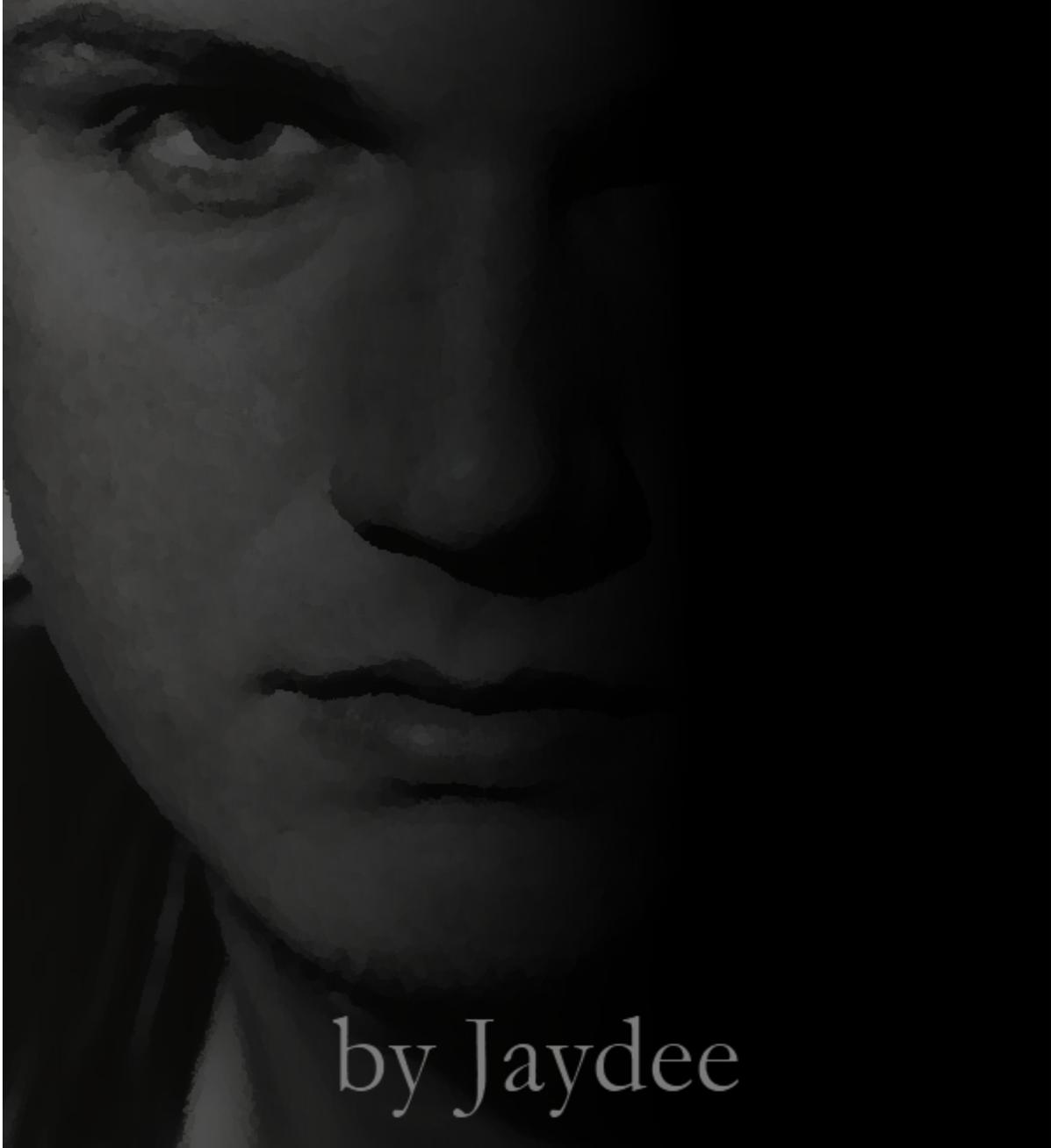


FACELESS



by Jaydee

PROLOGUE

The Orlando Sentinel

September 30, 2001

Backstreet Boy Goes Missing

By Ray Oxford

It's a solemn day for Backstreet Boys Fans around the world as the news hits that Nick Carter, the youngest heart throb of the Fab Five, is missing after a near fatal bus accident in Canada. The Boys were on their way to Vancouver, British Columbia after an excursion in Jasper, Alberta when slippery road conditions caused almost all of their tour buses to skid off the road and careen into the woods of the Rocky Mountains. While four of the members, Brian Littrell (26), Howie Dorough (28), Kevin Richardson (30), and



A.J. McLean (23) escaped relatively unharmed, Carter's Bus was found nearly destroyed. Police and firefighters were unable to find a body. At the moment, officials have no speculations over his disappearance.



The aftermath of the accident that left Nick Carter missing.

The Orlando Sentinel

October 7, 2001

Pop Star Presumed Dead

By Ray Oxford

After a week of investigation in the disappearance of Backstreet Boy, Nick Carter, the police have closed the case. Hope had risen for the safety of the young star when a trail of blood leading into the woods was spotted by a police detective. Unfortunately, the trail led to nothing and Carter was nowhere in sight. Officials say Carter's chances of survival are



very slim. "Though it looks like he may have survived the bus crash, it appears that he was bleeding profusely and he may have bled to death if he hasn't

been affected by the low temperatures up here."

The remaining Boys, however, refuse to believe that Carter has met such a tragic end.

"We can't give up on Nick so easily," says Brian Littrell, "he's our little brother. He's family. We know he's out there somewhere. We're just praying that he's all right."

As for the fate of the biggest selling pop group in the world, only time will tell.

CHAPTER ONE

Katarina Clark breathed in the sweet fresh air of the morning and sighed with content. It was a sunny, pleasantly cool day in the Rocky Mountains of Canada and she looked forward to exploring more of the lovely nature surrounding her. Of course, she still missed the ocean air in Florida. The Keys were by far her most favorite place on Earth, but there was something about this place that was alluring...as though something was calling out for her to stay and explore...

"Rina?" A sleepy voice interrupted her tranquility. Billie, her sister, crawled out of her tent. "What time is it?"

"It's 9:00." She grinned as Billie groaned and rubbed her face.

"How can you be up so early girl? Vacation is all about getting up late and bumming around, not rising at the crack of dawn and exercising!"

"Sis, dawn was 3 hours ago and what's wrong with being at one with nature? It's good for your health."

"So is sleep."

Katarina laughed heartily. She loved Billie very much, even with her moodiness. She couldn't have asked for a better sister. She was always there for her, supporting her...protecting her. They had an amazing bond considering that Billie was 8 years older than her. Katarina was only 19.

"Well good morning ladies," another head popped out of Billie's tent.

This time Katarina was far less enthused.

"Mornin' honey," Billie planted a gentle kiss on Kris's lips, "sleep well?"

"Oh yeah," Kris smiled wickedly, "I had lots of pleasant dreams," he shot a quick, meaningful glance at Katarina. Billie didn't even notice.

She looked away in disgust. Would he ever leave her alone? "I'm going to gather some firewood while you guys get dressed." Without waiting for a yes or no, she took off into the trees, needing to get as far away from Kris Reid as humanly possible. She sighed once she was out of earshot and fought the urge to scream out her anguish. Kris had been a giant problem in her life since she was 17 years old. Particularly because he couldn't keep his hands to himself. There was a time when she didn't mind having him plant long, deep kisses on her lips. After all, that's what couples do.

Katarina had met him in Disney World when she was working there as a cashier...and he swept her off her feet with his charming words and sweet demeanor. That's how he

always caught his victims. He played the loving boyfriend for 6 months until one night he asked for something she couldn't give.

Her body.

And that's when he changed. They never had fun anymore after that night. It was always about sex. Whether they went out to dinner in a fancy restaurant, whether they were talking about school or the weather, it *always* came down to sex. Why she didn't dump him after weeks of pressure, she still didn't understand to this day.

And then came the worst night of her entire life.

He'd told her he was taking her to a movie. He'd told her he wanted to talk out their problems. He'd told her a lot of things. What he didn't tell her was that he also planned to take her as far away from home as possible after the movie and force himself on her.

She shivered with horror as those painful memories began to resurface. Those slimy lips on her throat, the relentless hands on her skin, his vomit inducing voice telling her that no one would be able to hear her scream.

Thankfully, someone did.

Apparently, Kris was too 'busy' to notice the car that had parked beside his. Another couple had come for their own fun, but they knew that what was going on in the car next to them was no where near fun. They rescued Katarina before her so-called loving boyfriend could really do some damage, although he'd come awfully close. He drove off like a madman before they could catch him.

Her heroes had taken her home after that. She refused to go to the police station...because then her family would find out that she'd been seeing a man almost 10 years older than her. She dealt with her demons in private, not even telling Billie what had occurred between her and Kris. She eventually got over it and moved on with her life, although she still carried a tiny fear of men. She dated off and on, but she ran for her life the moment a guy got too close. That's all they seem to want...to get into her pants. Why couldn't anyone see her for who she was inside? Why couldn't they see past her attractive exterior and get to know her? Was chivalry really dead?

And then the nightmare came back to haunt her one year later.

Billie had told her that she'd found the love of her life and was engaged. Katarina had been thrilled...until they were introduced.

"Hi, I'm Kris Reid. It's a pleasure to meet you Katarina."

God, she'd never forget that ridiculously wide smile on his repulsive face.

Since then, it's been day after day of threats that he would finish what he'd started. And he'd been trying, the lousy son of a bitch. Luckily, she'd taken self defense classes and that had definitely come in handy.

She came to a little stream and sat down on the cool ground, bringing her knees to her chest. Strangely, she still believed in love. In the kind of love that seemed to only exist in romance novels and movies. She yearned to find him. The handsome, gentle man who would look past her face and see her true virtues. The one who would love her above all else and be tender toward her. He'd make her laugh when she wanted to cry, smile when she wanted to frown. To this man, she would give her heart...and once they married, something greater.

Herself.

And something told her that she would meet him soon enough.

"I know he's alive! He has to be alive!!"

They were all at his home in Atlanta, Georgia, struggling to make a final decision on the fate of their career. None of them had wanted this day to come, but life was going on whether they wanted it to or not. Brian looked at them in desperation, needing to know that his friends were behind him 100 percent. "You guys still believe that...don't you?" Everyone but his cousin averted their gazes elsewhere. Brian's heart sank.

"Bri..." Kevin stared at him solemnly, "it's been almost a year since..." he stopped, trying in vain to control his wavering voice.

"He's been gone a long time," Howie murmured and took a seat next to Brian, "and we haven't received a phone call...a letter..."

"But I know he's out there somewhere," Brian countered, "I told you about those strange phone calls--"

"Brian, you haven't had one of those in months," Kevin replied tiredly and rubbed his tearing eyes, "and those were probably pranks by some stupid assholes..."

A.J removed his sunglasses, revealing slightly red eyes. "It's just getting harder to keep the faith Rok. I'm trying to stay positive but--"

"We can't give up!" Brian cried out, "Nick is a part of us! He's our little brother! We have to believe..." he broke down in sobs, "we have...to..."

Kevin put his arm around his emotional cousin, his own tears now freely streaming down his chiseled face. "We have to let him go Brian."

A.J and Howie kept their eyes on the ground, knowing full well that the time had come to face their worst fear. Their little brother was dead...and BSB would no longer be the same.

Without Nick, they were not complete.

Their hearts were heavy with overwhelming grief as Kevin's words sunk into their numb minds.

"We have to let him go..."

"I'm so tired!" Billie yawned and stretched out her long legs, "I think I'm going to turn in."

"Me too," Katarina agreed. The three of them had been hiking for almost the entire day. It was grueling, but Katarina loved every moment of it...except the times when Kris would 'accidentally' touch her ass. *Disgusting creep*, she thought bitterly. She could even feel his unnerving eyes on her right now. *How could Billie not see this?!* Sighing, she began to put their belongings away. "You guys go ahead and sleep. I'll clean up."

"I'll help you," Kris volunteered a little too cheerily.

Katarina was about to object when Billie spoke. "Aww...isn't he a sweetie?"

Kris grinned and Katarina rolled her eyes in annoyance. *That wouldn't be the word that I would use to describe him...* She looked at him pointedly, but immediately wished she hadn't. There was hunger in his eyes. She gulped as she averted her gaze to her backpack. *Please God, don't let him hurt me. Not again.*

"Good night Rina," Billie waved and smiled lovingly at Kris before disappearing into their tent.

She busied herself with collecting garbage, totally aware of his presence coming closer and closer. *Go away Kris! GO AWAY!* His hands were suddenly on her hips. She stiffened.

"Finally, some alone time."

"Get your paws off me," she hissed.

"When are you going to stop resisting me Kat?" Kris whispered in her ear, "I know you want this as much as I do."

His arms were wrapped around her waist now, his body purposefully pressed against hers, forcing her to feel things that repulsed her to the point of retching. She closed her

eyes summoning all the strength she could while Kris nibbled on her neck. Then, she stomped on his foot and, leaving little time for him to yelp, she elbowed him in the ribs sending him reeling into a tree.

And then she ran.

She ran like the wind, away from his revolting arms, away from her unsuspecting sister, away from the emotions threatening to resurface. *Run*, she thought wildly as she sped past the towering trees and the marked trails, *I have to run!* It seemed like hours had passed when she finally stopped. She wiped the stray tears on her red cheeks and took in the fresh air in large gulps. *Why? Why won't he stop?* A tiny breeze began to blow and she shivered. It wasn't a warm one. Suddenly, she blinked and slowly turned around in a circle, gazing at all the evergreens and bushes that surrounded her. Everything looked the same. She frowned.

Where am I?

CHAPTER TWO

Caroline Parker put the last of her homemade cookies on the tray and smiled. He loved her chocolate chip delights. They were one of the few things that could coax a tiny smile on his face. She poured a glass of milk and took it and the tray upstairs. She may be 80 years old, but that didn't stop her from climbing the two sets of stairs to the second floor of her home. And she exercised nearly everyday...though her arthritis readily punished her after. She came to his room and opened the door. As usual, it was dark.

He hated light.

She knew all too well why.

"Darling?" she whispered.

Nothing.

Caroline came to his bedside. He was fast asleep. *Well, isn't this a surprise!* He usually was awake at night. It was the only time he liked to go out and explore the wilderness that surrounded her ancient house. She put down the cookies and milk on his nightstand and studied his relatively still form. She moved his blond hair from his eyes. He looked so peaceful...such a massive difference from his scowling face when he was awake. His body came alive all of a sudden and he rolled over. Her eyes softened. *Poor thing. He's been through so much.* It was no wonder he was so bitter. Still, she made it her mission to make him smile at least once a day.

Her eyes then fell on his sketch pad that lay next to him. He loved to draw and that pleased Caroline immensely. She was also an artist. Most days, when he was in a less acidic mood, they would spend hours making portrait after portrait...he drew them, she painted them. She opened the pad and flipped through the pages, not at all surprised at what she found. Sketches of trees, the mountain scenery, the house...and the men that she had come to know just by listening to his stories...whenever he felt like talking through his pain. There was the sweet looking young man with the big eyes, curly hair and pleasant smile that he had told her he loved to tease. Then there was the peculiar one...wild hair, goatee, and sunglasses...too many earrings and tattoos for her liking, but he said that he was a great friend and charmer...couldn't even hurt a fly. And the next young man, he'd told her, was like a father figure to him. Striking eyes and very masculine...someone she would probably fall in love with if she were much, much younger. And finally, there was the kind looking one. He had the same interesting face shape as the father figure (he'd said that they were cousins), but his eyes were much softer and his hair was neatly trimmed. To her, he appeared almost angelic like and he had the most effect on her dear friend. From his words, she could tell they had an unbreakable bond.

From his portraits, she could tell that he missed them all dearly.

Caroline put the sketchpad next to the milk and cookies and with a light smile on her face, covered him up to his shoulders with the quilt she had made him. She placed a tender kiss on his forehead. "Pleasant dreams dear..."

Billie came back to the campsite in a fit of panic. *Where could Rina have gone?!* The strong wind that had started not long after Katarina had disappeared nearly pulled her off the ground, but she maintained her feet firmly on the ground and rushed into Kris's arms. "No sign of her?"

"Nothing. It's like she was never here or something."

She was ready to burst into tears. "Kris, we have to find her! I'll just die if I lose her..."

"Shhh," he held her close and whispered in her ear, "calm down honey. Don't worry about a thing. We'll find her, but I don't think it'll be tonight."

Billie froze. "But...we can't just leave her out there fending for herself! She could be dying! She didn't even bring her jacket with her!"

"Billie, I know. But there's nothing we can do with the weather like this and it's too dark...."

"I don't care!" She moved away from him and missed the smug look on his face. "I'm not leaving without her." The rain was coming down now and she could feel it soaking through her clothes. *Rina...*

"Honey, we have to go. I promise as soon as the weather clears up, we'll go look for her okay?" He took her hand and lifted her face to meet his gaze, "Let's go back to the hotel and wait it out."

Billie knew he was right. It was practically impossible to find anyone with the weather like this. She closed her eyes. *Please be okay Rina. Don't die on me! I'll come find you as soon as I can.*

"Honey?"

She tugged his arm. "Let's go..."

She was cold and hungry.

But most of all, terrified.

Katarina moved her soaked blond hair from out of her eyes and trudged forward, not having a single clue as to where was or where she was going. *What did I get myself into?* She jumped in alarm at the sound of the clamorous thunder and hurriedly pushed the branches of the overbearing trees out of her way, praying with all her might that Billie or someone would find her and take her some place warm. She would even be relieved to see Kris.

Sort of.

Suddenly, she realized that there were no more branches to push. She looked up ahead. The relentless rain restricted her vision, but she could make out the outline of a house in the distance. *Oh thank you Lord!* She broke into a run, needing heat like oxygen. As she neared the house though, she began to grow wary. It looked like the kind of place you would see in a horror flick...old, worn down, and foreboding. But she'd rather spend the night in a house full of 'ghosts' than stay out here and die of pneumonia. A light flickered in one of the windows on the top floor and Katarina hoped that the person...or ghost living there would take pity on her. She stopped in front of the door, took a deep breath and knocked.

No answer.

Desperate, she knocked more urgently. *I know you're in there. Please open the door!!*

Still no answer.

With a sigh of despair, she gave up and turned away. *I'm so cold*, she whimpered inwardly, her body slowly going numb, *so cold...*

"Heavens dear! What are you doing out there at a time like this?!"

Katarina whirled around. "Oh! Please...I'm lost and I--"

The petite elderly woman grasped her arm gently. "I'm sure you can explain everything inside while I run you a nice warm bath. Now come on in."

For the first time in hours, Katarina's lips formed a smile. "Thank you so much..."

An hour later, Katarina took a seat next to the kind woman in the living room.

"Here you go dear. Some homemade cookies and milk."

"Thank you. I'm starving!"

"I imagined you would be," she smiled warmly.

She took a long sip and sighed. She could feel the tepid liquid trail down to her stomach. It was soothing. Her eyes then focused on her savior. "I really appreciate your kindness Mrs..."

"Parker. But please call me Caroline."

"Caroline," Katarina grinned, "I can't thank you enough."

"It's no trouble dear, " she sipped her tea, "I'm just doing what the Lord taught us to do. Now, are you going to tell me your name or do I have to guess?"

She laughed. "My name is Katarina Clark. My close friends call me Rina."

"Ah...it's unique. I like it. I thought it would be Kat though."

Her smile dimmed. "I don't like Kat all that much."

"Very well. Rina it is!"

Katarina flashed her another grin before taking a look around the place. It was much nicer than she expected. Polished wooden floors, cotton white walls covered in colourful paintings, cozy sofas and chairs, and in the middle was a simple coffee table adorned with porcelain statues of Mary and Jesus Christ. Obviously Caroline was a very religious woman. All of this was dimly lit by the roaring fire of the fireplace.

"My husband designed this entire house when he was 24. I was once a pretty young lady like yourself and he did everything he could to please me." Caroline's blue eyes twinkled. "I was 19 when I married him."

"19?!" Katarina exclaimed, "that's how old I am now! I can't believe it!"

"We married young back in my day," she replied and laughed at the shocked look on her face.

Katarina felt totally relaxed. She could spend hours talking to this woman. She was fascinating! "Do you live here alone?"

Caroline's smile faltered for a moment. "Yes I do, but I don't mind one bit. I have company every once in a while." She glanced out the window. "I'm afraid you might be here for a few days. The rain doesn't seem to want to let up."

Katarina eyes shook her head. "I've never seen so much rain in my life!"

Caroline chuckled. "You're obviously not from around here are you?"

"No," she admitted, "I'm from Tampa, Florida." A noise from upstairs caught her attention. "Did you hear that?"

"The house tends to make odd noises now and then dear."

Not entirely convinced, she kept staring in the direction of the noise. *I could've sworn it sounded like a gasp...*

"Well, come along now Rina. I'll show you to your room. After tonight's events, I'm sure you'd like to get some rest."

Her eyes returned to Caroline. "I am feeling pretty beat." She followed her up the stairs and down the hallway. A disconcerting sensation overwhelmed her as she passed by the different rooms and she wrapped her arms around herself. *If it weren't for the fact that Caroline said she lived alone, I'd swear that I'm being watched...*

Tampa...she's from Tampa.

It'd been ages since he'd heard that name. His steely eyes watched her like a hawk as she chatted with Caroline about who knows what. *She's beautiful*, he admitted to himself hesitantly. With her long golden hair that cascaded past her shoulders, gentle brown eyes that shone with innocence, full pink lips that any man would yearn to kiss and a pleasing figure that she was probably born with, she was the exact image of an angel. Too bad he didn't believe in them or anything else that dealt with God.

God ceased to exist for him long ago.

So did girls.

His blue eyes narrowed. He didn't like the feelings she evoked in him the moment he laid eyes on her. They were foreign to him...unbearable. Until now, he thought those types of emotions were dried up in his black heart. But what bothered him the most about her was that he somehow knew that there was more to her than just beauty...she was different. She was real. A small part of him wanted to find out just how real. She grinned again and his eyes softened, feeling lonely and wistful.

If only...

And then his moment of weakness was gone just as quickly as it came. She could never feel these these things for him. No one could. He clenched his jaw. A girl like her would cower in disgust if she saw what 'God' had blessed him with. He scowled. *How can she make me feel like this? I don't even know her...*

No, he didn't like this at all.

And what if she finds out the truth?! He shook his head. *Having her stay here is too risky. She has to go*, he thought mercilessly, *she doesn't belong here anyway. She belongs out there...with normal people just like her.* Determined, he walked down the

dark, grimy passageway and opened the wall that connected to his room. He would convince Caroline to send the angelic Katarina Clark on her merry little way tomorrow. Storm or no storm. To everyone else in the world, Nick Carter was dead.

He had to make sure it stayed that way.

CHAPTER THREE

"I can't accept it, but I know I have to," Kevin spoke solemnly into the phone, "we all have to accept that Nick's never coming back."

"I'm so sorry Kevin, " his wife responded sympathetically, "to be honest, even I have a hard time believing he's gone...he was so young. How's Brian?"

"Not good. Leighanne's been keeping a close eye on him and he refused to come to the press conference today," he shook his head, "he still believes Nick's alive."

"It's understandable. They were best friends."

"I know, but it's not good for him to keep this up. I don't want him to get sick...the heart surgery was enough to freak us all out and now with Nick gone, I couldn't take it if he leaves us too..."

"Don't think that way Kevin. Brian will be fine in time. You have to believe that."

"Kev," A.J interrupted and poked his head through the doorway, "they're ready for us."

He nodded. "Honey, I have to go."

"Good luck sweetie."

"Thanks. I love you."

"I love you too...if you need anything, don't hesitate to call me okay?"

"Okay."

Sighing, Kevin said good-bye and hung up his cell. Talking to Kristin helped him gather at least some strength to say farewell to his life as a Backstreet Boy...and to his little brother.

"You must be devastated Ms. Malone."

"I am," Rachel's tears fell freely down her cheeks, "I loved him so much."

"Do you know what you're going to do now? Are going to stay in his home? Or sell it?"

"I honestly have no idea," she replied shakily, "I need to deal with my pain before I can decide what I'm going to do without...without him..."

"Thank you Ms. Malone. This is Channel 5 news..."

Rachel walked away sobbing from the cameras and reporters and headed straight for the washroom. She stopped in front of a mirror and stared at herself for a moment before grinning in satisfaction. She wiped the stray tears from her cheeks. *That was some performance Rachel!* She laughed inwardly. *And the media bought every word! I should really consider getting a job acting...since Nick, obviously, won't be able to supply me with the necessities now.* She crinkled her nose. Work? Her?

Yeah. Right.

She had her looks, her body, and her wonderful acting skills. She'll have another bank account in no time. Her grin widened. *And what bank account would be more sweeter than that of another Backstreet Boy?* In a matter of moments she had Nick wrapped around her finger. She just had to flaunt her stuff. Snagging another one would be just as easy. She tousled her black hair and removed any left over make up on her face wanting to look as 'devastated' as possible. *Now, who should take Nick's place in my heart and wallet? Brian?* She rolled her eyes. *He's too into his wife to see straight. A.J?* She smirked. *Sexy, but not my type. He's always with Sarah anyway. Howie? Too...nice. Kevin?...Kevin!* Her face was beaming maliciously now. *The strong silent type...a challenge...but do-able. And Kristin?* Smug, she shrugged. *She won't be hard to get rid of. Sure, she's pretty, but compared to me?* Her smile widened. *Mrs. Rachel Richardson...* she nodded approvingly.

I like it.

It was six in the morning when Nick crept into the kitchen. He was hungry...and he needed to talk to Caroline. Her guest had to leave today. Caroline looked up from her stove and smiled.

"Good morning Dear. Sleep well?"

He managed a hint of a smile. "It was all right."

"Your breakfast is almost ready."

"Thanks," he sat down at the table and adjusted the patch of leather on his face. He'd been wearing it for almost a year now and he still wasn't used to it. It pissed him off. But he'd rather stare at that than at what was underneath.

"Nickolas dear, don't scowl like that. It makes me sad."

"Sorry," he muttered, "Caroline, we need to talk."

She smiled. "I was expecting you to bring her up sooner or later. What did you think of her? I thought she was lovely and--"

"I want her to go."

Caroline stared at him, stunned by the coldness in his voice, "Why? She needs help."

"She can find help somewhere else."

"Now Nickolas! If I had the same attitude you have right now, you wouldn't be here right now."

He scowled. "It would've been better if I had died that night."

"Nickolas!!"

Seeing the hurt in her eyes, he sighed. "I'm sorry Caroline. I didn't mean to say that." He stared at her gentle eyes. "It's just that I don't like her...she's trouble. I know it."

Caroline smiled knowingly. "Trouble eh?"

"Yes," he nodded firmly, "she could find out that I live here...she could tell everyone where I am..."

"And she's beautiful."

He didn't say anything for a moment, but eventually he nodded again. "I suppose she is."

"Suppose?"

Nick glared at her. "Caroline..."

She rolled her eyes. "Nickolas, she stays."

"She can't!"

"It's my house."

Frustrated, Nick rose from the table and began to pace. "But she'll ruin everything!"

"Dear," she stopped him and put a wrinkled hand over his, "do you trust me?"

He hesitated. "Y...Yes I do," his eyes softened, "you're the only one in this world that I trust."

"Then leave everything to me all right? Rina will not find out you're here. I promise."

He stared at her for a long moment before nodding. "Fine."

"I can't believe this weather," Katarina commented incredulously as she stared out the living room window.

"Believe it dear, " Caroline replied, "I've spent almost all my life up here. It won't change anytime soon."

She sighed. She was really hoping to get a hold of Billie somehow. She had to let her know that she was all right. Caroline had no phone...or TV. The only sign of technology was a radio. "Uh, Caroline. What do you do up here...for fun?"

She chuckled. "I read and I paint. That's enough for me."

Katarina smiled. "Must be nice to not be TV dependent." She walked to the paintings on the walls. The detail was exquisite. She could see that there was a lot of love put into them. She stopped at one that was a portrait of four very good looking men. Strangely, they looked familiar. "Caroline? Who are these men?"

"No one you know dear. Just figments of my imagination."

"Hmm..." she couldn't take her eyes off the painting. *I swear I've seen them before...*

"Rina? Why don't I show the books I have in my room? Perhaps one will be of interest to you."

She turned around. "You wouldn't mind?"

Caroline smiled. "Of course not. You're my guest!"

Katarina followed her upstairs although she still couldn't get that painting out of her head. There was just something about it...

"Rina?"

Startled, she looked up. "Yes?"

"I just asked what kind of books you like to read."

"Oh," she smiled sheepishly, "uh...actually I love romance novels..."

Nick stared at his sketchpad, overwhelming sadness clearly evident on his tired face. In just a few days it would be one year...one year without seeing his family, his home, his best friends. It only seemed like yesterday that they were all traveling the world together, making people smile, making good music. He wished he was with them right now. But he knew that was impossible. He could never see them again... His eyes fixed on Brian, his best friend in the world. How was he? Was he okay? Did he forget about him already? Nick hung his head. They all probably have. By now, they would have to believe he was dead. It'd been too long. A tear trickled down his cheek. He missed them so much...

"HA! We kicked your asses!" Nick cheered triumphantly.

"Whatever!" A.J exclaimed, "I demand a freakin' rematch!"

Brian danced around the bus, still holding on to the controller in his hand. "Who's the best?!!"

Howie crossed his arms. "If you say so Brian."

"Face it," Nick teased, "you guys never stood a chance against the all powerful Frick and Frack."

"Guys!" Kevin cried out, "I'm talkin' on the phone here!"

"C'mon Kev," Brian shouted, "stop bein' so serious for once!"

"Yeah," Nick continued, "why don't 'cha come take us on Kev?"

"Don't man!" A.J warned.

Howie nodded. "Yeah Kev, they're setting you up!"

"Aww, don't be such a sore loser guys"

"Nick, you're about two seconds away from a beating!"

Suddenly, Kevin came bounding to the back of the bus, pillow in hand. "You're all about two seconds away from a beating! Now hold still while I beat y'all to a pulp"

"AHHHH!!!"

Nick smiled. That was one of his fondest memories. He was only 16 at that time. They had so much going for them at that time...they had no idea what lay ahead for them. His smile construed to a frown. He had no idea that 5 years later, he'd be stuck in his own private hell, not being able to trust his own shadow. He wiped the tears from his cheeks. *No more crying.* He stood and left his room to find something to eat. *I have to move on with my life...*

Or whatever's left of it anyway.

Katarina put the book down and wiped her eyes. She was such a sap for romance novels. She could only hope that her prince charming would be just as dashing and gentle as the main character of the book she just finished. *Now what?* She looked around Caroline's room. Nothing much in it except for the shelf filled with books and a closet full of paints and other equipment. She stood and wandered out into the hallway. *I don't think she'd mind if I explore the house a bit. I doubt she'd hide anything anyway...* She went through room after room after room, not finding anything of particular interest. The rooms looked like they hadn't been used in years. Sighing, she opened the door to the last room on the floor. She was growing antsy. She hated having nothing to do. She stepped into the room, expecting nothing and was surprised to find an unmade bed, burnt out candles, empty plates and piles of paper all over the floor. She raised her eyebrows. *Caroline's not this disorganized...* She picked up the papers and glanced through them. They were empty. She shivered suddenly. There was something ominous about this room. The curtains were pulled tightly shut, making everything so dark and dreary looking.

Gingerly, Katarina sat on the bed. She shouldn't be in here, her mind screamed at her, but she couldn't leave... It was that feeling again...something was telling her to stay... It was then that she noticed the pad of paper on the nightstand. Curious, she picked it up and opened it. Impressed she kept on flipping through it. *These are incredible...I didn't think anyone could put so much feeling into a drawing.* She stopped halfway through and frowned. There they were again. Those men. *Why do they look so familiar?* She knew she'd seen them somewhere, but right now, her mind kept drawing a blank. Frustrated, she concentrated on their faces. They were really cute, especially the one with piercings! She smiled. Billie had always laughed at her sometimes weird taste in guys. *Billie...Billie!* Her eyes widened. That's where she'd seen them! In Billie's room...on posters! "Oh my God," she murmured. *I know who they are! They're--*

A low growl coming from her left interrupted her racing thoughts. She looked up and saw...nothing. She frowned. *But I could've sworn--* Then she saw it. A shadow moving toward her. Her eyes widened. "Wha--"

"Get out of my room."

She could see his blue eyes now. They pierced through her like knives. "Who--"

"Get out."

She stood and stepped as far away from it as he could get. *Wait...* she looked at the shadow. That was no ghost. That was a man. A very tall and very angry man.

"I...I..."

"Did you not hear me?" he growled.

Katarina's heart never beat so fast. He was frightening. And she couldn't even see how he looked like.

"GET OUT!!!!"

Screaming, Katarina fled from the room, ran down the stairs and made a bee line for the door.

"Rina?" Caroline came out of the kitchen, "what's wrong dear?"

"I'm out of here!" she cried out and didn't wait to hear Caroline plead with her to stay. She opened the door and stepped out in the nippy wind and rain. She couldn't see a thing, but it didn't matter to her. Any place would be better than that house with the frightening man. "Help," she shouted, "somebody! Anybody!! Help me!!" She was too busy screaming her lungs out to see the tree stump in front of her and she toppled over it, hitting her head hard on the ground. The last thing she saw in her mind were those piercing blue eyes before everything became shrouded in darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

"She was snooping around in my room!"

Caroline crossed her arms. "That did not mean you had to frighten the poor thing!"

Nick began to pace impatiently. "She knows! If she tells anyone--"

"That is the least of your problems," she interrupted, "you must go out there and find her."

"What?!" Nick exclaimed. "I'm not going out there! It's raining!"

"You should've thought of that before."

"But--"

Caroline stomped her foot on the floor. "Nickolas Carter, get you nice fanny out there now!"

Nick scowled.

She refused to budge.

"Fine," he mumbled after a few moments, "I'll go."

She grinned. "Thank you."

Sighing angrily, Nick disappeared into the foyer and after a few moments, she heard the door open and close. *He still has a heart*, she thought in relief, *it's not as hard as he makes it out to be. It just needs a little light...and I have a feeling Rina just might be that light...*

Nick moved his soaked hair out of his eyes, his mood very sour. He knew this was all his fault, but he couldn't help but feel a giant resentment toward Katarina Clark. She'd only been here for a day and already she'd turned his life upside down. *I'll probably catch pneumonia thanks to her...* His eyes darkened. *Then again, maybe she's doing me a favor. If I catch it I can finally leave this place...* He wandered further into the woods. He had no idea where he was going, but his gut was telling him that he was on the right track. A sudden loud crash of thunder startled him and he jumped. *Damn! That sounded pretty cl--* His eyes widened. *Oh shit!* He knelt down to her still form. *Oh man...this wasn't supposed to happen...* "Katarina?"

Nothing.

"Katarina? Come on...say something..." Nick was beginning to panic. *What if she's dead?* He checked her wrist and gave a sigh of relief. There was a pulse. Carefully, he lifted her sprawled body into his arms and ignoring the odd feeling in his chest, he marched quickly back to the house. "Caroline!!!" He called out, "we've got trouble!!"

She burst into the living room and covered her mouth in shock. "Oh dear!! Take her upstairs immediately. I'll be right up."

Nick did as he was told and brought her to the first room on the second floor. Gently, he lowered her onto the bed. She hadn't stirred once and he began to wonder if maybe she really was dead. After checking her wrist again, he pushed the thought away. No...she was still here...still breathing... His eyes raked over her body. Her clothes were plastered to her soft feminine curves... Nick shook his head. *Now is not the time to be thinking those kind of thoughts Carter.* His eyes stopped at her forehead and he stared at the massive bump in concern. *That doesn't look very good...*

Caroline came in and ushered Nick out of the room so she could tend to her. He waited impatiently right outside the door, his mind flooded with thoughts of guilt. He just wanted her out of this house...he didn't want her to get hurt... He ran his fingers through his wet hair and sighed. He always did stupid things. *This wasn't supposed to happen...*

"I knew you'd find me."

She stared at his tall figure, not at all frightened, but intrigued. His soft blue eyes gazed at her and he smiled.

She returned it, but she was confused by his words. "You were looking for me?"

"I'd been looking for you my whole life...and I know you've been looking for me."

Now she was really bewildered. "I don't understand..."

"You will soon enough." He reached for her hand, his face much more solemn, "I need you Rina..."

She was amazed at the sensations her body felt when his skin touched hers. She'd never felt anything like that before...but she liked it...

She liked it a lot.

"I need you to save me."

"Save you...?" she looked at his worried eyes, not at all comprehending what was going on.

"I know you're the only one who can."

She lifted her hand to his face. It was smooth, warm... He was handsome...but it was his eyes that held her attention. His beautiful eyes that were the exact colour of the ocean in her hometown.

"Save me Katarina..."

"From what?" she looked at him in concern, noticing how uneasy he was. He squeezed her hand.

"From myself..."

An hour passed before Caroline finally emerged from the room.

"How is she?" he asked immediately.

"She's fine for now and she'll be asleep for the rest of the night, so we won't know anything until morning." She yawned. "I'll stay with her. You go on to bed, dear."

Nick shook his head vehemently. "No way. You go to rest Caroline. I'm staying with her."

She patted his arm and a light smile curved her lips. "Don't fret now Nickolas. She'll be all right."

"I'm not freakin' out or anything...I'm just...well...it's my fault she's hurt," he crossed his arms, "it's my responsibility."

Caroline simply nodded and yawned again. Very well dear. Good night."

"Good night." He watched her until she disappeared into her room and he stepped hesitantly into Katarina's. Quietly, he took the chair from the desk and settled down next to her bedside. She did look much better than before. The bump seemed smaller... He watched the tiny stream of moonlight dance across her face and slowly his eyes softened. What was it about her that just made him want to touch her...hold her...? Something kept telling him that she was different...not at all like most girls. She looked so innocent, he was almost afraid that by just simply touching her, he would corrupt her. Still, his hand hovered over her face. He just wanted to feel what her pale cheeks felt like. His fingers lightly grazed her skin and he almost gasped from the electric sensations that traveled up his arm. He'd never had a reaction quite like that before...he liked it...

He liked it a lot.

Soft to the touch her face was... smooth as silk. He traced her cheekbones lightly and traveled to her lips. What would it be like, he wondered, to be the one to be able to kiss those lips? To be able to say that those lips belonged to him and nobody else but him. That *she* was *his*...

His thoughts suddenly began to frighten him. He could see a future with her and he didn't even know her? How was that possible? He shook his head.

The fact of that matter was that it was *impossible*.

He removed his hand from her serene face. *I can't do this to myself... I can't feel...I can't*. He closed his eyes, as though in pain. She was an angel...

He was nothing but a monster.

CHAPTER FIVE

He trapped her against the bathroom wall and began to pull up her skirt, very much anticipating what was to come. Kris hadn't had any sex in two whole days thanks to Kat's little disappearing act and he needed a release...badly. Luckily, a very hot stewardess was more than willing to please him and within the hour, he lured her here in the bathroom.

In twenty minutes, he got what he wanted.

Satisfied, he zipped up his pants. "Thanks babe. That was great."

She smiled sexily as she began to pull up her panty hose and pull down her skirt. "It certainly was. I could get fired for this...but hell, it'd be well worth it."

Kris laughed. "Definitely." He opened the door slightly ajar. No one was waiting for the bathroom. Smiling slyly, he closed it again. Then he pulled her into his arms again. "Nobody's waiting out there..."

She giggled. "Really?"

"Uh huh," he began to undo the buttons of her blouse. He knew she wouldn't say no. Nobody ever said no to Kris Reid. His eyes narrowed as his mouth traveled to her throat.

Except for Kat.

But that would all change soon enough. She owed him big time and until she gave him what he wanted, he won't let her breathe a moment's peace. She could deny it all she wants but he knew that she wanted him just as much as he wanted her. She was just being stubborn. But Kris had a thing for stubborn women...and he loved to conquer them. *As for Billie...* He smiled. He'd leave her and go find fun elsewhere just like he'd always had. But for now, he needed to keep stringing her along until Kat falls into his web. His smile widened.

He had big plans for his little kitten.

Billie looked out the window of her hotel room, cursing the storm for not letting up for even a hour. She hadn't seen or heard from her sister in two days and there was no one to comfort her. Kris had to go for a very important business meeting back in Tampa. She winced as another crash of thunder exploded in the horizon. She hated thunder with a passion. It'd frightened her since she was a little girl. *Kris...why did you have to go?* She needed him here, but she understood that his work was very important to him.

"It's for our future, baby. I gotta start saving up for our family, our children's college fund, our retirement when we're too old to make a living."

She smiled for a brief moment. She loved him so much and to know that he felt the same way about her was a blessing. Of course it helped that her parents and Rina also approved of him. Rina's opinion was especially important. She loved her sister immensely. Not because of their blood bond, but because she was also her very best friend. Tears stung her eyes. Where could she be right now? Was she cold, hungry...alone? Or was she unable to feel any of those things because she was.... Billie shook her head. *No. Rina is fine. She's a strong girl.*

She moved away from the window, reached into her bag and grabbed her discman and settled on the bed. She needed to distract herself fast or she'd go nuts.

*"I promise you from the bottom of my heart,
I will love you 'till death do us part.
I promise you as a lover and a friend,
I will love you like I'll never love again...
with everything I am."**

Billie sighed and relaxed her muscles. She knew their music would do the trick. It was one of the many reasons why she loved them so much. She'd been a huge Backstreet Boys Fan since she went to a concert of theirs when she was visiting a friend in Europe back in 1996. Her friends at work constantly teased her for that since she was still hooked on them now that she was nearing her 30's, but she couldn't care less. It's not as though she was only one. Kris kept trying to convince her to take their posters off her wall, but she refused to every time he brought it up. She was a fan through and through...and damn proud of it. Even though they weren't a group anymore.

*"You see me sitting here, a smile upon my face.
The time has come but you know that it's not too late.
There's been too many things together we have seen.
It's not that hard if you start to believe..."**

It had saddened her when she read the article in the newspaper this morning that they'd decided to call it quits, but she understood. With Nick gone, BSB would never be the same, whether they replaced him or not. It was either all five of them or nothing. She had actually cried when she found out that Nick was dead. Rina spent over an hour comforting her, though she had no idea who Nick even was. The only one she remembered was A.J because she thought he was really hot. She smiled. Her sister had the weirdest taste in guys. She loved A.J and all, but she was more into clean cut guys like Brian...or Howie. Suddenly, she opened her eyes wide open, the article she'd read about Nick's disappearance coming to mind. *He'd gone missing here in Alberta!* Fear began to settle in her heart. *And now Rina's gone too...* The tears returned almost instantly. *What if I can't find her either? What if she meets the same fate as Nick?!?!*

Kevin was just finishing his packing when a knock interrupted him.

"Hey Kev. Can I come in?"

"Sure Howie."

He opened the door and walked in, his eyes red from yesterday's events. "Leaving already?"

Kevin smiled lightly. "Yeah...Kristin's waiting for me in L.A. Thanks for letting me stay at your place though."

"No problem." Howie leaned against the wall. "It's really over huh?"

"Yeah...it is."

"I'm gonna miss it."

Kevin sighed. "So am I." They'd been touring the world, hearing people scream at them for almost ten years. It was going to be odd returning to a 'normal' life. But it wasn't like they had a choice. Their fans had been really upset, but they'd been expecting the news for months. The guys had often said in previous interviews that BSB were the five of them, not four...

"I called Brian a few minutes ago," Howie said quietly, "there's still no change."

"I'm not surprised."

"A.J's thinking on heading over to Atlanta with Sarah and spend a few days with him and Leighanne. Maybe having his friends around might help you know?"

Kevin nodded. "Yeah, Kristin and I are going in a few weeks."

"I'm spending a few days with the family before I go myself," Howie sighed, "I need to be around them right now." His eyes darkened. "Oh and before I forget, Rachel's downstairs."

He groaned and closed his suitcase. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I wish," Howie crossed his arms, "she claims she wants to say bye to you before you go."

"How nice," he replied sarcastically.

