kris, Julianne paused. She was almost there and she had nothing to say. Maybe she could just pretend to not notice Kris and just try to walk by. *And if she doesn't notice you, then what? Are you going to turn around and walk back and forth until she does?*

Probably.

I'm insane. I am totally insane.

Kris chose that moment to glance up from whatever it was she was doing. Drawing, it looked like. Her hazel eyes surveyed her surroundings until finally, they landed on Julianne. Recognition was slow, but once it registered, it was instantly replaced by surprise. And something else that Julianne couldn't decipher.

Julianne closed the gap between them. She glanced up at the sign above the bar and smiled down at Kris. "Come here often?" There was a line that Adrian would appreciate.

Evidently, Kris was caught off-guard. But she said, "Leigh's trying to get in touch with her lesbian side."

"Why are you out here?" Julianne asked.

Kris shrugged. "Not twenty-one," she answered.

Instantly, Julianne recalled that Kris's birthday was coming up. Actually, she hadn't forgotten; she could never forget. Still, the fact that she hadn't found a proper present was bugging the hell out of her. "I see," she said.

"Were you going in here, too?" Kris asked after a moment.

Julianne struggled with how to answer the question. The truth was, she just wanted to be wherever Kris was. But she couldn't admit that. "I like it better out here," she said finally.

Kris looked a bit taken aback but didn't pursue the line of questioning. "Leigh should be out any minute," she said. "She's been in there for over half an hour or so. I doubt she'll be much longer."

Julianne frowned slightly. She didn't like the thought of Kris sitting outside all of that time. Alone, no less. "Bored?" she asked.

"Not really," Kris replied, and held up a small sketch pad for emphasis.



"You're an artist," Julianne said. It wasn't a question because she already knew the answer.

Kris nodded slightly. "Something like that," she answered.

"May I see?" Julianne motioned to the pad. She had no idea where all of this courage was coming from, but she figured it was a lot more productive than sitting around drooling and babbling incoherently.

Kris hesitated a moment, but handed it over. Julianne made sure that their fingers didn't touch. "It's nothing much," Kris said, clearly embarrassed by the prospect of having Julianne Franqui look at her drawings. "They're just doodles, really."

Julianne tried not to smile at Kris's nervousness. *If only she could hear how fast my heart is beating.* She glanced down at the notebook in her hands and flipped it open to the first page. *Wow.* Page after page took her breath away. "You're amazing," she found herself saying. She glanced up and met with surprised hazel eyes. "I mean, the art is really amazing. You're really talented."

"Thank you," Kris responded, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips.

The door above them opened and Kris instantly glanced up. But it wasn't Leigh. Two women walked out laughing hysterically at some private joke. They started down the street, without casting a look in Kris and Julianne's direction.

"Shouldn't you be in there researching away?" Kris asked after a moment.

Julianne glanced at the door then shrugged. "I'm not really big on bars," she answered. "It's crowded and smokey and ..." She didn't know how to explain that she didn't want to be caught in a gay bar, unless Kris was in it. Instead of continuing, she shrugged again.

Kris nodded mutely.

Their conversation at a standstill, Julianne took the moment to look around the busy New York street. Even though people passed by almost constantly, nobody seemed to know or care who she was. Maybe they just didn't want to be caught looking too carefully at the building she was sitting in front of.

"Do you often sit outside of bars you don't intend to go into?" Kris asked.

Julianne smiled. "I have to say this is a first," she answered. "Do you?"

Kris smiled back. "It's also a first."

Julianne decided right then and there that if a billion and one TV News cameras appeared in front of her, and she was outed to the world, Kris's smile was worth the consequences that would follow. *I am so screwed.*

"May I ask why you're here?" Kris asked, her tone light and not at all offensive. "I mean, I have a good excuse..."

"I was lonely and wanted someone to talk to," Julianne answered. In a nutshell, that's precisely what brought her there. In more ways than one.



Kris laughed. "You were lonely?"

Julianne stared at Kris curiously. She wondered what Kris thought she did all day. "Have you ever been surrounded by a whole bunch of people ... and still felt totally alone?"

The question caught Kris off-guard once again. Hazel eyes contemplated Julianne in a way they never had before. It made Julianne wonder what Kris was thinking. "Is that how you feel?" Kris asked, instead of answering the question.

"Occasionally," Julianne replied, though 'always' was a truer answer.

Kris was about respond when a girl walked up to them. She was about to walk inside the bar when she took note of Julianne.

Shit.

"Oh, my God," the girl shrieked. "Are you Julianne Franqui??"

Julianne was afraid the girl would start hyperventilating. She smiled. "In the flesh," she answered.

"I *knew* you were gay, I just *knew* it!" the girl cried. "Can I have your autograph? Can I buy you a drink? Do you want to dance?"

Julianne didn't know where to begin. "I don't really drink and I'm not much of a dancer. But you can have that autograph if you want it."

"Hell yeah!" the girl cried. She started digging in her bag frantically. "I have a pen in here somewhere." Finally she found a sharpie marker and handed it to Julianne. A second later, she pulled her shirt up to expose her breasts. "Just sign the left one."

Julianne bit her lip. She had never been asked to do *that* before. Carefully, making sure she didn't touch any vital areas, she scribbled her signature on the girl's left breast. "There you go," she said, recapping the marker and handing it back.

"Are you sure you don't want a drink?" She seemed to notice Kris's presence at that moment. A knowing smile followed. "Oh, I see." She winked at Julianne. "Thanks for the autograph."

"You're welcome," Julianne replied, feeling deeply embarrassed. She didn't want the girl telling people Kris was her girlfriend. Kris didn't need that kind of publicity. She took the girl's hand and pulled her down gently. In her ear, she whispered, "I'd really appreciate it if you kept this quiet. Just between us." She let go and smiled the sweetest smile she could muster.

The girl blushed deep red. "You got it. No problem." She smiled at Kris and disappeared into the bar.

Julianne knew she should get out of there. But she didn't want to get up. Somehow, nothing seemed as important as being near Kris. "Sorry about that," she quickly apologized. "You don't need rumors spreading about you."

"She's probably in there telling the world that you're a lesbian and you care about rumors about me?" Kris asked.



Julianne stared into Kris's eyes and said, very seriously, "I'm used to rumors about me. I don't like it when they spread about the people I ..." She caught herself. "...know." She couldn't believe she'd almost said love. What was she thinking?

Kris sensed the pause. She stared curiously at Julianne. "I see," she said. "Thanks," she added after a moment. "I'm sure my being gay wouldn't cause a huge scandal, though." She paused to reconsider. "Except at my house."

Julianne grinned slightly. She wondered what *would* happen at Kris's house if Kris turned out gay. *Not like that would ever happen*, Julianne quickly reminded herself. In fact, she often had to remind herself of that. "Well I haven't been the center of a good scandal yet, so I guess it's about time."

Kris glanced at her curiously, as though unsure of how to take the comment. In the end, she said, "I wonder what's keeping Leigh?"

As a reflex, Julianne glanced up at the door. She couldn't see inside. "Do you want me to go check?" she offered.

"You're really aching to start that scandal, aren't you?" Kris joked.

Julianne laughed lightly. "I just don't want you sitting here all by yourself."

"You're here," Kris pointed out. Then added, "Unless I'm keeping you from something?"

"No. I have nothing else to do." Sadly, it was the truth. Unless one counted the pages and pages of dialogue she still had to memorize. But besides that ...

Before Kris had a chance to respond, the door opened and this time it was Leigh walking out. Actually, she was stumbling. Julianne stood just in time to keep her from falling down.

Kris rose at once. "Are you okay?" She approached her best friend and was instantly assaulted by the smell of alcohol. "Have you been drinking?"

It was a stupid question because Leigh was clearly drunk. "This lesbian challenged me to a drinking game," Leigh answered, her speech slurred. "There's this other one flashing everyone. Says Julianne Franqui signed her boobs... Oh, hey Julianne." She finally seemed to notice the actress, whose arms were around her waist.

"Hi, Leigh," Julianne greeted, not quite sure what to do in the situation.

Leigh stared at Julianne for a long moment. "You know, you sound like someone," she said. She turned to Kris. "Doesn't she sound like someone?"

Kris took Leigh's arm and draped it across her shoulder, trying to take some of the weight off Julianne. "C'mon, let's get you home."

"I'll help you," Julianne offered. She wanted to make sure they both got home okay. Plus, she wasn't entirely sure Kris could handle Leigh all by herself.

Kris started to argue, but instantly realized that without Julianne's help it would take forever to get home. "Okay," she finally relented. "But you really don't have to," she added, feeling uncomfortable.



"I know," Julianne said. "I want to." And she did. No way she would leave Kris alone. They started down the street. "How much did you have to drink?" she asked.

"Oh... about a zillion of those... thingies," Leigh answered, her hand forming what appeared to be a circle. "She threatened to ask me out on a date if I didn't."

Julianne arched an eyebrow.

"A simple no would've sufficed," Kris said, a little sternly.

"I don't know," Leigh argued. "Lesbians could have different rules." She stared at Julianne.

"Did you really sign her boobs?"

"Just the left one," Julianne replied. She glanced quickly at Kris, and saw what appeared to be a smile.

"Julia," Leigh said all of a sudden.

Both Julianne's and Kris's heads shot up at the same time.

"That's who you sound like," Leigh continued. "But don't worry, your voice is sexier. Although hers is like phone sex operator material..."

Julianne was too concerned with Kris's reaction to focus on her own. She vaguely heard the words 'phone sex operator'. Julianne couldn't tell what Kris was thinking; her face remained impassive. Self-conscious, and more than a little petrified, Julianne remained silent.

It didn't matter because Leigh was talking up a storm. "...wanted me to feel her up and I was like, 'Dude I'm not gay'. And she was like, 'What are you doing here, then?' And I was like, 'Research for my character'. That got her really impressed. I could've gotten laid tonight..."

Kris was shaking her head and rolling her eyes at the same. Julianne found it incredibly adorable. She realized she was staring, and looked away, but not before noting how gorgeous Kris looked. Julianne did her best to concentrate on the sidewalk or on the shops along the way. If she looked back at Kris, she wasn't sure she'd be able to look away.

* * *

Kris was furious at Leigh. How could she get drunk? She never got drunk. Well, there had been a couple of times, but ... why tonight? If Julianne hadn't shown up, Kris would have been out there all by herself.

It was starting, she could feel it. Leigh was starting to forget about her. The thought struck Kris painfully.

She glanced at friend, who had been talking nonstop for a while now. Then her gaze landed on the famous actress not two feet away from her. *How the hell did this happen?* Kris studied the look of concentration on Julianne's face. Julianne appeared to be particularly focused on the concrete. Kris wondered what she was thinking. *Probably wondering how the hell she got stuck walking us home.*



Kris looked away after a moment, afraid to be caught staring. The truth was, she didn't think Julianne minded walking with them. *But why?* Kris just didn't understand. Famous people didn't go around like this. They didn't just pop up out of the blue and sit down to make conversation. There was something very odd about this situation that Kris couldn't put her finger on.

Leigh's comment resurfaced, and Kris found herself frowning. Did Julianne sound like Julia? A little, it was true. But Julia's voice was different. It didn't sound so ... restrained. There was levity to it. Julianne's voice always seemed so ... contained. As though the actress was afraid to speak; afraid to say the wrong thing.

She risked another glance at Julianne and found herself staring into a pair of blue eyes. She quickly looked away, embarrassed and not entirely sure why. In fact, she wasn't sure of anything around Julianne Franqui. *She's so ... so ... indescribable.* That was the only word Kris could think of. Although, the word 'beautiful' also came to mind. It was a strange beauty. It was the kind that made you want to stare for hours.

For hours? Kris suddenly frowned at the direction her thoughts were headed. No, she decided after a moment. 'For hours' was a true enough estimation. Julianne Franqui was undeniably gorgeous. No wonder she was on the cover of a thousand magazines. No wonder she got paid millions of dollars just to be seen on television. People couldn't get enough of her.

Kris did her best not to look at Julianne. The last thing she needed was the actress thinking she was staring at her. *She'll probably think I'm in awe of her or something.* For some reason, Kris wanted to hang on to the idea that Julianne Franqui was a stuck up bitch.

Quite unconsciously, Kris snuck another glance. Thankfully, Julianne was once again focused on the sidewalk.

An enigma. That's what Kris decided that Julianne Franqui was. Because in spite of the fact that Kris wanted to dislike the actress, she couldn't. So far, Julianne had been nothing but nice ... and funny and ... maybe even a little charming. But, there was something else that Kris couldn't figure out.

Before she had a chance to think about it further, her apartment building came into view. "It's the next one up," she said for Julianne's benefit. Kris glanced at the actress to see if she could decipher a reaction. She was certain that Julianne was used to far more exotic locations. *This probably looks like a total dump to her.* But if the famous actress was disgusted by the building she did a good job of hiding it.

"I'm not feeling so hot," Leigh announced. In fact, she looked kind of green.

Kris prayed they'd make it into the apartment before Leigh threw up. Her best friend would never forgive herself if she vomited all over Julianne Franqui. "We're almost there," she assured her.

Once inside the building, they headed toward the elevator. On the way up, Kris remembered that Leigh had the keys to the apartment. "Where are the keys?"

"Pocket," Leigh replied, looking rather ill.

"Which?"

"Left."



It was on Julianne's side. Kris glanced at Julianne. "Would you mind?" she asked, feeling incredibly embarrassed by the entire situation.

Julianne looked hesitant, but complied. By the time the elevator doors opened, Kris had the keys in her hand. It was only a few feet to their apartment. She managed to get the door open just in time to see Leigh dart into the apartment. Seconds later, the bathroom door slammed shut.

Alone with Julianne once again, Kris searched for something to say. "Thank you," she said finally.

Blue eyes softly drifted to her own. "You're welcome." Julianne motioned to the direction Leigh had gone. "Will she be okay?"

Kris's gaze followed Julianne's line of sight. "Yeah," she said. "I'm sure she'll be fine. She doesn't usually get drunk like that," she found herself saying. For some reason she didn't want Julianne thinking it was a habit of Leigh's.

There was a short pause in which Kris wondered whether Julianne wanted to stay or leave. When the actress made no move to exit, Kris shut the apartment door. "Would you like something to drink?" she offered, hoping she had something to give Julianne.

"Sure," Julianne accepted.

Kris walked toward the refrigerator. "What would you like?" she asked, not quite certain she had many options.

"Evian water with two drops of fresh squeezed lemon," Julianne answered.

Kris stared at her nearly empty refrigerator and then over at the actress. Laughing blue eyes stared back at her, and Kris realized Julianne was kidding. "Would you like a cute little umbrella to go with it?" she asked, relaxing slightly.

"Make it blue," Julianne replied, looking relieved that Kris hadn't misunderstood her joke. She walked over to where Kris was standing and peered into the refrigerator. "Actually, I suddenly have a craving for ... that, right there." She pointed.

"Are you sure?" Kris asked, removing the container from the fridge.

"Positive," Julianne answered. "What is it?"

Kris smelled the contents and scrunched up her face. "I have no idea."

Julianne laughed. "Mystery drinks ... my favorite."

Kris walked over to the sink and poured the mysterious substance down the drain. "If you get poisoned and die I'm sure I'll get in trouble."

"Nah, they won't miss me," Julianne replied, returning her attention to the fridge.

Kris stared at Julianne for a long moment, not really thinking anything in particular. The fact that Julianne Franqui was in her kitchen staring thoughtfully at the contents in her refrigerator was particularly amusing to Kris. Bizarre ... but amusing. "I'm sorry I don't have much," she apologized.



Julianne shrugged and shut the fridge. "Actually, you have more than I do. I haven't bothered going grocery shopping yet."

"How come?" Kris asked. She suddenly remembered there was a box of soda in the cabinet. She kneeled down to retrieve a can. "Pepsi okay?"

"Yes, thank you," Julianne replied. "Oh, and um, because I haven't had time."

"Can't you hire someone to do some grocery shopping for you?" Kris asked. She filled a cup with ice and handed everything over to Julianne. "Sit down if you want."

Julianne popped open the can of soda and poured it into the cup. "I suppose I could," she said, sitting down at the table. "But I'd feel really bad and lazy asking someone to do that." She took a sip. "Why? Do you want to buy my groceries?"

Kris smiled, but didn't get a chance to respond because Leigh chose that moment to enter the kitchen.

"Bed," Leigh said, and pointed toward her room. "Night." Without another word, she headed off in the direction she'd directed.

Kris stared for a second then shook her head. "I'm sure she'll be a joy tomorrow."

Julianne grinned. "Good luck." She paused for a moment. "Are you tired?" she asked, sounding almost timid.

Kris stared at Julianne, unsure of what the actress was asking. "Not really," she answered finally. "Why?"

"Want to go grocery shopping?"

Kris glanced at the time on the microwave. It was almost two in the morning. "Now?" she asked.

"Sure. Something's gotta be open," Julianne said.

* * *

Something was indeed open. They ended up shopping for food in a small store near Julianne's apartment. Julianne still couldn't believe she'd gotten the guts to ask Kris to go food shopping with her. Even more, though, she couldn't believe Kris had actually agreed to the idea. Who went shopping at 2am? Apparently a few people, because they weren't the only ones there.

"Jif or Skippy?" Kris asked, holding up the two kinds of peanut butter available.

"Jif," Julianne answered at once, turning to look at the cereal selection. "I'm glad you're here to show me what the essentials are."

Kris smiled. "Well, everyone's gotta have peanut butter. It's like a law. In fact, it is a law. I read about it in one of Nathan's books."

Julianne cringed at the sound of his name.

"My ex-boyfriend," Kris explained, unaware of Julianne's reaction. "He's studying law at



Harvard."

She says it with such pride, too. But the pain was obvious in Kris's eyes. "Lucky him," Julianne said, her attention on the cereal boxes. "This is a tough decision."

Kris nodded. "Honey Nut Cheerios," she said, holding up the cereal box.

"Is that what you like?" Julianne asked. For some reason she was taking notes on Kris's preferences. She didn't know why. She didn't want to think about why.

"And Cap'n Crunch Berries." Kris reached for that box, too.

Julianne smiled. "Very nutritious," she said, grabbing both boxes. "I'll give them a shot."

"You've never had them before?"

"I'm more of a Kashi Go Lean kind of person," Julianne responded.

"A what?"

Julianne searched around and finally found the cereal of her choice. She pointed to the front of the box. "See? High in protein *and* fiber."

Kris took the box from her and inspected it. Scrunching up her nose she said, "Gross."

"Healthy," Julianne clarified, grabbing the box back. She put the Kashi cereal in her basket along with the Cap'n Crunch's Crunch Berries and Honey Nut Cheerios. "What else do I need?"

"Milk?" Kris suggested.

Julianne followed after her. It was funny that Julianne couldn't care less what she bought as long as Kris was with her.

"Do you want Skim?" Kris asked. "Being that you're so health-conscious. Are you on a diet?"

"Diet?" Julianne asked. "Not particularly. Why?"

Kris shrugged, placing the carton of milk in the basket. "Aren't all you people on diets?"

"I'm not a supermodel," Julianne replied. "But, as a matter of fact, I do prefer Skim."

"Gross," Kris replied once more.

Julianne smirked. "Picky, picky." She followed Kris down the aisle and grabbed some random food items she might want for later. "I should get some pasta. I can have it for dinner tomorrow."

Kris stared back at her. "Do you have a good cook?"

"Pardon?" Julianne asked, confused.

"Someone who cooks for you?" Kris clarified. "Do you have one of those?"

Julianne smiled. "I'm perfectly capable of cooking for myself, thanks," she answered. "What do you think I do all day? Sit around while my slaves fan me and feed me grapes?"



"Isn't it?" Kris asked, a slight smile on her face. "I've watched those *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* shows."

Julianne smiled and took a couple of spaghetti noodles off the shelf. "Well, you probably won't see me on there any time soon. If I had a cook he or she would die of boredom. I'm rarely home."

"Famous people parties?" Kris guessed.

"I hate parties," Julianne said.

Kris shook her head. "Does your fan club know about this?" she asked. "I wouldn't go around revealing your lifestyle on public television if I were you."

Blue eyes narrowed slightly. "Is that your subtle way of calling me boring?"

"Was I being subtle?" Kris asked, a small smile on her lips.

Julianne grinned, amazed that Kris was talking to her like this. *She's totally insulting me and I love it.* "I'll heed your advice, thank you," she said after a moment. She glanced down at her selection of groceries. "I think we're good." She headed toward the cash register.

Kris followed suit.

The man behind the counter barely glanced up as he rang Julianne up. *I love New York*, Julianne thought. *Nobody ever notices me.* He gave her the total, she gave him the money. And out the door they went.

"Where do you live?" Kris asked.

"About a block that way," Julianne motioned with her chin. Her hands were occupied with bags. "Thanks for coming with me."

"You're welcome," Kris replied. She carried the other half of the groceries. "It's not every day a famous person asks me to go buy groceries with them."

A famous person, Julianne thought, feeling depressed all of a sudden. *She'll never see me as anything else.* Not that she was expecting a different reaction. It just ... sucked. "Well, I heard Brad Pitt was in the area," she found herself saying. "Maybe tomorrow he'll take you shoe shopping."

Kris laughed. "We'll see," she replied.

They fell into a silence that wasn't quite as awkward as the ones before. A few minutes later, Julianne motioned to her apartment building.

"Wow," Kris breathed, looking up. "This must cost a fortune."

Julianne didn't reply, feeling embarrassed. She led Kris into the building and into the elevator. She hoped Kris wouldn't think her totally stuck up. She stared at the numbers on the elevator as she searched for something to say. "My assistant picked it out for me," she said, and realized that it didn't sound any better.



"Ah," Kris said. "So you do have a minion."

"I wouldn't call Karen a minion," Julianne replied, feeling a bit defensive of her not-quitefriend-but-not-at-all-minion. "She helps keep me organized. Sometimes things get a bit hectic. And she's a really good person..." She decided to shut up.

"Sorry," Kris said after a moment. "I didn't mean to insult you."

Julianne glanced into hazel eyes. "I wasn't insulted."

Awkwardness returned full force and Julianne suddenly felt uncomfortable. She could tell Kris also felt uncomfortable which only made Julianne more so.

The elevator doors swooshed open and Julianne stepped outside. Hers was the only apartment on the floor so reaching the door was only a matter of walking a couple of steps. She got out her keys and allowed Kris inside.

Kris looked around the moment she stepped inside. "Did you decorate this yourself?" she asked.

Julianne took in the piles of boxes scattered everywhere and smiled. "Are you kidding? I paid a fortune for a decorator." She started toward the kitchen.

"It was well worth the money," Kris joked, following the actress. "I like the whole cardboard motif." She deposited the bags she carried on the countertop and stood back, glancing around the kitchen. "How long have you been living here?"

Julianne looked around, wondering what Kris saw—what she thought of it; of her. "Just a few days," she finally answered. "It doesn't really feel like home yet."

"Unpacking might help," Kris suggested, her hazel eyes returning to Julianne's. "Just a thought."

"I'll keep that in mind," Julianne responded, fighting the urge to stare into Kris's eyes. She wasn't sure she'd find her voice again if she gave into temptation. "Would you like anything to drink? I have—" she started sorting through the bags—"milk, warm Mountain Dew, warm grape juice, and warm water." She glanced up expectantly.

Kris shook her head. "I should get going." She glanced at the time on the microwave. It blinked 12:00 at her. So she looked at her watch instead. It was nearly three-thirty in the morning.

"I'll drive you back," Julianne replied at once. "Just let me put some of this stuff away."

Kris frowned. "You really don't have to do that."

"Well, I think the milk will go bad if I don't," Julianne replied, winking at Kris before sticking the carton in the fridge.

Kris opened her mouth to respond. Shut it. Then opened it again. "You don't have to drive me home," she finally managed. "I don't mind the walk."

Julianne stopped putting away groceries long enough to stare thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Yeah, but if something happened to you it would be horrible publicity for me." She smiled again. "Besides, I wouldn't be able to fall asleep knowing you were walking home all alone. I'd have to



ask you to do something totally embarrassing like call me the second you got there... and well, that would just make me look silly. So, humor me?"

Kris stared at Julianne Franqui for a very long moment. "Okay," she relented. "I wouldn't want to be the cause of your insomnia."

If only you knew. Julianne grinned and returned to storing groceries. Once done, she faced her guest. "Thanks for doing this with me," she said. "I know it was an odd request."

Kris offered a small smile. "I'm starting to think odd things are the only thing I can expect from you," she said.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Julianne laughed. She reached for her car keys and motioned toward the front door. "Ready?"

Kris nodded. "If you insist."

* * *

Kris pinched her arm in the elevator on their way down. She hadn't really expected to be dreaming, but at moments it felt like the only explanation. The events of that night completely defied the laws of ... something. She couldn't come up with one that applied to the situation she was in. Maybe she'd have to name it herself. But for some reason she was having trouble concentrating.

The fact that Julianne Franqui was leaning against the elevator wall, looking as though everything was perfectly normal was particularly distracting to Kris. She felt like a drawing in the Sunday paper: *What object doesn't fit into this picture?* She could almost imagine a big red pen appearing out of the nothingness and drawing a big circle around her. Or maybe, it would draw a circle around the entire elevator. Or just Julianne. It didn't matter because any way you looked at it, something was out of place.

Kris decided it was she who was out of place, because the fancy elevator with gold trimmings around the buttons certainly didn't go with her. Julianne Franqui, on the other hand looked perfectly at home. The actress was probably used to gold trimmings. Her entire life had probably been outlined in gold.

When the elevator doors opened, Kris stepped outside first. The lobby was guarded by a man in a blue uniform who sat behind a large marble desk. He tipped the brim of his hat as they passed.

"Be careful out there, Ms. Franqui," the man called.

Julianne gave a slight nod. "Thanks, Terry," she replied. "Have a good night."

Kris found it strange ... and oddly fascinating ... the way that Julianne was on a first name basis with a man she couldn't have known longer than a few days. So, she decided to comment. "Do you generally make friends with your doormen so quickly?"

"Terry?" Julianne asked, holding the front door open for Kris to get by. "He's not my doorman." She motioned to the uniformed man leaning against one of the other glass doors. The man was snoring softly. "That's my doorman." She seemed amused by this. "Terry is one of my bodyguards. He's in disguise, though. He likes to blend in."



Kris tried not to focus on the implication that there was more than one. "Shouldn't he be following you places, then?" she wondered.

"Nah," Julianne answered, and started down the sidewalk. "I'm really not that paranoid." Then she stopped suddenly and faced Kris, who also halted. "Actually, that's not the complete truth," she admitted. "The truth is that my mother likes to know everything I'm up to and my moving to New York gave her the perfect excuse to stick one of her spies on me."

"I don't understand," Kris said, because she really didn't.

Julianne started walking again. "C'mon. We should get you home." This time, her voice sounded sad and kind of distant. Kris immediately caught the change in tone and wondered at the cause. After a moment, Julianne spoke again. "My mother is afraid that I'll do something scandalous. She has a tendency to hire people to follow me around so that in the off chance that I do get myself in trouble, she can nip it in the bud before it reaches the media." Julianne shrugged. "She's a tad ... insane."

Kris was dubious. "Your own mother spies on you?"

"Well," Julianne began, with a wicked grin that Kris was starting to warm up to. "She *thinks* she's spying on me. But I agreed to double whatever my mom was paying them. So, instead they send her false reports. They've written amazing fiction about my life." She laughed at a distant memory, then shrugged and glanced at Kris. "Occasionally, I ask one of them, like Terry, to watch out for things out of place. Usually when I travel to a place I'm not used to or when I move into a new location. Stalkers can get annoying."

"Sounds... complicated," Kris commented. She couldn't relate, obviously, but she felt kind of bad that Julianne had to go through so much trouble just to exist. *I guess it's the price you pay...*

Julianne stopped suddenly at a white Rav4. It took Kris a moment to realize it was Julianne's car. She'd been expecting something different. A Ferrari or a Porsche... even a limousine. "Do you have a weakness for white Rav4's or something?" she wondered, as she got into the passenger seat.

"Nah, this isn't the car I usually drive," Julianne answered. "It's a rental."

"Ah," Kris voiced. *She probably didn't want to have her Ferrari parked out in the middle of New York.*

"Mine's blue," Julianne explained.

Kris was caught off-guard. "Pardon?"

Julianne glanced at her and turned the ignition. "My Rav4 is blue."

"Ah," was the only thing Kris could think to say. She suddenly couldn't wait to get to her apartment. Being with Julianne Franqui was exhausting. The actress had Kris's mind in a whirlwind of confusion and mixed feelings. She wanted to figure Julianne out, but the more she tried, the more confused she became. And she was too tired to keep trying.

At least for the night.

Traffic was horrible, even at four in the morning. Blinking red and blue lights up ahead announced some kind of accident. Kris was sure that Julianne regretted the offer to drive her



home. "You could just drop me off," she suggested, wanting to get the actress off the hook. "I can walk from here."

Julianne nodded. "I'll drop you off," she said, and Kris found herself strangely disappointed. "At your front door," the actress added a moment later.

Kris was secretly relieved, especially since a moment later it began to rain. The last thing she wanted was a replay of prom night. Walking home in the pouring rain hadn't been fun at all. Although, the situation was different. Much different. It's not like Julianne Franqui was going to try to seduce her with candles and a hotel room.

It was at that moment that Kris realized just how tired she must've been.

She stole a glance at the actress, who was busy looking for something in the backseat. A moment later, Julianne dropped a black object on Kris's lap.

Kris recognized it as a CD folder. "Are you bribing me with music now?" she asked.

Julianne laughed, and Kris couldn't stop herself from smiling at the sound. "Pick whatever you want to listen to," Julianne said.

Kris unzipped the folder and opened it to the first page. She had a feeling that Julianne liked to keep things organized because everything was in alphabetical order. She read through the artists' names. "Ani DiFranco?" she asked, glancing up. Leigh listened to her.

"I like her lyrics," Julianne replied. "Very poetic."

"I've never really gotten into her," Kris had to admit, turning back to the CDs on her lap. She flipped through the pages. Julianne listened to everything. From Alanis Morissette to Metallica to Schubert to SWV to John Michael Montgomery ... the list went on. "Miss Saigon is excellent," she found herself commenting. "Leigh listens to that a lot. And Phantom and Cats ... all those." She found that Julianne had them all.

Eventually, after they'd moved all of two inches along in traffic, Kris settled for an unidentifiable CD. "What's on this?" she asked.

Julianne glanced at it and shrugged. "Ad—Um, my friend burned it for me," she said, looking momentarily flustered. "Is that your selection?"

"Sure," Kris answered, figuring it couldn't hurt. She handed the CD over and felt her finger brush against Julianne's for the briefest of seconds. "I hope it's not Country," she found herself saying, trying to ignore the strange tingling sensation at the spot their fingers had touched. *I'm getting way too ticklish*, she decided.

"Not a fan, I take it," Julianne replied, sticking the CD into the player. "There might be a stray country song here or there, just to warn you. I have random tastes."

Kris didn't really mind, because she was far more curious about the kind of songs Julianne Franqui had chosen to put together. It was like a clue; a musical clue.

A moment later, a song Kris didn't recognize filled the car.

"Not Country," Julianne announced. "You lucked out."



Kris found herself smiling. "What's this?"

"'Naked'," Julianne replied. "Avril Lavigne. It's my theme song, I think."

Kris tried to figure out what that meant by listening to the lyrics. But it was more of a love song than anything else. She briefly wondered who Julianne thought of when she heard this song. "Do you have a boyfriend?" she found herself asking.

"I couldn't possibly be more single," Julianne replied, glancing at her.

Interesting. Kris decided to just enjoy the song, because figuring Julianne Franqui out was going to be a long project.

And for some reason she actually felt up to the challenge.

47

"For the next three days," Naomi Mosier began, glancing down quickly at the clipboard in her hand, "we're going to film some of the 2002 scenes. So, Katherine and Neal, plan on being early and working late. Friday I'm leaving for an important meeting in California, so you all get the day off. Monday morning we'll start with the 1920's scenes. So, Julianne, Leigh, Alexa, John, Kevin and Samantha, you're free until then.

The director paused to glance around the table. "Questions?" When nobody responded, she continued. "Julianne and Samantha," she waited until the two actresses were looking at her, "we're going to lay off the more ... intense ... scenes until the end. It'll give you two a chance to get to know each other better. We'll start you off slow." She glanced at Leigh. "The three of you—" She motioned to Leigh, Julianne and Samantha Chelsom. "—are going to be working very closely. So, I hope you can work on building some kind of relationship off camera as well as on."

Julianne glanced over at Leigh, who looked about to pass out. They hadn't gotten a chance to talk all morning, but the way Leigh kept avoiding Julianne's gaze was a good indication that Leigh at least remembered the previous night's occurrences.

Julianne turned her attention back to Naomi. She was annoyed that she'd dragged herself over to the set only to sit through a boring lecture. The director could've told her as much over the phone. Mostly, she was annoyed that she'd gotten no sleep ... again. It was her own fault, of course. But that fact didn't make her any less grumpy. She planned on going home and falling asleep until the following Monday.

When Naomi finished speaking, she freed everyone but Julianne, Leigh, and the two main actors filming that day. "Can I have a word with you two," the director asked, meaning Julianne and Leigh.

Julianne wondered if she'd gotten in trouble already. She couldn't have done anything wrong just sitting there. "Sure," she replied, and followed the director away from the rest of the cast. Leigh trailed behind her. "Do we have to stay for detention?" Julianne asked, once they were out of earshot.



Naomi smiled widely and shook her head. Short blonde strands fell into her eyes and she pushed them away mechanically. "Just wanted to make sure the two of you were okay," she said. "You look ... beat."

"Rough night."

"Couldn't sleep."

Both answers flew out at the same time, and Naomi nodded. "Well, I just hope you manage to get a good night's sleep for Monday. We're going to start with a scene between the two of you. Page forty-two. Work on it." She patted Julianne on the arm, nodded at Leigh, and headed off to work.

Julianne regarded Leigh awkwardly. Finally, she asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Like a truck ran me over," Leigh replied, groaning slightly. "Over and over again." She yawned. "I'm exhausted and we haven't even started anything yet."

Julianne nodded sympathetically. "You'll be okay," she said. "Sleep and some coffee and you'll be good as new."

Leigh agreed. She was partial to the coffee idea, though. She looked around for a moment, and then locked her gaze with Julianne's. "Thanks for helping me out last night, and keeping Kris company."

"It was my pleasure," Julianne replied, trying not to sound too enthusiastic. Secretly, Julianne was overjoyed that she'd gotten to spend so much time with Kris. But there was no way she could explain that to Leigh without arousing suspicion. So, she remained silent.

Leigh ran a hand through her hair and bit her bottom lip nervously. She looked as if she wanted to say something, so Julianne waited. Finally, Leigh said, "This might sound really dorky, but I'm a film virgin, so ... uh, would you like to get together some time before Monday and go over some of our scenes? I'm having trouble with the pacing and I really don't want to look like a total fool in front of everyone..."

Julianne didn't know what to say. On the one hand, it probably meant spending more time with Kris or at least, Leigh. On the other hand, it meant ... complications. *Oh who am I kidding? This goes beyond complicated. This is now, officially, the Twilight Zone of lesbian drama.* "Sounds good," she found herself saying. "When ... where?"

Leigh considered. "Tomorrow? My apartment, since you already know where it is. Unless, you'd rather do it somewhere else. I don't care. It's really up to you since you're ... um ... you."

"Your apartment is fine," Julianne replied, trying not to be too overjoyed by the concept. Kris might not be there. She would probably make plans to go out with Anthony. She tried not to think too hard about that possibility. "What time?"

"When are you free?"

Julianne pretended to consider a non-existent schedule. "I plan to sleep until at least four," she said. "So anytime after that."

"Five okay?" Leigh asked. "Or six ... or seven ..."



Julianne tried not to laugh. Leigh was rather amusing, even when she wasn't trying to be. "Five it is," she said. "I'll see you then."

Leigh nodded. "Yeah, okay. Tomorrow at five, my place."

On a whim, Julianne reached into her bag and whipped out a small pad and a pen. She scribbled her home and cell phone numbers. "Just in case," she said, handing the piece of paper to Leigh. She started to walk away. "See you tomorrow."

"Okay," Leigh said. "See ya..."

Julianne shook her head on her way to her car. *I've kissed her best friend. I've reached into her best friend's pocket and fished around for keys. And I gave her best friend my number. I must be doing something totally, totally wrong ...*

* * *

"You're home early," Kris commented from her place at the kitchen table.

Leigh headed straight for the coffee machine. She'd decided to heed Julianne's advice. Coffee and sleep. Heaven. "Yeah, they're not starting with the 20's until Monday morning. So I'm free." She stuck the coffee mug in the microwave and waited. "Oh, I hope you don't mind, but I asked Julianne to come over tomorrow and rehearse with me."

Kris froze slightly at the announcement. "She's coming here?"

"Yeah," Leigh responded. "Is that okay? I figured since she already knew where it was." She looked momentarily worried. "I didn't do anything overly embarrassing last night, did I?"

"No," Kris answered distractedly.

Leigh paused long enough to retrieve the coffee. "No, it's not okay, or no, I didn't do anything embarrassing?"

"The last one," Kris replied. She stared at Leigh. "I don't mind if she comes," she said. In fact, she was slightly thrilled by the prospect. "We went grocery shopping last night," she found herself saying. She hadn't had a chance to talk to Leigh that morning about the events of the previous night. Leigh had left to the movie set before Kris had woken up.

Leigh sat down at the table, blowing into her cup. "We did? I don't remember that."

"Julianne and me."

This caught Leigh's attention. "What?"

"She asked me to go grocery shopping with her after you went to bed last night," Kris related. "Then we went to her apartment and she drove me home."

Leigh was momentarily speechless. "You went grocery shopping with Julianne Franqui?"

Kris laughed slightly and nodded. "Weird, huh?" She rose from the table to wash the dish she'd been eating breakfast from.



"And then you went to her apartment," Leigh repeated.

Kris didn't turn around from the sink as she responded. "Yeah, she hasn't unpacked anything yet. It looks pretty desolate. But man ... the view is amazing. The windows go from the floor to the ceiling. I bet if you lean against them you feel like you're hovering over New York City." She couldn't quite keep the awe out of her voice. "And everything looks so shiny and new. I've never seen anything like it before. Up close, anyway."

"Really," Leigh said, but she didn't sound particularly happy about it. In fact, she sounded rather upset. "And then she drove you home?"

"In a Rav4," Kris answered, turning around for that announcement. "And we got stuck in traffic cause a cab ran into some kid in a bicycle. It was pretty bad." When Leigh didn't comment, Kris frowned. "Are you okay?"

Leigh shrugged. "Yeah," she took a sip from her coffee. "Fine." She paused and looked down. "It's just .. you know, I was sick last night and then you just up and left me here all alone."

Kris didn't know what to say. Was Leigh upset with her over this? "Are you serious?"

"Well, yeah," Leigh answered, her eyes full of hurt. "I thought you would've cared about me a little more than to go off gallivanting with Julianne Franqui."

Kris's mouth dropped slightly. Then she got mad. "Hey, it's not my fault you got drunk off your ass last night. And you're the one that left me outside all alone for over an hour—"

"You told me it was okay!" Leigh yelled. "I didn't want to leave you there."

Kris shook her head, wondering where this argument had sprung from. "I don't want to fight about this. It's stupid."

"Oh, so my feelings are stupid now?" Leigh answered, rising from the table. "Thanks a lot."

"That's not what I meant," Kris told her, her voice calm. "And why are you upset, really? It's not because I left last night. If I'd gone out with Anthony we wouldn't be having this discussion."

That startled Leigh. "You're right," she said after a moment. "I wouldn't be upset if you'd gone out with Anthony."

"So, what's the problem?" Kris wondered, suddenly confused.

Leigh sighed and sat back on the chair. "Guess I got jealous."

"Of?"

"I don't know," Leigh said softly. She shrugged and glanced up at Kris. "Guess it's because she and I are supposed to be the ones getting to know each other better. I mean, we'll be acting together and everything ..."

Kris felt the words stab her in a thousand different places. *She's jealous of me for hanging out with Julianne?!* "I see," she said, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. She doubted if she succeeded.



Leigh noticed. "Oh, come on, Kris," she said. "You know how important this movie is for me. For my career. Don't be like that. This isn't about you."

Clearly not. Kris turned around and finished rinsing the dish. When she was done, she said, "I'm going to call Anthony. Don't worry, I'll be out of your hair tomorrow. Then you can bond with her all you want."

"Kris," Leigh called.

But Kris walked to her room and slammed the door without another word.

* * *

Julianne stared at the ceiling above her bed as she'd been doing for the past hour and twentythree minutes. She'd managed to fall asleep for a couple of hours, but thoughts of Kris drove her into consciousness.

I've fallen for a straight girl. A straight girl with a boyfriend. A straight girl who doesn't know she's been communicating with me through email for the past five months. Groaning, she covered her face with a pillow and screamed into it. That didn't solve any of her problems, though. But it succeeded in hurting her throat.

She tossed the pillow aside and reached for the phone. She was going to call the only other person in this world she knew could help her.

"Karen?" Julianne asked when someone picked up.

"Hi, Julianne," Karen replied.

Julianne sat up in her bed and concentrated on what she was about to say. "I have a huge problem," she announced.

"Does it have to do with your trailer arrangements, because I swear I—"

"No, no," the actress interrupted. "Nothing to do with work. This is a personal issue."

This confused Karen. "Pardon?"

Julianne took a deep breath. "Have you ever fallen for a straight woman?"

There was a very long silence at the other end of the line. "Uh, Julianne, if this is about what I told you that day, I would never dream about crossing the line with you—"

This was going to be a long conversation, Julianne suddenly realized. "No, I mean, I want your advice on what to do. How do you convert them over?"

Silence again. Then, "I'm very confused, Julianne. Are you in love with a gay man or something?"

If Julianne hadn't been so nervous she would've laughed. "Not exactly," she replied. "I'm in love with a straight girl."

Long pause. Very long pause. So long that Julianne wondered if Karen was still on the line.



"Hello?" Julianne ventured.

Karen's voice cracked slightly when she finally responded. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, I thought I heard you say—"

"I'm a lesbian," Julianne answered, the words feeling strange on her lips. It wasn't something she was used to saying. But there was no time to dwell on such things. She continued. "And you're the only other one I know, so you're my only hope for salvation."

"I....see," Karen answered. "Um, Julianne?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you call me back in about five minutes?" Karen asked.

Julianne suddenly felt embarrassed. She wondered if she'd interrupted something. "Yeah, sure. I can call back some other time. I didn't realize you were busy."

"No, I'm not busy at all," Karen replied at once. "Shocked ... but not busy. Just five minutes."

"Okay, talk to you in five," Julianne replied. She hung up the phone and placed it on her stomach. She watched the time on her alarm clock. A minute passed ... two ... Julianne had never realized how long a minute could seem. She tried to calculate how many minutes old she was but gave up after she realized what a dumb activity that was. Finally, five minutes passed. For good measure, she waited two extra minutes. Just in case.

"Hi, Julianne," Karen answered. "I just had to freak out for a moment and I thought I'd spare you. I'm better now. So, straight girls?"

Julianne wasn't sure what Karen meant by freaking out, but she decided not to dwell on that either. "Just one straight girl, actually. What do I do?"

"Hmm," Karen said, thoughtfully. "Well, that's a tricky one. But there's a surefire remedy."

Julianne sat up, ready to take notes. "I'm listening."

"Okay, the first thing you do," Karen began, as though she was teaching a top secret lesson, "is go into the bathroom, turn on the shower as cold as it will go, and get under the stream and think about the girl. Repeat that process several times. Then, get your favorite picture of her, tape it to the wall, and then bang your head repeatedly while looking at it."

Somewhere around the banging head suggestion Julianne realized Karen was kidding. She sighed. "I'm screwed, huh?"

"Pretty much," Karen replied. "But if it makes you feel any better, my girlfriend was straight too when I met her."

"So there's hope?" Julianne wondered.

"Occasionally you get lucky," Karen replied. "And if things don't work out, there's always Naomi."

