

Three Days in February

Two weeks ago:

He stopped, eyes wide to search the darkness, hoping against hope that they'd adjust so he could make his way through the thorny field without killing himself. With a gasp and beads of sweat rolling into his eyes, he landed on his stomach, ignoring a jagged stone that pressed into his side. He stopped breathing as a police car squealed by, painting the night with flashing blue and red lights.

Waiting for several breathless seconds, he lifted his head high enough to see over the tall grass; the road was clear and dark. "Shit!" he gasped as the night was suddenly shattered by the shrill sound of a distant alarm followed by the desperate barking of search dogs.

"Shit! Shit!"

He jumped to his feet and began to sprint through the grass, not feeling a thing as the sharp blades cut into his bare hands and arms and stickers peppered his socks and cotton-clad pant legs. Soon he disappeared into the darkness.

Present day:

Allie walked over to the window of her small, two bedroom house, she shared with Roger, her roommate of two years. He was renting a room from her while he worked on his undergrad and while she worked on her doctorate. He had borrowed her car - again - and was supposed to have been back over an hour ago. The street was empty, everyone already arriving back home from work as evening settled in.

"Come on," she grumbled with a sigh of irritation.

She was irritated for two reasons: first of all because Roger had her car and she needed to run some errands, but secondly, because her cell phone charger was in the car, as she'd charged her phone at school the day before and had forgotten it there over night, so her phone was about to die. They had gotten rid of their landline the previous year, opting for cell phone exclusivity.

Allie flipped open her phone, growling when she saw the one bar, which she knew would begin to flash if she kept the phone powered on, so she turned the phone off, the cheerful exit song making her even more irritated. A glance at the clock over the stove told her that she was supposed to call Brenda in thirty minutes for their two hour tutoring session.

"Damn."

No choice, she grabbed her jacket and keys, not looking forward to braving the mid-February Mile High City cold, she headed out. She and Roger lived in a quaint, quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of downtown Denver; close enough to get anywhere downtown in a matter of minutes - depending on traffic - but far enough to not be bothered by the noise and over population of the city.

Hands shoved into the pockets of her heavy jacket, she wrapped her dying phone in her hand somehow feeling safer knowing it was there, even though it was all but useless. She wondered how the older generations had survived without a phone tied to their person at all times. The amusing thing was, Allie really had very few people to talk to; she didn't date, had few friends and her family all lived pretty much within driving distance of each other. Even still, it was her lifeline in case... well, just *in case*.

Allie saw the bright lights of the gas station just up the street and was grateful for it. She was freezing, and was actually looking forward to grabbing a latte while she made her phone call to Roger. She was just grateful there was a payphone at the store!

"Evenin'," the store clerk said absently, glancing up at Allie from the magazine he was looking through.

"Hello."

Allie made her way to the back of the store where the drink machines were. She tugged a paper cup from the stack embedded in the metal dispenser and pushed the button, which would send hot and creamy latte mix into her cup. Sighing heavily as she tried to lose her irritation, she glanced around the store for a moment before returning her attention back to the filling cup. During her store perusal, she noticed a man walk in. He was medium in height but built like a linebacker, with wide shoulders and a thick neck. Allie noted short dark hair and a heavy brow before she turned back to her latte.

"Can I get change for a dollar?" she asked the cashier as she set her latte on the counter and dropped a five dollar bill next to it.

The cashier nodded, looking bored out of his mind as he rung up Allie's purchase and gave her the change. "Here 'go," he muttered.

"Thanks." Allie scooped up the change and headed back outside into the cold to use the phone. She held two quarters in her fingers as she walked to the phone, noting that the guy from inside the store pushed out of the store and walked towards a large white van, a plastic bag of goodies in a large hand. Allie met his gaze and sent him a polite nod before turning back to the phone and dialing after dropping the coins into the slot.

After three rings, Roger finally picked up. "Yo?"

"When are you bringing my car back?" she asked, not bothering to identify herself.

"I'm on my home right now. I'll be there in like forty minutes," Roger explained over the loud music in the background.

Allie covered her eyes with a gloved hand. "Roger! I told you I had to call Brenda at seven!"

"So call her. What's that gotta do with me?"

"Because my phone has one bar and the charger is in my car."

Roger glanced over to the passenger seat and noticed the cord to the charger dangling off the passenger seat, the body of it hidden beneath the takeout bag he'd just picked up. "Oh. Well that sucks. If you give me her number I can call her for you and tell her you'll be a few minutes late."

Allie sighed, her irritation growing. "I'm at the store down the street using the payphone. I don't have her number with me."

"So run home and grab it."

"Roger! It's like twenty degrees out here!" Allie exclaimed, turning to look around her, wishing there was some way to make this work. She noticed the guy from the store sitting in his van. She met his gaze for a moment, slightly uncomfortable as he stared back at her. Once again she turned her back to the parking lot. "Just get home as soon as you can. I'll email her and hope she gets it."

"Alright. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Fine. See you soon." Allie hung up the phone and let out a deep breath, which immediately crystallized in the frigid air. She grabbed her latte from where she'd set it on top of the phone box and sipped, humming as the warmth spread throughout her insides.

"Cold out, huh?" the guy in the van remarked, rolling his window down as Allie passed by.

"Sure is," she agreed, quickening her step a bit.

"Wanna ride?" he called out after her.

"No, thanks." Allie gave him a quick but dismissive smile before hurrying across the parking lot and to the sidewalk, feeling better with the busy road next to her.

Galen Murray blew out a heavy breath as she tucked a strand of auburn hair behind an ear. She tucked her bottom lip behind her front teeth during a moment of contemplation as she studied the offerings before her.

"Do you know which one you'd like to see, Miss?" the saleswoman asked, none too patient, as the redhead had been studying the glass case of necklaces for the better part of the past fifteen minutes.

"Can I see that one, please?" Galen finally asked, her voice lilting with a slight Scottish accent.

"Of course." The saleswoman removed the bracelet of keys from her wrist and inserted the correct one into the cabinet lock, sliding the door aside. She removed the gold and diamond necklace from its display and set it on a piece of velvet on the glass counter top. "It's simply beautiful," she commented, hoping to make this sale so she could finish closing the store and go home.

Galen reaching out and touched the necklace, a fingertip brushing over the modest diamond. "I just don't know," she sighed. She looked up at the saleswoman just in time to see the irritation in her eyes. "I think I'll come back later." She gave the woman a polite smile. "I want to sleep on it. Thank you for your help." She turned away in enough time to miss the glare that was aimed at her back.

It had been a long day for Galen, who worked as a ticket agent for United Airlines at Denver International Airport. It had been a busy day, uncharacteristic for February, as holiday traveling was over, and most people didn't fly during tax season, unless they were business class.

As Galen left the mall, she tugged on the necktie she had to wear for her uniform, sliding it off and stuffing it into the pocket of her heavy jacket. As she stared across the sea of cars, the littered the parking lot of the closing mall - everyone trying to get their last-minute Valentine's Day gift - her thoughts drifted to Cassie. Normally Galen was the type to do any sort of shopping months in advance: Christmas, birthday, whatever. This year, she'd waited up until the day before Valentine's Day to get Cassie's gift, a first in their four year relationship.

Galen pressed the button on her key ring to unlock her car door. As she did, something caught her attention. Glancing up, she could see over the top of her car a white van parked next to it. Seeing nothing unusual, she pulled open her car door and tossed her purse inside. About to climb in after it, she stopped, again something catching her attention. Her gaze returned to the white van, realizing that what had caught her attention was the sound of whimpering coming from it.

Concerned, Galen walked over to the passenger side of the van where the sliding back door was and listened. She heard movement inside and a heavy thud, as though something had been hit or kicked. More whimpering.

Galen walked up to the passenger side window and looked in, unable to see anything in the dark confines of the windowless back of the van. "Hello?" she called out, tapping on the window. She felt her stomach lurch when she heard the whimpering again, though it was muffled. "Hello? Is someone in there?" Everything inside Galen was sounding off an alarm, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling to attention.

"You're a nosy bitch."

Galen whirled around, hand to her heart as she saw a man standing near the back of the van, his eyes hidden in the shadow caused by a heavy brow and stark parking lot lighting.

"I'm sorry," Galen gasped, backing away. "I didn't mean to pry--"

Before Galen could even get the words out, she was grabbed in a steel grip around the neck and pulled into the stocky man. She tried to gasp for breath, but his grip wouldn't allow it. Her fingers clawed uselessly at his hand as her air supply was completely cut off. Terrified, she tried to blink away the darkness that threatened the edge of her vision, green eyes wide with shock and terror.