"The only reason I let her in was because of Nick..." his voice faltered, "I don't think he would've wanted us to be...rude to her since he liked her so much..."

Kevin winced. He hated hearing Nick being spoken of in the past tense. It made everything too real. "I guess I have no choice, but to see her then." He followed Howie downstairs, suitcase in hand, and kept his reluctance in seeing her in check when he saw at the foot of the stairs. It was really hard to, though, when she was grinning at him and dressed in red...just yesterday she acted like her world had ended. Then again, he expected as much from Rachel. Whether Nick had wanted to see it or not, it was easy to classify what kind of person she was.

A leech.

"Hey Kevin," she placed a hand on his arm, "I heard you were leaving already."

"Yes..." he frowned. Was it really necessary for her to press her body against him like that? He moved away and looked at Howie in irritation.

He rolled his eyes.

"I can take you to the airport now if you'd like."

"No thanks," Kevin replied and squished his suitcase in between his leg and her hers. "Uh, Howie's takin' me. Aren't you Howie?"

"Yeah, in fact, we'd better get goin' now." Howie opened the door. "See you later Rachel."

"Awww, can't I come with you guys?"

"Uh, there's no room in my car," Howie replied, knowing full well that there was and she knew it.

Kevin smiled. Any idiot could catch Howie's subtle hint. So he knew Rachel would get it.

"Oh." She shot him a frosty look.

Howie was unaffected. "Let's go Kev."

When they left the driveway, Kevin patted Howie's back. "That was great Howie. Couldn't have done it better myself."

"Thanks, but don't think you're off the hook yet. It looks like Rachel's moved on pretty fast and she wants to stick her claws into you."

Kevin shrugged. "I dare her to try..."

Katarina slowly lifted her eyes. *Where am I?* Her eyes moved from the ceiling to the sliver of light coming from the window on her left. *I'm back in Caroline's house...but how did I get back here?* She lifted herself up and groaned inwardly. *My head...* A soft sigh coming from her right, startled her and she nearly screamed when she saw him sitting in the chair next to her bed. Her breathing increased. *It's him...that horrible man...* But as the light from the window shone down on the side of his face, she realized that she wasn't quite as frightening as she thought he was. He was actually really...appealing. His blond bangs fell over his eyes and his cheek was a little flushed, but soft looking. She frowned. *He looks really familiar.* Another soft sigh escaped his lips and she wondered how such a gentle looking guy could've scared her to death last night. But then again, he was sleeping right now. Anyone looked docile when they were asleep. Even guys like Kris. His cool eyes resurfaced from her memories of yesterday and she shivered. She'd never forget those eyes for as long as she lived.

Suddenly, he began to move and Katarina was fully expecting those eyes to peer right at her at any moment. Instead, she saw something much more unpleasant. Her eyes widened. *His face...what happened to his face?!* She stared at the black patch of leather that completely covered the other side of it, leaving only a hole where his eye was and one for half of his lips. *Something terrible must've happened to him,* she thought sympathetically. Still, that didn't make him any less intimidating. She continued gazing at him tentatively. He was the artist...the one who drew all those beautiful drawings, the ones that Caroline had painted and had displayed downstairs. Caroline's hiding him here with her...but why? All of a sudden it became clear to her as she recalled her discovery yesterday. She gasped. *That's why he looks familiar!*

She was staring right at Nick Carter.

He could feel her eyes on him. He was really surprised that she didn't scream her head off when she saw him. Even Caroline had let out a minor yelp when she first glimpsed at his face. Katarina Clark seemed to be full of surprises. That both pleased and bothered him for reasons he'd rather not think about.

He'd spent all night thinking about her.

Tired of pretending to be asleep, he opened his eyes and squinted. Light. He stood and heard her gasp again. *Well, that's better than her screaming at me.* He pulled the curtains tighter and finally, turned to face her. It'd been a long time since he'd seen someone stare at him with wide eyes. It was kind of refreshing. Unfortunately, he knew it wasn't for star status...or his 'good' looks.

"I thought you were dead!"

Damn! So she did know who he was. That was just great. "I am."

Her fingers tightened on the blanket she was grasping. "But I see you..."

Nick stifled a laugh. She actually thought that he was a ghost. The old Nick might've played with that idea...but he was long gone. "I mean, to everyone else out there...I am dead." He looked away. "But as you can plainly see, I'm not." He was growing wary of her gaze and he moved toward the door. "I'd better get Caroline--"

"Wait!"

He stopped and turned slightly, showing her only his good side. "What is it?" he asked gruffly.

"How...did I get back here?"

He knew full well that that wasn't the question she had wanted to ask, but he was thankful that she chose something else. He often lost patience easily. "I brought you back."

"You did?!" she stared at him in bewilderment, "but you kicked me out!"

"Yeah well, like Caroline said, it's not my house." *Why does she keep looking at me like that?*

"Uh...thank you, I guess."

"Don't thank me. Thank Caroline." *Okay, I've had enough of her staring!* He put his hand on the knob of the door.

"I know you..."

Nick sighed impatiently and turned to look at her again. "I think we've established that already."

"No, not in that way..." her face grew pensive, "I know I've met you before...but where?"

"I'm going to get Caroline." He left the room before she could stop him again. As he made his way downstairs, he frowned. Something about her words was bothering him. She was talking crazy and yet, something inside of him was acknowledging that he knew her as well.

It'd be a snowy day in Tampa before he'd tell her that though...

CHAPTER SIX

Brian couldn't sleep.

He pulled Leighanne closer to his restless body, needing to feel her warmth. He breathed in the scent of her golden blond hair and sighed. She was the only one in his life that was keeping him sane since Nick's disappearance. But lately, he hadn't been sleeping well. He kept dreaming of Nick begging him to keep believing that he was still alive...that he could find him if he keeps the faith... *But how can I have faith in you Nick when you've been gone for so long...I can't keep doing this anymore...* Tears sprung to his eyes. Maybe everyone was right. Maybe it was time to put Nick to rest and move on.

He was going to miss his best friend.

The phone rang suddenly and both Brian and Leighanne's heads jerked off their pillows. "Ugh!" Leighanne groaned and switched on a lamp, "who could possibly be calling this late at night?"

Brian reached for the phone. "Hello?"

"..."

He frowned. "Hellooooo?"

"...Bri..."

His eyes widened. The voice sounded so quiet, but he'd know it without a doubt in his mind...it was his voice....! "Nick?!?"

"..."

I wasn't hearing things...I know I wasn't! "Nick, is that you?!"

"..."

"Please Nick," he pleaded, "talk to me man! Tell me where you are?!"

Click.

NO! Brian panicked. "NICK! NICK!!!" He listened to the dial tone in devastating sadness. He was so close...

"Brian," Leighanne said softly, "are you okay?"

"It was him Leigh...it was him."

"Brian..."

He put the phone back in its place and faced his wife. "Leigh, I'm telling you, it was Nick! I heard his voice!"

"But..." she sighed, "Brian, you can't keep doing this--"

"Doing what?" Brian exclaimed, "He's alive! I HEARD him! Why doesn't anyone believe me for cryin' out loud!" He rubbed his head in frustration. "My own wife thinks I'm crazy!"

"I never said that!"

"You didn't have to."

"Brian," she took his hand, "I don't think you're crazy at all. I just...I'm just worried that Nick's dea...disappearance is taking a toll on your health." Her blue eyes flooded with tears, "I don't want to lose you Bri..."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a tight embrace. "You won't lose me Leigh...I won't let anything separate me from you no matter what...I promise."

They stayed that way for quite some time until she finally pulled back slightly, "Do you really believe he's out there?"

Brian's eyes held her gaze firmly, "I was starting to lose hope, but now more than ever, I believe that he's alive...and we're going to find him."

She stared at him pensively for a few moments before a tiny smile curved her lips. "Then so do I..."

"Thank you Mr. McGregor," Caroline called out and waved to the grocery store owner as he drove away. She turned to look at Nick, who still had the same crestfallen face he had when they left the grocery store. "You forgot to thank Mr. McGregor for taking us to his store this late."

"I called him again." Nick rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I tried to say something...but I can't...I can't go home..."

Caroline frowned as she unlocked the door, "Nickolas, you can't keep doing that to him or yourself."

"I know!" He grabbed the groceries and furiously moved to the kitchen, "I know that what I'm doing is wrong, but I can't help it! There's still this part of me that won't let me

let go..." He put down the bags and sat down at the table, on the verge of tears. "I'm not the same person anymore...I'd only hurt them if I came back..."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is Caroline," Nick shouted, "LOOK at me! I'm a FREAK and I'm going to DIE a FREAK!" He stormed out of the room.

"Nickolas!!! Come back here this instant before I give your fanny a whooping!"

As expected, he didn't listen.

She sighed in frustration. *That's it. From now on he's not going into town with me.* She cringed when she heard his door slam shut.

It's going to be one of those nights...

"I need you now Rina."

She looked at his glimmering blue eyes. They looked so sad... "I'm right here with you...I'm not going anywhere."

"Go see me, Rina. I need you to see me..."

Now she was confused. "I don't under--"

He suddenly began to fade away and her eyes widened. "Where are you going?!"

"Please Rina...there's not much time..."

"But I don't know what you want from me!"

"See me Rina...that's all I want...see me...see me..."

Her eyes opened and there was nothing but darkness surrounding her. She rubbed her eyes and slowly adjusted to the gloominess around her. *I'm supposed to do something,* she thought to herself in bewilderment, *but what?* She knew she'd been having the oddest dreams since she arrived at this mysterious house, but she often had vague or no recollection as to what those dreams were about. She sat up and listened for any noise from downstairs.

There was nothing.

No Caroline...no Nick.

Nick.

She frowned. She'd been thinking of him quite a bit since their encounter earlier. He was just so mysterious, so interesting...

So sad.

She had asked Caroline about him, but that was a dead end.

"It's not my place to tell his story, dear. Perhaps, he'll tell you himself someday..."

Nick Carter...why can't I get you out of my head? Sighing, she got out of bed, feeling much better health wise, and stepped outside of the room she'd been sleeping in all day. She wished she could remember where the bathroom was. It was so dark in the hallway...

"What are you doing out here?"

His cold whisper made her jump in alarm. "God!" She stared at his icy blue eyes. "Do you have to sneak up on me like that?" She blinked. She could've sworn she saw a glint of humor in his eyes.

"You shouldn't be out here. You need your rest dammit!" he hissed.

Obviously she was just seeing things.

"I...I'm looking for the bathroom," she gulped. *Does he have to scrutinize me like that? You'd think he'd never seen a girl before!* "What are you doing out here?"

"Nothing."

It was then that she noticed that his eyes seemed a little on the red side. "Are you...are you okay?"

"Just fine thank you," he replied abruptly, "never been better actually."

"Oh." He definitely wasn't a great liar.

"How are you feeling?"

She looked at him in surprise and then shrugged. "Better. I guess all I needed was rest."

"You should get more."

Now she was feeling a little agitated. "You know if you want me to go away, why don't you just say so?" She began to move past him, "I've got to find the bath--" She felt his

hand wrap around her arm and she sucked in her breath, feeling a current of tingling shocks race throughout her whole body.

"That's not what I meant," he growled as his eyes bore into hers.

She couldn't even blink, his eyes inspiring both anxiety...and something else she didn't dare to even think about.

See me Rina...See me...

There was something in his eyes...she could almost see right into them...

Can you see me Rina? I know you can...

He was battling something...she could see it. The expressions on his face kept constring into so many different emotions. *Why is he fighting so hard?*

And suddenly she saw nothing.

He stepped back and let go of her arm. Confused, she shook her head. *What just happened?*

"Caroline's in the bathroom. You can use the one in my room." Without waiting for her response he began to retreat down the hallway.

Still a little bewildered, she followed as far behind him as possible. She had no idea what had occurred between them in that instant when his eyes locked so deeply with hers, but whatever it was, it scared her half to death...

And at the same time, she'd give almost anything to feel it again.

What was that?

Nick sat on his bed, twiddling his thumbs as he thought about their 'connection.' It had been amazing. It was something he'd never experienced in his entire life. When he looked into Katarina's eyes it was like he could see into her heart, into her soul...he could see her. What scared him half to death even more than that realization was that he also felt her searching for him...for that Nick Carter who loved the ocean, that had a great sense of humor, that could play Sony Playstation 2 for hours on end...

The Nick Carter who could love and be loved in return.

Tonight he realized that he was still there...still fighting to resurface... Nick scowled. Like hell he was going to let that happen. But how could he prevent it when every time she was near he ached to be that man?

His bathroom door flung open and she stepped out hesitantly, looking in all directions except his. It irritated him that she was scared stiff of him, although he didn't understand why. It wasn't as though he liked her or anything. Freaks and angels don't mix.

"Uh, thanks again," she murmured and hurriedly moved toward the door.

He watched her retreating figure with sudden conflicting emotions that further confused his racing mind. *Don't go yet...*

She stopped.

His eyes widened. *Did she hear me? But I didn't say it out loud...*

Katarina turned, her wary eyes falling on his. "Are you sure you're okay?"

He looked away, not wanting to respond, but somehow feeling that he needed to. "I'm fine."

"You can at least try to sound convincing."

He could hear the smile in her voice and he wanted to smile...damn, he wanted to so bad...

The next thing he knew, she was sitting right beside him. "I know we don't know each other very well, but if you need someone to talk to..."

He met her gentle gaze. "Aren't you scared of me?"

She smiled faintly. "A little, but not because of how you look, if that's what you're thinking." Sadness suddenly flooded her eyes. "No one seems to understand that it's not the outside that counts but what's inside..."

He looked at her curiously. Something about the way she said that told him that she had her own share of demons to deal with. He wanted to ask, but asking would be getting too close. He couldn't do that.

"I'd better go," she said quietly and stood, "my offer still stands..."

Nick kept his eyes glued to the floor.

"Goodnight Nick."

"Goodnight," he mumbled.

Just as she was about to shut the door he lifted his head. "Katarina?"

She peered at him expectantly.

"Thank you."

She gave him a smile that caused his heart to quicken its pace.

This is not good at all.

"You're welcome."

Rachel rolled over on her side and grimaced. *He's all the way in L.A and I'm stuck in Nick's damn house all by myself. What a joke!* Her plan to seduce Kevin had backfired and she was furious. She heard only hours before his flight that he was leaving early. That ruined all her ideas completely. *And damn Howie for getting in the way. To think I actually thought he was nice...stupid ass. He'll get what's coming to him.*

Her frown deepened, contorting her blemish free face. *And Kevin! Who does he think he is? God's gift to women? Hah! I'll show Mr. Eyebrows who's boss!* She got out of bed and stomped to her closet. Seething, she grabbed her suitcase and began to pack the necessities. She rushed to her drawers and smiled. *Good ol' lingerie. Where would I be without you?* She pulled out a raunchy little black number that worked wonders with Nick. *Yup, it'll be perfect. He'll be putty in my hands and his wallet will be mine for the taking!* Within an hour, she was all set. Grinning she picked up her cell phone and dialed the airport.

"Hi, I'd like a ticket on the next flight to Los Angeles, California..."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Good morning," Caroline piped up cheerily as Nick trudged into the kitchen.

"I guess," he replied and yawned as he took a seat at the table.

"Are you feeling better now?"

"A little," he looked at his watch and took a look around the kitchen.

Caroline watched him out of the corner of her eye as he kept glancing from his watch to the kitchen doorway over and over. She smiled knowingly. "She's gone."

"What?!" he exclaimed and then quietly regained his composure, "I mean...she...she just left?"

"Well, the storm's let up. There was no real reason for her to stay."

"Oh."

Caroline nearly burst out laughing at his attempt to hide the disappointment on his face. "But since I offered her a free place to stay for a few months, she couldn't resist."

Nick stared at her in confusion. "Huh?"

"She just went down to Mr. McAllister's to let her sister know where she is and that she's fine."

He cleared his throat. "Oh...well...that's good. Good for her."

"And for you too."

His eyes narrowed. "I never said that."

"Caroline's blue eyes twinkled with perception. "You didn't have to dear." She sighed happily. "Rina's a lovely girl."

"If you like her type."

She set his breakfast in front of him and sat down. "Nickolas, I really think she could be a very important part of your life."

He scoffed. "What life Caroline?"

"The one that God was gracious enough to give you."

"Are you kidding me?! If this is the life that 'God' wants for me, he can 'graciously' take it back and shove it up--"

"NICKOLAS GENE CARTER!! Don't you make me wash your mouth out with soap! And don't look at me like that either! You know I'll do it!"

Nick relented and began to pick at his food. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"It's not me you should be apologizing to."

He groaned. "Caroline, please!"

She rolled her eyes. "All right, all right!" Her smile returned. "So...?"

"So..." he repeated as he gazed at her warily.

"What do you think of Rina?"

"She..." he continued to pick at his food, "she's not like any other girl I've ever met." He slammed his fork on the table and crossed his arms. "There! I said it! Are you happy now?!"

Caroline grinned. "Very!"

A surge of never ending relief overpowered Billie's body when she saw her little sister running toward her. She grinned from ear to ear. "Rina!"

"Billie!"

They flung into each other's arms and Rina looked up at the clear blue sky. *Thank you Lord! Thank you!* "I was so worried about you girl! I thought I lost you for good!" Joyful tears ran down her cheeks.

"I'm fine," Katarina replied happily, "I met a very kind woman who let me stay with her and--"

Billie raised an eyebrow at her sudden cut off. "And?"

"And...uh...her grandson."

"Oh," she replied without question, "I'll have to thank them. Maybe I should buy them something before we go home."

"Uh, Billie," Rina looked at her nervously, "we need to talk."

"What about?"

"Well, see, the thing is...I'm not going home...just yet."

Billie stared at her, stunned by her sister's decision. "What? Why not?"

"I want to stay here a while longer."

Billie frowned. There had to be a better reason than that. "Rina, I don't think--"

"Caroline," she interrupted, "the woman who took care of me, is living up there all alone..."

"I thought you said her grandson lives with her."

She blushed. "He does...but he's not always there...he's...in school...a lot. So he only stays with her on weekends."

"Oh," Billie nodded in understanding, "she must be really lonely during the week."

"Yeah, she is and I just want to...keep her company for a few months, you know?"

She smiled. "You're so sweet Rina! Always willing to help other people."

"I guess," Rina smiled tentatively.

"All right. Well, let's get your stuff at the hotel and I'll drive you back to wherever it is you're staying at."

"Billie, before we go, I need to ask you a big favor."

"Anything."

"Please don't tell anyone I'm here."

Billie frowned again. "Why not?"

"Because...I don't know...just don't mention to anyone where I am please? I'd really appreciate it."

She stared at her sister's pleading eyes and sighed. "All right. I won't say a word."

Katarina grinned. "You're the best!"

"Yeah, I know!"

"Hellooo!" Katarina shouted when she closed the door to the house. "Caroline! I'm here!"

No answer.

She put down her suitcases. "Caroline?" *Where is she?* A dark figure suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs and she gulped.

"She went out for a walk," Nick said as he descended, "she'll be out for about an hour or so."

"Oh," Katarina wrapped her arms around herself, feeling really uncomfortable with his eyes on her. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about those eyes since last night and it was driving her crazy.

He stopped a few feet from her. "Need help with your bags?"

"Um, yeah. Thank you."

He nodded, grabbed the suitcases and ascended back up the stairs. She followed quite a distance behind him, unsure if she should try to strike up a conversation or not. He had the shortest temper... They turned into her room and he set the suitcases down and turned to face her. She stared at him, so many questions filling her mind. Why was he here and not back with his friends? Why did he wear that leather patch on his face? What was underneath it? Why couldn't she stop thinking about him?... She nearly burst out laughing. Like she'd ever ask him that last one!

"Uh," Nick shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, "do you...want to see the rest of the house?"

She raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You're asking me?"

"There's no one else here is there?"

She blushed and moved her gaze to the floor, missing the amusement in his eyes.

"Well?"

"Sure, but I kind of want to unpack a bit first."

He shrugged. "That's fine. I'll be back in a bit."

He hurriedly left the room and Katarina stared after him, feeling a little confused. Why was he being so nice to her all of a sudden? It was almost strange to hear his actual voice instead of all that mumbling that he often did. She smiled. He had a nice voice,

not too high, not too low... and quite masculine, but what was most surprising was the timid ring it held...not at all frosty and biting... She shook her head. *Get a grip Katarina. This is Nick Carter we're talking about here. He's a major superstar...you're just another normal human being.* She gazed at her clothes pensively. But there was more to him than just his superstardom. She could feel it... She was looking forward to seeing that side of him very much.

If she could coax it out of him.

He was losing this battle.

Nick watched Katarina stare at her surroundings in wonder and he'd never felt his heart beat so fast. She was really shy. He'd learned that very quickly while talking to her. And even though a big part of him was grateful for her shyness, a small part of him wished that she was more open so he could get to know her better. *That's just great, he shook his head, this is exactly what I need...for me to be all weak for a girl I don't even know.* But it wasn't his fault. Any guy would have to be crazy to not see how gorgeous she is...or the sweet personality she possesses.

"I can't believe how many secret passages there are in this place!" she exclaimed all of a sudden. "You can see every room in this entire house and no one would even notice that they were being watched..." She frowned. "You haven't been taking peeks in my room have you?"

He cleared his throat and tried his hardest to keep from blushing himself. "Of course not!"

An odd look crossed her face but it disappeared as fast as it came. "Just making--" Suddenly, she gasped and her eyes widened in horror.

"What?" Nick gazed at her quizzically.

"T...There's something on me..." she replied with a trembling voice. "I can...feel it."

"Let me see," Nick approached her and began to walk around her, not seeing a thing, but enjoying the view very much...

"Nick! It's moving!"

He frowned. "But there's nothing--" Then he spotted it. It was entangled in her hair.

A good old fashioned spider the size of a quarter.

This can't be good.

"Nick! What is it?"

"A spider."

She let out an earsplitting scream. "GET IT OFF MEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Nick winced and grabbed her trembling form. "Calm down! You're only making this worse!"

"GET IT OFF!!!"

He sighed impatiently. "I will but you have to hold still!"

"You don't understand!" she cried out, "I'm scared stiff of spiders...you have to get it off!!!!!"

Not knowing what else to do, he wrapped his arms around her waist and began to whisper in her ear. "Now listen to me. I need you to stay calm okay? It's not going to hurt you..." He could feel her body begin to relax a bit. "All right, now I'm going to take it out all right? It'll be okay."

"But--"

"Shh!" he ignored the sweet smell of her shampoo, "Just trust me."

"...Okay."

Slowly, his fingers weaved into her silky hair and he grabbed the harmless bug and flung it as far away as he could get it. "Okay. It's gone."

She heaved a sigh of relief and turned to face him. "Thank you so much! You have no idea how scared I was."

He managed a faint smile. "It's all good." She licked her lips, which immediately caught his attention and he realized that he was still holding her. Her lips weren't that far away...all he had to do was lean in a few inches...

"Nick..." she said softly.

He didn't like it at all. There was something in her voice that told him that she didn't want this. And then there was the fear in her eyes that wrenched at his heart. She wanted nothing to do with him.

He let her go.

"I'd better go see if Caroline's home yet." He brushed past her.

"Nick! Wait!"

He ignored her pleading and sped up, wanting to get as far away from her as he could possibly get. *I should've known better than to hope*, he thought bitterly. *But that won't happen again. Katarina Clark can keep being the sweet little angel and marry the perfect preppy with the perfect looks and the perfect job.*

I couldn't care less.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She watched as he held her tightly in his arms while sharing a tender kiss under the shade of the palm trees. Anyone could see how strong their love was, how much he loved her.

Rachel wondered how she was going to be able to break down that barrier. She needed money fast and Nick's savings were hardly enough now, especially since his bitchy family took back most of his assets. Luckily, she took enough cash to buy herself a nice apartment here in beautiful Los Angeles.

"I'm so glad you're here," Kristin cuddled his cheek, "I missed you."

"I missed you too," Kevin replied and leaned his forehead against hers, "I need you so much right now Kristin..."

"I know. We'll get through this together okay?"

Rachel smirked. *Puh-leeze! Why don't they just gag me now?!* She had to admit though, it was really going to be hard capture the Richardson fortune. But it wasn't impossible. She had her ways of making men give her what she wanted.

And she never failed.

"I think I hurt his feelings Caroline," Katarina sighed and took a sip of her hot chocolate, "I didn't mean to..."

Caroline nodded. "And he hasn't spoken to you since."

"Not at all...he just glares at me...but he doesn't know..." she trailed off.

"He doesn't know what dear?"

Katarina put down her mug and stared at the fireplace for a long moment before speaking again. "When I was 16, I met this guy and I totally fell in love with him...he was handsome, sweet...absolutely perfect."

"Sounds like it."

"But he wasn't at all...I learned that soon enough." She shivered as she recalled those painful memories again. "He...he wanted to have sex with me...and I refused."

"That's good. A woman should be chaste until she marries."

"He obviously didn't think so," Katarina replied bitterly, "and he..." she paused, unsure if she should tell her.

"He what, dear?"

"He tried to rape me."

"Why that louse!!"

Tears flooded her eyes. "It was so horrible Caroline...he came so close..."

Caroline wrapped her in her arms, hugging her tightly. "I'm so sorry dear. I didn't mean to bring back those terrible memories."

"It's okay. My therapist told me it was best to talk about my ordeal if I needed to..." She took a deep breath. "I've basically moved past it, but I still fear the closeness of any guy. I can't tell you how many guys I've pushed away because of that... Most of them only see a pretty girl who they could score with."

"Then they are brutes, Rina. They are animals."

"And when Nick came so close to me, that's what I kept remembering. I wasn't scared of him..."

Caroline pulled away and patted her hand. "I understand."

"Yes, I know you do, but Nick doesn't."

"Rina, did you want...did you want him to kiss you?"

She looked away for a second but then locked eyes with her. "I think I did."

Nick looked up at the full moon, completely lost in thought. So much had been on his mind for the past few days that he felt like he was going crazy. He wanted to go home. He wanted to die. He wanted Katarina.

Wait.

Forget the last one. He didn't want her. Not at all. Nick sighed and closed his eyes. He could deny it all he wanted. That didn't stop the fact that she was constantly on his mind, torturing him because she could never be his. He wasn't stupid enough to believe that a girl like her would want to spend the rest of her life with a guy like him. HE didn't even like himself, so why would anyone else?

"Hi."

Nick stiffened. *Damn.* He didn't turn around. "Hi." He grew wary when she was suddenly standing beside him, also looking up at the glowing moon. *What could she possibly want now?*

"It's kind of cool out here isn't it?"

"I guess."

"Do you want to come inside and help Caroline and I make cookies?"

"Not really."

She sighed. "Nick, I--"

"Look, I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone okay? So could you just leave me alone?"

"Why are you so mean?!"

"I have my reasons!"

She crossed her arms. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I don't feel like it."

"Fine! Stay out here then!"

"I will!"

She stormed back into the house and he slammed his fist on the side of the house. *Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! Why does she always have to get to me?!*

Suddenly, he heard the door open and he turned around to see Katarina stomping toward him. Before he could blurt out a single word, she grabbed him from the back of his neck, pulled him lower and planted a rough kiss on his cheek.

"There! Is that what you wanted?! Well, there you go, you big...you big...OX!!!" She ran back into the house and slammed the door shut.

Nick blinked in disbelief, unable to grasp what had just happened. *She kissed me?! A slow smile crept onto his face. She kissed me!* He had no idea how long it had been since he felt this...human. He raised his hand to his cheek and lightly ran his fingers on the tingling spot where her lips had been. Suddenly, he frowned. *Wait a minute...*

She called me an ox?!?!?

Katarina sat on her bed, wide awake, her cheeks still burning from her indiscretion hours ago. She put her head in her hands. *Oh God! I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life! How could I have done that? I must've been out of my--*

"Are you out of your mind?!" his voice hissed all of a sudden, and her head whipped up, scared half to death. She groaned. "Would you quit sneaking up on me like that?!"

"Do I look like an ox to you?!"

"I kissed you in the most humiliating moment of my life and you're worried about the ox comment?!"

He sighed and sat down at the end of her bed. "You didn't have to..."

"Well, I hate it when people are angry with me."

"I wasn't--"

"Don't lie to me Nick. I wasn't born yesterday okay?"

He crossed his arms. "All right. So maybe I was."

"Look Nick...I didn't mean to..." she paused, wanting to find the right words without revealing too much about feelings toward him, "if you thought I was hesitant about...well, you know...it wasn't because of you."

"Then...you did want to..."

She flushed. "I didn't say that either."

"Oh."

A little surge of relief ran through her as she realized that he was disappointed. Maybe Nickolas Carter wasn't as cold as he thought he was. He got up and moved to her bed side. She studied his face, suddenly curious about that leather patch. She wanted so badly to see what was underneath...

"I'm sorry," he said softly, "for being a jerk earlier."

"That's okay," she began to play with her hair, "umm, can I ask you something?"

"...I guess."

"Why do you...why do you wear that patch on your face?"

He sucked in his breath. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because. Just drop it...please."

She sighed. "Fine." Maybe someday he'll open up to her, she hoped. Until then, she just had to be very patient.

"I'd better go. You need to rest."

"So do you."

"Yeah...I guess I do too."

"Goodnight Nick." She gazed at him longingly as he made his way toward the door. Then he turned around and went back toward her. "What?" she whispered.

He leaned down and place a gentle kiss on her cheek. Immediately, she felt her face grow extremely hot. *Oh wow...*

"Goodnight...Rina."

"She what?!" Kris exclaimed.

"Rina's staying in Canada for a few more months," Billie replied non-chalantly, "she likes it there."

"So? Her home is here!"

"She'll be back eventually Kris," she frowned, "why are you making such a big deal out of this."

Shit. Don't blow it now Kris. He cleared his throat and moved the phone to his other ear. "I'm just...I'm just upset because I know how much you miss her when she's away. I hate seeing you sad."

"Aww. Don't worry about me honey. I'll be fine."

Good for you, he thought snidely. *Damn Kat!* He knew exactly why she chose to stay in Canada, but it wasn't going to work.

"Honey, where is she staying at?"

"To be honest I don't have a clue, but I trust her enough to know what she's..."

Kris didn't hear the rest of his fiancée's words. *Good for nothing!!! How the hell am I going to find her now?!*

"Kris? Are you still there?"

"Sure baby. I was just thinking about our wedding day and how I can't wait to see you in your beautiful gown."

"And I can't wait to be your wife. I love you so much Kris."

"I love you too Billie."

When he finally said goodbye to his pathetic girlfriend, he began to pace back and forth in his room. *You're not going to escape from me Kat...I'm going to find you...*

And you'll regret ever having said no to me...

CHAPTER NINE

"Rok, why do you keep saying that?"

"Because it's true," Brian cried out in frustration, "Nick phoned me! I heard his voice!"

A.J sighed. "Rok..."

"A.J you have to believe me! You know I wouldn't be saying this if it wasn't true!"

He looked at Sarah and Leighanne with skeptical eyes before returning to Brian. "Well...we never did find his body..."

"I'm just as wary as you are about this A.J, but I was there when the call took place and you should've seen the look on his face," Leighanne spoke up in her husband's favor.

"But I thought all those calls were ruled out as pranks," Sarah replied in confusion.

Brian shook his head. "I was beginning to think that everyone was right about that until a few days ago."

"What did he say when he spoke to you man?" A.J asked in curiosity.

"He only said 'Bri' and then he hung up on me."

"That's it?!"

"That's it."

A.J sighed. "Nick wasn't what you'd call eloquent..."

"He *isn't* A.J. He *isn't*."

"What do we do if it is him?" Sarah posed the question that had been dominating Brian's mind since the phone call.

"We have to figure out where he is...and bring him home," he said determinedly, "where he belongs."

A.J put his head in his hands. "I don't know what to think anymore..."

"Look," Leighanne took Brian's hand, "for now, let's try to put our minds on something else. Howie and Kevin will be here in about a week or so. Once we're all together, we'll discuss this more thoroughly...and hopefully find a way to get to the truth..."

"Mass has ended. Go in peace."

Howie lifted his head and stood, feeling a little less upset, but not completely tranquil with his emotions. He needed more time in here...to sort through his jumbled thoughts and to pray for Nick's soul, which he hoped wholeheartedly was safe in heaven. He waited until everyone had exited the church before he made his way to the front and sat in the first pew. With disheartened eyes he stared at the cross that loomed over the now empty altar. There were so many questions that needed answers...like why his sister left the world before he could say goodbye, why Nick died at such a young age...so many painful questions...

A part of him wanted to believe that Brian was right. That Nick was still here, among the living...breathing and talking and laughing like everyone else. But if that were the case...

then why wasn't he home yet?

No. It just wasn't possible.

Sighing, Howie closed his eyes and began to pray again, hoping to find solace in his faith that somehow, he would find the answers he so desperately needed.

"Excuse me?"

Startled, Howie opened his eyes and dropped his jaw.

Not surprisingly, she did the same. "Oh my God--I mean gosh..."

Howie stifled a laugh as she stumbled over her words. She was cute...more than cute actually.

He'd never seen anyone more beautiful in his life.

"Wow," she quietly exclaimed, "I never thought I would ever meet you..."

Neither did I, he thought to himself while in awe.

"I'm sorry," she continued, "you were praying. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"That's okay," he replied warmly, finally finding his voice, "was there something you wanted? An autograph?"

"No," she smiled, "I honestly had no idea it was you who was sitting up here. This is great! Must be my lucky day..."

You're telling me!

Her smile dimmed. "But since you're here, I really want to give you my condolences. I was so upset when I heard about Nick..."

He looked away and felt the sadness returning. "Thank you. I was just praying for him."

She nodded in understanding. "I should probably leave you alone now."

"Are you sure you don't need help with anything?"

"Well, I was actually looking for the priest," she smiled, "I'm getting married and I need to book a church."

Howie's heart sank even lower. *Well, so much for luck.* "His office is that way," he pointed over his shoulder, "he should be in there. Mass ended a few minutes ago."

"Okay. Thank you so much. And maybe afterwards, I can get your autograph."

He couldn't help but laugh, despite his dismal feelings. "Sure." Then he extended his hand. "Well, obviously you already know this but I'm Howie Dorough."

This time it was her turn to laugh and she took his hand and shook it. "It's nice to finally meet you Howie. I'm Billie Clark..."

"Hey sis!" Katarina spoke cheerily into the phone while Caroline searched for some food to bring home.

"Rina! How are you girl? I miss you!"

"I miss you too...and I'm fine. Perfect actually."

"That's great! I can tell by your voice that you're happy."

She smiled. "I am Billie. I don't know what it is about this place, but I love it."

"I bet it's the men," Billie laughed.

Katarina blushed, her sister's joke not far from the truth. But it wasn't the men...it was a man...

"Rina I can practically *hear* you blushing!"

"I hate you!"

"I know."

She laughed. "So what's new?"

"Oh my gosh Rina! You won't believe what happened to me yesterday!"

"What?"

"I went to book the church for my wedding and you wouldn't believe who I ran into!"

Katarina smiled at the animated tone of her voice. "Who?"

"Howie!!"

"Who's Howie?"

"Rina!!! Howie D!!!"

She was still confused, although the name did seem familiar. "Billie, I don't know any Howie D's..."

Caroline gasped and Katarina looked at her in bewilderment. What? she mouthed.

"He's a Backstreet Boy Rina!!" Billie exclaimed.

"A Backstreet Boy?!"

Caroline smiled and returned to her grocery shopping.

"Oh! Well, I thought the name was familiar..."

"Geez girl!"

"Sorry!"

"Anyway," Billie continued, "he was praying in church for poor Nick." Her voice dropped. "He was pretty sad..."

Katarina's heart went out to him. *If he only knew...* "That's terrible."

"Yeah. But he was so sweet to me Rina. He's exactly how I pictured him to be like...no, he's better than I pictured him to be..."

"Really?"

"Yes...I don't know what it is about him, but for some reason, I haven't gotten his sad eyes out of my head..."

Katarina raised her eye brows in surprise at her sister's statement. *Hmm...*

"I guess it's because I've been a fan of BSB for so long that it was such a dream come true to meet one of them."

"Yeah, that's probably it," she smiled.

"Kris was wondering where you were when I got back from Canada," Billie said, changing the subject.

Her stomach sank. "Please tell me that you didn't tell him where I am Billie!"

"Of course I didn't! I promised you, remember?"

She sighed in relief. "Thank you."

"Why don't you want him to know anyway? He's practically family now."

Ugh! "It's not him Billie...I just don't want other people knowing my whereabouts that's all..."

Nick opened his door and was surprised to see Katarina standing there with a smile on her face.

He gulped.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"I have an idea that I hope you can help me with."

Letting curiosity get the better of him, he moved out of the doorway to let her in. "What is it?"

She sat on the end of his bed and he wished that she'd chosen to sit somewhere else. Since her lips made contact with his cheek, he'd been having some pretty...interesting dreams. He may be a freak, but that didn't make him any less of a man...

"Hello?"

Nick looked at her in confusion. "Huh?"

"You didn't hear a word I said did you?"

"...Sorry."

"That's okay," she smiled again.

Dammit. Doesn't she see how she's killing me with that smile of hers...? "So, what were you saying?"

"Well, as you know, Caroline's birthday is coming up in a few days..."

He nodded and gave a hint of a smile. "Yup, 81 years old."

"I think that we should celebrate it."

He frowned. "No way! I told you, nobody knows that I'm alive Rina!"

She crossed her arms. "I meant the *three* of us Nick. I'm not that stupid."

Why did he always have the habit of messing things up? He sighed. "Right...I...I don't think your stupid at all." The room was nearly pitch black except for the crack of moonlight coming from space between the curtains, but he knew that she was blushing. He wanted to laugh.

Too bad he couldn't remember how.

"Um, I thought that since Mr. McAllister is taking her out to lunch that we could decorate the living room, bake a cake...and surprise her when she gets home."

"Sounds like a nice idea, but I don't see how I can help."

She frowned. "Why?"

He shrugged and sighed. "Well in case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly what you'd call a party animal. *At least not anymore.*

"That's okay. I'll coax it out of you."

He gazed at her. "I doubt you can."

She grinned. "We'll see." She stood and moved toward the door, "I'll find a way."

Nick watched her go longingly. He had the feeling that she would work very hard to bring out the part of him he buried long ago, but he was too weak to care right now. It

scared him senseless that she could do this to him...that he could feel such strong, foreign emotions for her in such a short time. But he did.

He was falling.

Hard.

CHAPTER TEN

She put the book down and sighed. There was no point in trying to distract herself. Her mind always wandered back to Nick. Katarina moved the covers off her and got up, tired of lying in bed. The sun was shining, coffee was brewing...it was time to be alive. Besides, if Nick was up, she wanted to be there. Yawning, she opened the door to her room.

"Ow! Caroline!"

"I know it hurts Nickolas, darling, but this is necessary."

"SHIT!"

"I'll let that go this time."

Wondering what was going on, Katarina walked down the hallway and stopped beside Nick's room. *What is Caroline doing?*

"I don't see why you think this is necessary Caroline. My face isn't going to get any better."

"You don't know that. Besides, this will keep your skin from getting infected."

"Ow!"

"Hush you big baby! I'm almost done."

Katarina's curiosity was really getting to her now. Whatever Caroline was doing, it had to do with Nick's face. *That mask must be off...* She crept closer to the door. *Maybe I can take a peek...*

"Rina's still sleeping Nickolas. You don't have to be watching the door like she's going to pop in at any moment."

"You're probably right...but just in case, I'd really feel better if you'd close the door. I don't want her to see me."

"All right dear, but I don't think she'd react so harshly if she saw you."

"Are you kidding me? She'll run like the wind the moment she sees what kind of thing I've become. I mean, look at her Caroline...she's beautiful..."

"That doesn't mean she doesn't see the beauty in anyone else Nickolas."

Her voice was getting louder. Katarina scrambled into the room next to Nick's and stayed perfectly still until she heard the door close. Feeling dejected, she trudged back to her room and sat on the chair in front of her mirror. Out of all people, the one she expected to see past her looks was Nick...and now she just heard it from his own mouth that because of how she looked like, he thought she was shallow. Tears filled her eyes. Won't anyone ever give her a chance? She stared at her reflection in the mirror, wishing that Nick's words didn't hurt her the way they did. It wasn't as though she was expecting him to feel the same way she did... Depressed, she began to run her comb through her hair and came to a decision. If Nick wasn't the guy she was looking for, maybe it was time to look elsewhere.

Maybe it was time to go home.

Kevin signed the last autograph and waved to the group of girls before returning to his shopping. Kristin had an audition today, so he was in charge of the groceries this time. Things didn't go as smoothly as planned though. BSB may be over, but that didn't make him any less popular apparently. He'd been searching for some pasta when four ladies approached him for an autograph. He was surprised considering, but hey, it was nice to know that they still had some loyal fans out there. The only thing that bothered him was that they also seemed to believe that Nick wasn't dead... He asked them why and they simply shrugged.

"Because Brian thinks he is and he's Nick's best friend."

He sighed as he picked up some Cheerios for breakfast. He wished he could use their logic.

"Hey stranger! It's been a while."

Kevin stiffened. *This has to be a joke.* He turned around and groaned inwardly. No, it wasn't a joke at all. Rachel was standing right behind him, grinning like she'd just won the lottery. The prize? *My bank account*, he thought angrily and crossed his arms. "Rachel, what are you doing here?"

"Same as you. Grocery shopping. This store is only a few blocks from where I live."

Where she lives?!?! This really is a nightmare! "Oh."

She inched closer to him and made a point of sticking out her chest...like that was supposed to be attractive... "You're welcome to come by and visit some time...I'm a great hostess."

He frowned. "Rachel, do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"What?"

"Look," he brushed past her and moved toward the vegetable section, "you may have been able to fool Nick with your 'charms', but you sure as hell didn't fool the rest of us, so look for your fortune elsewhere 'cuz none of us are biting."

Rachel put her hands on her hips. "That is not why I went out with Nick!"

"Oh please! We all knew it the moment we saw you!" Kevin shook his head, "I just wish Nick could've seen it before he..."

"All I'm doing is moving on with my life," she grabbed his arm, "and I think I can do it...with you."

"I'm married Rachel."

"So?"

Kevin removed her hand from his arm in disgust. "Stay away from me and *my wife*." He moved toward the cashiers at the front of the store.

"Kevin, get back here!"

He ignored her and paid for his groceries.

"Kevin!"

He left the store, aware of all the people staring but not really caring what they thought.

He was tired of her bullshit.

"What has got you so troubled dear?" Caroline looked at Katarina in concern. Since she'd come down for breakfast, she didn't look like her usual cheery self.

"It's nothing Caroline. Really."

She took a seat next to her young friend and patted her hand. "Talk to me Rina. You know I won't tell anyone, especially Nickolas."

Katarina stared at the fireplace, not saying anything. And then she looked at her. "I'm not a shallow person Caroline. I know I'm not."

She raised an eyebrow. "I never said that dear."

"I know you didn't. But Nick did."

"When?"

"...This morning."

Caroline gazed at her in confusion. "But..." and then she paused.

"Yes, I overheard everything."

"I'm sorry you did."

"That's okay," Katarina sighed, "it's better that I know the truth now instead of later when it'd be too late to do anything."

Now Caroline was frowning. "I don't understand."

"I...I'm leaving. Tomorrow."

"What?"

Katarina stood. "I can't stay here Caroline. It's too hard."

"But...dear...I just don't--"

"Nick doesn't see me the way I see him. He feels nothing for me. Why should I stay?"

"You don't know that Rina."

"I think I do."

She sighed. "Rina, why don't you talk to him? Let him know how you feel."

"Why? So he can laugh in my face? No thank you."

"Rina--"

"Caroline please," Katarina looked at her pleadingly, "don't make this any harder on me. It's going to be hard enough to say good-bye..."

"So, what do you think?"

Nick watched Katarina as she studied the portrait. When her lips curled into a smile his heart felt like it was going to pop out of his chest.

"It's beautiful Nick. You did a fantastic job."

He appreciated her comments, although he didn't show it. Lately, her opinions seemed to matter greatly to him...

"I'm sure Caroline will love it."