Julianne arched a brow. "Who?"



"Your director," Karen replied. "Didn't you notice her drooling all over you?"

There had been no drool. Julianne was sure of it. She frowned, a list of facts about Naomi Mosier . "But she's dating that producer guy ... what's his name ... Bob something."

Karen laughed. "And you're dating Adrian. What's your point?" She giggled. "Anyway, she's had the hots for you since forever. She asked me if I thought you'd ever go for her and I said no way. Oops, heh. My girlfriend went to USC with her, and they're still friends. So she's over our place a lot. When she told us she was going to try to get you for this movie, I told her to keep dreaming. Go figure."

Hmm. "What about Samantha Chelsom? That girl who's playing Emma. Is she gay too?"

"Nope, totally straight," Karen answered. "I think she's engaged, actually. I think everyone else is straight. That I know of." She paused. "Is Samantha the one you're interested in?"

Julianne tried not to cringe at the thought. Not that Samantha Chelsom was ugly, or anything, but her personality sucked. "Gross," she said, instantly thinking of Kris. She smiled slightly, then controlled herself. "She spent twenty minutes yesterday discussing lipstick shading with her assistant. Definitely not my type."

Karen laughed. "Yeah, I was going to say ..."

Julianne sighed quietly and stared at the ceiling once more. After a moment, she said, "Actually, Karen, my problem extends beyond the straight thing ..."

"What do you mean?"

Julianne hesitated only a second before taking a deep breath and plunging into the entire story. "Well, I was in Washington Square Park with Adrian ..."

* * *

Kris ignored the first two knocks at her bedroom door, then realized she was being childish. It's not like Leigh didn't know she was in there. "Come in," she said finally.

Leigh entered the room hesitantly, closing the door behind her. She leaned against it, as though trying to stay as far from Kris as possible. "I'm sorry," she said, sounding very much like she meant it. "I was a total ass."

Kris agreed with that. But she refused to speak to her best friend until she got a better apology. Acceptance was only the first step to solving the problem, after all.

Leigh sighed when she noticed that Kris wasn't budging. "I thought it over and I realized that I really don't care if you hang out with Julianne. I was being petty and selfish and ... well, I'm really sorry. It's this movie ... it has my brain in overdrive. I can't think properly." She searched Kris's eyes for some semblance of understanding. "I don't know what came over me. Maybe it was the hangover ... or just temporary idiocy."

Kris softened her gaze. In spite of it all, she did understand. She nodded, because she didn't know what to say.



"And I do want you there tomorrow," Leigh continued, sitting at the edge of the bed. She waited a moment, perhaps to see if Kris would tell her to get up. When Kris didn't protest, Leigh went on. "I wasn't jealous that you got to hang out with her and I didn't. I was jealous that you were having fun with her. I mean, if you befriend Julianne Franqui, once I become famous you won't be impressed." She ventured a smile.

"I'll always be impressed," Kris replied. "All the Julianne Franqui's of the world can't take that away."

Leigh smiled and looked away for a moment, then returned her gaze to Kris's. "So... are we okay?"

Kris did a quick inventory of her feelings, and found herself nodding. "I think so," she said.

"Good," Leigh said, sounding relieved. "So you'll be here tomorrow?"

"Made plans with Anthony," Kris answered. "But maybe we can hang around for a bit. Can we watch?"

Leigh brightened. "That'd be great," she answered. "I thought he wasn't too keen on the gay thing, though?"

Kris sighed, leaning back against her pillow. "Should I talk to him about that? It's so weird. He hasn't said anything specific, but once in a while he'll make these comments. And it's so ..." She searched the air for the right word and finally settled on "....*annoying*."

"Trouble in paradise?" Leigh questioned.

A shrug was all Kris could manage. Then she added, "He's nice, but I'm just not feeling it."

"Feeling what exactly?"

Kris considered. "Passion?" she said uncertainly. "I don't know. When we're together we have a lot of fun and I love talking to him about art because he knows so much. But beyond that ... it's like ..." She made a face to convey her emotions, but it didn't illustrate much beyond discomfort and perhaps constipation. "...nothing," she finished finally.

"Not like Nathan?" Leigh guessed.

"Exactly like Nathan!" Kris exclaimed. "That's the problem. It's like kissing a brick wall or something."

Leigh laughed. "Sometimes you have to teach them how to do it properly." She patted Kris's hand sympathetically. "It'll be okay. You're attracted to him, right?"

Kris considered the question, drawing up a vague picture of Anthony in her mind. He was attractive. Definitely attractive. "I guess."

"You guess?" Leigh wondered. "Shouldn't you know if you're attracted to your own boyfriend?"

Kris wasn't entirely sure what she felt for Anthony. Was it attraction? "It's confusing."



"As are you," Leigh pointed out. "Want to rent a movie?"

The abrupt change of subject startled Kris for a moment, until she realized she'd rather watch a movie than keep talking about her feelings for Anthony. "Sure," she answered. "But since you wronged me this morning, I get to chose."

"Just no more lesbian flicks," Leigh warned. "I'm all dyked out. Let's go for some het loving. Something with Brad Pitt in it ... or Antonio Banderas."

"Fair enough," Kris conceded, rising from the bed. "But it's your treat. After all, you're gonna be rich soon."

Leigh smiled. "Deal."

* * *

Julianne lay on the living room floor, staring out at the view of New York City. Buildings dressed in light stared back at her, though both were equally uninterested in the other.

Karen's advice had been simple: Tell Kris the truth.

The simplicity of the advice and the complexity of carrying it out were at war in Julianne's mind. How? When? Where would she tell her? What would she say? Why was she even considering it?

The actress closed her eyes and focused on the scenerios she'd created. There were several, but they could all be placed under three different categories: the Kris-Will-Hate-Me Category; the Kris-Will-Not-Hate-Me-But-Not-Forgive-Me Category; and finally the Kris-Will-Forgive-MeAnd-We'll-Become-Best-Friends Category.

Pointless, Julianne realized after a while. Thinking about all of this was pointless. Regardless of Kris's reaction, it had to be done. It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do.

Julianne rose from the floor and walked over to the window, not sure what she was searching for in the lively panorama. She felt so distant, standing there, as if floating over reality. The ground seemed so far away. High up in the clouds of her existance nothing felt the way it should. Chaos now reigned in a land that had struggled so desperately to remain stress-free. Complications she would never have predicted controlled the range of her emotions. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to turn, except down ... down to a world she'd never experienced.

Was it possible to combine her world with someone else's? Would she be given the chance? Would the door be shut forever? Both possibilities scared the hell out of her.

If Kris didn't forgive her ...

If Kris did ...

Julianne sighed and turned her back to the city, knowing nothing would bring her comfort. Nothing would bring relief.



"Kris, come on!" Leigh called, pounding on the door between words. "She's going to be here any second and I'm not even showered yet."

Kris opened the door just as Leigh delivered another hard knock to what was supposed to be the door. "Owww! Geez!" Kris cried, grabbing her nose as the pain registered.

"Serves you right. Did you leave me any hot water," Leigh wondered, stepping inside.

"What do you need hot water for?" Kris asked, rubbing her bruised appendage. "It's like 200 degrees in here."

A sudden buzzing noise interrupted the rest of the conversation.

"That's her. Shit. Tell her I'll be out in a second," Leigh said, and slammed the door closed.

Kris tightened the towel around her otherwise naked body and sighed. She walked toward the intercom. "Hello?"

"It's Julianne Franqui," came the response.

"Come on up," Kris replied. She looked around the apartment for a moment, making sure that it was presentable. Leigh had spent the entire morning cleaning everything. It didn't really make much of a difference though. Compared to Julianne's apartment, Kris' was a total dump.

The knock at the door a minute later interrupted her survey. She didn't have a chance to figure out what exactly bothered her about the comparison between Julianne's apartment and her own. It wasn't shame or jealousy. So maybe it was both.

"Hi," she said, opening the door for the actress. "Come in." She stepped aside to let Julianne in, and focused on keeping the towel closed. The last thing she needed was to give the actress a show. "I just stepped out of the shower," she said, by way of explanation. "Leigh will be right out."

Julianne smiled slightly but didn't meet her gaze. In fact, she looked everywhere but at Kris. Maybe Julianne realized that she was doing that, because she finally forced her gaze to meet Kris'. "Thanks," she said. "Am I early?"

Kris shook her head and closed the door. "No, Leigh is just ... late," she answered, feeling extremely self-conscious. "Mind if I get dressed real quick?"

"Not at all."

"Make yourself at home," Kris instructed before returning to her bedroom. Once the door closed, she rushed to the closet to pick out an outfit. Anthony would be there soon and she wanted to make sure she looked decent enough. Only, every time she considered something, she found herself wondering what Julianne would think of it. In the end, she decided she didn't care what anyone thought, and settled on jeans and a tee shirt.

Satisfied with the image in her reflection, she ventured out into the living room, where she found Julianne sitting patiently on the couch. "Leigh hasn't come out?" she asked, sitting down beside the actress.

"She came out," Julianne replied. "Then went back in."



Kris smiled. "It might be a few minutes. She has difficulty in the deciding-what-to-wear department."

"It's a common malady," Julianne replied amiably. "So what are you doing today? Hanging out?"

Kris shrugged. "For a bit. Anthony's coming over. We'll probably go out."

"Oh. Sounds like fun," Julianne replied.

Kris caught the strange look that passed across the actress' features, momentarily darkening her usually impassive expression. It was a flash; a flicker of the eyes. But it made Kris wonder.

It made Kris wonder if she'd imagined it.

* * *

Julianne was not looking forward to Anthony's arrival. In fact, she was downright dreading it. She'd often wondered what he looked like. What he sounded like. How he treated Kris. Now that she was so close to finding out, she wanted nothing else than to run away; hide away from the wave of jealousy that would inevitably follow.

For the moment, Julianne focused on Kris, and the way that Kris's wet hair framed her face so perfectly. And the way that Kris' lips formed the words she was speaking; their sound followed by their meaning.

What she tried not to focus on was the fact that her heart beat faster whenever Kris' eyes met her gaze. She tried not to think about Kris answering the door in a towel. She'd think about that later.

"Would you like anything to drink?" Kris asked. "I know that last time this posed a bit of a challenge, but I assure you that since your last visit I've packed the fridge up with delectable goodies."

Julianne had to smile. She liked the way Kris said the word "delectable." But she attributed that to the fact that she was slowly becoming pathetic. Or was she there already? She decided not to focus on that either. "Oh really?"

Kris nodded confidently. "Test me."

"I'd like a glass of soy milk, please."

"Chocolate or vanilla?"

Julianne's smile widened, though her eyes narrowed slightly. "Chocolate," she answered, wondering if Kris really did have soy milk.

"Coming right up," Kris said, rising at once to retrieve the drink.

Julianne watched her gracious hostess walk over to the kitchen and open the fridge. She decided to turn around before Kris caught her staring.



A moment later, Kris returned and handed Julianne a can of Pepsi. "Chocolate soy milk," she said. "Anything else?"

Julianne stared at the can of soda in her hand and grinned. "And here I thought you were bluffing."

Kris shook her head. "You should never doubt me." She smiled.

Julianne smiled back and found herself lost in beautiful hazel eyes.

"Sorry!" Leigh yelled, running out of her room like a madwoman on a rampage. She half stumbled, and nearly tripped on the way, but managed to somehow regain balance. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting," she added, once she'd managed a relatively safe arrival.

Julianne tore her gaze from Kris' at once, and looked up at Leigh. "It's no problem."

Leigh glanced back and forth between Julianne and Kris for a moment. "Did I interrupt something?" she thought to ask, sitting across from them on the coffee table.

"Nope," Kris answered at once. She glanced at her watch, then back up at Leigh. "Mind if I watch you guys rehearse?"

Leigh waited for Julianne to shake her head before she gave her own answer. "Of course not," she said. "You can be our own personal movie critic." She rose as she spoke the last word and turned her attention to Julianne. "Where should we start?"

"That scene we're filming next week might be a good idea," Julianne suggested. "Do you have it memorized?"

Leigh answered by tapping her finger against her temple. "It's all up here," she added, in case the gesture wasn't enough.

Julianne suddenly felt awkward. She'd never really done this rehearsing thing before. Acting had always been a solo mission for her. Even when she was around other people, she was never conscious of them. Now, however, all she could think about was the fact that Kris was going to be watching her.

Resigned, Julianne stood up and helped Leigh move the table so they had room. It wasn't much room, but it was more than they'd had before.

Julianne wracked her brain for the first line of the scene. She couldn't remember if it was hers or Leigh's.

Leigh solved the problem by starting. "Did you forget something?"

The lines rushed back to Julianne's slightly distracted memory and she was able to continue without missing a beat. "Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"For you."



Julianne paused before continuing. "I didn't think anyone would still be up."

"You probably weren't thinking much of anything at all." Leigh's voice remained calm, though it was tinged with an accusatory edge. "I—"

A sudden buzzing noise interrupted Leigh's line.

Julianne turned her attention to Kris, who was on her feet and almost near the intercom. A male voice answered Kris's default greeting of, "Hello?"

Julianne's stomach churned, knowing that the "me" who responded was Anthony. Soon he would appear at the doorway. Soon she would know who he was. Somewhere in the wake of the now silent intercom and the knock at the door, Julianne held her breath.

"It's just her boyfriend," Leigh explained a second later. "Do you mind if he watches for a little while?"

Julianne shook her head, even though she hadn't heard the question. Her gaze studied the way that Kris turned the knob on the door. She concentrated on the widening crack between the doorframe and the opening door. Kris's back blocked most of Julianne's view, until a moment later when the door fully opened and a tall guy rushed forward to envelop Kris in a hug.

Then he kissed her.

And Julianne instantly looked away.

"Are you okay?" Leigh asked, approaching the actress with concern.

Thankful for a distraction, Julianne looked at Leigh. "I'm fine," she answered. Something inside her hardened, then turned icy cold. Somewhere inside her, something died. "Let's take it from your next line."

Leigh nodded, and started the line again.

Julianne was vaguely aware of movement in the corner of her eye. She registered the fact that Kris and Anthony sat down on the couch to watch. But she didn't look at them. She concentrated on Leigh's voice and their empty exchange of dialogue.

Half an hour later, Kris and Anthony announced their departure. Julianne forced herself to glance over. But all she caught was a retreating back and a sudden flash of hazel that sent a jolt of remorse through her body.

The front door slammed shut.

"I can't believe Julianne Franqui was just in your apartment," Anthony commented the moment they stepped outside of the building.

Kris couldn't believe that she'd questioned Julianne's acting abilities. There was something amazing about the way that Julianne performed. Every feature, every gesture was so



uncharacteristic of the actress - at least in Kris's experience - that she couldn't help but be enthralled. "She's really good," Kris found herself saying for not particular reason, except she was thinking it and it was true.

"And hot," Anthony added.

Kris smiled, her gaze on the city that surrounded her. The noise, the traffic, the underlying layers of beauty that had to be peeled away to be found. Anthony's comment registered in her brain, and she found herself not caring if he thought Julianne was beautiful; it wasn't a lie. "She's gorgeous," she agreed.

"So are you," Anthony responded, taking her hand in his.

Kris smiled at the comment, but didn't say anything. She didn't care if he thought her beautiful. Did he think her talented, intelligent, interesting? Beauty was a shifting shadow; a figment of perception. It had no defining value, no permanence. She didn't want to be thought beautiful ... she wanted to be thought ... "Thanks," she said finally, her thought left unfinished.

"So, what do you want to do for your birthday tomorrow?" Anthony asked, used to the task of breaking the lulls in their conversation.

Kris had never minded silence. Her gaze rose to meet with that of her boyfriend's. Her boyfriend. It felt strange calling Anthony that. No one besides Nathan had ever worn that title. "I'm going to stop by my parents' apartment. Then, my brother and his --" Kris hesitated "--friend want to take me to lunch."

"Do I get you for dinner?"

Kris nodded distractedly. "Anthony?"

"Hmm?"

Kris opened her mouth to tell him, but she couldn't form the words: My brother is gay. She feared his reaction. "I went to a lesbian bar the other night," she said instead.

Anthony looked down at her, a brow arched in question. "Why?"

"Research, for Leigh's movie," she answered.

"Oh, right."

Kris caught the way he rolled her eyes. "They didn't let me in though. I stayed outside and then Julianne showed."

"Did anyone hit on you?"

Kris had to smile. "I was sitting beside Julianne Franqui. Who'd hit on me?"

"I would," Anthony answered easily.

"Over her?"

Anthony nodded, tightening his grip on her hand. "She's got nothing on you."



The way he said it, it was almost convincing. But it didn't matter. She didn't feel like competing with the actress on such a superficial matter. In fact, there was something almost nonthreatening about the actress. Ironic, given the actress' intimidating persona. "I promised I'd go out with Leigh tomorrow night," she said, suddenly remembering.

"Can I come? Or is it a girls' night out?"

Kris appreciated Anthony's easy going manner. She wondered what it would take to piss him off. "You can be one of the girls."

"I don't look good in drag," Anthony answered.

She searched his tone for a sign of defensiveness. She didn't find any. "I don't know about that, you've got great legs."

Anthony laughed. "Good genes and lots of soccer." He paused to look around. "Where do you want to go?"

"Surprise me," Kris said, feeling adventurous.

"Museum?"

Kris shrugged, but nodded. "Sure," she answered, slightly disappointed. A trip to the museum was hardly a surprise. Then decided it didn't matter. How adventurous could one be in the place she'd lived her entire life?

* * * *

Julianne looked around Leigh's bedroom, wondering why she'd agreed to stay longer. Wondering what she was waiting for and knowing the answer all too well.

"It's times like these I wish I'd recorded every episode of *Guardian* and had posters of you all over the place," Leigh joked, leaning back against the side of her small desk.

Julianne was thankful that there were more interesting things to look at than pictures of herself. The walls were painted a shade of blue that bordered on electric. It matched Leigh's personality, Julianne felt. It was a small room and Julianne was ashamed to think that her initial reaction to it had been a flashback to her walk-in closet back home.

Shaking her head, Julianne focused on the decorations. She was mildly surprised to see a few of Kris's paintings framed along the walls. There was one that didn't look like Kris's work -- namely because it was pretty horrid -- but was framed all the same.

"That one's mine," Leigh explained, following Julianne's gaze. "It's my constant reminder not to veer away from acting. Clearly, I was not born with many talents."

Julianne smiled. "What about the others?"

"You mean the ones that don't suck?" Leigh guessed. "Kris," she answered simply. "I like to collect her work so that when she's famous I can say I've been a fan all along. Plus, you know, they're beautiful."



"Looks like this is a very talented household."

"Thanks," Leigh answered, looking both pleased and embarrassed. "I still haven't figured out what to get her for her birthday."

"When is it?" Julianne asked, playing along. The fact that she still hadn't gotten anything either loomed vividly in her mind. She still wasn't sure how to sign the card. Julianne? Julia? Both? No name .. no card ...?

"Tomorrow," Leigh answered. "I'm a bit behind, huh?"

The actress shrugged. "Sometimes it takes a while to find the perfect gift."

"True," Leigh agreed. Suddenly, she brightened. "Hey, do you wanna go out with us tomorrow night?"

Julianne started to say no, but got interrupted.

"Oh, c'mon," Leigh insisted. "It'll be fun! Do you have plans or something?"

Moping came to mind. "Not really," she admitted.

"Then?" Leigh persisted.

Julianne looked up at Leigh's pleading face and relented. "Okay," she said, wondering what possessed her to keep digging her own grave.

And knowing the answer all too well.

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Julianne awoke to hammering in the distance. Her eyes opened slowly, attempting to bring into focus the haziness of her surroundings. The time of day lay shrouded in mystery until her vision cleared: 9:30am.

Her gaze unwittingly landed on the framed portraits along the wall. Julianne found it fascinating to think that every shape, every color, was a mere breath of life from Kris's hands. Instantly, she wondered what Kris looked like while she painted. It led her to wonder whether she would ever find out.

From the paintings, her gaze drifted to the window. The sky was gray, or maybe that was just the way New York City looked at nine in the morning. Julianne had never thought to notice before. There was something about the City that made Julianne feel lonely; alienated from a world that sought to embrace her. New York made her wish for something beyond the silence of an empty apartment. Perhaps it was the close proximity to hope that led her to desire things she'd never thought necessary.

Or lack thereof, she thought, turning her head to face the ceiling. Her mind drifted back to her conversation with Karen, which led unavoidably to thoughts of Naomi Mosier. The director was beautiful, Julianne had to admit. And she couldn't deny the small flutter of excitement that knowing another woman was interested in her brought.



She sighed, knowing that Adrian would tell her to go for it. Or at least not stop it from happening. But could she do that? What is unfair to use one to replace the other? Did it matter when there was nothing to replace? Naomi was an open door ... Kris was a brick wall with no obvious opening.

Julianne smiled, thinking of *Harry Potter* and the secret brick combination that led to Diagon Alley. Rolling her eyes, she focused again on the paintings.

After tonight, Kris would know the truth; Julianne vowed to tell her. It was the only birthday present that wouldn't be a lie.

The actress shut her eyes and willed her mind to follow. It was far too early for reality.

Hours later, Julianne stared critically at the reflection of herself in the elevator doors. There was poor lighting and a large dent from what looked like an angry fist distorting the image.

The dent momentarily distracted the actress from her self-evaluation. It made her wonder what could possibly elicit such a violent action. Love? It seemed like the perfect cover for something far uglier. Nathan hitting Kris couldn't have stemmed from love. Her blue eyes darkened at the memory. She'd find a way to make Nathan pay. And it would be far more painful than a punch to the face.

The thought comforted her enough to turn her point-of-interest back to her reflection. It had taken her hours to decide on jeans and a white sleeveless tee. As an afterthought, she'd opted for a leather jacket as well. Just in case they were headed to the North Pole for dinner.

She shook her head and nervously cast her gaze upward, toward the numbers atop the elevator doors. The first two numbers were missing and the rest refused to light up. Julianne had no idea what floor she was on. She just hoped it would stop at the correct one.

Finally, the doors painfully opened. She tried desperately to ignore the pain in her stomach that accompanied the anticipation of seeing Kris.

Making sure that the birthday card she'd picked up was still inside her jacket pocket, she headed toward the apartment door. In spite of finding it open, she felt the need to knock.

"Julianne?" Leigh called from somewhere in the apartment.

Stepping inside, Julianne called back, "Yeah."

Leigh appeared a moment later, wearing a silk bathrobe and a pink towel around her head. "Oh, my God, is that Prada?"

Julianne was caught off-guard by the question. Reflexively, she glanced behind her. Then realized that Leigh was referring to her jacket. "I think so," she answered, feeling embarrassed. So much for dressing casually.

"I was looking at a cheap knock-off of that same exact jacket," Leigh announced. "'Course, I couldn't afford that either." She laughed. "Wanna help me decide what to wear?"



Julianne was grateful that Leigh never remained on one topic of conversation for very long. "I'm not much of a fashion expert," the actress admitted. In fact, she'd had to call Karen earlier to ask what outfit she should wear. Always the helpful one, Karen had responded with, "You look hot in everything."

Perhaps it was time to invest in a male gay friend.

"Then you can keep me company," Leigh suggested. "I called Jeremy and he might accidentally bump into us there. So I've got to dress to impress tonight."

Julianne didn't bother asking where "there" was. She could already tell that this had been a mistake. They hadn't gone anywhere yet and Julianne already felt like a fifth wheel. Unconsciously, she glanced toward Kris's bedroom and noticed that the door was open and the lights were out.

"She's out with her brother and his boyfriend," Leigh explained. "She'll be back soon."

The doorbell buzzed before Julianne had a chance to comment.

"Anthony," Leigh guessed, walking toward the intercom. She pressed the button, and spoke into the speaker. "Go away, we don't want any."

A male voice laughed. "You sure? I've got some great deals on watches and hair products."

Julianne rolled her eyes.

"Fine," Leigh acquiesced, after two seconds of mock consideration. "Come on up." She opened the door and turned back to Julianne. "I'm gonna go change. You two can entertain each other."

The evening had just gone from bad to worse. "Sure," she found herself saying. Why not? It made sense that she would get stuck all alone with the boyfriend of the woman she was in love with. *I must have been a politician in another life*, Julianny decided.

Leigh started toward her room but stopped and turned around suddenly. "Oh, listen, whatever you do, don't tell Anthony that Kris's brother is gay."

"Okay," Julianne agreed, though she felt like welcoming Anthony into the apartment with that particular announcement. Too bad she wouldn't actually go through with it.

Anthony didn't bother knocking on the half open door and just walked right in. It took him a moment to notice Julianne, but when he did, he actually looked surprised. "Hi," he greeted, his gaze shifting from Julianne to Kris's bedroom.

"Hello," Julianne replied civilly. "Kris is out with her brother."

"Yeah, I know," Anthony replied, holding up his cell phone. "Just got off the phone with her. She'll be here soon."

Julianne felt like whipping out her own cell phone. She wasn't sure why. There's something about jealousy that makes one do stupid things.

"I didn't know that you and Kris were such good friends," Anthony commented.



Julianne wasn't sure how to reply to that. She guessed that he was alluding to the fact that she was going out with them, and said, "Leigh invited me." Suddenly she felt awkward. What would Kris think of her tagging along? Didn't Julianne Franqui have better things to do? What was she trying to prove, anyway?

"Well, I think it's cool of you to come," he answered. There was a sudden lull in the conversation that Anthony immediately filled, "So, do you enjoy acting?"

"Yes," Julianne answered. What else was there to say? She leaned against the back of the couch and crossed her arms. She figured conversing with Anthony would be a test in willpower. She couldn't figure out what Kris saw in him. He was okay looking, but nothing out of the ordinary. Kris could do better. Much, much better. "What do you do?"

Anthony shrugged. "At the moment I work at a flower shop," he answered. "I know it sounds kind of gay, but it pays decent and it's easy enough."

Loser. "Interesting," she commented instead.

"But I'm putting myself through college," he added, his chest puffing up slightly at the announcement. "I'm really an artist."

That's right. Julianne suddenly remembered what Kris saw in him. She wondered if he was any good. "Must be nice dating someone who is also an artist."

Anthony nodded. "Yeah, Kris is really great. I started talking to her because I was impressed with some of her work; truly breathtaking."

Julianne nodded, not knowing what else to say. Luckily, she didn't have to come up with anything. Kris chose that moment to enter the apartment. She carried a bunch of shopping bags with her. "Sorry I'm late," she said to Anthony. Then her gaze fell on Julianne. "Oh, hi," she said.

"Hi," Julianne replied. "Happy birthday," she added lamely.

Kris smiled. "Thanks." She held up the bags. "William and Mark went crazy buying me stuff." She laughed.

Anthony stepped over to give Kris a kiss.

Julianne entertained herself by staring down at the carpet. When she heard Anthony's voice again, she looked up.

"Who's this Mark?" Anthony asked casually, though his tone revealed an underlying layer of concern and jealousy.

Julianne almost smirked.

"William's friend," Kris answered simply. She glanced at Julianne quickly before saying, "I'm gonna put on one of my new outfits and then we can head out. Okay?"

Anthony nodded.

Kris started toward her room. "Leigh's still getting dressed?" she asked as she passed Julianne.



"Oh, you're home," Leigh said, stepping out of her bedroom almost on cue. "Have fun?"

Kris nodded. "Awesome time," she answered. "I'm gonna go change and I'll be right out." She disappeared into her room and shut the door.

Leigh turned to Julianne. "What do you think?" she asked, referring to the outfit she was wearing.

Julianne thought she looked fine. "Very nice," she said.

"You're a girl, you don't count," Leigh commented, turning to Anthony. "Well?"

"I'd do you," Anthony responded, winking.

Leigh smiled. "Thanks, Tony." She glanced at Julianne. "See? That's what you should've said."

Julianne laughed, wondering what Leigh would've said if she had indeed answered that way.

"Which purse?" Leigh asked, holding up about four different ones. She stared expectantly at Julianne.

The actress wished she had her fashion designer with her. "Um, the black one," she suggested.

"Good, I'm glad you think so too." Leigh tossed the other purses into the bedroom and posed. "How do I look now?"

"Good," Julianne answered.

Leigh shook her head and glanced at Anthony. "Tone?"

"I'd still do you."

Leigh glared pointedly at Julianne.

"I'd do you too," Julianne finally said.

"Excellent," Leigh answered, beaming. "Let's hope Jere—"

Kris opened the door to her bedroom and shut the light before stepping outside. "Ready," she called, interrupting Leigh mid-sentence.

Julianne glanced over at Kris and felt the blood in her body rush toward a very specific spot. She blinked.

"Mark picked it out," Kris said, by way of explanation. She appeared slightly embarrassed.

Oh. My. God. Julianne's gaze travelled from the high-heeled leather boots to the tight leather pants and up to the black tank top. She managed to close her mouth before anyone noticed, then forced her gaze away.

Anthony was positively drooling.



Julianne felt a pang of envy shoot through her body and her jaw tightened. She kept her eyes focused on the kitchen counter so she wouldn't be tempted to look at Kris.

"Tell Mark to take me shopping next time!" Leigh said, nodding in approval. "Is the birthday girl ready to party?"

Kris nodded. "Let's go."

Julianne sighed and followed the group out of the apartment. It was going to be a very long night.

Kris was having a hard time keeping her gaze off of Julianne. Something about those deep blue eyes kept calling her back. For most of the evening, Kris had been trying to figure out why Julianne had agreed to come. Had she and Leigh become such good friends? Or did Julianne Franqui have nothing better to do?

Unable to come up with an answer, Kris cast a glance around the small table, which stood laden with empty beer bottles and shot glasses. Leigh, Jeremy and Anthony had claimed most of the alcohol, while Kris was still nursing her first legally purchased Corona. Julianne, on the other hand, had opted for a virgin piña colada. Kris wasn't sure what to make of that order. Did Julianne not drink at all?

Kris wished she had the guts to ask Julianne some questions. For some bizarre reason, she was intrigued. Or perhaps it wasn't bizarre at all. Julianne Franqui was a Hollywood star after all; it was natural to be curious. And yet, all Kris could do was grab the slightly warm Corona and take another sip.

Inadvertently, her gaze travelled across the table and landed on Julianne's flawless face. The actress was watching the latest karaoke victim on stage, which gave Kris ample opportunity to study the pensive features on Julianne's face. But instead of taking advantage of the situation, Kris chose to look over at Anthony.

Her boyfriend was being unusually quiet, probably due in part to all of the alcohol he'd consumed. Amazingly enough, he didn't appear particularly drunk; just ... quiet. She was about to say something to him, when his cell phone went off.

"Yeah?" he answered, sticking a finger in his unoccupied ear to block out the noise.

Kris watched the parade of features as they appeared on Anthony's face as she tried to decipher the nature of the call.

"Is he okay?" Anthony asked. "Then why do I have to go? It's Kris's birthday. Okay! Okay!" He snapped the cell phone shut and looked apologetically at Kris. "Sam sprained his ankle or something. Mom wants me to meet them at the hospital."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Kris asked automatically.

Anthony shook his head and rose. "Nah, you deserve better than to spend the rest of your birthday in the hospital. I'll call you tomorrow," he promised, leaning over to kiss her.

Kris kissed him back, but pulled away after a moment. "Okay," she agreed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear, then kissed her cheek before walking away.



"Well, that sucks," Leigh commented, once Anthony had left. "Do you want to leave?"

"No," Kris answered. "Why should I?" She glanced quickly at Julianne to catch those intense blue eyes staring back at her. Kris instantly looked at Leigh.

Leigh glanced at Jeremy, then back at Kris. "Well, Jeremy was just telling me about this really cool club uptown."

"It's got neon lights everywhere," Jeremy added.

Kris guessed they were trying to imply a change in location. "Dance club?" she asked, not feeling much up to dancing.

"Well, you can also sit there," Leigh answered. "As you're doing now."

Kris shrugged. "I'm kind of digging the karaoke music," she said, thinking it was a good way of giving Leigh some alone time with Jeremy. "Why don't you two go ahead. Oh, and Julianne, if you want."

"But it's your birthday," Leigh argued. "I'm not leaving you alone."

Kris kept glancing over at Jeremy, trying to give Leigh some kind of signal that she understood. "Actually," she said, glancing at her watch, "it's after midnight, so you're free."

Leigh sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Kris answered. "After that shopping spree with Mark, I'm perfectly content to sit here and listen to bad music."

"By yourself?"

Julianne finally spoke up. "Actually, I think I'll hang here and listen to the bad music, too. It's kind of grown on me."

Kris bit her lip at the announcement. Julianne wanted to stay with her? Why?

Leigh didn't offer much complaint after that. "Okay, catch you guys later, then," she said. She paused long enough to ask Kris, "Did you have a good birthday?"

"The best," Kris assured her.

"Happy birthday," Jeremy said, then followed Leigh out of the bar.

Kris wasn't entirely sure what to do or say. Actually, she could think of a few things, she just didn't have the guts to say them. Not yet, anyway. She turned her attention to the man on stage, who was in the middle of singing an off-tune rendition of "Last Dance." At least it was a good song. She was so engrossed in the painful display before her that she didn't notice Julianne had moved closer. That is, until she felt soft breath on her ear.

"I didn't take you for a karaoke fan," Julianne commented.

Kris smiled. "I enjoy the occasional torture."



"Masochist," Julianne teased.

Kris turned, forcing the actress to sit back. "What's your excuse?"

The question appeared to catch the actress off-guard. Finally, she said, "I'm not much of a dancer," she said.

"Or drinker," Kris noted.

Julianne shrugged. "I like to keep focused." She grinned crookedly. "Though, I think they put some rum in this by mistake."

Kris arched a brow. "Can I see?"

Julianne handed the drink over, and waited patiently for Kris to sample it.

"Definitely not a virgin," Kris confirmed, handing it right back.

Julianne took a sip. "I feel naughty just drinking it."

Kris burst out laughing.

"What?" Julianne asked, innocently.

Kris shrugged, amused. "I just wasn't expecting you to say that." Not that she had any idea what she should expect. Her attention was suddenly drawn to the stage, where the previous performance ended. "Can you sing?" she found herself asking.

"Singing is not on my resume, if that's what you're asking," Julianne answered, glancing worriedly at the stage.

Kris grinned wickedly, wondering if the bottle of Corona was kicking in, or if she'd simply lost her mind. "I dare you," she said.

"Dare me to what?" Julianne asked, looking perplexed. Then her eyes registered meaning. "Up there?"

Kris nodded, figuring she had nothing to lose. "Yeah," she answered. "Sing .. um, 'Like A Virgin'."

Julianne cocked her head to the side, staring curiously at Kris. "And why do you want me to do this?"

"You're an actress, no?"

Julianne smiled, and stood up. "If this appears on tomorrow's news, I'm coming after you," she said, and started toward the stage.

Kris laughed, not believing her eyes. Was Julianne serious? Apparently so...

Julianne jumped on the small stage and grabbed the microphone as though she'd done it a thousand times before. The crowd suddenly felt silent.



Kris looked around, amazed at the fact that every eye in the room was suddenly on Julianne. She, too, then turned her attention to the actress on the stage, who appeared to have found the song she wanted.

"How are you folks doing tonight?" Julianne asked. Some people answered. Some people clapped. "My name is Julianne Franqui—" She was interrupted by loud cheering. "And I'm going to sing you a little song. But, before I do, I'd like you all to wish my friend Kris over there a happy birthday. She just turned twenty-one today."

Kris sank down in her chair as all eyes suddenly turned toward her. She wanted to crawl under the table and stay there.

When the happy birthday cheering died down, Julianne continued. "Kris requested this song, and so here goes."

Thankful that the spotlight wasn't on her anymore, Kris sat up straighter. Her heart was hammering in her chest for reasons undecipherable to her. She felt elated and nervous and amazed all at once. For a long moment, everything felt surreal.

And then the song began. And the crowd began to cheer. And Kris found herself both unable to stop laughing and unable to keep her gaze off of the enigmatic woman on stage.

*"I was beat incomplete
I'd been had, I was sad and blue
But you made me feel
Yeah, you made me feel
Shiny and new*

*Like a virgin
Touched for the very first time . . . "*

Julianne took the microphone off the stand and jumped off stage without missing a beat. She began singing to a young couple nearby. Kris noticed that the guy's jaw was hanging slightly open, much to the annoyance of his female companion. The actress winked at the woman and moved on to a different table.

Kris couldn't stop grinning, and occasionally laughing. One moment the actress was completely silent and the next she was jumping around the bar, singing "Like A Virgin" as though her life depended on it. Kris had no idea what to make of it. And she was having too much fun to worry about it.

When Julianne got near enough, she took her leather jacket off in one swift motion and tossed it toward Kris. The artist caught it smoothly, her senses suddenly attuned to the pleasant mixture of leather and perfume.

*"You're so fine and you're mine
Make me strong, yeah you make me bold
Oh your love thawed out
Yeah, your love thawed out
What was scared and cold . . . "*

Kris's gaze caught Julianne's, and for an interminable moment, she forgot how to breathe.



Julianne suddenly forgot the words to the song she was singing and had to break eye contact with Kris in order to catch the lyrics on the machine. Luckily, she caught the next line before it disappeared off the screen. Making sure to keep her eyes away from Kris's face, she focused on the rest of the song.

*"You're so fine and you're mine
I'll be yours 'till the end of time
'Cause you made me feel
Yeah, you made me feel
I've nothing to hide . . ."*

Somehow she managed to reach the ending without any major catastrophes. She took a bow the moment everyone started clapping. Somehow the fact that she'd just sung in public didn't daunt her. Perhaps it was the rum. She really didn't like alcohol. It made her do dumb stuff like this. And she wasn't even buzzed. If she got drunk she was certain she'd do a striptease to "Human Nature."

Replacing the microphone, she then turned and headed back to the table. It occurred to her suddenly that she'd have to face Kris. That part did faze her, though she didn't slow her pace. *Well, she did dare me.*

"I thought you said singing wasn't on your resume?" Kris commented as soon as Julianne sat down.

Julianne smiled. "It was," she admitted. "But I took it off. Now it's just reserved for special occasions and random dares."

"Why'd you take it off?" Kris asked curiously.

Shrugging, Julianne said, "It's not something I love to do. And when I first started out, my agent told me that any little skill helped. So, I put that down."

Kris nodded, her attention suddenly distracted by the approaching waitress.

The waitress placed a new piña colada in front of Julianne. "From her," she said, motioning to a solitary figure sitting at the bar.

Surprised, Julianne turned and lifted her drink in appreciation. She nodded her head and turned back to Kris.

"Do women buy you drinks often?" Kris asked.

Julianne racked her memory and shrugged. "I'm sure it's happened before. People do strange things for me." She nearly winced as the words passed through her lips. *Pretentious much?*

But Kris simply nodded. She cast a glance over at the woman by the bar. "She's staring over here," she said, her gaze falling back on Julianne's face. "She probably wants you."

Nearly choking on her drink, Julianne stared at Kris. "Excuse me?"

"Does that sort of thing bother you?" Kris wondered. "I mean, women being interested in you?"



Julianne had no idea how to answer that question. "No. Why?"

Kris glanced at the woman again and smiled. "I dare you to go talk to her."

"Um, why?"

Kris grinned. "Just checking to see where you draw the line at dares," she answered.

Julianne narrowed her eyes, but grinned. "Sneaky." She glanced over her shoulder at the woman. She was average looking, but not particularly Julianne's type. She turned back to Kris and smiled. "Very well." She rose, and taking her drink, headed for the bar.

The woman froze the moment she spotted Julianne heading toward her.

Julianne took a seat at the stool next to her and smiled. She offered her hand. "Hi, I'm Julianne."

It took the woman a moment to regain her composure, but she shook Julianne's hand eagerly. "Marissa. Marissa Blare."

"Thank you for the drink," Julianne said.

Marissa's grin couldn't have been wider. "Oh you're welcome."

Julianne leaned forward to whisper in the woman's ear, who tensed at the gesture. "Okay, don't look over, but you know that girl I was sitting with?"

Marissa nodded.

"It's her birthday today and she's acting a bit fiesty," Julianne announced, sitting back. "She sent me over here to talk to you ... so I don't know."

Marissa glanced over at Kris who was doing a horrible job of pretending she wasn't staring over. "She's beautiful."

Julianne tried her best to sound casual about that. "Why don't you go tell her that?" she suggested.

Marissa appeared to consider the offer, then finally said, "What's she having to drink?"

The actress grinned. "Corona."

Kris had no idea what Julianne was saying to the woman, but the way she was saying it made Kris more than a little confused. Was Julianne Franqui actually flirting with another woman? If so, what did that mean?

She tried to keep her gaze casual as she ventured another glance. Julianne was smiling brightly. *What in the world could they be talking about?* she wondered. The woman suddenly looked straight at her, forcing Kris to smile slightly. Then she shyly looked away. *Busted.* She focused on peeling the label off of her now empty Corona bottle.



"Looks like you're running low," a voice nearby commented.

Startled, Kris looked up to find the woman from the bar standing beside her. Confused, she glanced over at Julianne who was grinning from ear to ear and holding up her drink triumphantly. Kris's eyes narrowed slightly. Then softened when she realized the woman was still standing there.

An icy cold Corona was placed in front of her. "Didn't want you to go thirsty," the woman said.

Kris cleared her throat and sat up. "Uh, thank you," she said, not knowing what to make of the situation.

"My name's Marissa," the woman said, extending her hand forward.

Kris shook it quickly. "Kris," she said simply. She wished the woman would tell her why she'd walked over. The anticipation was making her sweat. She looked over at Julianne again and saw the actress engaged in vivid conversation with some guy. Annoyed, Kris turned back to Marissa.

"Julianne tells me it's your birthday," Marissa commented. "Are you having a good time?"

I was. Now I'm not sure what I'm having. "Yeah, great day," she said instead.

"Must be cool being friends with Julianne Franqui."

Were they friends? "She's really ... umm. ..." Kris glanced again at Julianne, and she had to stifle the impulse to say, "beautiful." Instead, she looked over at Marissa and said, "... something."

Marissa laughed. "She's something alright." She cleared her throat. "So, uh, do you want to go for a walk or something?"

"Excuse me?" Kris said, feeling entire body freeze.

Marissa tried again. "Well Julianne said that maybe you'd .. uh, be interested in .. ah..." She laughed nervously. "I'm not very good at this."

Kris's eyes narrowed to slits and she glanced sharply at Julianne Franqui. "Did she, now?" she asked, her hazel eyes locking with blue. Julianne grinned smugly and winked at her. Kris wondered what the going jail sentence for murdering actresses was lately. Turning back to the matter at hand, she smiled warmly at Marissa. "I'm actually kind of involved at the moment," she explained. "But, would you mind walking me out?"

Marissa looked surprised. "Uh, sure. No problem. I was heading out anyway."

"Thank you," Kris said, rising. "Let me just tell Julianne that I'm leaving."

"Okay. Sure."

Kris approached the actress and smiled. "Wow, Julianne, she's really cool," she said once she was within earshot.

The desired response was achieved. "Huh?"



Kris nodded. "She wants to show me her apartment uptown."

The look on Julianne Franqui's face was priceless. "Y-you're going to her apartment?"

Kris shrugged. "I have nothing else to do. Plus ..." She smiled shyly and leaned toward Julianne. "I don't know if it's the alcohol or what, but ... I'm feeling kind of curious tonight."

Julianne dropped the rest of the drink on the floor and instantly jumped as some splashed on her clothes. "Damn," she muttered. She picked up the cup and a few napkins and began dabbing away at the wet spots.

"You okay?" Kris asked, trying desperately not to crack up. "Did I just make you uncomfortable?"

Julianne shook her head. "Not at all. Nope." She wouldn't meet Kris's gaze.

"Don't you ever wonder what it's like?" Kris asked.

"What? What's what like? I mean, what what's like?"

Kris was having too much fun with this. "Kissing another woman."

"Well, I kissed Leigh," Julianne responded.

"You're right," Kris said. "And Leigh kissed you. So, I should experiment a little. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

"Nope," Julianne answered, frantically trying to wipe the stains off her jeans.

Kris grinned. "Okay. Well, I'll see you later. I left your coat on the chair."