"Bitch," he growled, squeezing harder.

The last thing Galen saw was a stain on his t-shirt before she collapsed.

Allie's cry of surprise was muffled behind the gag that was taped to her mouth. She cried out in pain as something - or *someone*, she realized - was tossed into the van, landing on top of her.

He slid the door shut, slamming it home before looking around to make sure he hadn't been seen. Coast clear, he hurried around the front of the van and slid behind the wheel, the van squealing out of its parking spot and into the darkness.

Allie squeezed her eyes shut, her head pounding, as the van got moving again. Her body swayed gently with the motion, even as she tried to wiggle her body more to get the weight off of her. Her hands were tied to the metal rings in the floor of the van, her ankles tied tightly together. Judging from the little she'd been able to hear outside the van, she figured it was probably the body of the woman who had been knocking on the window.

From the occasional passing street light, Allie was able to make out long auburn hair splayed across her chest, as the woman lay with her face almost in Allie's cleavage. Though the woman's weight was slight, it was extremely uncomfortable, and she prayed the woman would come to so she could move. Or, was she dead?"

The thought rooted in Allie's mind and tears sprang to her eyes. *Oh god!* She tried to move her face to get the tape off, but the guy had used too much of it. Using her tongue, she tried to push the rag out of her mouth and into the tape, hoping against hope that it

would either loosen the tape or pull it off altogether. She felt the tape loosen somewhat but then stopped; what would the guy do if he saw she had managed to get the tape off?

Whimpering slightly out of frustration and fear, she tried to calm herself by taking several deep breaths. As good of an idea as it was, it was incredibly difficult, as the tape partially covered one nostril, and she was only getting a limited amount of oxygen. Deciding to lie still for a moment, Allie tried to think back to what had happened. By the fact that her head hurt so badly, and that she'd awoken to find herself taped and tied in the back of a van, she assumed she'd been hit from behind.

From what she could recall, she'd been headed home from the gas station, her steps quick as she tried to hurry; it had been freezing outside and she was anxious to get home. She had heard the engine of a car behind her slow and finally come to a stop. That was the last thing she could remember.

She looked around the back of the van as much as she could with the streetlights. It looked to be an industrial van, as there was no carpeting, rather metal walls and a very hard, ribbed metal floor beneath her. Metal toolboxes lined the walls of the van, leaving a narrow space between, which was where she and the redheaded woman were.

Allie's inspection was interrupted when she felt movement against her. Suddenly, a loud gasp filled the space, startling Allie. She watched as the woman raised her head, face pale and eyes closed. She took several deep breaths then opened her eyes, looking around her surroundings then down at Allie.

"What the hell happened?" Galen whispered, her voice strained from being choked. She brought up a hand and rubbed her throat, swallowing several times and trying to ignore the pounding in her head. She realized that she was lying on top of a woman and tried to move off, but realized there was nowhere to go.

Allie could only stare, knowing full well the woman wouldn't be able to understand a word she said.

Galen studied the woman for a moment, blinking several times as her eyes refused to focus. Finally, she began to see her world clearly. Seeing the tape across the woman's mouth, she reached up and gently peeled it off.

Allie's eyes closed as she took a deep, realized breath. "Be care," she gasped, "he may get mad if that thing is off."

"Who is he?" Galen whispered, glancing up towards the front of the van, able to see between the driver's and passenger seat to the darkness beyond the windshield. The display lights in the dash didn't do much to expel the mystery of where they were headed.

"I don't know," Allie whispered back. She was trying desperately to keep her tears back, but wasn't hugely successful. She had to admit that, though she felt terrible about the

other woman ending up stuck in the van because she'd apparently heard or seen something that Allie had done, but she felt relieved to not be alone.

Suddenly, the van came to a stop, both women gasping in unison in fear and dread. "We're stopped," Galen whispered unnecessarily. Her eyes huge, she took in the woman's terror beneath her. "Oh god." She couldn't help but think that Cassie would wonder where she was, as she was due home now. She was already running late because of the side trip to the mall.

The sliding door of the van was opened, revealing a pitch black landscape beyond it. Galen and Alley looked up to see the man standing in the open door, looking down at them. The dome light revealed chiseled features and sharp lines, as well as several days' beard growth.

Galen cried out in surprise and pain when he grabbed her by the back of her jacket and tugged her violently out of the van, causing her to land hard on hands and knees on the ice-covered shoulder of the road.

"Get up," he growled, slamming the side door closed before dragging her off into the darkness.

Galen had no choice but to follow, noting in a strange moment of clarity how beautiful the moon was overhead, shining its silvery light down on the snow-covered landscape. Everything seemed to glow around them. Her musings were quickly put to an end when she was slammed up against a tree in the heavily wooded area she'd been dragged to.

"You nosy bitch," the man said, his face in hers. "Now you gotta die. I don't need two bitches to worry about."

"Please, don't kill me," Galen panted, tears burning her eyes as she looked at him with terror-filled eyes. "Please..."

He looked at her, the moonlight shining down like a spotlight on them through a break in the skeleton-like arms of the trees above. He looked at her face and what he could see of her body, and felt his own body react. It had, after all, been four years since he'd had pussy. Those fish in the pen hardly counted as a piece of ass.

Though terrified to see the change in his eyes - his intentions easy to see - Galen felt she might be able to use it to her advantage. "Please," she said again. "I'll do anything, just don't kill me."

Allie could feel the tears tickling as they rolled down her cheeks and into her hair and ears. She could hear nothing beyond her own heavy breathing, though she kept expecting to hear a gunshot or a scream. It never came. Instead, the dome light was suddenly shining into her eyes as the sliding door opened, the redhead woman shoved inside the van to fall on top of Allie again.

Allie's tears came harder in her relief and confusion that the woman was alright, though obviously very shaken. "Are you okay?" Allie asked, her voice trembling from her tears.

The other woman's tears were cold and wet against Allie's neck, but she nodded. "Yes," she whispered.

The van began to move again, the two women holding still and staying quiet in the back for long moments. Allie wasn't sure what to say as she felt the woman's body on top of hers shake with silent sobs. She wished her hands were free so she could hug her, feeling a deep need to comfort. "Are you okay?" she asked at length, her voice quiet so the man wouldn't hear her.

Galen sniffled, her body still hurting even as she tried to push it out of her mind. She was alive, and that was what mattered. She hoped. Finally, she pushed her upper body off of the woman beneath her. "I've got to be crushing you," she said stupidly.

Allie smiled weakly. "We don't have much choice. Did he hurt you?"

"I'll survive." Galen looked around the inside of the van again, then up to the driver's seat. She could vaguely see headlights coming at them from the opposite side of the road, but they were far and few in between. "I have no idea where we are."

"What was outside?" Allie asked, looking around as much as she could.

"Trees, lass. Lots of trees; looked like pine trees, like woods."

Allie's dark brows drew. "Where are you from?"

Galen looked down at her, surprised by the non-sequitur. "What?"

"Your accent."

"We've been nabbed by a sexual predator and you're worried about an accent?" Galen hissed.

Allie felt foolish. "I'm sorry." She looked away, unsure what to think. For a moment she'd been grateful for the normalcy of her natural curiosity, but her companion was right; it wasn't the right time for that.

Galen immediately felt bad. "No, I'm sorry." She turned her attention to the toolboxes, but noted each one had a lock on it. "I wonder if all of those are locked," she wondered aloud.

Allie followed her gaze, straining her neck to look at the toolbox in question. "I couldn't tell you."

"Only one way to find out." Galen stretched her body out as far as she could to reach the first tool box, but found it locked. She checked each subsequent one, also finding them locked, or empty. "Damn," she breathed, holding her tears back from the acute disappointment. "Damn, damn."

Allie tried to use her shoulder to wipe away the tears that fell down her cheeks.

"Let me help," Galen said softly, bringing up a hand to wipe away Allie's tears. "Do you want me to untie you?" she asked, eyeing the knots. She wasn't able to see them that well, but was willing to try. "Maybe re-tie them before we stop."

Allie sniffled, unsure what to do. "He may get angry and do something stupid if they're tied different."

Galen wanted to be angry with the woman, obviously scared out of her mind, but she knew that she had a point. Sighing heavily, she again pushed up as much as she could. "This must be so uncomfortable for you. I'm sorry I'm crushing you with my fat ass."

Allie managed a weak smile, hearing the teasing in the woman's voice, especially when it was more than obvious that the redhead didn't seem to have an ounce of fat on her. "It's not your fault."

Galen looked down at her. "What's your name, lass?"

"Allie. You?"

"Galen."