He frowned. The cheeriness in her voice had dropped all of a sudden. She seemed troubled. Should he even ask?

She sighed. "I'm going downstairs."

"Uh, Rina wait."

"What?" she looked at him sadly.

Nick frowned. Why was she so upset? "Are you...are you all right? You seem...kinda down."

"I have my ups and downs like everyone else..."

"Oh." He looked down at the floor. What else could he say?

"Nick, what...what do you really think of me?"

Confused, he raised his head to gaze at her again. "Huh?"

"Well...when you look at me," she began to play with her hair, "what do you see?"

He gulped. This was not expected. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh never mind," she moved to the door, "forget I asked."

"Rina," he went after her and grabbed her arm, "why do you want to know."

She wouldn't look at him. "Curiosity?"

"Right." Nick scrutinized her, millions of questions arising. "I see...well...you."

Now she was staring. "Me?"

"You." His mouth went completely dry from his uneasiness. If she kept pushing this, he was going to say things he didn't want to say. The less she knew about his feelings the better. But it was hard when she was looking at him like that...like she wanted the same thing he'd been craving for days...

She cleared her throat. "I see you too Nick."

He didn't know how it even happened, but both his arms were now around her waist and her face was just so close...

It was suddenly hard to breathe.

One kiss wouldn't hurt right? He thought to himself as he leaned his head forward and licked his lips. Just one to satisfy his curiosity...and the mystery that was her mouth. There was still a part of him waiting for a sign that she didn't want this, but when her arms wrapped around his neck, he knew without a doubt that she was just as anxious for this as he was...

"Nickolas? Rina? I-- Oh Dear!"

Both Nick and Katarina gasped and pushed away becoming fully aware of the sudden intrusion. "Caroline! You're...you're home early," Nick moved in front of the portrait he'd been painting for her and stared wide eyed at the shocked expression on her face.

"We...were...uh...just uh..."

Katarina looked so flustered that Nick wanted to hold her and let her know that it was okay. But now was definitely not the time to do so.

Surprisingly, Caroline broke into laughter. "No need to explain dear. I was a young lady once."

"I...I..." Katarina looked no where near humored. "I have to use the bathroom." She fled the room like her life depended on it.

Caroline shook her head. "Poor thing. She's so timid," she grinned and looked at Nick.

He knew that sparkle in her eye.

"I see you managed to bring her out of her shell a little more..."

"Caroline!"

She laughed heartily. "I'll be downstairs cooking dinner if you need anything."

Too embarrassed to say anything he just nodded.

"Oh and one more thing dear."

"...Yes?"

"If you're planning to court my guest, I suggest you lock the door next time!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"So have you heard from Kat?"

Billie smiled absentmindedly. "Yeah. She's fine."

"And you still have no idea where she is?"

"Nope," she replied simply and lost Kris's voice, her mind on other things.

"BILLIE!"

She snapped out of her reverie. "Huh?"

Kris scowled. "Have you heard a word I've said?!"

She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

He sighed angrily and adjusted the covers on top of them so he could face away from her. "Forget it," he muttered.

Usually, when his anger was directed toward her, she got upset, but oddly enough, it didn't trouble her so much this time. Her mind was still too focused on other things...like her meeting with Howie. It'd been a few days since she'd seen him, but he'd been on her mind constantly. *Wow. I must be a lot more star struck than I thought.* She turned her head to stare at the poster of her favorite Boys. Her eyes stayed on the shortest member of the handsome five. Such an adorable grin was plastered on his face. She wished she could've seen that same grin the day they met, but she understood that he really had no reason to smile. *I hope you feel better soon Howie...you and the rest of the guys.*

A light caress on her arm claimed her attention and she turned to face her fiancé. Aren't you supposed to be mad?"

Kris smiled seductively. "I could never stay mad at you baby."

She giggled. "Come here honey..."

Rachel's eyes narrowed as she watched Kevin, Kristin, and Howie enter the Littrell household from a safe distance. *Dammit! How am I supposed to keep an eye on Kevin now?!?* Ever since Brian and Leighanne had caught a stalker on their property a while back, security on their property was state of the art. There was no way she'd be able to get in without their permission.

She stepped out of from the bushes across the street from their house and dusted herself off. She did NOT have the patience for this. Her resources were depleting rapidly and she needed a refill fast. But first, her ego needed to be healed. Kevin practically destroyed it in L.A after their encounter in the grocery store. It left her hurt and unbelievably angered. She'd never hated anyone more in her life.

And now her priorities had officially changed. Sure, she was still after his money, but she was out for blood now. She was here to win.

She was going to ruin Kevin Richardson's life to the very last detail.

It's snowing.

Katarina stared out the window at the tiny flakes making their journey to the ground and smiled. She'd never been in Canada long enough to see snow, but there it was, falling before her. She couldn't wait to go outside and feel the cool mush in her hands. Maybe Nick would like to join her... Her stomach fluttered with excitement.

Nick...

She had planned to walk away from him yesterday, but after that intense moment between them, she didn't want to do anything but hope that another opportunity to feel his arms around her would arise again soon. Of course, without Caroline interrupting! Katarina had been humiliated beyond belief when she walked in on them like that. She apologized like a broken record until Caroline stuffed a cookie in her mouth and told her that if she hears one more apology from her, she'd give her fanny a whooping. Katarina laughed heartily and shook her head.

"What's so funny?"

She whipped around at the sound of his voice. "Nick! Hi..." She hadn't really talked to him since their 'encounter', but his eyes followed her everywhere she went. At first it frightened her, how intense his stare was...but after a while it pleased her to no end. Right now, with those eyes on her again, the butterflies in her tummy were suddenly wide awake.

"Hey. Do you normally laugh at nothing?"

She blushed and looked down at the carpet, missing the tiny smile that curved his lips. "I wasn't laughing at nothing, I was just..." She gulped when she suddenly noticed that she could now see his feet. That only meant one thing. Katarina wasn't at all surprised to feel his fingers touch her chin and tilt her head upward to meet his gaze. She wiped her palms on her pants. *Why do I have to be so nervous?!* Her eyes wandered around his face, one side appearing gentle, handsome...the other... There was no way of knowing with the black patch of leather hiding what was underneath.

"I like it when you look at me," he murmured out of the blue.

Katarina cleared her throat. "Do you?"

"Mhmm..." he licked his lips.

"May I ask why?" Her eyes couldn't rip away from his lips.

"NICKOLAS! RINA! I'LL BE BACK LATER!" Caroline called out from downstairs.

Startled, Katarina moved away from Nick and rushed to her doorway. "Okay Caroline!" When she heard the door close, she turned around to face Nick only to find that he was right behind her. Her face collided with his chest. "Oof!"

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she lightly rubbed her nose, "just a--"

His hand brushed hers out of the way and began to caress her nose. Her words stayed lodged in her throat.

"Does that feel better?"

She could only nod. And then to her shock...and delight, he leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss on the very tip of her nose.

"And how does that feel?" he whispered.

"...Much better," she croaked and felt the colour creep into her cheeks again.

His blue eyes twinkled in amusement. "Good."

Caroline waved to Mr. McAllister as he drove away in his beat up Chevy truck. *Such a nice man*, she thought to herself with a smile. Of course today he treated her with even more respect and courtesy than usual since she was now officially 81 years old. She laughed to herself as she stuck her key into the lock. 81 years old and still kicking as though she were 20, Caroline had never felt more alive. She had plenty to be thankful for. Her relatively good health, her talent in the arts...but more important, her dear friends that she had come to see as her children. True, Nickolas and Katarina hardly fit that term now, but to her, they would always be her babies.

She stepped into the house and shut the rickety door. "Nickolas! Rina dear! I'm home!"

Silence.

Caroline raised an eyebrow. "Hello?!"

"We're in the living room Caroline!" Katarina suddenly shouted.

She hung up her coat and made her way to where her darlings were. "How about I make us so--"

"SURPRISE!"

Caroline's jaw dropped as she stared at the colourful streamers and balloons that hung all over the place...on the ceiling, on the wall, over the fireplace... "My goodness!" Tears suddenly clouded her eyes when she beheld Nick and Katarina standing next to each other in the middle of the room, not because of how wonderful they looked together, but because Nick was smiling with a tenderness that melted her heart into a puddle of happy emotions. He was smiling! She approached them with open arms. "Come here my darlings!"

They didn't hesitate to join her and she hugged them tightly. "Thank you both for such a wonderful surprise."

"It was no problem Caroline," Katarina replied warmly, "it's the least we could do for everything you've done for us..."

"Yeah," Nick continued timidly, "for taking us in when we needed someone to care."

Caroline grinned. "Seeing that beautiful smile on your face made it all worthwhile Nickolas."

"Tell me about it," Katarina murmured and then gasped, "I mean..."

And for the first time, Caroline watched in total amusement as both of them turned a light shade of red. Laughing heartily, she took their hands. "All right you two. Lead me to my cake!"

"She was so happy," Katarina gushed as she put the dishes away hours later.

Nick dried the last dish and set it down with a smile. "I can still remember that look on her face perfectly when she walked into the living room. That was priceless!"

"It was," she agreed and closed the cupboards, "but the best part of the night had to be the Monopoly tournament."

He groaned. "You had to bring that up didn't you?"

Katarina laughed. "You are such a sore loser!"

“Hey, it’s not my fault I suck at Monopoly,” he crossed his arms and frowned, “stupid boat didn’t do crap for me.”

She exploded with more fits of laughter and Nick watched adoringly. Her face radiated with emotions that, for the first time, he understood...and felt. A familiar bubbling rose from his stomach, into his throat and then erupted from his mouth. He realized in amazement that he was laughing.

Nick Carter was laughing!

In fact, he was laughing so hard that he didn’t even notice that Katarina had stopped and was now gazing at him in wonder, sheer delight...

And something else that for now would go unmentioned.

Once he finally calmed down, he held her gaze. “What?”

She looked timid suddenly. “You...you have a great laugh Nick.”

“Thank you,” he reached for her hand, “so do you.” He watched in fascination as she played with his hand, grazing his fingers with hers, intertwining them... He loved how soft her skin was... how warm her hand felt against his...

And then she let go.

“I’d better go to bed,” she murmured, “it’s pretty late.”

She never asked him to follow, but somehow, he knew that was what she wanted, and he did without question. When they stopped in front of her door, he found that his heart was pounding relentlessly against his chest. They were covered in darkness making everything much more seductive.

Intimate.

“Nick?” she whispered while gazing into his eyes.

He gulped. “Hmm?”

“I hope I hear you laugh more often.”

God what was it about her eyes that lured him, enchanted him...captured him. Dammit, he’d never been this enthralled with a girl before... “You give me many reasons to laugh Rina... I don’t know how to explain what you’ve done to me.”

Her eyes flashed with confusion. “What I’ve done?”

“Yes,” he stepped closer to her enticing body, leaving only a few inches between them. “You make me feel...like me again.”

She smiled and it was obvious, although he couldn't see it that she was blushing. If it weren't for the fact that he found it so endearing, he might feel compelled to ask if her blushing was a medical problem...

“I'm glad I could do that for you.”

He smiled playfully. “So am I.”

Katarina laughed softly and began to twirl her blond locks with her fingers. “Nick?”

“Hmm?” He moaned inwardly as he watched her tongue moisten her lips and dart back inside her mouth. He could bet that she had no idea just how much more tempting she'd become with that innocent action.

“Do you...want to kiss me?”

Nick was immediately taken aback and delighted by her sudden boldness. She'd found his weakness...and now it was getting much too hard to hold on to his sanity. “What do you think?”

She was about to look down at the ground but he reached out and gently grasped her chin, forcing her to hold his intense gaze.

“I think you do.”

“You think right.”

“So what are you waiting for?”

Without another word, Nick's hungry mouth crashed down on hers...

CHAPTER TWELVE

Oh wow...

That was all Katarina's mind could think of as Nick's mouth worked hers earnestly, thoroughly...

Breathing suddenly didn't matter anymore.

He pulled her against him and she willingly accepted the closeness, wrapping her arms around his neck and nestling her fingers in his hair. How long had it been since she'd let a guy have this kind of hold on her? She didn't know, nor did she care. All that mattered now was that Nick was pressing her tightly against his body, kissing her the way no one had ever kissed her before.

He made her feel as though she were the only girl in the world...

This is how it's supposed to be, she thought deliriously, *this is how it's supposed to feel like*. For the first time, she understood what it meant to want someone, to yearn for that someone to take her away to places she'd never been...

He drew back slightly. "Rina..." his voice trembled, "make me stop."

"I don't want you to," she replied breathlessly and caught his lips again. Why had she waited so long to do this? No answers came, but then again, her mind was too clouded to think straight anyway. Her spine tingled as his fingers gently stroked the long column up and down, up and down...

She moaned and wished she had some way of drawing that same response from him...but she had no idea how. *Why do I have to be so inexperienced?!* She moved her unsure hands from his neck, down his back... *Should I? No...well...why not?* She let herself continue her journey and her hands landed on the back pockets of his worn jeans.

He moaned.

Yes! She happily exulted when his kisses deepened even further, pulling her deeper and deeper under his spell. She felt one of his hands leave her back and suddenly she heard the sound of her doorknob rattling. He was trying to open the door.

Her heart began to pound more rapidly, but for an entirely different reason now. She knew what opening that door could lead to.

Was she ready to take that next step?

She didn't have time to think about it because now the door was open and he was gently pushing her inside. *What do I do?* She thought wildly. *What if I can't...?*

And suddenly, she realized that his lips had stopped moving against hers.

She opened her eyes and saw him staring at her with a gaze that reminded her of Kris. The only difference was, she wasn't scared of Nick. Nick wasn't Kris at all...and she wanted him.

Badly.

"Rina, I won't if you don't want to."

She nearly burst into tears at the tenderness in his voice. He was doing everything right. He was exactly what she'd been waiting for her whole life.

So why didn't she feel right about this?

"I want to," she responded with a lot more conviction than she felt and before she could say more, his warm, eager lips claimed hers for a third time and her reluctance immediately died down. Who cares if she had doubts? Life was too short for doubts. She had to learn to live life to the fullest some time...so she might as well start now...

Right?

He directed her toward her bed, his lips not leaving hers for a second, his hands caressing her back, her arms, her neck...

She trembled with contentment, although one thing was still bothering her.

His mask.

Katarina didn't hesitate as she moved her hands upward toward his face and clasped the end of the leather obstacle.

Instantly, he sucked in a breath and drew back, letting go of her completely and turning away. "Don't touch it."

Her eyes widened at the sudden animosity in his voice. "But--"

"Don't EVER touch it Rina. EVER!"

She cringed. "You don't have to yell Nick!"

"Dammit! Do you not realize what you could've done?!"

"No Nick," she replied, now feeling her own anger rise, "I don't. So why don't you explain it so I can?!"

He whirled around and she saw with disdain that his eyes had grown cold...so very cold.

"I don't have to explain anything to you!"

"Fine, then get out!"

"Ri--"

"We have nothing more to say Nick," she interrupted coolly.

He scowled. "Fine. It's no loss for me."

He stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving her alone and hurt beyond words. Katarina, not knowing what else to do, climbed into bed and wept into her pillow, wondering how she could've been foolish enough to believe that Nick had changed. Maybe it was because she knew deep down that she *had* coaxed it out of him...that she had successfully brought the real Nick up to the surface.

And now he was gone...buried once again in the impenetrable darkness of the man she loathed with every ounce of her being.

"You've been pretty quiet D. Somethin' botherin' you?"

Howie looked at A.J and shrugged. "Nothing's bothering me really..."

A.J smirked and took another sip of his cola before responding. "Spill it man."

"Well," Howie looked around the kitchen nervously and set his cup of tea down, "I met someone."

"That's great man," A.J replied enthusiastically, "it's about time I hear some good news around here."

"Sorry to disappoint you then."

"What do you mean?"

Howie sighed. "She's engaged man."

"What?!" A.J stared at him wide eyed. "You're kidding right?"

"I wish."

"Shitty deal." He patted his best friend on the shoulder sympathetically. "How'd you meet her anyway?"

"In church. I was sitting there praying and she showed up," Howie smiled, "like a beautiful vision..." his smile faded, "but she was there to book the church for her wedding."

"Damn. Lucky you huh?"

"Yeah," Howie rolled his eyes, "I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I lose one of my best friends and my dream girl's getting married. Life couldn't be better."

A.J laughed half heartedly. "Nice D."

Howie sighed. "I know."

"So, have you seen her since?"

"No.

"Why not?"

Howie shrugged. "She lives in Tampa. It's not like I'm going to drive up there with some lame excuse to see her. I don't know her address anyway."

"So? Maybe you can convince her to marry you instead of the jerk."

"How would you know if he's a jerk or not. He's probably a normal guy with a normal job...nothing like me."

"D," A.J shook his head, "don't be so down on yourself. I hate it when you talk like that. It's not like you at all."

"I know...I guess I'm just a little depressed right now."

"I still think you should go look for her. After all, there has to be a reason why you met her in the first place. The man upstairs is the one with the master plan you know."

"No way A.J," Howie disagreed vehemently, "I can't do it. It'd be too hard. I don't want to be constantly reminded of what I can't have..."

"Billie? Can I see you for a moment please?"

"Yes sir," she called out from her unusually disorganized desk and put her files back in her desk before making her way to her boss's domain. *I wonder what he wants*, she thought as she stepped into the room. It was a busy time in the office and the only time, Mr. Williams interrupted a worker was if it was important.

"Have a seat Billie."

She smiled and sat down, hoping she didn't look too stressed out. "What can I do for you Mr. Williams?"

"I need for you to do me a favor actually. I know things are awfully busy at the moment, but you're the only one I can really depend on."

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"I need you to go out of town and take care of some problems in our other branch. They've been having some trouble with counterfeit money..."

Billie raised an eyebrow. "Enough said. When and where am I going?"

"Are you sure you want to go? I mean, if you don't have--"

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of everything."

He smiled in relief. "Thank you Billie. You have no idea how much I appreciate this. I'd go myself but..."

"It's all right Mr. Williams. I understand."

"Okay. Well, you'll leave first thing tomorrow morning and the branch is in Atlanta, Georgia..."

Dammit! Where the hell is she?

Kris paced back and forth in his bedroom. Kat had been gone for far too long now and he was getting sick of waiting. He had to find her.

Now.

But how? Not even Billie knows where she's hiding...at least that's what she says, lousy tramp! He stopped in front of his mirror and smiled smugly. *She can hide all she wants...but that doesn't make her any safer...* "You think you've won haven't you kitty kat? Well, gloat now, because once I get my hands on you, you're going to wish you'd never been born."

He laughed as an idea came to him. *Yes...looks like Billie isn't so worthless to me after all. She's actually done me a favor.* Kris moved to his bed and happily stretched out on it. He'll gladly thank her for it when she gets back from her trip. He smiled gleefully. Things were finally going to swing in his favor.

He couldn't wait until tomorrow.

He was hungry.

But unfortunately, it wasn't just for food.

Nick glowered at the little stream of sunlight that poked its way through the fabric of the curtains. He hadn't slept a wink last night. Every time he closed his eyes he saw her. He felt her. "What is *wrong* with me?" he growled in frustration and rubbed his eyes. "OW!" He'd forgotten that he didn't have his leather mask on. He ripped it to shreds last night after his fight with Katarina. He sighed and leaned back against his pillows.

Things had been going so well. He willingly opened his heart to her...and for what?

Nothing.

It all came down to the mask. The stupid, stupid mask!

Why couldn't she just leave it alone dammit?!

He leaned the good side of his face against the palm of his hand. Now they were back to where they started. Strangers.

They were nothing but strangers.

He got up and moved toward his mirror, which he hadn't looked at in what seemed like forever. Slowly, he lifted the blanket that covered it and winced at the monstrosity that was reflected back at him. Anguish overwhelmed him suddenly as the realization hit him. She could never love him. One look at his face and she would be gone. He knew it. No one could ever accept him like this.

Not even a perfect angel like Katarina.

He was a fool to ever think otherwise.

His muscles tensed in rage and screaming with a ferocity that even astounded himself, he grabbed the mirror and flung it across the room, listening as it shattered into pieces, wishing that could just die.

More than anything else...

He wanted to die.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I’m going to powder my nose.”

Billie stood and excused herself from the rowdy table where she'd spent the last two hours in utter boredom. She pushed through the crowd in the jam-packed club, and into the surprisingly clean washroom, wondering if her colleagues even noticed that she'd left. She heaved a sigh of relief, the washroom a quiet escape from the screaming and incessant drinking. Her temporary co-workers were nice people, but when they were drunk...that was a whole other story. At least the problem at the branch was almost taken care of. She'd probably be heading home in a few more days.

After touching up her make up and readjusting her outfit, she smiled in satisfaction at her reflection. *I just hope nobody hits on me*, she thought warily as she left the sanctuary of the washroom, *thank God I have my engagement ring on...* She glanced around the festive atmosphere and spotted the bar a few feet away from her. *I suppose I could use a soda.* She took no more than two steps when she collided into an unseen figure.

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s no problem,” Billie replied and raked her fingers through her short blond locks before glancing up, “it was my--” Her eyes widened.

It was him!

“Billie?!”

If it weren’t for the fact that she, too, was shocked out of her mind, she would’ve laughed at the bewildered expression on his face. “Howie! What are you doing here?”

He stared at her wide-eyed for a few moments before responding. “I’m visiting Brian and Leighanne. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here on business.” Her lips curved into a grin. “What a small world huh?”

His eyes softened. “Yeah...”

Billie, suddenly realizing that her heart was rapidly beating against her chest, moved her gaze toward the ground. *What is wrong with me?*

“How are you?” he asked, breaking into her confusing thoughts.

“I’m fine. A little tired, but fine. You?”

“To be honest, a little freaked out. I didn’t think I’d see you again.” He smiled. “I guess it’s my lucky day this time.”

She laughed, feeling flattered by his words. “Well, now I can see why they call you ‘Sweet D.’”

Howie shared in her laughter and then looked over his shoulder.

Billie raised an eyebrow. “Are you here with someone?”

He shook his head vehemently. “Not really. A.J’s here with Sarah, but I lost track of them a while ago. I was kinda feeling like the third wheel.”

“Aww...” her eyes brightened with excitement, “do you think I could meet them sometime?”

“Well, I don’t see why not, but maybe some other time. Unless you want to spend the rest of the night searching for them in here.”

She crinkled her nose. “Nah. Are you leaving now?”

“Depends. Are you?” he gazed at her hopefully.

Billie shrugged. “Well, to be honest, I was going to...”

“Oh. Well, do you have a ride?”

“Actually no. My co-workers appear to be having too much fun to worry about me.”

Howie smiled. “Good, then I can drive you.”

Touched by the offer, she gladly accepted and ignored the tingling in her stomach. “Thank you very much. Um...maybe tomorrow, we can meet for lunch...if you want...”

“Are you sure your fiancé won’t mind?”

Kris... She gulped, realizing that she hadn’t really thought of him much since she got here a few days ago. “Well, he’s not here...and even if he were, he’s not the jealous type.”

Howie nodded and stayed pensive for a few moments.

“Look, you don’t have--” His grin silenced her.

“I’ll pick you up at 1:00.”

"I just don't understand Caroline." Katarina sighed as she kneaded the cookie dough. "What did I do that was so wrong?"

Caroline's blue eyes glanced at her in sympathy. "Nothing, dear. There's just...there's a lot that Nickolas has yet to explain to you. That is, if he chooses to."

She grimaced. "Yeah. Like that's ever going to happen."

"Rina, I know I've told you this countless times already, but you have to be patient with him. I'm not trying to excuse his rude behavior with you these past few days, but he's been through so much pain that neither you nor I could ever comprehend."

Katarina shook her head. "Maybe you're right Caroline, but he's not the only one who's had to live with demons. I live with them everyday of my life and you don't see me acting like the biggest jerk who ever lived." No, that wasn't going to cut it with her. She was so sick and tired of his attitude that the thought of going back to Tampa was beginning to sound like a good idea.

"I need you Rina...I need you to save me."

"Save you...?"

"I know you're the only one who can. Save me Katarina..."

"From what?"

"From myself..."

She closed her eyes, haunting memories of her dreams plagued her mind, filling her with so many questions that had no answers. Who was the man in her dreams? Why was *she* the only one who could save him...and what did he have to do with Nick? She knew there had to be some kind of connection because she kept having dreams like that every time she and Nick fought...which was a regular routine these days.

Katarina had her share of terrible things said to her by Kris since he came into her life years ago, but while those instilled fear, Nick's harsh words were like a knife slashing unremittingly into her heart. And even when she ran away from him weeping, he would scream at her retreating figure to stay out of his life, to go to hell... and worst of all,

That he hated her.

Yet, if that were the case, why is it that when she sometimes pressed her ear to his door, she could hear him sobbing...wishing for death...and wishing for her?

Tears began to blur her vision.

Why won't you just talk to me Nick...?

Nick stared at the photo in his hand while sitting nearby his bed and wished there was some way to talk to them. He needed to hear their voices, hear their laughter... He wondered how his parents were doing, if Aaron's was riding high with his career, if BJ was making her dreams come true...

If they missed him as much as he missed them.

A tear rolled down his cheek and he wiped it away roughly. He was tired of crying. A man wasn't supposed to cry so easily. Could he even consider himself a man? A beast seemed more fitting. After all, that's what Katarina had called him during their last fight.

"Just stop it Nick! Stop treating me like everything is my fault! I didn't do anything but respond to what I felt! What I thought you felt!"

"Well, I guess you thought wrong didn't you?"

"What happened to you?! Where's the Nick Carter that I got to know and...care for?!"

"NOTHING THAT'S OF YOUR CONCERN DAMMIT! NOW GET OUT OF MY ROOM!"

"Nick please!"

"GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!!!!!"

"FINE! Obviously it was wrong of me to think that you had a heart...you're NOTHING but a BEAST NICKOLAS CARTER! DO YOU HEAR ME?! A BEAST!"

She didn't know that had shattered whatever was left of his heart...she didn't know that she had hit the mark exactly where it hurt the most. She didn't know that if he revealed himself to her, that's exactly what she would see.

A full fledged beast.

He stuffed the picture of his family back into his secret spot and grimaced at the scars on his wrists. How many times had he done it and failed...he couldn't even count anymore. His last attempt had almost done the trick, but Katarina found him sprawled in his bathroom and hollered to Caroline for help. They'd succeeded in saving his life. He felt no reason to thank them.

He didn't want to be saved.

Nick rolled down his long sleeves and stood. He wondered how much longer before Katarina would go to sleep so he could roam about the house freely...without her

beautiful eyes following his every move. God he ached to feel her touch again...to feel her lips surrender to his like they had once before. But there were too many things in the way. Too many spiteful words said.

"...you're NOTHING but a BEAST NICKOLAS CARTER!..."

He hated her for being right.

"Howie? Have you heard a word I said?"

He looked at Kevin suddenly and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry man. I've just got a lot on my mind."

Kevin looked at Kristin knowingly and then returned his gaze to Howie. "Billie?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"She seems like a nice woman," Kristin commented with a smile, "she fit in really well with us."

Howie laughed. "Thanks Kristin. You know how badly I strive for your approval."

Kristin leaned back in her seat and grinned. "Ha ha."

"FLIGHT 204 FROM ATLANTA, GEORGIA TO ORLANDO FLORIDA NOW BOARDING..."

Howie stood. "Well, that's me." He hugged the happy couple.

"Take care buddy and keep in touch." Kevin smiled halfheartedly. "If you need anything don't hesitate to call."

He nodded. "Same goes for you." Howie understood the nervousness in Kevin's voice. They, along with A.J and Brian all shared the same fear that distance would change the bond that they Boys had established once again. It would never be exactly the same without Nick...but they had to manage.

It was time to start a new life.

Howie stepped through the gate and made his way onto the plane, his mind on the events of the past week. Brian seemed to be resigning himself to the fact that Nick wasn't ever going to come back. The sometimes tense atmosphere of the Littrell house seemed to dissipate once he'd stopped wracking his mind for answers. Howie was more than relieved. Brian even looked healthier. And that was much more important than searching for something that they were never going to find.

Then there was Billie.

His lips curved into a delighted smile. Lunch with her had been the most pleasant hour and a half of his life. She was a fan, but he didn't get the vibe that she was after his money or his fame, especially since she had confessed in their first encounter that she was engaged to someone else. His smile dimmed. Kris Reid was his name. Billie had told him that they'd met about two years ago at a club in Orlando and hit it off right from the start. How he wished that she would've met him instead.

She also had a younger sister named Katarina and from what he gathered from the conversation, they had an unbreakable bond. She'd shown him her picture and he smiled with the realization that beauty seemed to run in their family. Katarina looked like someone that stole hearts easily. He could almost guarantee that Nick would've fancied her.

If he were still alive.

Howie relaxed against the comfortable seat and closed his eyes, picturing Billie's smiling face, her brilliant blue eyes sparkling with tenderness and humor, her kissable pink lips...

"Would you like a drink sir?"

The stewardess interrupted his pleasing thoughts with an offer of some drinks and he opened his eyes for a moment. "No thanks." She continued on her way and sighing, Howie stared out the window. He shouldn't be doing this to himself. She was getting married for crying out loud! He had no right to want her, much less love her. But it was so hard to fight these feelings when she had everything he'd ever wanted in a woman. She was gentle, kind, outgoing...she seemed to care a lot about others...

She was perfect...except that she belonged to somebody else...

"DAMMIT!"

Kris slammed the last drawer and restrained himself from smashing a hole in his fiancée's wall. He'd been searching all week and there was nothing. Absolutely nothing that could lead him to Katarina. *Stupid bitch! I ought to dump her ass for being so useless!* But that wouldn't be a smart move at the moment. Billie was his only passage to Kat...he couldn't afford to lose it.

Where are you hiding Kitten? How long will I have to wait to see your beautiful face...your body...to feel myself inside you... He grinned. He couldn't wait for that. But for now, he had to make due with Billie and the wretched wedding. She'd be back tomorrow. Finally he'd be able to get some, he thought slyly, feeling himself stirring just from that thought. He'd wanted to go out and find some way of releasing his frustrations but he'd been too busy searching her apartment for Kat's whereabouts.

What a waste.

The phone ringing caught his attention and he answered. "Hello?" A gasp was the reply and instantly his mood brightened. With a wide grin, he began to speak. "Is that you Kitty Kat?"

"Wh...where's Billie?"

"Out of town. I've been looking everywhere for you Kat."

"Tell Billie I called."

She hung up before he could utter another word. Laughing he put the receiver back in its place. Looks like his luck hadn't disappeared on him after all. He'd heard from her...he could feel his excitement growing. Just hearing her voice made him horny...until he realized an important detail.

Billie didn't have caller I.D.

"DAMMIT!!!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She'd had enough.

Katarina stared at her reflection in the mirror furiously. Nick had pushed her buttons for the last time. She went to the closet and pulled out her suitcase. She didn't know where she was going to go, but almost anything would be better than here. Home wasn't an option either.

Kris was there.

Pushing him out of her mind, her thoughts drifted back to last night and tears pricked her eyes. Did he have to do it? Did he have to come to her room last night drunk? Did he have to yell at her that he wished he'd never met her? Did he have to press his vodka tasting lips against hers?

No.

He didn't have to do any of those things. But he did. And what made things even worse was that when his lips touched hers...she could still feel his soul melting into hers, become one heart...one mind. And then he pushed her away and turned his back to her.

"You should leave. You don't belong here. And you never will."

It was then that she realized that her Nick was gone. He was gone forever. She'd wanted to bring him back so badly, but the harder she tried, the further Nick distanced himself. Caroline had urged her to give him time. Time to do what? Hurt her and hurt her and hurt her until he killed whatever love she had left for the man she cherished more than her own life? No...she won't let him do that. She won't let him take away the fond memories of his smiling face, his cheerful laugh, his glimmering blue eyes...and his warm lips. This was the hardest thing she ever had to do, but she had to admit defeat.

The Nick Carter she knew and loved really was dead...and there was nothing more she could do to bring him back.

"Kevin, why don't you just answer the phone and tell her to go away?" Kristin said in irritation when their phone came to life again for the sixth time in less than an hour.

He slammed down his fork and stomped to the receiver and yanked it off the wall. The incessant ringing immediately stopped. "There. Problem solved."

Kristin smiled and shook her head. "You do realize that you'll have to go out and buy a new one?"

"I don't care," Kevin returned her smile and took her soft hand in his. "I promised you a day of romance and I'm going to keep it."

"But I'm worried about this whole thing with Rachel, Kev. What does she want with you?"

Kevin sighed. "I'm sure she's just after cash Kris. Nothing new." He hated lying to her, but he didn't want his wife worrying more than necessary about Rachel sinking her claws into him. He'd walk into a pit of fire before letting that woman get her hands on him and his cash.

"So...what exactly do you have planned for us?" Kristin asked, changing the subject, in a tone that sent shivers of pleasure down Kevin's spine.

He lifted her from her chair and into his arms. "Well, I actually had quite a bit planned for tonight, but I'd rather just go straight for the main course." His lips lightly grazed her curved lips.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she murmured while her fingers nestled into his dark locks.

Laughing, he lifted her into his arms and disappeared into their bedroom where they would spend the rest of the day...

Brian put the last of his clothes in the dryer and turned it on before retreating back upstairs. It was a beautiful morning and he wished Leighanne were here to share it with him, but she had left early this morning to L.A for an audition. At least A.J was here for one more day. He wouldn't feel lonely.

"Yo Rok," A.J greeted when Brian walked into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee, "so I guess we're on our own today huh?"

"Yeah," Brian smiled lightly, "what kind of mischief you wanna get into today?"

A.J laughed. "A game of golf sounds good."

"I said mischief man!"

"Nah! That's your and Nick's department..." A.J's voice faded away with the realization of what he had just said.

Brian's mood instantly plummeted.

"Geez man. I...I didn't mean..."

"It's all right. Don't worry about it." Brian had the same trouble as the rest of the guys. They always talked about Nicks as though he were still here...still alive. This strong part of him still felt that he was on the right track about Nick, but without concrete proof...

There was no way of knowing. And it was time he let go.

"So, how're the wedding plans comin' along?"

That put the smile back on A.J's face instantly. "Great. It's gonna be a wedding to remember Rok."

He chuckled. "When it comes to you man, I believe that."

"Can it dude! Anyway, Sarah was going to a fitting today before heading for the studio..." his eyes grew dreamy, "she's gonna look so beautiful..."

Brian smiled. "I'm sure she will."

But soon enough, the cheeriness in the room was gone when A.J's face fell. "I just wish Nick could be there."

Brian sighed and looked out the kitchen window at the bright sun and blue skies. "So do I."

Caroline shook her head as Nick took a sip of coffee and groaned. "This stuff is gross."

"Well, if you hadn't broken into my liquor cabinet last night, you wouldn't have to drink it now would you?"

Nick glared at her. "Why are you talking to me like that?"

She crossed her arms. "Nickolas, your attitude last night was disgraceful! I did not bring you into this house to make everyone else's lives a bitter one."

"Then kick me out. See if I give a damn!" Nick sputtered and stood.

"Nickolas! Sit down NOW!" she ordered furiously.

Looking stunned, he took a seat and kept his cold blue eyes on her. "You've never yelled at me like that before..."

"I'm not going to sit back and watch you destroy your life. Don't you see what you're doing to Katarina and yourself? Do you not see how much she adores you? Why do you insist on treating her so crudely?!"

Nick stood again, "I don't have to listen to this!"

"I SAID SIT NICKOLAS!"

He did as he was told.

"You need to tell her the truth."

"No way."

"She has a right to know Nickolas."

"Why?! Just because she 'adores' me?!" Nick scowled. "I don't think so."

"Now you listen to me. Unless you want to live *alone* for the rest of your life, I suggest you get your fanny up those stairs and you talk to her. Apologize to her. And tell her the truth! Don't shut out the only woman in this world who has the courage to care for you the way she does."

"But I--"

"I, I, I, I! It's always I!" Caroline put her hands on her hips. "For once stop thinking about yourself and think about that poor girl locked in her room who's only mistake was to fall for you!"

Nick, by now, was staring at her wide-eyed. "Fall...for me?!"

"Do you *see* any other men in this house?!"

"But what if..." his gaze moved to the floor, "what if she runs when she sees me Caroline...I couldn't take it if she..."

"Dear," she approached him and cupped his chin, forcing him to look at her, "love is about risks. If you don't take them, you're going to spend the rest of your life wondering about what could've been. And that's no way to live!"

Nick looked at her for a moment before sighing. "I've been such a jerk Caroline."

She smiled. "You don't need to tell me that darling. I saw it all. But now's the time to fix it. Now's the time to take the risk. Are you willing to do it?"

A few minutes later, Nick was standing outside Rina's door, thinking of what he was going to say. He'd made a fool of himself last night...and the night before that...

And the night before that.

He had a lot to make up for, but he hoped that Rina would give him the chance to. He didn't know what he'd do if she turned him away. He took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in Caroline. I'm just taking care of something."

He opened the door and quietly slipped inside. He saw her bent over something on her bed. He frowned. What was she doing?

"I hope you're not going to be angry with me Caroline," she spoke up suddenly, her voice laced with pain, "but I can't stay here anymore. I need to leave before things get any worse."

His eyes widened. *She can't stay...? She's leaving!*

"I just hope you can understand. I--"

"You can't go!"

Katarina gasped and whirled around. "Nick!"

His eyes moved to her bed. She was packing her suitcase. "Why are you leaving?" he asked, feeling that his heart was going to break at any moment.

She stared at him in bewilderment for a moment before her eyes narrowed. "Why do you think?"

Nick shook his head. *Why did he ALWAYS mess things up?* "I...I'm sorry Rina. I didn't mean to--"

"I don't want to hear it Nick. I'm tired of hearing your excuses." She wrapped her arms around herself. "You hurt me...so badly..."

"But I wasn't thinking Rina...I didn't realize that I was being a fool for treating you like I did. But I realize it now...and I want to make things right."

"Nick, how can you possibly do that?" she asked in exasperation.

He didn't know how to answer.

She turned her back to him. "You won't change my mind Nick. Not you or anybody else."

"But--"

"Good bye."

He had to do something. He couldn't let her leave. Even though they spent the last week fighting like crazy, she was still the only reason he felt like getting in the

morning...the only reason why he wanted to live. Deep down inside, he really was thankful that she had saved his life that day. Because what could be worse than living a life without her to share it with? He didn't want to find out.

He refused to find out.

"I'm not letting you go Rina!"

"You can't stop me!"

Desperate, Nick closed the distance between them, gently grabbed her arm and turned her around. Her eyes flickered with surprise and hesitant desire when his mouth hovered only an inch from hers. "Yes I can."

He silenced her comeback with his lips.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It should've been so easy.

All she had to do was resist. Push him as far away from her as she could. Berate him for having the audacity to ask her to stay after all the pain he'd caused her... But with his lips moving so earnestly against hers, any attempt on Katarina's behalf to send him away flew out of her mind. She couldn't resist him.

She loved him too much.

Nick's fingers threaded in her golden tresses and she pulled him closer not wanting one inch of space between them. But the moment her body pressed against his, she could feel everything. His tense muscles, his heartbeat...and the leather mask that chafed her cheek.

"Don't touch it."

"But--"

"Don't EVER touch it Rina. EVER!"

"You don't have to yell Nick!"

"Dammit! Do you not realize what you could've done?!"

Immediately her common sense returned and she began to pull away but his arms tightened on her waist. "Nick, let me go," she squirmed.

"Please Rina...don't go," he pleaded, ignoring her request and instead burying his face in her neck, "don't leave me."

The desperate tone in his voice yanked painfully at her heart and she wanted nothing more than to hold him...let her lips roam over his face, whisper sweet nothings in his ear... but now wasn't the time. Not when there was so much to be resolved. "Nick," she wrenched herself away and took a few steps back, "you can't keep doing this to me."

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He just stared at her in a way that made her want to rush into his arms again. *No. You're stronger than that Rina.* She kept her gaze on his unreadable eyes. "Do you find it amusing to play me like a--"

"That was never my intention Rina," he interrupted, suddenly finding his voice, "and you know it."

She nearly burst out laughing. "Are you kidding me?! One minute you need me, the next you hate me..." she turned away from him, "my feelings are not a toy Nick!"

"I know that. I just... I'm scared Rina."

Her resolve softened, hearing the vulnerability in his voice. "Scared of what?"

There was no answer.

Thinking he had left, she turned around with a frown on her face, but there he was, rooted in the same spot, his stature rigid. He looked so afraid. Wanting so badly to comfort him, she cautiously took his hand. His eyes flickered with surprise at the gentle gesture, but he intertwined his fingers with hers. Smiling encouragingly, she led him to the bed.

They sat on the edge, side by side, their hands clasped together. She struggled not to let out a sigh. The tiny ray of sunlight in her room enhanced the brilliant blue of his eyes and she yearned to drown in them... If only they didn't look so troubled.

"Rina, I..." he frowned and let out a frustrated sigh, "I'm not very good with words."

"I'm listening Nick. Just tell me what's in your heart," she encouraged.

More moments of silence passed between them before he spoke up again. "You deserve someone better than me."

She shook her head. "I don't want someone else. I want you Nick."

His gaze left hers and wandered to the floor. "You say that now, but you don't know."

"Don't know what?" She let go of his hand and crossed her arms. "Why can't you just tell me what's going on?"

"Because once you see me Rina. You'll run. I know it!"

Now she was confused. "See you? I don't..." her voice trailed off as it dawned on her. Her eyes widened. "Are you talking about your face?"

He kept his mouth shut.

"Nick, you don't have to be afraid," she reached for his hand again but this time, he was the one who crossed his arms.

"You don't understand."

"Then make me understand Nick! All I want is to understand!"

He lapsed into silence again and kept his gaze firmly locked on the floor.

"Nick please..."

"...I've never...in my whole life felt the way I feel when I'm with you Rina," he finally lifted his eyes to meet hers, "and I couldn't take it if you looked at me like a...freak."

"Ni--"

"Cause that's what I am. A freak."

"No Nick," she whispered and tenderly wiped the tear that strayed from his eye, "you're not a freak. You could *never* be a freak to me."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she placed a finger over his warm lips.

"I don't care about your limbs, your hair, your face...I just care about *you* Nick. Who you are in here." She pressed her palm against his heart. "Nothing is ever going to change that."

Nick reached out and cupped her face. "Promise?"

She covered his gentle hands with hers and smiled. "I promise."

Moments later, his hands left her face and hesitantly moved to his. She watched his trembling fingers as they traveled to the back of his head to unclasp the leather layer on the mysterious side of his face. A nervous flutter in her stomach caused her to take a deep breath. She'd been waiting for this moment for so long...

He closed his eyes and slowly revealed himself to her.

Silence.

Nick was stunned by her silence. By now, he would've expected a shrill scream to escape from her sweet lips, a cry of disgust...of fear.

But there was only silence.

He kept his eyes shut tightly, afraid of what he would see if he opened them. He yearned to run and hide from her beautiful face, to take shelter in Caroline's arms and feel her motherly embrace right at this very moment. He felt too vulnerable. Too afraid.

Too free.

What was going through her mind right now? Was she wondering how she could've fallen for such a horrid thing? Was she thinking of ways to rid herself of his presence in her life? His heart rammed in double time against his chest, fear and shame accumulating in his mind. Would she laugh if she knew how frightened he was? He cursed to himself. All these damn questions were driving him crazy!

And then his heart leapt to his throat as he felt her finger lightly graze the marked side of his face. Was he dreaming? Drawing up whatever courage he had left, he opened his eyes. No. It was no dream. She was still here. And she was touching his face...his wretched face. Funny, usually the slightest touch on the tender flesh sent him on a whirlwind of suffering...

But now, he felt nothing...

Nothing but her healing hands on his face...

And his soul.

How could this have happened to him?

Katarina ran her fingers over the thick red ridges that were etched on the left side of his face...the grotesque red and white blotches that plastered the skin that had once been normal. The only spot left unravished by whatever circumstance that left Nick this way were his lips. He was hardly the Nick Carter that the world new as one of the hottest stars to walk the planet...