Julianne nodded. "Have fun ..."

Kris turned around, a huge smile on her lips. She hadn't had so much fun in ... well, a long time. Ha!

Marissa rose when Kris approached. "Ready?"

"Ready," Kris confirmed, and headed out.

Julianne watched Kris exit the bar and she ceased her pointless attempts to clean her clothes. What had just happened?

"Women," some guy mumbled to himself as he passed by her, shaking his head and walking briskly toward some unknown destination.

Julianne nodded in agreement, even though he wasn't talking to her. Sighing, she walked over to the table and retrieved her jacket. What was Kris thinking, going off with some strange woman? Experimenting? Something wasn't right about that. A lot of things weren't right about that. Confused, and not at all sure what to feel, Julianne headed toward the door.

"I wish I'd had a camera," a familiar voice said from nearby. "Your face was classic."



Surprised, Julianne turned around and found herself staring into amused hazel eyes.

Kris laughed. "Actually, your face right now isn't bad either," she commented, looking smug.

Relief surged through her like a lightning bolt. She'd never been so happy to find out she'd been tricked. Julianne felt her face smile. "That wasn't very nice."

"Serves you right," Kris answered. "Trying to freak me out like that. What'd you think I was going to do? Run away screaming, 'Oh no! The lesbians are attacking?'"

Julianne started laughing. "Guess we're even. I mean, I did sing in public for you."

Kris appeared to consider that comment. "Mm, I suppose that's true."

Tell her the truth, a little voice reminded Julianne. It had been such a great night. Did she really want to ruin it now? "Would you mind coming to my apartment for a little while?" she found herself asking, hoping it didn't sound as weird as it seemed.

Hazel eyes studied Julianne's features for a short moment. "Sure," the artist answered, though she sounded confused. Or maybe curious. Or perhaps both.

Julianne was relieved that Kris didn't ask too many questions. Now all she had to do was muster up the courage to confess.

Julianne's apartment was exactly the same as it had been the last time Kris had stepped inside of it: empty. She wondered if Julianne ever considered hiring a decorator. Giving the place a makeover would be a ton of fun. The apartment could use a couch or two.

She followed behind the actress, lights turning on as Julianne hit switches along the way. Even the second time around, the place was impressive. Kris's gaze instantly fell on the view beyond the windows. But the windows turned reflective when the living room lights came on. Kris stared at Julianne's reflection for a moment, before stepping toward the actress.

The impeccably white carpet made Kris feel as if she were walking on a cloud. The living room space was bare, except for a laptop computer hooked up to a long phone line. Kris wouldn't have taken Julianne for an internet junkie. Thoughts of Julia entered Kris's mind. She hadn't heard much from her friend lately, though Kris had sent several emails.

There wasn't much else to look at, so Kris turned her attention to Julianne. "Did you want to show me the new addition to your living room?" she joked, referring to the computer on the floor. "It's nice. Were you going for a sort of technology versus simplicity motif?"

Blue eyes sparkled with amusement. "How'd you guess?"

"Guess I have an eye for detail," Kris responded, feeling strangely at ease. "Are you online?"

The question seemed to throw Julianne. "Pardon?"



"The computer, is it online?" Kris asked, wondering why Julianne appeared so nervous. Ever since she'd asked Kris over the actress had been acting a tad strange. But Kris was starting to realize that Julianne Franqui was a very odd woman; in a dorky, yet charming sort of way.

Julianne kneeled down in front of the computer and hit a button, which caused the screen saver to vanish. "I must have left it on," she answered. "Why?"

"May I check my email real quick? I'll probably be too tired to do it when I get home."

Julianne hesitated but said, "Sure."

"If you have a problem with me using your computer, it's okay," Kris said quickly, feeling like she was intruding somehow.

"I don't mind at all," Julianne assured her. "Just wish I had a table or something."

Kris smiled. "I'll live." She sat down in front of the computer and headed to her email server. Julianne had moved away to give Kris some privacy. Kris waited a little anxiously for her inbox to load. Julia wouldn't have forgotten her birthday, would she? When the screen finished loading, Kris found herself staring at the words 'no new messages' for a few seconds longer than necessary. Disappointed and more than a little hurt, she logged out.

Julianne was leaning against the kitchen counter when Kris finished. "Everything okay?" the actress asked.

Kris shrugged. "Yeah," she said, knowing she didn't sound particularly convincing. "I just have this friend I haven't heard from in a while."

"I'm sorry," Julianne said, in a way that made Kris stare at her.

She replied, "It's not your fault."

The actress lowered her eyes and fell silent. "Kris," she said softly and suddenly, her eyes suddenly meeting Kris's gaze. "I have to tell you something."

* * *

Julianne took a deep breath, the words forming on her lips. "Kris, I'm—" She was suddenly cut off by her ringing cell phone. *Fuck!* "Excuse me," she said to Kris and flipped open the telephone. "Yeah?" she demanded impatiently.

"Bitches R Us? Do you deliver, by chance?" Adrian commented.

Julianne rolled her eyes and turned back to Kris. "I'll be right back," she told her, and stormed into her bedroom, while trying not to look like she was storming. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it. "I was right in the middle of telling Kris."

"No way!"

"Yes way," Julianne confirmed.



"Then why the hell did you answer the phone?" Adrian wondered. "You have shitty confessional skills."

Julianne groaned. "And you have shitty timing."

"Hey, I'm not psychic," Adrian argued. "How was I to know you'd finally grown the balls to tell her?"

Julianne sighed. "This is going to be really hard," she admitted. "What if she hates me?"

"She won't."

"How do you know?"

"I don't, I'm just trying to make you feel better."

Julianne looked around her bedroom, where Kris's paintings lined the wall. She suddenly got an idea. "I'm gonna go. Call you later." She didn't wait for Adrian to reply before shutting off the phone and tossing it somewhere in her closet. Taking a deep breath, she walked out of the bedroom.

Kris was still standing where Julianne had left her. When she saw Julianne, she straightened up. "You okay?"

Julianne wasn't sure what the correct answer to that question would be, so she didn't answer it. "Look, Kris," she began. "There's something really important that you should know, and I realize that I should've told you sooner, but ... I didn't know how."

"What is it?" Kris asked, sounding worried.

Julianne hesitated, knowing it was her one and only chance to make things right. If she chickened out now there would be no going back. "I'll show you," she answered, her heart beating faster with each second that passed. She turned and led Kris to her bedroom. With every step, she was tempted to stop. She was tempted to turn around, to lie, to make up something stupid. She wanted to say something, anything. She knew she was sinking fast. And all she wanted was one last breath of fresh air before she let herself drown.

Kris was growing progressively more nervous. What could Julianne Franqui possibly have to tell her? And where were they going? Maybe it was a last minute surprise party? Or maybe Julianne Franqui was a freaky sex addict and had a bunch of people tied up in her room. Maybe she was a serial killer ...

At the door, Julianne paused and turned around so suddenly that Kris collided into her. Soft arms went around her to steady her, and Kris almost didn't want to move. Her body tingled where Julianne was touching her. She instantly stepped back. "I'm sorry," she apologized, confused and startled. "I wasn't expecting you to stop." Julianne looked so pained that Kris was tempted to hug her. It couldn't be that bad, could it?

The actress closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, they filled with unshed tears.



Kris didn't know what to say or do. What was going on? She wanted to make Julianne feel better, but how could she do that when she didn't know what was wrong? "Julianne?" she said softly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm really sorry for lying to you," Julianne whispered, and opened the door.

Kris didn't know how to reply to that, so she remained silent. She stepped into the room after Julianne, wondering what awaited her. Her heart hammered in her chest, afraid of the unknown. At first, all that she noticed was a neatly made bed and a nightstand with a lamp on top of it. The room was bare otherwise. Unsure of what she was supposed to be looking at, she glanced at Julianne for a clue.

The actress motioned to the wall behind Kris.

It took Kris a long moment to register what she saw when she turned around. The first thing she noticed was the frame. The picture inside of it didn't make sense until moments later when she noticed the other two.

Stepping further into the room, she grew completely oblivious to the fact that Julianne was still standing there. She was trying desperately to understand how the painting Julia had bought, the painting the strange woman with no money had taken, and the painting Kris had sent to Julia had ended up in Julianne Franqui's bedroom.

She knew there could only be one explanation, but it made about as much sense to her as the entire situation. Slowly, she turned to Julianne who was patiently awaiting a reaction. "It was you?" she asked, unable to believe what she was thinking; unable to wrap her mind around the million thoughts running through her head at that moment.

"I'm sorry," Julianne said.

But Kris didn't really hear her. Her mind was rapidly putting together the pieces of the puzzle. The \$15,000 ... the fact that Leigh got a role in Julianne Franqui's movie ... the similarity in their voices ... Julianne reading *Harry Potter* ... the lack of emails ... Julia's hesitation in talking about herself ... "Oh my God," Kris whispered, suddenly feeling sick. She wanted to stop thinking, but the more she tried, the harder her mind worked to make sense of it all. She needed to breathe. She needed fresh air. She needed to get out of there. "I ... I have to go."

Kris didn't wait for Julianne to answer. She bolted out of the bedroom door and out of the apartment, vaguely recognizing the sound of her own name on Julianne Franqui's lips as the actress called after her.

50

Kris couldn't remember getting back to her apartment. Did she walk here? Take the subway? Somewhere, between Julianne's apartment and her own, she'd lost touch with her surroundings. Unable to retrace her steps, she reached for her keys, anxious to reach asylum. Her frazzled mind barely registered the fact that the front door was already unlocked as she stepped inside the dark apartment.

Muffled voices in the dark welcomed her arrival. Startled, Kris switched on the light just in time to see Jeremy fall over attempting to get his pants back on. Leigh was somewhere out of Kris's sight. "Hope I didn't interrupt anything," Kris commented, momentarily distracted from her worries by the scene before her.



Leigh popped up from behind the couch, her shirt inside out and backwards. "We were just watching TV," she said, breathlessly.

Kris glanced toward the television set. "Really," she said. "It usually works better when you turn it on."

Jeremy appeared a second later. "Hi, Kris," he greeted lamely.

"You know, you do have your own room," Kris reminded her roommate.

Leigh brightened. "Why don't we go look at it, Jer? It's got some of Kris's paintings. You'll love them." She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the bedroom.

Kris stood there long enough to see them disappear into Leigh's room, then shook her head and headed toward her own. On any other day she would've worried that Leigh was jumping into something too quickly. On any other day, she would've cared.

Instead, she found herself strangely torn between where she stood and where her mind wandered. A part of her still hadn't left Julianne's bedroom. A part of her wished that all of her had stayed.

But she'd listened to the part that had wanted to run. Sometimes the truth could be suffocating. Except ...

Except she still wasn't sure what the truth was.

Her gaze fell on the laptop computer resting on the bed. She stared at it for a long while, attempting to decipher her feelings. There were just too many unanswered questions keeping her from settling on a firm reaction.

Was all of Julia a lie?

It pained her that someone she'd grown so close to, and trusted so deeply could turn out to be ...

What? What was she exactly?

Kris sat at the edge of her bed and stared at the door, not really seeing it. She was angry, she was hurt, and she was confused. She wanted to confront Julianne and she wanted to never see her again. The duality of her feelings battled within her. The truth was, she didn't know what she wanted.

Julia was Julianne? How could that be? How hadn't she noticed? If Julianne hadn't said anything, would she have figured it out on her own?

She thought back to Julia's emails: actress ... poet ... lesbian. Kris frowned. How much of Julia was Julianne? Was it all a lie, a joke gone too far? Did Julianne like to fool people on the Internet? Befriend them and then make fools of them?

Anger began replacing Kris's initial shock. How could anyone be so cruel? What right did Julianne Franqui have to lie to people like that? Just because she was famous didn't mean she was above



the rest of the world. "And just when I was beginning to think I was wrong about her," Kris muttered, rolling her eyes. "Serves me right."

* * *

7:02

It had been 7:02 for what felt like hours now. Julianne stared at the alarm clock for a second longer, willing it to change, willing it to prove that time had not stopped.

She stared down at the envelope in her hand, staring at one side, and then flipping it over. All it said was, "Happy Birthday, Kris." The card didn't say anything more elaborate than that. Still, she'd chickened out of giving it to her. And now she was relieved she hadn't.

Sighing, she tossed the card aside and glanced at the time.

7:03

Guess it hadn't stopped after all; just changed slowly.... so slowly that after a while you stopped paying attention to it. Change was funny that way. It crept up on you, sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly. But regardless of pace or time, the only thing left were shards of broken memories, waiting to be stepped on without shoes.

Rolling her eyes, she slumped down on the bed. Her eyes kept drifting to the paintings on the wall. They hurt to look at now. They kept reminding her that she should've chased after Kris. That she should've tried to explain.

Explain what, though? That she'd been too selfish to be honest? That she wanted to cling to the fantasy of something that could never be?

Julianne closed her eyes, her body exhausted, her mind alert. She wanted to call Kris. Even if all that Kris did was yell at her, it was better than the silence of her room.

Said silence was suddenly interrupted by a familiar sound. Julianne opened her eyes and narrowed them, trying to focus on where the sound was coming from. She turned her head to look at the closet. The closet...?

She ran over and began tossing things out, looking at them briefly before continuing her search. Eventually, she found what she'd been looking for. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

"Julianne?"

Leaning against the closet door, Julianne tried to stifle her disappointment. "Speaking," she said. What had she been expecting? Did Kris even have her cell phone number?

"It's Naomi," came the director's voice. "Mosier," she added a second later.

"Oh, hi," Julianne greeted, trying to sound as polite as her mood would allow.

There was a short pause while the director regarded somebody else. "Julianne?"

"Still here," the actress replied, feeling impatient.



"I'm really sorry to be calling you so early, but I was hoping you could stop by the set today. I want to see where you and Samantha stand, chemistry-wise. I know we're not going to shoot those scenes quite yet, but I'd like to know how much work they're going to need."

"I can be there in an hour," Julianne replied, anxious for a distraction. She paused, suddenly worried. "Is Leigh Radlin going to be there?"

"No," Naomi answered. "We'll be working on your scenes with her on Monday. Why?"

"Just curious," Julianne answered, relieved. She didn't want to have to face Leigh. Not yet.

"See you in one hour," Naomi replied.

"Okay," Julianne answered, hanging up. Glad to have something to occupy her mind besides the turtle-speed passing of time, Julianne headed for the shower.

After calculating, and recalculating her life, Kris had come to a solution. It wasn't going to be easy, but she was going to have to do it. If Julianne Franqui thought she could buy Kris off with her fancy money, she had another thing coming. Kris was planning to pay back every last cent. It was going to take a long time, but she'd do it. And then she'd be rid of Julianne or Julia or whatever her name happened to be today, and return to a sane, peace-filled, internetridden existence. From now, she'd only speak to her father online. At least she knew he was the real deal.

Satisfied with her decision, she flipped open the newspaper.

"Please tell me you made coffee," Leigh mumbled as she entered the kitchen.

Kris arched a brow at her friend. She looked like death. "Long night?"

Leigh nodded through a yawn. "Jeremy and I had a truly bonding experience."

"Sex will do that," Kris commented.

Leigh paused in her coffee-pouring activity to stare at Kris. "Excuse me? I didn't sleep with him. We fooled around, there's a difference."

"My bad," Kris muttered.

"Why are you reading the newspaper?" Leigh asked, changing the subject away from her incriminating activities.

Kris sighed, not wanting to get into it. She looked up at Leigh. "I'm looking for a job?"

"Why? I thought rent was covered." Leigh sat down at the table, coffee in hand. "Did it run out already?"

"No, I'm giving it back," Kris answered.

Leigh stared. "Are you feeling okay?"



"Actually, no," Kris answered. It was inevitable. She took a deep breath. "You know Julia?"

Leigh nodded.

"And you know Julianne?"

Another nod.

"They're the same exact person," Kris explained, rising from the table to put the coffee mug in the sink. She didn't give Leigh a chance to respond before continuing, "Julianne told me last night. Took me back to her apartment where she proceeded to disclose her collection of my paintings. All of them, including the one I gave to the mystery lady. Guess who that was? Ugh."

Kris turned the faucet on, and began rinsing the cup, speaking over the loud stream of water. "But I'm going to pay her back every last of those \$15,000. Who would do such a thing? Pretending to be someone she's not just to ..." Kris wasn't sure what it was Julianne had gotten out of it, but she was sure it wasn't good. "She probably thought it was such a great joke. All her high society friends sitting around making fun of me."

Unable to clean the mug any more than it already was, she shut off the water and turned to her friend. "I feel like such an idiot," she admitted softly. Leigh sat back in the chair, looking stunned. "It was Julianne? All that time...Wow." She looked around thoughtfully. "You realize this means that we've been friends with Julianne Franqui for months!"

"Friends?" Kris spoke up. "Friends don't lie to each other like that. They don't pretend to be people they're not. If she really wanted to be my friend, she would've told me the truth from the beginning, instead of playing all of these mind games." Kris shook her head. "She's not my friend. She's just a stuck up actress with nothing better to do."

"She did get me a role in the movie," Leigh pointed out softly. "Man, this is too much information to process at this hour."

Kris nodded, agreeing. The truth was, that in spite of her anger, she was confused. And she wanted to not be confused any more.

"So what did she say to defend herself?" Leigh wondered.

Kris shrugged, leaning against the kitchen counter. "I ran out of there before she could say anything. I just ... couldn't ... deal. I needed air or something. How does one respond to something like that?"

"Are you going to go talk to her?"

"Yeah, I'm going to the bank and take out what's left of the money and hand it back to her. Then I'll see about paying the rest back."

"Do you think she'll take it?" Leigh asked doubtfully.

"Well, I don't want it," Kris replied. "I want nothing more to do with Julianne Franqui ... ever."



Julianne stared at her co-star. At first, she'd wondered why Naomi had chosen to cast her, being that Samantha wasn't one of the actresses that Julianne had auditioned with. But, Julianne now understood. The woman was amazing. It was almost enough to make Julianne forget Samantha's horrid personality.

Almost.

Julianne focused on staying in character. In about four lines, she was going to be kissing the actress before her. Julianne figured it had to be better than her past experiences.

On the second to last line of Samantha's monologue, Julianne stepped forward. On the second to last word, she leaned down. But before her lips managed to press against the other woman's, the director said, "Cut!"

Instantly, Julianne stepped away and regarded the director expectantly.

Naomi Mosier had a smile on her face. "Perfect," she commented. "We'll work on the blocking and pacing next week, but otherwise, nice job. Guess I can rest easy."

"Are we done for today?" Samantha asked, her tone impatient.

Naomi nodded distractedly, her attention on a different part of the set. "See you Monday." Julianne turned to leave, but a voice stopped her.

"Julianne?"

The actress turned to face the director. "Yeah?"

"Are you busy tonight?" Naomi asked, sounding hesitant and embarrassed.

Julianne's heart sped up, Karen's revelation still fresh on her mind. For a long moment, she didn't know how to answer. Finally, she said, "Not really." The words left her mouth before she could think about what she was saying.

Encouraged, Naomi continued. "There's this independent film playing at a small theater in Manhattan. I thought you might like to see it. I heard it's really good."

Well, that was a first. She was being asked out by her director, her *female* director. Had Karen told Naomi that she might have a chance after all? Or was Naomi just that perceptive? Or brave? Or both.

Julianne cleared her throat, trying to figure out what to say. Did she want to sit around her apartment feeling miserable all night? What if Kris called? What if she didn't? What if ... what if ... what if ... "Sounds good," she said at last. "I'm sure Adrian would like to hear about it."

"Adrian?" Naomi questioned.

"My—" Julianne hesitated. She was going to say boyfriend. But was it worth it to lie? Did it even matter any more? "Best friend. He's a director."

"Adrian," Naomi repeated as if trying to remember something. "Cruz?"



Julianne nodded. "The one and only."

"I'm a fan of his work. It's ..."

"Weird," Julianne finished for her.

Naomi laughed. "I was going to say provocative."

Julianne grinned. "Weird," she insisted.

"You should see some of my earlier films," Naomi replied.

Julianne smiled. "I have," she admitted. "I especially enjoyed *Galactic Cannibal*, it was ... um ..."

She searched for the right adjective.

"Weird?" Naomi guessed, smiling.

Julianne grinned. "Well, I was going to say psychotic."

Naomi laughed. "Thanks a lot." She glanced off to the side as something caught her eye.

Julianne noticed that someone was calling the director over, and figured their small chat was over. She found herself strangely relieved, and even more oddly disappointed.

"Duty calls," Naomi said, turning back to Julianne. "Pick you up at 7:30?"

Julianne started to nod, then paused. "Do you know where I live?"

Naomi smiled and started walking away. "See you tonight."

Julianne watched the director, not really thinking anything in particular, other than the fact that she'd managed to not think about Kris for about five minutes and that was major progress.

Maybe tonight she'd make it past ten.

Julianne had been ready by seven. Or would have been, had she not decided at 7:26 that what she was wearing wasn't appropriate. What did one wear on a date with a director, anyway?

She realized she was being ridiculous, standing there, in front of the full-length mirror with her pants around her ankles. "I used to be so cool," she whispered regretfully.

The knock on the door jarred her from her indecision. "Shit," she mumbled, reaching down to pull the pants back on.

She hopped across the room, trying to pull the pants up around her butt. Had she gained weight? "Be right there!" she yelled, hoping her voice would somehow make it across the apartment and through the front door.

Pants in place, she made a dash for the shirt she'd tossed across the room. It was inside out. "Damnit," she muttered, as she heard another knock. She stuck her head through the neck of the tee shirt and darted toward the door, trying to get her hands through the sleeves as she ran.



Finally, she was dressed. Or at least, she hoped she was dressed. She debated running back to the room to look in the mirror, but decided she didn't really care. Throwing open the door, she said, "I'm sorry that I took so lo—" The rest of the words died in her throat. "Kris," she breathed.

Hazel eyes glanced behind the actress for a split second. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not interrupting," Julianne answered. "I was just getting dressed. Do you want to come in?" She glanced briefly behind Kris, hoping Naomi didn't show up now.

Kris glanced down, and cleared her throat. "No, uh, I just wanted to come by and give you this," she said, handing Julianne a piece of paper. "I'll get the rest of it back to you as soon as I can."

Julianne looked down at the object in her hand, and realized it was a check. "What's this for?"

"It's what's left of the money you gave me," Kris answered. "I don't want it."

Julianne looked up, frowning. "I didn't give you any money."

"Look, you can save your lies because I'm not buying them anymore," Kris replied, sounding angry. "I don't need your charity, and I don't need your guilt-money. So, just take it and don't make this any more complicated than it already is."

Julianne took a deep breath, and tore the check in half. "That money had nothing to do with guilt. I bought a painting from you."

"The painting was fifteen dollars," Kris countered.

"Well it was worth more to me," Julianne replied, her gaze on Kris'. She didn't want to be having this conversation. "Please don't make this about money," she said, looking down at the torn pieces of paper in her hand.

Kris stared at Julianne before responding. "What is it about, then?"

The buzzing of the intercom interrupted Julianne's answer. She stared at Kris regretfully for a moment, and then hit the button. "Franqui," she said.

"Hey, it's Naomi. Sorry I'm late."

Julianne sighed; knowing her conversation with Kris was over. "Come up." She turned back to Kris. "I'm sorry."

"Doesn't matter," Kris replied, starting to walk away. "See you around."

"Kris, wait," Julianne began, not sure what it was she wanted to say.

To Julianne's surprise, Kris stopped.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"That's what everyone says after they hurt someone," Kris replied, then shrugged, turning away again. "It doesn't fix anything."



Julianne swallowed, trying not to cry at the desperation she felt. "Then let me try and fix it."

When Kris turned back around, Julianne noticed that her eyes were moist. "I feel like my best friend just died. And you're the one that killed her." She shook her head, and started to walk away. Then she paused. Without turning, she added, "I know you think I'm mad at you because you lied. And that may have been true at first, but it's more than that." She glanced back. "What's really killing me is that you made me believe in something beautiful and special, and ripped it away forever." She looked away. "Good luck fixing that."

Somewhere down the hall, Julianne registered the sound of the elevator doors opening. She glanced in that direction, just as Naomi stepped out into the hall. The director greeted Kris, who smiled politely as she disappeared inside the elevator.

Julianne stood frozen, unsure of what to do. Should she follow Kris? Should she let her go? What was the right thing to do? She didn't know. All that she knew was that she was dying inside and the pain was threatening to drown her whole.

"Are you okay?" Naomi asked, approaching the actress with concern.

Julianne knew she was about to start crying, but she needed to hold off until she was alone. "Look, I can't do this," she found herself saying. "I don't want to lead you on. I don't want to hurt you. I've done enough of that to last a lifetime, and at least right now, I have the choice to do something right for a change. I'm sorry." With that, she stepped into the apartment and closed the door.

Leaning her back against it, she let the tears fall.

51

After hours of staring at the ceiling, Kris had realized that several of the most popular constellations rested above her bed. Perhaps there were more hidden behind the Salvador Dali print above her, but she couldn't tell.

She couldn't help glancing at the laptop computer, which she'd hidden under a pile of clothes. The constant aching of her heart was starting to take its toll. The truth was, she missed her, whoever she was. She missed the emails, the phone conversations, the easy banter ... She missed ...

"Everything," she whispered, voicing her thought.

Well, there was always Leigh.

And yet, somehow ... it wasn't the same. Something wasn't the same, but Kris couldn't figure out what it was. Friendship was friendship ...

The thought of friendship made Kris frown. Lying wasn't friendship. But, still, she couldn't help but wonder how much of Julia was Julianne. How much was real? How much was a lie? If they balanced each other out, would she ever be able to forgive the actress?

Did she want to?



Kris sighed, knowing she did. She hated feeling angry. Carrying a grudge was exhausting. It was like a huge anvil crashing down on her head, over and over. She wanted the feeling to go away.

But she couldn't pretend that she wasn't hurt. And forgiving Julianne didn't bring Julia back. And how could she trust her again?

How could anything go back to being the same after it had been so irrevocably altered?

It couldn't.

Nothing could ever be the same.

Julianne found herself walking up the familiar sidewalk of Kris's street. After hours of evaluating and reevaluating her existence, she'd come to the realization that she was never going to sleep again.

Ever.

She could keep calling Karen and Adrian at the wee hours of the morning. She could keep staring out, at the view of New York, wondering what Kris was thinking at that moment. She could lay awake and wait for time to pass. She could think. She could worry ...

And before she'd know it, she'd be fifty and alone; a mere shadow of a movie star. Stuck obsessing about her lost youth ... her lost beauty ...

Her lost love.

Julianne stopped in front of Kris's building, gazing up. Her heart sped up as she started up the front steps.

If Kris wanted Julianne out of her life, then fine. But she wasn't going to go quietly.

Julianne's finger hovered over the button. It was two o'clock in the morning. Was she insane?

Before she had a chance to dwell any further on the question of her sanity, the door opened and someone walked out. Julianne took that as a sign.

Sneaking inside the building, she headed toward the elevator.

On the ride up to Kris's floor, Julianne wondered if she was dreaming. Had she fallen asleep without realizing?

She hoped not. It had been hard enough getting this far. And the hard part was still ahead.

Taking a deep breath, she waited for the doors to swoosh open. When they did, she stood in place. If she walked out, she'd probably go through with it. If she stayed in the elevator, she'd probably not come back up.

The doors began to slide closed.



She watched them.

The doors clicked shut.

Kris walked into the kitchen in search of something to drink. She yawned, wondering why she was still up at two-thirty in the morning.

Opening the fridge proved to be an unproductive activity. Grocery shopping was a must. How did they run out of food so quickly? It had only been a couple of days since she'd stocked up.

She was in the process of searching through the cupboards when the first knock came. It was so soft that the cabinets closing drowned out the sound.

The second knock was a little louder and caused Kris to pause and draw her brows together, listening.

The third knock caught Kris's full attention. She turned around and headed toward the door, wondering whom in their right mind would come over at this hour.

A glance through the peephole told her that it wasn't, in fact, anyone in their right mind. She sighed, and opened the door. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Two-thirty four," Julianne replied, not bothering to look at her watch. "I couldn't sleep."

Kris was about to snap at the actress, but let it go. It's not like she'd been sleeping either. "Well?"

Julianne handed over a piece of paper. "Here."

In spite of herself, Kris accepted it. "What is it?"

"Read it."

Kris unfolded the paper and read the contents, frowning as the words registered in her mind.

Dear Ms. Milano,

I bought a sketch of yours earlier. The figure in the picture reflected so much of how I feel sometimes, that it was as if it had been drawn with me in mind. I wondered if you have a gallery here in New York where I may perhaps view some more of your work?

Sincerely,
J.R. Frank

Kris looked up. "I don't understand."

"It's the first email I sent you," Julianne explained.



"I know, I recognize it," Kris replied. "But why are you giving it to me now?"

Julianne looked down. "Because that's all I wanted to tell you," she answered. "It wasn't meant to be a joke. It wasn't meant to be a big elaborate plot. I just wanted to let you know that I enjoyed your work."

"So you gave me a fake name," Kris countered.

"No, I gave you my real one," Julianne answered. "Julia Raye Frank. It's my birth name. I had it legally changed to Julianne Franqui when I was eleven."

Kris looked down at the email in her hand, not sure what to think. She hadn't known that Julianne Franqui wasn't her real name. Had Leigh? In all of her Internet searches, had she come across a Julia Raye Frank? Did it matter? This wasn't about the name.

"I came over because ... I want you to know that I wasn't lying," Julianne continued. "I may have lied about stupid things like what movie I was doing or what exactly it was I did for a living, but everything else was true."

When Kris didn't respond, Julianne continued.

"I am completely out of shape. I really love to cook. I love your paintings. I spend hours watching the TV Guide channel. I've never gone on a date. I'd marry Spongebob Squarepants in 1.2 seconds ... and I write really cheesy poetry when I'm bored." Julianne stared at Kris, awaiting a reaction.

Kris didn't have one. She was trying to register all of the information that was flying at her. Her feelings on the subject were fuzzy at best. She wasn't sure it was enough. She wasn't sure anything would be enough. And there was still one thing that Julianne hadn't confessed to. "Why did you pretend to be a lesbian?"

Julianne hesitated. "I wasn't pretending," she answered finally.

"What?" Kris asked, looking up and into sad blue eyes. Her surprise was evident.

"I'm not ... really 'out'," Julianne explained softly. "You and Adrian are the only ones that know. Oh, and Karen. She knows, too."

Kris hadn't been expecting that last tidbit of information. If anything, that was the one thing she'd been certain that Julianne had lied about. She was gay? How could she be gay? She always seemed so self-righteous in interviews. Always talking about her boyfriend and how in love she was. "How can I trust you after everything that's happened? How do I know what's true?"

Julianne looked down sadly. "You don't, I guess." She took a deep breath. "You've been such a good friend to me the past few months, and the last thing that I ever wanted to do was hurt you. And you're right; my saying that doesn't fix anything. I admit that I was selfish. I wanted to hang on to a fantasy that didn't exist. I wanted to cling to the hope that you could ever see me as anyone but Julianne Franqui. It was just such a great feeling ... to not have to hide for once. And I wanted to hold on to it for as long as possible." She glanced up. "I'm so sorry that I hurt you."

Kris stumbled over what to say. Her mind was in chaos as she tried to make sense of her feelings. She was still hurt. And she was still angry. And she wasn't sure that there was anything that



Julianne could say at the moment to make those feelings disappear. "I'm not sure what to say," she said honestly. "This is all a bit ... much."

Julianne nodded. "Guess I'll go then," she said, after a moment of awkward silence. "Good night, Kris."

"Julianne," Kris called softly, when the actress turned to walk away. She didn't want to say goodbye to her just yet.

"Yes?"

"Do you really like to watch the sun set?"

Julianne stared at Kris for a moment. "As often as I can," she replied.

Kris nodded. She stared blankly at the floor for a long while. It wasn't a lack of things to say that was causing her silence. It was the overwhelming need to say things she couldn't express. It wasn't anger she was feeling at that moment, but rather, a deep-rooted sadness that would not be easy to unearth. There were months of friendship to rebuild. And she wasn't certain it was possible. "I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can get over it."

"I understand," Julianne said.

Kris swallowed, wanting to say more, but not knowing what, exactly. "I appreciate you telling me these things."

Julianne nodded.

There was a part of Kris that ached to make Julianne's pain disappear. She could tell the actress was hurting. But she was hurting too. "Good night, Julianne."

"Good night, Kris."

Kris watched the actress start toward the elevator, almost calling her back. But there was nothing else left to say.

Not yet.

Not tonight.

52

Julianne had been dreading the arrival of Monday. Two of the people that she least wanted to face in the world would be an integral part of her every day life for the next few months.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

She spotted Naomi almost immediately upon entering the set. The blonde director was shaking her head at something someone had said. Julianne couldn't hear what was being said, but she figured it had to do with the lights because Naomi kept looking up and pointing.



Julianne kept her distance, not wishing to make her arrival known. She doubted she could keep that up for too long, however.

The guy Naomi had been speaking to walked away, and someone else approached the director. They exchanged a couple of words. And after a nod from Naomi, the crewmember walked off.

Julianne watched quietly from the side wall, wondering what she would say to the director once they were face to face. Should she mention what had happened? Ignore it? Apologize?

The director chose that moment to turn around, and their gazes met. To Julianne's surprise, Naomi started walking toward her.

"Feeling better?" Naomi asked once they were close enough to each other.

Julianne glanced up, surprised. "I'm sorry?"

"You looked really upset on Friday," Naomi answered.

Julianne stared into green eyes for a moment. "It's.... it's complicated." She cleared her throat. "I'm really sorry about what happened. I shouldn't have agreed to go out with you and then slammed the door in your face. It wasn't right."

Naomi looked around, and then stepped closer to Julianne. "I know you warned me to stay away and all, but taking advice isn't one of my strong suits." She smiled and shrugged. "So if you ever want to talk ..."

Julianne bit her lip, unsure of what to say to that. "I'm not ... I've never ... I don't ..." Finally, she gave up trying to speak.

Naomi looked away. "Karen told you, didn't she?"

"No!" Julianne answered. "Well, kind of ... but that has nothing to do with why I'm incoherent."

"Then?"

Julianne sighed. "It's a long story..."

Naomi pushed a few strands of hair behind her ear and gazed expectantly at the actress. "Do I get to hear it sometime?"

Julianne wasn't sure what was going on. Did Naomi know she was gay? Did she not know? "Maybe," she answered. "I mean, yes, if you really want to."

The director smiled. "I was kind of freaked out that Karen had warned you about me and that's why you'd changed your mind on Friday."

"No," Julianne answered, guessing that Karen hadn't told Naomi about her after all. So, what had Friday night been about? "I'd ... known before."

Surprise passed across Naomi's features. Then she nodded. "Well, I'd like to hear your long story sometime. I'm told I'm a good listener."

Julianne smiled. "You're on."



Naomi smiled back and excused herself before returning to work.

For a moment, Julianne had completely forgotten they'd been standing in the middle of a busy film set.

Out of the corner of her eye, Julianne noticed Leigh. They locked gazes for a moment, but Leigh instantly looked away and continued her conversation with Jeremy.

Resigned, and a little disappointed, Julianne turned away and headed toward her assigned trailer. She'd talk to Leigh later.

Hopefully Leigh would talk back.

After much internal conflict, Kris found herself staring at the computer screen. Her empty inbox stared back at her. After a second, she double-clicked on the folder labeled 'Julia'. Every email that Julianne had ever sent her appeared before her. She quickly glanced through the list, each subject heading causing her heart to ache.

She wanted the aching to stop. She didn't understand why it bothered her so much. It was just email and a few conversations online and on the phone. How could friendship be built out of words? How did it become the kind of friendship that kept her up at night with its absence?

Kris stared at the list in front of her. She wasn't sure what she wanted to find there. It was just unnerving to think that after months of conversation, she hadn't had a clue. Had it been obvious all along? If she read the emails now would she be able to make sense of everything?

She looked over the emails again, each complete with its allotted subject and date. It was like a map to a friendship she no longer understood. There were so many.

She dragged the mouse over the link to the first email and let it hover for a few seconds. Finally, she clicked on it.

The message opened up before her, much as it had done the first time she'd read it. Only now, her feelings were different. As her gaze drifted over the words, she fought the urge to close it, to give up.

The first few emails were so professional, so distant. They made Kris wonder what Julianne had been thinking. What had she wanted out of the message? Why had she written?

She read on, reliving the moments where Julia's words had made her smile.

It was strange, reading over the same words and placing Julianne's image and voice behind them. Stranger, still, was the fact doing so wasn't as difficult as Kris initially expected. It made her uncomfortable. To her mind, both should've sounded different. She should've been able to tell which voice was Julia's and which was Julianne's. She wanted to be able to highlight the lies.

With every email, Kris grew progressively more anxious. She thought reading through the emails would help her sort through some of the madness. Maybe they'd validate her anger and her pain. But if anything, they left her feeling empty and confused.



Did Julianne really major in Comparative Literature? Did she really hate her family? Did she write poetry?

Those weren't the thoughts she should've been thinking. Those weren't the questions she should've been asking.

But they were. And it confused her further. Exasperated, she ran a hand through her hair. She didn't want to face Julianne Franqui. She wasn't ready.

At the same time, she didn't want to do nothing.

Absently, she found herself clicking on the first email. The familiar words stared back at her.

From her nightstand, she retrieved the folded piece of paper that Julianne had given her. She stared at the same words printed on the page, then back up at the screen.

She wasn't thinking anything in particular as she hit 'reply.'

Subject: Re: your art

Dear J.R.,

Thank you for your interest in my work. What about it touched you so?

*Sincerely,
Kris Milano*

Kris stared at the short note, unsure of what she was doing, or what she was hoping to accomplish. In the end, she decided not to think about it. She'd been overanalyzing every detail of her life for the past twenty-one years and so far, it hadn't done her any good.

A second later, she hit send.

Julianne just wanted to crawl into bed the moment she got home and stay there forever. Unfortunately, despite her exhaustion, she wasn't particularly sleepy.

The first day of filming had gone relatively well, considering her co-star was giving her the silent treatment. In spite of that, Julianne enjoyed acting with Leigh. She got completely caught up in their moments of dialogue. At times, it was enough to make her forget that Leigh wasn't really her sister. And that as soon as the director yelled, "cut," they'd return to a silent reality.

As for Naomi, Julianne enjoyed the director's technique. Whenever Naomi would stop them, she'd always have something important to contribute. She was always clear in what she wanted, but still gave the actors enough leverage to do what felt right.

Julianne had spent a large part of the day watching the director in action. She hadn't once seen Naomi lose her patience or yell at anyone. It didn't mean, however, that the young director didn't at times seem frustrated or stressed. But somehow, she managed to get through things in a calm, professional manner.

Needless to say, Julianne was intrigued.



Turning on her side, Julianne examined the paintings on the wall, and reality came tumbling down on her. It was so tempting to disappear into her character. Elizabeth Doyle didn't have to worry about unrequited love. In spite of everything else, at least Emma loved her back.

Blue eyes examined the pictures, wondering if it was right to keep them there. Should she return them? Or just take them down? Julianne wasn't sure she could part with them so easily.

Sighing, she lay on her back, wishing she could stop thinking about Kris for five minutes. It was over; she had to let it go.

Sitting up, she reached for the computer, making sure the phone line was plugged in. Once online, she checked her business email. As she'd expected, several emails from Eric cluttered her inbox. She read through them, relieved to find that she hadn't missed anything important.

When she finished, she hesitated. Usually, she checked her personal address along with her business one. But what was the point of checking it now?

Still, she found herself leading the mouse in that direction. She figured she could at least delete the junk mail.

As she waited for the mail to load, her attention was drawn away from the computer by the sound of the buzzer. Frowning, she put the computer aside, and headed toward the front door. The thought that perhaps Kris had thought to stop by hurried her steps.

Hitting the intercom button, she said, "Yes?" in a voice that she hoped didn't sound as hopeful—or desperate—as it felt.

"Hi. I was in the neighborhood."

Disappointment was Julianne's initial reaction. But it was quickly replaced by something akin to shyness; or maybe nervousness, or maybe both. "Come up," she said.

As she waited for the knock, Julianne wondered where her life philosophy had gone. Simplicity. She had to return to simplicity.

Knock. Knock.

Unfortunately, Julianne had the unsettling feeling that she was about to invite further complications into her life. "Hi," she greeted.

The director smiled. "I hope you don't think I'm stalking you."

"If I did I wouldn't have let you up," Julianne replied. "Want to come in?"

Naomi nodded and stepped inside. She glanced around.

Julianne closed the door and stood behind the director, wishing she had some other furniture besides her bed.

"I like the whole ... less is more motif," Naomi said, turning to face Julianne.

Julianne smiled, leaning her back against the door. "I think in this case, less is less."

Naomi smiled, suddenly looking shy and awkward. "You're probably wondering why I'm here."



The thought had crossed Julianne's mind, but she had yet to find a polite reply to that comment. So, she remained silent.

"Well, I was in the neighborhood," Naomi began, "which I know sounds really lame, because that's what everyone says. You probably think I traveled an hour out of my way to be here." She glanced at Julianne for confirmation.

The actress smiled, amused. She'd never seen a director act so uncomfortable in her presence before. It was cute.

"Anyway, you seemed kind of sad today," Naomi continued. "Not while the film was rolling, but in the times in between. So, I thought I'd stop by and see if you were okay."

"Why?"

Naomi shrugged. "Call me overly caring."

Julianne wasn't sure how to respond. A part of her kept wondering what Naomi Mosier wanted from her. But another part was too busy noticing how good the director looked in jeans to care. "I'd ask if you want to sit down, but ..." She motioned to the empty apartment. "There's always the carpet."

The director looked around and smiled. "Actually, I was going to see if you wanted to get something to eat. I haven't really had anything since breakfast."

"At least you managed to fit the most important meal of the day into your schedule," Julianne responded.

Naomi smiled. "It was a cracker."

"Just one?"

"I was in a hurry," Naomi admitted.

That settled things. "Dinner it is," Julianne replied, reaching for the door. She couldn't very well let her director starve to death.

Julianne stared dubiously at the sign that read Gray's Papaya. When Naomi had suggested dinner, Julianne had expected someplace where the tables had cloths, and the silverware was actually silver. She hadn't expected a greasy-looking hotdog joint.

Naomi was studying Julianne's face carefully. "I take it this is your first time?"

"I'd have to go with yes," Julianne replied, meeting Naomi's gaze.

The director smiled. "You haven't lived until you've tried one of these hotdogs," she answered. "You're not a vegetarian, are you?"

Instantly, Julianne thought of Kris. And suddenly wished she was vegetarian just so she'd have an excuse not to eat there. "No," she found herself saying. She considered telling Naomi that



she wasn't particularly hungry, but she kept her mouth shut. Besides, she'd had hotdogs before. Maybe. She couldn't remember.

When it was their turn in line, Julianne let the director order for her. She ignored the people staring and pointing at her, whispering, "Is that Julianne Franqui?"

Naomi handed Julianne a hotdog and led them to the condiment table. "Does that bother you?"

Julianne was staring down at the object in her hand with a mixture of repulsion and morbid curiosity. Adding some ketchup, she said, "Does what bother me?"

"Getting recognized everywhere you go," Naomi explained. She glanced behind Julianne where people were still staring. "I think you've got a few admirers."

Julianne glanced in the direction Naomi was looking and caught sight of a couple of boys who were all but drooling. She smiled and winked in their direction, then turned back to Naomi. "Um, I think I'm just used to it now," she said in answer to Naomi's question. "Don't you ever get recognized?"

Naomi shrugged and took a bite of her hotdog, heading outside to leave room for other people. Once they were both outside, she said, "Mostly by film geeks. I'm not known by mainstream America."

"Yet," Julianne added. "I think this film will change that."

They crossed the street, walking with no particular destination in mind.

"What do you think it will do for you?"

"Out me," Julianne said softly. She stared down at the uneaten hotdog, wondering why she'd said that.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Naomi asked, in such a casual way that it made Julianne wonder if she'd heard her confession.

Taking a deep breath, Julianne looked into expectant green eyes. "I'm not sure I'm brave enough to put this in my mouth."