"Galen?" Allie asked, dark brows drawn. "What kind of name is that?"

"Scottish."

"Ahh. That would explain the accent."

Roger shivered as he hurried into the house. The gas tank was extremely empty in Allie's car, so he'd turned off the heater to save on gas on the way home. He just hoped his roommate wouldn't notice, after all, he *had* grabbed her phone charger to bring in. That had to count for something, right?

All that said, he was surprised to find the front door locked. "Fuck." He dug into his pockets for his keys. He unlocked the door and stepped inside, expecting to see an irate Allie waiting for him. The wide, charming grin he always used to defuse any situation he got himself into slid off his face as he found an empty living room. "Allie?" he called,

closing the front door behind him. He set the charger down on the coffee table and walked to his bedroom. "Allie?" he called again, shrugging out of his coat.

When Roger got no answer, he headed back out into the living room. He felt panic set in when he saw Allie's laptop lying on the couch, shut down and closed, which was beyond unusual. He headed to the stairs that would lead to the large loft Allie used as her bedroom and home office. Reaching the top of the stairs, he looked around the darkened room; no Allie.

Roger jogged back down the stairs and went to his bedroom to grab his cell phone. He quickly dialed Allie's number, only for it to go directly to her voicemail. Chewing on his bottom lip, he tugged his jacket back on and grabbed Allie's car keys, which he'd left on the coffee table with her charger.

It seemed the night temperatures had gotten even colder in the few minutes since Roger had arrived at the house. He started the car and backed out of the driveway, now kicking himself for not getting gas; he hoped he had enough to go look for Allie.

Cassie stood with hand on hip as she stared down at the frying pan, waiting for the hamburger to brown fully so she could add the taco seasoning. She glanced over at the small TV that was mounted under the cabinet. The evening news was on, and she was paying it little attention, as all she wanted to hear was the weather. This time when she glanced over at the screen, however, she felt her blood go cold.

Stepping over to it, she grabbed the remote and turned up the volume so she could hear what was being said, her eyes riveted to what she was seeing on the screen.

"... are not releasing the identity of the woman who owns this 2006 Civic Si Coupe, however they are looking for any information as to the whereabouts of the owner."

Cassie felt her stomach drop, easily recognizing Galen's beloved red car. The door was open, Galen's purse on the passenger seat. "Oh god," she breathed. After their fight earlier that morning, Cassie hadn't been hugely surprised that Galen hadn't come home right after work.

She turned the knob on the stove to turn off the burner then hurried over to the phone, dialing the police with a shaking hand.

Galen and Allie looked at each other with wide eyes as the van came to a stop. They'd been driving for what seemed like hours. Allie's arms were so cramped from being kept in the same position for so long, as well as her body hurt from the weight of Galen on top of her.

"God," Galen breathed, her heart beginning to race.

It seemed like forever until finally footsteps were heard outside the sliding door of the van, and then the door was slid open. The man looked at Galen, a handgun pointed at her head. "Get out and do nothing stupid or what happened between you and me in the woods is the least of your worries."

Galen bit down hard on her lip to keep herself together and from crying. She climbed out of the van, trying to be careful not to hurt Allie. Her hand was grabbed in a vise-like grip by the man, who turned the gun on Allie, who still lay tied to the floor.

"If you make a sound, I'll kill you," he threatened.

Allie said nothing, her gaze riveted to the barrel of the pistol. Left alone after the man drug Galen away, she let out a long, shaky breath. She couldn't tell where they were, as the darkness beyond the open door was complete.

Galen looked around as she was cruelly dragged behind the man's long gait, almost running to try and keep up. They were surrounded by thick stands of pine trees: the mountains. She was pulled to a cabin of some sort. The place looked like it hadn't been inhabited in years. She noticed a broken pane of glass in one of the windows next to the door, and assumed that's what he'd been doing while she and Allie had waited in the van, as the man turned the knob on the door and pushed it open.

Once inside the cold, dark space, Galen was shoved in. Suddenly, the beam of a flashlight flicked on behind her, showing the way to a dust-covered table and chairs. Though obviously abandoned for awhile, the cabin seemed to be in good shape with nice furniture.

"Sit."

Galen did as she was ordered, not fighting him as he took her hands behind her back and clicked cold handcuffs around her wrists, effectively linking her to the chair. Galen was left in the dark again as he headed back outside, leaving her alone. Admittedly, she was utterly creeped out, left alone in a strange, dark cabin, of which she'd only seen a thin beam of light. She wasn't, however, left alone for long. Soon, the man shoved Allie inside and to the table, the other woman rubbing her rope burned wrists.

"Sit," came the simple order again.

Allie sat down in the chair across from Galen, their fear-filled gazes meeting as Allie, too was tethered to the chair with a pair of handcuffs. They were left alone for a few moments until he returned, setting a battery-powered lantern in the middle of the table and flicking it on. Eerie shadows were cast over Galen and Allie's faces, as well as the man who stood next to the table. His already sharp features were painted razor thin.

He set large hands on the table top and leaned on it, looking from one woman to the other. "If either of you do anything stupid, I will blow your fucking head off. Got it?" Allie nodded, Galen merely stared back at him. With that, he pushed off the table and headed out, closing the door behind him.

Galen let out a shaky breath, her eyes glued to the door. "I wonder where he went," she whispered.

"And how long he'll be gone."

Galen looked to her companion, able to really see her for the first time, even if it was in buttery lantern light. She realized that Allie was actually a very beautiful woman with long, almost black hair and eyes that were a strange blue/gray color, although it was hard to tell in the shadowy-heavy light. She thought she looked young, twenties somewhere. "How long had he kept you in the back of that van?"

"Seems like forever," Allie whispered, angry as she felt a tear trickle down her cheek. She wanted to wipe it away, but had no use of her hands. Again. So, she used her shoulder as best she could to wipe it away. "Tonight just before seven."

"Only about an hour or so before me."

Allie nodded. "What does he want with us?"

Galen shivered, trying desperately to forget what had happened against that tree, even as her body still hurt. "The whole picture I don't know, but I think I have at least one idea."

Allie studied Galen for a long moment. "Did he really hurt you?" she asked softly.

Galen looked away. "Like I said, I'll survive." She didn't want to think about and certainly not talk about it. "What do you do?"

"As in a job?" At Galen's nod, Allie explained. "I'm working to finish up my doctorate in English."

"Really? That's wonderful." Galen gave her a small smile, difficult to be as excited for Allie as she normally would have been.

"Shit," Allie said suddenly, her head falling back against the back of the chair.

"What?"

"I have an appointment with my advisor tomorrow morning at nine. Think he'll let us go by then?" she asked, sarcasm in her voice.

"Somehow I don't think so."

"I can't believe this has happened," Allie whispered, another tear slipping down her cheek. She blew out a breath then looked at Galen again. "What do you do for a living?"

"I work for United Airlines at DIA. I sell tickets at the ticket counter or sometimes I work at the terminal gate."

"You know, I've flown a million times and I've never met someone who does that. I've met flight attendants before, but never someone who calls for passengers to board."

Galen smiled. "Well, now you have."

The two fell silent again, each lost in their own fear or nightmarish musings of what could be their fate. Galen looked around the cabin again, able to see more with the lantern light. The main room was small, but held a kitchenette, the table where she and Allie sat, a massive stone fireplace and a couch. A hallway disappeared into darkness on the far end of the room, assumedly leading to bedrooms.

The cabin had several windows that were the rustic, four-paned type that slid up or down to open or close. Galen studied the closest window to her, trying to mentally eye the distance and if she'd be able to get to it and through it with chair in tow.

"What are you thinking?" Allie whispered, following Galen's gaze.

"Do you think one of these chairs would fit **through** that window?" Galen whispered back in response.

Allie eyed the size of the window and then looked at one of the other two unoccupied chairs, doing mental calculations. "Wow, I don't know. Especially since we're cuffed to the chair; it would have to be able to fit not just the bulk of the chair, but our bodies in the same spatial load."

Galen sighed in resignation. "Okay, that idea is out." She jiggled her cuffed wrists, testing the strength of the chair. "Damn. This thing is solid." She grunted with each attempt as she tried to break the wooden rod free of the chair that the handcuffs were wrapped around. "Not going to happen."

Allie shared Galen's disappointment, though it was short lived as the man came back into the cabin. He carried two fast food bags in his hands as well as two gallon jugs of water. Setting everything down on the table.

"How's it going, ladies?" he asked conversationally. He walked over to Allie and unlocked the handcuffs.