Yet absolutely nothing had changed in her feelings for him. If anything, they grew into something much more intense...much more significant. She wanted to love this broken man. She wanted to hold him every night and take care of him...marry him. She wanted to have his children and grow old with him. They were crazy thoughts at her age, but never in her life had she felt more sure about anything.

She'd found her soulmate.

"You're not running," he suddenly murmured.

Katarina smiled at the hope that flickered in his eyes. "I see no reason to."

"You still want me...after seeing all this?"

"I think I want you even more than I did before Nick." Her hands left his face and took his hands once again. "Do you...want me?"

His lips curved into the grin that stole her heart. "Do you have to ask?"

Laughing, she let him pull her into his arms and she rested her head on his chest as he leaned back against the wall. She sighed as he stroked her hair. Bliss...that's what this was. Pure bliss. But after a few moments of tranquil silence, more questions arose. "Nick?"

"Hmm..."

"...How did that happen to you?" She immediately felt his body tense and she closed her eyes tightly, expecting him to retreat back into the 'other man' and send her away again.

"I...I don't know if I can tell you Rina. It hurts to talk about it."

"I understand," she murmured, "I don't want to bring back horrible memories for you."

He lapsed into silence again. She was itching with curiosity, but she'd rather not know anything than cause him any kind of pain. She relaxed in his arms again and felt herself drifting when suddenly his voice broke through her cloudy mind.

"But someday, I'll tell you...when the pain of remembering stops. For now, I just want to be with you."

She smiled and relished in the sensations that flowed through her body as he ran his soothing fingers up and down her arm. "Nothing would make me happier," she whispered softly before drifting into a peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Time seemed to go by so quickly for everyone and before they knew it, Christmas was fast approaching. As minds drifted to loved ones and gifts they were planning to give, no one gave a thought as to what the future held in store for them. No one bothered to wonder...

No one knew that happiness would soon be nothing more than a memory of what once was...

“So do you think Kristin will be home on time for Christmas dinner in Kentucky?”

Kevin put the receiver between his chin and shoulder and stirred the chicken soup that was simmering on the stove. “She should be. I think today’s the last day of auditions for that tour.”

“That’s good. Otherwise Mom would probably have a fit,” Brian chuckled.

Kevin smiled. “That’s Aunt Jackie for ya huh? Always wantin’ the whole family together for the holidays.”

“Tell me about it! But I can’t wait. It’s so strange to feel this kind of normalcy again.”

“Yeah, we can actually make plans to see the family without being limited by a damn schedule.” Kevin sighed. “I miss it though.”

“So do I.”

Things went silent for a moment as they both reminisced about life on the road. It was tiresome and at times, unbearable, but at the same time, none of them would trade their success for anything in the world.

“I spoke to Jane earlier today,” Brian spoke up suddenly.

“Really?” Kevin raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “How are they?”

“All right considering. But things aren't exactly festive since it’s another Christmas without Nick.”

“Yeah. I understand.”

Brian sighed. “She told me Aaron’s taken his passing the worst out of everyone. He’s even thinking on quitting the business.”

“Shit.” Kevin shook his head. “Maybe we should talk to him.”

“I told her we would probably come by to see him after the holidays.”

“Good. So...I talked to Howie earlier today.”

“Yeah, I phoned him up yesterday too. He wanted me to help kill A.J,” Brian laughed, “apparently he’s a real whack job now that the wedding’s getting closer.”

Kevin cracked up. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me!”

“I know! Oh, did he mention Billie at all to ya?”

“Yeah, he told me that he’s been thinking about visiting her in Tampa...”

“Coming!!”

Billie typed the last few words into her laptop before getting up from her desk in her room to answer the door. As she approached, she looked at her watch. *Can't be Kris...he said he'd be back tomorrow.* Curious, she opened the door and she was greeted with a bouquet of white roses in her face.

“Merry Christmas!”

Her befuddled expression soon turned to one of delight when she recognized the voice. “Howie!”

He lowered the bouquet and flashed her a warm grin. “Hi.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was in town and I thought I’d stop by and see how you were. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Are you kidding me?” Billie exclaimed and moved out of the doorway to let him in, “come on in!”

He laughed and took a few tentative steps inside.

She closed the door and watched as his eyes swept over her simple apartment. It was probably nothing compared to the place he lived in, but she loved her home anyway and was relieved to see a look of approval on his face.

“Simple, yet stylish. Just like you,” he smiled.

“Aww, cut it out,” Billie giggled and took the flowers from his hand, “are these for me?”

“Yeah...my Christmas present to you.”

Billie gasped. “Oh! But I didn’t get you anything!”

Howie shrugged. “That’s okay. I wasn’t expecting anything from you in return.”

“But still...”

“Billie, don’t worry about it.” Howie took her free hand and squeezed it gently. “I just wanted to give you something nice. Call it...a gesture of friendship.”

Friendship. Her stomach sank oddly enough, but not wanting to question why, she flashed him a grin and motioned to her sofa before retreating to the kitchen to put her flowers in the water. “Thank you for being so sweet!” she called out while fetching a vase, “I really appreciate the gesture.”

“Your welcome! Something smells good, by the way.”

She smiled. “I’m cooking.” And before she could stop herself she cleared her throat and asked, “Would you like to join me for dinner?”

“Well, I don’t want to intrude on you and your fiancé.”

My wha... oh! She frowned. *How could you forget that Billie?! Maybe you need to get a little shuteye early tonight.* She strolled back into the living room and took a seat beside him. “Actually, Kris is out of town on business. He’ll be back tomorrow.”

Howie ran his fingers through his curls and looked at her in uncertainty. “Well, only if you’re sure he won’t mind.”

“Nah. I told you already that he’s not the jealous type. Besides, like you said, we’re friends now right?”

An odd look flickered over his face before he responded. “Yeah.”

He held her gentle gaze and Billie found herself wondering what it would be like to lose herself in his eyes...and then she realized with alarm that she already was. *But there’s nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting right? It’s not like he’s interested in me or anything...*

He suddenly blinked and rose from the couch. “So, what are you making?” he asked hurriedly.

Swallowing the disappointment that wasn’t supposed to be there, she stood and plastered a smile. “Fettucini Alfredo and Fried Chicken. Sound good?”

Howie returned her smile. “Sounds great!”

“Which tree do you want?” Nick watched with a smile on his face as Katarina looked around their surroundings in great concentration. An adorable little crease formed in between her shaped eyebrows and it took a lot of willpower not to put down the ax he was holding in his hand and take her in his arms to kiss her the way he’d been wanting to all day long. Ever since the day he’d put his heart on the line and revealed the atrocity that lay beneath his leather mask, they’d spent almost every waking moment together. Talking, laughing...and stealing fervent kisses when Caroline wasn’t watching.

November had been the most blissful month of his life with his two favorite ladies at his side and he realized that thoughts of death and depression hadn’t even come to mind in weeks. *Maybe this is what happiness really is like*, he thought to himself while recalling the song A.J had penned last year during his bout with alcoholism. He looked up at the unusually clear night and his eyes fastened on one of the many stars that sprinkled across the black velvet sky. His only wish was that his friends and family could’ve witnessed the happiness that warmed the very core of his heart.

Sadly, he knew that could never be.

The feeling of Katarina’s cool hand against his stirred him from his somewhat shaded thoughts. She peered up at him with knowing eyes.

Without speaking, he pulled her into a close embrace and kissed her forehead before leaning his smooth cheek against the top of her head.

He could only hope that everyone he loved was being cared for in the same way Katarina and Caroline took care of him.

Perfect.

Rachel stared at his broad back through the crowd of strangers that moved in time to the music pulsing through the speakers. Kristin was nowhere in sight and his buddies had all gone to the dance floor. Now was the moment to strike. She sashayed her way to his table where he sat alone with a drink in hand, his eyes staring blankly at nothing. He was obviously in his own world. She laughed inwardly. *This’ll be easier than snagging Nick!*

She grinned and slickly slipped into the booth, making sure to place her hand on his thigh. “I didn’t expect to see you here Kev.”

He blinked a few times before settling his gaze on her. And then his green eyes narrowed. “Rachel, I thought I told you to leave me alone.” He removed her hand from his thigh. “I’m NOT interested.”

“I think I could change your mind,” she purred and leaned into him, pressing her chest against his arm.

“Dammit,” he slammed down his drink and stood, “when I get back I want you gone Rachel. GET LOST!” He stepped out of the booth and stalked toward the dance floor.

I knew that would work! She opened her purse and pulled out a tablet. *Good ol' roofies...work like a charm.* Smiling wickedly, she took a quick glance around the club before slipping her secret weapon into his drink. With a straw, she stirred it until the tablets were dissolved completely. Then she stood and strolled to the bar and made herself comfortable on one of the stools, making sure she had a perfect view of his table.

Now all she had to do was wait.

“Ugh! I’m stuffed!” Howie leaned back against his chair and let out a contented sigh. “Dinner was great. You’re a wonderful cook.”

Billie smiled in appreciation and stood to collect the dishes. “I’m glad you liked it.”

If only he could admit to her that it wasn’t only her food that he enjoyed. He ached to tell her that he relished being with her, that her smile took his breath away...

That he was head over heels in love with her.

His smile dimmed. But he’d never be able to tell her any of those things. She was taken and the last thing he wanted to do was scare her off. He peered at her back while she started running the water in the sink. If she couldn’t be his, then at least he could cherish her friendship. He stood. “Let me help you.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

He smiled and took a dishrag. “I insist.”

Billie rolled her eyes and smiled. “Fine.”

While she rinsed and he dried, Howie struggled to think of something to say besides his real feelings. But it was so hard when she was so close. He closed his eyes. *She’s engaged D. Engaged!*

“Are you okay?”

He opened his eyes to find Billie gazing at him in concern. “Sure. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Oh. Well, good things I hope,” she looked away, “like maybe a special lady?”

Howie cleared his throat in nervousness. *How did she know? Was he that obvious?* “You could say that.”

She raised an eyebrow. “So you do have a girlfriend?”

“...No. I’m single.”

“How come? I’m sure there are plenty of girls for you to choose from.”

“Yeah,” Howie replied dryly, “that’s the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed. “I may have plenty to choose from, but that doesn’t mean I’m stupid enough to believe that over half of them are interested in ‘normal’ Howie D and not ‘Backstreet Boy’ Howie D.”

Billie nodded in understanding. “That must be rough.”

“It is,” he looked at her wistfully, “but I know the right girl is out there somewhere. Maybe she’s even right here.” She met his gaze, surprise evident in her face and he looked elsewhere. “I mean...here in Florida...” When her gaze didn’t leave his face, he took whatever courage he had left and locked his eyes with hers. What was possibly going through her mind?

“Maybe the right girl for you is right here, Howie.”

His heart hammered like crazy in his chest. Was he misinterpreting the heated look in her eyes? Or the parting of her glistening lips? Did it matter? He took a step forward and took her hand. “Billie, I--”

“Honey! I’m home!”

Howie and Billie jumped away from each other in shock and he turned to see a tall, blond haired guy who looked about Howie’s age and wearing a business suit standing in the kitchen doorway, a smirk on his face.

“I didn’t know you had company baby.”

Billie raked her fingers through her hair and wrapped her arms around herself. “Uh, honey, this is Howie Dorough. Howie, meet my fiancé, Kris Reid.”

“Give me your keys Kevy. I’ll open the door for you.”

Kevin shook his head, trying to wipe the cobwebs that seemed to be forming in his mind. “What...keys?” he slurred.

“The keys to your house silly!” Rachel giggled and suddenly dug her hand into the deep pocket of his snug blue jeans. “Better yet, I’ll get them myself.”

“Get...a...way...Rach...” He frowned. “Where...are we?” And then he felt her hands graze what was below the belt and with faint disdain he felt himself reacting to it.

“That’s it Kevy...good boy...” She grabbed the keys and slipped it into the lock and opened the door. “Now where’s the bedroom baby?”

“Uh...” *Where am I again?* “That way,” he replied sluggishly while pointing to his left, “or maybeeee...that way...” he pointed to his right, “dunno...”

“That’s okay. We’ll find another spot to have some fun.” And without another word, she wrapped her arms around him and pressed her ruby red lips against his.

Kristin! She’s here! His heart glowed with happiness. “Kris...” he murmured between kisses, “you’re...home early...honey...”

“...Yeah. I came just to be with you.”

“Good,” he deepened the kiss and found himself being led into the living room. And then she pulled away. “Mmm...come back...here...” he stumbled backward a bit and smacked his back against a creamy white wall. *Ugh...why do I feel so weird...?*

“Come here Kevy,” she purred.

He looked up and could just barely make out her naked form. He squinted. “Kris...did you dye...your hair...?”

“Um, yeah...do you like it honey?”

A sloppy smile curved his lips. “Sure do...”

“I’m glad,” she sauntered over to him and pressed her body against his, “now, where were we?” She ran her hands over his broad chest and suddenly ripped open his shirt.

“Dunno...why don't...you show...me,” Kevin whispered hoarsely. He thought he heard her laugh. *Kris, sure is...acting strange...* And then he felt himself being pushed onto the sofa that was conveniently next to him and she positioned herself on top of him.

He remembered nothing after that.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Caroline observed the happy couple as they decorated the Christmas tree with her homemade decorations in her living room while sipping a steaming cup of Chamomile tea. Nick and Rina looked lovely together. They reminded her so much of her and her husband, Monty, when they were their age. Full of high hopes and dreams for a seemingly bright future. She smiled. They were very much in love.

She wondered if they even realized that.

They will soon enough. She set down her cup and decided to fetch more of her cookies from the kitchen. Besides, she had the distinct feeling they were waiting for a moment alone.

She would happily oblige.

Katarina glanced around the room with a satisfied grin. Holly, poinsettias, tinsel and other staple Christmas decorations definitely converted Caroline's living room into a festive wonderland. And the tree...with the twinkling lights, glimmering ornaments and the immensely bright star at the tip, it was the most beautiful tree she'd ever seen.

Of course, she was admittedly biased!

Nick's arms wrapped around her waist and she leaned back against him and sighed. "It's perfect Nick."

"I agree," he murmured, "you know, Caroline's in the kitchen..."

She giggled and turned to face him. Noting the mischievous sparkles in his lively blue eyes, she grinned. "What do you have in mind?"

"If you knew, you'd be smacking me right now."

She shook her head. "Perv."

He laughed and pulled her into a hug. "You don't have to worry about me, Rina. I'm as harmless as a kitten."

Immediately she stiffened and pulled away from his embrace. *Kitten...*

"Is that you Kitty Kat?...I've been looking everywhere for you Kat."

She hated that word. The sudden memory of Kris and his hands invading her body assaulted her mind and she began to tremble.

“Rina? Are you okay?” He rested a hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away and whirled around.

“Don’t touch me!”

Nick’s surprise was soon replaced with hurt. “Did I do something wrong?”

Katarina took a deep breath and schooled her frightened emotions. “I’m sorry Nick. I just...was thinking about something else.”

“Did I push you? I didn’t mean to...”

“No, no.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a reassuring hug. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It was just me.”

“Are you sure?” he held her tightly. “I don’t want to scare you away.”

She drew back slightly and tenderly kissed one of the ragged scars near his left eye, trying to calm the uncertainty in his voice. “You could never do anything to scare me away Nick.”

He pressed his forehead lightly against hers. “I hope so Rina. But...I just want you to know that I won’t ask you to do anything that you don’t want to do.”

How many times had she heard that one? She’d lost count long ago, but with Nick, it was a whole other story. She trusted him...and lately she found herself fighting her own corrupt needs around him.

That had never been an issue before, but she knew that although she wanted him, the only way she would give in to her desires would be if he placed a wedding ring on her finger. Call her old-fashioned. Call her crazy. But that was her decision... And she would stick to it.

“Thank you Nick, for being so understanding.”

He grinned and she couldn’t help but return his adorable smile. She could see why the girls went nuts for him. Even with his face mangled, that one smile made her insides turn to jelly. She leaned forward to kiss him when suddenly he pulled away and tossed tinsel in her face.

Her eyes widened in shock as the glimmering decorations landed in her hair and attached to her clothes. “Nick!!”

He cracked up and grabbed another handful.

Katarina's lips curved into a sly smile. "All right, Nickolas Gene. You asked for it." She grabbed the can of silly string on the table that had been sitting there since Caroline's birthday.

Nick dropped his jaw. "You wouldn't!"

"Oh...I would!" She took a few steps forward and held back her laughter.

"Uh..." he took a few steps backward and dropped the tinsel in his hand. "Bye!" He turned and made a break for the stairs.

Grinning, she ran after him. "You can't hide from me Nicky!!!"

"Damn! He showed up right when you were about to go for it?" A.J shook his head and made himself comfortable on Howie's couch. "You must've been pissed. I know I would've been."

"Are you kidding me?" Howie exclaimed as he poured his best friend a glass of cola. "It's a good thing he showed up before I did something I'd regret later!"

"But D, she practically gave you the go ahead to make your move!" He pulled out a cigarette from the pockets of his jeans and searched the other one for his lighter. "I think she digs you man."

"Yeah. That's why she's marrying someone else." Howie rolled his eyes and sat in the loveseat across from him. "And no smoking in my house!"

A.J sighed and slipped the cancer stick back in his pocket. "Seriously Howie, if Billie was giving you all those signals, she's not as happy with this Kris guy like she claims to be."

"I don't know A.J..."

"Well, what was he like anyway?"

Howie frowned. "I suppose he's the kind of guy that girls go for, but to be honest, he seemed a little full of himself. Don't take my word for it though. I'm biased."

"Hell D. You're too nice for your own good. I'll just bet the guy was a complete asshole."

"You said it. Not me."

They laughed heartily and finally, A.J decided to change the subject. "So, when are you gonna come by and visit Sarah and me in Malibu?"

Howie shrugged. "Just tell me when and I'll stop by."

"Cool." A.J took the cool glass from the coffee table and took a long sip before setting it down again. "I called Kev last night to invite him over for a few days but I just got his machine..."

Ohhh... Where the hell am I?

Kevin wanted to open his eyes, but they felt so heavy. His body ached and his head was pulsing relentlessly. *What the hell happened last night? I didn't even have any alcohol...* He moved a little and realized with shock that he wasn't alone. Someone's bare limbs were entangled with his. *Kristin? When did she get back? Wait...* He knew his wife's body...her scent, her skin...

The woman next to him was NOT his wife!

The shock was so overwhelming that he didn't hear the sound of the front door opening and light footsteps wandering into the house or his wife's cheery voice...

Until it was too late.

"KEVIN?!?"

His eyes whipped open and he sat up in alarm, ignoring his throbbing head. All he could concentrate on was his wife's face. Her stricken, pale face.

He'd never forget that look for as long as he lived.

He ripped his gaze away from hers to see who it was that lay next to him. *No...NO!*

"Oh God," she took a few steps back, "oh God...how could...how could you? How could you do this to me?!"

Kevin winced at the pain in her voice. "Kris, it's not what you think! I would never--"

"You TOLD me you didn't LIKE HER KEVIN!!"

"Kristin you have to believe me! It's not what you think!"

"Like hell it isn't!" Kristin interjected furiously. "To think I actually thought you were different...that you loved me. YOU BETRAYED ME!!" She broke into sobs. "You betrayed us..." and without another word she stalked toward the door.

"Kristin wait!" Kevin lept off the couch and wrapped a blanket around his waist. "Kris!" He chased her outside.

"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR IT KEVIN!"

"But you don't understand!" He caught her arm. "Please--"

She whirled around, her face construed in a scowl and slapped him. "DON'T TOUCH ME! I DON'T EVER WANT YOU TOUCHING ME AGAIN!"

Kevin gripped his cheek and felt his heart break in two as she stepped into her car and sped off down the street. "Kristin..." he whispered before the tears began to fall.

And Rachel laughed gleefully from the front window of the now broken home and watched as he fell to his knees in a heap of shame.

"You're not coming home for Christmas?!"

"I can't Billie. I have my reasons."

"Rina, what's going on? You never keep anything from me. Why the secrecy all of a sudden?"

That's it baby, Kris cheered on while listening with the other phone in his fiancée's bedroom, *get her to tell you where she is...and WHO she's with.*

"...Billie, you have to *promise* me you're not going to tell anybody. Not mom, not dad...and NOT Kris."

He stifled a laugh. *Go ahead honey. Give her your word...it's not like it's going to make a difference!*

"Of course I promise! You know I won't say a word to anybody."

"All right. Well, you know I've been staying in that house with Caroline."

"Yeah, the place I dropped you off at...the scary looking house near Jasper."

Jasper...Jasper, Alberta. BINGO! Kris leaned back in the bed, his grin a mile wide.

"Right. Well, I kind of lied about Caroline having a son...he's actually a...guy who was lost in the woods last year...He found Caroline's home just like I did when I wandered off from the camp site."

"Mmhmm...what exactly are you trying to tell me Rina?"

"Well, he's my boyfriend Billie."

WHAT?!?

"Boyfriend?! Are you serious?!?"

Kris listened to her cheery laughter and felt his blood begin to boil.

"Of course I'm serious! We got off to a rocky start, but we worked things out...he's so perfect Billie...I've never felt this way about anyone in my life!"

"Wow, girl, you sound like you're in loooove!!"

"I think I am Billie. And I'm so happy!"

By now, Kris had twisted the telephone cord around his hand so tightly, he felt the circulation cutting off. *DAMN HER! DAMN HER!!*

"What's his name?"

"...His name is Nick."

"Ooh! He even has the perfect name! Named after my sweet Nicky...God rest his soul."

"...Yeah...God rest his soul...Anyway, I wanted to spend the holidays with him up here. I hope you understand."

"Well, why don't you bring him down to Tampa? I can meet him."

"NO...I mean...he doesn't want to leave Caroline alone and neither do I..."

"Oh...well maybe some other time. At least I have Kris to spend Christmas with."

He'd heard enough. It took all of his strength not to slam the receiver back in its place. *Nick huh? He's the asshole who stole MY KITTY KAT. No...if she thinks for one second that she's gotten rid of me, she'd better think again. I'll have her in my bed one way...or another. But I'll be damned if I let her pussy boyfriend fuck her first!* His scowl turned into a smile that would make the devil proud.

He was going to Canada.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The stars above them twinkled like tiny diamonds against the black sky and the chilly breeze swirled around them, attempting to chill them to the bone...but they hardly paid attention. All they could feel...all they could see was each other.

Katarina gazed into his eyes, wondering how she could've survived this whole time without him. He'd become everything to her...her world, her life...

Her heart.

He caressed her soft cheek with his finger. "I love you Rina," he whispered ever so gently, sending shivers of warmth throughout her whole body and tears threatened to stream from her eyes.

"I love you too, Nick," she murmured, meaning it fully, without a doubt in her mind.

He grinned and dipped his head to tenderly meet her lips with his.

A moan escaped her lips and she pressed her body closer to his, aching for so much more, but afraid of asking for it. She pulled back and opened her eyes to gaze at him again...

And then she screamed.

"What's the matter Kitten? Isn't this what you wanted?"

Katarina stared wide-eyed as Kris grinned at her slyly while holding her tightly in his arms. "Where's Nick?! Where is he?!"

"Nick's dead and buried baby. It's just you and me now."

"No!" She tried desperately to wriggle out from his grasp, "that's not true!"

"Believe it Kitty Kat...now you're all mine...and it's time you paid for rejecting me."

"No!" she cried out as his lips assaulted her neck and he forced her to the cold ground. "Get off me Kris!! GET OFF!!"

"God you smell so good," he murmured, ignoring her cries, "I've been waiting so long for this..."

"Please!!" she begged, fear gripping her heart, "stop!!!" His hands continued roaming her body, ripping apart her clothes, taking away her dignity. "No!! NOOOOOOOO..."

"Rina! Rina! Wake up!!"

"Noooooooo!!!!!" Katarina screamed again and sat up with a start. "Oh God! Oh God!" she sobbed. "He hurt me Caroline...he hurt me so bad..." She felt her arms fall around her and she continued to sob on her shoulder.

"Shhh..." Caroline rocked her back and forth, "it's all right darling. It was just a nightmare. No one hurt you. You're right here with me...it's okay..."

After listening to her lulling words for a few moments longer, Katarina finally willed her tears to stop and she lifted her head. "I...I'm so sorry for waking you Caroline. I didn't mean..."

She shook her head. "You didn't wake me, dear. It's about 7:00 in the morning."

"Oh..." she took a deep breath and tried to rub the cold sweat off her forehead. "It was such a horrible dream Caroline," her voice shook, "Nick was there at first...and we were having such a beautiful time together...and then he disappeared...and *he* was there instead..." Her eyes began to water. "And he...he..."

"Don't say it Rina. I understand," Caroline looked at her sympathetically. "Just remember, it was only a dream. You know that louse never got what he wanted...and as long as you're under this roof, he won't."

Feeling a tad reassured, she nodded and looked around. "Is Nick here?"

"Yes, but he didn't hear a thing. He's such a sound sleeper."

"Good," she sighed, "I don't want him to worry."

"Dear, have you told him what happened to you?"

Katarina shifted her gaze to her hands. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because...I...I don't want him to treat me differently Caroline. I like it when he touches me...when he kisses me... What if I tell him and then he treats me like some kind of broken china."

"If he reacts that way, it's because he cares about you Rina. He's very worried about making a mistake with you...he doesn't want to lose you."

"He won't," she promised. "...I guess you're right. Maybe I should tell him. After all, he's been nothing but honest with me so far."

Caroline smiled. "I think that would be wise. Now, go have a nice relaxing bath and I'll fetch you some breakfast."

Katarina took a deep breath and finally managed a smile. "Okay..."

Billie wiped her eyes and decided that she would no longer cry for Kris Reid for the rest of the day. She pushed herself to get out of bed and have a quick shower. Later, as she rubbed her hair dry, she felt the tears prickling at the back of her eyes again. Christmas was two days away and HE was on his way to Canada for business that would run from tomorrow until after New Years.

He didn't even invite her to come along.

"I don't see why I can't come with you, Kris! It's the Christmas Holidays! I want to spend them with you!"

"For crying out loud Billie! It's a BUSINESS TRIP! There will hardly be time to celebrate! Besides, you have your parents! Why don't you go see them?!"

"I told you they're on a cruise until after New Years!"

"Well I'm sorry honey, but there's nothing I can do."

And then, this morning, she awoke to find that he was gone. He left her just like that.

Without even kissing her good-bye.

Billie held back her tears and changed into a fresh outfit. *I won't let him get to me. If I'm not important enough for him, I refuse to let him be important to me.* She raised an eyebrow, surprised at her attitude. After all, he'd done things like this before and she'd never been this upset. What had changed? Confused, she strolled into her kitchen to make some breakfast and almost instantly spied the piece of paper with Howie's phone number on the table.

"Give me a call some time okay? I'd like to keep in touch with you...and know how you're doing."

Without a moment's hesitation, she grabbed the paper and went into the living room. She sat down on the couch, picked up her cordless and dialed. For some reason, the moment she heard his voice, her heart leapt to her throat. "Uh, hi Howie. It's me, Billie."

"Billie? Who's Billie?"

Her heart sank. "Don't you--"

His laughter interrupted her. "I'm just kidding!"

She let out a sigh of relief and giggled. "Geez! You had me for a second there."

He chuckled again. "So, how are you?"

"I'm...okay. You?"

"Just chillin' I guess. Billie, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah...I am," her voice shook slightly, his concerned voice warming her heart, "it's just that...I'm a little sad."

"Why?"

"Well, Kris left for a business trip this morning...and he won't be back until after New Years some time."

"WHAT?!"

Billie winced.

"And he just left you there alone?!"

"Mmmhmm." She didn't trust her voice anymore.

"That lousy son--"

"What?"

"Nothing. Do you have any other plans then?"

She sighed. "No. My sister is spending the holidays with her boyfriend in Canada and my parents are on a Holiday Cruise."

"I see."

She could hear a slight hesitation in his voice and she wondered what was going through his mind.

"Billie, why don't you come down to Orlando and spend Christmas with me and my family?"

"Oh Howie, I couldn't possibly--"

"Sure you can. You just told me you're not doing anything else."

"But I don't want to intrude on your family get together..."

"Are you kidding? They'd probably be glad to know I'm bringing someone along...even though our relationship's platonic."

"I don't know Howie." She heard him sigh.

"Billie, you don't deserve to spend the holidays by yourself. I promise, my family won't bite!"

She laughed. "Well that *really* was my only concern..."

"Hey!"

They cracked up and Billie suddenly felt better about everything. Her mood was back to its original cheery state.

Thanks to Howie.

"All right. I'll go."

"Great! I'll pick you up Christmas Eve at about 5:00. Okay?"

"Sounds good..."

Brian whistled to the Christmas tunes playing on the stereo while he swept the floor in his kitchen. He couldn't wait until Christmas Eve. He'd finally be back in his hometown. He liked living in Atlanta, but his heart will always belong in Lexington. He tossed the trash into the garbage bin and had just begun to wash the dishes when he heard Leighanne's voice calling out to him over the running water. He shut off the tap. "Be there in a sec Leigh!"

He dried off his hands and met her at the doorway where she waited with tons of groceries. "Hey you," she smiled and gave him a peck on the lips before putting some of the bags in his arms.

"Hey," he returned her smile and leaned in for another kiss which she accepted gladly.

"Well, I see somebody's in a good mood today!"

Brian laughed and they headed back into the kitchen. "Yeah I am. I don't know what it is. I guess it's just the whole holiday spirit thing."

Leighanne nodded and set some of the groceries down on the table. "I'm just really happy to see you like yourself again Bri. I missed seeing you smile like that."

He also set down his bags and then pulled his adorable wife into a warm hug. "I missed me too Leigh," he sighed, "and I'm glad to be back."

"Good." She drew back and studied his face for a moment. "You know, I never asked you why your attitude changed so abruptly..."

Brian shrugged. "To be honest, I don't really know how to explain it to you. I just...get the feeling that wherever Nick is...he's happy. He's safe. That's all that's ever really mattered to me."

Leighanne smiled and caressed his cheek. "I'm so lucky to have such a devoted and caring man like you in my life, Bri."

"No," he leaned forward and kissed her sweet lips, "I'm the lucky one. I love you Leigh."

"I love you too."

Brian pulled her closer and was about to suggest that they move this tender moment into the bedroom when the phone rang, spoiling the mood. He sighed in disappointment. "The next time we get this cozy, remind me to pull the plug on the phone 'kay?"

Leighanne let out a hearty laugh as she left to answer the phone.

He regained his composure and resumed his housework, whistling again to the holiday tunes. When he finished drying the dishes and putting the groceries where they belonged, he frowned. *Leigh's been gone a long time...maybe the call's important.* He strolled into the living room and saw Leighanne hang up the phone, a grave expression on her face. Brian instantly grew wary. "Honey, what's wrong?"

She looked at him in disbelief. "That was Kristin."

Relieved, he let his guard down. "Oh! She's back in L.A now? That's great! Her and Kev will be in Kentucky for Christmas dinner after all."

"No, she won't Bri."

His frown returned. "She won't? But why?" Leighanne's next sentences left him slack jawed.

"Kristin found Kevin with another woman...and she left him..."

He sat on his bed, alone, drowning in the misery that threatened to overtake him. In his hands, he held her picture. The picture of the woman who'd stolen his heart from the moment they met. A woman who he vowed to love 'til death do them part. A woman

he'd betrayed in one stupid night. Kevin would never, ever, forgive himself for being so weak. And for betraying her with his dead friend's ex-girlfriend. *God Nick, I'm so sorry... You have to believe me buddy...*

Kristin has been gone for two days now and with each passing hour, his heart grew more and more heavy. Everywhere he went in the house, he could see her smiling face, smell her perfume, feel her presence. He loved her so much. How could he have done this to her? His guilt was suddenly overridden with fury. And with HER! His distraught green eyes narrowed. He'd never hated anyone more than he hated Rachel Malone at this very moment. Right now, it wouldn't take much for him to strangle the life out of her...wipe that smug smile off her face.

"Admit it Kevy...it was hot. You liked being with me. It was the best damn sex you ever had in your life!"

Sour liquid rose to his throat, but he shoved back down. He couldn't believe he'd actually touched that...that...tramp! His scowl deepened. The funny thing was that he didn't remember a single thing about Rachel. Not one single detail. He sighed and his eyes flooded with tears. It didn't matter now anyway. Kristin was gone.

His life was over.

Kevin just barely heard the phone ring and he absentmindedly picked it up. "Hello?" he grumbled.

"Kev? Is that you?"

He closed his eyes, his cousin's words gripping him tightly. No. It wasn't him. He wasn't the man he thought he was.

No...

It wasn't him at all.

"Kev?!"

"Yeah..."

"What happened Cuz? Kristin called here a few minutes ago and--"

"What?!" His eyes were instantly alert. "She called you? Is she okay? Do you know where she is? Can you give me the address?"

"Whoa!" Brian exclaimed, "hold up dude. I don't know where she is. She spoke to Leigh."

"Can you ask her if she knows anything?"

"Uh, I hate to say this buddy, but Leigh's not exactly impressed with you at the moment."

Kevin sighed. "I can't blame her."

"What happened Kev?" he prodded softly, "I thought you two were happy together."

"We are...we were..." Kevin felt his eyes begin to mist. "I don't know what happened Brian. I just went out with some friends to a club...I didn't even have any alcohol...and Rachel was there and she tried to seduce me again, but I remember sending her away!"

"Kev, you're not making sense to me."

"I know...I just...I don't remember what happened to me that night. All I know is that I woke up the next morning...and *she* was next to me."

"Who?"

"...Rachel." His face twisted in disgust and he fought the urge to puke what little he had eaten since yesterday.

"...You're joking."

"I wish." There was silence at the other end of the line after that and Kevin wondered if Brian had hung up on him or something. He wouldn't be surprised. It seemed like the whole world was against him at the moment.

"There's something fishy about this."

A shot of relief ran through him before comprehending his cousin's reply. His eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Let's discuss this when we have time in Kentucky. I don't want to get into details over the phone."

"I'm not going Brian."

"Kev, you have to. Don't you think the family's going to wonder what happened to the two of you?"

"They'll wonder even more when they see that Kristin's not with me." Pain pierced his heart when those words left his mouth. How was he ever supposed to go on with his life without her?

"Please Cuz...just show up. We'll talk more then, okay?"

Kevin stayed silent, unsure of what he should do, but eventually he let out a fatigued sigh and agreed. After all, since he'd lost his wife...

He may as well lose his family's respect too.

Nick's forehead was creased in concentration as he sketched. He wanted this to just right. With his pencil, he drew the lips he knew so well...the lips that tasted like honey... Just thinking about them made him want to rush out and find her. But he didn't want to interrupt her lessons. Caroline had begun teaching Katarina how to quilt a few weeks ago and he'd promised not to cause a distraction. That was okay anyway. He was busy working on his own things...like his surprise for his girl.

His girl... A broad grin brightened his abnormal face and he stopped sketching. Even though they'd been a couple for almost two months now, he still couldn't believe that she was his...that she actually wanted to be a part of his life...a part of him. Perhaps, God wasn't such a horrible man after all.

Maybe.

All he knew for certain was that he was a lucky man to have Rina in his life...and he was going to do whatever he could to make her happy. His grin still intact, he went back to work on his drawing. A few minutes later, he heard a soft knock on his door.

"Nick? Can I come in?"

Shit! "Just a sec!" He stuffed the drawing pad into his safe place and shoved his pencils inside one of his drawers before settling comfortably back on the bed. "Okay!" Katarina stepped in and his heart quickened. "Hey!"

"Hey," she mumbled and it was then that Nick realized that something wasn't right. She looked nervous...scared...

Was she scared of him? Did he do something wrong? *But what?* he wondered, *I didn't even get to talk to her much this morning...*

"Nick, we need to talk." She looked at him with troubled eyes. "There's something you need to know...about me."

He didn't like the look of foreboding in her eyes. *What could possibly be wrong? Things are going so well right now...* "What about?"

She climbed into his bed and nestled herself into his arms. "You've been completely honest with me since we became an item...and I...I want to be honest with you now."

"Rina, you're beginning to freak me out here," he moved his head so he could peer at her face, "are you..." The words stuck in his throat.

As if she knew what he was thinking, her eyes widened and she vehemently shook her head. "No...I'm not breaking up with you Nick. I lo...care about you. I'd never do that."

He relaxed slightly, but the apprehension in her eyes still didn't leave. "Then what is it?"

She stayed quiet for a moment as she put together her thoughts and then she finally opened up. "Remember the day before yesterday when I yelled at you not to touch me?"

He nodded. *So there was something more to her attitude than what she admitted.* He had the feeling, but had decided not to press the issue because she looked really shaken up.

"The reason I did that was because you said something that triggered a memory...of someone who'd once been a very important part of my life. Kris."

Instantly, he stiffened. *Kris? Who the hell is Kris?*

"He's my ex-boyfriend."

Now he was feeling a little agitated. "I reminded you of your ex? If you're trying to keep me from freaking out Rina, you're not doing a very good job..."

"Nick, just listen please?" Katarina gazed up at him, her eyes pleading with his.

He sighed and nodded.

"Kris was the first guy I thought I was in love with. He treated me like a queen, was always a gentleman and I thought I'd never meet anyone as great as he was."

Nick had the urge to find this Kris and give him a good kick in the ass, jealousy flowing through his veins.

"I later realized that I was totally wrong about him. One night, he'd asked me to...have sex with him and I told him no."

His frown deepened. He didn't like where this was going.

"Since that night, he kept pressuring me and pressuring me until finally...he lost patience and...and..."

Her voice, by now, was trembling so terribly and Nick feared the words that were about to come out of her mouth.

"He tried to force himself on me."

"WHAT?!?!?!" Nick bellowed in outrage.

Katarina pulled away from him and scurried to the other end of the bed, frightened by his reaction.

He knew he'd scared her half to death with his outburst, but right now he was too shocked, too angry. In fact, he'd never been more furious in his life.

"He RAPED you?!"

"Nn...no. He came close, but some people came to my rescue," she answered, her voice just barely above a whisper.

He got off the bed and began to pace. "I'll kill him," he ranted, "I swear if I ever see that son of a bitch, I'll kill him."

"Nick, don't talk like that please..."

"What do you want me to say?! That I'm happy the asshole nearly..." he didn't finish the sentence. He refused to finish it. "He hurt you Rina!"

"Yes, he did. But it's over now."

He kept his lips in a tight, firm line. Like hell it was. *He's lucky I'm fucking trapped in this house...mother fu--*

"Nick...can't you just hold me?"

He looked over at her tremulous body and his eyes softened at her vulnerability. He was by her side in an instant, enveloping her in his arms, wanting desperately to take away her pain. "I'm so sorry Rina," he whispered while she wept, her head against his chest, "I wish there was something I could do..."

"Just hold me Nick...and don't ever let me go...ever..."

"I won't," he vowed while stroking her hair, "I'll protect you with my life Rina...I promise."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"God, thank you for your blessings," Caroline began, her head bowed, "for bringing Nickolas and Katarina together and for leaving them in my care..."

As she continued praying, Nick glanced around the kitchen. It smelled heavenly with the Turkey freshly roasted, the potatoes, salads, steaming rice... His stomach grumbled. He was ravenous. The table was beautifully set up with a red table cloth, candles, Santa napkins...the whole works. He stifled a laugh. He had no doubt the Santa napkins were Rina's idea. His gaze wandered to her then and his heart swelled with adoration. She was absolutely stunning tonight in a simple, white cotton turtleneck and snug fitting blue jeans. She had nothing formal to wear, but it hardly mattered. She looked gorgeous in anything. Her recently curled blond main was swept up in a ponytail, making her face much more prominent...and all the more enticing. He sighed.

She was his angel on earth.

Caroline finished her prayer and Katarina lifted her head and met his gaze. She smiled knowingly and for the first time, Nick felt the urge to blush. She knew he'd been eying her.

"Well, dig in children. You have all night to tend to your heart's desires, but you need a full stomach to do so!" Caroline teased and chuckled at the mortified expressions on their faces.

"Caroline!!" Katarina exclaimed incredulously.

She continued to laugh. "Just because I'm a strong believer in the Lord, doesn't mean I don't have a sense of humor, darling."

"I shouldn't even be surprised," Nick shook his head, but eventually joined in her laughter. Soon enough, Katarina could no longer hold in her own amusement.

It was a long time before they actually ate anything.

Hours later, the food was gone and Caroline had wished them a Merry Christmas and retired to bed, exhausted after doing some last minute wrapping and cooking the dinner, leaving Katarina at Nick's mercy. They were lying on the couch in front of the fireplace with their arms wrapped around each other...staring deeply into each other's eyes...lost in the moment...

Lost in each other.

Nick let his fingers trail up and down the smooth skin of her arm and hoped he wouldn't do anything to frighten her. He didn't want her thinking about that bastard...Kris...anymore... She was his girlfriend now and would take every precaution

to protect her, care for her... love her. Yes, he loved her. With every fiber of his being. He was almost certain that he'd loved her the moment she walked into his life four months ago and more than anything he wanted to tell her that, but he couldn't find the right words... No words seemed to fit just how much he cherished the woman in his arms.

It was funny how long ago, he thought he'd never feel this strongly for anyone. He sang about this kind of emotion all the time with his best friends and yet, he had a hard time believing that kind of love existed. That you could drown in someone's love...that you could fear losing that person...that you could love someone so much without caring who they were and what they did. But it was true. Every word he'd ever sang had become believable because he was experiencing those feelings right now...with Rina.

She inched her head forward, grazing his lips and he felt it from his head, all the way down to his toes. Not wasting anymore time thinking, he caught her lips fully and deepened the kiss, needing to satisfy his hunger for her...

Even though it would take an infinite amount of lifetimes to do so.

"So, you must be excited man. Your dream came true!" A.J chuckled into the phone while winking at Sarah who stifled a giggle while she and Denise, A.J's mother, set down the dinner utensils.

"Ha,ha A.J." Howie muttered. "If it were a dream come true then why do I feel so rotten."

A.J's laughter died down and was instantly replaced with sympathy. Howie loved this woman so much and yet he could do nothing about it. He wished there was some way he could help his friend. "I'm sorry D. I guess I forget sometimes how complicated the situation is."

"That's okay man. I know you were just kidding around." He sighed. "I just wish she wasn't engaged. Maybe then..."

"But D, I don't see why you just don't go for it anyway!"

"Are you crazy? You, of all people, should know how important an engagement is!"

"Of course I know man, but the difference between me and Billie is that I'm engaged to a woman I love and respect and who I KNOW respects me." He shot a Sarah a loving glance before continuing. "From what you've told me, it sounds like Billie needs a way out...fast." He heard let out another sigh.

"She doesn't want a way out A.J. She loves him. You didn't hear how upset she was when she called me. She wanted to spend the holidays with him so badly...and the jerk just left her there alone!"

"I think the correct term is asshole, dude." His mother shot him a stern look from across the room and A.J gave her an innocent smile.

"I just have to move on. It's that simple."

A.J hated hearing Howie sounding so depressed, especially on Christmas Eve. "D, what you have to do is show her what she's missing. Show her how things could be if she'd dump his a...butt for you. Show her that you're crazy about her!"

"And if she rejects me?"

"Well, at least you know you tried man. The point is to *try* Howie. You only live once you know!"

"...I hate to say it, but you're right," Howie replied after a few moments of reflecting.

A.J smirked. "Dude, aren't I always?"

Rachel stretched out on her bed in a panther-like motion, grinning like an animal who'd caught its prey. She knew it would work. She knew she'd have Kevin right in the palm of her hand AND make Kristin blubber like a fool in the process. "How could you Kevin? Wa, wa, wa!" she mimicked mockingly and laughed until her stomach hurt. She took another sip of Champagne, her treat for her success. *Now, it'll only be a matter of time before he comes crawling to my bed, begging for another romp in the sack!* Although, technically, it would really be their first romp in the sack...

But he didn't have to know that.