Naomi laughed. "Well, if you're sure you want to let a hotdog get the best of you."

Julianne glanced down and sighed. "Alright, but if I get food poisoning, you're going to have to deal with an absent lead actress."

"I'll take my chances," Naomi responded.

Julianne stopped walking, forcing the director to do likewise. "Next time, I pick where we go for dinner," she said, not sure why she thought there'd be a next time. After another long moment of hesitation, she took a small bite. She chewed. She waited to be grossed out.

Naomi waited patiently for a reaction, looking highly entertained. "Well?"

Julianne took another bite and started walking. "Shut up, it's good." She could hear Naomi laughing, and then running to catch up to her.



"Another Gray's Papaya success story," Naomi said, sounding mighty pleased with herself.

Julianne was about to comment but the sound of her name forced her to turn around. Of all the people ... "Hey, Anthony," she greeted.

Kris's boyfriend caught up to them a second later. "I thought it was you," he said, grinning. He glanced at Naomi.

"Anthony, this is Naomi Mosier, my director," she introduced, feeling incredibly awkward. "Naomi this is Anthony ..." She had no idea what his last name was. Kris had never told her.

Anthony quickly jumped in. "Anthony Brooks, pleasure to meet you. So, you're Leigh's director, too?"

"That I am, " Naomi confirmed.

"Cool," Anthony said. "Anyway, I'll leave you ladies. I was on my way to visit Kris."

The sound of her name made Julianne flinch. She tried to cover it up by saying, "Have fun."

"I'll tell her you said hi," Anthony assured her.

Great.

"It was nice meeting you, Naomi. Catch you later, Julianne."

"You too," Naomi said.

"Bye, Anthony," Julianne said, watching him walk off.

They resumed their aimless walking.

"Good friend of yours?" Naomi asked after a moment.

Julianne had to laugh. "Not quite." She hesitated, and then said, "Do you still want to hear the long story?"

Naomi smiled. "I'd love to."

"How come you keep checking your email every five minutes?" Anthony asked, sitting back against the headboard of Kris's bed.

Kris closed the laptop, after yet another disappointing visit to her email account. "Sorry, I wrote to a professor about getting into his class," she lied. Well, half-lied. She had written to a professor. But that wasn't why her computer kept calling her every two seconds. She joined her boyfriend on the bed, sitting so that she was facing him. "So, how was your day?"

Anthony shrugged. "I worked, and then I bought two books for class. Sucks that the summer is over, huh?"



"Yeah," Kris agreed, though it hadn't really hit her yet. She'd been so busy with everything else in her life that she'd completely forgotten about school starting up again.

Anthony reached over to touch Kris's leg. "I ran into Julianne Franqui on the way over here." The sound of her name brought Kris into complete focus. "Really? What did she say?" she asked, trying not to sound too enthusiastic about the information.

"Nothing much," Anthony replied, his hand beginning to caress her thigh. "She was walking with the movie director."

Kris tried to ignore the feel of Anthony's hand on her thigh. She wished he wasn't touching her at that moment. "Did she ask about me?"

Anthony paused to look at her. "Nope. She didn't say much of anything."

Disappointed, Kris stifled a sigh. Had Julianne gotten her email? Did she not care about their friendship anymore?

"So, what do you want to do now?" Anthony asked, a crooked grin on his face.

Kris glanced down and took a hold of Anthony's wandering hand. "Um, let's just take things slow, okay?" she said, leaning over to kiss him so that he didn't think she didn't want to do anything; even though she kind of didn't. But she ignored that feeling. She pulled her lips away a moment later and looked into his eyes, hoping he wasn't hurt by her implication.

Anthony smiled. "No problem," he said.

Relieved, Kris kissed him again, harder, as if wishing that his lips could erase the constant aching of her heart. Thoughts of Julianne suddenly popped into her head and she quickly pulled away.

"Something wrong?" Anthony asked, looking concerned.

Yes, she wanted to say. There were plenty of things wrong. Only, she didn't want to talk about them. Not with him. "No, sorry," she said. "I just wanted to get more comfortable."

He smiled at that, pulling her closer. "Better?"

"Sure," she said, hoping she sounded believable. She wanted him to kiss her and make her forget everything. She wanted to melt.

Anthony leaned over to kiss her again, his mouth already parted. His tongue grazed her lips in a way that made her want to pull away and wipe them dry.

She wasn't melting. Instead, she was too busy concentrating on the mechanics of the kiss. Why couldn't she just surrender? Why didn't it feel like her heart would pound out of her chest? Where was the passion? All she felt was a strange, cold feeling of solitude. Like their lips were two magnets of equal polarity, struggling to meet. And all she could sense was the air in between, breathing distant promises of fantasies not yet realized.

Slowly, she ended the kiss, hoping it hadn't seemed too sudden. "Sorry," she apologized. "I'm just really tired."

Anthony did a good job of hiding his disappointment. "Want to hang out tomorrow?"



"Call me," she told him.

"Okay," he agreed, kissing her cheek. "I'll let myself out."

Kris watched him go. As the door closed behind him, she wondered what the problem was. Was it Nathan? Was it Anthony?

Was it her?

She glanced at the computer, tempted to check her mail again. "I'm so pathetic," she whispered, shaking her head. Ignoring the impulse to log on, she grabbed the sketch pad she kept by her bed.

At least there was more than one way to keep her mind occupied.

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Julianne stood in the doorway of her empty apartment and breathed in the stale aroma of solitude. There was something strangely alarming in the contrast between the busy city she'd left moments before, and the eerie silence of her badly decorated apartment.

For the first time since she'd moved in, the apartment's nakedness made her uncomfortable. She felt exposed, her emptiness reflected in the barren white walls and the expensive white carpeting that had nothing to show for itself but its delicate beauty. The only evidence of an existing personality hung in the walls of her bedroom, each expressing a delicate truth she couldn't quite understand.

Kris's paintings fascinated her; the purposeful use of texture and color, hiding the shadows that hovered behind like unspoken secrets. The gentle brushstrokes and charismatic themes that struggled to reveal what they struggled to conceal.

Julianne entered her bedroom and stood before the paintings. She'd never had an appreciation for art before she'd encountered Kris's painting in the park. They were beautiful, just like the hand that created them, and the body attached. But beyond that was the opportunity to find oneself reflected in the random patterns and perfect shapes.

She turned away, noticing for the first time the computer still resting where she'd left it. She was tempted to ignore it. But telling Naomi everything only served to remind her of all she had lost. And in spite of Naomi's kindness, words alone could not replace a friend.

The bed squeaked in protest against her added weight. She turned the screen to face her and glanced at the contents on the page. Her inbox contained three messages. Only one of which caught her eye.

Frowning, she checked the date. It had been sent earlier that day. For a moment, she considered the possibility that she'd accidentally left one of Kris's emails un-filed. But that couldn't be.

Her heart caught up to her thoughts, and then sped past them. She selected the message and an eternity later, the email opened on the screen.



Julianne read the words, her mind attempting to find a rational explanation. A vague recollection loomed in her mind. She'd handed Kris a copy of her first email. Was this Kris's response? Was this Kris's way of starting over? And if so, what did it mean?

After a moment, she hit reply:

Dear Kris (can I call you that?),

I sometimes have this feeling that the world sees through me. That they see only what they want to see, and dig only as deep as their misgivings will allow. I've often felt lonely in a crowd full of people. In moments when a million eyes are cast my way, I've struggled to find one pair among the many that see something the others do not see.

For the first time in a very long time, your painting made me feel understood. And I can't imagine anything more beautiful than the image of truth reflected and manifested in the empathetic visions of a stranger's mind.

Sincerely,
Julianne Raye Franqui

"Knock, knock," Leigh called from the open doorway, forcing Kris to glance up from the computer screen. "Email from dad?" Leigh guessed, stepping into the bedroom.

Reflexively, Kris lowered the screen so that Leigh couldn't see what she was reading. "Uh, no," she said after a moment.

Leigh paused, sensing Kris's hesitation. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to pry." She took a step back from the bed. "See? Not prying at all."

Kris managed a smile, but it was clearly forced. "Julianne wrote me," she admitted.

Leigh frowned. "Why? Hasn't she done enough? I'll have you know, that I didn't speak to her at all this week during filming. Well, except for the scenes we were in together, but those weren't even my words, so, it doesn't really count as conversation."

"You've been ignoring her?" Kris asked, feeling a strange mixture of embarrassment and annoyance. "You didn't have to do that." Did Julianne think that Kris told Leigh not to speak to her? "Has she tried to approach you at all?"

Leigh shrugged. "Well, yeah. But I stood my ground. Nobody messes with my best friend and gets away with it. Not even famous actresses who think they own the world just because they're rich and beautiful."

"Since when do you think that of Julianne?" Kris wondered, suddenly feeling defensive of the actress. The irony didn't escape her.

Sitting down at the edge of the bed, Leigh regarded Kris with a serious expression. "I gave what Julianne did to you a lot of thought, and I realized that someone has to be a really shitty human being to take advantage of somebody else like that. I mean, she lied to you for months. And then came here and lied to your face. You have to be a pretty self-centered, self-serving bitch to do something like that. So, I admit, I was wrong about Julianne Franqui."



Kris wasn't sure why, but Leigh's words pained her. She wanted to agree with Leigh. She wanted to be able to dismiss Julianne Franqui as cruel and egotistical. But she couldn't bring herself to feel antagonistic towards the actress. Not any more. "I think we're both wrong about Julianne," she said after a moment. "I don't think she lied to me to hurt me, or use me. What would she gain from that?"

Leigh thought about it for a moment then said, "Cheap entertainment at the expense of an unassuming stranger? Who knows? She probably had a group of her famous actor friends placing bets on how long it would take you to figure things out."

Kris lowered her gaze. The thought of Julianne laughing at her made her chest ache. "I don't think that's what happened," she whispered. "Do you really think she'd do that?"

"Like I said, who knows?" Leigh answered. "All I do know is that she hurt you. And that's more than enough incentive for me to ignore her for the rest of my life."

Kris smiled slightly. "Thanks. But, I think you can ease up on the silent treatment."

"You're going to forgive her, aren't you?" Leigh guessed after a moment.

Kris didn't answer. She was afraid that if she said yes, Leigh would give her a reason not to. And she wanted to forgive Julianne; more than anything she wanted to make things okay.

Leigh nodded. "Sometimes I think you'd forgive anyone anything." She half-smiled. "It's one of those annoying flaws I love about you."

Kris smiled, relieved that Leigh wasn't going to give her a huge speech about how she was making a mistake.

"Do you want to catch a movie or something?"

"Yeah," Kris answered. "Go check what's playing. I just want to ..."

"Yeah, yeah," Leigh replied, waving her hand dismissively and standing up. "Tell the fake lesbian that you've forgiven her many faults." She paused. "Hey, maybe she was using you as research for her character."

Kris opened her mouth to reveal what Julianne had told her. But she instantly thought better of it. Julianne had confided in her. In spite of everything, the last thing she wanted to do was betray the actress's trust. "I'd make a really lousy lesbian research subject," she said instead.

"Heh, if you say so," Leigh commented on her way out of the door.

Kris stared at Leigh's retreating back, wondering what her friend meant. Remembering Julianne's email, she instantly forgot all about Leigh's comment, and focused instead on the open reply box on the screen.

Dear Julianne,

I think I have the opposite problem. Or maybe it's the same one, only to a lesser degree. I don't generally have a million eyes cast in my direction. But sometimes just a few can feel like a lot.



My parents have always put a lot of pressure on me because I was the only girl. And somewhere between being proud of me and seeing what I've done with my life, they've lost hope. Now they just pray I find someone to support me so that I don't end up starving on the streets.

When I painted that picture, I'd just come back from a visit to my parents' apartment. It was during Christmas, so some of my other relatives were there. And the entire time that I was there, people kept asking me what I planned to do with my life. And when I told them I wanted to be an artist, they immediately turned to Nathan to ask what he was doing. Of course, his goals in life were a big hit. I was instantly forgotten; dismissed as a future housewife.

At the end of the party, I was so angry and annoyed that I came home and started drawing. It was an act of improvisation mostly. I just wanted to get things out there. I guess art is my way of speaking up without being heard.

Take care,
Kris

Kris read over the email several times over. It was the first time she'd told Julianne what had led her to paint that picture. A part of her wanted to delete the email and write something else; something less personal. But the part that won out was the part of her that was dying to be understood. And for some bizarre reason, she felt that Julianne Franqui could understand her.

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Julianne closed her eyes, attempting to shut out the sounds around her. It wasn't the noise that bothered her. Rather, it was the inescapable feeling that despite her role in the film she was useless between takes; just another prop in a set littered with them.

"Julianne," a voice called, startling the actress.

Blue eyes opened at once to find Leigh standing in front of her.

"Look, I just wanted to apologize for ignoring you lately," Leigh said, her words sounding strangely rehearsed.

The apology caught Julianne off-guard. "You had every right—"

"I know," Leigh interrupted. "But I shouldn't have done it. It was rude, and immature ... and it was just my way of dealing with an uncomfortable situation."

"I understand," Julianne replied.

Leigh nodded, moving over so she could stand closer to Julianne. "But I want to ask you a few things."

Julianne braced herself. "Shoot."

"Why did you do it?"



The actress shifted uncomfortably and looked down at the ground. A piece of paper caught her attention for no other reason than she wanted to avoid answering the question. "It's not an easy answer to give," she replied.

"Why? Because it doesn't make you look good?" Leigh asked sharply.

"How do you justify doing something you knew all along was wrong?" Julianne asked.

"You can't."

"Precisely," Julianne replied catching Leigh's gaze. "I could give you many reasons, but none would be good enough."

"Try me," Leigh challenged.

Julianne glanced around the set, looking for Naomi. She hoped the director would motion her away from the inquisition. Unfortunately, the blonde was busy talking to the assistant director. Resigned, Julianne turned back to Leigh. "I knew if I told her the truth that things would change between us. I was scared to lose her as a friend."

"You must lead a lonely existence if a stranger you met on the computer means that much to you," Leigh said.

Julianne lowered her gaze. "I do."

Leigh nodded, leaning her back against the wall. After a long moment, she finally spoke. "Kris, too," she said softly. "I mean, she's got me and all, but it's not the same." She shook her head. "She changed a lot when you entered the picture. She was happier. And I never really understood how you could be made happy by words on a computer screen, but ..." She waved a hand dismissively.

Julianne waited for Leigh to continue. She wasn't sure what the redhead was trying to imply, and even less what to say in response.

Leigh glanced up at Julianne's face and nodded. "I get it, I think; why you did it. At first, I figured it was a game to you, for fun. But looking at you now I think you look about as miserable as Kris does. And that's pretty miserable. So, that's got to mean you care."

Julianne looked away, embarrassed that her feelings were so transparent. She worried that if Leigh looked hard enough, she'd notice just how much Julianne cared.

"Anyway, I'm going to go have my daily argument with the wardrobe lady," Leigh announced, sounding less than pleased by the idea. "She has no taste, seriously. Take care, *Julia*." Leigh winked as she walked away. "Check your email when you get the chance," she said over her shoulder.

Dear Kris,

When I was six, I told my grandmother that it was my dream to become an actress. She said, "A dream is a memory of something that happened while you were sleeping. If you really want something, reach for it while you're awake."



When I told my mother that I was going to be an actress, she laughed and said, "Better start claiming a spot under a bridge somewhere, because that's surely where you'll end up."

Looking back, I think it was a combination of my grandmother's faith, and my mother's mockery that got me where I am. Although, I think luck also had a lot to do with it.

For what it's worth, I'm glad you painted that picture. Otherwise, we never would've met. And I may be alone in this, but I'm really glad we met.

Take care,
Julianne

Kris wasn't sure if she was glad that they'd met. In fact, she wasn't sure of anything much these days except that Julianne Franqui occupied a grand portion of her thoughts. Her feelings saw-sawed between uncertainty and excitement, between wanting to believe and not being sure what to believe.

So, in the end, it was indecision that led her to the Upper East Side. To a neighborhood where people had forgotten the value of money because they had too much of it, to a place where she could never hope to fit in. So why was she trying? What was so amazing about Julianne Franqui? Why did she care?

Kris didn't know the answers to any of those questions, but she intended to find out. She needed to find out why her thoughts yo-yoed back to Julianne at any given moment; why she felt compelled to check her email twenty times a day in the secret hope that Julianne had written back. There had to be a reason. There had to be a way to make it stop.

Julianne's bodyguard glanced up as Kris entered the building. Kris tried to remember his name. Tony? Toby? She gave up after a moment. She briefly wondered if he'd do a strip search before letting her up. "Hi, I'm here to see Julianne Franqui," she said, hoping she didn't sound like a psycho stalker.

How many times did this man hear those words? She half expected him to say, "What else is new, beat it!" But he didn't say that. In fact, he smiled. "Head on up, Miss Milano." The confusion must have shown on her face, because he added a moment later, "Miss Franqui cleared you. You're always a welcomed guest."

Kris wasn't sure what that meant, but she smiled politely and thanked the man. Julianne cleared her? Did the actress give him a picture with a post-it note saying, "Let this girl in at all times." Kris felt that stepping into Julianne Franqui's life was like doing a time warp to a different dimension. The song inevitably got stuck in her head, and she hummed, "Time Warp," all the way up to the top floor.

She wasn't sure what she would say to Julianne once the actress opened the door. She suddenly wished she'd rehearsed a speech of some kind. Only, what was there to say, really? "Please help me understand you," didn't exactly translate into an adequate greeting.

Therefore, she paused before knocking, hoping the next few seconds would lead to a revelation in brilliant dialogue. But it didn't, so she decided to wing it.



As her knuckles met the wooden surface of the door, she wished she'd taken another few seconds to decide what to say. A stream of possible one-liners filtered through her mind. But they merely flickered once before fading. And then they ceased all together when the door opened.

Julianne looked surprised to find Kris standing there. She blinked a couple of times before speaking. "Kris, hey," was her own witty opening.

Kris figured she couldn't do much worse than that. "I got your email. I wasn't sure how to reply."

Julianne tilted her head to the side. She grinned slightly. "You came all the way here to tell me not to bother checking my email?"

"That's part of it," Kris answered, and then reconsidered. "Actually, it's not part of it at all. I just feel ... strangely overwhelmed by—" She paused as a pleasant smell drifted in from the apartment. "What's that?"

Julianne appeared thrown for a moment, then answered, "Dinner. Oops." She excused herself and ran across the apartment to the kitchen.

Kris hesitated at the doorway for a moment before stepping inside. She closed the door behind her and followed Julianne. Whatever it was that the actress was cooking smelled incredible.

"Pasta primavera," Julianne said as if reading Kris's mind. "It's a recipe from the book you gave me."

Kris walked around to sit at the kitchen counter. She didn't want to be in Julianne's way. "Are you expecting someone for dinner? I probably shouldn't have just stopped by like this."

Julianne glanced up from the stove. "I'm not expecting anyone," she said quickly. "And I'm glad you stopped by. I hope you're hungry, cause there's lots."

Kris hadn't actually said she would stay. In fact, she wanted to say, "No thanks," but the delicious aromas emanating from the kitchen were making it hard to resist. So, she found herself admitting that she was starving. All she'd managed to eat that day was a Pop-Tart for lunch.

Julianne seemed pleased with Kris's concession. "I'm sorry, what were you saying about being overwhelmed?" she asked, looking around to make sure that everything was cooking properly. Then she gave Kris her full attention.

Kris glanced down, avoiding Julianne's blue eyes, which she could feel watching her. "Emailing was getting too confusing," she found herself saying. "It's too easy to get emotional and personal, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that yet. I'm not sure what my emotions are."

"What do you propose instead?" Julianne asked.

"I don't know. I guess that's why I'm here. To see if you have any of the answers."

Julianne considered. "I don't have much in the way of answers," she admitted. "I have dinner, though. And I rented a movie, if you'd like to watch it." She paused for a moment, looking sad. "Kris, I want very much to be your friend. And I want you to be able to trust me. But the last thing that I want is to impose myself on your life."

Kris wondered if Julianne really felt that she was imposing. It was so strange to look at the person before her and occasionally forget who she was. But wasn't that what Julianne was



always telling her? That nobody really knew who she was. "I want to be able to trust you," Kris answered, knowing that to be the truth. "I guess it's just going to take some time."

Julianne smiled. "Time we've got," she answered. "And dinner's ready."

Julianne wasn't sure what had possessed Kris to stop by, but whatever the reason, she was grateful. She was also grateful that she'd decided to make pasta for dinner, and not steak. In fact, she decided to make vegetarian meals from then on, just in case Kris made it a habit to drop by unannounced every time she was cooking.

Smiling to herself, she followed Kris to the bedroom, plates and cups in tow.

"You should invest in a dining room table or something," Kris suggested, looking around the bedroom.

"I was thinking of putting it right next to the bed," Julianne said.

Kris nodded thoughtfully. She glanced up at Julianne and smiled. "You do realize you have a huge apartment right outside that door."

Julianne laughed and headed toward the bed. "I'll try to remember that when I finally go furniture shopping."

Kris smiled and followed Julianne, taking her place on the bed. "Don't you get worried you'll drop food on your sheets? What is this, silk?"

"Um," Julianne glanced down. "I'd have to go with 100% cotton. But close." She smiled. "I can get you a bib if you'd like."

Kris glared at her. "Funny," she said. "I could just drop some of this lovely sauce on your beautiful spread, here." She made a show of balancing some pasta on the fork. "Oh...ohhh...."

Julianne was amused. She half-hoped Kris would drop the food on her bed, though she noticed that Kris was being careful not to do that. "Haha," she said.

With a satisfied smile, Kris put the food in her mouth. Her teasing mood changed immediately. "Wow, this is so good," she said, taking another bite. "How'd you learn to cook like this?"

"Lots of Food Network watching," Julianne replied, relieved that Kris liked her cooking.

Kris nodded, her mouth full. After she swallowed, she said, "So what did you rent?"

Julianne hesitated for a moment. "Uh, *Bound*," she said. "But we can watch something else if you'd like."

Kris shrugged. "Whatever. What's *Bound* about? I haven't seen that."

"Gina Gershon is in it, and that's all that matters," Julianne replied with a slight grin. "Hotness personified."



Kris paused in her eating to look over at Julianne. "I know that movie. That woman with the annoying voice is in it, too, right?"

"Indeed," Julianne agreed, relieved that Kris didn't seem weirded out by her comment. "Up for it?"

Kris nodded, returning to her food. "Did I mention this is really good? Because it is."

Julianne grinned and rose from the bed to get the movie ready. She tried not to think too hard about the fact that Kris Milano was sitting on her bed, eating her food, and getting ready to watch Gina Gershon get it on with Jennifer Tilly. Was she dreaming?

"I like the frames," Kris said suddenly.

Confused by the statement, Julianne paused and turned around. "I'm sorry?"

Kris motioned to the paintings on the wall. "I like the frames you put around my pictures. They look all professional-like."

Julianne glanced up at the paintings. "Well, I happen to think the artist is going to make it big one day," she said, without turning. She focused instead on getting the DVD into the player, and turning on the TV. Then she returned to the bed to find Kris watching her curiously. "Why?" Kris asked.

"Why what?"

"Why are you so confident in my talent?" Kris asked seriously.

Julianne stared into curious hazel eyes, wondering how someone so beautiful and talented could possibly not know it. She glanced toward the paintings. "It's right there in front of me, how could I question something I can see?"

Kris lowered her gaze. "Thanks."

Fearing awkward silence, Julianne grabbed the remote control from the nightstand. "Ready for some lesbian action?"

Kris started coughing and reached for her glass of soda.

"I meant the movie," Julianne clarified a second later, slightly embarrassed.

"Right," Kris croaked through her coughs. "I knew that."

Julianne grinned to herself and hit play.

Lesbian action. Of course Julianne had meant the movie, Kris thought, attempting miserably to get her coughing under control. Well, so much for not embarrassing herself. She was lucky she hadn't dropped the pasta all over Julianne's comforter. What had gotten into her? One second she was prancing through New York City trying to figure out whether or not she was glad Julianne Franqui was in her life, and the next moment she was sitting on the actress's bed, coughing hysterically.



Lesbian action.

What did that mean exactly? Kris glanced up at the screen, worried that she'd somehow agreed to watch some freaky lesbian porno movie. *Bound*. Thoughts of leather and BDSM rituals flashed through Kris's mind. Whips and chains and handcuffs ... Oh my.

"Are you okay?" Julianne asked, concern plainly written on her features. "You look flushed."

Kris glanced up, not quite meeting Julianne's gaze. "Yeah, just swallowed wrong," she said. "Hate when that happens." She focused on the food on her plate, afraid to look up at the screen; afraid of what she might see there. She decided that if she concentrated on eating, it wouldn't look as suspicious.

Julianne stared at Kris for a moment, then turned her attention to the movie. "We don't have to watch this if it makes you uncomfortable," she said. "I've got plenty of other movies."

Was she that transparent? Kris wondered. She didn't like Julianne thinking that she was uncomfortable with lesbian ... stuff. She wasn't. She'd watched all of those other movies with Leigh. So, it wasn't that. It wasn't that at all. "No," she said a second later, hoping she hadn't hesitated too long. "I don't mind."

Knowing that she was acting ridiculous, Kris glanced up at the screen to see what was going on. Her eyes lingered on Gina Gershon's character, remembering Julianne's comment. *Hotness personified*. Was that the type of woman Julianne was attracted to? Kris couldn't picture Julianne with the bad-girl type. In fact, she couldn't really picture Julianne with anyone. It was too weird a concept.

"A bad ass clad in leather," Kris said out loud, not really meaning to. But since she'd already said it, ... She glanced over at Julianne. "That's your type?"

"I don't really have a type," Julianne said. "I just think she's hot."

"In this movie, or in general?" Kris questioned.

Julianne grinned, her gaze locking with Kris's. "Primarily this movie."

Kris smiled, turning her attention back to the movie, alternating between attempting to follow the plot and finishing her meal. It was quite the bizarre situation she'd wandered into. A part of her felt like she was intruding. Julianne didn't seem to mind her company, but it was possible that the actress was just being polite.

It was a bizarre situation indeed. A big nobody like her, sitting on Julianne Franqui's bed. Julianne Franqui, who had appeared on countless magazine covers, and talk shows. The same Julianne Franqui that Kris had disdainfully watched from her place outside of the twodimensional world Hollywood stars existed in. *That* Julianne Franqui was sitting next to her, eating pasta primavera, and inwardly drooling over a different actress.

Bizarre was perhaps an understatement. Especially after one considered the events that had led to that moment. Or maybe it wasn't bizarre at all. Maybe it was just fate.

Remembering the movie, Kris snapped out of her thoughts, and nearly choked all over again. Unblinking, she stared at the screen. There wasn't any leather, chains, or handcuffs. In fact, there wasn't much of anything besides two women on a bed together. Naked.



Lesbian action.

Kris lowered her gaze, embarrassed for some reason. It wasn't quite the same kind of embarrassment as watching sex scenes with her parents – that bordered more on mortifying. It was a differently kind of embarrassment. Or maybe it wasn't embarrassment at all, just shyness.

Kris felt self-conscious all of a sudden. Like Julianne was watching her reaction, trying to decipher something about her. A quick glance at the actress proved otherwise. Julianne was busy eating her dinner. Kris looked away before Julianne caught her looking.

She risked another glance at the television, relieved when she realized that the scene was over.

"Here, let me take that," Julianne said suddenly.

It took Kris a second to realize that Julianne was referring to her empty plate. She handed it over. "Thanks," she said. "It was really good. You should've been a chef."

Julianne grinned crookedly as she rose from the bed. "Is my acting that bad?"

Kris glanced up at the actress. She was tempted to joke around and say she'd seen better, but Kris had noted a hint of self-doubt in Julianne's question. Was it possible that Julianne Franqui wasn't as confident as she appeared? "No, but it's not quite as edible," she said instead, hoping it was a neutral enough answer.

Julianne laughed. "I'll be right back," she said and walked out of the room.

Kris grabbed the remote and paused the movie so that Julianne wouldn't miss any of it. She figured that Julianne had already seen it before, but still.

Alone with her thoughts, Kris glanced around the bedroom. Besides the framed paintings, there wasn't much in the way of decoration. There wasn't much in the way of anything, really. If not for the fact that the television was a Phillips flat screen, Kris would never guessed that a rich person lived there. There was also the size, factor.

Besides that, however, there was just the bed and the nightstand next to it. Kris briefly wondered if Julianne had a goody drawer. Then halted in her thoughts averted their direction, cursing *Sex & the City* or perhaps *Strictly Personals* on Metro for corrupting her mind.

Still, Kris was curious. Not enough to go snooping, of course. That would just be ... wrong. But she wondered what Julianne Franqui kept in the drawers beside her bed. A diary? A Bible? Julianne didn't really seem like the Bible-reading type. Books, maybe? Or, maybe the drawers were empty. Just like the rest of the apartment.

Kris directed her attention to Julianne once the actress re-entered the bedroom.

"Oh, you paused it," Julianne said, surprised. "You didn't have to."

Kris shrugged. "Didn't want you to miss any Corky-goodness," she said. "I know how much you value her screen time."

"How thoughtful of you," Julianne said, sitting down.



"I still don't get what you see in her," Kris commented. "What about her is so 'hot'?"

Julianne grabbed the remote, but didn't un-pause the movie. "Are you asking because you don't understand how women can be hot, or just this one in particular?"

Kris smiled amused by the conversation, in spite of the fact that it was weird and kind of surreal. But then, so was the rest of the situation. "Just trying to figure out what you find attractive. Is it the tattoos, the muscles, the tough attitude...?"

"Hmm," Julianne said, looking thoughtful. "Yes."

"Yes to which part?"

"All of it," Julianne replied. "Would you like me to replay that sex scene in slow motion and go inch by inch, cause I could probably do that."

Kris knew she was blushing and hoped that it wasn't too noticeable. She knew that Julianne was just teasing, but still. "You seemed a lot more innocent online," she said. "You'd never volunteered such telling information without me having to pry it out of you." Kris didn't know why she was saying the things she was saying, except that the thoughts were in her mind and she was tired of answering her own questions.

The comment clearly took Julianne by surprise, and she took a second to respond. "Sorry, I guess I'm missing that convenient backspace button," she said, sounding shy all of a sudden. "It makes it harder to edit myself."

"Then don't," Kris said. She didn't want Julianne to edit herself. The last thing she wanted to see was the Julianne Franqui she'd been watching on TV all of this time. There was more to the actress than that, she could tell. Why else would she be sitting there? "I like it when you're ... yourself."

Julianne frowned. "You mean, make sexual references about hot women on television? Cause maybe it's for the best if I *do* edit myself."

Kris laughed. "I don't mind."

"Okay," Julianne allowed. "But, to be fair, later we'll have to rent a movie with some actor you think is hot, and then I get to ask you why."

"Deal," Kris said, feeling sad for some reason. What actor did she think was hot? Leigh would know. She'd have to remember to ask her best friend later. In the mean time, there was lesbian action.

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Julianne stared blankly at the piano keys beneath her outstretched fingers. She knew she was supposed to be playing; she'd heard Naomi yell, "action," just moments before. She'd only stepped out of character for a second, a blink of an eye. But it had been long enough to notice that Kris had slipped into the set. It was enough to kill her concentration completely.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, turning slightly. She could see the entire crew watching her intently. The lights had been dimmed for the purpose of the scene. Elizabeth Doyle enjoyed playing in relative darkness. "Can we try that again?"



"Still rolling," Naomi called back.

Julianne turned her attention to the piano in front of her. She closed her eyes, attempting to access the part of her mind that didn't care if Kris was watching, the part that belonged to Elizabeth.

A second later, she began to play, her fingers gliding over the keys. Who would've thought that eight years of forced piano lessons would ever come in handy? But at that moment, she was grateful to her parents. Learning Elizabeth's music hadn't been as hard as it would've otherwise been.

She continued to play, ignoring the cameras around her and the eyes she knew were fixed on her performance; one pair in particular. Elizabeth Doyle was alone in that room, eyes closed, lost in the music. But Julianne knew that she wasn't alone. She knew that Samantha had entered, and was close behind her.

Yet, Elizabeth remained unaware of Emma's presence. So, when she felt the warm fingers touch her skin, her eyes flew open and her hands abruptly ceased their dance. The last key she hit was the wrong one, and the awkward note echoed in the sudden stillness of the room.

Julianne didn't turn, reveling in the comfort of her lover's touch.

"Why did you stop?" Emma asked softly. "It was such a beautiful melody."

"Some things are more beautiful than music," Elizabeth responded, finally turning. She stared at Emma for a long moment. "You shouldn't be here."

Emma trailed her fingers across Elizabeth's cheek. "I waited until everyone left."

"And cut!"

The director's voice cut through the moment, shattering the illusion. Julianne blinked, returning to herself.

"Take five everybody," the director added a second later, her attention on the notebook in front of her.

"Thank God," Samantha muttered as she passed by Julianne.

It was then that Julianne remembered Kris, and nervousness crept up on her. Should she go talk to her? Should she pretend she hadn't seen her? Julianne knew that Leigh had finished early and left with Jeremy. So, what was Kris doing there? Waiting for her?

The questions continued to multiply in her mind as she made her way toward Kris. She wasn't sure when she'd made a conscious decision to approach the artist, but it was too late to make a U-turn.

Kris was smiling as Julianne approached. "That was really good," she said by way of a greeting. "And you look very nice in a dress."

Julianne had forgotten she was in costume. As a reflex, she glanced down at herself and laughed. She'd never thought she'd be standing in front of Kris in a frilly dress. "Yeah, I've always wanted to be a lady." She glanced up nervously. "So, what brings you here?"



"Oh, I'm just waiting for Leigh. We're having best friend bonding night. Movies, pizza, the works." She grinned excitedly, and glanced around the set. "Any clue where she's hiding?"

Julianne felt a mixture of emotions at that moment: disappointed that Kris wasn't there to see her, and angry with Leigh for standing Kris up.

"Is something wrong?"

Julianne cleared her thoughts, focusing her attention on Kris. "Uh, it's just that Leigh left about an hour ago. With Jeremy," she added quietly.

Confusion flashed across Kris's eyes, followed by disappointment. "Oh," she said. "I guess she forgot." She shrugged, and laughed, though it was clearly forced. "I should've probably waited at home."

"Sorry," Julianne offered, wishing there was something she could say to make things better. She came up blank.

Kris glanced up suddenly. "But, hey, what are you doing after this?"

Julianne ran her evening schedule through her mind, wishing that Karen were around to keep track of things. She vaguely remembered getting invited to a party by one of the other cast members, but she didn't recall accepting. "Nothing, really," she answered, fairly certain that was true. *Nothing I can't cancel, anyway*, she amended silently.

"Want to see a movie or something?" Kris asked sounding shy all of a sudden.

"I'd love to," she answered, hoping she sounded casual despite the fact that her heart was doing somersaults inside her chest. "I'm not sure how long this is going to run, though." She motioned to the cameras behind her for emphasis.

Kris shrugged. "I don't mind watching," she said. "Unless you mind having me here," she added quickly. "I don't want you to think that—"

"I don't mind," Julianne interjected. "It's nice having you here." She didn't add that it was also nerve-wracking as hell.

"Okay," Kris said, smiling slightly.

Julianne glanced behind her and noticed everyone resuming their posts. "I should get back," she said. "See you later?"

"I'll be here," Kris promised.

Julianne nodded and excused herself, glad that now, she had something to look forward to.

Kris watched the ongoing action from her place in the shadows. It was fascinating to watch Julianne switch so rapidly from one character to the next. She wondered how it was possible to be so many different people at once.



Her gaze traveled across the set until it came to rest on the director; Naomi Mosier. Kris mulled the name over in her mind, as she watched Naomi watch Julianne. There was something in the director's gaze that caught Kris's attention; that kept her from looking away.

Earlier, during her conversation with Julianne, she'd noticed the director watching them. Well, watching Julianne mostly. And she'd noticed a flash of something in those green eyes. Something alien yet familiar.

Kris thought back to what Anthony had said that one day, when he'd run into Julianne. *She was walking with the movie director.* Kris hadn't given it much thought at the time, probably because Anthony's wandering hands were distracting her. But now ...

Was there something going on between them? she wondered. The director was beautiful as far as Kris could tell. And Julianne ... Kris sighed, feeling sad all of a sudden.

The director's voice slashed through her thoughts, startling her. Noise and commotion followed, and it took Kris a moment to realize that Naomi had wrapped things up for the night.

Her sadness evaporated in an instance, replaced by anticipation. Hanging out with Julianne was rapidly becoming one of her favorite things to do. The actress was funny and smart and just being around her made Kris feel ...

Kris let the thought linger as she spotted the actress walking toward her. "Hey," she greeted, trying not to smile too brightly or widely even though she felt like doing so for some reason.

"Sorry that took so long," Julianne apologized. "I still have to get out of this getup."

"I didn't mind the wait," Kris assured her. "It's not every day I get to sit in on the production of a major motion picture." She chose not to comment on the "getup." Personally, she thought Julianne looked beautiful in it, all feminine and delicate. It wasn't quite as intimidating as Julianne's usual look.

"Well, follow me," Julianne instructed. "I'll give you a tour of my home away from home. You'll be happy to know it has furniture."

"I take it you didn't decorate it," Kris teased as she followed the actress to her trailer.

Julianne fidgeted in her seat. Her gaze was fixed on the movie screen, but her mind was miles away. She couldn't even remember what movie they'd agreed to watch. Actually, she didn't really care. She was too distracted by the fact that Kris was sitting next to her, close enough to be touching, but not.

So, Julianne made sure to sit perfectly still. Only, they'd agreed to share a big tub of popcorn, and Kris was holding it. What if their hands reached in at the same time? Julianne suddenly felt like a dorky teenage boy in the middle of a first date. She wasn't sure how else to feel. How did other twenty-three year old women behave at the movies with their friends? Friends they had huge crushes on. Friends they were possibly in love with.

"I hope you don't expect me to eat this all by myself," Kris whispered a second later.



"I thought you said you were hungry," Julianne teased, grabbing a handful of popcorn. She figured she could make that last for at least ten minutes. Then, after that, she could systematically calculate her popcorn-reaching cycle so that no hand-touching would occur. Satisfied with her plan, she relaxed slightly.

Julianne spent the next ten minutes trying to follow the plot of the movie, while nibbling slowly on the popcorn in her hand. But it was no use. Her thoughts kept drifting, and she felt anxious. And Kris's hand was tempting her from its place on the armrest. It would be so easy to cover that hand with hers, to feel the soft fingers interlacing with her own.

"Here," Kris said, handing the popcorn over. She leaned closer and whispered, "Maybe if it's in front of you it will entice you more."

Julianne stiffened, feeling Kris's soft breath on her ear. Her gaze fell on the bucket in her lap, hoping that staring at it long enough would still the beating of her heart. She turned her head to look at Kris, to answer her, not realizing that Kris hadn't moved. Suddenly she found her face so close to Kris's that if either of them leaned forward, their lips would inevitably touch. And Julianne totally froze.

Kris's breath caught in her throat at the suddenness of finding Julianne's lips so impossibly close to her own. It took her a moment – too long—to finally pull back, and she wondered at her hesitation. For a moment she'd almost considered ... almost wanted to...

No.

The word echoed through the walls of her mind, silencing all other thoughts. *No*. She'd been caught off-guard. It had taken her a moment to react; that was all. She begged her heart to slow down, afraid that Julianne would hear it above the movie, and wonder what it meant.

Kris felt something soft and light bounce off her cheek, her thoughts instantly shifting. She glanced questioningly at the actress who was doing a poor job of looking innocent. "Did you just throw popcorn at me?" she asked, her brow arching.

Julianne gasped in mock surprise. "I would never do anything like that," she replied. "What if it got out?"

And here Kris had thought that Leigh was the only freak who threw popcorn. But, at least her best friend had the courtesy to aim it at the television screen. Kris grinned, relaxing slightly. If Julianne didn't feel awkward, then why should she? Her gaze fell on the movie screen. How much of the movie had she missed? She had no idea. It wasn't that good, anyway.

Kris grabbed a handful of popcorn and contemplated her next move. She could throw one so that things would be even. Or two. Or, she could be really daring and throw the whole thing. The thought made her smile. Her mother would certainly not approve of this behavior. But, her mother wasn't there.

She waited until Julianne appeared totally lost in the movie. Then, as subtly as possible, she drew her hand to the side and then let the popcorn fly.



Startled by the unexpected action, Julianne jumped in her seat, sending the bucket of popcorn flying into the air. It crashed on the floor several seconds later, its contents scattering across the floor.

Kris shrank down in her seat, unable to stop laughing. Several people shouted at them to be quiet, which only made Kris laugh harder, though she was trying her best to stop.

Beside her, Julianne was trying to hide her face. "Do you want to get out of here?" the actress suggested after a moment.

Through her giggles, Kris nodded. She followed the actress down the row, excusing herself as she bumped into random people's knees.

Finally, they made it outside and burst into laughter.

"I've never seen anyone jump that high," Kris teased, as they began their descent down the busy streets of Manhattan. "It was just popcorn, you know."

"Shut up!" Julianne said, laughing. "I only threw *one* at you, not a whole army of them."

"Oh, so you admit it, then!"

Julianne paused. "Um, admit what?" She smiled. "And anyway, I'm jumpy by nature."

"Well, you should've thought of that before you attacked me," Kris told her. "You can't just challenge me and expect to get away with it. It doesn't work that way."

"Fair enough," Julianne replied, grinning slightly. "So, what are we doing now that you ruined our movie-going experience?"

Kris stuck her hands inside her jacket pockets, wishing to warm them. "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"Whatever you want."

"I'm kind of hungry," Kris admitted.

Julianne nodded. "Okay, what do you want to eat?"

"There's a great vegan restaurant around here," Kris suggested, hoping the actress didn't mind. "Unless there's something else you'd like to eat."

"I'm open to anything," Julianne replied. "So, how's school going?"

Kris shrugged. "It's school. I have a nice long paper to write for Monday."

"Shakespeare?" Julianne asked hopefully.

Kris laughed at Julianne's tone. "I never thought I'd say this, but I wish it were on Shakespeare," she answered, shaking her head. "But alas, I have to write it on Foucault. I hate Foucault. At least Shakespeare had fairies. Foucault has ..." She struggled to remember what her paper was on. "The author something."



"Function?" Julianne guessed.

"Right. The author function." Kris nodded. "I mean, how complicated is that? The author writes. That's his function, end of story. Why the need to complicate things further by writing long, pretentious essays that analyze everything to death?"

Julianne just smiled.

"You probably like all that stuff," Kris guessed.

"I think it's interesting," Julianne admitted. "But I think I'd like it less if I was expected to write papers all the time."

"I thought you were a Comparative Lit major."

"Yeah, for like three semesters," Julianne answered. "And then I got cast for *Guardian*, and other roles started appearing. I really hated college. It's not for everyone, I guess."

Kris nodded. Sometimes she felt like college was a waste of her time, but it was important. At least, that's what everyone kept telling her, so it had to be true. "Do you regret dropping out?"

"Can't say that I do," Julianne replied. "I mean, it's nice to have a degree in something, but I'm doing what I love to do. And if I ever stop acting, then I can easily go back to school. Study something pointless, like Latin."

"Why Latin?"

Julianne smiled and shrugged. "I don't know. Why not?"

Kris nodded. "I guess it's nice, having that luxury," she said, not meaning it negatively. It was just a fact. "Not having to worry about money or anything."

"I've been lucky," Julianne agreed.

Kris motioned for them to turn the corner. The restaurant was close. "So, what do you think you'd want to do if you weren't an actress?"

Julianne considered the question for a long moment. "A poet."

"Aren't you that already?"

Julianne glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"I just think, there's some things you're born being," Kris said.

"Like an artist?" Julianne guessed.

Kris simply smiled. She didn't think the question needed any confirmation. "Do you think you were born to be an actress?" she wondered.

"Yes," Julianne said without hesitation. "I guess you're right. Some things you just are."

"It's okay," Kris said, wondering how to ask whether Julianne was among the invited. "Who's coming?"