Allie rubbed her wrists, relieved to be free again. Between the ropes and the metal bracelet of the cuffs, the skin of her wrists was raw and painful. She watched as he uncuffed Galen,

the two women meeting eyes for a moment, as a bond was beginning to form between the two victims. As Allie looked at Galen, she knew in that moment that no matter what happened, no matter how long or short of time they were captive, and no matter what the outcome would be, she'd be able to survive it with the strength of the woman sitting across from her. She knew intuitively that Galen was would be the rock.

"Now, I want you two to eat up." He took one of the chairs between them, first setting the gun on the table in clear view and easy reach, then began to dole out wrapped cheeseburgers from the bags. "Don't **know** about you two, but I'm hungry as hell."

Galen watched him dig into one of the cheeseburgers, literally getting it down in three bites. She felt surreal, sitting at a kitchen table with two strangers, one of **whom** would be a fellow life line, the other already having brutally attacked her, yet there they sat, having a nice, calm dinner of McDonald's and water.

She reached for one of the sandwiches, sensing there would be hell to pay if she and Allie didn't comply. She would have to force herself to eat, as it was the last thing she wanted to do. "Why are we here?" she asked quietly as she picked a pickle off the sandwich.

The man looked at her, cheek bulging with another cheeseburger. "Well," he said around the large bite of food, "we gotta have somewhere to stay, right?" He shoved more food in.

"I mean, why are Allie and I here? With you."

The man looked over at Allie. "Is that your name? Allie?" At her nod, he sighed, grabbing one of the jugs of water and downing a huge gulp. "Hmm," he said, as though contemplating something. "I like that." He smiled at her then he turned to Galen. "What's your name?"

Galen felt sick. She was getting more terrified by the minute. The man was so unpredictable: angry and violent one moment then polite and even friendly the next. She wondered what his trigger was. "Galen," she finally said.

"That's different. Kinda cool." He chugged more water then unwrapped a third sandwich. "Eat up, guys."

"What's your name?" Allie asked quietly, picking at her food. Like Galen, it was the last thing she wanted.

The man looked at her, sizing her up. "You can call me John," he finally said. "See?" he grinned at both women. "Don't you feel better that we're all acquainted?"

Galen noted that he still hadn't answered her question, and something was telling her not to push it. Maybe she'd get a chance to ask again later, or maybe he'd just tell them.

Roger chewed on the end of his thumb as he watched the police officers talk amongst themselves. He glanced over at the blood droplets that were found in the snow next to Allie's purse on the sidewalk. He'd driven to the gas station and talked to the attendant, who had remembered someone with Allie's description in the store. After leaving the gas station, Roger drove the route that Allie would have walked, using the residential streets rather than busy Kipling. That was when he'd spotted her purse and had called the police.

"Anything more to tell us?" one of the officers asked, pulling Roger from his thoughts.

Roger shook his head. "No, that's everything."

"Alright. Well, if anything pops up, give us a call."

Roger nodded. "Will do." He watched the officers walk to their squad cars and leave, leaving him feeling alone and really worried.

Cassie sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair next to the desk of Detective Ray **Espinoza**, who she was told was the detective working Galen's case. As she waited for him, she watched a **newscast** that was playing on a TV in the corner. She couldn't hear what was being said, as the noise in the office was too loud, but from what she could see and read splayed across the screen was a man named Jonathan Alan Betts who had escaped from Territorial Correctional Facility in Canon City two weeks before, and was still at large.

"He's been seen in the area," a man said, startling Cassie. She looked up to see an overweight Hispanic man dressed in a rumpled suit standing next to her chair. "I'm Detective **Espinoza**, we talked on the phone."

Cassie accepted his hand in greeting. "What have you been able to find out?" she asked, getting right to the point.

"Well," he said, sitting in the chair behind the desk. "There doesn't seem to be any signs of a struggle in Miss Murray's car, nor anywhere nearby. It's almost like she just up and left."

Cassie shook her head, tucking a blonde strand of hair behind an ear. "No way, not Galen. She's far too responsible for that."

"How long you known her, Cassie?"

"Four and a half years, but we've been together for four."

"Any problems? Any debts she may have had? Enemies?" he asked, pen in hand as he jotted down some notes.

Again Cassie shook her head. "No. We live a quiet life, Detective. Nothing special."

"She involved in any illegal activities? Questionable friends or acquaintances?"

Cassie chuckled. "Oh no, not Galen. She's as straight laced as it gets in that way. Not a chance."

"And what about your relationship? What's that like?"

Cassie hugged herself, feeling alone and very small in the large, busy office, police moving around, talking on the phone and to each other. A police radio squawking somewhere in the corner. "It's been a bit rocky lately," she admitted.

"Rocky enough for her to maybe go off somewhere? Cool down or blow off steam?" Espinoza asked with a raised brow.

Cassie let out a tired sigh. "I wondered that myself when she wasn't home on time, but no, I don't think so. And, especially not without her car; that car is her baby."

"Alright," he said, jotting down a few more notes. "Thanks for coming in and talking to me, Cassie. I appreciate it."

Cassie sucked her lips in for a moment, trying to fight the rising emotions. "You've got to find her, Detective Espinoza," she said softly.

"We're doing all we can."

Galen's eyes shot open, her cry of surprise muffled behind a large hand. She found herself looking into the deep-set eyes of John from where she was handcuffed to the frame of the twin bed she slept on. Allie slept not six feet away on her own twin bed.

"For being a nosy bitch you get to be *my* bitch," John whispered.

Galen could easily feel John's intent pushing against her leg, followed by his hands tearing at the button and zipper of her work uniform pants.

Allie woke from the light sleep she'd been in, glancing across the dark space to Galen's bed, where she heard heavy breathing and a quiet, pain-filled whimper. Tears sprang to Allie's eyes, realization of what was happening just a few feet away hitting her full force. She wanted nothing more than to jump off the bed and beat the living hell out of John for doing that to Galen. She could only imagine what Galen must be feeling right now.

John groaned deep in his throat as his body shuddered with his release. Chest heaving, he buried his face in Galen's neck. "God, you're beautiful," he whispered. "I can't wait until we're settled and all three of us can enjoy each other."

Galen didn't say a word, her eyes squeezed shut as she held everything down inside, including her emotions. She bit her tongue as John pulled out and climbed off of her.

"That was great," he whispered, leaving a kiss on her cheek then leaving the room.

Both hands cuffed to the iron bars of the headboard, Galen had to use her shoulder to wipe off his kiss, and then to catch the silent tears that slid down her cheeks.

"Galen?" Allie whispered in the dark.

Galen's tears increased, realizing that Allie was awake. Her humiliation deepened. "Yeah?" she whispered back.

"Someday, I'll kill him."

Galen nodded, not caring that Allie couldn't see her. "Yeah."

Allie was relieved to not be tied to the floor of the van as they drove. Instead, she and Galen sat side by side, well, almost. The space was so small that Galen was nearly sitting in Allie's lap. John had slammed into the room, scaring the hell out of both of them just after dawn. He'd demanded they be loaded into the van within two minutes of being released from their bonds, including going to the bathroom.

They'd been driving for nearly an hour, Galen as silent as the grave. Allie had kept her own silence, not sure what to say after what had happened the night before. She'd had a pretty good idea what had happened the day before when John had pulled Galen from the van, but somehow she could close that off from her mind: out of sight, out of mind. But, to have Galen attacked mere feet away had shaken Allie deeply.

"Galen?" she whispered, looking at her companion's profile.

"Yeah?" Galen said, unable to meet Allie's eyes. She had not been able to get back to sleep after John's visit. She was scared, deeply ashamed and humiliated. Knowing that Allie had either seen what had happened, or was just simply aware of what had happened, made it so much worse. She was worried that she would break, which was something she'd never done in her entire life.

Allie could hear the defeat in that one simple word. Though words were her life, she knew that at that moment they had no place. Instead, she wrapped her arm around Galen's shoulders and pulled her close. At first Galen was somewhat stiff, and Allie thought for

sure she would pull away, but she didn't. Within a few moments, Galen relaxed against Allie, and finally allowed the comfort, turning just enough so she could bury her face in Allie's shoulder and be fully held.

Allie rested her head against Galen's, her hand raising to run through soft, auburn hair. "We're going to get through this," she said softly. "We have to."

Galen nodded, not sure that she believed it. "I bet Cassie is so freaked out," she said after a moment.

"Who's Cassie?" Allie asked, continuing her actions. She could feel Galen relaxing more and more, so she began to massage Galen's scalp, wanting to comfort her in any way she could.

"My partner," Galen murmured, her eyes sliding closed at the wonderful sensation Allie was producing.