He'd passed out as soon as he'd landed on top of her, just as she suspected he would, which in a way, she regretted. It would've been nice to give him a good fuck before proceeding with the rest of the plan, but oh well. That morning's events made everything all worthwhile. That hadn't been planned at all. All she wanted to do was trick Kevin into thinking they'd slept together. She set up everything to the last detail. Planting a open condom wrapper on the floor, knocking pillows, lamps and other furnishings to the ground, and best of all, ridding Kevin of his clothes and nestling his body against hers. Tricking Kristin had simply been a bonus. A very, very, pleasing bonus!

That'll teach you Kevy, she thought with a diabolical grin on her face, *nobody rejects Rachel Malone*. Her grin contorted to a sneer.

Nobody.

"Ugh! I'm stuffed!" Brian groaned as he took a seat next to his brooding cousin. They were sitting on the front porch steps of his family's house in Lexington. Brian rubbed his hands together. It was nippy out there, not to mention snowing. But they needed a place to talk without anyone listening in. He could understand Kevin's attitude. There'd been none stop questions from both the Littrells and the Richardsons for almost the entire dinner and at one point it had gotten so tense, he thought Kevin was going to explode right then and there.

Thankfully, he didn't.

He waited until *after* dinner to do that.

"I'm going back to L.A first thing tomorrow morning," Kevin uttered while watching his breath filter out of his mouth.

"All right, but right now, I want to know the whole story Kev. Start right from the beginning." Brian listened patiently as he launched into what he knew, from the first moment Rachel hit on him to the present situation. Throughout it all, his creases in his forehead deepened as he wondered how a woman could be so heartless. Had she no respect for Nick's memory or the sanctity of marriage?! Did she not realize how much damage she'd done? Brian was almost glad Nick was not around to witness the kind of woman his girlfriend really was. Well, they'd all known...but Nick had been totally oblivious to her games.

"And that's it," Kevin finished, "Rachel ruined my life and my marriage is probably over for good."

Brian could hear him trying to control his wavering voice. Kevin was probably one of the most toughest men he'd ever known, but he was never ashamed to cry when he needed to and that made him all the more admirable. Unfortunately, the situation had done more than destroyed his marriage.

It had also destroyed him.

While putting a comforting arm over his cousin's shoulders, he absorbed the information, still having that same feeling that he did in Atlanta that something wasn't right. "Kev, you said you don't remember any details about that night...so you don't even recall touching her...anything like that?"

"Hell no," Kevin replied in disgust, "and frankly I don't want to. I get sick just thinking about it."

"Look, I know it's not a pleasant thought Cuz but don't you think it's a little odd that you don't remember not even a slight detail of what happened to you after you left the club that night? Like you said, you weren't even drinking alcohol, so you didn't drink anything that could cloud your judgment."

"That's true," Kevin looked up at Brian, finally catching on to Brian's insinuations, "do you think that there's a possibility that I didn't lay a hand on her that night? That she did something to me to make me think I did?"

Brian nodded. "I wouldn't put in past her." He watched as Kevin's eyes suddenly began to glimmer with hope.

"If I can prove that she did something to me, I can get Kristin back!" He stood. "I have to find out Brian. I have to know the truth...before it's too late!"

"Your family is absolutely wonderful," Billie praised as she and Howie stepped into the warm Orlando night, "they're so polite!"

Howie smiled with pride. "Thank you. That means a lot coming from you." She returned his smile and once they had taken a seat in the patio in the backyard, he let his gaze wander over her, the sights pleasing to his eyes. Her luminous short locks were curled instead of the straight look she usually had and instead of the normal modern business woman clothes, she was dressed in a modest, red spaghetti strapped dress with a scooped neckline and a skirt that reached down to a little above her knees, showing only a bit of her long, smooth legs. She was definitely a sight to behold...

It was almost hard to believe that she didn't have a vain bone in her body, but she didn't. She was a tenderhearted person who cared deeply about others...and she trusted easily. Thinking of Kris, Howie wondered if that was also her biggest flaw. She turned to look at him then and he groaned inwardly. *Nice Howie. She caught you practically salivating for her...real smooth.*

"Is there something in my hair?" she asked and began to run her fingers through her curls.

Howie nearly laughed out loud. She didn't have a clue after all! "No... I was just noticing how...wonderful you look tonight." *You look wonderful all the time.*

"Thank you," she replied with a sweet smile and nudged his shoulder. "You don't look so bad yourself."

Howie laughed and adjusted his crisp black dress shirt. "Thanks. So, I guess you don't regret coming then?"

"No. Not at all."

"Good." His gaze moved to the ground. "I know it wasn't the Christmas you really wanted but I--"

"Oh! That's not true Howie," she took his hand and squeezed it gently, "this was even better than what I had planned. It was perfect..."

He sensed she wanted to say more but nothing else came from her tantalizing lips. And then he realized that she was still holding his hand and keeping his gaze on her, he intertwined their fingers. Her eyes changed then. He could see the flicker of something. Nervousness...confusion...maybe even desire? And then she spoke in a tone so soft, he barely heard her. "I don't know if you noticed, but there's mistletoe right over our heads."

Howie gulped and looked up. Sure enough, she wasn't joking. There it was...the infamous mistletoe. The oldest trick in the book. The funny thing was, he didn't put it there. "I...I didn't... I don't want you to think that--"

She giggled. "Don't look so flustered! I know. I saw your Mom put it out here before dinner."

"Oh," he replied with relief before laughing, "I guess my Mom has plans for my Dad."

Billie nodded and suddenly cleared her throat. "Well, I guess since we're under it, we might as well...keep tradition."

Howie knew from the look in her eyes that this was what she wanted...and boy did he ever want to...but... "Billie I--"

She silenced him when she leaned forward and softly pressed her lips against his. All reason left his mind then and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his lap and returned her kiss with all the pent up emotions that'd been building in his heart since the day they met. To hell with principles!

He'd never felt anything more right in his life.

"Nick, where are we going?" Katarina asked with a smile as they trudged through the snow covered woods.

"Not far," he replied mysteriously and guided her through the evergreens.

She gripped his hand firmly, not wanting to get lost. It was pretty dark out except for the moonlight and for some reason, it was disconcerting. But at least Nick was here. She knew he'd keep her safe. The last few hours have been heaven on earth. They'd lain in each others arm for what seemed like forever, touching, caressing, kissing... It had been so long since she'd let a man touch her the way Nick did and while

at first she'd been tense, she'd soon relaxed and let herself delight in the foreign sensations that claimed her mind and body. Who would've thought that something that had scared her to death months ago could now give her so much pleasure.

At the same time, their exploring also made her yearn to give him more and although her body screamed yes...her mind and her heart gave a resounding no. She was not ready, nor was she willing to go back on her vow of celibacy until she married. And somehow, Nick knew that...and had backed off before things could go too far. He'd been so scared to touch her at first, afraid that he'd bring up painful memories...

"Rina, I don't want to hurt you in any way. I don't want to push you..."

"You're not Nick. Just don't go too fast..."

He'd been good to her and that just made her love him even more.

"Here we are."

Snapping out of her thoughts, she looked around and her breath caught in her throat. It was beautiful! They overlooked the snow capped mountains and trees and below them was a lake, frozen by the dropping temperatures. The moonlight washed over all these features, casting a magical silhouette over the landscape. "Oh Nick...it's wonderful!"

"I thought you'd like it," he stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist, "I come out here sometimes to think...I've only seen it once in the daylight though."

Sensing the sadness about to creep into him, she turned to face him. "When?"

"The day this," he pointed to his face, "happened to me. It was the last place I spent with the fellas..." his voice trailed off.

Katarina realized then why this place had become so special to him. It was his last happy memory with his best friends...his brothers. "I know they miss you, Nick," she cupped his face, "just as much as you miss them."

"I know," he murmured and stared off into space for a few moments before returning his gaze to her face and he smiled. "Now, there's a reason why I brought you out here."

She didn't like it that she changed the subject so abruptly, but tonight was a special night. She didn't want him to be sad, so she put that one pessimistic moment out of her mind. "Really? May I ask what that reason is?"

He took her hands and locked her eyes with his. "I was making you a present for Christmas, but it's not finished yet."

"That's okay," she shrugged, "I can wait. Just being here with you is good enough."

"That maybe true, but I still wanted to give you something so that you wouldn't forget this night."

He let go of her hands and curious, she watched as he shoved his hand into his winter coat and pulled out something wrapped in red tissue paper.

"I'm sorry about the wrapping. I really suck at that sort of thing..."

She laughed. "Don't worry about it." She took it from him and unwrapped the gift. She gasped. It was a beautifully crafted mens silver necklace with a charm that simply spelled BSB. It glittered with what Katarina knew had to be diamonds. "Nick...I can't...oh my gosh!"

"I bought for myself before...well, you know, and I want you to have it. It used to be my most cherished possession, until you came along."

"Oh Nick..." she ran her fingers over the letters, "I don't know if I can accept this."

"You can and you will." He took it from her hand and unclasped it to put it around her neck.

She was still in shock once it was fastened on her. It felt so heavy...who knows how much it must've cost him! He turned her around again and inspected it. His grin broadened.

"It's perfect on you."

Tears flooded her eyes. "Thank you Nick. I promise...I'll never take it off." He pulled her into a tight embrace and Katarina closed her eyes, savoring the kiss he planted on the top of her head, thanking God for finally answering her prayers...for giving her Nick.

It took all of his willpower not to run over there and shove the bastard off that cliff. Kris watched in overpowering jealousy as Kat's lips melded to his. *That should be me...* His eyes narrowed. How many times had Nick bedded her...taken what belonged to him...? *No*, he thought, *the guy's a pathetically in love with her. He's probably waiting for the right moment.* He smirked. He could see it every time his wretched blue eyes landed on her. It made him sick. *What a loser!*

He'd been watching them and the old hag they lived with for the past few days now, through the windows of the decrepit house or when they came outside, which only seemed to be at night. Kris soon realized why. Kat's knight in shining armor was a nasty son of a bitch...at least one side of him was. He almost shit his pants when he saw it. *That* was the man she'd fallen in love with? After seeing that face, Kris knew it'd be insanely easy to steal back Kat...until he realized with disdain that this 'man' was no ordinary human.

After glimpsing his face the past few days he'd come to notice that there was something familiar about him and once he'd really thought about it, he came to the shocking conclusion that the bastard was none other than the 'dead' Nick Carter, the blond Backstreet Boy that Billie cried like a banshee for last year. He rolled his eyes. *What a baby!* But after assessing the situation, his smile had returned full force. Kat's boy toy being Nick Carter actually *would* make things even easier. If the wretched pop star was living here instead of in Florida, it had to be because he didn't want to be found.

Kris decided to let their make out fest continue without an audience and quietly crept back to his car, which he'd kept well hidden as a pile of snow a few miles from the house. Once he was out of earshot he began to whistle tunelessly, knowing his plan was flawless.

I wonder what my little kitten would do to keep her prince charming safe...

I guess I'll find out soon enough...

CHAPTER TWENTY

“You mean to tell me that you and Rachel...” A.J’s voice trailed off into the shocked silence of Kevin’s living room. Christmas was a thing of the past now and New Years was only 2 days away. A.J was having a big New Years Bash at his home in Malibu, so they all decided to see Kevin, who’d just finished explaining himself to his remaining band mates. Their shock was not surprising.

Howie closed his dropped jaw and stared at Kevin as though he were seeing a ghost. “I don’t believe what I’m hearing...”

Kevin hung his head shamefully while Brian shook his head. “He doesn’t know for sure what really happened actually.”

“But...” A.J shifted uncomfortably, “wouldn’t you know if you did something...like that.”

“That’s where the problem is,” Brian replied, “Kevin doesn’t remember a thing and we have to figure out why.”

“I need your help fellas,” Kevin finally spoke up, his voice a lot stronger than how he felt, “I need to find out what happened to me that night. I need to know if I really did cheat on my wife...”

“So, you think there’s a chance that Rachel’s messing with your mind?” Howie asked, though he knew the answer. They all did. Each and every one of them knew how girls like Rachel Malone worked.

Kevin nodded. “I know you guys find it hard to believe...”

“Not really,” A.J interjected, “Rachel’s always been the biggest bitch...whether Nick wanted to see it or not, we all knew it. I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if she set you up or something.”

“All right,” Brian stood, “so we all agree. We help Kevin find out the truth.”

“Sure,” Howie agreed, “but how?”

Kevin smiled wryly. “Let’s just say it’s going to take a lot of patience and a hell of a good stomach.”

“You’re going to L.A for New Years?!” Katarina exclaimed.

Billie gulped. “Yeah...I am.”

“With who?”

“...I’m meeting Howie there.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Billie chewed her bottom lip, trying to push away the feelings of guilt and restlessness that had been her annoying companions since Christmas Eve.

“Billie, what’s going on? You sound strange.”

“It’s nothing sis. Really, I just have a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

“...Okay.”

Needing to change the subject, Billie began to throw questions at Katarina. “So...how's it going with you and Nick?” She heard her sigh and smothered a laugh. Her sister was obviously head over heels for her boyfriend.

“I’ve never been so happy in my entire life. I love him so much Billie...I don’t think I can even begin to describe it.”

“That’s wonderful Rina. I’m so happy for you.” Tears sprang to her eyes. She wished she could say that same about Kris...but things were changing much too fast for her taste...and it all started with a simple kiss...

“Billie, I have to go now...are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine sis. I’ll talk to you after New Years all right?”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too.” She hung up and leaned back in her bed, her mind running with so many different thoughts she felt as though her head might explode. The fact of the matter was that in her entire life, she had never felt such exhilarating rushes of warmth and passion until the night she and Howie had kissed. God she could still feel his warm hands caressing her arms, his fingers running through her golden locks...she could still feel his taut muscles pressed against her... She shook her head. *I’m so stupid! I should’ve never kissed him! I’m an engaged woman! I’m supposed to marry Kris...I’m supposed to love him! I do love him!*

So why on earth do I feel like I’m trapped...with no way out?!

“I’ll be back in a while okay?” Nick smiled down at his angel while she leaned forward and pecked his lips.

“Hurry back okay,” Katarina whispered.

“I will.” He pressed his lips against hers once more before closing the door behind him. He adjusted his bulky winter coat and stepped into the snowy territory, an ax in hand. He had to go get more firewood and he had to do it fast. He hated being away from Katarina for longer than necessary. Determined, he moved to the back of house and set his mind to work. In a matter of minutes he had enough wood to last the rest of the winter. He shivered as the wind blew heavily around him, snow billowing up everywhere. It was the only time of the year that he hated here in Canada. It was too cold for his taste. He missed the warm sunshine and ocean air. He missed Tampa so much...

But there was no way he could go back.

And now, he didn't want to. Everything he needed was right here. He frowned. Everything except his family...his friends... He shook his head. *No. Don't dwell on things you can't change Nick. That was your past. It's time to think about the future.* His frown immediately contorted to a grin. *My future with Rina.* A familiar, but out of place sound interrupted his optimistic thoughts and he turned around, craning his neck.

There was nothing.

His eyes peered through the white evergreens and eventually he shrugged. *I guess I was just hearing things.* He turned back around and was just about to pick up a pile of wood when he heard it again. That noise. Frowning, he whirled around and stomped toward the sound. He moved the trees out of the way, but once again there was nothing there. *What the hell is going on?* he thought, puzzled.

Then fear quickly gripped his heart. Did somebody know he was here? Did they somehow find him?! *No...it couldn't be possible. Nobody could know...right?* He wished he could be certain, but deciding not to take any more chances, he stalked back to pile of wood, grabbed up all he could and quickly marched back to the front of the house. There, he paused, straining to hear that noise. But this time nothing came.

Sighing, he opened the door, put the wood inside and closed the door, hoping that he hadn't been discovered...

Rachel sauntered to the doorway, wondering who could possibly be ringing her doorbell. But once she peeked out the window, her curiosity immediately died down and was replaced with malevolent delight. She ran her fingers through her raven coloured locks and adjusted her tube top before opening the door. "Kevy...this is quite a pleasant surprise."

He smiled and leaned against the doorway casually. "Rach. I've been meaning to stop by for quite some time now."

She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow, not quite believing his words. "Really?"

"Yeah...I can't seem to get you off my mind."

She grinned. "No man can Kevin. That's my curse," she turned away laughing, unaware of his sudden sneer of disgust. "Follow me...I'll gladly give you an encore performance."

"That's not why I'm here Rachel," he replied as he shut the door behind him.

"Hmm..." she responded disappointedly, "so why are you here then?"

He grinned as he reached out and caressed her cheek, sending unfamiliar tingles down her spine. *What the hell was that?!* she wondered. She'd never felt something like that before...

"You see Rach, I'm a very formal kind of guy. Even though we're obviously past the point of being...modest, I thought it'd be wonderful if we could get to know each other a little better. I wanna know what you like, what you dislike..."

By now, his hands were rubbing up and down her arms and Rachel was too dumbfounded to speak. She didn't understand why his attitude had suddenly changed. More important, she didn't understand these awful heady sensations that seemed to overwhelm her as he gazed at her with those intense green eyes. She shook her head. *What the hell is the matter with me?! I must be getting sick or something. Besides, that can't be really what he wants...* She plastered a seductive smile on her face and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Come on Kevy...we can talk anytime... Right now, I want to feel you..."

"Rach, I'm serious," he pulled away and turned his back toward her, "you showed me what I was missing in my life...and I want to show you how much I appreciate that by treating you right."

"But how could you possibly--" she stopped herself. How the hell could he say that when he couldn't know what happened between them?

"What?" Kevin whirled around.

"Nothing," Rachel replied simply and suddenly grew anxious, "what are you really doing here Kevin?"

"I told you. I--"

"I don't buy it. Something's not--"

He stopped her quickly by pressing his lips against hers and Rachel quickly forgot what she was going to say.

"So..." he murmured.

"...Okay..." she replied, bewildered that she was even agreeing to such an odd request. *Well, at least he'll give me money!*

Kevin grinned broadly. "Perfect!"

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Tonight is the night.

Kris stared at the seemingly decrepit house through the looming evergreens with a wicked grin on his face. Tonight, he was going to get exactly what he wanted. Tonight, he was going to take back his lil' Kitten.

Tonight, he was going to ruin her life.

All he needed was right in the palm of his hand. He stared at the items and nearly burst out laughing. He knew his plan wasn't going to fail. He knew Kat way too well. Once she realized what kind of hold he had on her and her Prince Charming, she would drop everything and go home with him. He stuffed his ammunition back in his pocket and rubbed his hands together in anticipation...and also to warm them up. It was freezing! *The things I do for my Kitty Kat.* He smiled again. *But it'll all be worth it after tonight.* He let out a quiet chuckle.

It's gonna be a happy new year for me!!

"There's so many people here!" Billie gripped Howie's arm tightly while she stared in obvious disbelief at the extravagance of A.J and Sarah's Malibu Home and the people in it. There had to be at least 200 guests!

Howie patted her hand in reassurance, although what he really wanted to do was wrap his arms around her, embrace her, and whisper in her ear that she would be fine...that she was the most beautiful girl here. But he couldn't. Since that wonderful Christmas night, things between him and Billie hadn't been really uncomfortable, but he sensed that she was plagued with guilt over their not so platonic kiss. He wished he could feel just as guilty as she did. Unfortunately, guilt was the last thing on his mind.

"Hey guys!" Sarah greeted suddenly with a bright smile. "I'm glad you could make it Billie."

She returned her smile and Howie felt her body immediately relax.

"Thank you for inviting me. I know we don't know each other that well still..."

"It was no trouble, trust me. Besides, I have a feeling that *somebody* would've been very moody tonight if you hadn't come." She grinned knowingly at Howie.

He shifted uncomfortably and shot Sarah a pointed glance while Billie turned a light shade of red. "A.J really found his perfect match didn't he?"

Sarah laughed and took Billie's hand. "Come on. Leigh and I were about to get into some girl talk." She turned to Howie again, but this time her face was much more solemn. "A.J, Bri, and Kevin are out on the patio..."

Howie nodded in understanding. "Thanks Sar."

Billie looked at him in worry. "Are you going to be all right?"

Her concern warmed his heart and he smiled. "Yeah. Me and the guys just have to take care of something that's all." He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. "I'll see you later?"

She gave him a dazzling grin. "Okay."

"Hey," Howie greeted quietly a few minutes later as he stepped into the quieter patio of the McLean house.

Brian, Kevin, and A.J nodded in return. "Billie here with you?" Brian asked with a dim smile.

"Yeah, she's talking with Sarah and Leighanne." Howie moved next to them and they all stood next to each other silently after that, staring up at the starry sky, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Do you think he's watching us right now?" A.J asked moments later, his tone somber and thoughtful.

"I think so," Kevin ran his finger through his hair and sighed. "or maybe he's playin' some practical jokes on the angels up there..."

"Yeah," Brian continued, "just like the fish flavored bubble gum incident."

They all laughed at that, recalling that memory so vividly.

"I remember when we had that Millennium TV thing and I thought he was pretending to be Nick Washten..." Howie chuckled.

Brian grinned. "You totally ruined that for him man!"

"I know!"

Their laughter mingled with the night air like a cheerful melody as they recalled more memories of Nick and his mischievous personality...until Brian suddenly broke into a quiet sob.

“He had so much going for him... I don’t understand why he was taken from us so soon...”

Kevin put his arm over Brian’s sagging shoulders while A.J and Howie struggled with their own tears. They could pretend all they wanted that things were okay, but the truth was that they still missed their best friend...they were still grieving. There had to be a reason why they couldn’t let go of his memory...but what could it be?

“I’ll be back,” A.J whispered and disappeared back into the party.

When he returned moments later, the mood hadn’t changed, but at least Brian wasn’t crying anymore. “Here,” he passed around some glasses and poured each of them some apple cider. “Let’s make a toast. To Nick...that wherever he is, he’s safe...and happy.”

They raised their glasses and as they each took a sip the same thought passed through all their minds.

Happy New Year Nick.

He stared at his reflection, hoping he looked okay. He sighed and sat back on the bed. It was New Years Eve and Nick knew he should be feeling festive, but for some reason, he didn’t feel much like celebrating. Tonight was the last night of his first full year without seeing any of his family and friends...everyone he ever cared about. He wished he knew what they were doing this year. He wondered if they were having a big bash or if they were just spending a quiet evening with close friends.

Don’t think about it anymore Nick. You’re only going to ruin the night if you keep dwellin’ on what you can do nothin’ about. Resolved to put his solemn emotions on the backburner he stood and moved toward the door. Suddenly, an awkward feeling washed over him and he stopped, his face contorting to a frown. *What was that?* And then he realized, with sudden hope, that they were thinking of him...they hadn’t forgotten him... He closed his eyes and smiled. *Happy New Year Fellas...*

With that same smile still on his face, he walked out of his room and down the hallway toward the stairs.

"Nickolas dear! Dinner's ready!!"

"I'm coming Caroline!" He called back to her as he descended down the stairs, the smell of her cooking making his stomach growl. Feeling at peace, he made his way into the kitchen and saw that Katarina wasn't with her. "Where's Rina?"

"She went outside to grab some more firewood. We could use it. This house isn't getting any warmer." She smiled at him and winked. "I know you'd like to go out there and help her dear, but I need you to set the table."

Nick feigned his annoyance. "Ugh. I guess if I have to..."

Caroline laughed. "Get working you lazy bum!"

Just one more and that should be enough, Katarina thought to herself, grabbing one more piece of firewood and adding it to the pile she would take back into the house. As she collected the heavy pieces into her arms, she wondered how her sister was doing. She knew something wasn't right even though Billie told her otherwise...and she had the feeling that Howie was involved. More than anything, she hoped he was. That way, Kris would be out of her life forever.

She wouldn't have to live in fear for the rest of her life.

She shook her head, forcing herself to push those thoughts out of her head. It was New Years Eve for crying out loud! It's time to celebrate the coming of a New Year. 2003! It was bound to be a hell of a lot better than this year was. She grinned. At least this year, she'd have Nick. Joyful, she began to hum as she made her way back to the house.

"Leaving so soon Kitten?"

No. She stiffened. *No. No. No*. She did not just hear his voice. She DID NOT hear his voice.

"What? Aren't you going to give your brother-in-law a proper greeting?"

Shocked, she dropped all the firewood and with her heart slamming against her chest, she slowly turned...little by little...until she came face to face with her worst nightmare. *NOOOOO!!!!* She wanted to scream so loudly, but nothing was coming from her gaping mouth.

He grinned. "Why so shocked Kitten? You knew I'd find you sooner or later..."

Her stomach turned and she knew that any second she would throw up. She tightly closed her eyes. *Please let this be a dream...please don't let this be real...please God...I'm begging you...* She opened her eyes to find that he had moved...and was mere inches away from her. Just as she was about to let out an earsplitting scream, he clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Shhh...you wouldn't want your precious Nick to know I'm here would you? Besides, we have things to discuss. In private." Kris's free arm snaked around her waist and pulled her up firmly against him.

Katarina began to trembling uncontrollably and let out a few muffled screams but with the wind blowing so forcefully, no one would be able to hear.

His head leaned toward her ear. "It's been too long Kitten...much too long. And even though I'm barely touching you, I'm reacting to you so deliciously...can't you feel me Kat...?"

Oh she felt him all right. She could feel everything...especially the sour liquid that was racing up her throat. *Please not again...please not again...*

"But I suppose there'll be plenty of time for that later." He grinned maliciously. "Now, I'm going to remove my hand from your beautiful mouth okay? But if you scream, I'll take you right here and now and I know you don't want that, do you Kitten?"

She shook her head vigorously, knowing that she had no choice but to do exactly what he said.

"All right."

He slowly stepped back and Katarina immediately put plenty of distance between them, not wanting to risk the chance that he would trick her. He laughed at her then, not loudly, but quietly...making it seem much more menacing. Oh Lord, how was she going to get out of this mess? "Wh...what are you doing here? How did you...find me?"

Kris rolled his eyes. "Does that really matter Kat? What you should be worrying about is how your Prince Charming's going to take it once he finds out that you've left him."

"Left him?!" Gathering the last amount of courage she had, she raised her chin and crossed her arms. "I WILL NOT leave Nick. And certainly NOT for you Kris."

He laughed again. "Oh you will Kitty Kat. I can guarantee that you will." He slipped his hands into his pockets and fished out what looked to be an envelope of some sort. "Hmm...I wonder what this is..."

Katarina watched with sudden trepidation as he opened the envelope...

And then her heart stopped dead.

His smile was so ridiculously wide it made her cringe. *This can't be...how did he...!*

"Ah yes! Now I remember! There're the photos I took of Nick a few days ago while he was chopping up some firewood for you and the old hag!"

He knows! She realized in alarm and covered her mouth. *He knows everything!!!*

"Tsk. Tsk. I wonder what would happen if I took these photos to the media. I'm sure the whole world would love to know that Nick Carter is not dead," his smile grew unbelievably wider, taunting Katarina torturously, "that he's very much alive...and looks like *sideshow freak!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Billie searched through the dense crowd until she saw him walk back into the party with A.J, Brian, and Kevin behind him. Her forehead creased in worry. They didn't look too cheerful. As she drew near, she saw that their eyes were a little red. Were they crying? "Howie!"

He looked up and met her gaze. His eyes seemed to brighten immediately. "Billie, are you having fun?"

She studied him for a moment before nodding. "Yes, everyone's been so nice to me."

"Good to see you again Billie," Brian gave her a hug, followed by Kevin and A.J.

"I must say Howie, you've got some fine taste in the ladies department," A.J grinned and looked at Billie appreciatively.

"A.J, cut it out," Howie growled through clenched teeth.

"I'm just messin' man! Don't get your shorts all tied in a bunch!"

Billie laughed. "It's okay. I heard you were a flirt anyway."

"What can I say? I love women!"

Kevin chuckled. "If only Sarah were here to see this."

A.J scoffed. "My lady love trusts me implicitly," he replied as he walked away to find her.

Howie leaned toward Billie. "He's whipped actually, but he'll never admit it."

Billie giggled. "His secret's safe with me."

Kevin and Brian said their good-byes and left to mingle with the other guests, leaving her all alone with Howie. She pushed her nervousness out of her system. "Are you all right? All of you looked a little upset."

Howie gave her a dim smile. "Just thinking about the past that's all."

Billie knew exactly what they were referring to and her worry was replaced with sympathy. She watched how his face grew pensive again and she decided right then that she was not going to let him dwell on things that could not be changed. She took his hand. "Dance with me?"

He looked at her stunned and then he broke into an adorable grin. "Sure!"

She led him to the dance floor and knew instantly that she hadn't thought things through because the up beat song that was playing was suddenly replaced with a romantic melody and that could only mean one thing. Before she could say anything, his arms wrapped around her waist and he pulled her close to him. Immediately she was transported to Christmas Eve and their intimate contact...

His eyes focused on hers and she wanted to look away but she couldn't. Those dark eyes had already captured hers and there was no way to escape. *I don't want to escape...she thought dreamily and threaded her fingers in his curly locks, throwing caution to the wind. Was it so wrong to want someone this much? How can it be wrong when it feels so incredibly right?*

His head leaned in closer and she closed her eyes anticipating his warm lips. Instead, she heard his soft voice whispering in her ear. "I want you Billie..."

She opened her eyes and met his smoldering gaze. And without a second thought, she nodded.

Nobody noticed as they weaved their way through the crowd and ascended up the stairs toward the bedrooms...

"You can't!!!"

"Oh I can and I will Kat."

"You bastard!" Katarina cried out, anger and fear coarsing through her veins. She didn't think the situation could possibly get any worse, but it had and it would take a miracle to fix it.

Kris snickered. "Ooh, when did you get so mouthy Kitten? I like it."

"Kris, you can't let the media find Nick. You can't!!!"

"Oh? And who's going to stop me?"

"I WILL!!!" she sputtered.

It only made him laugh harder. "Give me a break!"

"What do you want Kris?! What'll it take for you to leave Nick alone?!"

He sneered. "Nothing. That blond asshole will get what he deserves for taking you away from me!"

You never had me! She kept her tears in check. She refused to let him see her cry. He'd seen her cry too many times already. But what could she do? She *had* to protect Nick...she didn't want him to get hurt... Katarina nearly cried out in anguish. She knew exactly what she had to do. It would cost her everything...her dignity, her self respect...but she had to do it.

She loved Nick too much to let Kris do this to him.

"I'll do ANYTHING Kris. Anything you want...just please don't expose Nick. I'm begging you..."

Kris grinned. "Anything huh?"

She nodded tersely, feeling ready to retch again. "Anything."

He came toward her and she closed her eyes again, hoping that it would be over quick...

"Pack your bags Kitten."

He was behind her. Katarina opened her eyes and attempted to turn around to face him, but he put his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to stay put. "What?" Her voice trembled.

"Pack your bags. You're going back to Tampa tomorrow morning with me."

"Come on Kristin," Kevin murmured softly as the phone rang for the fourth time, "pick up please..." Rachel, who'd arrived to the party an hour earlier had kept herself glued to his side almost the entire night until she finally decided to go powder her nose.

Now that she was gone, he had time to call his wife. It had taken a lot of convincing, but Leighanne finally gave him the number where he could reach her at. He heard someone pick up suddenly and his heart went to his throat.

"Hello?"

Kevin nearly burst into tears. He hadn't heard her voice in so long. "Kristin..."

"Kevin?! How did you get this number?!" she responded angrily.

"Kris, don't be mad please...I need to talk to you."

"We have nothing to say to each other."

"Kristin..." He could hear her weeping. "Don't cry Kris..."

"Damn you Kevin...don't you dare act as if you care!"

"I do honey. I miss you so much."

She didn't respond.

"Will you meet me tomorrow...so we can talk?"

"I don't think so," Kristin replied shakily.

"I'm begging you baby...please? You have to know what's going on."

"I don't want to know anything about you anymore Kevin."

He squeezed his eyes shut, her words stabbing him in the heart. "Please?..." He heard her sigh.

"All right. I will. But this means nothing Kevin. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes. I understand perfectly." He praised the Lord for at least getting the chance to see her again. "Come to A.J and Sarah's tomorrow at noon."

"...Okay."

She hung up after that and he listened to the dial tone, wishing he could've told her he loved her, but he knew that probably wasn't a good idea right now.

A genuine grin curved his lips for the first time in ages. At least he'd see her tomorrow. After weeks of wondering... waiting...

He'd see Kristin again.

Nick looked at the clock in the kitchen for what seemed like the millionth time in less than five minutes. "Rina should be back by now."

"Don't fret darling. I'm sure she'll be here soon," Caroline replied as she poured three glasses of champagne.

Then, as though on cue, he heard the door open and he stood and rushed to the foyer. His eyes immediately softened at the sight of her. "There you are!"

"Nick!" Katarina raced into his arms, nearly knocking him to the ground.

"Whoa," he laughed and held her tightly, "I missed you too." She looked up at him with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. His face contorted in concern. "Rina, are you okay?" His frown deepened. "You're trembling..."

"I...I'm fine. Just a little tired."

He kissed her forehead. "Next time, let me get the firewood okay?"

"...Okay."

"Good," his grin returned, "now I also wanted you to know that I've been a very good boy and helped Caroline set the table for dinner."

She laughed, although Nick didn't notice how forced it was. "I see...and you were hoping for some kind of reward?"

He nodded vigorously. "Hell yeah."

Katarina tilted her head upward and Nick didn't hesitate to meet her halfway and as soon as his lips met hers, his insides turned to mush. There was no doubt in his mind as to how much he loved this woman in his arms. He'd do anything for her...give her whatever she wanted...

And tonight he would tell her just that.

It was a half an hour after midnight when Katarina and Nick said goodnight to Caroline. "Sleep tight," Katarina hugged the woman tightly, knowing that after tonight she'd probably never see her again.

"Goodnight dear," she replied sleepily, "you two behave."

"We will," Nick promised and snuck a sideways glance at Katarina.

She managed an amused smile.

Caroline disappeared up the stairs and Katarina turned to face Nick. She'd never seen a more amazing smile in her life. His ocean blue eyes twinkled brightly with happiness and she was proud to know that she was the cause of it.

And tomorrow she would be the cause of his pain.

She held back tears as he took her in his arms and nestled his face in her neck. She stroked his golden hair and breathed in the scent of his shampoo and soap. It was such a masculine scent...nothing had ever smelled so heavenly. It was going to be so hard to leave.

"Rina..." he murmured and lifted his head and caught her lips in a kiss that opened the floodgate of tears that'd been building since her encounter with Kris.

He pulled back slightly, concern written all over his face. "Why are you crying?"

"I...I'm just so happy Nick...being here with you...makes me so happy."

He kissed the trails of tears tenderly before capturing her mouth again and she returned his fervent kisses with the same passion, letting herself drown in his embrace. There would never be another man for her. She knew that wholeheartedly and more than anything else in the world she wanted him to know that...

He drew back again, took her hand and led her by the Christmas Tree that glimmered brightly with colourful lights. "Stay there," he whispered and moved toward the old radio beside the fireplace and turned it on. Luckily, a beautiful slow song was just starting to play and Katarina smiled as he moved back to her and shyly asked her to dance. They fell into step perfectly, their arms wrapped around each other in an intimate embrace. Katarina closed her eyes and leaned her head on his chest, listening to the song that had suddenly become dear to her heart...

*"Sayin' I love you
is not the words I want to hear from you.
It's not that I want you
not to say it but if you only knew
how easy it would be to show me how you feel.*

*More than words is all you have to do to make it real.
Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me
'cuz I'd already know.*

*What would you do if my heart was torn in two?
More than words to show you feel...
that your love for me is real.
What would you say if I took those words away?
Then you couldn't make things new
just by sayin' I love you..."*

It was then that she realized by the way he held her, the way he gazed into her eyes, the way he listened to her every word when she spoke...Nick loved her. He'd never said it before, but the fact of the matter was he didn't need to. He proved it to her everyday.

"Rina...I--"

Before he could speak another word, she lifted her head and pressed her mouth against his. "I know Nick," she whispered between kisses, "I know...and I..."

"I know too," he responded and deepened the kiss, sending them both into a world where only they existed...

*"Now that I've tried to
talk to you and make you understand,
all you have to do is close your eyes
and just reach out your hand
and touch me...hold me close...
don't ever let me go.*

*More than words is all I ever needed you to show.
Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me
'cuz I'd already know."**

Hours later, with her suitcase packed, she left a piece of paper on her pillow...her letter to Nick. She quietly opened the door and crept to his room. He was sound asleep with a smile on his face. Katarina wept at his bedside while watching the shimmer of moonlight dance across his face. *Nick...* She reached out and brushed his bangs off his forehead and then pressed her lips softly against it. "I love you Nicky...so very much..." she whispered shakily, "don't ever forget me..."

Minutes later...

She was gone.

**"More Than Words," by Extreme.*

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Caroline yawned as she poured herself a steaming cup of freshly made coffee. It was 9:00 in the morning, the latest she'd even woken up in the entire year. She sat down at the table and dug into her breakfast, ready to start a new day and a new year. *Maybe I can coax Rina and Nickolas out of bed to help me take down the tree.* She smiled, recalling how much fun it had been to watch them bond so well while decorating the blessed tree. She'd known from the start that they belonged together. Fate and the Lord had brought Katarina Clark to her doorstep all those months ago.

She yawned again and decided that she would let them sleep a while longer. After all, they most likely went to bed much later than she did. She cleared the table after devouring her breakfast and moved into the foyer. *I think I'll go for a stroll in the woods.* With a content smile, she slipped on her boots and winter coat and stepped out into the nippy morning, unaware of the disaster awaiting her when she returned...

"Doesn't it feel good to be going home where you belong?"

Katarina ignored Kris and his wretchedly cheerful voice and stared out the window at the billowy clouds beneath her, wondering when her tears would stop raining down her pale cheeks. They'd been in the air for three hours now and with each mile flown, the further Nick was...

And the more miserable she became.

God she'd never felt so much pain...

Nick...it's only been three hours and I already feel like I can't go on without you... The tears continued to stream out of her eyes like overflowing waterfalls. *If you only knew that I didn't have a choice...* She let out a tiny whimper.

"Would you quit your damn weeping?!" Kris hissed in her ear suddenly, "it's downright pathetic!"

"Leave me alone," Katarina mumbled furiously without looking at him, "you forced me go with you...so you can PUT UP with my MOOD!"

And then she felt his hand on her thigh.

"I can think of plenty of ways to get your mind off *Nicky*."

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!!!!!" Katarina bellowed and whirled around to face him with her vision blurred by yet unshed tears. Kris stared at her in shock while everyone

turned to stare at them in blatant curiosity. Normally, she'd be embarrassed beyond belief. Today, she couldn't care less. She didn't care about anything anymore.

A stewardess approached them cautiously. "Uh, is everything all right?"

Katarina moved her gaze back to the window once again. She could feel Kris's eyes burning into her back.

"Everything is fine," he growled.

She leaned her head against the window pane and let out a dismal sigh.

Nothing would ever be 'fine' for her again.

"So this is it, isn't it?"

Howie looked at Billie and felt like his world was about to crash down over him. They were at the airport waiting for the plane to take her back to Florida...and out of his life. "I guess it is...but I don't want it to be."

Billie looked at him, her eyes glazed by emotions he felt in his heart. "Neither do I..." She reached out and caressed his cheek. "Last night was..."

He groaned inwardly. Only one word could describe last night.

Heaven.

Being in her arms...touching her...feeling her... It had been heaven. And now she was going away...

Funny, it all seemed to make logical sense last night. After hours of bodily bliss, they looked into each other's eyes and knew that their 'friendship' could not continue. They had crossed the line...tempted fate...and now it was too late to go back. Neither of them wanted to go back. And so they agreed.

They would never see each other again after their only night together...a night in which they'd discovered so much more than just wanting... It was the right thing to do.

So why did it feel so damn wrong?!

"Billie, can you promise me something?"

"Anything."

He wiped the stray tear from her cheek. "Don't you ever regret last night...because I know that I won't. Not for one single moment."

She pulled him into a tight embrace. "I promise I won't Howie."

He returned her embrace with everything he felt and planted a light kiss on her neck and let go.

"Flight 345 from Los Angeles, California to Tampa, Florida now boarding..."

She grabbed her carry on bag and gave him one more wistful look before turning away. She gave her ticket and walked through the gate.

Howie watched her until she disappeared from sight.

"You know, you were right about having a strong stomach Kev," A.J grimaced while tapping an unlit cigarette on the coffee table in his living room. "It was disgusting watching Rachel hang onto you like a damn mosquito."

"Yeah, well, at least you're not being seduced by her," Kevin muttered, repugnance on his face. Rachel had tried, yet again, to get him into bed last night.

He'd rather throw himself at a pack of wolves.

The sound of two feminine voices wafted into the living room suddenly and Kevin's heart immediately quickened it's pace. A.J patted his back and stood to meet Sarah and Kristin.

"Hey Kristin, give A.J a hug!"

She managed a mild laugh. "Hi A.J."

It was a friendly hug, but Kevin had never been more envious of A.J than he was at this very moment. Her eyes fell on his then. God she was beautiful. He ached to take her in his arms and hold her...

If only her gaze wasn't so cold.

"We'll leave you two alone," Sarah took her fiancé's hand and led him toward the door.

A.J turned his head long enough to meet Kevin's gaze. 'Good luck' he mouthed.

Kevin nodded his thanks and then focused his eyes on Kristin. "Hi."

She took the seat across from him and crossed her arms and legs. "Hello," she replied coolly.

He took a deep breath. "Kris, you have to know what's going on."

She shook her head. "I don't want to know anything. Not anymore."

"You don't understand baby. I--"

"What's there to understand Kevin?! You broke our vows!! It doesn't get much simpler than that!!"

"Dammit," Kevin stood, "I didn't break any of our vows Kristin! EVER!!"

"I SAW YOU!!! FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, I SAW YOU!!!"

"JUST LISTEN TO ME KRIS!!" He willed his voice to calm down. "Please, just listen okay?"

After a moment of uncertainty, she nodded tersely. "Okay."

He launched quickly into his story, explaining every last detail that he could remember. In truth, he didn't have concrete proof that he hadn't broken his vows to his wife, but somehow, he *knew* that he didn't. It had taken Brian's questions for him to finally listen to his gut. Something was not right. And he had to figure out why and fast. When he finished, Kristin stared at him with an intensity that normally would be gratifying...

"I don't know Kevin..."

"Kris, you *know* me. I'd never do anything to hurt you!"

By now, she was softly weeping and taking a chance, he moved to sit next to her. When she didn't move, he thanked God and reached out and gently cupped her face.

She gazed at him. "I want to believe that what you're saying is true Kevin...that you were tricked in some way by her..."

"Then do believe it honey. Give me time to find out the truth." Finding more courage, he lightly grazed her lips, causing his blood to warm up profoundly. "Please...just give me...give *us*...some time."

Her eyes, which had closed when his lips came into contact with hers, slowly opened again and locked with his. "All right."

Nick whistled happily while putting the finishing touches on Katarina's breakfast. He put the scrambled eggs on the plate next to the bacon, hash browns, and toast and grinned. He wasn't the greatest cook to ever walk the planet, but he didn't do a bad job this time around. He was certain she'd love it. He put the heaping plate on a tray followed by a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and lifted it. Carefully, he ascended up the stairs, praying that he didn't drop it all on the floor. He'd worked too hard at doing something special for his girl and he didn't want it ruined because of butterfingers.

He stopped at her door and knocked. "Rina? It's me...good morning!" His cheerful grin wavered slightly when she didn't answer. "Rina?" *Maybe she's still sleeping...* Juggling the tray with one hand he opened the door, hoping that she was fully clothed...well...he wouldn't mind if she wasn't...but that was beside the point...

But as soon as he stepped inside, his smile contorted to a worried frown.

Katarina was not in her bed.

Where did she go? He set the tray down on her nightstand and looked around the room. His heart began to pound in uneasiness. Everything looked so...vacant. Wary, he moved toward her closet. Taking a deep breath, he opened it. Nothing was there except empty hangers. *No...it couldn't be...she must've moved her clothes somewhere else...* He whirled around and quickly scanned the room. No clothes in sight...and no suitcase either. And then he spotted the white envelope on her pillow.

His body filled with dread.