Leigh appeared thoughtful as she counted off on her fingers. "Jeremy, Steve, Kim, Ignacio and Summer."

Kris hoped she hid her disappointment well. "Is Julianne still at the set?" she found herself asking.

"Nope. I invited her, but she said she wasn't feeling well," Leigh answered, looking at Kris curiously. "Sorry," she added with a smirk.

Kris stared at the computer screen in order to avoid Leigh's gaze. Julianne wasn't feeling well? What did she have? A cold? The flu? Something worse? And she was all alone in that big empty apartment. Kris bit her lip thoughtfully, lost in thought. That is, until Leigh cleared her throat loudly.

"I said, anything new in your life?"

Suddenly, Kris perked up. "Anthony and I are going away for the weekend."

The shocked look on Leigh's face was priceless. "You're what?"

"Going. Away," Kris said, making sure to emphasize each syllable. "His parents rented a cabin in the woods up north. They had a change of plans and left it to us."

Leigh sat back in her chair, shaking her head in amazement. "I don't believe it. You're finally going to give it up."

Now Kris was confused. "Give it up? What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you slept with him already and didn't tell me." Leigh sounded upset.

Kris blinked. "Slept with ..." Then she realized what Leigh was implying. "Oh, no, no. I'm not going to sleep with him. We're just going to spend the weekend together. It should be fun."

"Erm .." Leigh coughed. "Hold on. So, you and Anthony discussed that there would be no sex going on up in the cabin of love?"

"Well," Kris frowned, "No."

Leigh nodded. "I see. So, he invited you to go away with him, alone, to a cabin in the woods-- again, alone--and you don't think the boy has sex on the mind?"

Kris chewed on her bottom lip. "It didn't occur to me."

"Amazing," Leigh said, shaking her head once again.

Kris glanced nervously at the floor. "But I did tell him I wanted to wait until I got married."

Leigh rolled her eyes. "Kris, you watch *Sex & the City*. Do you want what happened to Charlotte to happen to you?"



"That's a TV show," Kris began, thinking that Leigh was being ridiculous.

"News flash: impotence happens," Leigh stated. "The last thing you want is to save yourself for however many years and then come home to a flaccid penis."

Kris blushed.

"Next thing you know, you're shagging your husband's parents' gardener," Leigh added, shaking her head. "It's a pity. Although, the gardener was really hot..." She got lost in her thoughts for a moment.

Glancing away from her best friend, Kris sighed softly. Was it foolish to wait? Was anybody waiting anymore? And what if she waited and it was a mistake? Maybe it wasn't so much about saving herself for marriage, maybe it was just fear. Turning back to Leigh, she asked, "Have you slept with Jeremy?"

"Not technically," Leigh answered. "But I probably will tonight." She winked.

Kris didn't bother to ask what the 'not technically' meant. She had a paper to write and this was not the place to do it. She closed up the laptop and packed it up in its case.

Leigh watched silently for a moment. "What are you doing?" she asked finally.

"I'm going to go to the library," Kris answered, though a part of her knew that's not where she'd end up. "I really need to get this paper done."

"Hey, if you want me to take everyone somewhere else, I can do that," Leigh offered. "I really didn't mean to make you leave."

Kris smiled. "Nah, don't worry about it. I would've probably ended up leaving anyway." She kissed Leigh's cheek. "Have fun tonight. Be careful," she warned, but winked. "I'll be home late, probably, so ..."

Leigh smiled. "Good luck with that Foofoo guy."

"Foucault?" Kris guessed. "Thanks." She laughed and headed out the door. It was true that the paper had to be written, but first, there was someone she needed to check up on.

Julianne woke to the subtle sound of knocking. She looked around her bedroom for a moment, trying to figure out why she'd fallen asleep. The pounding in her head was an instant reminder. The knock came again, and she groaned as she made her way across the apartment to answer it.

Her headache was momentarily forgotten as she stared at her visitor. "Hey," she greeted softly. She was certain that her heart had skipped several beats once her brain had processed who was standing there. "I wasn't expecting you."

Kris looked at her with concern. "Did I wake you?" she asked.

"No," Julianne lied, and then realized her disheveled appearance was a dead giveaway. "Yes."



Kind of. I took a short nap."

"Leigh told me you weren't feeling well," Kris said.

Julianne wondered if Kris had come all the way there just to check up on her. The thought almost made her smile. *She cares about me.* "Just a headache," she answered.

"Is it bad?" Kris asked gently.

"It's getting better," Julianne lied.

Kris smiled. "You really are a bad liar," she said. "Are you going to invite me in?" Julianne stepped quickly aside to allow her visitor entrance. She glanced at the bag Kris had strapped to her shoulder. "Are you moving in?"

"Ha," Kris said, smiling. She shook her head. "I have a paper due tomorrow and Leigh invited some people over. I figured I'd stop by and check on you and then head back to the library."

Julianne stared at Kris for a moment. "Kind of out of your way," she said lightly, hoping it didn't make Kris uncomfortable.

"I was worried about you," the artist confessed. "Is that weird?"

Julianne grinned, feeling giddy. Her headache started to fade. "I'm flattered, not that many people worry about me." She sensed an awkward silence approaching so she quickly added, "Have you eaten? Cause I haven't. I can make you some dinner. You can work on your paper here, if you'd like."

Kris appeared to mull over the idea. Finally, she said, "What are you making?"

Julianne grinned and led her guest to the kitchen. "What are you in the mood for? I'm pretty stocked."

"Pancakes," Kris answered.

Julianne turned, her brow arched in question. "You want pancakes for dinner?"

"Is that weird?" Kris smiled.

Julianne grinned. "Probably, but we can be weird together. Although, that's hardly wellbalanced."

Kris slid the laptop case off her shoulder and leaned against the kitchen counter. "You know, I really don't get you. You like to eat healthy, but you can't last five minutes on an exercise machine?"

"Well," Julianne began, gathering the ingredients for her pancake feast, "it's really very simple. I have my very own nutritionist, but forgot to hire a personal trainer." She winked. "Now, what kind of pancakes would you like? Blueberry, chocolate chip, raspberry ..."

"I'll just take plain ones," Kris answered. After a pause she asked, "Are you making these from scratch?"

"Yup. Why? Is that weird?" Julianne smiled, risking a glance at those hazel eyes.



Kris smiled back, in a way that Julianne found disarming. "Where should I hook this up?" she asked, lifting up the case.

"You'll probably be more comfortable in my room. You can sit on the bed."

Kris stared at Julianne for a short moment. "Are you sure I'm not inconveniencing you?"

"Pancakes and your company, what more could a girl want?" Julianne said, before she could edit herself. Quickly, she added, "I should probably make the bed, though. I left it all a mess."

Kris held up her hand to stop her. "You make the pancakes, I'll take care of the bed." And then she disappeared toward the bedroom before Julianne could argue. Julianne grinned to herself, feeling dorky but happy. *Pancakes for dinner*, she mused. *What a strange but interesting woman. Oh, and hot, too. Can't forget that.* Headache all but forgotten, she turned to the task at hand.

"You've *never* had pancakes for dinner?" Kris asked, torn between being aghast at the revelation and wanting to moan at how good the pancakes were. She opted to keep both reactions at bay for the time being, and focused on taking another bite. If she could afford her, Kris would hire Julianne as her personal chef.

Julianne shrugged from her place on the bed. "I think Mother would flip out if she knew this is what I was eating," she answered. "She wouldn't be too pleased with the fact that we're eating on the bed, either. She's rather fond of that intrinsic object known as the dinner table."

Kris smiled, unable to believe that Julianne's mom could be that exacting. "Maybe if they were Ralph Lauren pancakes," she suggested.

"I don't think Ralph has ventured into the pancake-making business," Julianne replied with a smile.

"I just found out the other day that he makes paint," Kris said, amazed still. "*Paint*. I wonder what kind of people actually buy that."

Julianne glanced down guiltily and concentrated on the remaining pieces of her food.

Kris pointed her fork at Julianne. "You bought Ralph Lauren paint?" she asked incredulously. After a moment, she laughed. "Well, I guess that answers my original question."

"Hey, it was Adrian's idea," Julianne said defensively. "And it looks nice."

Kris smiled and finished the last of her dinner. There was something she was meaning to bring up, but she wasn't sure she'd reached that level of comfort with the actress yet. Still, it was either Julianne or her brother. "Um, can I ask you a personal question?" she found herself asking, wondering if she'd actually manage to get through the subject without blushing.

"What's up?" Julianne asked, staring at Kris curiously.



"How long would you wait to have sex with someone if you were in a relationship with them?" Kris blurted out.

Julianne blinked several times before answering. "Uh... I think I'm definitely the wrong person to ask."

Kris studied the actress for a moment, amused that Julianne seemed embarrassed by the question. *Guess I'm not the only one.* "You've really never had sex?" she asked. It was one thing for mysterious Julia to be a virgin ... but Julianne Franqui?

"Only on film," Julianne answered with a shy smile. "I've never found someone I'd like to date, let alone sleep with."

"Never?" Kris found that hard to believe.

Julianne looked down at the comforter. "So, uh ... why did you ask me the 'how long' question?" Kris sighed. "I made plans to go away with Anthony for the weekend," she answered, trying to decipher Julianne's reaction. "Leigh said he probably thinks we're going to ... And, I'm thinking maybe we should."

"Oh," Julianne said. "Well, um, do you love him?"

The question caught Kris off-guard. She'd never thought of Anthony in terms of love. Was she in love with him? She wasn't sure. Maybe after this weekend she'd know. "Ask me again after the weekend," she answered. "So, what do you think?"

"About?"

"About me sleeping with him," Kris clarified.

The ringing cell phone interrupted Julianne's answer. "Excuse me," she said, taking the object from her nightstand. "Franqui," she greeted, rising from the bed.

Kris grabbed her laptop and made a point to look like she wasn't eavesdropping, even though she was. She couldn't help it after she realized it was Naomi on the other end.

"Friday?" Julianne was saying. "Sure, I'd love to. What time? ... Okay. See you then ..." Laughter. "I don't think so ... Okay, bye." Click.

Quickly, Kris deleted all the gibberish she'd been typing and did her best to look busy.

"How much do you have done?" Julianne asked, sitting back down on the bed.

"Approximately nothing," Kris replied, sighing. "I'm never going to finish this."

Julianne went to get up. "I'll leave you alone, then. I don't want to distract you."

Without thinking, Kris grabbed Julianne's hand. "Stay," she said. She stared down at her hand, which held the actress's, then let go. "It's your bed. And you're not distracting me. I just can't write papers." She sat back with a sigh. Before she could talk herself out of it, she said, "So ... you have a date or something?"

"Um," Julianne said, looking shy again. "Kind of. I'm not sure what's going on."



Kris nodded, her stomach doing odd things at the confirmation. "Do you like her?"

"She's beautiful," Julianne said thoughtfully. "I don't know her well enough to know if there's anything there yet, though."

"Maybe you'll find out on Friday," Kris said with a smile she didn't quite feel. *What is wrong with me?* Her gaze landed on the computer screen. *Stupid paper.*

Julianne pulled down the covers on her side of the bed and got in. "I'm taking a nap," she announced. "My headache is coming back."

Kris nodded. "I should go. I can finish this at the library."

Julianne frowned. "You're not bothering me. Finish it. I promise not to snore too loudly."

Kris laughed at that. "Deal."

Julianne smiled at her and turned on her side.

Kris bit her lip, her gaze resting on Julianne's form for a second longer than necessary. She loved it when Julianne smiled at her. The actress had the most beautiful smile. Shaking her head, she turned back to the paper, determined not to let anything else distract her.

When Julianne opened her eyes, the first thing she noticed was the time glowing bright and red on her alarm clock: 6:46. Had she really slept all night? Well, at least her headache was gone; that was the second thing she noticed. The third thing came a second later when Julianne turned over and found herself face to face with peacefully slumbering Kris.

Julianne's breath caught in her throat and she felt her heart skip several beats. She waited several moments to see if Kris would wake up, but the artist didn't stir. Julianne relaxed slightly. She knew she should get up and take a shower, but the view from her current position was far too beautiful to ignore.

Unable to resist the temptation, Julianne pushed several strands of hair from Kris's face. She pulled her hand away quickly, afraid that she'd get caught, but Kris continued to sleep. *Stop staring at her*, she commanded herself. *Get up. Get up. Get up. Stop being creepy and stalkerish.*

Julianne sighed quietly. In spite of her screaming conscience, she couldn't help but enjoy the moment. It wasn't every day she got to wake up beside the woman she loved. *How did I get myself into this mess?* she wondered. *And why is she so beautiful?* The actress quietly studied the gentle features of Kris's face, her gaze locking on soft, full lips long enough to regret it. *What am I doing?*

Angry with herself, Julianne rose quickly from the bed and headed for the bathroom.

Hazel eyes slowly fluttered open. Kris stared around for a moment, trying to figure out where she was. *Julianne's. The paper. Oh, shit, the paper.* Kris sat up with a start, grabbing her laptop. She'd only closed her eyes for a second, or at least, she'd thought it was a second. She glanced at the time. *Crap!*



She stared at the computer screen, trying desperately to figure out how to write four more pages by nine o'clock. She still had to get back to campus. After a moment of freaking out, she gave up and put the computer down. There was no use. She'd just have to hand the paper in late. With that matter resolved, she yawned and settled back into the covers. No wonder she'd fallen asleep. Julianne's bed was so comfortable. It was like sleeping on a fluffy white cloud. *Mmm...she thought blissfully, her eyes closing. I don't know how she gets up in the mornings. Speaking of which...*

Tired eyes opened once again, this time narrowed slightly. She listened intently to her surroundings, trying to decipher the actress's location. The sound of running water was a clear enough indicator.

Satisfied with knowing where Julianne was, Kris let her eyes close. But her thoughts drifted instantly to Julianne and Julianne was in the shower. And ... why was she picturing Julianne in the shower? Kris shook her head, trying to clear the images from her mind. Her heart was pounding and she wasn't entirely sure why. *God, I must be really tired.*

But the images floated back into her subconscious. Drops of water cascading over soft, soapcovered skin. Her eyes snapped open. She blinked at the ceiling, feeling ridiculous and aroused and ... *aroused?* "What the hell?" she wondered. "I need coffee. Lots of coffee."

Julianne stepped out of the bathroom feeling refreshed. The hot water had helped to clear her thoughts, but she was still annoyed with herself. She was going to have to find a way to set her romantic feelings aside. Somehow.

Finding the bedroom empty, Julianne went in search of her guest. She found the artist in the kitchen a moment later. "Sleep well?" she asked, tightening her bathrobe around her waist.

"I'm in love with your bed," Kris answered, leaning against the counter. "I didn't want to get up."

Julianne smiled, suddenly envying her own bed. "Did you finish the paper?"

Kris lowered her gaze. "No," she answered with a sigh. "I'll have to hand it in late. I fell asleep. I blame your bed."

"Sorry," Julianne said, feeling guilty. Perhaps Kris would've been better off going to the library after all.

Kris waved her hand in a dismissive manner. "It's okay." She glanced around. "You don't appear to have a coffee maker."

"I can run out and buy one," Julianne replied with a grin. "I usually just drink Coke or Sprite in the morning."

Kris gave a half-nod. "Oh, right," she said, remembering. "Got any of that?"

"Fridge," Julianne answered. "Help yourself. Are you going to class?"

"Nope," Kris answered, grabbing a can of soda. "No point. Well, I mean, there's a point, but the fact that I don't feel like going kind of counterbalances the point, and so ..." She shrugged, taking sip. "What time do you have to be at the set?"



"I don't," Julianne answered. "I'm not in the scenes they're shooting today."

Kris paused in her drinking. "Why in the world are we awake at seven o'clock in the morning then?" she wondered, setting the can on the counter. She walked over and took Julianne's hand, pulling her toward the bedroom. "Let's be lazy."

Julianne let herself get dragged into the bedroom, wondering what Kris meant by "lazy." She had a fairly good idea it involved her bed somehow, and had no complaints on the matter. Unfortunately. "I take it you're not a big morning person?" she guessed with an amused smile.

Kris climbed on the bed, letting go of Julianne's hand. The actress instantly missed the contact. "I value sleep," Kris confirmed, grinning up at her.

Julianne stood by the bed for a second. "I should put some clothes on," she said, realizing she was a little too naked under her robe to get into a bed with Kris. "I'll be right back." She grabbed a pair of shorts and a tee shirt from her closet, changed into them, and made her way back to the bed.

Kris had made herself comfortable, and something inside Julianne ached at the sight. But she pushed the feelings away and climbed in beside her friend, trying not to question the situation. She just wanted to enjoy the reality of it.

"What's the next scene you're shooting?" Kris asked softly, shifting her head on the pillow so she could look at Julianne more clearly.

Julianne ran the shooting schedule through her mind, trying to pinpoint where they were. "Unless Naomi changes her mind, I think my next scene is the one where Emma tells Elizabeth she's getting married."

Kris was quiet for a second. "That was sad," she said.

"It was a different time," Julianne offered, studying Kris's face, unsure of how to feel at that moment.

Kris considered. "I guess," she answered. "I bet it's not really easy these days either." She stared at Julianne for a moment. "Do you wish you were straight?"

Caught off-guard, Julianne hesitated. Did she? Maybe. Sometimes. Oftentimes. But not at that moment. "I wish I didn't sometimes feel like I wished I were straight," she answered finally. "But given the opportunity, I don't think I'd change who I am."

"That's good," Kris said. "I wouldn't change you either." She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again. "Will you be making breakfast later?"

Julianne smiled slightly. "What would you like?"

Kris yawned and focused sleepy hazel eyes on Julianne's sleepy blue ones. "Surprise me," she replied.

"Okay," Julianne agreed softly, running various breakfast ideas through her mind. She kept her gaze fixed on Kris. The artist had closed her eyes again. She watched and waited until Kris's breath evened, until she was certain that Kris was asleep.



"I love you," she whispered, barely audibly, into the world where unheard thoughts resided. She hadn't meant to say it; hadn't wanted to think it. But she was tired and her mind was clouded again. It was too much, being there with Kris by her side; too much, and not quite enough. Still, it was enough for now.

She closed her eyes, willing her mind to rest.

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"Oh man, you're probably gonna get this one," Julianne muttered, looking at the Trivial Pursuit card she'd picked. It was hours after their nap, and after a hearty breakfast of fruit and croissants, Kris had suggested they play a board game. Trivial Pursuit was the only one Julianne had brought, so it won by default.

But, Kris had changed the rules of the game slightly. Instead of a slice of pie for a correct answer, they'd get to ask the other a personal question. "An intellectual truth or truth game", Julianne had called it when Kris had suggested the idea. The artist had simply smiled. And now, Julianne was certain she was about to get asked something she probably wouldn't want to answer.

"Ooh, does it have to do with art?" Kris asked excitedly. "Sweet. Let's hear it."

Julianne cleared her throat. "What Botticelli painting do some wags call 'Venus on the Half-Shell'?"

Kris grinned. "*The Birth of Venus*," she replied smugly.

Rolling her eyes, Julianne returned the card to the back of the deck. "Okay, fine, smarty pants. What do you want to know?"

Kris was thoughtful while she thought of a question. "Do you have any birthmarks?"

Julianne felt herself blush. Where had that question come from? "Yes," she answered.

"Really? Where?" Kris asked curiously.

Julianne was about to answer, but shook her finger at Kris. "Nu-uh. You only get to ask one question. And you did, and I answered. So, it's my turn."

Pouting, Kris relented. "Fine, I'll get you next time."

Relieved for now, and hoping there wouldn't be a next time, Julianne rolled the dice. She landed on green. She groaned. "That's sports, isn't it? I don't know the first thing about sports."

"Good," Kris answered with a satisfied smirk. She took a card from the box and read, "What pro sports team is nicknamed 'the Broadway Blues'?"

Julianne thought long and hard. "Broadway... that's New York. So, um, the New York some things. Er, the Braves!"

Kris blinked at her. "That's insulting. The New York Rangers." She put the card back and shook her head. "The Braves? They're not from New York."



"I did mention the not knowing anything about sports thing, right?" Julianne said. "I could've sworn I did."

With a laugh, Kris took her turn. "Yellow."

"Which two founding fathers graced the first two stamps sold in the U.S., in 1847?" Julianne asked, hoping that Kris was as adept in history as she was in sports.

"Ben Franklin," Kris said, "and ...". She scrunched up her face. "George Washington?" she ventured uncertainly.

Julianne frowned. "How do you know this stuff?" she asked, impressed in spite of the fact that she was losing.

"Should've stayed in school, Miss Franqui," Kris teased. "Hmm, so where was I? Oh, right. Your birthmark. Where is it?"

Julianne sighed. "It's on my butt."

Kris grinned. "Oh really? Interesting."

Julianne hoped that Kris's next question wouldn't be, "Which cheek?" With a resigned sigh, she rolled the dice and landed on pink. "Yes! Good."

"What Broadway play sold tickets from a Zoltar fortune teller machine in FAO Schwartz?" Kris read off.

"*Big*," Julianne said confidently.

"Damn," Kris cursed.

Julianne rubbed her hands gleefully. "Hmm, what can I ask?" she wondered. It had to be something evil. Very evil. "Have you ever had a dream in which you were more than friendly with another woman?"

Kris blushed at the question and looked intently at the game board. "Uhh ... yes."

Now Julianne was intrigued. "Oh, really? When?"

"Nope, you used up your question. My turn," Kris said quickly. "Blue."

Julianne narrowed her eyes. She'd get her on the next one. "Okay, what Asian country boasts the largest Muslim population in the world?"

"Uh," Kris looked around as if hoping to pluck the answers from the air. "China?"

"Tsk tsk, Indonesia," Julianne replied. She took her turn. "Yellow."

"Let's hope you suck at history," Kris mumbled. "Who told Milk Wallace in 1964: 'They're going to kill me ... I know too much about Elijah'?"

"Malcolm X," Julianne answered.



Kris narrowed her eyes. "I hate you."

"Right. So, what happened in this dream?" Julianne asked, grinning.

Kris shook her head. "I'm not telling."

"Then you'll have to take a dare," Julianne replied matter-of-factly.

With a sigh, Kris agreed. "Fine. What's the dare?"

Ah, there were so many possibilities, Julianne thought smugly. "I dare you to dance with me at a lesbian bar on Thursday night."

Kris cocked her head to the side, gazing at Julianne curiously, and smiled. "Okay," she answered. "Sounds interesting. I thought you were going to make me put underwear on my head and run through the second floor screaming 'fire!'"

Julianne's eyes widened and she grinned brightly.

"Don't even think about it," Kris warned, grabbing the dice. She rolled. "Yay, pink. Go art."

"What 1991 road movie was originally intended for Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn?"

"*Thelma & Louise*," she answered easily. "Leigh tells me all of this random stuff."

Julianne mumbled under her breath. "Okay, shoot."

"Who was the last person you had a crush on?" Kris asked.

Julianne froze at the question. She wanted to tell her. It was so tempting. But she couldn't. She didn't want to deal with the consequences that would follow. There had been enough of those lately. "I plead the fifth."

"Aw, come on," Kris said. "Tell me. Naomi, right?"

"My lips are sealed," Julianne replied, her heart aching. How would Kris take it? Would she freak out? She wasn't strong enough at that moment to find out.

Disappointed, Kris sighed. "Okay. Then, I dare you to sign up for a lesbian porn website."

Julianne stared at her. "You're kidding."

"Nope. It's one or the other, Sparky," Kris replied, smiling.

Julianne groaned and grabbed her computer. "I can't believe you're making me do this."

"Better get your credit card ready," Kris snickered. She crawled across the bed, pushing the game board to the side, and sat slightly behind Julianne so she could stare at the screen. "I must supervise."

Julianne was distracted by Kris's nearness for a moment. She wanted to lean back, to feel more of the warm softness she was sure to find there. Instead, she went into Google and typed in



"lesbian porn". After a lot of clicking and closing of pop-up windows, she managed to find somewhere to register. "If this appears on the front of *The Enquirer* tomorrow, I'm gonna ..."

"Gonna what?" Kris challenged, leaning forward to rest her chin on Julianne's shoulder.

Kiss you, Julianne thought, her heart hammering in her chest. "Are you ticklish?" she suddenly wondered.

Kris pulled back. "Uh, no," she answered.

"Somehow I don't believe you," Julianne replied, typing in her credit card digits. A few seconds later, she was registered. A world of lesbian porn lay at her fingertips. "Now, what am I supposed to do at this website?"

"I'm sure you'll find something to keep you entertained," Kris teased, moving over slightly.

Julianne put the laptop on the floor and turned to Kris. "Like?"

"Threesomes between big-breasted, sweaty blondes," Kris answered laughing.

"I prefer brunettes," Julianne replied, grinning. "And how do you know about these blondes? Go there often?"

Kris nodded in mock seriousness. "Yup. I'm addicted to lesbian porn. You've found my dirty little secret." She laughed. "Is the game over?"

"Yes I think we've embarrassed each other enough for one day," Julianne replied, closing the board and throwing the game pieces into the box. After clearing the bed, she lay down and stared up at Kris who was sitting cross-legged next to her. "So, now what?"

"I don't know," Kris answered. "I've had fun today."

"Me too," Julianne replied, hoping that wasn't Kris's way of saying she had to leave soon.

Kris looked down at her curiously. "Hey, are you ticklish?"

"No," Julianne lied.

A mischievous smile appeared on Kris's lips. "Oh really? Are you sure?"

"Remember I'm taller and stronger than you are," Julianne warned, sitting up. She needed to be on the defensive in case Kris tried anything.

"Taller, maybe, but not stronger," Kris argued.

"I am, too, stronger."

"Prove it," Kris challenged.

Julianne arched a questioning brow. "And how do you propose I do that?" she wondered.

Kris looked around thoughtfully. Then she brightened. "We'll wrestle. First to pin the other one down, wins."



Is she trying to kill me? Julianne wondered. "Fine," she agreed, because she was a masochist. A dirty, dirty masochist. "But we'll do it by the bed. I don't want to hurt you when I take you down."

Kris rolled her yes. "You're far too cocky for your own good," she said, rolling off the bed. "Come on, Sparky."

"What's with the Sparky?" Julianne asked, getting off the bed and joining Kris at the foot of it.

Kris smiled. "It's cute."

"You're so weird," Julianne said. "Now, how are we doing this? I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't know, I've never wrestled before," Kris answered lightly. "But I do have two brothers, so I think I have an advantage."

Julianne laughed. "Well, that's true. I kept my sister back with crosses and holy water." She paused. "Okay, so all I have to do is pin you down on the bed?"

"You have to *try*," Kris corrected.

Julianne scratched her chin thoughtfully. Okay. She stepped forward swiftly and started tickling Kris's stomach. As she'd expected, Kris started doubling over with laughter. Julianne ignored Kris's pleas and carefully, but efficiently got Kris on the bed.

"You cheater!" Kris cried, struggling to escape Julianne's tickling hands.

Julianne laughed, and grabbed Kris's hands with one of her own and pinned them down behind Kris's head. With her free hand, Julianne continued to tickle Kris. "Admit I'm stronger," she said.

"No!" Kris refused, while laughing uncontrollably. "You're a cheater!" Somehow, she managed to get one of her hands free, and that was all of the advantage she needed. Kris started tickling Julianne, which distracted the actress from her own attack. That got Kris's other hand free, and she pushed Julianne over, rolling on top of her. She laughed, pinning Julianne's hands down with both of hers. "I win."

Julianne was laughing and gasping for air, but she was still aware of the fact that Kris was straddling her waist. "You win," she admitted, smiling, though she was having trouble concentrating on anything besides the nearness of Kris's body. She swallowed.

Kris stared down at her, her laughter simmering down to a chuckle. "I should get off of you now."

"You," Julianne said, not thinking.

"What?" Kris answered.

You're the last person I had a crush on. "I don't know," Julianne responded, feeling embarrassed. "I don't know what I'm saying."

Kris smiled and let go of Julianne's arms. "Let's get something to eat. Loser's treat."



"Fair enough," Julianne answered, noting that Kris was still on top of her. She tried not to focus on the points where their bodies were touching. But she was losing that battle. *Baseball. Snow. Cold water. Bill Clinton naked on a cold day. Ew.*

Kris jumped up, suddenly, as if realizing she'd been there too long. "Sorry," she quickly apologized, blushing.

Julianne noticed a change in Kris's demeanor and she worried at its meaning. *Can she tell how I feel?* She sat up, trying to decipher Kris's mood. "For what?"

Kris paused before answering. "For popping your mighty bubble."

"Well, sometimes I need to be brought down back to earth," Julianne replied.

Kris lay awake many hours later, staring lazily at her own ceiling. Her gaze traced patterns along the glow-in-the-dark stars, in the hopes of encountering an accidental constellation.

Meanwhile, a series of random thoughts ran laps around her brain. The process was making her dizzy. She wished there was a way to make it stop. But her eyes continued to seek order in the randomness of chance.

Kris's unanswered question haunted her. *Have you ever dreamed...* Yes, she had admitted. No, she would not tell more. How could she? How could Kris tell Julianne that she had been the star; that all day long she kept going back to the details of the dream, half ashamed, half excited.

Her eyes closed of their own volition, and she was back in the memory of the dream. The vividness of it made her mouth dry.

Kris remembered candles; white, glowing candles surrounding a large bed. Everything else was dark. Soft, undecipherable music played from somewhere far and somewhere near. Kris couldn't tell where it was coming from. Perhaps her heart was singing. But she was alone. No. Not alone. Waiting.

Waiting.

And suddenly, she wasn't alone anymore. Julianne was there, staring at her with curious blue eyes. She seemed to be asking an unspoken question. And Kris didn't know if she had the answer.

Everything shifted. The candles were gone. Darkness dressed in moonlight bathed the sparkling tresses of Julianne's hair. And Kris was mesmerized. She wanted to paint a picture of that moment. But she was stirred from her wish by Julianne's fingers on her lips.

Julianne spoke, but Kris hadn't listened. She'd been too focused on the movement of the other woman's lips. Pressed together then apart, murmuring questions that folded themselves across the canvas of Kris's memory.

The bed was soft, Kris had somehow noticed. But Julianne's skin was softer as her fingers trailed across the smoothness of Julianne's arm. She quickly pulled her hand back, unsure of her actions, her intentions.



And then Julianne's lips were closer, moving toward her with an impossible slowness that spoke of timelessness and doubt. But Kris didn't move away, couldn't move away. And the space closed in around her, making her gasp as soft lips brushed ever so briefly against her own.

Kris's eyes opened, her heart pounding. She wanted to stop thinking about the dream, but couldn't. It was alive in her thoughts; as vivid as any memory powered by hope.

The stars on her ceiling dimmed to the point of non-existence. Her thoughts drifted.

In that moment of waiting, of questioning, she could've pulled away. She could've turned the lights on and broken the spell.

But Julianne's lips were so inviting. And when they pressed against hers once again, she let go. She let go of worry, of doubt. In that moment, she surrendered to the sweet taste of truth. She pressed harder and deeper, searching for something she hadn't known she needed.

And slowly, the world dissipated into nothingness.

Kris opened her eyes, and turned on the light.

"Kris?" William sounded alarmed as he opened the door to his apartment and found his stepsister standing there. "Did something happen?"

Kris passed by him, entering the apartment, feeling flustered and confused. Her voice took on a nervous edge as she spoke. "I'm freaking out," she announced, just as Mark walked out of the bedroom. He sent a questioning glance to William who shrugged.

She was oblivious to the exchange as she continued. "On the way here I stopped at the confessional at Church and then I thought 'what am I doing here?' I mean you don't just confess these things to a priest, do you? You have to admit them to yourself first. But when you do that's it, it's real. It's out there. You can't reign it back in once you've released it into the world." She started to pace.

William and Mark watched silently for a moment. Finally, William spoke up. "Um, Kris," he began, gently, though his voice was thick with sleep. "What are you talking about?"

Kris paused long enough to glance at her audience. She sighed and sat down on the couch. "I've been having these thoughts about someone." She paused, feeling foolish and embarrassed. The fact that she was sitting there felt surreal; a scene she was imagining; a 'what if' scenario that would play out and then fade into the background of her thoughts, leaving her safe from consequence.

But, she knew it wasn't a passing thought she was caught in. She was at the edge of a cliff and she was about to dive. "A girl someone," she whispered, looking down.

Mark and William exchanged another glance. "I'm going to make coffee," Mark announced, moving off to do just that. "Lots of coffee," he muttered under his breath.

William stepped closer, grabbing a chair from the table. He sat down with a sigh. "So, what kind of thoughts?" he asked.



Kris glanced up. "Please don't make me go into details. This is embarrassing enough as it is." She ran a hand through her disheveled hair, noticing for the first time that she was still in her pajamas. "I had this dream where we kissed."

"I had a dream I kissed this girl Cathy Evans from work," Mark supplied. "A dream doesn't mean anything." He paused, making a face. "I hope. God, what if I'm straight?"

William watched Kris with concern. "It was just a dream?" he questioned.

"Yes," she said. Then shook her head. "No. There were other things." She chewed on her bottom lip. "She confuses me. Whenever I see her ... I just want..."

"To fuck her brains out," Mark offered.

Kris' head shot up at the words and she blushed furiously.

"Mark," William warned.

"Don't 'Mark' me," his boyfriend argued, grabbing another chair. He pulled it closer to Kris. He pushed stray locks of blonde hair out of his face and leaned forward. "Now, your brother sucks at this stuff. So, I'm going to take over. Tell me about this girl. Is she cute?"

Kris smiled slightly at the thought of anyone calling Julianne Franqui "cute". She paused to consider her words. "She's gorgeous," was all she could come up with. Images of photo shoots and pictures she'd recently encountered while surfing the web filtered through her mind. She instantly lowered her gaze, afraid that they'd see her thoughts reflected.

"What's her name?"

Kris considered how much to say. "Julianne," she answered. She sighed. "But she's got a date on Friday. And I should be happy for her, because she's my friend, but I don't want her to date Naomi."

"Oh, so she's gay?" Mark asked.

"Yeah," Kris confirmed. "But there's no way she'd ever be interested in me. I mean she's ..." She bit her tongue to keep from saying anymore. Explaining her crush on Julianne Franqui of all people wouldn't be easy. "And I'm still not really sure of what I'm feeling. I'm not even sure why I'm here. I just couldn't sleep. And I couldn't tell Leigh. She'd flip out."

"You're always welcome here," William told her.

Mark nodded. "It'll be okay," he said. "You'll figure things out. Just go with the flow of things."

Flow of things. Right. From the dark recesses of her mind, something started to emerge. "Anthony," she said, shocked that she'd somehow forgotten all about him. "I'm going away with him for the weekend."

"Well," Mark said thoughtfully, "that's good. Maybe he'll help you figure some stuff out. I mean if you really care about him, then maybe what you're feeling for Julianne is just a fleeting crush."

Yes, fleeting. Kris liked the thought of that. "Perhaps," she allowed, finding comfort in the knowledge that her feelings could be temporary.



Could be.

58

Julianne stared at her reflection in the mirror, finally settling on an outfit. Ironically, it turned out to be the first one she'd tried on. But in the end, she realized she didn't really care if Naomi liked her clothes. What difference did it make if she wore one thing or the other? It's not like Naomi was going to date her outfit.

The actress turned away from her reflection and glanced quickly at the time. She was running late. The fact that she kept stalling in the hopes that Kris would call hadn't escaped her.

She's not going to call, Julianne reminded herself, not for the first time. *She's on her way to spend a wonderfully romantic weekend with Sata—er, Anthony*. She took a deep breath. "And I have a date," she announced to the empty bedroom. "Which I'm already three minutes late for." *Crap*.

The actress hurried out of the building, waiting, somewhat impatiently, for the door attendant to get her a cab. She knew she wasn't in a good mood. In fact, she'd almost called to cancel the date about four times, but she didn't want to be alone. Not that night, when her thoughts would undoubtedly turn to Kris and what she might be doing with Anthony.

Julianne shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. "Thank you," she said, as a cab finally pulled up.

"Have a good night, Miss Franqui," the doorman told her.

From the taxi cab window, New York seemed distant and unreal. Maybe all images viewed through square-shaped portals were doomed to seem dreamlike in nature. Is that how she seemed to other people: distant and unreal, reduced to a two-dimensional figure? It felt lonely in that place. She wanted desperately to be real. Kris deserved someone real.

Julianne sighed, her gaze drifting along the scenery. She wondered what Kris was thinking at that moment. Was she happy in Anthony's company? Did he make her smile? Could he give her everything she needed? And if so, could Julianne ever accept that?

She wanted to believe that she would, that she could move beyond the pain and jealousy. But in the back of her mind, she would always believe that she could do better; that she could make Kris happier.

But, could she? Julianne suddenly wondered. Would Kris be happy in the public eye? Would she be happy giving up her privacy? Exception

People would want to hurt them; break them up. People would say things, and assume things. They would lie to sell more papers. They would make a mockery of everything Julianne considered to be beautiful and true, simply because she didn't exist in their realm. Twodimensional figures weren't expected to have feelings; they weren't allowed to love.

Julianne lowered her gaze at the realization: Kris was safer in Anthony's arms.



"Sixty-eighth and Broadway," the cab driver announced, rolling the vehicle to a stop.

Snapping out of her reverie, Julianne quickly handed him the money and stepped out into the cool night air; ready for her date.

Kris stared out the window of the car Anthony had borrowed from his parents, her gaze fixed on the darkness outside, while her mind traveled at a thousand miles per hour through the highway of her thoughts. She had the uneasy feeling that there would a head-on collision occurring sometime in the near future.

After her visit to William's apartment, Kris had decided to bury herself in schoolwork. Classes became her sanctuary for the remainder of the week. She'd avoided the set. She'd avoided Julianne's apartment. Worst of all, she'd avoided Julianne.

Kris knew they'd had an agreement to go out dancing the night before, but she'd chickened out of the dare. The fact that she had wanted to go scared her. Kris had figured that if she avoided Julianne until the weekend, she'd be safe. The weekend would show her that Anthony was right for her. *I hope...*

Kris turned her attention away from the window. "So, what are we doing tonight?" she asked, hoping to strike up a conversation. Talking would keep the silence at bay. Silence was dangerous. Silence led to thinking. And thinking led to guilt. *How could I ignore Julianne like that?* The thought nagged for her attention; filled her with uneasiness.

"We could build a fire," Anthony suggested. "And watch a movie. I brought some."

Kris nodded. "That sounds nice," she told him, searching her mind for another conversation starter. Why couldn't she ever think of anything to say around him? Conversation came so easily when she was with Julianne. *UGH!* "So, um, do you come up here often?"

Anthony shook his head, his gaze on the road ahead. "No, my parents usually like their alone time to be ... well, alone." He smiled, glancing at her quickly. "I think it's sweet that after all of those years of marriage they still manage to find romance."

Kris nodded. "Yeah, that doesn't happen often," she said, recalling her parents' divorce. "I think true love is hard to come by," she added, not sure why she was saying that, especially to Anthony.

"I don't know, sometimes you get lucky," Anthony replied. "We're almost there."

Kris glanced out of the window, noting the change in scenery. She wished she could feel happier about being out in the woods, surrounded by undisturbed beauty.

The car came to a stop in front of a small log cabin and Kris stared at it for a moment. Several horror movies came to mind.

"I'm sure it's a lot less creepy in the day time," Anthony teased, as if reading her mind. "Come on, let's get our stuff inside. We've got a fun-filled night ahead of us."

Yes, fun-filled, Kris thought, and stepped out of the car.



Julianne was trying desperately to pay attention to everything that Naomi said, but her mind kept drifting. Why hadn't Kris called? Had she scared Kris off? Were her feelings too obvious?

"Julianne," Naomi said, breaking into her thoughts.

"Hmm?" the actress glanced up, realizing for the first time that she'd been tapping her fork against the table. She ceased the movement at once and regarded the director with an apologetic smile. "Sorry."

"Are you okay?" Naomi asked, her voice full of concern.

Julianne glanced around the restaurant for a brief second before turning her attention on attentive green eyes. *She cares about me ... why can't I care about her? Why must things be so complicated?* "I'm just having trouble concentrating, I'm sorry. It's been a long week."

The director nodded her head, taking a drink from her glass of wine. "Want to talk about it?"

"No, I just ... I just want to stop thinking," Julianne answered, wishing it were that simple.

Naomi motioned for the check, and sat back in the chair, staring thoughtfully at Julianne. "Do you want to go home?" she asked gently.

Home. What was that? "I'm not sure I want to be alone," Julianne answered, not really caring how it sounded. *She's going to get the wrong idea*, a little voice warned.

"You don't have to be," Naomi replied.

Kris stared at the television, attempting to focus on the images flickering across the screen. But, she was too nervous to concentrate. She kept wondering what Anthony was thinking. She kept wondering what the night would bring. Would something happen? Would she let things happen? She still didn't know.

Beside her on the couch, Anthony shifted. "Do you want a soda or anything?" he offered.

"No, thanks," Kris answered, keeping her gaze on the television screen. If she appeared engrossed in the film, maybe he wouldn't try anything. *He's your boyfriend, not a stranger*. But he felt like a stranger. And wasn't she supposed to be there to get to know him better? Wasn't this supposed to be fun? "Anthony," she said, turning to him. "Can we talk?"

"Sure," Anthony answered, shutting off the TV. He turned so he was facing her. "What's up?"

Kris turned, too, taking a moment to decide what to say. "Do you feel awkward?" she asked, and quickly added, "Because I do."

"I'm kind of nervous," he admitted, running a hand through his hair. "I'm not really sure how to read you."

"Read me?" Kris asked, confused. Was she a book?



Anthony stared at her uneasily. "I don't want to cross the line or anything," he told her softly. "I don't want to be a jerk."

"Oh," Kris responded, feeling torn. "I'm having trouble figuring out where the line is," she admitted. "Can we just ... play it by ear?"

"Yes, definitely," he said, and visibly relaxed. He took her hand and resumed the movie.

Kris glanced down briefly at their entwined hands and took a deep breath, letting her gaze rest on the television screen. Her heart was hammering, her thoughts were racing, and she was sure that she'd left reason and logic back in the City. "Anthony," she whispered, a part of her hoping he wouldn't hear her.

"Yeah?"

"Let's go to bed," she said, looking at him.

"I'm sorry I've been such a bad date," Julianne apologized, feeling embarrassed for her behavior all night. "I'm surprised you're still here." She didn't look at Naomi as she spoke, choosing to keep her gaze fastened to the sidewalk ahead.

The fact of the matter was that she wished she could start the evening over again, beginning with not being late. As a result of her tardy appearance, they'd missed their movie. Naomi hadn't been mad, though. Julianne wondered if she ever got mad. The director was such a free spirit; so calm and carefree. It didn't seem possible that a person could be so tranquil.

Naomi smiled at her. "I understand that you've got things on your mind," she answered with a slight shrug. "Just wish I could help."

"You've helped," Julianne assured her, glancing into green eyes. She wasn't sure how she would've gotten through the evening alone. "I really appreciate your company. I'm just terrible at showing it."

The director laughed easily. "It's okay, Julianne. I'm happy just to be near you." She rolled her eyes at the comment. "Sorry, I promised myself I wouldn't say things like that."

Julianne smiled, feeling flattered. "Why?" she wondered.

Naomi glanced at her, embarrassed. "Because I know that I like you a lot more than I should, and I don't want to freak you out."

"I'm not freaked," Julianne said. "Flattered, but not freaked." She glanced up to see her building not too far ahead. She could feel her heart pounding.

"Good, I don't want to make you uncomfortable," the director said, her voice shy but honest.

Why am I pining over someone I can't have? Naomi is perfect. Her thoughts battled back and forth, trying to find a solution to the problem. She wasn't sure there was a good solution besides getting over Kris, and how long would that take? How far was she willing to go to expedite the process?



"Well, we're here," Naomi announced, glancing up at the building.

Julianne stared at the door and then back at Naomi. *I could just say good night. Right here. Just say good night.* But she didn't want to say good night. She wanted to feel whole again. She wanted to stop aching. She wanted more than emptiness and silence. "Do you want to come up?"