"I bet Roger is, too," Allie commented absently.

"Boyfriend?"

Allie made a face. "God no! Roommate."

Galen smiled. "Girlfriend?"

Allie chuckled. "No. I don't date."

Galen pulled away just enough to look up into Allie's face. "Why? You're a beautiful woman."

Allie blushed slightly. "Thank you." She shrugged, resuming her combing once Galen put her head back down. "I've been told I'm married to my academics. Guess that's true."

Galen closed her eyes, Allie's comforting touches putting her to sleep. Before she knew it, she fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

"You know," Allie began, but then felt the steady, even breath against her neck. She listened, realizing Galen had fallen asleep against her. "Galen," she whispered, slowly moving her body as far over to her left as she could, the edge of a toolbox biting into her side. "Lay down." She slowly and gently maneuvered Galen until she lay on her side, legs curled up against her body and her head resting in Allie's lap. Allie continued to run her fingers through her hair, her own head resting against the toolbox behind her.

John tapped his fingers against the steering wheel with the song on the radio. It was some old bluegrass tune, which he didn't like, but it was the only station that would come in as

they climbed higher into the mountains. Though his fingers tapped, though his head bobbed, his mind raced, dark images and even darker fears pranced across his brain.

What have I done? What am I going to do? What would she say? She'd hate me, wouldn't she. She'd look down that long, pointed nose at me and she'd hate me.

John shook those thoughts out of his mind, not wanting to think about it or be affected by it. By *her*.

As John continued to drive, eyes focused fully on the road as the clouds began to obscure things, leaving wet trails across the windshield, he heard the ladies talking quietly in the back. He turned down the radio, wanting to join them, hear what they had to say and be part of their world. He would try, would force it if he had to.

John glanced over at the passenger bucket seat, noting that only a Styrofoam cooler held throne there. How he wished a woman sat there, smiling at him, talking to him, holding his hand. He didn't want to be alone anymore, would *never* be alone again.

Three hours after entering the van, John slid the door open to reveal their next location. "Welcome home, ladies," he said with a bright smile, his pistol held at his side.

Galen climbed out of the van, squinting against the harsh glare from the winter wonderland that surrounded them. The cabin that sat before them looked newer than the one they'd stayed at the night before, but still looked as though no one had been there for a year or more. The curtains were closed, windows sealed and snow drifted halfway up the door.

John raised the pistol and pointed it at the deadbolt of the door, the loud **report** made Galen and Allie jump, Allie **grabbed** Galen's arm in surprised fear. Galen grabbed Allie's hand and held it tightly in her own.

"It's okay," she whispered.

Allie's heart was racing so fast she felt lightheaded. She squeezed her eyes shut and took several deep breaths, the cold air making her lungs hurt. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that John had pushed the door open, a hole where the ruined lock was.

"Come on, Allie," Galen said softly, squeezing Allie's fingers gently.

"Come in, ladies!" John called from inside, his tone making it clear there was no room for argument.

The cabin was small, all the furniture covered with white sheets that were no longer white, as they'd become yellowish from gathered dust and bug carcasses. Galen took it all in,

Allie's hand still held safely within her own. As she took in the room, she suddenly felt very angry. She was not only angry that she and Allie were captives of a mad man, but also of the fact that they were in somebody else's home, looking at and using their stuff, and it was all wrong. Totally and utterly wrong.

"John?" she said, biting her tongue to keep any of the hatred she felt out of her voice.

"Yes, Galen?" John asked, shrugging out of his jacket and tossing it to the covered couch.

"When are you going to let us go?"

Allie's eyes widened in surprise at Galen's candid question. She looked over at John, almost holding her breath at his response.

John slowly turned to look at Galen, his expression carefully guarded. "Who says I'm letting you go, Galen?"

"We have lives, John! I have a partner at home who's probably worried sick! Allie has a life, she has school! We both have families and-"

In a flash John was in front of Galen, rage on his face as he brought a hand up and backhanded her, knocking her to the floor. He ignored the sting in his hand, noting the blood that dribbled down Galen's chin. Jaw muscles bulging with his contained emotions, he turned to Allie. "Clean her up," he growled. "You two have ten minutes to shower and be presentable." With that, he stormed out, slamming the door after him. Within a few moments, the sound of hammering could be heard.

"He's trapping us in here," Allie whispered. She looked to the front door. Though she saw nothing, the sound of the hammering brought to mind the image of boards being nailed in place, and could almost see boards being nailed over the windows.

Galen buried her face in her hands. "I can't do this," she whispered, shaking her head. "I can't do this, Allie."

Allie grabbed Galen by the arms, shaking her. "Galen!" She waited until Galen looked at her. "Yes you can. You can." She brought a thumb up and wiped some of the blood away. "We're on a clock; let's clean you up."

Galen smirked, following Allie deeper into the cabin to find the bathroom. "If there's even running water." They found the bathroom, Galen watching as Allie tested the sink faucet. She was surprised when water ran. "This guy is nuts, Allie. You know that, don't you?"

Allie nodded, moving over to the tub and shower, a plastic sliding door barrier from the rest of the bathroom. "Yes, Galen I do." She looked at the redhead. "But right now he holds the cards, and we'd be far smarter to play the game than to buck against the system."

"I like smart women."

Galen and Allie turned, startled to hear John's voice coming from the open doorway. He tossed Galen a package wrapped in a plastic bag. "Ten minutes," he reminded, then left.

Galen looked within the bag, drawing out a bottle shampoo and a bottle of body wash. She smirked. "Guess he likes his girls clean."

As much as Allie would have loved to join in on Galen's negativity, she knew it would do them no good. She had to believe that at some point they'd have a chance to escape, but to fight against the status quo, she felt in her bones it was the wrong thing to do. With a deep breath to push down her natural modesty, she stripped off her jacket and shirt, leaving her standing there in a pair of jeans and bra. Turning her back to Galen, she reached behind her to unhook her bra and unbuttoned her jeans.

Galen glanced at her quiet companion, sensing that Allie was meaning to comply, whatever her reasons. Deciding to do as Allie did, she also disrobed. She heard Allie step over to the tub and try the faucet, both surprised when water sputtered out of the water-spotted spigot.

"Come on, Galen," Allie said softly, feeling more vulnerable than she ever had. She hadn't been naked with another human being since gym class in high school. She tried to block that out of her mind as she stepped under the warm spray, allowing the water to smooth back her long hair.

Galen was shocked, left standing with her mouth hanging open at Allie's sudden boldness. Standing naked, she walked over to the shower stall, pushing the door aside and stepping inside with Allie. In truth, she was absolutely craving the warmth. Doing her best to not stare at Allie's naked body, Galen turned her back to her.

"Turn around, Galen. Let me take care of your mouth," Allie said gently, touching Galen's naked shoulder for emphasis.

Galen turned around in the tiny tub, trying to not touch Allie in any way, as the space was incredibly limited and she didn't want to offend or intrude. "Okay," she agreed, standing still.

"We're running out of time," Allie said, squirting some soap into her palm and rubbing it between her hands with some hot water to form lather. "This may hurt."

As gently as she could, Allie washed away the blood from Galen's lip, brows furrowed as she concentrated on the wound, curious at how bad it was. It looked to be a nasty - though small - cut that her teeth caused when her lip was pressed against it during John's strike. She winced in sympathy with Galen as she washed it.

"Sorry," she whispered at Galen's hiss of pain.

Galen was both soothed and enflamed by Allie's gentle touch. It had been so long since she and Cassie had made love, so long since she'd been touched at all, let alone with gentle hands. As Allie continued to clean her lip, she looked into Allie's eyes, such an unusual color yet so filled with depth.

She tried her best to not notice the rest of Allie's body, but despite their situation, she found herself *absolutely* noticing it. Allie was thin, but not too much so. She had slight musculature in her arms and shoulders, and no matter how hard Galen tried to not notice, she couldn't help but see Allie's breasts, which were absolutely beautiful: full, though not too large for her frame. She quickly cut her eyes away, focusing on the Pepto-pink tile that lined the shower stall.

"Okay, I think you're okay; no stitches or anything," Allie said softly, taking one last look at Galen's lip before dropping her hand from where it had cupped the redhead's jaw.

She was amazed at how soft Galen's face was. As she turned to start washing, as they were running out of time, her gaze swept across Galen's incredible body. She looked like she lifted weights on a regular basis from her muscular frame, though was still incredibly feminine with flared hips and beautiful breasts. She had to admit that she felt slightly intimidated by Galen, from her gorgeous body to her absolutely gorgeous face.

"Happy Valentine's Day, by the way," Galen smirked, taking the bottle of shampoo Allie handed her.