Hesitantly, Nick sat on her bed and picked it up. Why did he have such a bad feeling? It was only a letter...and yet, he felt as though his life was about to change...and not for the better. With slightly trembling hands, he tore the envelope open, pulled out the piece of paper and unfolded it...

Nick,

By the time you'll be reading this, I'll be on a plane back to Tampa. I know I promised you that I'd never leave you, but I can't keep it. I wish I could tell you why, but there seems to be no point in explaining. Nothing could make this right. I didn't want to leave you. You HAVE to know that. But I didn't have a choice. Lord knows how much I wanted to stay...to have your beautiful blue eyes gaze into mine, to feel you hold me close...I don't think you'll ever know how much I cherish every moment we've ever spent together.

Please don't be angry with me Nicky. I had to do what was right. For you. Maybe someday, you'll understand. And no matter where I am, please know that I'm always thinking of you and your smiling face. Don't forget to smile Nicky...and laugh too. Smile and laugh when you think of me, when you think of us and those special moments we shared. I'll try to do the same, even though my heart is heavy without you.

*With all my love,
Rina*

For a long time, he didn't move...no blinking...no twitching... He just stared blankly at nothing, feeling himself slowly shut down...fade away... *She left me...she never cared about me...* His heart tore in two.

She never loved me!

And that's when he snapped.

In a rage, he ripped the letter in half, shoved her gourmet meal off the tray and stormed downstairs. He marched into the living room and spotted the tree...their tree...

Their damn tree!

"RINA!!!!!" He stalked toward it and ignoring the pine needles that drilled into his hands, he threw it across the room and it smashed against Caroline's paintings, which fell to the floor in a heap. "DAMN DAMN DAMN!!!!!" Not through yet, he hurled himself into the damaged tree and tore off branches, ornaments, tinsel...anything he could get his hands on, hardly caring about the blood gushing from his wounded fingers.

And once he realized that he had destroyed his only connection to his beloved, he exploded in tears and sobbed uncontrollably. This was exactly what he was afraid of. He put his trust in her...he fell for her...he bought every word...he LOVED her for crying out loud! His eyes hardened although the tears kept flowing.

He'd *never* forgive her for deserting him.

And he'd never forgive *himself* for believing.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

4 Months Later

Katarina slipped on her shades as she walked into the Florida sun from the building behind her, but the sun had little to do with her use of them. Sighing, she tossed her bag full of books in the backseat of her white convertible and stepped into the front seat. Instead of turning the ignition, she leaned her head back against the chair and willed herself to stay awake. She hadn't had a decent night's sleep for a long time now and it was really taking a toll on her both physically and emotionally. Finally pulling herself together, she started the car and began to head to Billie's. While at a red light, she stifled a yawn and tried to shake the cobwebs out of her mind. But she couldn't.

She just kept seeing him.

Hearing him.

Feeling him.

BEEP

Startled, she stepped on the gas and raced forward. *Concentrate Rina! You're driving!* For the rest of the drive, she focused on road rules and regulations, wanting to make it to her sister's in one piece. But once she was parked in the driveway, she leaned her forehead against the steering wheel and let herself be overwhelmed by the emotions running through her system.

He needed her.

He needed her so badly that Katarina could feel his anguish coarse through her veins like an incurable virus. She fought back the urge to sob. More than anything, she wanted to be on the next flight to Canada and run to him. More than anything, she wanted to see his face and feel his warmth as he wrapped his arms around her waist while gazing at her with those mischievous blue eyes...

"Rina?"

Startled yet again, her head flew up in alarm, nearing smacking into Billie's.

"Whoa!" Billie took a hurried step back. "That was too close."

"I'm sorry," Katarina murmured distractedly, "I didn't even know you were there."

"Obviously! I saw you drive up and I came down to greet you. I must've called out to you at least 5 times!" Billie's forehead creased with worry, noting her sister's slouch and tired voice. "You're still not sleeping well are you?"

"I'm fine," she replied tersely as she stepped out of the car and grabbed her books, "I just have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"A lot on your mind or just Nick."

Just hearing his name made her want to scream. "Billie, don't."

She sighed and put a comforting arm over her shoulder and they headed into the apartment complex. "Rina, if you still love him, why don't you just go see him?"

"I can't."

"Why?!"

"I WILL NOT leave Nick. And certainly NOT for you Kris."

"Oh you will Kitty Kat. I can guarantee that you will. Hmm...I wonder what this is... Ah yes! Now I remember! There're the photos I took of Nick a few days ago while he was chopping up some firewood for you and the old hag! Tsk. Tsk. I wonder what would happen if I took these photos to the media. I'm sure the whole world would love to know that Nick Carter is not dead, that he's very much alive...and looks like sideshow freak!"

"I just can't Billie. Can we just drop it?"

Her sister unlocked the door and waited until they were inside the apartment before responding. "Rina, I'm really worried about you. You just haven't been the same since you came back from Canada..."

Katarina tossed her bag on the couch and plopped down next to it. "Look who's talking. I haven't seen a genuine smile on your face since I came back either."

Billie looked away. "That's different."

"How so? You're obviously hurting as much as I am. Why don't you go see Howie?"

"Because...we had an agreement. But there's nothing stopping you!"

She nearly burst out laughing. *If you only knew...*

"Anyway," Billie moved into the kitchen, "Kris is coming over for dinner tonight."

Katarina groaned inwardly. If it wasn't one thing, it was ALWAYS something else. "Oh."

"You're welcome to join us."

I'd rather eat dirty socks. "No thanks. I think I'll just go visit Mom and Dad."

"But Kris really wants you here. He said that it'd be nice for all of us to spend some time together. He won't take no for an answer."

Her eyes narrowed. *In other words, be there or else.* But at least her innocence was still in tact. Surprisingly, Kris hadn't asked her once for her body. She often wondered why, but continued praying that he would be satisfied with just kisses. Her face twisted in revulsion. She'd lost count of how many times she'd have to let his lips touch hers. Her body trembled with fear just thinking about it. How long before he asked for more? She sighed in frustration. When was she going to be put out of her misery?! No... She wanted to live. As long as Nick was still alive, she wanted to be here...even though she'd never see him again.

She closed her eyes to elude the tears and sleep came easily...but she knew it would not last long.

Billie placed the spaghetti into the bowl of boiling water and then sat at her table and rubbed her face in frustration. *4 months...4 damn months and I still can't get over it. What's wrong with me?! I'm getting married in two months and all I can think about is Howie...* This was supposed to be the happiest time of her life and instead of being happy, she felt as though she were waiting for a death sentence. Kris irritated her more and more as the weeks flew by, not just because of his often flippant attitude but because of the odd looks he'd been giving Rina lately. Maybe she was just imagining things but she could almost swear that there was desire in his eyes. She'd called him on it once, but as usual he brushed off her observations as irrelevant and led her to the bedroom.

Speaking of the bedroom, she hadn't exactly been having the time of her life there either. Sleeping with Kris had become more of a chore than an actual period of enjoyment. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd been satisfied. Well, actually she could. But she refused to acknowledge it. It hurt too much, especially since Howie was apparently seeing someone else. Backstreet Boys weren't a group anymore, but that didn't stop the media from prying into their lives anyway. She'd learned through a newspaper article that Brian and Leighanne were working diligently with their signed artists on their label, BriLeigh Productions, A.J and Sarah were still on their honeymoon in an undisclosed location, Kevin's marriage with Kristin was on the rocks and Nick's family was busy with the Ocean's Campaign he left behind when he passed away.

And Howie?

Howie's been touring around the world for his Lupus Foundation with his sister and a pretty blond without a name. Who knows? Maybe the blond was a friend, but Billie

didn't want to delude herself. If she was Howie's girlfriend, she had to accept it. Deal with it.

Move on.

But even if she could, there was still Rina to worry about. She didn't know it, but almost every night, Billie could hear her little sister sobbing and worrying about her ex-boyfriend. Obviously, she was still in love with him, so why didn't she just find a way to work things out? She sighed. To be honest, Billie didn't even know what had happened between Nick and Rina. She came back to Tampa with Kris and merely told her that she and Nick were no longer a couple. End of story.

And who was Nick anyway? The only thing she knew about him was that he lived in a strange old house in Canada with an elderly woman. Maybe she should try to find out more about him. But how? She stood, stirred the spaghetti and went to the living room. Rina was sleeping. Billie wished that she could feel relieved, but she couldn't. Because even as she slept, Katarina was frowning...twisting and turning...murmuring that she had to save him. She had to save Nick.

But from what?!

With a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies on a tray, Caroline knocked on the door of Nick's bedroom. "Nickolas darling?"

"What?"

She winced at the coldness in his voice. "I made you some cookies. Would you like them?"

"I'm not hungry."

Sighing, she opened the door. As usual, he was sitting on his bed with his arms crossed and a glare that would scare off the devil himself.

"I said I'm not hungry."

"Well that's just too bad for you because you're eating anyway." Caroline set down the tray on his lap. After a few moments of ignoring the delectable scent, he finally picked one cookie up and took a small bite. Appreciation flickered in his eyes for a second before the emptiness returned.

"Thank you," he mumbled.

"Your welcome. Not how about coming downstairs for a while to help me paint."

"I don't feel like it."

She sat down in front of him and placed a gentle hand over his unscathed cheek. "Nickolas please, can't you accompany me at least for a while?"

"I can't," he snapped and roughly moved the tray off his lap, "I don't have the patience or the heart to sketch. Not when all I see--" he stopped.

"When all you see..." she watched as his face darkened even more.

"I don't want to. I just want to be alone."

"I know she hurt you dear but--"

"Hurt?!" Nick glared at her incredulously. "Hurt doesn't even begin to describe it!"

"I--"

"I don't want to hear it Caroline. I don't want to EVER hear her name again. EVER!!"

Knowing that he was much too angry to continue the conversation, she simply gave up and left the room. At least they'd actually talked this time. It was the first time in months that he said more than one word sentences and Caroline was grateful. But the anger was still there. Still burning within him.

Anger and love.

He could deny it as many times as he wanted, but she had far more years of wisdom than he did and she knew without a doubt that Nickolas was very much as enthralled with Rina now as he was before she left. She went into Rina's room and stood in the middle, happy that she could still feel her presence. She missed her very much and hoped that one day she would return. Not just for her sake...

But for Nick's as well.

A few minutes passed before Nick reached underneath his pillow and pulled out his prized sketch book and flipped it open again. Her face stared back at him and it took all the strength he could muster not to caress the smooth paper...

Or rip it out of his book and tear it to shreds.

But then he'd have to rip out every single page in the pad because every page was filled with her. Her smile, her eyes, her lips...he had every detail down to a tee. It was the present he'd planned to give to her on Christmas Eve, but it hadn't been

completed. He'd finished it New Years Day, hours before making her breakfast...hours after she'd fled his life forever.

He shook his head. He was pathetic. How was it possible that he could still feel so taken by her after what she'd done? Did he like being in pain? Did he like being stupid?! He should HATE her, wish her nothing but harm, curse her for leaving...

Instead, he spent his nights wondering if she was okay...if she ever thought about him...if she imagined his lips worshiping hers as he'd done so many times already. He put the pad aside and ran his fingers through his longish blond locks. Caroline hadn't trimmed his hair in months. He wished he could tell her how he was feeling...that living was unbearable, that his face ached for Rina's healing touch.

That he desperately needed her to live.

No, no, no!! Nick scowled. He didn't need ANYONE. Especially Katarina. If she had the audacity to leave him high and dry, she could go to hell and never come back. Feeling the familiar ferocity returning, he grabbed the pad of memories, shoved it back in his hiding place and proceeded to brood.

At least living with anger was better than living with the fact that he'd never see Rina's smiling face again.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Howie sighed when he got off the phone with Kevin. *Poor guy*, he thought sympathetically, *still no luck with Rachel*. He wished there was something more he could do, but other than pretend that Rachel was welcome into their circle of friends, he couldn't think of anything else that could be of benefit to his friend. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts and he went to answer it. Surprise registered on his face immediately. "A.J?!"

He grinned at him. "Hey buddy!"

Laughing, they shared a hug and Howie ushered him in. "When did you and Sarah come back from your honeymoon?"

"A few days ago," A.J replied cheerily and Howie was envious of the smitten look on his face.

"I'm guessing it was everything you hoped it would be?"

"And more!" A.J grin was brighter than the Florida Sunshine and Howie was delighted for him. "But we'll talk about it later. I just flew in to see how you're doin'."

Howie shrugged. "I'm fine. I got back from Mexico the day before yesterday with Polly and Lisa."

"Lisa?! Who's Lisa?!"

"A girl I've been seeing."

"What?!" A.J exclaimed. "Are you serious?!"

Howie nodded and shrugged again. "What's the big deal?"

A.J raised an eyebrow. "Hello? I can think of a real big deal. A big deal that starts with B and ends with E..."

"A.J don't start."

"Why the hell are you going out with someone you don't even like?!"

"I never said that!"

"It's written all over your face dude. And you know you can't play dumb with me so don't even try it."

"A.J! Billie's ENGAGED!!"

"So? That didn't stop you from...well..."

Howie turned a light shade of red. "That was just a moment of weakness."

"Hah! Moment of weakness my ass!" A.J followed him into the living room, "ten bucks says you don't regret your little rendezvous with Billie one bit."

He didn't respond.

A.J grinned in satisfaction. "I knew it!"

"Does it really matter whether I do or not man? It changes nothing. She's already made a life for herself. A life that doesn't include me."

"Only because you guys were stupid enough to make that pact of yours."

"It was the right thing to do."

A.J sighed. "You don't always have to do everything by the book D! Especially if it costs you your happiness."

"As long as she's happy then it doesn't matter how I feel."

"And if she isn't?"

Howie looked away from his friend's stare. "I don't know."

"I'm going shopping with Sarah for a few hours," Kristin said, her voice distant.

Kevin rubbed his eyes in worry. "Oh. Okay. Will I see you...later?"

"Maybe. Depends on how I'm feeling."

He took that as a no and distressed, he said good bye and hung up the phone. He was losing her. With each passing day, she grew more and more distant...and until Kevin found his proof, there was nothing he could do to stop her from permanently separating herself from him. That frightened him beyond words. *Shit*, he cursed as he dialed Brian's number, *what am I going to do?!*

"Hello?"

"Bri? It's Kevin."

"Hey Cuz! Any luck yet?"

"I wish."

"Oh man, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Kevin sat on the couch in his living room and closed his eyes. "It's not your fault that Kristin doesn't believe me. There's no one to blame but myself. Maybe I'm not trying hard enough."

"Don't lose hope yet Kev. You just need to be a little more patient, that's all."

"So, how've you been?" he asked, in dire need of changing the subject.

"Okay. Leigh and I have been workin' our butts off for our production company. Aaron came by the studio and I produced a song for his new album. It's scary how much he reminds me of Nick."

"Yeah, when I saw him in January, I'd swear I was looking at Nick himself when he was that age."

"I...I'm worried about him."

"About Aaron?"

"No...about Nick."

Oh no. Kevin groaned inwardly. *He can't be doing this again.* "Bri..."

"I'm serious Kevin. Something's wrong."

"Brian I thought you were passed this."

"I am...it's just that..." he sighed, "I don't know how to explain it to you Cuz. I just have this really bad feeling..."

"You have to help me."

Katarina stared at his worried frown and felt her frustration building. "I don't know how!!"

"Rina please...you're the only one who can help me...I need you!"

"But don't you see?! There's nothing I can do...he won't let me help you!!"

She watched as his figure became more translucent. "Wait...where are you going?!?"

"Rina..."

"No, don't go yet! Please!" She reached out for him and grabbed nothing but the fog that surrounded them. "Nick wait!! Nick!!!"

"NICK!!!!" She screamed and sat up in bed, dripping with cold sweat, her heart beating wildly against her chest.

Her bedroom door opened and Billie rushed into the room. "Rina? Are you all right?"

That was the last straw. "NO! I'm NOT ALL RIGHT!! I'LL NEVER BE ALL RIGHT UNTIL I HELP HIM DAMMIT!"

Billie's eyes widened. "Rina!"

She put her head in her hands and desperately tried to calm down. "I...I'm sorry Billie. I didn't mean to yell. I'm just...I'm just so scared for him..." She felt her sister sit next to her and wrap her arms around her.

"Why? Is Nick in some kind of danger?"

"Not the criminal kind of danger," she murmured softly.

"Huh?"

Katarina pressed her hand against her chest, feeling the heavy necklace and closed her eyes.

"I bought it for myself before...well, you know, and I want you to have it. It used to be my most cherished possession, until you came along."

She was losing him. The Nick that she knew and loved with every fiber of her being was being consumed by the hurt and anger that had ruled over him once before.

Anger and hurt that was directed at her.

I have to do something! But how could I possibly help him without Kris finding out?! At the moment, nothing came to mind. But she would think of something. She had to.

She would not let Nick destroy himself.

Howie hid behind the bushes in front of Billie's apartment complex and wondered what the hell had possessed him to drive to Tampa and see her after all this time. He smiled

ruefully. A.J. Who else could convince him to do something spontaneous and possibly stupid?

"I'm not through with you Kris!"

"So what?!"

Alarmed, Howie peered over the bushes and saw Billie racing after Kris who was heading toward one of the cars parked in the front. Her arms were flailing everywhere and her cheeks were bright red.

She was downright pissed.

"You didn't answer me Kris! Why do you keep looking at Rina like you want to eat her alive! She's 19 YEARS OLD!!!"

"I don't have time for your atrocities Billie. Call me when you decide to grow up."

Howie clenched his fists. How dare he talk to her that way?! He moved to give him a piece of his mind, but he was already in his car and speeding away from the scene. Billie stared after him, trembling from the force of her anger. Cautiously, he stepped out of the bushes and moved toward her. He cleared his throat.

Billie whirled around and her jaw dropped in shock. "Howie?!"

"Uh," he shoved his hands in his pockets. "hi."

She closed her mouth and blinked in disbelief...and then she rushed toward him and pulled him into a tight embrace. "Oh Howie..."

He closed his eyes and returned her embrace, letting her cry on his shoulder. He stroked her hair, trying to calm her. "It's all right Billie. I'm here now."

"I...I'm so...glad."

So am I, he thought as he replayed what he'd just witnessed. What kind of guy talked to a woman that way? What kind of guy was Kris Reid? Why on Earth was a girl like Billie marrying him?!

After a few more moments of wonderful closeness, she drew back and wiped her eyes. "Do you want to come in?" she asked shakily.

He nodded and held back a smile when she took his hand and lead him to her apartment. It just felt so good to see her and feel her again after so many months apart. She opened the door and he followed her in. It still looked exactly the same, except for a few new items like books on interior design that sat on the coffee table. He picked one up and flipped through it. "Are you studying something new?"

"No, I love my job and I wouldn't trade it for anything. They're my sister's. She goes to the International Academy of Design and Technology."

"Oh I see. I didn't know your sister was back in town."

Billie sat on the couch. "She came back in January...Howie, why are you here?"

He gulped and took the seat across from her. "I came...to see you."

"But I thought..."

"We were wrong Billie...I know that now. We shouldn't have made that stupid pact... It only made things worse."

"Worse?" she murmured and held his gaze.

"Worse. Because I missed you so much."

Her eyes glimmered with fresh tears. "I missed you too Howie...but..."

His heart stopped. "But what?"

"But what about your girlfriend..."

He could've smacked himself silly right now. He'd forgotten how news spread easily about his relationships since he was still considered a celebrity. She must've read or seen something about him and Lisa. "We're not together anymore."

Hope flickered in her eyes. "Really?"

He nodded. "We broke up last week after someone opened my eyes to the fact that I was helplessly in love with someone else."

Billie's hand flew to her mouth. "What?!" she exclaimed.

Before he could respond the door opened and a pretty but exhausted looking young woman strolled in with groceries in her hands.

"Billie, could you he--" She stopped in stunned silence when her eyes fell on Howie.

He stood and grabbed the bags from her hands. "I'll help you." As he set the bags of food down on the table, he could hear Billie and who he assumed was her sister whispering at a mile a minute about his visit. He smiled and shook his head.

Women.

He walked back into the living room and was not at all surprised when the whispering came to an abrupt halt. Billie's sister was now seated beside her, curiosity blatantly obvious in her eyes.

"Howie," Billie stood, "I'd like to introduce you to my sister, Katarina Clark. Katarina, this is Howie Dorough."

A shy smile turned Katarina's lips and she extended her hand. "Hello."

"Hi," he shook her hand before taking a seat again. "It's nice to finally meet you Katarina. Billie's told me a lot about you."

"Call me Rina and I've heard a lot about you too."

He smiled. "Good things I hope."

She returned his smile. "Of course."

Howie marveled at how pretty these two women were. It was almost intimidating. And he was still positive that if Nick were alive, she would definitely catch his interest. "So I guess you know about my previous career."

"Well to be honest I never followed your career as much as Billie did...and still does," she shot her a little smile, "but I've learned a few things about all of you now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah..."

Howie expected her to elaborate but she didn't.

"Would any of you like some Iced Tea or something?" Billie asked cheerily.

Howie was glad to see her smiling again. "I'd like a glass if you don't mind."

"None for me Billie, thank you."

She disappeared into the kitchen and Howie noticed a determined look on Katarina's face suddenly. He wondered why.

"Howie, do all of you live here in Florida?"

He laughed. "Now I do believe that you didn't follow my Backstreet Boys career."

She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay. In a way it's kind of refreshing to have someone not know every little detail of my life. Uh, I live in Orlando. A.J recently married, but he's been living in Malibu with his wife for a while now. Kevin lives in L.A...with his wife... and Brian lives in Atlanta with his wife as well."

"Atlanta...Georgia."

Howie laughed. "I see you know your geography."

Katarina blushed. "I must seem like a real nut case to you."

"Nah, you're just as charming as your sister." His smile died down. "Nick lived here in Tampa before he passed away. Well, actually he lived in Ruskin."

"...The small town outside of Tampa..." she replied, her voice suddenly somber.

"Yeah," Howie sighed, "he was a great guy and awesome friend."

"Yes he is...I mean," Katarina cleared her throat, "I'm sure he must've been."

Howie didn't pay much attention to her suddenly odd mood because Billie had returned to the room with a cool pitcher of Iced Tea. She looked at him and immediately frowned. "Nick."

He nodded, but put a smile on his face. "I was just telling Rina about him."

"Well, it was nice to meet you Howie," Katarina stood, "I've got to do some studying now."

Howie stood as well and smiled. "It was nice to meet you too."

She returned his smile and then turned to Billie. "I'll be in my room if you need me for anything."

Billie nodded and after Katarina was out of earshot, she let out a worried sigh.

Howie frowned. "What's wrong?"

"She's sad again."

"Why?"

"Well, her ex-boyfriend...his name was Nick as well. The name probably brought back the memories again."

"Oh no," Howie groaned, "I had no idea! I should apologize..."

"It's okay. I'm sure she knows you didn't do it intentionally."

"What happened?"

Billie filled the two glasses and set down the pitcher before responding. "I don't know. Nick lives in Canada actually, so I never even met the guy. She was...is very much in love with him, but obviously something happened that totally changed their relationship and she refuses to do anything about it."

Howie nodded. "That's too bad."

"I know."

He smiled. "You know? I was just thinking that if Nick were still alive, he'd totally be into Rina."

Billie laughed. "You really think so?"

"Sure!"

"But I thought Nick only like brunettes or something."

Howie shrugged. "There's always the occasional exception..."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

It was 1:00 in the morning when Nick emerged from his room after a fitful sleep. He rubbed his icy blue eyes and stopped in front of Caroline's room. He opened the door slightly and peered inside, making sure that she was okay. Satisfied with her tranquil breathing, he shut the door and continued his journey, past Katarina's room, which he didn't dare to glance at, and moved down the stairs with drooping shoulders and a headache that made him feel like his eyes were going to pop out of his head. He paused at the foot of the stairs and scowled as he took in his surroundings. He hated this place now. It brought nothing but pain and suffering and memories.

There were too many memories.

Memories so sweet that he ached.

With a heavy heart he crept into the living room and sat down on the couch. There, his scowl gave way to an expression of sorrow, hopelessness...despair. Months had passed and yet the pain of losing the only girl he'd ever truly loved was still as fresh as it was the first day of the wretched year. How could it not? Katarina was the only girl who made him feel like Nick Carter, the man. Not Nick Carter, Backstreet freak. His agony filled eyes surveyed the once cheery room. Sure, it still looked the same...but the light...

The light was gone.

Nick sighed and put his head in his hands, remembering all too well the precious moments they'd shared in this room.

"I...I'm just so happy Nick...being here with you...makes me so happy."

His eyes darkened. Was it that easy for her to lie? Was he that easy to fool? Nick stood and moved to the window, staring not at the trees illuminated by the moonlight, but his horrid reflection...the dark circles under his blank eyes...his shaggy locks...the scars that would forever mark his face...

And he realized just how pathetic he really had become.

Am I really letting some girl ruin my life any more than it already is...? Am I really that stupid?! He shook his head in disgust. This had to stop. A sheet of frigid ice froze over the emotions that flickered in his eyes and he retreated to his bedroom, once again letting the anger win. He would get some rest. He would wake up early in the morning and ask Caroline to cut his hair. He would hide his face from the world once more.

And he would live the rest of his pitiful existence hating the woman he loved more than his own life.

Rachel applied her ruby red lipstick, smiled at her radiant appearance and left her washroom in a hurry to see her boyfriend of 5 months. She grinned when she saw him sitting on her couch, looking relaxed and unbearably sexy. "Hi!"

Kevin's lips curled into a smile. "Hey Rach."

She sat on the couch and snuggled up against him, placing a hand on his chest and running it up and down his torso suggestively. "So...what are we doing today?"

"Well, I thought we'd just stay in an--"

That was enough for her. She pounced on him, pressing him into the couch. "Good," she grazed her lips against his, hardly aware that he stiffened in revulsion, "I wanna stay in too."

"Rachel, that's...not exactly...OW! You bit me!!"

She laughed. "Sorry...I guess I got a little carried away."

"I guess..." he sat up, forcing her to get off him.

Rachel was not amused. "Kevin! We've been seeing each other for months now! I was hoping that--"

"Rach, I told you that I like taking things slow," he smiled again, "besides, it's not like we haven't done it before right? I'm sure that you can wait a while longer."

She tamed her appetite as soon as those words left his lips. The last thing she needed was for him to figure out that she was so desperate because she HADN'T bedded him. She smirked inwardly. *But I will...all I need is a little patience...*

"Why don't you tell me about your family?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "What family? My dad left after I was born. My mom was a waitress. The end."

Kevin frowned. "Surely there's more to them than that."

"Why do you care?"

"Because...you're my girlfriend. Why wouldn't I care?"

An odd feeling stirred in her stomach then. He cared about her?! She frowned.

Kevin raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I don't understand..." She shrugged off her sudden inhibitions and forced a playful smile on her face. For now, she would concentrate on her boy toy. "Never mind. How about if we go out for lunch today...?"

Brian answered on the first ring. "Any change?"

"No, nothing's working Brian! I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. I can only throw up so many times..."

He swallowed a chuckle. The issue was too serious and he knew that Kevin wasn't kidding around. "She hasn't even slipped once?"

"No...but she sure as hell is getting more antsy to get me to sleep with her again...well, maybe not again...I don't know! Shit this is bad!"

Brian shook his head. "Kevin, don't you quit now. You need to get Kristin back."

"That's just it Brian...this has gone on for so long that I'm beginning to think that even if I find out the truth it'll be too late."

"She loves you man. I know she does."

"I used to think so...but lately she's just been so distant." His voice wavered. "I haven't even seen her lately. She keeps making up excuses not to meet me..."

Brian hated to admit it, but that didn't sound good. Not one bit. "Kevin, just...just hang in there okay? You can't let Rachel win. You're not a quitter." He heard him sigh.

"I'm gonna keep tryin' Cuz. I'll give it everything I've got, but I can't help wondering if it's all in vain..."

"I knew it was a good idea to see her!" A.J. exclaimed in satisfaction while grinning at Sarah from across the bedroom.

She laughed.

"For once, you were right A.J.," Howie chuckled, "but if you tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it!"

"Whatever dude! So, what's the plan now?"

"Well, she's going to break off the engagement."

"It's about damn time!" A.J followed Sarah, their hands intertwined, downstairs and into the kitchen, where their adorable dogs were waiting with tails fiercely wagging. "This Kris guy sounds like a real prick."

"You're telling me! I've never wanted to physically hurt anyone this badly in my entire life!"

It was A.J's turn to chuckle. "Well isn't that interesting? Sweet D wants to kick some ass!"

"*Anyway*, Billie's coming to Orlando tonight and we're going out for dinner and then dancing."

"And of course, you'll be heading back to your place for some boo-tay!"

"A.J!" Both Howie and Sarah exclaimed at the same time, causing him to laugh his head off.

"I'm just messin'! Geez you two..."

"Are you sure you're going to be all right here all by yourself?" Billie eyed her sister warily.

Katarina rolled her eyes. "Billie! I'm going to be 20 years old in a matter of days! I think I can handle being on my own for a few hours!"

"I know you can. It's just that you've been so out of it lately..."

"I'll be fine. Go have fun with Howie. You both deserve it."

Billie sighed. "All right..." she cleared her throat, "uh...I might not come...home tonight..."

Katarina smiled. "You don't have to explain. Just have fun and...uh...well, you know."

They laughed and shared a bear hug. "Love you sis."

"Love you too."

As soon as she was out the door, Katarina locked it and retreated to Billie's bedroom. *Okay Rina...think. Where was the last time you saw it...* She began to search through her sister's belongings, hoping to God that she would find what she was looking for. Nick's life was depending on this. After rummaging through some pictures of Kris, she finally found it. Her address book. She sat down on the bed and took a deep breath. *Please let it be in here...* She opened the book and immediately went to the L's.

Larrobby...Landon...Lincoln...Lindon...Littrell...LITTRELL! She nearly collapsed with relief. *Wait*, she frowned, *that is his last name right?* Just in case, she found the 'official book' that Billie bought a long time ago and flipped through it. Once again, relief settled in her system. Yes, his last name was Littrell.

She jotted down the address on a separate sheet of paper, put the address book back where she found it and flew into her own bedroom and grabbed her telephone. Minutes later, she had a seat on the plane leaving for Atlanta, Georgia at 9:00 a.m tomorrow morning. Katarina gulped. She had made a promise to Nick that no one would ever know his secret...but she knew that it was a secret that had to be broken. He was slipping away. She could feel it more and more everyday and since she couldn't go to him...she would find someone else who could. Someone who could influence him to turn his life around, be the Nick Carter that she loved so much.

And that person was Brian Littrell.

With Kris out of town on business, it was the perfect time to set her plan in motion.

It was time for Brian to learn the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Kris left his co-worker's hotel room sated and grinning gleefully while strolling down the hall to his own room. *Nothing like a great romp in the sack to put you in a good mood!* He stopped in front of his door, unlocked it, and walked in. Immediately, he made his way to the top drawer and pulled out a photo of his lil' Kitten. His diabolical eyes roamed over her smiling face as she looked up at her precious Nick. His eyes narrowed. *I win. You lose Nick Carter. No wimpy Backstreet Boy's gonna beat me.* He smirked. *Especially if he looks like you!*

Kris shook his head in disgust. To this day he didn't understand what Kat sees in him. Nick was so nasty...so...pathetic. He, on the other hand, had the looks, the confidence, and the personality. Everything a girl could ever want. He closed his eyes and licked his lips, recalling Kat's glorious mouth against his and every muscle in his body tightened. Oh yeah...he wanted her.

Badly.

Patience buddy. Don't let your urges get in the way of your plan. Make her relax...let down her guard...wonder...

And then go in for the kill.

Billie awoke to very tender kisses being placed on her shoulder by his warm lips. Smiling, she rolled over to gaze into his handsome face. "Good morning."

Howie's face broke into a sleepy, but beaming grin. "Good morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Perfectly."

She snuggled closer to him. "Good." She giggled as he nestled his head into her neck, his goatee tickling her. But his breath against her skin wiped out her laughter and was replaced with longing.

"Billie...I want you here...every morning when I wake up."

"Oh Howie..."

He lifted his head and peered at her with those warm brown eyes that always caused her insides to melt. "I'm crazy about you Billie. I have been since the moment we met."

A surge of happiness and flattery exploded from her heart. She caressed his cheek. "I didn't want to admit it before, but since the day I met you...you were never far from my mind either." Her smile dimmed. "I felt so confused."

"But that doesn't matter now. You're going to be a free woman soon, we'll get engaged...eventually marry...have at least three kids...start their college funds..."

Billie laughed. "You sure think ahead!"

He joined in her laughter, but it soon died down and he pulled her so that she laid on top of him. He cupped her face. "I meant what I said before."

Her heart began to suddenly pound at a much quicker pace. "What you said...?"

"I love you Billie."

Her eyes flooded with joyful tears and she sighed. "I love you too Howie."

Their bodies took over after that.

Katarina stepped out of the airport and hailed a cab. She handed the driver the piece of paper with Brian's address on it and leaned back against the seat, tired as usual. Her dreams were getting worse with each passing day and sleep was getting harder and harder to attain. She pushed her sunglasses back up her nose. At least her make up mostly covered the dark smudges under her brown eyes. Hopefully, she could get through her confession to Brian without collapsing into unconsciousness.

She prayed that her plan would work...that Brian would believe her and do something to help Nick. She was running out of time. He was fading so quickly. Her eyes glazed over with tears that she refused to shed. It was all her fault. If she hadn't left, he wouldn't be in so much pain...he wouldn't be so angry...

And they'd still be together.

If only there were some way of letting him know that she still loved him...

"We're here Miss."

"Thank you," she murmured shakily as she stepped out of the cab. She paid the driver and waited until he drove off before turning to glimpse at the Littrell household. It was beautiful looking place... It also looked like there was no way to get in. *Great. Now how am I supposed to talk to him if I can't even get to the door?* As if someone had heard her, the door opened suddenly and she gasped and moved out of view.

"I'll call every day okay? Promise."

"Aw Leigh...say you'll stay."

"Bri..."

"..."

Katarina turned bright red. *Oh Geez...*

"I love you B."

"I love you too."

Katarina heard the door close and a pair of high heels clicking down the steps. She took a deep breath. *You can do this Rina. You have to!* The gate opened and a beautiful and thankfully friendly looking blond woman stepped out onto the sidewalk. Her eyes registered surprise when they fell on Katarina.

"Can I help you?"

"Uh...yes," Katarina gulped, "you don't know me, but I'm Katarina Clark, B--"

"Oh! Are you related to Billie?"

"Yes, I'm her sister."

The blond grinned. "I thought you had a slight resemblance to her! It's a pleasure to meet you! I'm Leighanne Littrell." She put down her suitcases and extended her hand.

Katarina took it and smiled.

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, actually I'm here to see Brian. There's something I need to discuss with him."

Leighanne's eyes suddenly held a lot of questions, but there was no time to answer them.

"Is that okay?"

"Sure, I'm sure he'd be interested to meet you...or has he met you before?"

"No...but we have a...mutual friend...and I need to talk to him about that."

Leighanne nodded. "Okay." She punched in a number into the security system and the gate re-opened. "There you go." She looked at her watch. "Oh shoot! I'm gonna be late for my flight!" She looked up at Katarina and grinned again. "I hope we'll meet again so we can get to know each other better. I'm sure you're as sweet as your sister."

Katarina blushed. "Thank you. I hope so too."

They said their good-byes and Leighanne drove off, leaving Katarina with an open gate and a ton of doubts, but she shook them off. *Don't chicken out now Rina.* She stepped onto the Littrell property, closed the gate and proceeded up the walkway and stopped at the door. She gulped again and then rang the doorbell.

Brian lifted his head from the book he was reading and raised an eyebrow. *Leighanne wouldn't ring her own doorbell...unless she forgot her keys. No, that can't be it. I saw her put them in her purse. Visitors? I'm not expecting any.* He sighed warily. Did they need to change the security system again? He moved toward the door, hoping that they didn't. The last thing he wanted was his house to look like a prison. He opened the door and sure enough, the person in front of him was a total stranger.

"Uh, hello."

"Hi," he replied cautiously, "may I help you?"

"I'm Katarina Clark, Billie's sister."

Instantly, he relaxed. "Oh! Billie's sister? She's mentioned you before. How are you?"

"I'm fine thank you...may I come in?"

Brian laughed. "Of course. By the way, you and your sister are cute!" He laughed even more when she blushed. "Although I don't think Billie blushes quite like that!"

Katarina chuckled. "I can't help it...I don't handle compliments very well."

"That's all right," he ushered her into the living room. "Would you like something to drink? Coffee, juice, cola..."

"No, I'm okay thanks." She sat on the couch and began to twiddle her thumbs.

Brian took the seat across from her and noted her nervousness. He wondered why. "So, do you like wearing sunglasses indoors like A.J?"

She smiled lightly and took them off, revealing warm, but fatigued looking brown eyes. "That better?"

Brian grinned and nodded. "Much better. Well, what can I do for you?"

Her nervousness became much more evident. "I need to talk to you Brian...about something very important."

"Okay."

"Um...I...well..." she stuttered.

Brian leaned in and patted her hand. "It's okay Katarina. Just take your time."

She looked at him gratefully and relaxed slightly. "I...I heard that you were one of...Nick's closest friends."

His mood instantly plummeted, recalling his concern that Nick was not okay. "Yeah...he was my best friend out of all the fellas."

She nodded. "That's why it's important that you know..."

He looked at her in confusion. "Know what?"

"There's a lot that I need to explain to you Brian. I just don't know how to start."

He sighed. "Look, if you don't mind, I really don't want to get into this with you...I've been having lots of bad feelings about Nick and..."

"So have I."

He nodded. "And I don't want to dwell on it because he's dead and--" He paused, finally registering Katarina's words. He stared at her in bewilderment. "So have I?" She was now trembling.

"Yes..."

"But I don't understand. How can you...?" He looked at her more closely. "Did you know Nick before he passed away?"

"No..."

He was getting more and more confused by the minute.

"I met him after he passed away."

She said it so quietly that he barely heard her, but he'd heard enough to suddenly feel ill. "Wh...what?!"

Katarina held his gaze. "Brian, Nick's not dead."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Katarina had never seen anything more pallid in her entire life until now. To say Brian was stunned was too much of an understatement. Hell, if it weren't for the fact that she felt like crawling into a hole and dying, she might've laughed at his startled expression. But there was nothing funny about this situation and even the slightest chuckle would seem out of place.

So it was Katarina's turn to be stunned when he burst out laughing as though she'd just told him the most hilarious joke he'd ever heard.

Obviously, this wasn't going to be an easy task to overcome.

"O...okay," Brian stuttered as his chuckles died down, "you really had me going there for a second..."

Oh God, she groaned inwardly, *he didn't believe a word I said.*

"You know, everyone said I sounded like I belonged in the loony bin every time I said that Nick was alive. I didn't believe them before but now that I've heard it from someone else's mouth, I think I realize just how ludicrous it sounds! Can you believe I actually...thought..." Brian's voice trailed off and the glimmer in his eyes faded away when he realized that Katarina hadn't said a word, her face devoid of expression except for the despair in her eyes. "Oh...God," he choked out, "you...you're not kidding are you?"

Katarina shook her head, not trusting her voice. She watched as his blue eyes widened, his skin colour drain again, and he began to tremble. "But..." he blinked, "I...how?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and managed a tiny shrug. "I'm not sure how he survived the crash...he wouldn't tell me everything. But he's alive. Breathing. Just like you and me." It was then that she thanked God that Brian was sitting down because the way his body was swaying...

He was bound to pass out.

"Brian--"

"Where is he?!"

"...In Canada. He lives in the mountains...quite a distance away from the crash site."

"Canada...Canada?! Nick's in CANADA?!?!"

She winced at the incredulity in his voice.

"He's been in Canada this WHOLE TIME and didn't have the DECENCY to CALL?!? To tell us WHERE HE WAS and THAT HE WAS OKAY?!?!?"

"Brian, you don't understand--"

Furious, he stood and began to pace. "He wouldn't do that! If he was okay, he wouldn't scare us all like this. I KNOW he wouldn't." His pointed gaze fell on her. "You're lying!"

"I'm not," she replied meekly, "I--"

"I don't want to hear it," he covered his ears.

"I have proof."

He may have blocked off his hearing passages, but that didn't mean he couldn't read lips. Slowly, he removed his hands from his ears and stared at her warily. "Proof?"

Katarina nodded and reached into her blouse. After hesitating for a moment, she pulled out her only reminder of her love.

Nick's necklace.

She kept her eyes on the sparkling silver. "He...gave this to me Brian. He told me that it was specially made for him...one of a kind...so no one else would have it except him..." When he didn't respond, she looked up and gasped as Brian's eyes rolled to the back of his head before he collapsed in an astounded heap on the floor, missing the couch entirely.

"OhGodOhGodOhGod! Brian?! Brian!!!"

Oh...

"What do I do? Brian?! It's Katarina! Can you hear me?! Oh God..."

What happened? As though awaking from a strange dream, he tentatively opened his eyes and stared into the face of the woman who'd just confirmed what he'd known in his heart all along.

His best friend was alive!

"Oh thank God!" she breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you okay?"

"I...I think so," he replied while she helped him sit up. He rubbed the back of his head. "What happened?"

"You fainted."

His face began to burn with embarrassment. "Well I feel like an idiot."

Katarina shrugged. "It's okay. If I were you I would've probably hurled."

That made him smile. He wouldn't doubt for a second that his floor would be a mess if the situation were reversed. But as he recalled their conversation thus far, his smile disappeared quickly. There were too many questions that needed answering.

Answers he'd been searching for since Nick's 'death.'

"Katarina..." he paused for a moment, gathering his jumbled thoughts, "if he's been alive this whole time, why hasn't he come home? Why didn't he tell us...?"

She gazed at him in understanding. "Brian, there's so much that you don't know...and I don't have the right to explain." She sighed. "Nick's not...the same person that he was when you last saw him. He's changed...and not for the better."

Worry sparked once again and Brian's face contorted in concern. "What do you mean?"

"I can't explain," she replied softly, "you're going to have to see for yourself."

Brian's eyes widened in excitement...and anxiety. "See him...after all this time..." his forehead creased, "aren't you going to take me to him?"

Katarina shook her head vehemently. "I can tell you where to find him and how to get there...but I can't go with you."

"Why not?"

"There's..." she looked away, "I just have my reasons."

He raised an eyebrow in curiosity but didn't push the issue. "So, how did you find him?"

"...Well, I went camping with my sister and her fiancé and I ended up...wandering a little too far from the campsite. I came across an old house where Caroline, the woman who's been taking care of Nick this whole time, took me in from the rain and offered me the opportunity to stay with her for a few days." A tiny smile curved her lips. "She's such a kind woman..."

"Sounds like it."

Her eyes shone with happiness as she began to recall everything. "And then I met Nick...and he was the reason I stayed longer."

She quieted after that and Brian could see her mind churning with memories that brought life into her tired brown eyes, colour back in her cheeks... But soon, the moment passed and melancholy took its place again. He reached out and touched the necklace that hung heavily from her neck, wanting to confirm that it was real...even though he could see it with his own eyes.

"You have to go to him. He needs someone who cares...and understands him."

He met her pleading gaze as he analyzed the way she spoke of him. The tenderness in her voice when she said his name, the light in her eyes when she remembered him... and he understood. "You love him," he said quietly.

Katarina gasped and moved her gaze elsewhere. "...Am I that obvious?"

Brian smiled. "I can hear it in your voice...and I know he loves you too."

"No he doesn't. He hates me."

"I don't think so," his face turned pensive, "I remember having the distinct feeling that he was happy..." his eyes fell on the necklace again, "and he wouldn't have given his prized possession to just anyone Katarina."

Her eyes glazed over with tears and Brian patted her shoulder. "Hey, why so glum? Love is beautiful...especially when it's mutual."

"It's not. Trust me," her voice trembled, "I just wish I could tell him why..."

He stared at her quizzically. "Why...?"

"Please...go to him," she continued, ignoring his question, "he needs you."

Although, he had the feeling that Nick would be much happier to see Katarina, he agreed without mentioning it. "I'll take the next available flight."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

This was hardly what he'd had in mind.