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Kris tried to focus on the feel of his hands on her body. She tried to cling to the words emanating from his lips as he whispered, "You are so beautiful," into the space between his experience and her own. His breath felt cool against her body, as he kissed her stomach. His mouth left cold, wet trails along her breasts, lingering with hope, evaporating with reality. Kris tried to focus on his enthusiasm, and his passion, wishing that it was enough to carry them both through.

Why couldn't life be more like the movies? Everything was so passionate and beautiful when edited down into flashes of perfection. She wished she were experiencing the air-brushed version of that moment.

Is this what she had waited twenty-one years for, this feeling of numb indifference; the anticipation of the end before it had even begun. Is this what she was praying for? Clinging to?

She felt a breeze enter through the window, and wished she hadn't noticed it. Was this fair, using him only to quench her insistent need to hide? Was it right?

In his eyes she had seen a mixture of so many emotions she couldn't quite decipher them all. She knew there was lust and anticipation. But was there love? It didn't matter, she realized, it didn't matter what he felt if she couldn't reciprocate his feelings. How could she wake up the morning after and look him in the eyes?

She felt his hands undo her belt buckle. "Anthony, wait," she found her mouth saying, though her mind hadn't given it permission to speak.

Anthony paused in his actions. "Am I going too fast?"

She paused before responding. What excuse could she give him for leading him this far? How could she possibly justify her feelings of estrangement? "I can't do this," she whispered, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm sorry. I thought this is what I wanted but—"

"Oh," he said, as if he were still expecting her to answer his question about going too fast. "Oh," he said again, looking all of a sudden awkward. He glanced down at where he was, straddling her body. "Sorry," he said, and got off, sitting down awkwardly beside her.

Kris tried to search for words, but couldn't find any. She felt exposed, sitting there topless on a strange bed, staring at a boy whom she'd almost granted full access to her body, only moments before. What was there to say?

"Are you okay?" Anthony questioned, his disappointment flashing quickly to concern. "I didn't hurt you, did I? I hadn't even—"



"No," she assured him, quickly, surprised by his tone. She'd half expected him to lash out at her. *He isn't Nathan*, she reminded herself, and felt sad that she had to remind herself of that at all. "I think I'm just losing my mind," she added, feeling foolish for saying it, but believing it nonetheless.

Anthony frowned as he looked at her. "Why do you think you're losing your mind?"

She glanced at him, embarrassed. "I'm just going through a phase, I think," she answered, saying it mostly to satisfy his curiosity, though a part of her still believed it was true. "I'm really sorry, Anthony. I just need to sort some things out."

Confusion grazed his features as he stared at her. "Are you breaking up with me?"

She hadn't meant it that way. The thought hadn't really crossed her mind. But maybe it was the only way she was ever going to figure herself out. She couldn't keep leading him on. Not like this. Even if she didn't know what she wanted, what she didn't want was quite clear.

Her eyes filled with tears as she nodded. She could feel the foundations of her life crumbling before her very eyes. What was she doing? So many parts of her wanted to take it back, and yet the small spark of relief she felt at the confirmation kept her from doing so.

Anthony swallowed, looking torn between wanting to comfort her and wanting to cry himself. "Okay," he said. He glanced around, as if wishing to recall the moments when looking at that bedroom hadn't caused him pain. "Do you want to go home?"

Home. She suddenly wondered where that was, exactly. She didn't know, and didn't want to contemplate it. Kris just knew there was only one place she wanted to be.

And only one person she wanted to see.

"I see you've done a lot with the place," Naomi teased upon entering the apartment.

Julianne laughed. "I plan on getting furniture this week," she responded, though she hadn't really thought about it. It was such a low priority in her list of things to do; she sometimes forgot it was even an issue until someone pointed it out. And it was always the same two people anyway. "Can I get you something to drink?" she offered, stepping toward the kitchen.

"Sure. Whatever you're having is fine."

Julianne was about to respond when her cell phone rang. "Sorry," she apologized to her guest. "Franqui," she said into the phone.

"I'd like two large pizzas with pepperoni, anchovies and pineapple."

The actress rolled her eyes at the familiar voice. "Would you excuse me for a moment?" she asked Naomi. When the director nodded, Julianne retreated into the privacy of her room.

"Am I calling at the wrong time?" Adrian asked.



Julianne closed the bedroom door and leaned her back against it. "You're always calling at the wrong time," she answered. "But I missed you. How's the tomato movie?"

"Apple," Adrian corrected. "And it's finally done. You'll be very proud. Or disturbed, one of the two."

Julianne guessed it would be the latter.

"So, I heard a female voice in the background," Adrian continued. "What have I missed?"

"Too much to recount over the phone," Julianne admitted. "But, I'm freaking out."

"That's new." Pause. "In case you couldn't tell, that was sarcasm."

Julianne stepped away from the door and lowered her voice. "Adrian, I invited her up. And I don't know how to read her. I mean, is she thinking about sex? Or am I just assuming that she's thinking it? And does she want to, or not want to? This is a lot more complicated than I thought it would be."

"First of all, who is 'her'?" Adrian asked.

"Naomi."

"The hot director?" Adrian whistled. "Did you know she posed for *Playboy*?"

"She did not."

"Did, too," Adrian argued. "When she was eighteen."

"Oh, my God, she did not pose for *Playboy*," Julianne responded, feeling frustrated and ridiculous that she was even having that discussion.

"I'll look for the issue," Adrian said. Julianne could hear him rummaging in the background. "It's around here somewhere."

Julianne banged the cell phone against her forehead. "You drive me insane."

"Found it!" Adrian cried. "Oh wait. This isn't her. Nevermind. Hey, Jules, you should sleep with this one right here. She wants to be an elementary school teacher, *and* her breasts are real."

"Can you be serious for a minute?" Julianne pleaded. "I'm really confused right now."

Adrian sighed. "Okay, blah blah hot lesbian in your living room ready for action. Blah blah confusion. 'Oh no it's my first time.' Blah blah blah. So, what do you think you should do?"

"I don't know," Julianne replied honestly. "She's beautiful and smart and funny and I'm really attracted to her. But..."

"She's not Kris," Adrian guessed.

"Right," Julianne answered. "And I don't want to move too fast. It's just that ..."

"You want to forget about Kris and hope that banging Naomi will do the trick."



"Yeah. Well, minus the word 'banging'."

"Look, Julianne, just do what feels right."

Julianne sighed. "I'll talk to you later."

"Have fun."

Julianne hung up the phone and stared at the carpet for a long moment. She knew she had to go back out there and face Naomi, but she was scared. What would feel right? And if she went with the flow, if she just let things happen, would she regret them in the morning? She wouldn't be able to take anything back.

She stood and stepped out of the room. She found the director looking out the glass windows.

"It's such a beautiful view from here," Naomi said as Julianne approached. She turned. "Is everything okay?"

Julianne looked into green eyes and smiled. "Yes. It was just Adrian. He finished his film."

"I'm sure it will be brilliant as usual," Naomi replied with a wink. "Can't wait to see it."

Julianne could wait. She could wait a long time. But in the end, she knew she'd love the movie. Adrian had a fascinating way of making insanity interesting. Suddenly remembering that she'd offered her guest a drink prior to the interruption, she said, "Wine okay?"

"Perfect."

Julianne took a deep breath as she headed toward the kitchen. She needed to relax. Everything felt awkward, every movement felt forced. She felt outside of herself, as if she were playing a role she couldn't find the motivation for. She knew she was shaking, and wondered if Naomi felt half as nervous as she.

She opened one of the cabinets and reached up for a glass, knowing in the same way that people foresee catastrophes that she was going to drop it. She tipped it the wrong way instead of grabbing it properly, and it slid, smoothly, effortlessly from her grasp. A mere second elapsed from the moment the glass dropped from her fingers to the moment it shattered across her kitchen floor. Yet, in that brief expanse of time, she understood the limitations of possibility; she was as capable of keeping that glass from breaking, as she was of keeping her heart from love.

Naomi was at her side at an instance. "Are you okay?"

Julianne turned from the mess on the floor and stared into concerned eyes. "I'm fine," she answered. "Just a huge klutz."

Amusement replaced concern. "I'll try to keep that bit of news from the presses, then," the director replied. "For a price."

"I hope it's cheap. I'm trying to save up for furniture." Julianne smiled, aware of the fact that Naomi was right in front of her. She swallowed. "I'm really confused," she admitted in a whisper.



"About?"

"Everything."

"Then we'll take it really slow."

Slow. Julianne felt her heart speed up as their lips drew nearer. She closed her eyes, letting the moment carry her across the deep ravine of doubt. She felt Naomi's lips touch hers, in an instant that felt both surprising and surreal. Julianne wasn't sure if it was happening or not. But she knew she liked the softness pressing against her mouth; liked the way Naomi's body fit against hers.

It felt like hope. It tasted like possibility. And in an irrational moment she thought that maybe, if only she'd tried, if only she'd reacted quickly enough, she could've kept the glass from breaking.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the knock at the door.

Kris hated, with a passion, the anticipation of staring at a closed door two seconds after knocking. She hated the knowledge that for all of that time spent rehearsing, over and over, what she would say, that she would forget everything the moment she was faced with the opportunity. She was nervous, standing there, thinking of nothing and everything, staring, rather hopefully and absurdly at the wooden patterns of the door.

She thought of the drive back from the cabin. Anthony: driving in silent resignation. Kris: writing and rewriting an imaginary monologue. She would apologize to Julianne, she had decided, early on. She would explain a version of the truth that neither concealed nor revealed the actual reasons for her distance.

She thought of Anthony with a slight pang of regret. Regret for not having discovered that she didn't – and couldn't – love him the way he wanted. Regret for having parted the way they had: stuck in a series of awkward gestures and incomplete sentences. It was goodbye with uncertain punctuation. Goodbye? Goodbye ... Goodbye.

And now, Kris was standing there, waiting, waiting for a chance to explain, however vaguely, that she was confused and scared; torn between knowing and not wanting to know. She was not there to confess, but merely to apologize for being a coward.

The door opened, finally, and Kris tensed with anticipation. "Hi," she said, when she saw Julianne standing there in the open doorway. She wanted to say so much more than that, but as expected, she had forgotten the words she'd settled on. They had abandoned her, the way her breath had abandoned her when Julianne had looked at her.

"Kris," Julianne said with surprise. "I thought you were—"

"I was," Kris interrupted quickly. "Can we talk?" It was at that moment that Kris realized that Julianne wasn't alone. Naomi. The date. How selfish of her to have forgotten, how incredibly self-centered. "Sorry. It's a bad time," she said, feeling embarrassed and out of place. She hadn't rehearsed this part. She didn't know what to do.



"Kris, are you okay?" Julianne asked gently, looking at Kris' face carefully. Could Julianne tell that she'd been crying? Was it obvious?

Naomi appeared beside Julianne before Kris had a chance to reply. "I should get going," she announced. "I have an early meeting tomorrow with the producers." She looked at Julianne and smiled. "I'll call you?"

Julianne nodded. "Okay," she added, as if the act of nodding wasn't enough.

"Bye, Kris," Naomi said politely, and retreated down the hall.

Kris felt like an intruder. She couldn't remember ever feeling so embarrassed, so out of place. "I'm so sorry about that," she said, the moment the director disappeared into the elevator. "I completely forgot about your date."

Julianne shrugged. "Nothing to be sorry about," she said. "Come in."

Kris tried not to imagine what she might have interrupted. She entered the apartment and looked around, as if expecting things to be different. She noticed the broken glass on the kitchen floor and stared at it in surprise. "What happened there?" she asked.

Julianne came up beside her and sighed. "I'm just a klutz, that's all," she answered. She turned to Kris and stared at her with concern. "What's wrong?"

Everything, Kris wanted to say. Everything was wrong. "I couldn't do it," she said, instead. It hadn't been what she'd come here to say. She didn't want to talk about Anthony and their failed romance. She had merely wanted to say, *I'm sorry for not calling you. I'm sorry for not keeping our date. I don't really understand why I stayed away. Please don't ask me to explain.* But everything started to topple out of her mouth before she could stop it. "We were on the bed, in this beautiful cabin in the woods, and ... I just froze."

"It was your first time, it's understandable," Julianne told her.

Kris shook her head. "No, it wasn't timing. It wasn't even fear or nervousness. I just didn't want him. At all. I should've at least felt something, right?" She glanced up into blue eyes, which Kris was certain had flickered with something. *What? What are you thinking, Julianne?* "Do you think there's something wrong with me?"

"No," Julianne answered. "You just didn't want him."

Kris nodded. "Right," she agreed. It was normal. It was fine. "But I didn't want Nathan, either," she admitted. "Maybe I'm asexual."

"Yes, that's probably what it is," Julianne agreed with a smile. "Join the nunnery."

Kris smiled, too. She remembered what she'd come to say and said it. "I'm really sorry about the past week. I was a jerk." She stared at the floor, unable to meet Julianne's gaze; knowing that no matter what she said, it would be a lie. "I wasn't thinking clearly."

"You had a lot on your mind," Julianne said. "With Anthony and everything. It's okay."

Julianne's words filled Kris with guilt. She wanted, more than anything, to admit the truth. But it would make things awkward and uncomfortable, and she still wasn't sure if what she felt was real. "I hurt you."



"I'll live," Julianne assured her. "I understand."

Kris wanted to cry, standing there, feeling torn and confused, hating her uncertainty, and still holding on to it for dear life. She swallowed back the tears, not wishing to explain her emotions. "I'm a mess," she admitted, in spite of herself.

Julianne stepped closer and wrapped her arms around Kris, hugging her tightly.

Kris closed her eyes, relaxing into Julianne's body. She could smell the vanilla sweetness of Julianne's perfume. Or maybe it was the natural scent of her skin. Everything about Julianne was soft and warm. Kris wanted the hug to last forever.

But it was Julianne who broke the contact first. "If you think you're a mess, you should've seen me earlier," she said with a slight smile. She nodded toward the glass on the floor.

"I'm sure you were charmingly dorky." Kris grinned.

Julianne laughed. "I'm not sure I could pull that off."

"Dorky?"

"No, charming," Julianne answered, sounding shy.

"Just dorky then," Kris teased. She motioned toward the kitchen. "Come on, let's get that mess cleaned up."

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In the midst of insomnia, thoughts came to her in fragments: shards of broken glass scattered across the floor ... soft lips moving against her own ... the knock at the door.

Julianne opened her eyes and stared at the bedroom window. Sunlight spilled through the blinds, casting vague shadows on the floor. She stared at them for a while, focusing on the undecipherable patterns that invaded her carpet. She listened to the silence, trying to make out other signs of life.

But all was quiet in her penthouse apartment. The rest of the world was nonexistent from her throne. It was in those moments when nothing felt real. How had she gotten there? How was any of this hers?

At twenty-three she had accomplished more things than most people did in a lifetime. At least, that's what she'd always told herself. Now she wasn't so sure. What was an accomplishment, anyway?

She thought of James, the homeless man she had encountered on the street all of those months ago. Surviving for him was more of an accomplishment than anything Julianne had ever done.

"I'm going to be rich and famous one day," Julianne had told her grandmother one day. It was the first of many times.



Her grandmother had been silent for a long time, then had said, "And why is that so important to you, Julia? What are you going to do with all that fame and all of that money?"

What indeed.

The phone rang, bringing her introspection to an end. "Hello?" she answered.

"Did I wake you?"

Julianne smiled at the sound of her voice. "I couldn't sleep," she admitted.

"Me neither," Kris said after a moment. "What's wrong?"

"Excessive thinking. You?"

"Same."

"Anthony?" Julianne guessed.

"Partly, but other things, too," Kris told her. "I'm just tired of thinking. I thought I'd call and bother you."

"You're so thoughtful," Julianne joked. "I was thinking of getting furniture today."

"That's what kept you up all night?"

Julianne laughed. "Yes, this is a huge step for me." She paused. "Do you want to come with me? I hate shopping alone."

"I don't know, what's in it for me?"

Julianne grinned. "I'll think of something."

"Oooh, a surprise. I'm in. When are we going?"

"I'll drop by your apartment at one. Sound good?"

"It's a date, Miss Franqui. See you then."

Smiling, Julianne said, "Bye." She hung up the phone and set her alarm for 11:30. That would give her enough time to get ready.

Yawning, Julianne drew the covers over her head and closed her eyes.

Kris had somehow forgotten a very important piece of information: Julianne was Julianne Franqui. Thankfully, the people of New York did a wonderful job of reminding her. Everywhere they went someone would stop them to ask for Julianne's autograph. Some asked the actress for a picture. Others assumed that Kris was someone important too, and asked for her autograph as well. And who was she to deny them?



"Look at that, famous by association," Kris joked once a swarm of people had left them alone.

"Can I have your autograph, too?" Julianne teased.

"Sure, got a pen? I'll sign your forehead." Kris smiled at the actress as they walked. "Does that get annoying after a while?"

"Getting my forehead signed?"

"Do you get your forehead signed often?"

Julianne pretended to contemplate the question. "No, as it turns out, you're the first to even offer."

"What a pity," Kris replied in mock seriousness. She smiled and shook her head. "I meant all the autograph-signing and picture-taking."

"I wouldn't say 'annoying'," Julianne answered carefully. "I'm kind of used to it. I wish I wasn't, though."

Kris nodded, trying to place herself in Julianne's shoes. She found it impossible. How could strangers vying for your attention ever become routine? It felt so strange, experiencing this aspect of Julianne's life. Kris had lost count of how many people had told the actress that they loved her. After hearing it so often, Kris wondered if the word "love" had lost all meaning to Julianne.

"You could have anyone you wanted," Kris found herself saying. She glanced up at Julianne.

"That was random," Julianne replied with a smile.

Kris searched her memory for the last thing Julianne had said. It had been something about autographs. "Sorry," she apologized. "I was just thinking that all of those people want you."

"I'm pretty sure they just asked for my signature," Julianne replied. "Did I miss some offers somewhere?" She turned around jokingly. "Let's go back."

Kris laughed and grabbed Julianne's arm, turning her back around. "Seriously! I bet I could ask anyone if they would sleep with you, and they would all say yes."

Julianne considered that. "I bet it's safe to say that most gay men and straight women might not be too keen on the whole sex thing."

"Fine, give me your cell phone," Kris demanded.

Arching a brow, Julianne handed it over. "I hope this is a quick call you're making. I'm on a tight budget."

"Oh shut up," Kris answered, smacking Julianne on the arm with the phone. "I don't even want to know how much money you have." She started dialing the number to her brother's apartment. After a few rings, Mark picked up. "Hey, Mark? It's Kris."

"Hey, sweetie. How's it going?"



"Good. I am just calling to ask you a question."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You're the gayest guy I know."

"Aw, thank you."

Kris smiled. "Alright. So, say you had to sleep with a woman. Would you sleep with Julianne Franqui?"

"Honey, that girl can get into my pants any time."

With a satisfied smirk, Kris said, "Thanks! I'll talk to you later. Send my love to William." Kris hung up and grinned at Julianne. "See?"

"See, what? I didn't hear what he said," Julianne answered.

"He said you could get into his pants any time."

"And how do I know you're not lying?" Julianne challenged.

"Call him yourself," Kris said, waving the phone in front of the actress' face. She hadn't actually expected Julianne to grab it, though.

Julianne hit redial and put the phone to her ear.

Kris watched in surprise and amusement.

"Hi, Mark?" Julianne said. "This is Julianne Franqui. I heard you wanted me to get into your pants."

Kris burst out laughing.

"No, this isn't Kris," Julianne said, casting a glance at her laughing companion. "This really is Julianne Franqui ... I don't know ... Uh, Prada ... Well, you can't expect me to remember what kind of shoes I wore two years ago ... Okay, fine! Just for that I'm not sleeping with you." She clicked off the phone, and shrugged at Kris. "He didn't believe it was me."

Kris grinned. "I still made my point."

"We still need to find a straight girl," Julianne countered. "Oh, and look at that, I'm staring at one right now. Would *you* sleep with me?"

Caught off-guard, Kris blushed. She didn't know how to answer the question, though she knew what she wanted to say. "I thought we agreed that I was asexual," she said.

"Cop out," Julianne said, shaking her head in mock disappointment.

"Would you sleep with *me*?" Kris wondered.

"Oh, look! It's a furniture store," Julianne answered. "Goodie!"



"Cop out," Kris teased, but followed Julianne inside the store. She suddenly wanted nothing more than to know the answer to that question.

Julianne would've been in and out of there in twenty minutes. She would have glanced around, pointed to the first couch she saw that looked plain enough to match whatever she decided to put around it, and walked right back out.

Kris, on the other hand, had a different conception of couch-shopping. Hers involved sampling every couch available and weighing the comfort, look, and price factors carefully.

Julianne was merely amused. Julianne loved the pensive look Kris would get on her face whenever she'd sit down at a different couch, and the dismissive looks she'd give when the object wouldn't live up to her expectations.

Realizing that they might be there a while, the actress decided to sit down.

The second she settled into the recliner, she knew she was in love. "I'm getting this!" she called to Kris, the moment the artist was close enough to hear. She put her feet up and sighed. "This is all I need in life."

Kris walked over and smiled. "There's a black suede couch over there that would match it."

"Does it pass the Kris Milano Couch Test?" Julianne teased.

"Innocent cows were slaughtered for your comfort," Kris replied with a slight grin.

Julianne cocked her head to the side. "Says she who wore leather on her birthday."

Kris opened her mouth to argue, and then shut it. Then opened it again and said, "That was Mark's fault!"

"Ahuh. I didn't hear you complaining."

Kris dropped her shoulders and sighed. "You're right. I'm a hypocrite." She eyed the recliner for a second. "That does look comfy."

"I'm not getting up," Julianne stated.

Kris got closer. "Oh, come on. Don't be a brat."

"I *am* a brat."

Kris narrowed her eyes. "And here you had me nearly convinced that you were a decent human being."

"Well, I am an actress," Julianne answered with a grin. She sighed melodramatically and closed her eyes. "Mmm... I could live on here forev—" Julianne's eyes snapped open as she felt a sudden weight on her body. She tried not to moan as Kris' back pressed against her breasts.

"Not bad," Kris commented, her head coming to rest beside Julianne's. "A little lumpy, though."



Julianne tried to relax under Kris' weight, but it felt too nice for comfort. "Really? It doesn't feel that lumpy to me. Although, gravity seems a bit heavier in this part of the store."

Kris smiled. "That's very odd. I can't imagine why."

"You know," Julianne began, "if a news camera appears suddenly, I'm going to have to deny we're friends."

"I'll pretend I'm just a crazy fan stalking you," Kris agreed, laughing.

Julianne wanted to wrap her arms against Kris' stomach, to hold her closer, but she didn't dare move. She kept her hands on the armrests. "I promise to bail you out."

"May I help you ladies with anything?" a male voice said from somewhere near.

Kris jumped off of Julianne, although she made a noble effort to look like she wasn't jumping off. Julianne instantly missed the feeling, and regretted the interruption. But it was for the best. There was no point in getting used to such things. Especially in public. *I was wrong ... it's not the movie that's going to out me.*

She turned her attention to the salesman, whose eyes grew wide with recognition. Before he could go into babble-mode about how much he loved her, she intercepted the silence, "I'd like to get two of these, and whatever couch my friend here decided on." She nodded to Kris, who was blushing and looking down at the floor. *Why does she look so guilty?*

Kris glanced up and over at the salesman, who wasn't looking at her at all. "Um, it's the black suede one," she said.

The man seemed to snap out of his thoughts, and tore his gaze away from Julianne. "Uh, great!" he said, with a tone of over enthusiasm. Julianne was certain she heard his voice crack. He cleared his throat. "They can be delivered within the week," he said, turning back to Julianne. "Is there anything else I can help you with, Miss Franqui?"

"Yes, is there anyway you can deliver me along with the chair?" she wondered. "I don't want to move."

The man relaxed visibly and laughed. "I'm not sure that can be arranged, but you can stay there as long as you want. I'll be by the register when you're ready." He smiled and excused himself.

Julianne turned her attention to Kris, who looked awkward and embarrassed. "Are you okay?"

Hazel eyes rose up to meet with azure ones. "Yeah, it's just ... I didn't want him to think that ... you ... that we ..."

"Are a couple?" Julianne finished, her heart sinking.

Kris shook her head. "I just didn't want to get you in trouble ..."

Julianne studied Kris' face for a moment, trying to understand the truth behind the words. All that she could come up with was that the artist was scared of getting mistaken for a lesbian. "It's okay," she said, hoping she didn't sound as hurt as she felt. "I'm pretty sure he's not going to run to Entertainment Tonight with the news that a cute Puerto Rican girl was sitting on my lap."

If possible, Kris blushed even more.



Julianne decided it was time to drop the subject. "I guess that means I have to get up now."

Kris walked over and offered her hand. "C'mon, lazy bones."

Julianne let herself get pulled from the comfort of the recliner. Somehow, touching Kris' hand was more appealing than sitting where she was. The realization was unsettling, in spite of the fact that it wasn't surprising. "Want to get dinner afterwards?"

"Are you always thinking about food?" Kris wondered as they headed toward the cash register.

Julianne smiled. "No, sometimes I think about other things."

"Like?"

Kissing you. Touching you. You. You. You. Her cell phone saved her from having to come up with a response. She stopped walking. "Franqui," she greeted.

"Hi, Julianne," came Karen's voice. "Am I interrupting anything?"

Julianne glanced at Kris for a moment then answered, "No, I'm just furniture shopping."

A short silence greeted her. "Furniture shopping? By yourself?"

Julianne rolled her eyes. "I *am* capable of buying furniture for myself, you know." She paused. "But, um, Kris is with me."

"Ah," Karen said knowingly. Though Julianne wasn't sure what Karen thought she knew. "I'll make this quick then. You're set to fly out of Newark on Friday night. The *Guardian* premiere is on Saturday. And your date called to confirm."

My date? Julianne thought about it for a full second before grinning. "Really? That's wonderful! Did you get him a hotel room and everything?"

"Everything's settled," Karen assured her. "Though, Julianne, aren't you picking them a bit young. I mean his *father* called to confirm."

Julianne laughed. "Age is just a state of mind."

"Right. Well, he's arriving Friday morning with his mother and sister. I'm having a limo pick them up at the airport. I'll get you their contact info when you get here. Also, you'll have to break the news to Adrian that he's not going to be your date for the evening, cause he didn't get the memo."

"Oh, damn," Julianne said. "I'll call him later."

"Last thing," Karen promised, "your mother knows you're coming this weekend, so you better call her. She's left about five messages on your answering machine at home. She said she lost your phone number in New York."

Julianne rolled her eyes. "Okay."

"That's it," Karen replied. "I'll let you get back to your ogling, er, shopping."



"Hardy har har," Julianne answered, shaking her head. "Weren't you the one who once found me intimidating? Can we go back to that?"

Karen laughed. "Bye, Miss Franqui."

Julianne hung up the phone and stared at it for a second before putting it away. She looked around for Kris and found the artist sitting on a nearby couch. "Sorry about that," she apologized.

"It's okay," Kris said, rising. "I get that you're popular." She smiled.

Julianne smiled back, but looked away before she could get lost in hazel eyes. An idea was brewing in her mind, but she wasn't sure if it was a good one. She dismissed it for now. Maybe later, she'd go back to it. When they were alone.

"It just doesn't make any sense," Kris commented, stabbing a leaf of lettuce from her salad. "You'd think after all of this time, they'd get a clue. It's so obvious they love each other."

Julianne shrugged, busy with her own plate. She glanced around the restaurant for a moment and turned back to Kris. "I guess it's just not obvious to them."

Kris shook her head. "Yeah, but I mean, they have a kid together now. They lived together ... Hello?"

"I'm sure they'll end up together," Julianne assured her. "Some things take time."

"Love shouldn't be so complicated," Kris argued.

Julianne chuckled. "It's a sitcom."

"All I'm saying is that Ross and Rachel need to get their act together. It's uncanny that anyone could be so blind."

Julianne sat back and smiled. She glanced around and sat up, looking slightly more serious than she had before. "Can I talk to you about something?" Kris' heart skipped a beat at the actress' tone. "Sure," she said, though she was suddenly nervous. Ever since they'd left the furniture store, Kris had worried that Julianne would bring up the incident on the recliner. Incident. Calling it that made it seem like an unfortunate accident. And there had been nothing unfortunate or accidental about it. *I'm turning into a perv.*

"What are you doing this upcoming weekend?" Julianne asked.

The question caught Kris off-guard. She'd been so convinced that it would be a recliner-related question. "Uh, nothing, why?"

"Do you want to go to California with me?" Julianne asked. Then quickly added, "I have to go to the premiere of my last movie on Saturday. And I thought it'd be nice to show you my house. You know, I thought it would be good for you to see how I live when I actually have furniture."



California? She wants me to go to California for the weekend? With her? To her house? Furniture... Kris' mind was reeling. She wasn't sure her brain was even forming coherent thoughts. Still, she forced herself to speak. "I don't think I can afford the plane fare."

"I hired a private jet," Julianne answered, a bit shyly. "You don't have to pay for anything."

"Right," Kris said, feeling completely overwhelmed. A weekend in California. With Julianne. How could that possibly be bad? "Sounds like fun," she found herself saying. Didn't she have homework? There were papers to write and books to read. She had midterms coming up. Julianne Franqui was going to get her kicked out of college. And still she couldn't keep from feeling giddy at the prospect of going to Julianne's house.

"Great," Julianne replied, grinning brightly.

Kris found herself staring at Julianne's smile. *God, she's so beautiful. Gorgeous. Unreal. And I'm so, so screwed if I keep thinking like this.* "So what are we doing after dinner?" she asked, fearing that it might be nearing the time they'd have to part ways.

Julianne shrugged. "If you're up to it, I think I recall someone promising me a dance."

Kris smiled. "You're on." *So, so screwed.*

61

"I thought we were going to a lesbian bar!" Kris yelled over the loud music. She glanced around the club that Julianne had led her into, trying to see through the clouds of smoke. Everywhere she looked, scantily clad people were dancing and jumping around. Red and blue and green lights bounced from the walls to the floor to the ceiling and back again.

Julianne smiled and took Kris' hand. "I thought you wanted to dance."

Kris had to smile back. She looked at their intertwined hands for a moment, feeling unreasonably giddy. "A deal's a deal," she replied. The dance music was making her want to jump around. She felt suddenly energized.

As they made their way to the dance area, Kris noticed that it was mostly guys dancing. There were a few girls scattered along the place, but the majority were men. Arching a brow, she leaned against Julianne and asked, "Where are we?"

"Gay club," Julianne replied, her lips near Kris' ear. "But if you were really that set on a *lesbian* bar ..."

Kris closed her eyes momentarily as Julianne's cheek brushed against her own. She opened them quickly and shrugged. "Hey, if sweaty guys with no shirts turn you on ... then who am I to judge?"

"Don't they turn *you* on?" Julianne shot back.

Kris had no idea how to answer that question. She listened as Missy Elliot's "Party People" came on the speakers. And she laughed. "We have to dance to this, come on!" She grabbed both of Julianne's hands and pulled her into the crowd.

"You like this song?" Julianne yelled over the music.



Kris nodded as she let go of Julianne's hands and started moving a long with the beat. She could feel the energy pulsating all around her. She was grateful that she'd worn a tank top because it was certain to get hot in there soon.

Julianne just stood there, as dancing lunatics began to slam against her. "I'm getting a drink!"

Kris shook her head and grabbed Julianne's hand again, pulling her closer. "This was your idea, Miss Franqui." She mouthed the words along with Missy, "Let me dance with you, let me wear you out ..."

Julianne laughed. "You're making me nervous," she admitted.

"Why?"

The actress stared at her, and then leaned over to say, "Cause you look really hot when you dance."

Kris tried to hide her surprise, her heart pounding at the words. "Well, you look really dorky just standing there. So dance!" She put her arms around Julianne's neck and pressed against her. She didn't want to think too deeply about what she was doing, because if she did, she'd probably stop. And it felt too good to stop.

Especially when Julianne put her hands on Kris' waist and started loosening up. "Better?" the actress asked.

Kris grinned. Julianne should loosen up more often. "Yes, you look a lot less dorky now." She was sure her voice would be shot by the end of the night. She might be deaf, too; the music was so loud. But she was having too much fun to care.

Julianne was stunned. She was stunned at her own audacity. *You look really hot when you dance.* The words echoed through her mind. Had she really spoken them out loud? Loud enough, even, to be heard over the music. What other thoughts might escape unchecked into the air between them? The question worried her.

But the feel of Kris dancing so close to her was distracting, and her thoughts wandered away from the worry and the fear. Julianne had stepped away slightly after the first song. She didn't want Kris to notice how much she enjoyed the close contact. Especially after the slip-up. Still, the dance floor was crowded and their bodies were inevitably pushed closer by forces beyond their control.

As La Rissa's "I Do Both Jay and Jane" started, Kris said, "Thirsty?"

Julianne nodded. She grabbed Kris' hand so that she wouldn't lose her in the crowd and led them in the direction of the bar. "What do you want?" she asked Kris.

"Water," Kris called back.



Julianne ordered two bottles of water from the bartender, who thankfully didn't give her a second glance. She handed one of the bottles to Kris and said, "Want to get away from the music for a bit?"

Kris gave her a relieved look as she nodded.

They set about finding someplace relatively quiet, and eventually came across an empty bench in one of the upstairs hallways.

"Oh, my God, it feels so nice to sit down," Kris said, with a sigh.

Julianne sat down beside her and leaned back. "Let's not move from here."

"Deal," Kris agreed, opening her bottle of water. She downed half the contents in one long gulp.

Julianne laughed. "Want mine, too?"

"Don't tempt me," Kris warned. She started pulling at her tank top. "I'm all sweaty now."

"Well, you were pretty into it," Julianne replied. "Some of those moves would've put Shakira out of business."

Kris started laughing. "Shut up."

Julianne smiled and closed her eyes. She was exhausted. How many songs had they lasted? Like five? She couldn't imagine dancing all night. It was inhuman.

Kris yawned and put her head on Julianne's shoulder. "Do you mind?"

Julianne leaned her cheek against the top of Kris' head. "Nope."

"I think I'm falling asleep."

"Want to go home?"

"Not yet."

Julianne glanced down to see that Kris had taken her hand. Her heart sped up at the contact. It was such an innocent gesture, but it made her body tingle.

"Kris?"

Kris lifted her head suddenly and let go of Julianne's hand. "Mark?"

Julianne looked up at the guy standing in front of them. *So, this is Mark...* He looked like a surfer boy who'd misplaced his board. Or perhaps, just his boyfriend's step-sister.

"What are you doing here?" Kris continued.

Mark pointed to the air around him. "Gay club." Then to himself. "Gay. A better question would be, what are *you* doing here with—" He paused as caught Julianne's gaze. "Oh, my God."

"Nice pants," Julianne said with a smirk.



Mark blinked and started to walk away. "I'm hallucinating and I haven't even taken anything yet..."

"Excuse me," Kris said to Julianne.

Julianne watched as Kris pulled Mark out of earshot. She smiled and closed her eyes again. This might take a while.

"Were you seriously just cuddling with Julianne Franqui?" Mark asked incredulously.

Kris frowned at him. "I wasn't *cuddling*. We're just tired."

"Are you guys together?" he asked, his voice low. "Cause that would be *scandalous*!" He said the word "scandalous" as if it were a good thing.

Kris tried not to roll her eyes. "We're just friends."

Mark glanced over at Julianne. "I can't believe you actually know her. How did that happen?"

"Very long story," Kris explained. "I'll tell it to you another time."

Mark was still staring. "Doesn't she look like she's posing for the cover of something?" He sighed. "I totally meant it when I said she could get into my pants." He grinned and looked over at Kris. "Do you think she was flirting with me?"

"There you are. I've been looking for you."

Kris glanced up to see her William walking over to them. *Great. Just great.* "Hey William."

William looked confused. "What are you doing here?"

"She's here with her *girlfriend*," Mark teased.

"Since when do you have a girlfriend?" William asked, looking completely lost. "I know you said you were confused, but ..."

Kris wanted to crawl under a rock. "She's not my girlfriend."

Mark turned toward his boyfriend and said. "She was cuddling with Julianne Franqui."

"I wasn't cuddling!" Kris insisted. She looked at William. "I wasn't cuddling."

"Julianne Franqui?"

Mark nodded and pointed toward the bench, where Julianne was sitting, eyes closed, looking like she didn't have a care in the world.

"Oh my God. That totally looks like her." William stared in awe.

"It is her," Kris said. "She's my friend."



William looked at Kris, eyes wide. "Since when?"

"It's a long story," Mark said. "She'll tell us later." He smiled at Kris. "Skip ahead to the part where you introduce us."

"If you embarrass me, I'll kill you both," Kris warned, and started walking toward Julianne. "Now, stay right there, and try not to look like you're staring." *Please God ... let Mark behave.*

Julianne sat up as Kris approached. "Everything okay?"

"They want to meet you," Kris announced. "But if you don't want to meet them, you don't have to. I'll tell them to go away."

"They?"

"William is here, too," Kris explained, nervously. She hated putting Julianne on the spot like this. Julianne's face lit up. "Oooh, did he bring embarrassing baby pictures of you?" She stood up and smiled. "Lead the way."

Please, please God ...

Mark was the first to speak as Julianne approached the two men. "Before you say anything," he began. "I just have to tell you that I am *the* biggest fan. I've seen all of your movies. I mean, all of them. I even have *Guardian* the first season on DVD. And—"

Julianne laughed. "It's nice to meet you, too, Mark."

Mark leaned against William for support. "Honey, she knows my name."

William stretched out his hand. "I'm William. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Franqui."

"Julianne," she said, quickly, shaking his hand. "It's so nice to meet you. Kris has told me a lot about you."

William and Mark both glanced curiously at Kris. Kris shrugged awkwardly, looking uncomfortable.

"So, what brings you two here?" William wondered.

Julianne and Kris glanced at each other. "Just wanted to go dancing," Kris said.

"You guys didn't look like you were dancing," Mark commented.

William quickly piped in. "Hey, Kris, can I talk to you for a minute?" Kris stared at him. "Now?"

"Yeah." William smiled politely at Julianne and excused himself, dragging Kris along with him.



Julianne watched them walk away and turned back to Mark, who was staring at her. "Guess it's just us, then."

Mark grinned. "He's probably just concerned for her," he said. "She's been all confused lately."

She arched a brow at his words. "Confused?"

"Yeah, you know girls and their sexuality," he said with a shrug. Then paused, looking worried. "I mean, with guys. Sexuality with *guys*. Not girls." He stuck his hands in the pocket of his pants and looked down. "Please make me stop talking."

Julianne stared at him, trying to understand what he was saying. She glanced over at Kris and found the artist staring back at her. She gave her a small smile, and was relieved to get one in return. *What are you confused about?* she wondered. Turning back to Mark, she decided not to press the matter. She found him glancing at her curiously.

"So, um," Mark continued. "Are you and Kris close friends?"

Julianne couldn't help but smile. "I'd like to think so."

"She didn't tell us that she knew you," Mark explained. "Unless..." His eyes grew wide as something occurred to him. "Julianne..."

"Yes?" Julianne asked, confused by Mark's reaction.

Mark started laughing and covered his mouth. "Oh, my God. That means that ... Oh shit."

Julianne had lost track of the conversation somewhere along the way. "Something wrong?"

Mark cleared his throat and appeared to gather some self-control. "No," he said, though it was clear there was something he wasn't telling her. "So, uh, what brings you to New York?"

Julianne was surprised. Didn't they know about Leigh? "Filming," she answered. "Kris' friend Leigh is in the movie with me."

"That's right," he said. Comprehension finally seemed to dawn on him. "I forgot about that. It's just weird to be talking to you. My head's a little muddled. So, you met Kris through Leigh?"

"It's a long story," Julianne told him.

"So, I hear."

William and Kris returned at that moment.

"Sorry about that," Kris apologized. She glanced worriedly at Mark. Then back again at Julianne. "I'm glad he didn't scare you away."

"Hey!" Mark complained.

Julianne smiled. "I can take him."

"Hey, again!" Mark said. Then winked at Julianne. "Actually, you can if you really want to."



William smacked him on the arm. "Hello? Boyfriend standing right here. Getting a little freaked out."

Mark smiled and put his arm around William's shoulders. "Isn't he cute when he's jealous?"

William rolled his eyes.

Julianne and Kris smiled at each other.

"Anyway, we're going to go downstairs," William announced. He smiled at Julianne. "It was really nice meeting you."

"Yes, so great," Mark emphasized. "We should go out to dinner or something, sometime."

Julianne nodded. "I'd like that."

"Really?" Mark asked, surprised. "How about Friday?"

"She'll be in California," Kris interjected. "And she's really busy..."

Julianne ran her schedule through her head. "Maybe next week sometime," she suggested. She didn't want to let the opportunity pass by. "If Kris doesn't mind," she looked at her friend, worried that she'd crossed the line. Maybe Kris didn't want her hanging out with her family.

Kris looked at her. "No, I don't mind at all."

"Great," William said. "We'll be in touch, and maybe we can settle on something."

Julianne nodded.

"Wait, can I have your autograph?" Mark asked, searching his pocket for a pen and paper. "Otherwise, no one will believe me at work tomorrow."

Julianne scribbled a quick message and her signature on the paper he handed her. "There you go."

Mark jumped happily and thanked her several times over before William finally took him by the arm and pulled him away.

"I am so sorry about that," Kris said. "I had no idea they would be here."

"They're adorable," Julianne said. "I'm glad I got to meet them finally."

"Really?" Kris asked.

"Yes, really. Did you not want me to?"

Kris shook her head. "No, I just... I didn't want to put you in an uncomfortable situation."

Julianne smiled. "My life is one long uncomfortable situation," she joked, though it was partly true. She shrugged slightly. "You make it comfortable."



Kris looked at her but didn't say anything.

"So, what do you want to do now?" Julianne asked, looking around.

"I'm kind of partied out," Kris admitted. "Did I pass my dare?"

"With flying colors," Julianne told her.

They started walking toward the stairs.

Kris looked at her with a raised brow. "So, Shakira, huh?"

"Oh yeah."

62

Julianne knocked on the open door of Naomi's office. She'd been thinking things over all weekend and had reached a decision.

The director glanced up from the stack of papers on her desk and smiled. "Julianne," she said, standing. "You're here early."

"Can we talk?" Julianne asked, closing the door behind her.

"Uh oh," Naomi replied good-naturedly. "Of course. Is this business or ..."

"Not business," Julianne answered quietly.

The director nodded and came around the desk. She motioned to the couch against the wall. "Let's sit."

Julianne took a deep breath and joined Naomi on the couch, wondering how to say what she wanted to say without sounding like an idiot.

Green eyes studied her patiently, yet curiously. "What's wrong?"

"The thing is this," Julianne began, feeling nervous. "I really like you. You're smart and beautiful and funny ..."

"But..."

Julianne hesitated. "But I'm in love with someone else," she confessed.

Naomi stared at her for a long moment, before nodding. "Kris?" she guessed.

The actress was surprised, and wondered if it was obvious to everyone, or just to those looking closely enough. "Yeah," she admitted.

Naomi nodded. "Karen sort of warned me that there was someone else," she said. "She didn't say who, but ... you don't really hang around many people, so the process of elimination was short." She smiled slightly.



Julianne didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "If things were different..."

Naomi laughed. "Yes, if," she said. She smiled at Julianne. "I appreciate your honesty. I hope things work out with Kris."

Julianne chuckled. "Well, the straight thing might present a problem."

"Most of us were straight once," Naomi replied, with a laugh. "But, I guess things will just have to follow their natural course."

"Yeah," Julianne agreed, not wanting to cling to false hopes. "Anyway, I'll let you get back to work. You looked busy." She stood, and started toward the door. At the doorway, she paused, and looked at the director. "Thanks."

"For?"

"Everything," Julianne replied, meaning it. She smiled, and walked out of the office, feeling like a great weight had been lifted.

"*Mami*," Kris said impatiently. "Mom! Calm down."

"*Pero cómo me voy a calmar, Kristina, cuando me vienes con esto de ir a California con una persona ajena.*"

Kris was growing exasperated. "She's not a stranger. She's a friend. And it's only for the weekend."