Allie thought for a moment and then nodded. "I guess it is Valentine's Day, isn't it? I've never celebrated it before." She quickly rinsed her hair then moved so Galen could get under the water as Allie lathered the shampoo into her hair.

"Why?" Galen asked, smoothing her hair back away from her face under the warm spray.

"Because I've never had a reason to," Allie said, again changing places with Galen so she could rinse the shampoo out of her hair.

Galen studied her, brows drawn. "Why?"

"I've never had a boyfriend before, Galen." Allie closed her eyes and tilted her face up to the spray, missing Galen's shocked expression.

"Are you telling me that someone as absolutely stunning as you has truly never dated before?" Galen asked, unable to wrap her mind around it. She quickly ran soapy hands over her body, wanting to make sure she'd be washed before John called their time.

Allie nodded, switching places with Galen once more. She felt shy admitting this to Galen, and foolish considering how shocked Galen seemed to be. She was also slightly flushed from Galen's compliment. "Like I said-"

"Married to your academics," Galen finished, remembering what Allie had said before. Galen was quiet for a moment as she finished rinsing. "You know, I was at the mall that night to get a Valentine's Day gift for Cassie."

"What did you get her?" Allie asked, finishing with her own rinsing. Though she felt incredibly vulnerable standing in a tiny shower stall naked with Galen, she didn't want to leave the warmth of the water, as it was cold as hell in the cabin.

"I decided not to," Galen sighed. She felt sadness engulf her all the sudden, as the weight of the situation they were in hit her, as well as the fact that it was likely that her relationship with Cassie was over. Though, **would** she actually ever get home to know for sure?

"Hey," Allie said, resting a hand on Galen's shoulder. She could tell Galen was about to cry. "It's all going to be okay." Her heart went out to Galen, and before she could give it a second thought - or consider the fact that they were naked - she pulled Galen to her in a comforting hug, gasping slightly at the feel of Galen's body against her own.

Galen wrapped her arms around Allie and buried her face in the warmth of her neck. She sighed into the hug, grateful for Allie's kindness. She closed her eyes and just tried to lose herself in the comfort of another human being. They stood like that for several moments, both able to forget about their situation in their escape in each other.

Allie had never felt so close to another human being as she did to Galen in that moment. She felt a connection to her that went far beyond the bond of survival. In a strange way, it was almost as though a deep part of her already knew Galen, and trusted her implicitly. Trust wasn't an easy thing for Allie, which was a huge reason why she'd never given her body to anyone before; it was a vulnerability that she just wasn't willing to take. But standing there in that shower stall, Galen's skin pressed against her own, she felt her heart race and body respond in a way that both scared and excited her.

Galen ran her hands down the water-slicked skin of Allie's back as she pulled away just enough to be able to look into her face. She studied Allie's eyes and saw all of her own emotions and feelings reflected in their blue-gray depths. Her eyes slid closed when she felt a soft touch on her cheek, Allie's fingertips brushing along the skin.

Allie was lost in the unbelievable green of Galen's eyes and the softness of her skin, and her very presence. Before she could even think, she leaned forward and rested her lips against Galen's, surprised by their softness. Realization dawned on her and she backed away with a gasp. "God," she breathed, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth, eye wide. "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

"Shh," Galen whispered, gently pulling Allie's hand away. "Don't apologize." She understood why Allie had kissed her, and in truth, she, too needed the closeness and felt the

draw. She wrapped her hand around the back of Allie's neck and gently tugged her close, initiating a kiss of her own.

Allie was shocked at the move, but she couldn't bring herself to pull away. She snaked her arms up around Galen's neck and surrendered to the moment. She'd only ever kissed someone once in her life, so kissing was still a relatively new experience for her, but in that moment, she felt like she'd been kissing Galen forever.

Galen deepened the kiss, all thought gone as she caressed Allie's tongue with her own. She forgot where they were, forgot about the fact that they were in a dire situation, and forgot that she had a partner sitting at home. All that existed for her in that moment was Allie and the kiss they were sharing.

Suddenly, the spell was shattered when a loud thud sounded against the closed bathroom door. "Time's up!" John shouted from the other side. "Get out here now!"

Allie gasped, startled as she backed away from Galen. She was flushed, Galen's taste still on her lips. "My god," she panted, heart racing for a whole new reason, now. Hand on her heart, she glanced over in the direction of the door. "I hate him," she whispered.

"I know, I do, too. We've got to get out of here, Allie," Galen whispered back.

"But how?"

"I don't know," Galen sighed, pushing the shower door aside as Allie turned off the water. She stepped out and looked around: no towels. "Shit." She looked in all the cabinets and drawers, finding only what seemed to be a forgotten hand towel stuffed in the back of a drawer. "Guess they missed this one when they packed up for the season."

Allie stared at the small towel that Galen handed to her, offering her first use. "This is crazy," she muttered, taking the towel and blotting her wet skin as best she could, trying not to fully saturate the terry cloth so Galen could use it, too.

"I'm going to try and think of something, Allie," Galen whispered into Allie's ear, in case John was standing on the other side of the door still. "We'll get out of here."

Detective **Espinoza** looked at the gathered group of people, which included Cassie, Roger and Allie's parents. "Thank you all for coming," the large man said, sitting in one of the chairs that had been brought into the interrogation room that had been brought in to accommodate everyone. "I wanted to give everyone an update on your cases. You might be wondering who these folks are," he said, indicating the two separate parties. "I think your two cases are linked, and here's why."

An hour later, Cassie stood outside the police station, hugging herself as she stood with the family of the other woman who had possibly been taken by the same beast that took Galen. She felt numb, and it had not one thing to do with the twenty-five degree temperatures.

"I can't believe this has happened," the woman that Det. Espinoza had identified as Allie Callaghan's mother said. "How can this have happened?" she looked into the stricken face of each of the people who stood on those cement stairs. "How could this monster have taken my daughter? Allie would *never* allow that!"

"Neither would Galen, Mrs. Callaghan," Cassie said softly. "But she's smart; if this Jonathan Betts guy really has them, she'll find a way to get away. That much I can promise you."

It was late afternoon by time the three had uncovered all of the furniture in the cabin, as well as had explored it. There were two bedrooms, each with a double bed with brass headboard. This detail made John smile, as he had somewhere to cuff his ladies for the night; after all, it wouldn't do to wake up and find them gone, now would it?

He had entertained the idea of bringing Allie to his bed for the first time and keeping her with him, but decided against it, as he was looking forward to having a huge bed all to himself, after being forced to sleep on what was not much more than a cot for four years back in Territorial. Also, after two days of driving and two weeks of running, he was exhausted. Tomorrow night he would begin the terms of the three-way relationship with Galen and Allie.

As John readied for bed - pistol always at his side - he thought about the two women who were in the next room. He'd had a plan since he'd run from the prison, and it had taken him two weeks before he saw the woman that he knew was for him. Not only had Allie been absolutely gorgeous and sexy as hell, she'd been so easy to get it wasn't even funny. Obviously he'd not intended on a second woman in Galen, and she'd already proven to be trouble, but she too was beautiful and he had thoroughly enjoyed their time together.

He grinned as he tugged his shirt over his head. He couldn't wait until he could see them both fully undressed; maybe they'd have a threesome at some point. Even still, he enjoyed the one-on-one attention of Galen thus far. Soon, he would have the pleasure of exploring Allie, too.

Allie and Galen lay in bed, Allie's left wrist with Galen's right, handcuffed in the same pair of cuffs around a bar in the brass headboard. They lay on their backs in silence, night all around them.

Allie turned her head to look at the black space that would be Galen's head. She hadn't forgotten about their moment together in the shower, and in fact it had been haunting her

all day since. She wondered why it had happened, and what did it mean? She had enjoyed it, for sure, but knew it was wrong. "Galen?" she whispered.

"Yeah?" she heard whispered back.

"Tell me about Cassie. Why didn't you get her a Valentine's Day gift? How did you two meet?"

Galen sighed softly, her own thoughts on the events of that morning. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel Allie's body against hers. If she closed her eyes even tighter, she could feel Cassie's. She let out a louder sigh and turned to look over at where she knew her companion was. "We met nearly five years ago," she began. "I'd only been in the country for a few years, and some friends introduced us." She turned and stared up into the darkness that was the ceiling. "At first I wasn't fond of her. But," she shrugged, "eventually she won me over. We began to date and the rest is history."

"Are you happy?" Allie whispered.