Nick gazed at the portrait he'd painted, torn between tenderness and rage. He'd been doing so well lately. No feeling sorry for himself, no thinking about her 24/7, no feelings. But now, here he was, a paintbrush in his hand, staring at her beautiful face.

A face he'd been seeing in his dreams every night.

He sighed angrily. He'd made no progress at all.

"It turned out beautifully, Nickolas," Caroline murmured and squeezed his rigid hand that she'd taken a hold of a few seconds before.

All he wanted to do was draw a dark picture...dreary images that would reflect the kind of life he led. The life he yearned to leave behind. It was supposed to be black as death... Instead, he'd managed to mix the yellow and white until he'd gotten the golden hue of her hair, he used a rich brown that matched the warmth of her eyes... Nick scowled. *Why do I still care dammit? She's done nothing but make my life a living hell and here I stand thinking about her...loving her more than anything...more than words...*

"Do you want me to put it in your room while you wash up?"

"Keep it," he said gruffly and wrenched his hand from Caroline's, not wanting to acknowledge the realization that no matter what happened...no matter how badly things ended between him and Katarina, he'd love her 'til the end of his days. "I have no use for it."

"But darling..." her voice trailed off when Nick turned to face her. After a moment, she conceded. "Very well."

He gave her a curt nod and trudged back upstairs, wondering what had changed her mind. Was it his overbearing silence? His glare?

Or maybe it was the film of tears in his lifeless blue eyes that were threatening to spill...

"So, have you finally decided to mature?"

Billie rolled her eyes at her "charming" fiancé as he stepped through the doorway. "You could say that."

He gave her an odd look and sat on her couch. "What's up baby?"

She didn't bother to sit down. This wouldn't take long. "It's over."

He yawned. "What do you mean?"

"Our engagement Kris. It's over." She totally expected him to blow up at her. Bombard her with questions. Beg her to change her mind. But she never expected him to look so...amused.

"Really?"

She frowned. "Yes really. You think I'd be kidding about something this serious?"

"Serious for you maybe. I personally couldn't care less."

Billie's jaw dropped. "How dare you? After YEARS of being together, you can sit there and tell me that YOU DON'T GIVE A DAMN?!"

"That's right. I think you're finally growing a brain Billie."

It took all her strength to not lunge at him and slap the toothpaste ad grin off his face.

"What? You think I wasn't expecting this? I knew as soon as you met that Backstreet Bastard, you'd leave me. You're that predictable, *honey*."

"Get out!" she yelled and stormed to the door and opened it wide. "Get THE FUCK out of my apartment."

Kris laughed. "With pleasure, but you'll be seeing me around anyway. Your sister and I have some unfinished business."

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

"We're sleeping together honey. Didn't she tell you?"

Her heart stopped. *Sleeping together?!?! Billie* shook her head. "I don't believe a word out of your mouth anymore Kris. Now I'd appreciate it if you left--"

"Ask her Billie. She'd never lie to her precious older sister...well, at least not to her face..." he laughed again and stood. "Just ask her."

"GET *OUT* YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

Still chuckling, he sauntered to the door. "Good riddance honey and thanks for the sex."

"GO TO HELL!!" She slammed the door in his face. As soon as she was certain that he was gone, she slumped to the floor and sobbed, wondering how she could've been so stupid.

What a way to spend the weekend.

Kevin sighed and clicked onto another Backstreet Boys Fan page. It was amazing that months after their split, there were still thousands of sites dedicated to them. But a lot of the sites held too many memories...pictures of him and Kristin...when they were happy...

When they were in love.

He still loved her...

But he'd come to the point where he doubted that she felt the same way. He hadn't seen her in days...

Could it be that their destined marriage had come to an end?

"I thought I might find you here."

Startled, he whirled around and blinked. "I...I was just thinking about you."

Kristin gave a tiny smile and nodded.

"How did you get in?"

"I still have the key."

For some reason, that gave him hope. "Oh."

She stepped closer and cleared her throat. "There's something I think you should know."

He inched toward her. "What?"

Kristin looked up at him and their eyes locked in a gaze that stirred a lot of pent up frustration. Kevin took yet another step forward making it easier to reach out and take her in his arms. If only he had the courage...

"I was talking to a friend of mine yesterday..." Kristin murmured, her eyes never leaving his, "She went to a club last night with a friend of hers."

"Mhmm..." Kevin stuck his hands in his pockets so squelch the temptation to run his fingers through her hair.

"Her friend met a guy and he offered her a few drinks. She disappeared after that and wasn't found until this morning."

Now he was frowning. "Is she okay?"

Kristin shook her head. "She woke up in some apartment, naked...and alone."

"Oh God..."

"Kevin...the reason I'm telling you this is because when asked about what happened, she couldn't remember... She had no recollection about what happened to her after that jerk gave her a few drinks."

Suddenly the situation seemed very familiar. His eyes widened. "And..."

"The police told her that she'd probably been drugged."

That's it! Kevin blinked again as it dawned on him. "I can't believe this! Why didn't I think of this sooner for crying out loud?!"

"You don't know for sure Kevin..."

"The hell I don't! I'm 100 percent sure that she drugged me...what other explanation can there be?"

Kristin stared at him warily.

"I didn't sleep with her Kris...you have to believe that."

"I think... I do."

For the first time in ages, he broke into a genuine smile. "You do?"

"I do." She took his hand, but her face remained serious, "but we have to prove that Rachel used something to impair your judgment."

Kevin's eyes held the glimmer of determination. "We will." He squeezed her hand. "Together."

Kristin smiled. "Together."

Caroline placed the bag of red delicious apples into her cart and continued down the path until she came across some vegetables that she would definitely need for dinner tonight. Unfortunately, it would be yet another dinner that she would be eating alone.

He hardly ate a thing anymore. Even her cookies were often left untouched on his night stand while he tossed and turned in his bed, calling out Rina's name...begging her to come back. Of course, she never told him that. He was already disgusted enough with

his attitude. Caroline sighed, not wanting to resign to the fact that the Nickolas she'd come to know and love like a son was never going to come back.

But she had the feeling it would take a miracle.

Luckily, she believed in miracles.

"I was wonderin' if you could help me sir."

"What can I do for ya sonny?"

"I'm looking for someone. I heard you were the one who could give me directions to her home."

Caroline raised an eyebrow in curiosity. Obviously, he was from out of town. She'd never heard anyone with an accent quite like that. Kinda cute though.

"Who are ya looking for?"

"Uh, I think her name is Caroline...Parker? Yeah Parker."

She nearly dropped the bushel of carrots. *Me?!*

"I guess this is your lucky day sonny 'cos sweet ol' Caroline is here right now, doin' her grocery shoppin'."

Letting the curiosity get the better of her, she left her cart of groceries and walked toward the front of the store. She turned the corner...

The stranger turned and their eyes locked.

Dear God Almighty! It couldn't be!

"Mrs. Parker?"

It took her a moment to react, but eventually she nodded. "...Caroline...call me Caroline dear."

He smile politely and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Brian Littrell."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Caroline, Brian realized as they walked the last few feet up to her humble abode, was probably one of the most admirable women he'd ever had the pleasure of meeting. They'd walked from the quaint grocery store all the way to her doorstep in under two hours thanks to her sheer will and his determination to keep up. She was 81 years old and he was only 28 and he had to keep up with her! That said a lot didn't it? Especially when she had arthritis to worry about! He grinned. Yes, Caroline was definitely admirable.

And oh so adorable!

"Now, let's get you inside for some cookies and milk. Made by yours truly."

Brian stifled a laugh. Katarina had told him to expect to eat lots of cookies during his stay. "Thank you ma'am...I mean Caroline," he corrected when she shot him a pointed glance.

She smiled after that and opened the door. "I trust you'll be staying here for a while."

"That depends..." Brian peered at her, his face now serious, "I think you know why I'm here."

Caroline nodded. "Indeed I do. Although I must say, I'm curious as to how you found out."

Brian felt another wave of relief wash over him. *It's true...it really is true!* "Katarina told me."

She gasped. "You saw Rina?! How is she? Is she okay dear?"

He was taken aback by all the questions. "She's all right. Looks a little exhausted...but all right."

Caroline did not look happy with his response. "She must be thinking of him..." She shook her head. "She shouldn't have left."

"What happened?"

"I wish I knew dear. I wish I knew." Sighing, she placed her groceries on the table in the kitchen and urged Brian to follow her into the living room. "Sit down darling. I'll fetch you those cookies."

"Actually Caroline," Brian stayed standing, "if you don't mind, I'd...I'd really like to see Nick."

She smiled in understanding...but her eyes were anxious. "Of course, but Brian, I need to warn you..."

"Of what?"

"Nickolas is quite different from the last time you saw him..."

Brian frowned. "Katarina said the same thing. Is something wrong with him?"

Caroline looked away. "I think you'd better see for yourself."

Katarina stepped quietly into the apartment, hoping to God that Kris wasn't back yet and that Billie wasn't home. At Brian's urging, she spent the night in his guestroom. It was against her better judgment to stay, but she was just so tired...and she wanted to get to know Nick's best friend a little better. She wanted to find out why he was so special to him. A light smile curved her lips. Brian was definitely what Nick told her he was. Kind, considerate and very down to earth.

Not to mention goofy!

No wonder he and Nick got along so well... According to Brian, Nick was a goofy guy himself. Always laughing, smiling... Katarina's smile subsided. But life had played a cruel trick on Nick.

And he had lost everything he held dear.

Katarina hoped that by sending Brian to him, he would somehow find the courage to face his future and not be the bitter man he had condemned himself to be.

"It's about time you got home."

Stunned, Katarina looked up as the lights flickered on. Billie was sitting on the couch, her eyes red. "Billie, what's wrong?"

"Where were you?" she asked, ignoring the question.

"I...went out of town...to see someone."

"Nick? Or Kris?"

Kris?! She'd rather have porcupine quills attached to her ass! "Neither. I went to see Brian."

Billie looked at her warily. "Brian? Why?"

"I needed to talk to him about something important, but now it's over and done with." She refused to go into any more detail than that.

"I broke off my engagement," she spoke quietly, changing the subject so abruptly that it surprised Katarina.

"You did?!" She looked at her in shock for a moment, but then her eyes softened. "Howie?"

A smile brightened Billie's face. "He loves me Rina. I mean, really loves me. I don't think I've ever met someone who actually treats me like a human being. He makes me feel like it's okay to be me."

Katarina sat down next to her and gave her a bear hug. "That's wonderful Billie! Finally you got that jerk, Kris, out of your life."

Billie pulled away suddenly and gazed at her questioningly. "A jerk huh?"

"Yes," Katarina studied her hands, "I...never liked Kris for lots of reasons. One being that he never treated you right."

"And the other reasons?"

She kept her mouth shut.

"Rina did you sleep with him?"

Katarina felt as though she'd been slapped in the face. "Billie! How could you say that?! I'd never--"

"Kris told me when I sent him to hell that he never cared about me..." her gaze grew cold, "because he was sleeping with you."

"No! That's not..." Katarina stopped, her heart wrenching with fear. *Oh God...he wants me to lie...*

"What do you want Kris?! What'll it take for you to leave Nick alone?!"

"Nothing. That blond asshole will get what he deserves for taking you away from me!"

"I'll do ANYTHING Kris. Anything you want...just please don't expose Nick. I'm begging you..."

"Anything huh?"

"Anything..."

"Well," Billie peered at her closely, "did you Rina? Did you sleep with my ex-fiancé?"

Nick peeked through the curtains and glared at the sunlight that washed over the landscape. *Damn light...* He closed his eyes to block it out, but opened them again instantly and nearly let out a anguished cry. He was going crazy without her...

Damn her for doing this to me! DAMN HER!!

"Nickolas, darling. Are you hungry?"

"No. I don't want anything," he snarled, "go away!"

"Nickolas! Don't you dare speak to me in that tone of voice!"

"I'll talk however I damn well feel like it!" He kept his gaze on the golden scenery outside. "I'm tired of this bullshit! I hate my life! I hate this place! I hate EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE! DAMMIT! GET OFF MY ASS! I DON'T NEED YOU OR ANYBODY ELSE!!!"

"...Not even your best friend?"

Holy shit... Nick stiffened and his heavy breathing faltered. That was not Caroline's voice... It was a male...a male with a very familiar accent...a male that he'd known practically his whole life... But...

It couldn't be!

It just couldn't be!

"Nick?"

He gripped the curtains tightly, refusing to turn around. "...You're...not supposed to be here."

"Neither are you Frack."

Frack... He closed his eyes, pain wrenching his insides. It'd been over a year since he'd heard that familiar nickname.

"Nick, look at me."

I can't dammit! "No."

"Why?"

Because I'm a freak! "I don't want to."

"I missed you too buddy."

Nick nearly smiled at the sarcasm in his voice. Nearly.

"Why didn't you come home Nick? We've all been worried sick...we thought you were *dead* for Pete's sake!"

"That's what I wanted everyone to think."

"What?! Why?! Did you honestly think that'd be funny? Well, newsflash Nicky. It's not. It's not funny AT ALL!"

"Just *go* Brian. I don't need *any* of you to tell me what to do! I have a different life now!"

"A life you claim to hate."

"So?"

'Dammit Nick! What the hell is wrong with you?! LOOK AT ME!"

"YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!"

"THE HELL I CAN'T!"

Nick's grip on the curtains was iron tight and when he felt Brian's hands on his shoulders he tried his best to shake him off. "DON'T TOUCH ME DAMMIT!" He felt him back off.

"Nick... Why won't you talk to me?" The hurt was evident in his voice. "Do you know how many nights I've been awake in my room, wondering if you were okay? If we'd really done all we could to find you? I was sick with grief Nick! And now all you can do is push me away?!"

"You don't understand Brian. You don't know what it's like to lose your identity...your life...in *one single night!*"

"What do you mean?"

Nick let go of one of the curtains and touched the damages on his face. His mask was on the bed.

And there was no way to reach for it.

"Please...Fr...Frick...just...go."

"I'm not leaving until you tell me why you're acting like this."

"You'll be here for the rest of your life."

"DAMMIT NICK!"

Brian's patience was wearing thin. Funny. So was Nick's.

"Nick..."

He refused to utter another word.

"Nick...look at me buddy."

"..."

"*Please?*"

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Brian held his breath as Nick made a slight movement. *That's it Nick...*

He paused. "Bri...I can't..."

The vulnerability in his voice was so tremendous that Brian felt the back of his eyes prickling with tears. "Nicky, I've known you since you were a little man...you don't have to be afraid."

He scoffed. "Yeah, that's what Rina said and look what happened."

"Huh?"

"She left me. Just like you should."

"Nick, she misses you." He saw his muscles stiffen.

"You...saw her?"

"She's the one who told me where to find you."

Bitter laughter wafted from his tense frame. "I should've known. Rina never keeps her promises."

Brian frowned. "She's worried about you. When I saw her...she looked so...ill."

Nick shrugged. "I don't care."

Yeah. Right. Brian's frown deepened. "The Nick I know wouldn't say that."

"Yeah, well the Nick you knew is *dead* Brian."

The wooden tone of his voice sent shivers down his spine. He shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"Dammit Brian! You just won't give up!"

"I REFUSE to give up on my best friend! I don't believe for a second that this is who you are!" An anguished growl was heard before Nick whirled around and Brian stepped back, the shock almost too much to bear. *Oh...my...*

"DO YOU BELIEVE IT NOW BRIAN?" he scowled. "DO YOU?!"

The ferocity in his veins was so overwhelming and Nick wanted nothing more than to tear this place apart...starting with Brian. No...he could never hurt his best friend.

Never.

“It was...the fire...wasn’t it?”

Nick closed his eyes, recalling those horrid flames, nipping at his face. Oh God, he could feel his skin melting all over again...

“Oh geez Nicky...”

“Now do you understand?” his voice trembled, “now do you see why I couldn’t go home...why I can’t be the man I was...?”

Brian took a step forward. “Ni--”

“Don’t come closer Bri...it doesn’t look any better no matter where you look at it.”

“Nick, do you really think we care about how you look like? You know us better than that! We know how it feels to be judged by your looks...we understand better than anyone!”

“But that’s not your identity!”

Brian’s face contorted in confusion. “Identity?”

Nick moved his gaze to the floor. “I’m the *popular* one right?” His voice dripped with bitterness, “the one *all* the girls want...the baby face... Well guess what? That’s all gone! Now what do I have left huh? Who’s gonna care now Brian?! WHO?! Without my looks I’m just another faceless man in this stupid hell hole.”

“...When did you become so cynical Nick?” Brian asked in a soft tone before shaking his head. “Yes, I admit there are probably a few people out there who’d freak out over your appearance...but you know what? Those people don’t matter Nick! What about those who love you? Your family, friends...*all* those you hold dear? Did you honestly think we’d turn our backs on you just because of how you *look* like?!”

Nick tried his hardest to keep from sobbing. “Rina left me...and I loved her more than anything.”

“You don’t know why she left Nick...and if you love her the way you say you do, you should give her the benefit of the doubt.”

He could feel the tears beginning to stream down his cheeks. All his hard work to bury himself in his misery was dissipating. Was he really ready to let go?

“Nicky...let’s go home.”

He looked up at him again, a glimmer of hope lighting up deep within himself. “Home?”

Brian smiled as he took a few steps forward and placed his hand on his shoulder. “Home.”

Nick stared at him for a moment before a cry of emotion escaped his lips and his eyes overflowed with tears that had been building since the day his life changed forever. The real tears of pain, fear...and for the first time, happiness.

He was going home!

“I’m so sorry this happened to you buddy,” Brian whispered, his voice trembling from his own tears.

Nick’s sobbing increased as his soothing words comforted him. Brian had no idea just how significant his apology was. He had yet to reveal his other secret to him...

He had yet to tell him that the reason he’d been left with a disfigured face...

Was because of him.

Kris stared at his reflection with a satisfied smirk. Could I be any better looking? Laughing he strolled into his kitchen and poured himself a glass of orange juice. Yes...he was finally free. He was finally able to free himself from the shackles of his damn engagement to Billie and go after what he really wanted.

Her adorable baby sister.

Oh yeah, he couldn’t wait to get his hands on her.

As his thoughts took the usual perverted turn, he heard the doorbell ring. He set down his juice on the table and made his way to the door. To his surprise, there was a police officer staring right back at him with a stony look in his eyes. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Mr. Kris Reid.”

“Who wants to know?”

The policeman scowled. “Are you or are you not Kris Reid?!”

“Yes I am,” he replied snidely, “what do you want.”

“You’re being served with a restraining order.”

“What?!”

He gave Kris the papers. “If we are to find you within 20 feet of Ms. Katarina Clark and Ms. Billie Clark, you will be arrested. Is that understood?”

His body writhed with fury. “ON WHAT GROUNDS?!”

“Oh I think you know Mr. Reid. Good day.”

Kris slammed the door and immediately ripped the official document to bits. “DAMN THOSE BITCHES!” He grabbed one the vases resting on his coffee table and flung it across the room. They were going to pay for this.

No...

She was going to pay.

His little kitten was going to get a lesson she’ll never forget.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

“Hello?...Yes...It’s done?...Good...Thanks a lot Dad. Okay...Bye.” Howie hung up his cell and took the two sobbing women in his arms again and wished to God that there was more he could do for them.

“Wh...what did your dad say?” Billie stuttered as she wiped her eyes.

Howie ran his fingers through her soft blonde locks. “My Dad pulled a few strings at the police station and one of the officers just served Kris with the restraining order.”

“God Howie...I...thank you so much...” she gazed up at him, her eyes red from bawling for so long.

He lowered his head and kissed her forehead. “You know I’ll do anything you ask, Billie. Anything.”

She gave a light smile and nestled her head back on his shoulder.

Howie turned his head and peered at the top of Katarina’s head. She hadn’t spoken in a while. “Rina? Are you okay?”

“No...”

His heart broke for her. He’d never heard a more vulnerable voice. The poor girl had been through so much. She didn’t deserve that kind of pain.

Nobody deserves that.

“Is there anything more I can do?”

Katarina finally raised her head. “...I don’t think so...but thank you so much. You’re such a wonderful person...just like he said you were.”

Howie raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

Her face grew even more pallid. “Um...no one you know.” Her eyes suddenly grew misty again and her body stiffened. “Kris can’t get near us...ever?”

“Ever.” His eyes narrowed and he tightened his embrace on both of them.

I’ll make sure of that.

“Are you all packed?” Caroline looked at Nick as he gave her a tentative smile.

“Yeah...” He sat down on his bed. “I’m going home Caroline. Can you believe it? I’m actually going home.”

She cupped his face and grinned. “Yes darling. Home.” She sighed. “I’m going to miss you though.”

He put his hands over hers. “Caroline, you’ve been like a...second mother to me. Even during those moments when I treated you so...horribly, you’ve always been there for me. Guiding me.” His eyes softened. “I...I love you very much.”

Her eyes glistened with tears and she grinned. It was the first time he’d ever said that to her and that made her heart swell with pride for the man who’d become so special to her. “I love you too Nickolas. Promise me you’ll take care of yourself.”

“I’ll try.”

“And darling...try to find Katarina once you settle in again. Make things right between you two again.”

His faint smile disappeared. “No.”

“Nickolas...”

He looked away. “I can’t Caroline.”

"Don't you love her anymore?"

"...I love her," he replied hesitantly, "I...I never stopped loving her Caroline, but..."

"But what?"

"She broke my heart."

Sighing, she sat next to him, but kept a hold of his hand. “If there’s anything I want you to leave this house with Nickolas, it’s with the lesson that forgiveness is the greatest virtue. Yes, she left you and I know it was wrong of her, but can you really see yourself spending the rest of your life without her?”

Nick kept his gaze on the floor. “I don’t know...”

“Just think about it darling.”

He nodded.

“Good, now let’s get a move on. I don’t want you and Brian to miss the flight.”

Hand in hand, they descended the stairs. Caroline thought that when this day came she would be sad. That she would be so utterly depressed at the prospect of being left alone again. Instead she found herself feeling nothing but happiness for her Nickolas.

Her son.

Brian turned around from gazing out the door and gave them a grin that could light up an entire room. “Ready?”

Nick gave Caroline a nervous gaze.

She squeezed his hand and then let it go.

He leaned down and gave her a peck on the cheek. ‘Love you,’ he mouthed.

Her eyes pooled with more joyful tears. ‘Love you too,’ she returned.

Nick graced her with a smile and then faced Brian. “Ready.”

“Rina, I’m so sorry.”

Katarina looked at her sister through tear filled eyes. She hadn’t stopped weeping since she’d spilt her darkest secret. “It’s not your fault Billie. You didn’t know.”

Billie wrapped her arms around herself. “I should’ve though. I saw the way he looked at you...but I didn’t care. I was just so blind...” She bit her lip. “I didn’t mean to put you through so much pain.”

“Please don’t blame yourself,” Katarina shifted on the bed to face her, “if anything, you should be angry with me...I should’ve told you about him sooner.”

“Yes...you should have...but I...I can’t be angry with you Rina. I just...I just wish I could take away those terrible memories from you. I can’t believe Kris...”

Katarina looked away, those memories replaying over and over. Her throat constricted with panic. *No...don’t Rina...It’s over...He can’t hurt you anymore...But...*

“Rina...”

The next thing she knew, her sister was beside her, holding her while her body shook violently from uncontrollable sobs of despair. It happened so long ago, she should be over it by now.

No.

It didn't matter if it happened 2 years ago or 2 minutes ago. You never get over something like that. Not easily.

"Rina? You still haven't told me why Kris had such a hold on you."

"I can't tell you Billie."

"Why honey?"

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"He RAPED you?!"

"Nn...no. He came close, but some people came to my rescue."

"I'll kill him! I swear if I ever see that son of a bitch, I'll kill him!"

"Nick, don't talk like that please..."

"What do you want me to say?! That I'm happy the asshole nearly...He hurt you Rina!"

"Yes, he did. But it's over now."

"Nick...can't you just hold me?"

"I'm so sorry Rina, I wish there was something I could do..."

"Just hold me Nick...and don't ever let me go...ever..."

"I won't, I'll protect you with my life Rina...I promise."

"Because," Katarina lifted her head to meet her sister's worried gaze, "I have to protect those I love." *I have to protect Nick.*

Just like he would protect me.

"Kevin? It's Brian."

"Hey Cuz. What's up?" Kevin glanced at his watch. Kristin would be here at any minute. He grinned.

Rachel was going down tonight.

“I need you to call A.J and Howie for me.”

“Why?”

“You guys have to meet me at Nick's old house in Ruskin. Nick's family will be there too.”

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “Again I ask why?”

“I...I can't explain over the phone. But y'all *have* to be there. It's important.”

He heard a stewardess in the background and his curiosity mounted. “Are you on a plane?”

“Yeah, I'm on my way back from Canada.”

“Canada? What were you doin' all the way over there?”

“Bringing home something special.”

Kevin didn't know what to make of that. “Okay...”

“Look Kev, I know this is soundin' pretty weird to you, but just trust me on this okay?”

The doorbell rang and Kevin rushed to the door. “All right Cuz. When do you want us there?” He mouthed a loving greeting to his wife before returning to the kitchen.

“...How about the day after tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

“Thanks...oh, before I go, how are things with...you know.”

Kevin grinned and rubbed his hands together in excitement. “Oh that's under control now.”

“Really?”

Kristin winked at him and he laughed.

“Trust me Bri. It is.”

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

"Okay," Kristin looked at her husband nervously, "I'm ready...I think."

Kevin cuddled her cheek. "You'll do fine honey. Just keep her distracted long enough so I can search her place for those drugs she used on me. If I can find them..."

"I know."

They stepped out of the car and quietly walked into the apartment building. As the elevator ascended to the 4th floor, he sent a quick but pleading prayer to God that things would work out for the best. *Just give me back my life...that's all I want.* The elevator doors suddenly opened and hand in hand, they stepped out and crept up to Rachel's door.

Kristin squared her shoulders and shot Kevin a wary, but determined gaze. He gave her an encouraging smile and went to make himself inconspicuous by hiding behind a giant sized plant at the end of the hall not far from Rachel's place.

Ugh! Who the hell could it be? Rachel got off the couch and lazily strolled to the door. *Maybe it's Kevin!* Her ruby red lips curved into a sly smile. *Maybe he's come for a midday snack...* She opened the door, awaiting his kiss when suddenly she realized that the person standing before her wasn't Kevin.

It was his wife.

Her eyes narrowed. *His EX wife as far as I'm concerned.* "What do you want?"

Kristin crossed her arms and shot her a scowl. "To talk...I guess."

"Look," Rachel put her hands on her hips, "Kevin is mine now and you have NO claim over him whatsoever so BACK OFF."

She rolled her eyes. "Like I want that jerk after what he did to me. Frankly, I think you two deserve each other."

Rachel laughed. "Hey, it's not my fault you don't know how to treat a man. It's nothing to do with love *Kris*. It's all about one thing. Good, hard S-E-X. And that's what he gets from me."

Kristin's face contorted in disgust. "What kind of person are you?"

"A smart one," Rachel shrugged, "I'm not stupid enough to believe that love conquers all. That is pathetic." She saw the sudden pity in her eyes and she scowled. "Don't you

look at me like that! If there's anyone to feel sorry for it's yourself. You lost Kevin. I won him. Fair and square."

Kristin cocked her head to the side and she scrutinized her. "Did you now?"

Rachel suddenly grew wary. *Does she know the truth? No...she couldn't.* She turned away. "I'd like you to leave now." When Kristin brushed past her and made herself comfortable on the couch, anger clouded her insides. "How dare you! Get out!"

"We need to talk!" Kristin bit back.

"About what?!"

"I'm getting a divorce from Kevin."

Rachel's eyes widened in shock. *A divorce?* Her shock was soon replaced with utter glee. *A divorce!* She did it. She won! She gave Kristin a victorious grin and gloated in her triumph, unaware that her boyfriend, dressed all in black had snuck past her through the door she'd left open and silently crept into her bedroom.

C'mon...c'mon... Kevin searched through each of her drawers, desperately seeking the proof he needed to rid his life of Rachel Malone for good. He moved into her closet and searched through every nook and cranny, every pocket.

But to no avail.

Dammit! He nearly slammed the closet door shut, but the last thing he needed was for him to get caught. *Just a while longer Kristin...* He slowly opened the door and peeked his head out to hear Rachel blabbing to Kristin about how easy it had been to steal him away, how much she loved him... He rolled his eyes. He doubted he even knew the meaning of the word. Besides, did she not just say that she didn't believe in love? He shook his head. *Quit wasting time Richardson. Get to the bathroom.* Quickly, he snuck from one room into the other and quietly closed the door behind him. *Okay. The medicine cabinet.* He opened it and went through each bottle, scrutinizing every single pill.

And still there was nothing.

His frustration was mounting and at the moment he felt ready to explode. *Where dammit?! Where could she have hidden those damn pills?!* His hawk eyes wandered from the Advil bottle to the perfume bottle to her lipstick holder...

Her lipstick holder.

A strange feeling grasped his gut as he took hold of it. He'd seen Rachel apply her lipstick several times.

But he'd never seen her use a lipstick holder.

He shook it slightly and gasped at the rattling sound. Slowly he opened the innocent looking item and he stared at his contents before his green eyes began to twinkle with victory.

Bingo!

Nick removed the wig, cap and sunglasses and took in the familiar surroundings. The smell of the ocean, the pictures of his family that rested on the coffee table, the vast amount of awards that plastered the walls...and the dusty Playstation that rested on the floor next to the television. Tears welled up in his eyes as Brian put his arm over his trembling shoulders.

Home.

"Welcome back buddy," Brian said cheerily while observing the nicely kept place. Obviously, Jane couldn't part with it.

"I...I don't even know what to say Bri..." Nick took a deep breath and continued to let his eyes wander, "I missed this place so much..."

"Well, you won't have to miss it anymore."

Nick cast him a light smile. "I guess I won't." He moved into the kitchen. Everything was spotless in here. Clean sink, dishes... *I guess Mom really gave this place a good scrub.* He could distinctly remember the pile of dishes that he'd left behind, thinking that he'd take care of them once he got back. He shook his head.

Life was very unpredictable.

From there he strolled back into the living room and up the stairs to his bedroom...well it was actually his and Rachel's. He frowned. Where was she anyway? "Yo Fri... Brian!" He just wasn't used to saying that nickname anymore.

Brian walked into the room a few moments later. "What's up?"

"Where's Rach?"

He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Uh...she lives in L.A now."

"Why? I thought she'd be stayin' here or something."

"Look Nick, there are things you need to know about Rachel that you're not going to believe."

Nick sighed. "To be honest man, I don't even care." His thoughts immediately went to Katarina. "I stopped caring about her a long time ago."

Brian gave him a knowing glance. "Katarina's only about 40 minutes away Frack."

He bristled at the nickname but said nothing about it. "Yeah..."

"Well..."

"I'm not going Brian."

He sighed. "Obviously you haven't changed. Still as stubborn as always."

Nick moved to the window and stared out at the sunlit ocean, Brian's words bothering him. He *had* changed. He was not Mr. Hyperman, he was not Kaos...he was certainly not Frack.

So what was he? Where was he?

Where had Nick Carter gone?

"Rina!"

Katarina stepped out of the shower and covered herself with a towel. "What?"

"Brian's on the phone for you!" Billie's voice wafted into the steamy room.

Her heart immediately quickened its pace. *Nick!* She wrapped her dripping hair in another towel and rushed into her room, her skin slowly forming goose bumps from the cooler air. She grasped the phone. "Hello?"

"Katarina? It's Brian."

"Hi, how are you?"

"Happy. You?" he whispered excitedly

"...I'm all right." She raised an eyebrow. "Why are you whispering?"

"...Well, Nick's around...I don't want him to know that I'm calling you."

Nick... Her heart wrenched with pain. "You found him."

"Yeah. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw what had happened to his face..."

"I told you he'd be different."

Brian sighed. "I know...and he is. Not just physically, I mean. He's so...quiet."

Katarina could hear the worry in his voice. She wished she could tell him that Nick would be fine, but she couldn't.

Not when her dreams kept telling her differently.

"I brought him back to Ruskin last night."

She gasped. "He's back?!"

"He's back...and I think you should come see him."

She bit her lip. "I don't think so Brian."

"Why not? I know he misses you."

"I can't...I'll only get him in tr--"

"Katarina, before I left for Canada, you told me that he needed me...but I think you and both know what he really needs."

Lord she did. But what if Kris finds out? He'll ruin Nick's life. *But there's a restraining order...he can't do anything now...right?*

"Katarina are you still there?"

She took a deep breath. "What's the address?"

Rachel shot Kristin another smug grin before moving to the door. "Well thank you for the wonderful news. You can go now!"

Kristin stared at her for a moment before her lips curved into a satisfied smile. "No, I think I'll stay. Just to see the show."

Now she was confused. "What the hell are you..." her words died as a very tall, very angry man appeared out of nowhere in front of her. She blinked. "K...Kevin? How did... I don't under--"

"Keep your mouth shut!" Kevin growled. "Did you HONESTLY think I wouldn't find out Rachel?"

She kept staring at him in bewilderment.

"HOW STUPID DO YOU THINK I AM?!?"

"Kevy...baby, why are you..." She watched as he slipped his hand into his pockets and pulled out her lipstick holder...

Her stash!

Shit!

Her eyes widened. "Uh...it's not what you think..."

Kevin laughed bitterly. "You've got to be kidding me."

No dammit! This can't be happening! Not when I am so close! "I never used those on you Kevin. I swear!"

"Quit bull shitting me Rachel! I had all the symptoms...I left my drink unattended..." he shook his head, "you are the epitome of the word PATHETIC."

"I did it for us Kevin! I know we belong together I know it!" She forced the tears to come. This has to work! "Kristin could never love you the way I do!"

"Love? You nearly ruined my life and damn well could've killed me with these stupid pills and you claim to LOVE ME?" He sneered. "I should have you arrested!"

"NO!" Rachel felt fear for the first time in her life, "don't put me there! Please don't put me there! I'll do anything! Anything!"

Kevin glared at her for a good minute before smiling. "If you so much as come within a foot of me or my wife, you'll be in jail so fast your head will spin. Do I make myself clear?"

What about the money?! She panicked. Without Kevin, she couldn't keep this place! "But..."

He grabbed his cell phone.

"NO! I'll do it! I'll stay away!" She decided to try to tears one more time. "But Kevy, you can't leave me. I love you baby!"

"I don't give a damn Rachel. I never did." He turned his gaze to Kristin who had been enjoying the scene silently, although she felt a tiny shred of pity for the woman.

She obviously never knew love of any kind.

"Shall we go Mrs. Richardson?" He held out his hand to her.

Kristin grinned. "We shall." She took his outstretched hand and walked out together, ignoring the cries of the defeated Rachel Malone.

Hand in hand Mr. and Mrs. Richardson walked off into the warm summer day, fully believing in the power of the devotion to their marriage...

And to each other.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Nick sat in his bed, listening to Brian whistling while the aroma of frying bacon and eggs wafted into his room, enticing his stomach. He shifted, trying to get comfortable. Yes, this was his bed...he'd had it for many years...but it didn't feel right.

Nothing about his room or his home felt right anymore.

Is it wrong to feel this way? he wondered. *I'm supposed to be whole again...happy to be here...I was happy to be here...* He sighed and grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper. *Help me...* he wrote over and over again. *Help me...help me...* He stared at the scrawled words for a moment before deciding to let his feelings flow.

*"I wish I could define
all the thoughts that cross my mind.
They seem to big for me to choose.
I don't know which one's to lose
when I've fallen down so far.
I think I'll never see your light
bouncing off of me...
Shining down here from your eyes..."*

Finally finding a way to release his pent up frustration, he continued writing about all the bewildering emotions that threatened to consume whatever was left of the Nick Carter that everyone knew, that Caroline adored...

That Rina loved.

Rina...

*"Help me
figure out the difference between right and wrong
weak and strong, day and night
where I belong and
help me
make the right decisions
know which way to turn, lessons to learn
and just what my purpose is here..."*

Lord help him, he needed her so badly he ached. His gaze moved to the window once more, the bright blue sky a stark contrast to the bleakness of his mood. He scowled. *So tell me God, if you're all about justice, why did you leave me like this? Why do I still love the girl who lied to me?* He squeezed his eyes shut.

Why doesn't she love me anymore?

Katarina made it as far as Nick's front door before she froze with fear. *I shouldn't be here...* If only her heart could agree with her mind. She let out a tremulous sigh before knocking on the door. *Please don't make me regret this God.* The door opened and Brian greeted her with a grin she suspected was one of the reasons why thousands of girls were crazy about him.

"You made it!"

She managed a hint of a smile. "Yeah."

"Nick's upstairs still," he told her as she stepped inside, "he might be sleeping, but I doubt it." He frowned. "I heard him pacing all night."

Katarina felt her worry stir again. Her dreams hadn't been wrong. Nick was in trouble.

"Rina, I think you can help him."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"Yes you can."

Her eyes stayed glued to the floor. "I can't Brian. I shouldn't even be here. I'll only cause him more pain."

"If you knew that, then why did you bother coming?"

Brian gasped and Katarina stiffened at the icy tone of the new voice. Slowly, she turned around and instantly, it was like her soul had suddenly popped back into her body. Her eyes took in his tall, lanky frame, his imperfect skin, the tousled gold locks on his head...

The lack of warmth in his murky blue eyes.

He was hardly the image of Prince Charming, but she loved him with a passion that was indescribable.

More than words could ever express.

"Uh, I'll be upstairs if anyone needs me," Brian said, wanting to retreat from the suddenly thick atmosphere in the living room.

"No," Nick responded, his voice edgy, "I need to talk to you," his gaze stayed fixed on Katarina for a moment before he continued, "to both of you."

Katarina tried to speak, but no words could escape her dry mouth.

"But don't you two need to talk first? I can--"

"Katarina and I can talk later," he interrupted, "this is more important."

Katarina...more important...? She blinked back her tears, his words echoing in her mind.

Brian put a reassuring arm around her shoulders and she peered at him with grateful eyes, missing the spark of jealousy in Nick's eyes.

"What do you want to talk about?"

Nick's face contorted to one of wariness, pain...

Fear.

"I...I want to tell you...about my face..."

A few minutes later, they were seated in the living room, Nick across from Katarina and Brian. Nick's eyes narrowed. She clung to him like a damn lifeline. If it wasn't for the fact that Brian was head over heels for Leighanne...

"Nick, would you quit looking at us like that?" his best friend snapped, "if looks could kill, we'd be goners by now...and don't you get any funny ideas. If you'd stop acting like a jerk, maybe she wouldn't be so frightened!"

Nick was angry beyond compare at Katarina...but the last thing he wanted was to frighten her. He concentrated his gaze solely on her and felt his eyes slowly soften. There was no way to describe the sensations that clasped his heart by being in her presence after so long. It had been such a shock to see her again. To smell her light perfume, feel her soft gaze warm his hardened heart...

Why Rina? Why did you go? We could've been so good...

No, he could never forgive her for leaving, but nothing could stop him from adoring her.

Wanting her.

Loving her.

He'll spend the rest of his life loving her from afar.

"Are you sure you're ready to tell us Nick?" Brian stared at him, concern evident on his face, "you don't have to..."

"Yes I do," he replied, putting his frame of mind back to what he'd been dreading since Brian had found him, "I need peace...and I won't find it if I keep this all inside..."

"Just take your time Nicky," Katarina murmured ever so softly.

The first words she'd directed to him since they'd laid eyes on each other today...

And they were exactly what he needed to hear.

He took a deep breath and began to tell his tale...

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

2001

"Gotta admit," Kevin looked out at the marvelous view, "this place is beautiful."

"Definitely," Howie agreed, "and so peaceful."

The five brothers sighed, letting the tranquility of the day relax their tired muscles and weary spirits. They'd been touring for almost two months now, making up the dates they'd missed when A.J had to deal with his own problems. Thankfully, he was okay now and life could go back to normal.

Well, as normal as you can get for a Backstreet Boy!

Nick's fingers itched to grab a pencil and paper to sketch the breath taking sight of picturesque mountains, luscious trees, and the glimmering water of the lake below. All of it was shrouded by an infinitely blue sky, which was beginning to darken because it was nearing nightfall. It was times like these where he really thanked God for blessing him with the chance to see such eye opening scenery.

"I wanna bring Sarah to a place like this when I pop the question," A.J decided with a smile.

"So you're really gonna do it man?" Brian asked while ruffling Nick's spiky hair.

"Hey!" Nick swatted his arm away and shot him a pointed glance.

Brian simply laughed.

A.J shared in his laughter and then responded. "Yeah...she's it for me. I know that now."

"That's great," Howie muttered in feigned annoyance, "A.J's gonna tie the knot before I do."

"That is pretty humiliating for ya D," Nick teased and flashed him a toothy grin.

Howie crossed his arms but couldn't hide his smile. "Ha, ha Nick. I don't see you shopping for a ring either!"

"Nah, Rach and I aren't at that stage yet..." his thoughts drifted to his girl, making him oblivious to the wary glances between the rest of his band mates. He really liked Rachel. She was very sexy, smart...

Did he forget to mention sexy?

And who knows? Maybe once he gets all the partying out of his system, he'll pick out a ring and ask her to settle down with him. For now, though, he just wanted to have some good, old fashioned fun.

"Uh Nick," Kevin interrupted his thoughts, "if you ever decide to marry...make sure it's with someone who really loves and deserves you okay?"

Well duh!" Nick smirked at him, missing his hidden meaning, "it's not like I'm gonna marry some gold digger or somethin'."

Howie, A.J, and Kevin shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other while Brian cleared his throat. "I think we'd better start headin' back to our buses guys. It's gettin' late and we have to be in Vancouver tomorrow."

They all agreed and began the hour and half trek down the path they'd taken earlier. Brian immediately fell into step with Nick. "So Frack, what are you up for tonight? X-Box or PS 2?"

Nick grinned and Brian laughed knowingly. "X-Box!" They exclaimed at the same time.

Kevin shook his head while A.J and Howie burst out laughing. "You two are hopeless!"

"I told you I'd beat your ass!" Brian grinned triumphantly later that evening.

"Nick shot him a stony glare. "I let you win," he grumbled.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night Frack."

Nick attempted to maintain his irritation, but it was no use. Both he and Brian burst into laughter again. After the goofiness had subsided, they leaned back against the walls of the rumbling bus, facing each other.

"You know Frick, it's nice that we got to chill like this today."

"Yeah," he agreed, "it was. I know I haven't been exactly available since I married Leigh..."

Nick shrugged. "I understand man. Besides," he smiled, "Rach keeps me busy."

Brian raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure she does."

Nick noticed the disapproving tone of his voice and frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He sighed. "Listen man, don't get me wrong, Rach is a great...looking girl and all, but--"

The bus suddenly lurched cutting off the conversation. Nick and Brian tumbled forward slightly, nearly knocking heads.

"Shit!" Nick reached for something to hold onto, "what the hell was that?"

Brian gripped one of the bed posts. "I don't know. It is raining out...maybe the driver didn't see where he was goin' for a second."

"I'm gonna go check it out," Nick stood, "you call the guys and see if they're all right."

"Sounds like a plan," Brian replied as cautiously got up and reached for his cell phone.

**

"Kev? It's Brian."

"Hey, you okay? Did you bus nearly slip off the road?"

"Well, I don't know about my bus but Nick's sure did," Brian reported as he looked in the cupboards for some food.

"Right! I forgot you're on his bus. He's okay too?"

"Yeah, he just went up front to ask the driver what happened."

"Okay, I just finished talking to Howie and A.J when you called and they said that things are fine on their buses too."

"All right," he replied, relieved, "I'll go let Nick know. I'll see you later."

"Yea--" The phone suddenly went dead.

Brian frowned. "Kevin?"

"NO!"

Nick! He turned and was about to rush to see what happened when the bus lurched again. Brian yelped as he catapulted forward, hitting his head on the wall before collapsing into unconsciousness...

"The rain's just got the roads a little slippery that's all and that's not good with all these curving roads up here. But we'll be all right. I've got expert driving skills!"