"I don't know," her mom said, her tone conveying her disapproval. "Are you visiting your father?"

"I'll be in Los Angeles," she replied, regretfully. It would've been nice to see her Dad. But at least her mom appeared to be softening on the issue. "I won't have time to go up there and see him."

Her mother let out a long sigh. "*Bueno, llámanos cuando llegues a la casa de tu amiga*," she instructed.

Kris smiled, knowing she'd won. "I promise I'll call the second I get there," she said. She said goodbye to her mom, and hung up the phone, just in time to see Leigh enter the apartment.

"Hey, roomy," Leigh greeted with a smile. "What are you up to?" She joined Kris at the kitchen table.

Kris held up the phone. "Had to tell my mom about my trip."

"I can't believe Julianne is taking you to her house," Leigh said, shaking her head. "What do you think you're going to do there? Is she taking you to the premiere?"



Kris shook her head. "I don't think so. I think she's got a date." She shrugged. "I guess we'll just hang out." She hadn't given the details much thought, and the more she thought about it, the more nervous she grew. How would she ever fit into Julianne's world?

"So, I take it things are a lot better now?" Leigh asked gently. "You know, since your fallout."

"Things are great," Kris replied, unable to keep the smile from her face. "She's ..."

Leigh stared at her expectantly.

But the adjectives that came to mind seemed inappropriate, and Kris paused. The ringing phone saved her from having to come up with something to say. "Hello?" she answered.

"Hey, can you come over? I have something to show you."

Kris grinned at the sound of Julianne's voice. "What kind of thing?"

"It's a surprise," Julianne replied. "I'm making dinner. Do you have homework to do?"

Kris didn't even want to think about how much. "A ton."

"Bring it. I've got a scene to rehearse, anyway. I'll walk around mumbling to myself while you study."

Kris laughed. "Okay, I still have to shower. So, I'll be over in like an hour."

"See you then."

"Bye," Kris said. She hung up and looked up to find Leigh looking at her. "Julianne," she explained. "I'm going to her apartment."

"Gathered that," Leigh told her.

"I'm going to jump in the shower," Kris announced, rising from her seat. She started toward her room, but stopped when Leigh called her. She turned to look at her roommate.

Leigh had stood up as well. "Jeremy has this friend," she said. "He's really cute. I thought maybe we could double tomorrow night."

Kris shook her head. "Sorry. I'm not really in a relationship kind of mood."

"It's just to hang out," Leigh argued. "He doesn't want to marry you."

She hated getting put in this position. "I might have plans with Julianne," she said. "And I really don't feel like doing the dating thing again. There's a reason I broke up with Anthony."

Leigh crossed her arms. "What reason is that?"

"I really have to get in the shower," Kris insisted, wishing to put an end to the conversation. What was Leigh's problem?

"Kris," Leigh started, her tone changing. "Is there something you want to tell me?"



"Like what?" Kris asked, feeling nervous.

"I don't know," Leigh said. "But if there is ... I'll understand."

Kris didn't know what Leigh was getting at. Or rather, didn't want to know. "I'm just tired of everything being about guys," she said. "I don't see why I should suddenly jump at the opportunity to go out with a person I've never even seen before, just because he's male and you think he's cute."

Leigh stared at her, mulling over Kris' words. Finally, she nodded. "Okay, that's fair."

Relieved, Kris softened her gaze. "But I'd like to hang out with you before I leave on Friday," she said.

"Pizza and movie night? Thursday?" Leigh suggested.

"Deal," Kris agreed with a slight smile, glad the storm had passed. "I'm going to take that shower now."

Leigh nodded, and headed toward her room. "Tell Julianne I said hi."

Kris managed to make it to Julianne's in a little less than an hour. And she was more than anxious to find out what Julianne's surprise was. The thought of dinner was also alluring. Kris was starved.

Julianne opened the door a crack and peeked out. "What's the secret password?"

"New England clam chowder," Kris replied, smiling.

"Red or white?"

Kris narrowed her eyes. "Seen the movie a few too many times, have you?" she asked.

"I love *Ace Ventura*," Julianne answered. "Now, what's the correct color?"

"Um, white?" Kris guessed. She couldn't remember. "I can never remember what he answers."

Julianne looked thoughtful. "I can't remember, either. So, white it is. But, you have to close your eyes."

Kris played along and closed her eyes. "Something smells nice," she said, as pleasant scents wafted into the hallway. "What's cooking?"

"You'll find out soon enough, Oh Impatient One," Julianne replied, guiding Kris further into the apartment.

Kris had no idea where they were going, but soon enough, Julianne stopped.

"Open your eyes," the actress instructed.



Kris did as she was told and smiled at the sight before her. Julianne's furniture had arrived. The couch she'd selected and the two recliner chairs had replaced the empty carpet space. But the object that caught her eye the most was the dining table. Kris laughed. "When did you get that?"

"I told the guy at the store to pick one out for me," Julianne answered. "I'm sure it was the most expensive one. But at least it matches with everything." She laughed. She motioned to the food on the table. "Dinner is served."

Kris smiled and looked around again. The apartment looked so much nicer now. It looked inhabited finally. She noticed that there was a flat screen television on the wall in front of the couch. "Did you move the one in your room?" she asked.

Julianne gave her a 'yeah right' face. "I bought it on my way home from the set today," she answered. "I knew the furniture was arriving, so I thought I'd give the living room a reason for existing."

"Television is the reason?" Kris asked with a grin.

Julianne nodded, walking behind the island in the kitchen. "What do you want to drink?"

"Whatever you're having is fine," Kris answered. She glanced at the two recliners. "So, why did you get two? Are you getting a roommate?"

Julianne shrugged and set about filling a couple of glasses with ice. She glanced up and smiled. "Why, do you want to move in?"

Kris laughed, and walked over to help Julianne. But for some reason, the prospect of living with the actress didn't seem half bad.

After the dinner plates had been cleared up, Julianne sat Kris down at one of the recliners and instructed her to study. The last thing she wanted was for Kris to start failing. But, she wasn't willing to give up her time with Kris either. So, it was a good arrangement. And best of all, Kris didn't seem to mind.

"I think I'm in love with this chair," Kris announced after a few minutes.

Julianne smiled from where she stood. "I told you." She turned back to the script in front of her, trying to concentrate on the scene. She was pretty certain that she had the entire script memorized, but they were filming that scene the next day and she wanted to make sure she had it down cold. And it wasn't even the lines, those she knew, but everything else. It was an important scene and she wanted to get it right.

"What are you working on?" Kris asked.

Julianne stopped mouthing the lines to herself and stared at Kris. "Just running the lines for tomorrow's scene."

"Can I help?"

"Don't you have homework to do?" Julianne asked. "If I'm distracting you I can go do this in my room."



"No," Kris answered. "I just don't feel like studying." She caught the look Julianne sent her and laughed. "I'll lock myself in the library tomorrow and catch up, I promise." She stood up from the chair. "You're worse than my mother, do you know that?"

Julianne grinned, slightly proud of herself. "I try."

"So, how can I help?" Kris asked, now standing in front of Julianne.

Julianne sighed, defeated. "Okay, it's a short scene. Just read Emma's lines. And just to warn you, this is really sappy."

"Aww, I remember this one. It's sweet." Kris smiled. "Do I start?"

"Go ahead."

Kris cleared her throat. "I heard your song last night. It echoed through the trees outside my window, and I thought ..."

"What?"

"I had the crazy feeling that you were standing in the garden."

"With a piano?"

"Isn't it crazy?"

Julianne stepped closer to Emma, who was really Kris, and said, "I believe that us standing here together is crazy."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No. I want you to stay forever."

"That's even crazier."

"Is it? You promised yourself to a man you do not love and you think *this* is insanity."

"Who says I do not love him?"

"You do not have to say it, Emma. I can see it. You speak of love as if it were an obligation."

"Not love," Kris said. "Just marriage."

"So you admit you do not love him?"

"According to you, I do not have to. And what difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference to me," Julianne said softly, stepping closer. "I can show you love."

"Don't." Kris glanced up from her reading, and met Julianne's gaze.

Julianne's heart started pounding, and she fell completely out of character. She was so close to Kris, their lips so near. It was the perfect excuse, the script called for a kiss. Julianne saw Kris start to close her eyes, and felt her own shut. Soft breath tickled her lips ...



What was she doing? She wasn't Elizabeth and Kris wasn't Emma. This wasn't right. Julianne stepped away. "Thanks," she said, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt. Her whole body hummed with sexual energy, and she didn't know how to make it stop.

Kris had opened her eyes and was looking at her with an unreadable expression. "Any time," she said, handing the script back.

"You make a good Emma," Julianne replied, hoping the tension between them would ease. She wished she could read Kris' mind, to decipher what the other was thinking. Had she crossed the line?

"Too bad I didn't audition," Kris said with a smile. "So, um, do you need to run that again?"

"No," Julianne said quickly. "I think I got it." If they went through that all over again, Julianne didn't know what she'd do.

Kris watched the credits rolling on the television screen, wondering what had happened to the movie. Was it over already?

"Did you like it?" Julianne asked from her place on the other side of the bed. "I thought it was cute."

"Yeah, definitely cute," Kris agreed, thankful for an adjective. Ever since the near-kiss earlier in the evening, Kris had been lost to the outside world. Julianne had suggested a movie, and Kris had agreed. She'd hoped that a movie would distract her from her thoughts, but on the contrary, it gave her ample opportunity to surrender to them.

They had almost kissed, Kris realized. If Julianne hadn't pulled away, it would've happened, and there would've been no turning back. She knew it was in the script, that it would've been justifiable, at least on the outside. It was just acting...

But, she couldn't justify the fact that she'd wanted it to happen. She couldn't justify her disappointment when it didn't. She couldn't explain why she kept going back to it. Why her mind kept imagining it happening; kept picturing how it would feel. She, Kris, had wanted to kiss Julianne.

Still wanted to.

The thought made her dizzy.

Julianne turned the movie off, and glanced at the time on the alarm clock. "It's late, do you want me to drive you home? Or I'll walk you."

"No," Kris replied, distractedly. "I can take a cab."

"Spend the night," Julianne suggested. "You look tired."

Kris turned her head to look at Julianne. What if they kissed? Right now, on that bed. Would Julianne kiss her back? And then what? *God, her lips look so soft.* "Um," she knew that Julianne had said something. But what?



"Do you want to?" Julianne asked.

Want to...? Yes to whatever it was. "Sure."

"Kris, are you okay?" Julianne asked, concern in her voice. "Did I make you uncomfortable?"

Kris snapped back into the world of the living. "I'm fine," she answered. "Just tired, I guess." Not that she would be able to fall asleep. Ever, ever again. She glanced at the TV, where an infomercial was playing. "Have you ever bought any of that stuff?"

"I plead the fifth."

Kris smiled to herself. She could picture Julianne ordering random things at the strange hours of the morning. "You're a compulsive shopper."

"I enjoy pointless gadgets that only work for the people on TV," Julianne said.

"Maybe you just don't know how to work them properly," Kris teased.

Julianne smacked her lightly with the remote.

Kris laughed, grabbing the remote from Julianne's hand. "Let's see what else is on." After flipping through an endless amount of channels, Kris realized that there was nothing good on any of them. She settled on the Food Network, since she knew Julianne liked it. "This okay?" "Ah, the Iron Chef," Julianne said with a heavenly sigh. "Perfect."

"Nerd." Kris smiled, thinking it was adorable.

Julianne grinned. "I want to compete against one of the Iron Chefs."

"Why don't you?"

"I have no idea how to cook with those weird ingredients," Julianne replied, sounding regretful.

"You can compete against me," Kris suggested. "I'll heat up a pop tart, while you create something spectacular."

Julianne laughed. "You're some competition."

"I try." They fell silent as they watched the show for a few minutes. Kris was still unable to pay full attention to anything. "Julianne..."

"Yes?"

"When are you going to see Naomi again?"

"Tomorrow."

Kris tried not to frown. "Got another date?"

"Oh, you meant see her see her?" Julianne asked. "I ... um .. I told her yesterday I kind of didn't want to date her anymore."



"Why?" Kris asked, feeling completely shocked.

"I don't have feelings for her," Julianne admitted.

Kris felt irrationally elated. "I see," was all she could think to say. But she wanted to say more than that. She wanted to know more. "Did you ... did you kiss her?"

"Yes."

Her elation instantly evaporated. "Oh, is she a good kisser?"

"Yeah, it was really nice."

Kris decided she couldn't hear about it anymore. She was sorry she'd asked. "But you don't have feelings for her?"

Julianne glanced at her curiously. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious," Kris answered, worried that Julianne might suspect her true emotions. "Things seemed to be going well."

"One could say the same of you and Anthony," Julianne answered. "Sometimes the feelings just aren't there."

Kris looked into Julianne's eyes, so blue and beautiful. "So where are they?"

Julianne smiled. "I don't know."

I think I do, Kris thought. But only smiled in return.

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Wednesday, 1:02am

Life felt more serious when cloaked in silence.

She watched the glowing numbers on the alarm clock, seemingly brighter in the darkness of the room. What she wanted was to close her eyes and surrender. She wanted to ignore the way time passed slowly, only when she remembered it was there.

But her mind was oblivious to her wishes. It was a mirror reflecting what she felt, but not controlling how she felt it. And her thoughts projected light onto the silver screen of unwanted consciousness: forcing her to think, forcing her to feel ...demanding her attention.

Julianne stared at the paintings on the wall, now dark and grotesque in the presence of shadows: strange how beauty was so easily distorted by the absence of light. She was growing tired of darkness ... of the pain.



Mistakenly, she had assumed that she could control it. She couldn't remember the moment when she'd felt herself falling, and let go. But she blamed it on the silence: the pauses, the comas, the breaths between words. All of those moments too intangible to mention had somehow convinced her that she could take on the night.

And now she realized why she had always opted for solitude. Until now, she hadn't had a clue what it meant.

Wednesday, 1:46am

Cons:

- Disowned by family
- No legal marriage (Vermont?)
- No kids (adoption, artificial insemination?) - Sin?
- Hiding
- Shame
- Fear

Pros:

Kris stared at the computer monitor and sighed. Were there any pros to being gay? She couldn't think of any. "God, this is depressing," she muttered, closing down the Word document. Society sure didn't make it easy. How did Mark and William get up in the morning? Or Julianne for that matter.

Julianne...

She eyed the telephone by her bed. Was the actress asleep? Probably. It was nearly two in the morning. Then again, she wasn't altogether sure that Julianne ever slept. Still, if she called, the possibility stood that she would say things she didn't want to say.

Then again, if she didn't call, she would have to spend the rest of the night wondering if Julianne was still awake. Then at some point, the fantasies would start implanting themselves upon her subconscious, making her wonder dumb things like: is Julianne thinking of me? Or, worse yet: Is she dreaming of me? And the corniness of her meanderings would escalate until sense, logic, and reason would dissipate into oblivion, leaving Kris frustrated, annoyed, and more often than not, breathless and turned on.

She picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Franqui."

Kris smiled into the receiver. "Did I wake you?"

"Not really. I was just watching TV. Is something wrong?"

"Only if boredom qualifies as a problem," Kris replied. She wondered if Julianne minded these post-midnight phone calls. She also wondered if there was any way of getting a recording of Julianne's voice. It was addicting. "Anything good on?"



"Infomercials," Julianne answered. "Let's see ... more infomercials ... news ... weather ... something with weird alien creatures ... a naked woman riding a horse ..."

Kris laughed. "Perv."

"Hey, I didn't make the movie," Julianne answered.

"Would you ever do porn?" Kris wondered.

"Sure. Right after *Summer's End*, I'm getting a boob job."

"I think your boobs are fine," Kris replied.

"How sweet of you to notice. I didn't know you were looking."

She knew she was blushing now. "So, how did shooting that scene go? The one we practiced." Kris noticed that the noise in the background vanished, and she wondered if Julianne had turned off the TV. Or just muted it.

"Well," Julianne began, "it started out fine. But then once Samantha and I started kissing, Naomi flipped out. She started screaming at Samantha, telling her that she was the only one I was allowed to kiss. Then, Samantha punched her. They started wrestling, and tearing at each other's clothes—"

Kris rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Are these the kind of fantasies you entertain at night?"

"Well, sometimes they're wearing white shirts and crew people throw water at them."

Kris started laughing. "What is this? The naughty side of Julianne?"

"It's late."

"Ahuh."

"It is!"

"So what really happened?"

"I delivered my lines with astounding precision," Julianne answered. "And then I kissed Samantha like she's never been kissed before."

Kris decided that she didn't like Samantha anymore. Actually, she didn't know Samantha, but that only made it easier to dislike her. "Sounds good."

"So what did you do today?"

Well, I contemplated my blooming homosexuality for about four hours. And then I thought I'd call you, and confuse myself further. "Leigh and I had a pizza and movie night. Best friend bonding time and all that."

"Have fun?"

"Yeah, it was nice getting to spend time with her," Kris answered. "Though we really didn't talk much. Jeremy called about three times."



"How are they doing?"

"As a couple? Fine, I guess. Leigh seems happy, and that's good enough for me."

"Good."

"What time are we leaving Friday?"

"I'll be picking you up at 7:30."

"That early?"

"It's going to be a long day."

Kris couldn't wait.

"Um, Kris?"

"Yeah?"

"Things are going to be kind of different in California. There will probably be a lot of cameras following us around. And I'll probably have to go back to being Julianne Franqui at times."

"Who are you now?" Kris wondered.

"Me."

Kris didn't know if she understood the difference. But she had a feeling that she would soon find out.

Thursday, 3:43pm

"Are you seriously in love with Julianne Franqui?"

Kris sighed at the question, regretting having answered the phone. "Mark, I'm kind of busy at the moment."

"What are you doing?"

"Packing."

"For what?"

"A trip."

"Kris..."

She sighed once again, this time in resignation. She took a seat at the edge of her bed, pushing the suitcase aside to make room. "I'm going to California with Julianne for the weekend."



"No fucking way!"

"She has to go to the premiere of her last movie," Kris explained, knowing there was little she could say to keep Mark's imagination from running rampant. Especially after the things she'd told him.

Mark gasped. "Oh my God, I get to be the uncle of Julianne Franqui's children. Pinch me."

"I'd do more than that if you were here," Kris told him. "Look, Mark. There's really nothing going on with Julianne. She's Julianne Franqui, and I'm ... well, no one. And well, we're just friends."

"Have you kissed her?"

"Of course not! Hence the 'just friends' part."

"Is she really gay?"

Kris groaned. "Please don't ask me to answer that."

"Meaning yes." Mark shrieked. "This is so unbelievable. So, what's your plan of action?"

"My what?"

"How do you plan on winning her over?" Mark explained. "Are you going to fake a nightmare so that she crawls into your bed in the middle of the night? Or wait until she's in the shower and then sneak in accidentally?"

She frowned. "I really have to get back to packing."

"Wait," Mark insisted, his tone turning slightly serious. "I kind of have to tell you something."

"What's that?" Kris asked, feeling impatient.

Mark hesitated. "Please don't kill me. But when you left me alone with Julianne that night at the club, I may have accidentally let out the fact that you were ... you know, questioning. And I don't know, but I don't think I did a very good job of hiding that you were questioning your feelings about her."

Kris froze. "What?"

"I'm sorry, I just found myself saying things. And I don't remember what I said exactly."

"Mark!" Kris yelled. "Please tell me you're kidding. What did you say to her?"

"I'm sorry, Kris. I really don't remember. I'd had a bit to drink. I might have not said anything at all."

"But you think you did?" Kris insisted.

"I think I remember saying something about you questioning your sexuality," he answered.

Kris' mind was spinning. Did Julianne know? She'd die of humiliation of that was true. "I have to go."



"Are you okay?"

"A little dazed."

"Are you mad at me?"

"No. But I *am* going to kill you."

"That sounds fair. Have a good time in California. Don't forget to get me a souvenir."

"Mark," she warned.

"Love you! Bye." Mark hung up.

Kris clicked the phone off and tossed it on the bed. "This is really, really bad."

"What's really, really bad?"

Kris glanced at the doorway to find Leigh standing there. She hadn't realized she'd spoken out loud. "Uh, I forgot to tell one of my professors I'd be gone on Monday," she fibbed.

"Oh," Leigh replied with a shrug. "That doesn't sound so bad. I'm sure can just email them, right?"

Kris nodded. "Sure," she agreed.

Leigh stood there silently for a few seconds, looking around. She nodded at the suitcase. "All packed?"

Kris glanced at the object, feeling an odd mix of emotions at the memory of her impending trip. "Almost. Julianne wasn't very forthcoming with what kind of clothes to take."

"So take at least one of each type," Leigh suggested. She brightened. "She might take you to dinner at one of those really exclusive restaurants. You'll get to sit in the V.I.P. section and get people whispering and wondering who you are."

The thought of that made Kris ill. "Do you really think so?"

"Who's that hot girl with Julianne Franqui', they'll whisper behind their silk napkins and goldframed menus."

"I meant the part about going out to dinner." Kris stood, walking over to her closet. She started searching through the contents. "I have nothing to wear to something like that! I thought we'd stay in and order pizza or something."

Leigh arched a brow. "You do realize this is Julianne Franqui's house you're going to." She walked out into the living room and came back a moment later with a magazine. She pointed to the cover, where Julianne's picture was featured. "Famous movie star. Ring a bell?"

Kris glanced at the picture. It was often hard to connect the two people in her mind. Maybe that's what Julianne had meant about having to go back to being Julianne Franqui for a while. But where did that leave Kris? She suddenly wondered if it was a good idea to go to California at all.



Leigh started flipping through the magazine. "How well do you think you know Julianne, Kris?" she wondered absently.

"What do you mean?"

Leigh shrugged, not looking up from the pages. "It just seems to me that she's led you into some kind of fantasy bubble where only the two of you exist. And that's nice and all, but she's still her." She whistled, and turned the magazine over so that Kris could see it. "Do you think they'll photograph me like this?"

Kris ignored the photo. She'd already seen it, and had consequently spent fifteen minutes debating on a cold shower. It had also led her to wonder if other people looked at that picture and felt the same way, which had resulted in a series of mixed emotions she'd proceeded to ignore.

"Earth to Kris," Leigh called.

"I'm here."

"Ya sure?" Leigh questioned, closing the magazine. "So who's Julianne's mystery date to the premiere? The hideous creature from the MTV Movie Awards?"

Hideous creature? Kris made a mental note to ask Julianne about that later. "Uh, I have no idea, actually. She hasn't told me."

"What do you guys talk about, anyway?" Leigh wondered. "Jeremy asked me that the other night and I honestly didn't have an answer."

"Why did Jeremy ask you that?" Kris wondered.

Leigh shrugged. "Who knows? Little Nuyorican girl from the wrong side of the tracks hanging out with multi-million dollar celebrities. It's bound to spark some interest in the minds of the public."

"Since when am I from the wrong side of the tracks?"

"Just thought it sounded more dramatic," Leigh answered. "So, what do you and Miss Franqui talk about?"

Kris thought about it. "Everything. And nothing. We just talk ..."

"I see," Leigh said, sounding very much like she didn't see at all.

"You talked to her too when she was just Julia," Kris said defensively.

"Not really. I mean, we talked, but we didn't have hour-long conversations like you two do. And now we just talk about the movie. Nothing mind-boggling."

Kris didn't know what to say to that.

"What time are you leaving tomorrow?"

"Julianne said 7:30."



Leigh nodded. "Well, I'm going to take a shower. Jeremy's picking me up later. You sure you don't want to go? That cute guy is still interested."

Kris sighed. "No thanks."

"You sure there's nothing you want to talk about?" Leigh asked seriously. "I mean, I am still your best friend, right?"

"Always," Kris assured her, offering a smile. "I'm just a little stressed out. I'm fine."

Leigh smiled. "You're still a bad liar, but okay. You know where I live if you do want to talk about anything."

Kris smiled, and then watched the bedroom door close behind her friend. She stared at the suitcase. Leigh was right. It didn't make any sense that Julianne would invite her to her house just to sit around and eat pizza. But if a fancy dinner was what Julianne had in mind, Kris would have to sit that one out.

She stared at the suitcase and sighed. "God, please don't let this be the weekend from hell."

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Julianne stared at the clouds outside of the airplane window, wondering how anything could look so unmistakably solid, seem so undeniably present, and still be like nothing at all. She was growing tired of illusions. Was anything ever simple in this world of smoke and mirrors? Or was it all just a matter of finding peace amidst the doubt.

"You seem pensive."

Julianne turned her attention away from the window and gazed into curious hazel eyes. "Did you have a nice nap?" she asked.

Kris nodded and let out a yawn. "I didn't get much sleep last night. Traveling jitters, I guess." She glanced around the jet. "It's kind of weird not flying with hundreds of other people."

"Would it make you feel better if I sat behind you and kicked your chair?" Julianne wondered. "I don't want to rob you of the experience."

"Maybe on the flight back," Kris replied in mock seriousness. "I wouldn't want you to go out of your way for my convenience."

Julianne grinned, and relaxed into the seat. In spite of all of the mixed emotions regarding her friendship with Kris, she was content at that moment. And maybe that was all that mattered in the end.

"So what were you thinking?" Kris asked suddenly. "When you were staring out of the window."

The question caught Julianne off-guard, and she struggled to find a quick way to get out of answering. But it was stupid, she realized, to edit herself so frequently. Did she really need to paint a perfect portrait of herself for Kris' benefit? If her feelings for this woman were real, then why couldn't she just be honest? "Um," she said, looking out of the airplane window again, as if



the answers were floating alongside the airplane. "I was just watching the clouds. Thinking that they're deceptive."

Kris watched her carefully, her gaze drifting to the window then back again to Julianne's eyes. "Why deceptive?"

Julianne felt incredibly ridiculous admitting her meandering thoughts. She instantly regretted having gone with the truth. It made her feel vulnerable. "I was just being silly," she answered, hoping it was enough to deter the topic. "Are you thirsty?" she added.

"No," Kris responded. She glanced out of the window again. "Why deceptive?" she asked again.

The actress sighed quietly, then gave up trying to avoid the question. "Switch seats with me," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"Switch," Julianne said again. "If I'm going to explain then you need a better view."

Kris seemed confused but switched seats with Julianne without further question. Once she was settled in the window seat, she glanced expectantly at the world outside. "What am I looking at?"

"I don't know. What do you see?"

"Clouds," Kris answered automatically, looking back at Julianne. "Will the questions get harder as we go along?"

Julianne smiled. "What do they look like? And if you say 'clouds' I'm going to tickle you mercilessly when we get to California."

A raised eyebrow was Kris' response, before turning back to the window. "Was that a threat, Miss Franqui?"

"Maybe."

Kris smiled, but didn't reply. Instead, she took a deep breath and focused on trying to decipher what Julianne was trying to get her to see. "They remind me of cotton candy," she said finally. "Why cotton candy?" Julianne wondered.

"Just the texture. They look soft."

"And edible?" Julianne teased.

Kris laughed. "You're not answering my original question."

"Why are clouds deceptive?" Julianne shrugged and nodded to the window. "I invite you to try and test your cotton candy theory."

Kris thought about it for a moment and smiled. "I see. But why is that important?"

"What?"



"Why is their not being what they appear to be important to you?"

Julianne realized that was Kris' real question, and that was a harder one to explain. Or maybe not. Maybe nothing was ever really hard to explain unless you wanted to skid around the truth. "Because nothing ever is," she told her.

"Important?"

"No, what it appears to be."

Kris considered that. "Maybe you just have to look closer."

"Oh, my God, this is beautiful," Kris breathed, as she stepped inside Julianne's house. Her gaze immediately flew to the glass windows across from her. She could almost see the ocean from where she was standing. She tore her eyes from the view and looked around. Everything was so ... bright.

It was strange to look outside and see endlessness, instead of the usual shadows cast by buildings overhead. It made her feel like she was standing in the foyer of a palace. Or at least something out of an episode of MTV *Cribs*.

"You like?" Julianne asked, looking around. "It's not much."

At first, Kris thought that Julianne was being sarcastic, but then realized she wasn't. Julianne actually sounded unsure, self-conscious even. She glanced around again, amazed that two people could look at the same thing and see something totally different. "Well, I'm a little disappointed that the walls aren't lined with diamonds. And I suppose gold-trimmed tiles wouldn't hurt either."

"Your sarcasm is duly noted, Miss Milano," Julianne replied. "May I show you to your quarters?"

Kris gasped in mock surprise. "There's no butler?"

Julianne rolled her eyes and started walking.

"How about a maid?" Kris continued, following her hostess toward the living room. She paused to look at the view a little closer. The beach was right below. "This is like a dream house. I can't believe you live here."

Julianne turned around and glanced at Kris seriously. "You can stay here whenever you want, for as long as you'd like. Even if I'm not here."

Kris looked at the actress and smiled. "What fun would that be?" she asked. "But thanks." She followed Julianne to the guest bedroom and dropped down her stuff. "It has a balcony?" Kris walked across the room and slid open the glass doors that led to the small balcony. Warm, salty air instantly brushed against her face as she stepped outside. She stared at the view of the ocean ahead. "I'm marrying your house."



"You could just as easily marry me," Julianne replied. "I promise the sex would be better."

Kris' heart leapt up her throat. She could feel her entire body responding to those words. *She's kidding. Laugh.* She laughed, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt. *What do I say to that?!*

Thankfully, Julianne changed the subject. "I'll let you get settled. Come find me when you've gotten bored of the view."

"That might be never," Kris answered, with a slight smile. She wasn't kidding either. She could easily stare at the ocean forever.

"Then I'll find you, when I get bored of waiting." Julianne winked and walked away, leaving Kris alone with the Pacific Ocean.

Kris smiled and leaned against the railing, feeling the breeze in her hair. She willed herself not to think about anything; not the way that Julianne looked when she smiled or moved or breathed. Or the way her voice sounded when she talked or laughed or whispered. Kris didn't want to think about the way her body tingled when Julianne's was near, even when they weren't even touching.

Kris wanted, merely, to exist, peacefully, at that moment, without the complications of emotions, and strange body responses. *Marry her? Better sex? Jesus. She's trying to kill me.*

She stared at the water for a few minutes longer, then went back into the room. She hadn't really noticed it before, having been distracted by the balcony. The walls were a light shade of blue, with framed black and white photographs of unfamiliar landscapes lined across them. There was a double bed, neatly made, and a dresser with a mirror. Kris wondered how many guests Julianne usually had. She couldn't imagine that there would be many.

Kris took a deep breath and sat at the end of the bed, debating on whether to unpack or meet back up with Julianne. It was silly that she was already missing the actress when they hadn't been apart for more than fifteen minutes. For the sake of stubbornness, she decided to unpack. She was sure that Julianne wanted some time to settle in.

Julianne paced around her living room, feeling frustrated and anxious. Why did she return her mother's phone calls? It seemed silly now, though it had seemed like a good idea at the time. "I can't come over for dinner tonight," she insisted for the third time in ten minutes.

"You have yet to provide me with an apt excuse, Julia," her mother replied.

Julianne closed her eyes, knowing that her mother now had the upper hand. She never called Julianne by her real name unless she was reaching her boiling point. "I have a guest," she ventured to say hoping that perhaps that served as a proper reason for skipping dinner.

"What kind of guest?"

"A friend from New York," Julianne answered. "Kris," she added, if only because she liked the sound of the artist's name on her lips.

"Are you cheating on Adrian already?"



The question was so unexpected that Julianne was speechless for a few seconds, until she realized that her mother probably assumed that Kris was a man. "Adrian and I aren't a couple any more," she answered. "I forgot to tell you."

"Is that so? Well, I hope this 'guest' of yours is worthy of your time."

Julianne found herself smiling. "More than worthy."

"Dinner starts promptly at seven," her mother answered.

"But, Kris—"

"The invitation is for two," her mother said, curtly. "Call it morbid curiosity."

Julianne didn't like the sound of that. Kris deserved better than to be a 'morbid curiosity'.

"I'm going to hang up now, Julianne. You know being on the phone too long gives me a headache. Please be on time."

"Kris is a vegetarian," Julianne blurted, feeling resigned.

"I'll inform the cook. See you tonight."

"Bye." Julianne waited for her mother to hang up first, then shut off her phone. Dinner was bound to be a nightmare. She turned around to find Kris looking at the view outside. It was strange how one person could make her feel both jarred and peaceful all in the same instance. Was love always so conflicting?

Kris looked away from the windows as Julianne approached. "Is my being a vegetarian a hot topic of conversation these days?" she asked. Then shook her head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

Julianne looked outside for a moment, at the ocean and the sky, feeling momentarily panicked by the concept of Kris meeting her family. "Would you be at all interested in attending dinner at my parents' house?"

She looked slightly shocked, but tried to cover it. "I'd love to."

"I must warn you that they are evil people," Julianne said, her tone light, though she meant the words. "My mother and sister, especially. They make Satan cower."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating," Kris replied with a grin.

Julianne shrugged, giving up. "You'll see. I apologize in advance for the traumatizing experience you'll probably go through."

"Are you trying to scare me?" Kris asked good-naturedly.

"Is it working?" Julianne asked hopefully.

"No," Kris answered after a moment of consideration. "I think now I'm just morbidly curious." Julianne flinched, recalling her mother's wording. There was something disturbing about her



mother and Kris using similar phrasing. Or maybe it was fitting to the occasion. Only tonight's events would tell. "Funny you should say that."

"Why?"

"Apparently, my mother feels the same way about meeting you," Julianne admitted.

This seemed to confuse Kris, who frowned slightly. "Why would she be morbidly curious to meet me?"

Julianne shrugged. "Probably because genuine interest in anything besides money and gossip eludes her. Plus the fact that she probably thinks we're dating. And that you're a guy."

"Well that's a nice twist," Kris replied, smiling. "Does that mean you want me to show up to dinner in drag?"

The thought made her smile. She couldn't imagine what her mother's reaction to that would be. "I think I like you better like this, actually."

"You think?"

"Well I haven't seen you in drag yet to compare," Julianne teased.

"Good point," Kris conceded. "So, why would your mother think we were dating?"

"Well, I didn't really correct her when I suspected that's what she assumed..." Julianne wasn't sure what Kris would make of that admission.

"Are you trying to give your mother a heart attack, Julianne?" Kris asked. "Cause if you are, and she really is as evil as you say, I'd gladly pretend to be your girlfriend for the evening." She winked.

Julianne wanted to laugh at the idea, but it was hard to ignore the pang of disappointment that accompanied hearing the word 'pretend.' "She really is that evil. But, I suppose there's no need to kill the woman." She smiled.

Kris smiled back, but didn't say anything, her attention once again on the view outside.

Julianne tried not to stare, tried not to focus on the emotions coursing through her. If she had had any ounce of courage she would've told Kris that she didn't want her to pretend to be anything. That she'd take the real thing any day. But how could she put into words this emotional desperation she was lost in? "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Not really," Kris replied, glancing at Julianne. "My nerves are a little wired from all of the excitement."

It was often the case that Julianne would have to step outside of herself, and into Kris' shoes in order to understand what Kris was trying to say. It was easy to forget that her life was not ordinary. It worried her, trying to figure out how they could fit in each other's world, if it was even possible to merge them. This friendship between them, how long could it last?

"Julianne?"

The actress looked at Kris, momentarily startled. "Sorry?"



There was concern in the hazel eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Just a lot on my mind," she replied.

Kris nodded. "Are you nervous about the premiere?"

The premiere? Julianne had nearly forgotten that's the reason she was there. "Um, partly," she answered, though it was the least of her concerns. "Do you want to go down to the beach?"

Kris' eyes lit up at the suggestion. "I'd love to. I haven't been to the beach in ages."

Strange the things one takes for granted when living by the sea. But Julianne was secretly pleased that she could make Kris happy. She loved her enthusiasm and her appreciation of the things that Julianne barely noticed she had. It made Julianne want to take notice. It made her want to wrap everything up with a big red bow and hand it over to Kris.

Maybe. Maybe some day. She liked to pretend there was hope.

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Kris had never seen a house so beautiful up close. She'd been watching it attentively from her seat in Julianne's limousine. The closer they got to it, the more breathtaking it became. Kris felt a lump in her throat at the realization that this was her destination. It seemed too beautiful to be real. She turned to look at Julianne, to share her thoughts, but the actress was in the middle of what sounded like an important conversation.

Not wanting to intrude, Kris leaned her head against the window and lost herself in the images flying past. It felt almost like a fairy tale, being in Julianne's world. Manhattan seemed so far away at that instance. It was as though she had stepped into an alternate reality, and this was now her life. She lifted her head, glancing at Julianne for a moment before returning her gaze to the outside world.

Except, it wasn't her life. She was fully aware of that. This was just a snippet, a peek at something outside of her sphere of existence. She was merely getting to taste a free sample of success.

"Ah, home sweet hell," Julianne laughed, leaning against Kris to look out of the window.

Kris loved the heat of Julianne's body. She wanted to lean into it, to feel more. Why did simple contact feel so complicated? "It's beautiful," Kris said, trying to concentrate on the scenery.

"It's pompous and pretentious," Julianne said. "They always have the lights on in all of the windows so it looks more majestic. My mother's idea."

"Sounds like a large electric bill," Kris said, though she couldn't even imagine how large.

Julianne sat back, reclaiming her previous spot near the opposite window. "I don't think my mother has ever seen a bill."



Kris noted that Julianne's tone was more matter-of-fact than judgmental. She wondered if Julianne herself had ever looked at a bill. It didn't seem likely, given Julianne's smooth transition from spoiled rich kid to super stardom. Luck seemed unevenly distributed among the masses. The limousine rolled to a stop, and the chauffeur stepped out to open the door for them. Once outside, Kris stared up at the mansion with an uneasy feeling. She had no idea what to expect. But she wanted to meet Julianne's family; she wanted to see, first hand, what Julianne grew up with.

"Ready?" Julianne asked.

Kris glanced up at her and offered a brief smile. "I don't know. Are you?"

"Never," Julianne replied. She glanced up at the house and sighed. "Let's get this over with. Whatever you do, don't look directly into my mother's eyes."

Kris smiled, relaxing slightly, and followed Julianne toward the front door. Before they had a chance to knock, a woman who looked like an exact replica of Julianne, if quite a bit older and with short hair, opened the door.

"Opening doors now, mother?" Julianne commented. "That's new. I didn't think you knew how."

Julianne's mother didn't reply, her gaze on Kris.

Kris shifted uncomfortably under the woman's intense gaze, but didn't look away. She didn't want to appear intimidated.

After a few seconds, blue eyes shifted to Julianne's. "Are you going to introduce your guest, Julianne? Where are your manners?"

"Mother, this is Kris. Kris, this is my mother."

"You may call me Susan," her mother said, turning her back to them and starting into the house.

Kris glanced at Julianne with a raised eyebrow.

"After you," Julianne indicated with a wave of her arm. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Kris smiled and stepped into the grand foyer. If the woman wanted attitude, Kris would show her attitude.

Julianne listened to the clattering of silverware against the bottom of plates. The noise, while rhythmic, only served to grate at her nerves. She wanted to take Kris' hand and lead her friend out of there. It was too quiet. The lack of conversation bothered her.

Finally, it was Julianne's sister that broke the silence. "So what happened with Adrian?"

Susan glanced up from her plate, seemingly torn between telling Jan to be quiet, and genuinely curious to know Julianne's response. She opted for curiosity. "Yes, Julianne, what did happen?"



Julianne could feel all eyes watching her; her mother's, Jan's, and even Kris'. She didn't want to lie in front of Kris. She didn't want to pretend anymore, or formulate any more stories to conceal the truth. But what would admitting the truth accomplish? "I'm not in love with him," she finally answered.

"So who are you in love with?" Jan asked.

The question made Julianne freeze. She didn't know how to answer it without lying. "What makes you think I'm in love with anyone?" she countered, trying to stall, hoping the question would dissipate into nothingness.

Jan shrugged. "Are you?"

"Guess you'll have to tune into Entertainment Tonight just like everyone else," Julianne replied, rather proud of herself for avoiding the question.

Resigned, Jan turned to Kris. "Mom was sure you were Julianne's new *boyfriend*," she informed. "She had the staff cleaning the entire house in preparation of your arrival."

"Jan," Susan warned, clearly embarrassed by her youngest daughter's revelation. "So, Kris, are you in the film with Julianne?"

Kris appeared momentarily thrown by the sudden attention. "No, I'm an art student at NYU. My roommate is in the film, though."

"Kris is a very talented artist," Julianne supplied, jumping at any chance to boast about her friend's talents.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Jan asked curiously.

"Is that all you ever think about?" Julianne asked, annoyed by her sister's questions.

Jan ignored Julianne's question and focused her attention on awaiting Kris' response.

Kris shook her head slightly and said, "I did. But we broke up."

"Why?" Jan asked.

"None of your business!" Julianne said.

"Julianne," Susan chastised.

Jan looked annoyed. "I'm free to have a conversation with your friend if I want to. You don't own her. She's perfectly welcome to tell me to shut up whenever I cross the line."

Frustrated and more than a little angry, Julianne tightened her jaw, but didn't say anything. Jan was right, as much as she hated to admit it. Kris was fully capable of taking care of herself.

"I wasn't in love with him," Kris answered, if only to put a stop to the quarreling.

"Seems to be going around," Jan commented, glancing at Julianne.

"It can't be easy," Susan interjected, "being an artist in New York."



Kris shrugged. "It's not really easy being anyone anywhere."

Susan stared at Kris for a moment. "Well, I suppose you would know about struggle. I have always admired your people."

Julianne snapped her head to look at her mother. She stared, disbelieving. Kris calmly took a sip of her drink and looked at Susan. "What people would that be?"

Susan waved her hand in a circular gesture as if to indicate that by 'people' she meant one giant entity: the all-encompassing minority. "Hispanics. I watch it on TV all of the time. Those poor people getting rescued from their rafts." She shook her head and took a sip of wine. "Frankly, I can't imagine how they manage it. Did your family arrive here by such means?"

Julianne blinked.

Jan stifled a laugh.

Kris smiled. "Yes, of course. Us Puerto Ricans escape the island by raft all of the time."

"So it's a common thing in your culture then?" Susan wondered. "Amazing what people get used to."

Julianne wanted, desperately, to bang her head against the table, and pray that this was all a bad dream. She had known that her mother was evil, but ignorant and stupid, too? "They're a commonwealth, mother. I'm certain airplanes are a tad more convenient."

Susan absorbed this information from behind her glass of wine. Her blue eyes darted to Kris and narrowed slightly. It was clear to Julianne that her mother did not appreciate being corrected by her daughter. Especially when it resulted in personal embarrassment. It was also clear to Julianne, that Kris' sarcasm was equally unappreciated. "Seems unfair, then, that affirmative action would still include you as a participant, no? Puerto Ricans must feel very high and mighty, having the best of both worlds."

The humor left Kris' eyes. "What seems unfair, ma'am, is that your idiocy is allowed to take residence in such a beautiful home as this. I'm certain that the size of this mansion is in compensation for the size of your brain."

Jan burst out laughing but hid it with a large, dramatic cough.

Susan's mouth hung open slightly, then shut quickly. Unable to reply, she took another sip of wine.

Julianne cleared her throat, mostly to keep from laughing herself. Kris had told off her mother. Kris. She was nearly giddy with amusement, and slightly frozen from the shock. "Well, thanks for dinner, mother," she said, rising. "Kris and I have some matters to attend to."

Kris rose as well, her gaze cast downward, as if she were just now realizing that she, Kris Milano, had just called Julianne Franqui's mother, stupid.

"Julianne," Susan said sternly, yet with an eerie calm. "Could I speak to you privately?"

It wasn't really a question. Julianne glanced quickly at Kris. "I'll meet you in the limo."



Thankful that she got to wait outside, Kris nodded, and started toward the front door. She turned around, only, to offer a polite nod to Jan.

Julianne watched Kris leave and then, resigned, followed her mother into the next room.

"I don't want you anywhere near that ... that..." Her mother's voice trailed off, anger replacing her cool demeanor.

"Her name is Kris," Julianne said, starting to get angry herself. She couldn't believe the things her mother had said. "Rafts, mother?"