Galen was quiet for a long moment before she shook her head. "No. We haven't been happy for well over year now. I was at the mall looking to get her something, lass." She smiled. "I think the lady in the store was about ready to kill me, I took so long. Ultimately, I got nothing. I think somewhere deep inside I know... it's over."

"Oh, Galen," Allie whispered, reaching across her body with her free hand to touch Galen's side. "I'm sorry."

Galen turned to her side, head resting on the arm that was forced above her head from the shared handcuff. She faced Allie's direction, leaving her left arm free. "Can I ask you something, Allie?"

Allie had heard the shift in Galen's body position, and from the sound of her voice, guessed at what she'd done. She mirrored the position. "Of course."

"Why have you not dated, really? You say you're married to your studies, but that just doesn't sit right with me. Not to judge or anything of the kind, it just seems odd for a beautiful woman in her twenties to relegate herself to books only." She reached out with a hand, not sure what she'd find. She found an arm, as Allie now lay on her side, too. Running her hand up and down that arm, she finally rested her hand on Allie's side. "Talk to me."

Allie enjoyed the touches, but was not thrilled about the subject matter. Even so, she felt she owed honesty to Galen. "I guess I never found the person who really got me interested. I dated a guy for a short time my junior year of high school, but that was all."

"No one in college? Do you mean to tell me that no one asks?"

Allie smiled. "No, they do. I just think that I've been in the graduate program so long - between my masters and now doctorate - that the guys know to stay away."

"That's really sad," Galen murmured, scooting a bit closer to Allie. She rested her hand on her hip now, their bent knees mere centimeters apart.

"Why is that sad?" Allie asked, her own hand finding Galen's arm, fingertips skipping along the soft skin she found there.

"Because nobody should be alone forever."

Allie smiled, which registered in her voice. "It's not forever, Galen. Just right now, no one has made me want to explore that part of myself." *Until now.* "I focus on school. I want that degree in my greedy little hands and then I'll deal with everything else."

"But, what if someone wants you before that?" Galen countered.

Allie decided to dodge the question. "Why didn't you get Cassie a V-Day gift?"

Galen was silent for a moment, surprised by the turnabout. But then, it was fair play. "Our relationship has been in trouble for more than a year," she said simply. "I don't think either of us is sure we want to continue."

"Oh Galen, I'm sorry," Allie said softly, feeling bad. "Why?"

Galen shrugged, realizing Allie likely couldn't see the gesture. "I think we've grown apart."

John opened his eyes, though wasn't sure why. He lay silent, listening: he realized that quiet murmurs came from the room next to him. He strained to hear, but couldn't make out any words or sentences. Perhaps the two ladies were talking about him. Perhaps they were making plans. Perhaps he should intercede.

They lay in the dark silent for a moment, both lost in their own thoughts about what Galen revealed about her relationship with Cassie. Finally, Galen spoke, her soft words breaking the silence.

"Why do you think he's keeping us with him? I'd say he's not some serial killer or anything, or I'd think we'd both be dead by now."

"I know. To be honest, my gut tells me he's lonely," Allie said.

"Lonely?"

"Yeah. I think he wants a companion; he just happened to get double his money's worth. I think we're going to continue to travel around with this guy; he's not going to let us go, Galen. I'm really worried after what happened today, when he slapped you; things could get nasty."

"I know." Galen was quiet for a moment. "We've got to figure out his weakness," she whispered. "What button can we push?"

"Maybe be super sweet and nice? Make him trust us so maybe he'll take the chains off - literally - and we can make a run for it."

They both froze when the floor outside the door squeaked. Galen gasped as suddenly she had an idea; it could either set them free or possibly get them killed. She moved closer to Allie. "Do you trust me?" she whispered, heart racing at what she was about to do.

"Of course," Allie whispered, her own heart picking up as she felt the energy pouring off Galen in waves.

"Good. I need you to trust me and I need you to play along." With those words and not a second to spare before John slammed open the bedroom door, Galen took Allie in a deeply passionate kiss as her hand found Allie's ass.

John flicked on the light, stunned when he saw the position **the** two women were in. Busted, Galen tried to move away from Allie. John grinned, his blood immediately heating and heading south. "No," he said when Galen's hand moved off Allie's finely shaped ass. "I like that hand right where it was."

Allie was struck dumb, shocked and confused by what Galen did, and terrified of what John was going to do about it. She watched him as he moved to a chair that was tucked into the corner and tugged it over to the side of the bed, his pistol firmly in hand. She *also* noticed the excited bulge that was beginning to develop in his pants.

John sat down, **laying** the gun on his thigh. He studied the two women, who were looking back at him. Catching Galen's eye, his grin widened. "Fuck her."

Galen felt her heart rate quicken even more. Her plan had worked, but now she had to go through with it. "What?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound as stunned as possible. "John, it was an accident. I'm sorry I kissed her-"

"So then fuck her, Galen. This isn't hard." He caressed the grip on the pistol. "Do it. *Now.*"

Allie squeezed her eyes shut for a moment as she tried to get her breathing and fear under control. She was confused and somewhat hurt with Galen. What the hell was she *doing*?

Galen let out a nervous breath then turned to Allie, who was looking at her with wide, fearful eyes. *Please trust me*, she pleaded with her eyes as she reached out and caressed the side of Allie's face.

Understanding, Allie let out a breath and nodded. She allowed herself to be pushed onto her back, Galen running her hand down her side, then over her stomach and up to rest between her breasts.

"You know John," Galen said, eyeing him. "This would be a hell of a lot easier - and more entertaining for you - if I could use both my hands."

John studied Galen's eyes for a moment, able to see the fire of desire within their green depths. He glanced at Allie, who had her face turned away from him. He pushed up from the chair, reaching into the pocket of his jeans and pulling out the tiny handcuff key. Walking over to the bed, he pointed the gun directly in Galen's face. "I better enjoy this, because both of you are next."

Galen said nothing, simply met his gaze, her own steady. She waited until he unlocked the handcuffs, freeing both she and Allie from their metal grasp. "Thank you, John," Galen said sweetly.

Allie wanted to laugh out loud, now reading Galen loud and clear. Galen looked at her, and as their eyes connected, the emotion shared between them was intense, as they now had to totally trust the other, and had to be completely in tuned to make this work. She knew that she had to not only trust Galen, but she had to fully accept her, too.

With a deep breath for courage, she cupped Galen's face and brought her in for a kiss, Galen moving her body atop Allie's. The full body contact felt amazing, and Allie couldn't help but think back to their shower earlier.

Galen left Allie's mouth, kissing her way to her ear where she whispered, "Focus on me. Forget about him. Just keep your focus," followed by a swipe of her tongue to the lobe.

In lieu of a verbal response, Allie squeezed Galen's shoulder, letting her know she understood.

Galen wracked her brain, trying to decide the best course of action to both, fulfill John's request, but also to stay smart. Losing clothes - though desirable - would not be wise; if her plan worked as she wanted it to, she and Allie would need to stay both focused, *and* dressed.

She insinuated a thigh between Allie's, Allie's legs opening to accommodate her as they resumed their kissing. Galen was physically focused on Allie, but her hearing and mind was on John. She was trying to hear any change in his breathing, and lapse in his judgment or watch. *Anything* that she could use against him.

Allie buried her hands in Galen's hair, responding to the kiss and fully participating in it. She sighed softly when she felt Galen's thigh press against her, a feeling that was foreign, but wonderful. She tried her best to clear her mind of why they were doing what they were doing, and tried to focus on the fact that they were doing it. It wasn't an ideal situation for her to experience sex for the first time, but it was what it was, and it couldn't be changed.

Galen lowered herself completely so she and Allie were truly body to body as the kiss continued. She felt Allie's hands in her hair, encouraging the kiss, which made Galen feel better, to know that Allie understood and was as much into this as she could be; that is, enough to make it look convincing for John.

She broke the kiss and began to lick and kiss Allie's neck, on the opposite side from where John sat. Again, she made her way to Allie's ear. "You feel amazing," she whispered, "and you're doing great."

Allie's eyes slid closed at the sensation on her neck, and her hips bucked slightly at Galen's words. She gasped softly when Galen pressed her hips into hers, causing a flood of warmth and sensation between Allie's legs. Her hands slid from Galen's hair down her back, her fingers almost claw-like as she held on.

John sat in the chair, watching. He could feel the pressure in his pants, which had almost become painful. He took his hand off the gun and put it on the growing bulge, rubbing and squeezing.

Galen ran her tongue up the side of Allie's neck and to her ear, her hand sliding down to the hem of Allie's shirt. She snaked her way underneath and sighed at the soft skin that met her fingertips until she felt the underwire of Allie's bra. She returned to Allie's mouth as her hand cupped Allie's breast, the nipple already hard against her palm.