Nick laughed. "I'm sure you do man. Well, I'll head back and tell Bri what's--" His eyes widened. "Oh my God!" He watched in horror as A.J, Howie, Brian and Kevin's buses suddenly spun out of control and careened off the road. "NO!" Nick cried out.

"Shit!" The driver tried to stop the bus but it was no use. It reached the same area where the others had been and instantly slid forward. Nick and the driver screamed as it made a half turn, knocking them to the ground and tossing them around like rag dolls.

Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh GOD! Nick panicked, wondering if he was going to survive the night.

The bus suddenly stopped, but at such an alarming angle that Nick knew that one wrong move would spell the end. His breathing came quickly, frightened about his fate, the fate of his friends...

Brian!

"B...Br..." he couldn't speak. He had to help him...but how? Cautiously, he attempted to move. *So far so good...* He lifted his arm to his head and felt the gash on his forehead. He closed his eyes in pain. *Must...get to Brian...* He carefully lifted himself to his feet.

Nothing happened.

Okay. One step at a time Nick. Just one step at a time.

One step was all it took.

The bus made a horrid noise that shook Nick to the very core of his being before it careened down into the unknown...

Ohhh...

Brian could barely open his eyes, but he managed to see enough to instantly regret it. The once luxurious bus was now a disaster with so many things overturned and broken...

I'm still in here...how am I going to get out?

He tried to lift himself up but the pain was overwhelming. He ached all over. *Try Brian...try!* It was then that he noticed the smell of smoke wafting into the space where he lay amid the mess. He peered forward and saw the flickering of orange underneath the crack of the door.

Oh Lord...I'm going to die...

He felt his eyes drooping and tried to will them to stay open...

Please...

His head fell to the floor.

Help....

That was his last thought before the blanket of unconsciousness wrapped around him once more.

How he managed to get out of the bus, he didn't know. Maybe it was a miracle...

Whatever the case, Nick was glad to be out of that hell hole of a bus. He never wanted to look at another one for as long as he lived. He could still distinctly recall the sound of the trees and metal shattering against each other, the smell of gasoline spilling, his body thudding against God knows how many objects...

Carefully, he lifted his head. All he could see was destruction and trees.

Lots and lots of trees.

Not too far in the distance he could see Kevin, A.J and Howie's buses. *Please let them be okay...* He moved his gaze to his left and saw the bus driver, who's forehead was gushing with blood. Nick reached for his own forehead and realized that he was still bleeding profusely.

But where was Brian?

Just then, the front of the bus erupted in flames. "Brian!!" Nick yelled, knowing that if he wasn't out here...

He forced his mangled body up off the ground and stumbled toward the melting metal. "Brian!! I'm coming!!" As he drew closer, smoke drifted into his nostrils and open mouth and he gasped and let out a fit of coughs. *Keep going...* He got to the open door of the bus, said a tiny prayer and lunged into the flames. He smacked his head against some kind of hard object and landed on the burning ground with a horrid thud. Dazed and unaware, he lay there, trying to summon the strength to go on.

And then he smelled it.

A smell so rotten, it made him want to retch.

It was him...

"OWWW!!!" He howled as he ripped his face off the ground. He clenched his fists and screamed as a pain unlike anything he'd ever felt before claimed his body. "My FACE!!" He cried out. "MY FACE!!"

"N...n..ick..."

His voice was so weak that Nick knew his best friend didn't have much time left. But the pain...

"H..he..lp..."

Brian choked out and coughed like no tomorrow.

Nick, desperate from the intense pain and hearing Brian's distant voice, coughed over and over again before pushing himself up. He could barely see a thing, but he knew that behind the door where his belongings were, he would find his best friend. He limped toward the door, trying to stay away from the flames that licked at him from all directions...

2003

Nick put his head in his hands, not wanting Katarina or Brian to see him crying. "I...managed to get you out of there alive...and then I heard voices...Kevin...yelling for us." His shoulders shook. "I couldn't let them see me. I knew my face was so bad. It hurt like hell...and there was blood all over your shirt... I had to get out of there. So I ran." After that, no one breathed a word, letting the story sink in. Even though he knew that Brian was going to feel guilty, he couldn't help but feel relieved that he now knew the truth.

He had saved his life...

And Nick had lost his.

"This is all my fault," Brian choked out, suddenly breaking the silence, "if it hadn't been for me being stuck in there..."

"It doesn't matter anymore Bri," Nick mumbled, "it's over. You're alive. That's all that matters."

"No, dammit! That's not all that matters!" Brian stood, his tone very angry, "You saved my life and you..."

Feeling his temper rising Nick's eyes narrowed, "I said it doesn't matter anymore! I'd like to pretend it never happened!"

"How can you pretend when every time you look in the mirror you see what--"

"DON'T!" Nick bellowed, standing up and towering over Brian, "YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE SO DON'T YOU PRETEND THAT YOU DO!"

Brian stepped back, his eyes showing the depth of his hurt. "You...you blame me, don't you?"

Nick didn't know what to say...how to explain what he felt. He just didn't know how to communicate with him anymore.

Brian turned away. "I gotta go." He marched out of the room, his head low.

It was then that Nick felt Katarina's eyes on him.

Go after him.

He blinked at her. "What?" She hadn't spoken a word and yet he knew. He knew just by looking in her eyes...

Go after him. You don't blame him. I know it.

Nick gazed at her and wanted to say something...anything. But the words stayed locked in his heart.

"We'll talk later," she murmured.

He nodded...

And then he was gone.

Brian rushed out of the house toward the lapping water of the ocean. Nick's house was near the open sea and Brian was grateful. He needed a peaceful place to think. He took off his shoes and stepped onto the warm sand. No one was around so he walked around freely, trying desperately to rid himself of the bothersome feelings of sadness and guilt. *He blames me... I ruined his life...*

How was he ever going to live with that?

"I don't blame you Bri."

Brian didn't bother to turn around. "You shouldn't be out here. Someone could see you."

"This is my private beach. No one would be here."

He'd forgotten. Sighing, he sat down. "You don't have to lie to me Nick. It was written all over your face that you hate me...I'm sorry."

"No...I'm sorry...for making you think that I hate you when I don't."

Brian heard him walk up next to him and sit down. They sat together, staring out at the beautiful ocean, the waves lightly lapping against the shore. Such a peaceful sight.

"I admit that for a few days after...that night, I was feeling a lot of resentment...towards you...towards everybody who had what I used to have." Nick took a deep breath. "But I moved passed it and you know why?"

Brian shook his head.

"Because I knew that you had a beautiful wife waiting for you at home and you would do your best to live your life to the fullest. I could relax knowing that you would be all right. You...and the fellas."

Brian felt his tears falling down his cheeks. "...Thank you Nick...you don't know how much that means to me."

"I do...that's why I said it."

Hearing the light tone in his voice, Brian turned his head to look at him. Nick was smiling.

Laughing, Brian extended his hand to him, "Friends Frack?"

Nick stared at his hand for a moment and then took it. "Best friends...Frick."

Katarina gulped down a huge glass of water and set the glass down in Nick's sink. Nick and Brian had been gone for an hour now. She was so nervous and there was no real reason to be...except that he would be back soon.

And they would have to talk.

God, what am I supposed to say? Sorry? It didn't feel right to apologize. She had a damn good reason to leave. But Nick didn't know that and without that tidbit... Tears flooded her eyes.

Their relationship would be over.

No more crying Rina! Haven't you cried enough?

She'd spent the first few minutes after Nick's departure, sobbing for him. He was the bravest man he'd ever encountered in her life. Brave and loyal...

And so vulnerable.

She had yearned to comfort him when he'd started crying. He'd tried so hard to hide it, but she knew him too well. It hurt him so much to talk about that night. *Oh Nick...*

"I thought you'd left."

Katarina whirled around at the sound of his voice and her breath caught. Lord she loved him so much... "No...I...I just was thirsty."

He walked up to her slowly and a strong part of her wanted to run and hide. But her heart...

It would not let her move.

"You...you wanted to talk?" she whispered.

He stopped, his head just inches from hers.

She could do nothing but gaze into his murky eyes...

"I don't know about you," he growled softly, "but I didn't come here to talk."

Before she could utter a response, he closed the distance with his lips claiming hers.

Katarina moaned as his lips worked desperately over hers, as though he were trying to drink the very essence of her soul. She pulled him closer and entangled her fingers into his blond locks. How long had it been since she'd last felt this heady sensation? Since she'd last felt his hands caress her back and his tongue tease hers?

And yet, she felt like sobbing.

This was no ordinary kiss. This was the kind of kiss to be remembered. The kind that you look back on and think "Oh yes!"

This kiss was their good bye.

Nick suddenly moaned and drew back, nestling his smooth cheek on her shoulder. Trying her hardest not to let the tears fall, she gently ran her fingers over the exposed, wretched side of his face.

He let out a long sigh. "Rina..."

She closed her eyes. *Nick...*

After a few moments, he lifted his head and met her gaze. His eyes bore into hers. "Things could've been so different...but--"

"But I left," she interrupted, her voice trembling, "and you'll never forgive me for that...will you?" She lifted her hand to his face and smoothed back the bangs from his forehead.

His eyes softened for a moment and then hardened just as quickly. "I can't."

Those two words shattered her heart into so many broken pieces...it would take a lifetime to put them together again. A single tear escaped and ran down her cheek. He reached out to brush it away, but she stepped back. "Good bye Nick."

He clenched his fists. "...Good bye."

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

The next day had been an overwhelming one for everyone concerned. When Kevin, A.J and Howie had come face to face with Nick for the first time, they had bawled like babies and welcomed him back with open arms.

"I can't believe you're here!" Kevin cried as he gave Nick the biggest bear hug he could muster.

"We thought we'd lost you lil' bro," A.J murmured.

Howie was too overcome with emotion to say anything. He'd just joined into the group hug, his tears mingling with everyone else.

And Nick's family?

Nick sat on the bed and managed a tiny smile. He'd missed them so much...and he feared that once they had a glimpse of his face, they would send him away.

"How could you ever think such a thing!" His mother had scolded, "You're our son Nickolas! We'll love you no matter what!"

And Aaron had practically jumped on him, hugging him tightly, absolutely no fear in his eyes. *"You're still a dork to me Nick!"*

Nick wiped a few tears that had shed again as he recalled those few moments of happiness. But as usual, they didn't last long.

Why?

Because even though he had his family back, his brothers...his life, he didn't have the one thing he needed the most.

The one person he needed to be complete.

And he had no one to blame but himself.

One Month Later

"How was the operation?" Katarina asked as she made herself comfortable on the sofa, her eyes red and swollen.

"It went all right actually," Brian replied happily, "the doctor says he's still got a lot of scars, but at least it's not as bad as before..."

She smiled in relief. "That's great. I'm so happy for him."

"I knew you would be. He came back home a few days ago and he's anxious to take those bandages off his face to see the results." His voice grew quieter. "You should come see him."

"No Brian. We said good bye already. I don't need to go through that again." She heard him sigh.

"Leigh wants you to visit."

"When you guys head back to Atlanta I'll come see you then. But now that you're staying with Nick..."

"I guess I understand. I hope you know he misses you though."

I miss him too. "I have to go Brian. Let me know if anything changes."

"You bet. Bye."

"Bye."

Katarina hung up and stood, trying her hardest to just put Nick out of her mind now. She had a class at 1:00 and the last thing she needed was to have her mind on things that she shouldn't. The door suddenly opened and Billie walked in with bags of groceries in her hands.

"Hey girl," Billie greeted as she walked in, a beaming smile on her face.

She'd been practically glowing since she and Howie got together and Katarina couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy. It must be nice to have the perfect life. "Hey."

Billie set the groceries down on the ground and frowned. "Did Brian call you?" She gasped. "Is Nick okay?"

"Oh he's fine, the surgery was a success in reducing some of the scars at least," Katarina sighed, "I just...I just want to be with him so badly..."

"Oh Rina," Billie sat beside her distraught sister and put her arm over her shoulders. "Why don't you go to him then?"

"Because," Katarina sniffed, "he doesn't want me."

"Did he say that?"

"He didn't have to."

"Rina...you have to fight for what you want. You can't just sit around here moping for the rest of your life for him. The guy could've died the night of that bus crash but he didn't. He lived...and I personally think that was because he was meant to meet you...and fall in love with you."

"Right. That's why he won't forgive me for leaving."

"Why don't you tell him the truth?" Billie suggested, "maybe if he knew, he wouldn't be so damn stubborn."

"What difference does it make now Billie?" Katarina cried out, "he doesn't need me, he never did and I have to accept that."

Billie frowned. *Fine. If you both are going to be so stubborn about it then I guess I'll have to put you two together myself!*

Nickolas,

I am happy to say that I am in good health and happy that things have gone so well for you since you returned to Tampa. I must say that this old house isn't the same without you though. Perhaps you can take time out of your busy schedule in the future to visit me. I'll have some fresh chocolate chip cookies and milk waiting for you!

I will be going into Jasper to visit some friends in hopes of being able to see your T.V debut with your friends. Please sing from the heart, darling, for I will know if you're not! I do hope you give my best to Brian and tell him that he and his wife are invited to join me at my home at their convenience.

Well, although my health is quite good, my arthritis doesn't cease to bother me so I have to cut this letter short. Take care my darling and I hope to see you soon.

Love,

Caroline

*P.S - "Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were." **

Nick sighed and leaned back against his couch, the quote getting to him more than anything else in Caroline's brief but enlightening letter. He really missed her and promised himself that he would go visit her the moment he had some free time. Yes, life was getting back to normal and first on the agenda?

Bringing back Backstreet Boys from its long slumber.

Was the world ready for the new Nick Carter?

Was *he* ready for the world?

There was only one way to find out. He went to the washroom and peered into the mirror, seeing nothing but bandages. With trembling hands, he reached for the clip, removed it, and slowly began to unravel the gauze. He closed his eyes, afraid to see what was lying beneath. When he felt a brush of cold air against his cheeks, he gulped. This was it.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes...

And blinked.

Shocked he lifted his hand to his once damaged face. It was still pretty mangled, but the worst of it had been fixed and all Nick could see now were minor scars. Tears flooded his eyes. *This is me...this is me...*

If only Rina could see me now!

His heart deflated then. What would she think of him? Would she still love him with his face fixed?

Did she still love him?

Something told him that she did...and he loved her. More than anything else in the world.

So why is it so hard for me to forgive her?

"Nick?" Leighanne called out suddenly, "Howie's here!"

Nick was relieved. He needed a distraction badly and with Howie and the rest of the guys here, he wouldn't have to think about Katarina. He slowly descended the stairs and nearly burst out laughing when he caught the shocked look on his friends' faces.

"It's like you're a whole new person!" A.J exclaimed.

"The doctor did a great job," Kevin marveled.

"I still have quite a few scars though...I'll never be the way I was before."

"Well, we certainly don't care," Brian patted his shoulder, "we're just glad you're here."

"Thank you," Nick murmured and then he realized that there was someone in the room that he'd never met before...but he'd seen her picture many times... He gulped. This was definitely unexpected.

"Nick," Howie put his arm around her, "I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Billie Clark."

Billie. That was her name. "...Hi," he said warily, as though fearing that she would treat him horribly for the things that went on with Katarina.

"Hi Nick," she greeted and extended her hand, "it's such a pleasure to meet you after all this time. I'm so glad you're back."

"Uh, thank you," he replied and shook her hand, "...you...you and your sister kinda look like each other."

"I'm sure Katarina's much more attractive," Billie winked at him and Nick turned a light shade of red while everyone else burst out laughing.

After a few moments of light bantering, everyone except Nick, Howie and Billie headed toward the beach for some fresh air and a picnic although judging from the grayish tint of the sky, it looked like it was going to rain.

Nick looked at Billie for a second before clearing his throat. "How's Katarina?" he asked, trying to sound as casual as possible, even though his heart was pounding wildly in his chest.

"She's all right. Studying a lot..."

"Oh." *What about guys? Has she met anyone? Is there anyone she's interested in? Or does she still think about me the way I think about her?* He sighed. Like she'd even answer those questions.

"I think I'm going to call her right now and check up on her," Billie said and stood, but Howie stopped her.

"Billie, I'm sure she's fine. She told you she was going to stay home didn't she?"

"Yes, but ever since I found out about Kris I--"

Nick froze. "Did you say Kris?"

Howie looked at him oddly. "Yeah she did...why? You know who he is?"

Nick nodded vehemently. "He lives in Tampa?!"

"Yes, but he can't go anywhere near us," Billie said, trying to reassure him, "we put a restraining order against him."

Nick frowned. The mention of that bastard's name was nagging at him for a reason he couldn't explain, but he knew it meant trouble.

"Remember the day before yesterday when I yelled at you not to touch me? The reason I did that was because you said something that triggered a memory...of someone who'd once been a very important part of my life. Kris. He's my ex-boyfriend."

"I reminded you of your ex? If you're trying to keep me from freaking out Rina, you're not doing a very good job..."

"Nick, just listen please? Kris was the first guy I thought I was in love with. He treated me like a queen, was always a gentleman and I thought I'd never meet anyone as great as he was. I later realized that I was totally wrong about him. One night, he'd asked me to...have sex with him and I told him no. Since that night, he kept pressuring me and pressuring me until finally...he lost patience and...and...he tried to force himself on me..."

Nick immediately felt his muscles tense. No, this guy wasn't going to sit back because of a stupid restraining order. He knew it. He just knew it.

"Just hold me Nick...and don't ever let me go...ever..."

"I won't. I'll protect you with my life Rina...I promise."

He stood and moved toward the door.

Howie followed. "Nick! Nick, where are you going?!"

"To Tampa. I have to see Katarina."

Billie smiled. "I'm glad you came to your senses."

"It's more than that," Nick slipped into his shoes, "something's not right."

Now she was frowning. "What do you mean?"

"When you mentioned Kris...I just..." Nick paused, not quite sure how to describe the connection that he and Rina had. "I just got a really bad vibe..."

**Cherie Carter-Scott, "If Love Is A Game, These Are The Rules"*

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Ugh! I'm so sick of reading! Katarina yawned as she shoved her books back in her bag. She'd been studying for almost three hours now. Enough was enough! Tired, she strolled from her room into the kitchen to find some dinner. While preparing some vegetables she was suddenly overcome with a feeling of foreboding. Frowning, she set down her knife. *Nick...* Why was he on her mind? She sighed. He was always on her mind.

And as usual something wasn't right.

When are you ever going to get over him Rina?

The sound of the phone ringing interrupted her pessimistic thoughts and she rushed into the living room to grab the receiver. "Hello?"

"Rina?!"

"Billie, hey!"

"Oh thank God you're all right!"

Katarina raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"Listen to me. I want you to go to Mom and Dad's okay?"

"What?! Why?!"

"Just do it please!"

"But--"

"Ri--"

Silence.

Katarina gulped. "Billie?! Billie answer me!" Slowly she set the receiver back in its place. *What is going on?*

The sound of the wind gusting outside was her answer.

She wrapped her arms around herself. *Maybe I should go to Mom and Dad's...* Deciding that that would be best, she began to retreat to her bedroom when the lights began to flicker. *Okay...now I'm starting to freak!* She rushed into her room and slammed the door shut. She leaned back against the door and closed her eyes, trying to block the negative vibes that threatened to overwhelm her. *Oh Nick...* She grasped the

necklace that she hadn't taken off once since he'd given it to her. *Why are you so scared? If only I could tell you not to be...that I'm fine...that you'll be okay...*

As long as I stay away.

"Hey D! Nick! What's taking you so long?" A.J called out as he stepped into the house again. He was met with silence. "Helooo!!" With a raised eyebrow he wandered throughout the house, wondering where his friends could've disappeared to. "Great," he muttered as he stepped back into the living room once again, "they just take off without even telling anybody."

And then he saw the piece of paper on the floor with very familiar handwriting. Curious, he picked it up. *This is D's writing...* His eyes scanned the brief note and instantly he tensed. *Shit!* He dropped the note and rushed back outdoors. "Guys! We gotta get the hell outta here now!"

Kevin was the first to lift his head. "Why? And where's Howie and Nick? Didn't you tell them that we're waiting for them?!"

"Yeah," Brian looked longingly at the steak in front of him, "I haven't eaten anything since breakfast!"

"Forget about food for cryin' out loud!" A.J replied in exasperation. "They're gone and we've got to go after them!"

Leighanne frowned. "What?!"

"A.J," Sarah stood and rested her hand on his arm, "you're not making any sense!"

"I'll explain on the way! Come on you guys. I think Nick and Howie are in trouble!"

Katarina lit the last candle in the living room and then moved back into her bedroom, finding that she was more comfortable in there than anywhere else. As she suspected would happen, the flickering lights in her house soon stopped flickering all together and now she was cloaked in darkness. She took a shuttering breath as she sat on the edge of her bed and clasped the charm on Nick's necklace. She hated the dark. It brought back so many horrible memories that she needed to bury. The attempted rape...the time she got lost in the woods...and worst of all, she'd lost Nick to the darkness.

The abysmal darkness of his depression.

No, she wiped her eyes before any tears could fall, I will not cry. I will not cry! She gripped the charm tighter. I've cried enough for you Nick. I can't do it anymore.

Crack!

Katarina whipped her head up and her breathing increased. *What was that?*

Crack!

She gulped. *It's nothing....it's nothing...right?* She cautiously rose from her bed and quietly crept up to her door and pressed her ear against it, listening for anymore odd noises.

But there was nothing.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. She stepped out of her sanctuary and tip toed as quietly as she could into the living room. The candles cast ominous shadows everywhere making her regret lighting them. *I don't need light anyway...I can put up with no electricity for a few hours right?*

The thunder crashed in the distance and she jumped. *Okay. Maybe not.* She closed her eyes and took another deep breath. *Calm Rina...you have to stay calm. Nothing's going to happen to you here. You're in your home. The door is locked. No one can get in unless they have a key and only Billie and I have... Wait! Kris has a key!*

He has a key!!

Her eyes shot open...

And then she screamed.

Nick gripped the steering wheel so tightly, his hands ached. He sped up the car, wanting desperately to get to Rina. He didn't understand why or how he knew, but she needed him. She was scared half to death. And Kris... His eyes narrowed.

Kris...

"Since that night, he kept pressuring me and pressuring me until finally...he lost patience and...and...he tried to force himself on me..."

His breathing grew heavy as his repressed anger toward Kris began to seep from where it'd been hidden all this time. He hated this guy with everything he had and he hadn't even met him.

Yet.

Nick had a terrible feeling that he would be meeting Kris Reid tonight and the thought both delighted and angered him. Delighted because he'd been wanting to rip his head

off since Rina's confession and angered because the bastard had caused so much pain to the girl he loved more than life itself.

I'm almost there Rina. Just hold on a little longer. I won't let him hurt you again.

I'll kill him if I have to.

"You won't get away from me this time Kitty Kat. I've got you right where I want you."

Katarina shuttered, his closeness a fearful reality. She struggled against his tight embrace, but to no avail. "Let me go! You have no right to be here!!"

Kris laughed menacingly. "How naive can you get baby? Did you really think I'd let a piece of paper keep me away from you?" His hand left her waist and traveled slowly up to her neck. "No my little Kitten...I told you I'd have you...and now I will."

"No!" she cried out and tried desperately to wriggle herself from his grasp, but his grip on her tightened painfully and she yelped.

"YES!" And then he shoved her onto the floor and before she could make a move to escape, he pounced on her.

Katarina cried out in pain as his knee dug into her stomach. *Not again please! Not again!*

"Why bother fighting Kitten? No one's going to save you this time. I'm going to have you all to myself. All night long...over and over again until I hear you beg for more."

She covered her ears, not wanting to hear his disgusting words, but soon enough, his hands gripped her wrist and violently pulled them away and held them above her head.

"YOU'RE GOING TO LISTEN TO ME DAMMIT!"

She squirmed under his scrutinizing, feral eyes and felt the tears coming. Was this it for her? Had her luck ran out?

"Relax baby. You're going to enjoy this. I promise." He grinned broadly. "I never disappoint."

She shook her head vehemently. "Please Kris! Let me go! Please!"

His head lowered and his lips were on her, ravishing her neck, her chest...

"STOP PLEASE! NOOOOO!!!!!"

"We're on the 6th floor, apartment 631..."

Billie's voice echoed in Nick's head as he raced up the stairs. *One more flight of these damn stairs...* He raced through the doors and stopped, needing to catch his breath. It had been a long time since he did this much strenuous activity and he was definitely out of shape.

"STOP!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Rina!" He ran in the direction of her terrified scream and prayed to God that he wasn't too late. He soon found the right apartment and pounded on the door. "RINA!!!"

"NICK!!!!!"

Hearing the desperation in her voice tore him apart and with all the strength he could muster, he kicked in the door and stormed in, finding his love in the living room with his worst enemy on top of her, attempting to finish what he started. Filled with a ferocity that he never knew existed, he grabbed the bastard by his hair and yanked him backward.

"OW!"

"GET THE FUCK OFF HER YOU SON OF A BITCH!!!" Nick shoved him away and immediately reached for Katarina who was pulling her sweater back on. She scrambled into his arms and sobbed into his chest.

"Oh Nick..."

"It's okay," he murmured and kissed the top of her head, "I'm here now."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Prince Charming coming to his true love's rescue."

Nick positioned himself with Rina behind him and he met Kris's searing glare head on with his own. "You're going to regret touching her asshole."

Kris sneered and dismissed the threat. "If you think I'm going to be scared off by a pussy like you, you've got another thing coming."

Nick grinded his teeth together to keep from lashing out at him. He had to get Katarina out of this place before he could unleash his rage. If he gets his way...

Kris won't make it out of this alive.

Slowly he stepped backward, moving Rina along the wall until they were close enough to the door. Without losing sight of Kris, he took Rina's hand. "Go."

"No, I won't leave you alone with him."

"Rina, I don't want to argue with you. Get out now."

A low bloodcurdling laughter escaped Kris's lips. "You won't get away from me Kitten. Once I finish off your boy toy here. I'm coming for you."

That's it! He'd pushed Nick's buttons for the last time. He lunged forward and knocked Kris down to the floor. With blinding anger, Nick nailed him square in the jaw. "You will NEVER EVER come near her again!" Another hit to the jaw. "DO YOU HEAR ME?!" Kris's nose oozed with blood and Nick chose to nail him again. "DO YOU?!"

"We'll...SEE!" Kris snarled and brandished a very sharp...very dangerous pocket knife...

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

"NICK WATCH OUT!!!" Katarina screamed as Kris aimed for Nick's stomach. She raced toward them and kicked his hand, knocking the knife out of his hand and toward the other side of the room. The action gave the opposite reaction to what Katarina expected though and the next thing she knew, Kris had her once again and his arms wound tightly around her neck, nearly choking her. *Oh God what did I do!*

Nick stood and Katarina could see the fury and worry in his eyes. "LET HER GO!"

"I don't think so," Kris bit back and inched toward her bedroom.

"Nick!" she struggled to find a way back to him but the more she tried, the more tightly, Kris held on and breathing was becoming much too hard to do.

"Rina!" Nick moved to save her but Kris grabbed the table next to them and knocked it over, blocking his path.

Instantly the carpet burst into flames and Katarina realized in horror that Kris had knocked down her candles. Nick cowered away from the flames and she realized that Kris had found his weak spot.

Fire.

Before she could utter another word, Kris shoved her into her room and closed the door.

It was his worst nightmare come to life all over again.

Nick watched the flames spread quickly over the carpet, the walls, the furniture. He was surrounded. He gulped and felt his breath catch in his throat.

He had to get out of here!

No NO! Not without Rina. I won't leave without her!

But the flames...

The horrid, blinding flames...

"So what are you going to do now Carter? Run like the baby you are?"

Nick whipped his head up and felt his blood begin to boil again as Kris approached him, the fire licking his feet.

He didn't seem to care.

"I'm not leaving without Rina."

"Good. Neither am I."

The smoke began to block Nick's vision and invade his lungs. Just like before...

"You've fucked me over for the last time Carter. I'm going to make sure you stay dead this time."

"Bring it on asshole," Nick growled before Kris made his move.

Katarina searched and searched for a weapon that would be of use to her. Ignoring the smoke that began to filter into her room she settled on the vase of flowers that Howie gave her as a gesture of friendship. She hated to ruin it, but Nick's life was on the line and she loved him too much to let him fight Kris alone.

Even if that meant losing her life in the process.

Grabbing a blanket to cover her nose and mouth she opened the door and was greeted with black billowy smoke coming from all directions. With watery eyes, she crept out of the room toward the sound of fists pounding against flesh. Though her sight was impaired, she could make out Kris's frame easily and moved behind him. Nick was underneath him, struggling to keep him from punching his lights out. Without hesitation, Katarina brought the vase down on Kris's head, knocking him out instantly and his body crumpled over Nick's. Katarina let go of the blanket that helped her breathe and reached out to pull Kris off him. Nick coughed relentlessly and yelped as a flame nipped his arm. Katarina pulled him up and Nick wrapped his arms around her tightly. She closed her eyes and returned his embrace. *Nick...*

Yo...you have...to get...out of here..." he managed to say before coughing again.

Katarina shook her head before bursting into a fit of coughs as well. "N..nno...I...won't leave...you..."

Nick lifted her into his arms and quickly moved toward the exit, he set her down outside. "Go!"

"No Nick!" she held him tightly as the fire alarm wailed and tenants everywhere began to vacate the building.

"Rina..." he pulled back and cupped her face.

She gazed into his amazing blue eyes, feeling his love enter her, surround her... Her eyes filled with tears. "Nick..."

He leaned forward and gently pressed his lips against her forehead.

"Nick! Rina!"

They turned to see Howie racing toward them, pushing through the crowd of people that desperately wanted to get out.

"Are you guys all right?!"

"Fine," Nick responded, "now get her out of here."

Howie glared at him. "You're coming too!"

"No I'm not," Nick replied stubbornly, "I have unfinished business."

"Nick--"

"JUST GO!"

Howie looked at him in uncertainty but grasped Katarina's hand. Before he could utter another word, Nick rushed back into the fiery pit that was her apartment.

"Nick!" Katarina screamed, "No!!"

Kris smirked as Nick came into view again. This was it.

The perfect time to strike.

And this time he would win.

Coughing unremittingly, Nick approached the lifeless form of Kris, knife in hand, his mind made up.

God didn't seem to want to punish Kris for hurting Katarina...so it was time to take justice into his own hands.

Ignoring the overbearing flames, he stood over the bastard that caused his angel so much pain. He aimed the knife over Kris's heart. *This is for you Rina...*

"I don't...think so."

Nick's eyes widened as his gaze moved upward to Kris's face. He was wide awake with a grin that Satan would appreciate and before Nick could move out of the way, Kris threw a burning cloth directly at his face.

"OWWWW!" Nick cried out as the fabric attached to his face. The familiar stench of flesh burning invaded his nostrils. *Nooooooo!* He yanked the cloth off him and clutched his injured face.

Kris slowly stood and let out a weak but victorious laugh. "Once...again...Nick...Carter's...a freak..." His face twisted into a scowl. "Rina...will never...love you...now..."

Nick felt the anguish returning. When the doctor fixed his face, he felt ready to face the world again, be the Nick Carter that everyone so desperately missed...

And he could show Rina that he wasn't a monster...

Now he was left with nothing again.

Nothing but his broken heart and empty dreams.

"I win...you lose..." Kris continued, laughing harshly despite the heavy smoke.

Nick sank to the floor, his face throbbing...

His heart dying.

And then the memories began to return...

"I don't want someone else. I want you Nick."

"You say that now, but you don't know."

"Don't know what? Why can't you just tell me what's going on?"

"Because once you see me Rina. You'll run. I know it!"

"See you? I don't... Are you talking about your face? Nick, you don't have to be afraid."

"You don't understand."

"Then make me understand Nick! All I want is to understand! Nick please..."

"...I've never...in my whole life felt the way I feel when I'm with you Rina...and I couldn't take it if you looked at me like a...freak."

"Ni--"

"Cause that's what I am. A freak."

"No Nick, you're not a freak. You could never be a freak to me. I don't care about your limbs, your hair, your face...I just care about you Nick. Who you are in here. Nothing is ever going to change that."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He closed his eyes, not wanting Kris to see his tears. Katarina had promised him that she would love him despite his beastly appearance. And then she'd broken her promise to never leave him. What made him think she could keep this one? He didn't trust her enough to take the risk. *I can't do it Caroline...I can't let my anger go...*

"That's right...Carter...you're a...loser...and always will...be." Kris taunted, "and...after...I kill...you...Katarina...will be all...mine."

"Just hold me Nick...and don't ever let me go...ever..."

"I won't. I'll protect you with my life Rina...I promise."

Nick hands balled into fists. He loved her so much...and deep down inside him, he knew that she loved him with an intensity that matched his feelings for her. All he had to do was let go of his anger...let go of the darkness...

Let Nick Carter back into the light and bury the faceless stranger that he had become.

"Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were."

Slowly, he rose to his feet, his head foggy and yet clear at the same time. "Ri...na will never...be...yours...you...asshole...and you know...why...?" He met Kris's vile gaze. "Because...even if you...take her body...you will never...have...her mind...her heart...her soul...because they...belong...to me. ONLY...TO...ME!!!"

"DIE YOU SON OF A BITCH! JUST DIE!!" Kris snarled and lunged toward him.

But Nick was too fast and he sidestepped him and grabbed his collar "No...it's you who has...to die..." Not a second of hesitation stopped him as he hurled Kris toward the window behind him and watched as his body flew into the glass and disappeared into the night.

With a mixture of satisfaction and trepidation he listened until Kris's terrified scream came to a sudden halt and he knew without a doubt in his mind.

Katarina's nightmare was over.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

In her sister's car, outside the dilapidated building that was once her home, Katarina sobbed on Billie's shoulder, never having felt such a devastating loss in her life. "I lost him Billie...I lost him!"

"I'm so sorry Rina," her sister replied shakily and hugged her tightly, "I wish there was something I could do."

But they both knew that no one could do anything to change destiny.

It was destiny that caused Nick to have his accident.

It was destiny that brought Nick and Rina together.

And it was destiny that took him away again.

For good.

Katarina would never forget the sound of the building crashing to the ground in a heap of flames, with the knowledge that somewhere in that devastation was the only man she'd ever loved.

The only man she could ever love.

She could still hear Brian screaming for the loss of his best friend while Leighanne gripped his hand.

She could still see Sarah holding A.J as he sobbed in her arms and Kevin collapsing to the ground in a heap of tears with Kristin by his side, comforting him as best she could.

She could still feel Howie's tears on her shoulder...

Now what were they supposed to do?

How could any of them move on after witnessing something so traumatic?

How was she ever going to live without him?

The familiar music that quietly drifted from the radio into her ears, caused her eyes to overflow with tears as memories of being held in Nick's arms pierced her heart relentlessly.

*"Sayin' I love you
is not the words I want to hear from you.
It's not that I want you*

*not to say it but if you only knew
how easy it would be to show me how you feel.*

*More than words is all you have to do to make it real.
Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me
'cuz I'd already know...*

*I never even got to tell him that I loved him...and now he'll never know. I didn't get to
show him...*

Suddenly Billie stiffened. "Rina."

"...What?"

"Look at this."

Katarina lifted her head and stared at her sister, puzzled. "What?"

"Just look," she replied without looking at her.

With tired eyes she looked toward the direction that Billie was so interested in and instantly her eyes widened. In the distance she could see a figure staggering toward them...a familiar figure that Katarina knew like that palm of her hand. Not quite believing it, she rubbed her eyes and peered in the same direction.

"Dear God," Billie gasped, "it's him!"

Katarina jumped out of the car and raced toward him, nearly knocking down anyone who was in her path. "Nick! Nick!!"

He lifted his head. "Rina!"

Elation swept through her as his arms wrapped around her and pulled her close. "Oh God Nick!" She buried her face into his neck. "I thought I lost you!"

"R...Rina..."

He suddenly felt so heavy and Katarina realized that he was collapsing. "Nick?!" She came down with him and when she peered into his face she held back an urge to bawl. "Oh Nick..."

His eyes locked with hers. "...It's...bad...isn't it?"

She brushed his bangs off his forehead. "It doesn't matter Nicky. As long as you're here...with me."

Despite his failing health, he managed a smile. "...L...Love you Rina."

Katarina returned his beautiful smile with her own and just before the paramedics came to the rescue, she leaned forward and kissed him tenderly on his warm lips.

"I love you too Nicky."

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Kevin grinned as he strolled down the street, a bouquet of roses in hand for his wonderful wife. No one approached him, which was still strange to him after all this time, but he was slowly getting used to it. After sitting down for hours with A.J, Howie, Brian, and Nick to discuss their future, they had decided that Backstreet Boys was the past. It was time to really move on and pursue other dreams. Both he and Brian wanted a family. Howie wanted to be an actor and focus on his relationship with Billie. A.J wanted to help troubled teens with the problems that he had learned to deal with long ago...and Nick?

Nick wanted simply to marry his soulmate.

And yesterday afternoon...

He did.

It had been a simple, but romantic wedding at Caroline's home where they'd first met. The old, but homey house would now be their residence as well. It was strange to think of Nick living so far away from Florida, but it was what he wanted and Kevin and the rest of the guys understood.

Because although Caroline's home had been the place where he'd suffered...

it was also the place where he'd found a mother figure...

And the love of his life.

"Excuse me sir, could you spare some change?"

Kevin looked down at the woman kneeling before him who had nothing but rags and dirt to cover her body. His eyes widened as the familiar face stared back at him. "Rachel?!"

"Change sir? Can you spare me some change?"

Doesn't she recognize me? "I...don't have any..."

She smiled. "That's okay. My boyfriend's really famous so he'll give me some real soon!"

He looked at her warily. "Really?"

"Yup! His name is Nick! Do you know Nick? They say he's alive...so I know he'll come for me soon! Very soon!" She sighed dreamily. "He loves me you know? He'll give me whatever I want!"

"Uh..." Kevin didn't know how to respond. But he knew without a doubt that Rachel had gone off the deep end.

"Are you sure you don't have any change? I want to look beautiful for Nick when he finds me," she held out her hands.

Still in shock, Kevin reached into his pockets and pulled out a few quarters. He placed them in the palm of her hand and gave her a sympathetic glance before turning away.

"Thank you sir!!" she called out as he distanced himself from her.

She'd caused him so much pain and yet, he couldn't help but feel sorry for Rachel. The change in her life had obviously been a drastic one and that had transformed her.

At the same time he knew that she deserved every horrible thing that came her way...just like Kris.

He shook his head. Kris had gotten his punishment all right. When Nick had thrown him out the window, they'd all thought that he would die...

But he didn't.

The bastard lived for a short while to the chagrin of everyone who knew him. And then came the news that he was a paraplegic...condemned to a chair for the rest of his life.

He shot himself not long after.

Yes, life deals you happiness and pitfalls, but it's how you choose to handle those stumbling blocks that makes all the difference because what you do to others will surely come back to you.

It was a lesson that Kevin and the fellas would never ever forget.

Last Night

Katarina gave herself another critique before taking a deep breath. *All right. I think I'm ready.* She smoothed the revealing white satin gown and strategically placed her curled blond tresses in front to cover herself. She was not used to wearing something this...risqué but it was her wedding night.

And she wanted to be beautiful for Nick.

She smiled and felt her cheeks grow warm as she recalled Caroline's advice. *"I was once in your position Rina and I know how nervous a bride can be before the marriage is consummated. Just remember, go slowly darling. You have the whole night to tend to your heart's desire..."*

How embarrassing!

But she loved Caroline like a mother and knew she was only trying to ease her nerves. And in a way, it did. She'd never laughed so much in her entire life.

"Rina! Do you want champagne?" Nick's voice called out to her out of nowhere, startling her.

"Uh...no. That's okay!" She took another deep breath and opened the door. To her relief and dismay as odd as that seemed, Nick's back was to her.

"Are you sure you don't want any? It tastes pretty good."

"...I'm sure."

He turned around with a glass in hand. "All ri--" His jaw dropped and the glass of champagne fell to the floor and shattered, spilling on his socks. "Damn!"

"Are you okay?" Katarina asked, unaware that it was she who'd caused his sudden clumsiness.

"I'm more than okay," he replied, his eyes never leaving hers, "God Rina...you look so beautiful."

She blushed and lowered her gaze to the floor. "Thank you. I'm glad you like the gown."

"I like the whole package."

Hearing how close his voice sounded she lifted her head again and saw that he was right in front of her. His eyes glimmered with such love that Katarina couldn't help but smile. There was no trace of the surly man she'd met so long ago. She cupped his face and ran her thumbs over the light bumps that would forever scar his cheeks. To most people he would never be the gorgeous Nick Carter that had millions of girls swooning...

But to her, he was the most gorgeous man she'd ever known.

Inside and out.

Nick smiled and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her closer to his tall frame. "My angel," he whispered before lightly grazing her soft lips, "my beautiful angel."

She trembled with desire as his lips took hers fully, suddenly feeling the need to feel this man entirely, in every possible way. "Nick..." she moaned when his lips left hers and traveled to her neck. And then he lifted her into his arms and carried her to their bed.

As he gently set her down, Katarina felt her desire give way to nervousness once again and she knew that Nick must've seen it in her eyes when he settled in next to her because he took her hand. "We don't have to do this now Rina...I know how hard it must be after everything..."

She nodded.

"But I want you to know that I'll never ever do anything to hurt you. I'll take my time. I promise."

Her heart melted at the sincerity in his eyes. She sighed happily and placed his hand on her hip. He smiled and moved closer making Katarina realize that his proximity didn't scare her one bit. She trusted Nick with her heart, her soul...

And her body.

This time she instigated the kiss, feeling much more sure of her actions...and of his love for her. His lips were so tender as they connected over and over again with hers and slowly his body moved closer and closer...until he was right where he needed to be.

Where she wanted him to be.

He drew back again and locked her eyes with his. Such vibrant blue eyes he had. So full of life...and intense adoration...

For her.

I love you... That's what they told her and she beamed.

I love you too.

And with his body, he showed her just how much.

Bliss.

This was bliss.

Nick held his bride close to him, never wanting to be without her again. He'd been with his share of girls before, but none of them...not Mandy, nor Rachel could ever compare to the woman who'd changed his world and stolen his heart since the moment she'd walked into his life. What they had shared went way beyond making love. It was his

soul connecting with hers in a way that was just too incredible to explain. All he knew was that he'd found true love.

He'd found his soul mate.

"Nick," she whispered suddenly.

"Hmm..."

"...I'm so happy."

He smiled and kissed her shoulder. "So am I."

She sighed and lightly ran her fingers up and down his arm. "...Can you sing for me Nicky?"

He raised an eyebrow and stared into her warm eyes quizzically. "Sing?"

"Mhmm..." she smiled lazily and closed her eyes.

Nick gazed at her peaceful face for a moment trying to think of the words to describe his emotions at this very moment...to describe just how much he cherished her presence. He reached out and caressed her soft cheek before he opened his mouth...

*"Lying beside you, here in the dark...
feeling your heart beat with mine.
Softly you whisper...
You're so sincere.
How could our love be so blind?
We sailed on together
and drifted apart...
And here you are by my side..."*

*So now I come to you with open arms
Nothing to hide...believe what I say.
So here I am with open arms
hoping you'll see what your love means to me
Open arms..."*

Her breathing was now a steady rhythm and Nick smiled. He could watch her sleep for the rest of his life and never grow tired of it. It was so hard to believe that he had once been stupid enough to let his anger push her away. But that wouldn't happen again. He would never let anything or anyone push her out of his life. He smoothed her silky hair back from her face and continued singing softly to her as his eyes began to droop.

*"Living without you...living alone
This empty house seems so cold."*

*Wanting to hold you, wanting you near...
How much I wanted you home.
And now that you've come back,
turned night into day.
I need you to stay.*

*So now I come to you with open arms
Nothing to hide...believe what I say.
So here I am with open arms
hoping you'll see what your love means to me
Open arms..."**

And on that final note, he fell into a tranquil slumber, knowing that this was only the beginning of the rest of his life.

THE END

* *"Open Arms," by Journey.*