"She should feel thankful she didn't need one," Susan retorted. "Those people are never appreciative. We allow them in our country and all they do is complain."

"Do you hear yourself?" Julianne demanded.

Susan shrugged her slender shoulders. "I donate to their charities. I know what goes on. And that ... whatever she is, is never allowed in this house again."

"Like she'd want to come back!" Julianne yelled.

"Julianne, I'm not going to say this again. I don't want you associating with such low-class filth!"

Julianne had never felt so angry in her life. The nerve of her mother! How dare she! "You no longer get to dictate my life."

"I'm not speaking about your life, Julianne," Susan said, her voice returning to calm, comforted by the knowledge that she'd make Julianne lose her cool. "Don't get dramatic."

"Kris is my life," Julianne answered, not even shocked by the easy way the words slipped from her lips.

Susan didn't even blink. "Stop speaking nonsense."

"It's not nonsense, mother," Julianne replied, her anger fueling her courage. "It's the truth. I'm gay. A queer, dyke, whatever you wish to call me. And I'm in love with Kris. Deny it, accept it, I don't give a damn." With that, she turned on her heels and headed toward the nearest exit.

Kris paced alongside the limo, feeling adrift in a sea of mixed emotions. How had she come to lose control? It was so unlike her, so terribly alien to her personality to speak her thoughts aloud. And yet, the words had come tumbling out of her mouth before she'd had a chance to stop them.

But it wasn't regret that she felt then, standing at the foot of majestic perfection. Glancing up at the tower of grandiosity which housed the key to her unveiling. It was something more specific than regret. She had entered the mansion with a sense of awe and fascination, and left it with a sense of pity so profound that it took her moments to define the emotion.

Kris now understood the balance of the world. She had been wrong in thinking it unfair that Julianne should have so much: beauty, fame, fortune. The superficial luxuries of life, so easy to mistake for blessings and endowments, now seemed to Kris as mere substitutes for the true miracles of being.



How could Julianne have survived so many years in the company of such cold indifference? It didn't seem fair that someone should be robbed the comforts of a loving home, however elegantly disguised between the folds of velvet ensembles and gold-rimmed perfection.

Anger replaced pity.

The ocean breeze stung her lips, and she licked away the salt, wondering for an instant if she was crying without realizing it. Despite her anger, the thought of facing Julianne filled Kris with dread. The fact remained that she had overstepped her boundaries at dinner, and the possibility that Julianne would be upset stood out firmly in Kris' mind.

The sound of footsteps caught Kris' attention, and she felt her breath catch.

"We should get out of here," Julianne said, in a tone that begged definition. It wasn't one that Kris had ever heard before.

Startled at the sudden apparition of the actress, Kris was rendered mute. Without a word, she followed Julianne into the limousine. They sat quietly, listening to the sounds of the engine starting, distracted by the suddenness of motion.

"I'm sorry," Julianne said, the words smooth and cool against the hardness of silence. "I didn't think it would get that bad."

Kris had been prepared for anything but an apology. Her mind failed to come up with an apt response.

Julianne glanced at her, then looked away. "I understand if you want to go back to New York."

The backward nature of the conversation threw Kris for a loop. Why would Julianne think she'd want to leave? "I'm the one who should be sorry," she finally said. "I didn't mean to insult your mother like that. It was completely rude and--"

"Well-deserved," Julianne finished, looking at Kris once again. "It is she who should feel sorry." She smiled. "I'd never seen you so forthcoming before. I should make you angry sometime."

Kris grinned, letting the sweetness of relief course through her. "I think it would be wiser if you didn't, Miss Franqui. Who knows what uncensored things might escape into the night?"

"Well, now my curiosity is peaked."

Kris smiled, feeling the overwhelming need to hug the actress. But she merely crossed her arms against her chest and settled back into the seat.

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Julianne had missed the sound of the waves. She had missed the midnight walks down the shore; standing barefoot and carefree in the wet, slick sand; sinking with each footstep only to emerge and sink again. It was only in the presence of such factors that she realized what a huge part of her daily existence had been missing.



It felt nice, now, to sit in the quiet solitude of night, and stare, undisturbed, at the rhythmic pattern of the waves. She wanted to stay there forever, away from her mother, the public, her friends.

Away from Kris...

Julianne wondered how much longer she could last without confessing. Fear of losing Kris' friendship was starting to become more of an excuse than a reason. Would rejection be so bad? She could move on from that; to what, she wasn't sure, but it had to be better than letting her emotions fester away in a deep vault of longing. Anything had to be better than this. Sighing, she leaned back on her elbows. She had always considered herself a confident person. All of her life she had gone after what she wanted, so why not this time? What was so terrifying about the word 'no'?

Kris had been watching Julianne for a while. It hadn't been her intention to run into the actress at the beach. They had both said their good nights. They were both supposed to be sleeping.

And Kris had tried. She had stared up at the ceiling, watching the darkness argue with the light. She had listened to the waves, attempting to find a rhythm that would soothe her. She had even counted 484 sheep before reaching the conclusion that sleep would never come.

So she had gone for a walk, and stumbled, quite unexpectedly, upon the form of Julianne Franqui. In a moment of irrational panic, she had hidden. And now she felt ridiculous, like a voyeur. Like a ridiculous voyeur.

Still, she didn't reveal herself. It was far too tempting to remain hidden, to observe Julianne in her natural state, without having to worry about staring too hard or too long. Even if she felt a little creepy, looming in the shadows like a crazy stalker.

Kris wanted to be brave. She wanted to walk up to Julianne and tell her, flat out, that her feelings ran deeper than simple friendship. That she was desperate to kiss her, even though the thought was as terrifying as it was exciting. Kris wanted to let it all out, to confess it all. Maybe then, after the rejection that was sure to follow, she could move on. She was tired of driving herself insane with fantasies and what-if scenarios.

But she wasn't that brave. She could never say those things, even though she wanted to. Although, she would've never imagined saying the things she'd said to Julianne's mother. So, maybe there was a chance.

Kris let her attention drift back to the figure a few yards away. Life would be so much easier if people came with thought bubbles.

The footsteps startled her out of her thoughts. And she turned, surprised to find Kris walking toward her. She'd figured the artist was asleep. "How'd you know I'd be here?" she wondered.

Kris looked at her for a moment and then sat down. "What makes you think I was looking for you?" she teased.



"Couldn't sleep?" Julianne guessed.

"No," Kris admitted, staring out at the ocean. "I guess it's just been an overwhelming day."

Julianne nodded. Overwhelming indeed. She still hadn't figured out how she'd managed to come out to her mother. A part of her was still in denial about that. "Well, I guess this is a good spot for insomniacs."

Kris was silent for a while, and Julianne struggled to keep her gaze from falling on the artist's face.

"Do you miss all of this when you're in New York?" Kris asked, glancing over. "It's so peaceful compared to the City. Well, it's so peaceful in general, really."

"I do miss it," Julianne admitted. "But I'll be back here in a month or two."

"Oh," Kris said, with what Julianne thought was a hint of sadness. "I guess once you finish the movie you won't have a reason to stay in New York."

Julianne didn't know how to say that there was reason enough for her to stay. But that wasn't really the problem. "I have to come back and finish out the season of *Guardian*."

"Oh, right," Kris replied. "How much longer is the series running?"

"It could end this year," Julianne answered. "But they asked me to renew the contract for two more seasons."

"That should keep you pretty busy, then," Kris replied.

Yes, very busy indeed. More movies, more TV shows, more promotional tours, more interviews. What was even the point in telling Kris how she felt? Julianne didn't have time for a relationship. "I haven't signed the contract yet," she found herself revealing.

Kris glanced at her in surprise. "Are you debating whether or not to continue?"

Julianne didn't know how to answer that. The fact of the matter was that she'd had that contract in her possession for months. She'd discussed it with her lawyers. She had, in her mind, intended to spend the next two years in the role of Kiara. But she was hesitant. A very strong part of her didn't want to have that responsibility looming overhead. She wanted the option to do something else, or to do nothing at all. "Yes," she said finally. "Guess I am."

Kris nodded, but didn't ask for details. "I'll miss you when you leave," she said, smiling, if a bit sadly. "I've gotten used to having you around."

The words made Julianne's heart skip a beat. "I'm keeping the apartment," she said, though she hadn't fully decided on that until that moment. "I'll be back."

"Good," Kris said.

They felt silent for a long time, listening to the waves. Julianne was desperate to say something. But she wanted to come up with something that was more than a random waste of breath to fill



the silence. She wanted to say something meaningful, something profound, something that would express, however minimally, the emotions coursing through her.

It bordered on painful, sitting there, inches away from the one person she longed for, and censor the only thoughts that really seemed to matter. Why was saying 'I love you' so difficult?

"Do you think it's weird?"

Julianne blinked, completely thrown by the question. "Do I think what's weird?"

"Us?"

"Us?" Julianne questioned.

Kris looked at her briefly before looking away. She pushed away the strands of hair blowing in her face and continued. "That we're friends."

"Is it weird to you?"

"Sometimes," Kris admitted. "When I remember who you are."

"And who am I?" Julianne wanted to know. She was suddenly intrigued by the turn in conversation.

"Julianne Franqui, TV and film star," Kris answered. "You know, when we were in the airport, I saw about three magazines with you on the cover. And two that just mentioned you. It felt very strange. Like I was caught in the middle of a very bizarre dream."

Julianne didn't know how to respond to that. What was Kris trying to say? "Does my fame bother you?"

Kris frowned and looked at the actress. "Bother me? It impresses me. I look around at all of this and I am so amazed." She shook her head. "It doesn't bother me, Julianne. But it makes me a little sad."

"Why sad?"

"Because," Kris began, "before I got to know you, all I had to go by was what I saw of you on TV. You were that two-dimensional figure that was easy to hate because you didn't seem real. And it saddens me that there are people out there that will want to bring you down. That will want to hurt you because even outside of your television or movie roles, you seem to them, still a character."

Julianne stayed silent, a lump in her throat. She didn't trust her voice to speak.

"I should tell you that I think you're wonderful," Kris continued. "And I think anyone in this world would be incredibly lucky to be with you."

Julianne stared into hazel eyes, made almost black by the darkness. She had to remind herself to breathe. She still couldn't speak. No one had ever said anything like that to her before. Not with such open sincerity. It made her heart ache. "Thanks," was her brilliant response.

"You're welcome," Kris replied.



This was her chance, Julianne realized. This was her opening. The moment to tell Kris everything, regardless of the consequences. Her heart was pounding so fast and hard that she could barely hear the waves above the noises in her chest. She wanted to think of the right words. She wanted to be clear that she didn't expect anything, and that nothing would change. She wanted, merely, to feel hope, if only for the brief second before Kris' reaction. It was that moment she was craving, the simple taste of something besides this bitter need.

"Julianne," Kris said suddenly. "What is it you're looking for? In someone else, I mean."

Had she let the moment pass, Julianne wondered, feeling both relieved and disappointed that it was Kris who had spoken. "In what sense?"

"Why did you stop seeing Naomi?" Kris asked softly.

Julianne frowned at the question, unsure of what to answer. The truth came easily to her mind, but she found it impossible to voice it. "I didn't have feelings for her."

"But why?" Kris said, turning to face Julianne. "What about her wasn't what you were looking for?"

Julianne felt like a coward. She was tired of dancing around the questions, tired of avoiding the truth. "She wasn't you," she said, and for a second wasn't sure she'd actually spoken the words.

Kris stared at her for a long moment, which felt, to Julianne, like an eternity. "She wasn't me?" she asked hesitantly, as if afraid that she'd heard incorrectly. Or maybe afraid that she had heard correctly. Julianne couldn't be sure.

"Yes," Julianne answered simply, tearing her gaze away from Kris' eyes. She didn't want to see what she'd find there. A part of her wanted to cry. She felt such an overwhelming combination of fear and relief at that moment that she didn't know what to do with the emotions. She risked a glance at Kris and found the artist staring at her. "Are you freaked out?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light, in spite of the fact that she was terrified.

"Just shocked," Kris answered. "And, I think... confused."

"About?"

"What you're trying to say," Kris answered.

Julianne felt something inside her give up. "It doesn't matter," she said, looking away. "I should get some sleep."

Kris didn't answer right away. But finally, she said, "Okay."

Disappointed, Julianne stood up, and brushed away the sand from the back of her pants. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Kris glanced up at her and nodded. "Of course."

"Good night, Kris," Julianne said.

"Good night."



Julianne almost hesitated, wanting to say something else. Maybe she hadn't been clear enough, maybe she should say more. But what was the point? She had been dumb to think that admitting her feelings would change anything.

Resigned, she waved to Kris and headed toward the house.

Kris watched Julianne until the actress disappeared inside. What had just happened? One second she was working up the nerve to tell Julianne how she felt, and the next she was completely frozen.

She wasn't you...

The words replayed in Kris' mind until she thought her heart would fly out of her chest. Julianne had feelings for her. Julianne had feelings for her and Kris had let her go to bed. "I'm such an idiot," she said, thinking back to how she had reacted. She would've kicked herself if she wasn't so overwhelmed.

She had to go find her.

Somehow, she stifled the urge to run as she started after Julianne. She had to think clearly. She had to plan some sort of monologue. An apology for her recent stupidity might not be out of place, either.

Oh God, Julianne has feelings for me.

The realization of what that meant nearly knocked her off balance. She thought she might explode from the sheer overload of feelings.

But she resumed her steps, entering the house, and heading toward the stairs to the second floor. She felt like she was walking in slow motion. She felt like she was caught in a wonderful dream that was soon about to end. She wanted this moment to last forever, because she was terrified of the one that would follow.

She hadn't planned for anything that wasn't rejection. The notion that Julianne might feel the same way had merely lingered in the background with all of the other hopes and dreams that she wouldn't let herself think about. So, how could she know what to do?

She paused in front of Julianne's bedroom door. She could see a beam of yellow light escaping through the crack at the bottom, and the knowledge that Julianne was at the other side of this wooden barrier filled Kris with a longing so profound it made her want to cry.

After swallowing several times, she willed her hand to knock. And then she waited, dreading each second that passed, knowing any second now she'd be faced with a decision.

The doorknob turned; the beam of light grew bigger and bigger, until it was eclipsed by Julianne's body standing in the doorway. Kris stared hesitantly into confused blue eyes, and felt all of her doubts and reservations slip away. "If I tell you I'm in love with you, will it freak you out?" she asked, thinking that moment surreal. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest. She wasn't certain she was breathing.



Julianne stared at her as if she couldn't decide if Kris was real or not. "What?" she asked finally.

Kris stepped closer as if guided by an invisible force that filled her with a courage she never knew she possessed. She glanced briefly at Julianne's lips, wanting nothing more than to feel them against her own. She looked back up at Julianne's eyes, and saw a flash of something unrecognizable. "I love you," Kris said softly, hoping it would get through this time, trying, desperately, to cling to the hope that Julianne still meant what she'd said on the beach.

"Kris..." Julianne said, her voice uncertain.

"You don't have to say it back," Kris said, quickly, afraid that she had said too much. "I just wanted you to know." She started to step back, but Julianne took her hand. Kris wasn't sure how she hadn't had a heart attack yet. She was certain that what her heart was doing at that moment wasn't healthy. Kris glanced down at their hands, unsure of what to make of the gesture, unsure that any of this was even really happening. Tentatively, she stared up into blue eyes, and waited.

Julianne was panicking. Her entire brain had frozen the second Kris had begun to speak. There were so many things she wanted to say; to ask, but she was rendered mute by the impact of the moment.

So many things were happening inside her mind at one time that she didn't know where to begin. She wanted to go back, to examine every memory for evidence that what Kris was telling her was true. Julianne wanted to sit down and break apart each seemingly inconsequential moment, to find the buried fragments of dismissed phrases, the tossed-out pieces of unimportant words. How much had been apparent? How much had she ignored?

"Please say something," Kris said.

Julianne snapped out of her thoughts, suddenly aware that she was holding Kris' hand; unsure of how that had happened. She stared down at their intertwined fingers, trying to buy time. She was uncertain of what to say; what to do; how to act. "You're ... you ..."

Kris offered her a half smile. "Do you have trouble without a script, Miss Franqui?" she teased.

Julianne didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She glanced down at their hands again, and then at Kris' face. 'I love you' just didn't seem like enough to convey what she was feeling. How could three words express all of the nights and days and hours, minutes, seconds, spent fantasizing over this moment, while feeling, all of the while, that it would never come?

There were no words, at all. There was only the silence filled with shortened intakes of breath. There were only the occasional muted sounds of something indistinct and undecipherable, barely audible above the intensity of the moment. There was only the act of opening a door to find everything she had ever wished, and hoped, and prayed for, standing in the doorway.

She caught Kris staring at her lips, then look away as if embarrassed. Julianne's heart raced, and skipped, and pounded; she felt her entire body both tremble and freeze. Time lost all meaning, all existence. Julianne became aware only of the fact that Kris' lips looked so beautiful, and soft, and incredibly inviting. And though they were only inches from her own, they seemed like miles away.



It was Kris' turn to catch her staring, and their gazes locked for a split second before fading behind closing eyelids. Julianne lost track of whether or not she was breathing, noticing only the heat of Kris' body pressing slowly against hers. She lowered her head and her lips brushed against softness so sweet, she almost pulled away from the onslaught of emotion.

She felt Kris' body stiffen, then relax into her, pulling her closer. Their lips met briefly, came apart for a split second, before meeting again. Julianne's entire body felt ready to explode with sensation. She thought she might melt, or become consumed by the simple pleasure of feeling Kris' mouth moving against her own.

Kris pressed into her, moaned against her lips, kissed her deeper, until Julianne thought she might pass out. Her entire body screamed and trembled and burned with a wonderful heat that spread through every fiber of her being. She let it wash over her like a tidal wave of immeasurable bliss, and surrendered completely to the moment, until finally, after what felt like a century spent in a blink of an eye, she pulled her lips away, and whispered, "I love you, too."

66

Kris had been awake when Julianne left the bed that morning. She had listened to every movement and every sound, until the door had opened, and quietly closed. She had listened to the receding footsteps down the stairs, until finally, she felt it safe enough to open her eyes.

She glanced around the strange bedroom, not yet used to the surroundings, and tried to pin down her emotions. As she gazed around, seeing but not registering, she wondered what had led to that moment. One second she had been spying from the shadows, too shy to approach the actress, and the next, she was knocking on Julianne's door, she was admitting things she'd never thought she'd say, she was swept up and away from rational thought.

If Kris had been thinking clearly, she would have paused at the bottom of the stairs, stared up at Julianne's bedroom door, and then continued on to the guestroom. She would have gone to bed, wondering about what Julianne had said. She would have invented, and reinvented a plethora of what-if scenarios that would have culminated with a kiss. But it would have been okay, because it wouldn't have been real. There are no consequences to idle fantasies.

Instead, she had lived out her thoughts. She had stepped up to the brink of possibility and jumped, head first without further thought. She had given herself up to the moment, to the tension and elation and excitement, pushing away the confusion and uncertainty and fear. And now what? Now that everything was out in the open, now that she knew exactly how Julianne's lips felt against her own, what was she going to do?

Everything had changed. She could feel it from the second she'd drifted back to consciousness. She had felt it in the second before they'd kissed, a shift, subtle, yet unquestionable. The entire framework of their friendship had been frantically altered by a simple declaration of love. There was no going back from that moment; no way to return to not-knowing.

Kris closed her eyes at the memory of Julianne's kiss. In that moment, she had lost every inhibition, every worry, every doubt. She had wanted to give everything of herself to Julianne, to rip open the fabric of her previously meaningless existence and pour its contents into Julianne's world. She had wanted to make Julianne see, to feel, the depth of her emotions. It had felt like dying and being reborn again, her entire body reeling from the shocks of pleasure coursing through her. It had been overwhelming, perfect, and terrifying; and she had wanted more.



And then everything changed.

They had stopped for half a second, a miniscule fraction of time, but long enough to bring reality crashing down around them.

What had happened? What had they just done?

Kris rolled over on the bed, and wiped her eyes, feeling completely overcome. It was one thing to admit she had feelings for Julianne, it was another to act upon those feelings. And now that she knew Julianne felt the same way, what did it mean? What would they do?

The sound of the doorbell interrupted Kris' thoughts, and her attention shifted to the sound of undecipherable voices. She could almost make out Julianne's, but couldn't hear what she was saying.

Kris wondered who else was downstairs. She was fairly certain she'd heard a male voice. And maybe another female's, she wasn't sure. She also wondered how long she could hide out in Julianne's bedroom before it became obvious that she was hiding.

After thinking it over for several minutes, she finally decided she really needed to get up. She blamed her bladder, and the fact that she couldn't avoid Julianne forever.

But maybe she'd wait a few more minutes.

"I brought you a copy of *Red Like Me*," Adrian announced, holding up the tape. "You can add it to your collection of movies you hate."

"It's really interesting," Karen commented. "Rachel loved it."

Julianne glanced over Adrian's shoulder toward the stairs. She was half anticipating, half dreading Kris waking up. She knew they needed to talk, but it would have to wait until she returned from the premiere later that night. And she had no idea what she would say to Kris when she saw her.

Adrian turned around to see what Julianne was looking at. Seeing nothing, he turned back. "Um, Julianne. I'm over here." He waved the hand holding the tape.

Suddenly remembering she had company, Julianne's mind refocused on her guests. "I'm sorry?"

"*Red Like Me*," Adrian repeated, handing her the movie. "It's all yours."

Julianne stared at the tape in her hand, and then up at Adrian. "Thanks. But what the hell is *Red Like Me*?"

"My movie," he reminded her. "Apples? People?"

She stared at him blankly.

Adrian sighed. "The tomato movie."



Julianne finally remembered. She tried not to roll her eyes. She knew how important Adrian's insanity was to him. "Can't wait to see it." She turned to Karen. "So what am I doing today?"

"You're having lunch with Derek and his father, Steven, at noon. Then you've got an interview at two, which shouldn't take too long. There's a cast dinner at six. And the movie starts at eight. And then there's a party at the director's house."

Julianne sighed to herself. She was never getting home. "Okay."

"Isn't it great to be back in L.A.?" Adrian teased. "And Derek. Is that the guy you've decided to dump me for tonight?"

"He's like eight," Julianne informed him.

"That's sick, Jules. It's bad enough you're a lesbian. Now you're a pedophile, too?"

"Not funny," Julianne replied.

Adrian shrugged. "Can't win them all. So you're taking an eight-year-old to the movie? Isn't there like a big hot sex scene in there?"

Julianne shook her head. "No. I mean, we filmed it. You both remember that catastrophe. But the producers felt it would be best if the movie didn't stray too far from the show. So they cleaned it up."

"That sucks," Adrian said. "Will the DVD have the uncut scenes? Will there be an unrated version?"

Julianne ignored the question, and ventured a glance at the stairs again.

Adrian arched an eyebrow as he caught her staring over his shoulder again. "Julianne, what's going on with you?" Then comprehension dawned on him. "Ohhh, that's right. I forgot Kris came with you."

"Ooooooh! Where is she?" Karen asked, looking around.

Julianne wanted to kill them both. "Would you two shut up and try to act like mature adults?"

They glanced at each other. "Are we mature adults?" Adrian wondered.

"No, I don't believe we are," Karen answered. "So is that why you keep glancing at the stairs every two seconds?"

Adrian stared at her in surprise. "She's in your bedroom?"

"Please drop it."

"Does that mean there's something to drop?" Adrian asked.

Julianne started walking to the kitchen, and stopped in her tracks as she saw Kris enter the living room. Caught off-guard, it took Julianne a moment to react. "Good morning," she said, trying not to sound as awkward as she felt. She turned. "Kris, this is my assistant, Karen, and my occasional best friend, Adrian."



"Nice to meet you," Kris said. "I've heard a lot about you." She said it to both of them, but Julianne noted that her gaze never left Adrian.

Julianne glanced at Adrian, whose gaze was completely glued to Kris, and a surge of irrational jealousy took over. She instantly pushed it away. "Anyone hungry?"

"Starved," Kris answered, her gaze drifting back to Julianne. "But I should go take a shower."

"I'll make something while you do," Julianne told her.

Kris excused herself from her new acquaintances, her gaze lingering on Adrian far longer than necessary and disappeared down the hall toward the guestroom

Julianne gave Adrian a look that could bend metal.

"Whoa!" Adrian said, holding his hands up defensively. "I was just thinking she looks really familiar."

"You've seen her picture," Julianne reminded him, unsure of why she was overreacting.

Karen moved away from the line of fire and went to sit down on the couch.

Adrian approached Julianne. "I could've sworn I'd seen her before."

"I'm going to make breakfast," Julianne announced, unsure what to comment because she was unsure what she felt. "Want some?"

"No thanks," Adrian said, looking concerned.

"Karen, breakfast?" Julianne offered.

"Nope," Karen answered. "But, do you mind if I drool over your TV?"

"Go right ahead," Julianne answered. She went to walk away, but Adrian stopped her.

He was frowning. "What's going on?"

Julianne shook her head. "I have no idea," she said honestly. "I'm just really confused right now. And I think it's making me a little ... insane."

"This is new?" Adrian teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Julianne bit her lip, and glanced at the hallway where Kris had gone. "We kissed last night."

Adrian's eyes widened. "What?"

"She told me she's in love with me."

Adrian stared at her in disbelief. "Since when?"

"I don't know," Julianne answered. "We kissed, and it was just ... perfect. Only, then it got weird and awkward between us. And I asked her if she wanted to spend the night in my room, and she did. But we just went to sleep, or to pretend to sleep, and I ... I don't know what all of this



means. I don't know what she wants, or if I can even give her what she wants. And now I have to get through today somehow, and I don't know how I'm going to manage that without going crazy."

"Yeah, it sounds like you definitely need to talk to her," Adrian agreed. "I'm bound to not be of great help at the moment. I'm still stuck on the kissing thing. I should really install cameras in this place."

Julianne stared at him. "You know, sometimes I wonder why I bother telling you anything at all."

"Behold the power of the thong," Adrian assured her. "No woman can resist it."

Julianne almost smiled at that, but then remembered her plight. "I don't know what to do."

"Isn't that always your problem?" Adrian asked. "And what do I always tell you?"

"Something about *Playboy*?" Julianne guessed.

"Ha," Adrian said dryly. "No, do what feels right."

Julianne sighed. "That's the problem, nothing feels completely right."

"One...two... three ... four," Karen counted. She hesitantly put her thimble down. "Damn."

"Ha!" Adrian said. "Two thousand dollars, please."

Kris looked at Karen and smiled. "That's what you get for giving him Park Place."

"It seemed like a smart move at the time," Karen grumbled, counting out her Monopoly money. She mortgaged a few properties, sold three houses, and after much mumbling under her breath, gave Adrian his two thousand dollars. "It's okay. I'll get my hotels back, and then he'll be sorry."

Kris laughed, and rolled the dice. She moved safely into one of her own properties. "Whew," she said, relieved. She looked at Adrian as he took his turn. All day she'd been trying to figure out where she'd seen him before, but to no avail. Maybe it had been on television with Julianne. "So, who's this guy that Julianne is going to the premiere with?"

Karen and Adrian exchanged a look.

"It's, um, Derek," Adrian replied.

Derek. Kris tried to remember if Julianne had ever mentioned a Derek to her, but she couldn't recall. "Is he an old friend?"

They started laughing, and Kris looked at them in confusion.

"He's an eight year old friend," Karen told her.

Kris was a little confused. "She's known him for eight years?"



Adrian grinned. "No, he's just eight."

"Eight?"

"Eight," Karen confirmed, with a smile. "Derek's sister wrote Julianne a letter telling her that her little brother was sick. I'm not sure of the disease. Cancer, maybe. And Julianne wrote back to the parents offering to help with money for any treatment necessary, if it was needed. And that regardless, if Derek was feeling better at the time, that she would like him to be her date to the premiere of the movie. She sent four plane tickets along with the letter, so that the family could come along."

Kris smiled, falling in love with Julianne all over again. "That was really nice of her. Does Julianne do that kind of thing often?"

Adrian snorted.

Karen shrugged and looked down at the game board, taking her turn. "Julianne never even read her mail before."

"And she only started cause I made a deal with her," Adrian supplied.

"What kind of deal?" Kris asked curiously.

"Oh I just had to call this girl," Adrian answered. He seemed to think of something and paused. "Um, but anyway, I told her I would as long as she read three letters a week."

Kris frowned. "Why didn't she read them on her own?"

"Some theorists believe it's because she didn't have time to be bothered," Adrian answered. He glanced pointedly at Karen. "But I think it's because it was just easier for her to pretend not to care. She's always had issues with people not seeing who she really is, and I think reading mail from her fans was a like opening a bunch of little mirrors. She'd have to directly face how other people saw her."

Kris pondered that for a moment, not sure it made sense to her. "Does she read it now?"

"I don't know, I have about two boxes for her to take back to New York, if she wants," Karen said with a smile. "Most of it goes through her official fan club, and they just send back a picture with one of those stamped autographs. Oh, and it's your turn."

"Sorry," Kris apologized, and rolled. She drove her little metallic car into Boardwalk, and groaned. "Well, I'm officially out."

"I win," Adrian announced, holding up his fortune. "Oh, yes! Now, where can I exchange this for real money?" He brightened. "You know, when we play with Julianne, we should tell her to give us real money if she loses."

Kris laughed, and started helping to clean up the pieces from the game on the coffee table.

"We should get going," Karen announced. "I have to get back to Rachel."

Kris glanced over at Karen. "Who's Rachel?"



"My girlfriend," Karen answered. "She's depressed about my going off to New York. And I keep telling her, it's only for another month, while Julianne finishes filming, but she's still moping about it."

"You're going to New York?" Kris asked, unable to decide which comment surprised her more.

Karen nodded. "Yeah, it's very hard to be a long-distance assistant. But I was finishing off a screenwriting course, and Julianne was nice enough not to complain about my prolonged absence."

Kris was curious where Karen would be staying, but didn't ask. She also didn't understand what Julianne needed an assistant for. Julianne seemed to get along fine on her own. But Kris didn't mention that either. "I see," she finally said.

Adrian took the lull in the conversation as a sign to stand up. "Well, it was very nice meeting you, Kris," he said.

Kris rose as well. "Thanks for staying around to entertain me."

"Our pleasure," Adrian replied. He stared at her for a moment. "Um, listen, at the risk of it coming off as a pick-up line, have we met before?"

Kris smiled. "I had actually been wondering that myself. You look so familiar."

"Hm," Adrian said pensively. "It'll come to me."

Julianne fastened the microphone to her shirt and waited for the cue. As soon as it came, she put on her interview face, and turned her full attention to the person facing her.

"And welcome back to our *Guardian: A Second Chance* special. I'm sitting here with the star of the film, Julianne Franqui. How are you doing, Julianne?"

"I'm well, thank you," she answered. "How are you doing, Phil?"

"Fantastic," he answered.

Julianne wondered if anyone who actually used the word "fantastic" to describe their state of being was ever really "fantastic." She waited for him to continue.

"So, have you seen the film yet?" Phil asked.

"No, I haven't actually, I'm heading to the premiere tonight. I'm very excited about seeing the finished product."

"You're currently not filming any new episodes of the TV show. What have you been doing to keep busy during the hiatus?"



"I'm filming a movie called *Summer's End*, which I believe is due to come out at the end of next year."

"Are you enjoying that project?"

"I'm loving it. It's going to be a wonderful film."

"Well, I'm sure your fans are anxious for its release," Phil replied. "I have here some questions sent via email from some of your viewers."

"Okay," Julianne replied.

Phil held up a note card and said, "Jane Harvey, from Minnesota, would like to know if you're 'still dating that hunk Adrian Cruz?'"

Julianne forced herself to laugh, but the truth of the matter was that she was annoyed by the question. Why did people care about her love life? She was also unsure of what to say. It was one thing to pop the bubble of illusion that her mother and sister carried, but quite another to go public with the news.

And Kris? It had been less than twenty-four hours since they'd kissed, and already things were complicated. It would be a lot easier to hide her relationship with Kris if people still thought she was with Adrian. But were they even in a relationship? She could feel a headache coming on. "No, we're no longer together," she finally answered, deciding that even if the truth was more complicated, it still felt better than a lie.

"Well, Jane, if you're watching this, the hunk is now available," Phil joked.

This time, Julianne did laugh.

Kris walked through Julianne's house, observing every piece of furniture, every object. She loved the knowledge that everything there was purely Julianne. Or was it? Had she hired a decorator? Maybe Julianne had told her, but she couldn't remember. And in the end, it didn't really matter.

She felt sad, being there, unsure of where she stood with Julianne, or if she stood at all. Love was supposed to conquer everything, they'd told her, but was that true? She had never seen any evidence of it. All she had ever witnessed was evidence to the contrary. So, what had really been the point of telling Julianne how she felt? What was the point of getting excited over the fact that Julianne felt the same way?

In a month or two, Julianne would head back to California. She would go on to make her shows and movies, and Kris would return to selling paintings on the streets; to spending all of her time and energy studying to become something she already was.

It was silly, these feelings she carried. It was silly and insane to think anything could come out of it. They could never make it work.

But, still, all of these thoughts of logic and reason did nothing to erase the way she'd felt the moment she'd heard Julianne say 'I love you'. They could not change the way she still felt at the thought of Julianne, however innocent the thought. She wanted more. She wanted everything. She wanted to walk around that same house and not feel awkward or invasive. She wanted to



ask Julianne every question she had ever wanted to ask but had been too shy to. She wanted to touch Julianne without being afraid that her touch would be unwelcome. She wanted an ending to all of this painful uncertainty.

Kris sat down at the bottom step of the long staircase, wondering if Julianne had changed her mind; fearing that everything she had ever wanted had appeared and then vanished, all the while, trying desperately to convince herself that she didn't care.

After the cast dinner, Julianne diligently went to pick up her date from the hotel he was staying at. She was already in love with the little boy, and she'd only met him for an hour. Lunch with Derek and his Dad had been pleasant, if a little stranger than she was used to. She had been thanked profusely for her help with Derek's treatment, and she thanked whatever deity was in charge of fate that of all the letters Karen could have chosen at random, it had been Jennifer's that landed in the three-letter pile.

She also had Adrian and his stupid agreement to thank. But mostly, Kris... Kris was at the root of all of this goodness.

As she'd arrived at the restaurant for the scheduled meal, it had occurred to Julianne that Kris should have been there. She had been so busy trying to avoid the awkwardness that she had forgotten what was important. How could she tell Kris she loved her, and then abandon her the next morning?

Starting tonight, something would have to change. It had already begun, this unconscious metamorphosis that had started the moment she'd received Kris' first email. Julianne had changed, she could feel it; but she was still the same. And that worried her.

In the hotel lobby, she watched the elevator doors open, and Derek and his father emerge. She smiled at them both. "You're welcome to come along," she said to the older man. "If you don't feel comfortable leaving Derek in my care."

Steven smiled. "Derek won't let me," he said with a laugh. "You two have fun. Have him back before midnight."

"It'll be closer to ten or ten thirty," she promised. She'd already decided to skip the party at the director's house. All she wanted was to sit through these agonizing two hours of watching herself perform, and then return home, to Kris.

Julianne smiled at Derek and offered her hand. "Ready?"

The little boy nodded and took her hand.

Julianne grinned to herself, feeling happy and giddy, if still petrified about what awaited her at her house. She glanced down at the grinning boy whose life she'd helped save, and felt assured, beyond anything else in this world, that fate did exist.

Kris played with the sand, letting it slide through her fingers. It was soothing, though she was growing restless and impatient by the passing of time. She'd had almost an entire day to



contemplate her entire spectrum of emotion, and the only thing she'd managed to figure out was the fact that she loved Julianne.

And that was hardly news.

"Fancy meeting you here."

Kris' heart skipped a beat, and she turned her head to see Julianne walking up to her. "Hi," she said, feeling shy all of a sudden. In her mind, she'd known exactly what she would say the moment Julianne got home. But now she couldn't remember a single word of the extensive monologue she'd mentally written.

Julianne sat down, and Kris noticed for the first time, that she was carrying a bowl. "Hi," Julianne said back.

"What are you eating?"

"An experiment," Julianne declared, grabbing the spoon. She pointed at the contents in the bowl. "It's Cap'n Crunch Berries, Honey Nut Cheerios, and Kashi Go Lean."

Kris scrunched her face in disgust. "Are you insane?"

"Want the first bite?" Julianne offered.

Kris shook her head, though now she was morbidly curious. "Are you really planning to eat that?"

"Why not?" Julianne asked. "I figure, if they taste good separately, they should taste good together."

Kris smiled. "I'm sorry to say your logic isn't very well thought-out. What about pizza with ice cream."

Julianne looked thoughtful. "You know, that doesn't sound half bad."

"Are you pregnant?" Kris demanded.

"I don't know, I guess it depends on how skilled you are at kissing," Julianne replied with a wink.

Kris wanted to smile, but the comment reminded her of everything they hadn't yet talked about. "How was your day?"

Julianne stared down at her bowl of assorted cereal. "It was okay," she said, playing with the cereal and the milk. She lifted a spoonful. "Do you think this will taste good?"

"Not even a little bit," Kris replied, and couldn't help but smile.

Julianne put the cereal in her mouth, and crunched thoughtfully. "Mmmm," she said, once she'd swallowed. "Not bad."

Kris was skeptic. "There's no way that tastes good."

"Delicious," Julianne said in between bites. "I should mix things together more often."

"And what led you to this new culinary discovery?" Kris wondered.



Julianne smiled. "Well, I realized I had no cereal this morning. So I stopped to get some on the way back home. And I couldn't decide between your personal favorites and mine. So I took one of each. And then I couldn't decide which one to eat. So I thought I'd try them all at the same time." She smiled. "Is that weird?"

"Very," Kris confirmed. But it was cute, too. She glanced away, knowing they had to talk about what had happened. "What are we doing?" she asked.

Julianne glanced at her. "Sitting at the beach."

Kris didn't crack a smile, or look at Julianne.

Julianne took that as a hint to be serious. "I think we're acting like idiots. But me, more than you, cause I should've known better than to panic."

"Panic?" Kris asked.

Julianne put the bowl of cereal aside and turned to face Kris. "Do you have any idea how long I've been in love with you?"

Kris froze at the words.

"Forever," Julianne said. "Since before we met in New York. Since before I bought that second painting from you. All of that time I'd been so convinced that nothing could ever happen between us that I never let myself wonder what would happen if something could. And last night something happened. And I panicked because I didn't know what it meant for me to be in love with you."

Kris thought about what Julianne had said for a moment. There were too many things to react to and it was hard to decide which one to focus on. But she decided to go with the one that really mattered. Anything else, she could sort through later, alone. "So, do you know now what it means for you to be in love with me?" The words sounded surreal to her. She still didn't quite understand how she'd come to a point where she could be saying these things to another person, to Julianne Franqui, of all people.

"I know what I feel," Julianne said. "But I don't know what you feel, or what you want."

Kris stared at her. "What do you want?"

"I want you," Julianne said.

Kris wanted to cry, both from happiness and fear, but she managed not to. There were still too many things left to talk about. "I haven't really come to terms with what it is I want. I mean, I know how I feel about you. But, what does it mean in terms of us? You're still Julianne Franqui. You're still famous and always in the public eye. We'd have to hide everything. I don't even know what to tell my parents. And your career... what if people find out? It'll be all over the news. Everyone will find out. Are you willing to risk that?" "Are you?" Julianne asked softly.

"I don't have as much to lose as you, Julianne," Kris stated. She sighed. "But, the thought of my parents finding out. Knowing how they reacted to William..."

Julianne nodded, but fell silent.



"I don't want to make a mistake," Kris continued, feeling her heart break. Where was she going with this? Did she really want to break up with Julianne before there was even anything to break?

Julianne didn't respond right away. Finally, she asked, "Do you regret what happened last night?"

"No," Kris said quickly. "Do you?"

"I could never regret anything with you," Julianne answered.

Kris didn't know what to make of that comment. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to be with you," Julianne answered honestly. "But, not at the risk of making your life more complicated."

"What about your life?"

Julianne smiled. "My life is already complicated. You're more important than my petty fears."

Kris felt sad. If Julianne weren't famous this probably wouldn't be as complicated. "It's still your life, Julianne. It's going to be you whose life will be under a microscope constantly."

"They'd drag you down too."

"I have nowhere to get dragged down from," Kris said.

Julianne sighed. "So, what are you saying?"

Kris hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. "I'm saying that in spite of the fact that I'm completely terrified about what it would mean to both our futures, it doesn't change the fact that I'm totally in love with you."

Julianne stared at her. "I told my mom last night that I was in love with you."

"What?" Kris asked, shocked beyond belief. "When?"

"When you were waiting outside," Julianne answered. "I actually said the word 'dyke' to my mother."

Kris laughed, still not over the shock of Julianne's announcement. "What did she say?"

"Nothing, yet," Julianne answered. "I just dropped the bomb on her and left. I haven't heard from her, so she may still be standing there with her mouth hanging open."

"Wow," Kris said. She couldn't imagine coming out to her mother. But, thinking about what loving Julianne meant about her sexuality was a different matter entirely. One she wasn't completely ready to deal with. Somehow, love just seemed a lot easier to handle when one didn't think about all the little details that accompanied it.

"I'm really tired of living a lie," Julianne explained. "I'm tired of pretending every day of my life. I just want to be."

Kris smiled. "It sounds good in theory."



"I know," Julianne admitted. "But I'm willing to try."

Kris nodded, wondering how much trying that would take. "Do you think love is enough to make things work out?"

"Do you want to find out?"

There it was, the question she had been asking herself all day. Did she want to find out? Yes. But she was also afraid to. So it really just came down to figuring out what was more important: fear or love? She looked at Julianne, who was staring at her expectantly, maybe hopefully. "Yes," she said.

Julianne smiled. "Do you think we're insane?"

"Certifiably," Kris conceded, with a grin, feeling excited all over again. She was going to be dating Julianne Franqui. What in the world was she getting herself into? And why did it not seem to matter in the slightest bit?

Julianne stared at the ocean for a moment. "So, do you want to go watch a movie or something?"

Kris started laughing. "So is that it?"

"Were you expecting fireworks or something?" Julianne asked with a grin. "I could spend another hour professing my undying love for you, if you'd rather."

Kris considered. "Don't I get some kind of prize for being the one who finally won you over?"

"Um," Julianne pretended to think about it. "I'll share my creation with you." She held up the bowl of now soggy cereal.

Kris took it, and stared down at the big mess of gooey-ness. "Gross."

Julianne grinned. "You're beautiful even when you look totally disgusted."

Kris' heart skipped a beat. She wasn't yet used to hearing Julianne say things like that. "It's going to take a while to get used to this, isn't it?"

"Well, you don't have to eat it if you don't want to," Julianne teased. "It looks a little mushy."

"I meant us," Kris said with a smile.

"Probably," Julianne said.

Kris caught Julianne's gaze, and decided she wanted something besides cereal. "Can I trade this in for something else?" she asked, holding up the bowl.

"I don't know," Julianne said. "It took a lot for me to give you that." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Alright, but just this once." She took the bowl back, and held it protectively. "What would you like instead?"

"I don't know, something else," Kris said, moving closer.



Julianne looked around. "Sand?"

"Um, nope," Kris said, her face inches from Julianne's.

Julianne glanced at her lips, then up at her face. "It's very distracting when you do that."

"Good," Kris said, with a grin.

"I'll give you some ocean water," Julianne whispered. "But that's my final offer."

"Guess I'll just have to take it then," Kris answered, brushing her lips lightly against Julianne's. "Unless you want to change your final offer?"

"You drive a very hard bargain, Miss Milano."

"Better get used to it."

And then, for the time being, all conversation ceased.

THE END

Thanks for reading the first version of TBSOL! I hope you enjoyed it. Want more? The final version of TBSOL is in the works, but in the meantime you can check out TBSOL v2, a totally updated and different version with a completely different ending. Read it free at <http://www.theblindsideoflove.com> For all news and info about what's coming up please visit <http://www.ingriddiaz.com> and if you want to make sure never to miss a thing – like when TBSOL will be published in its final form – subscribe to the [free mailing list](#).

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