"What's he doing?" Galen whispered into the kiss, her words barely audible. She left Allie's mouth to return to her neck, giving Allie an excuse to look in John's direction.

Allie opened her eyes briefly, trying to focus on what she was seeing, as Galen had begun moving her hips against hers in a steady rhythm, the feelings that spread throughout Allie's body extraordinary. She turned back to Galen, grabbing her head to bring her back in for a kiss. Her moan was breathy as she moved against Galen and arched into the hand that cupped her breast. A soft gasp escaped when Galen's fingers pushed the satiny cup up and away from Allie's naked breast, which was palmed beneath Allie's shirt.

"He's rubbing his crotch," she whispered, a hand reaching down to Galen's ass, pulling her further into her, needing more pressure against her.

Galen sent a quick glance John's way before she returned her focus to Allie. They both were excited far beyond where they should have been at that point, but Galen knew it was the adrenalin of the situation that was pushing them faster towards release.

"Galen," Allie whimpered softly as her pleasure increased. She plundered the redhead's mouth, feeling like she was about to lose control of herself. She moaned into the kiss as Galen quickened her thrusts, Allie's hips working in tandem to reach their shared goal.

Galen pushed up to her hands and looked down at Allie, meeting hooded eyes, so filled with need and desire. For a moment, she could almost believe that they were in their own bed somewhere making love rather than in the home of a stranger, trying to trick a monster. Her attention was caught when she heard a zipper. A side glance at John showed her all that she needed to see; with his need in his hand, John's focus was fading, though his other hand still rested lightly on the pistol. She knew it was a matter of time before even the gun didn't matter.

Short on time now, Galen redoubled her efforts with Allie, quickening her pace to the point where the brass bed squeaked beneath her and Allie gasped in surprise, her hold on Galen tightening almost painfully. She took Allie's mouth in a hard kiss, though it didn't last long as both began to breathe far too heavy to sustain it.

Allie's eyes closed as her body released, her fingers digging into Galen's back. A moment later, Galen joined her, burying her face in Allie's neck with a **muffled** cry.

The moment was shattered by John's moan. Galen peeked over at him just as John let go of the gun, his focus on his own rapid strokes. Without a word of warning, Galen jumped off the bed and snatched the gun, aiming it at John. Hatred burned in her eyes as her finger found the trigger.

It took John a moment to register what was happening, but then he found himself staring down the barrel of his own gun, his dick in his hands. "What are you doing?" he asked stupidly.

"I'm about to kill you, you mother fucker," Galen growled. She lowered the gun enough to make her aim clear. The memory of John's attacks, which her body still hurt from, fresh in her mind. She took satisfaction as she looked into terrified eyes before pulling the trigger.

CLICK!

John grinned, realizing the gun had jammed. He'd had that problem several times with that gun in the past. He began to move, ready to lunge at the bitch who held the gun in shaking hands, but before he could even move, his eyes widened, the butt of the gun coming right at his head.

Galen watched in satisfied silence as John fell off the chair, blood surfacing on the side of his head where the gun butt had made contact. "Die, you fucker," she hissed. She bared her teeth as she sent a well-placed kick to his head, John's unconscious body reeling with the movement. Her next kick went right to his erect penis. "Die!"

"Galen!" Allie gasped, a hand on Galen's arm. "Enough. Let's go, come on. He's not worth one more minute here."

Nodding, Galen and Allie hurried from the room, the gun still in Galen's hand. They found their winter coats and shoes, hopping into them as they made their way from the cabin, jackets shrugged on out in the dark cold. They both stopped short when they saw a red minivan parked in front of the cabin.

"Whoa, where did that come from?" Allie wondered.

"Who knows. He had us locked up half the day, so probably then," Galen muttered, hurrying over to the vehicle. She pulled the driver's side door open and climbed in behind the wheel. Only then did **occurred** to her she had no keys. "Oh fuck," she gasped, looking over at Allie, who had climbed into the passenger side.

Eyes wide, Allie looked at the ignition then back to Galen. "We have to go back in."

Quickly, they hurried from the van, not even bothering to close the doors. Allie reached into her coat pocket as they did, sighing in relief when she felt her cell phone was still there. "I wonder if I'd have any signal here."

"You've had that thing the *entire time*?" Galen hissed, hand on the doorknob of the cabin.

"I haven't exactly had the opportunity to use it!" Allie defended. "Either he was with us or we were tied up."

Galen nodded and pushed back into the cabin, crying out when she saw a bloody and dazed John stumbled towards them. On pure instinct, she raised the gun and fired, the sound deafening within the confines of the cabin. The slug hit John in the side, knocking him back a step before he fell to his knees.

"Let's go!" Galen screamed, deciding against the keys.

Shaken, but knowing she had to push it aside, Galen followed Allie back out into the night, the women running as quickly as the snow would allow.

"My god, my god, my god!" Allie chanted, wanting to throw up as she kept seeing John being shot again and again.

"Keep running!" Galen exclaimed, bobbing and weaving through the thick stand of trees. "Are we going the right way?" she gasped, her lungs wanting to seize from the frigid air.

"I don't know," Allie said, stopping and looking around her. "I don't remember which way we came in."

"Let's just keep going," Galen said, grabbing Allie's hand and tugging her along.

They ran through the trees, trying to ignore the cold, though that was getting harder and harder, as their shoes were nearly soaked through. "We've got to find shelter," Allie chattered.

"I know." Galen stopped, panting in exertion and fear. They were in a clearing, surrounded by trees on all sides. "God, which way?"

Allie took in their surroundings, then stopped. "Wait," she said, squeezing Galen's hand, which she still held. "Listen..."

Galen tried to shut everything else out as she listened to the night around them. A slow smile spread across her frozen lips. "A car."

"Which means a road. Come on!"

Galen barely even noticed the cuts and scratches on her face as they barreled through yet more trees, snow their constant companion as it began to fall from a dark sky. She had never been so cold and miserable in her life, and was terrified that she and Allie would freeze to death.

Suddenly, there it was: a road. They shared an excited hug before turning in anticipation when they heard the car engine they'd heard earlier get closer. Within moments headlights popped into sight.

"Thank god!" Allie exclaimed, waving her arms in the air to get the driver's attention.

As the car got closer and slowed, Galen felt her excited relief turn to dread and panic. "Oh no," she whispered. "No, no, no!"

At first confused, Allie glanced over at Galen then back to the car, able to see that it was a red minivan. "Shit!"

Again they were on the run, headed back into the trees. The van came to a screeching halt, the door opened and booted feet pounding on the pavement.

"I'll fucking kill you!" John yelled out, using the last of his strength to follow the two pairs of footsteps in the snow.

Allie stopped suddenly, her entire body frozen, including her lips, making it very difficult to speak. "We can't keep doing this, Galen," she managed.

"We can't stop, Allie. We have to run-"

"No! We will die out here. We need that van, or we will die." Allie looked down at the gun Galen still had clutched in her hand. Looking Galen in the eye, she reached down and wrapped her numb hand around the cold metal of the barrel.

"No, Allie," Galen whispered, shaking her head. "I'm not going to burden you with this."

Allie leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on Galen's lips. "I already am, Galen," she whispered against them. She gently removed the gun from Galen's trembling hand, her heart racing. "Let's finish this."

Galen took a deep breath and nodded. "Let's finish this."

They stood together and waited. It wasn't long before John emerged from the trees, though his gait was sluggish and stiff. He glared at the two of them, death in his eyes.

"Fucking bitches," he growled. "I was good to you."

Allie ignored him as she raised the gun, held in both hands. She didn't wait for him to speak again as she fired once, twice, a third time. Two of the bullets hit their mark, John falling to the snow, which quickly melted with the heat of his blood.

Allie's entire body shook as Galen carefully took the gun from her and took her in a tight hug. "It's over," Galen whispered. "It's over."

Allie cried, her fear and adrenaline coming out in sobs. She wrapped her arms around Galen and held her close, needing her comfort and safety. She calmed down after a few moments, her body beginning to tremble from the cold again. "Let's go," she murmured into Galen's neck, feeling Galen's nod of agreement.

They moved apart, but kept a firm hold on the other's hand as they made their way back to the road, neither looking at John's body as they passed. It didn't matter anymore, it was over.

Galen climbed behind the wheel of the still-running van, quickly cranking the heat up as Allie buckled herself in next to her. They shared a look that said so much, so much that they knew wasn't possible to say out loud. Galen grabbed for Allie's hand, holding it safely within her own on her leg as she pulled onto the road.

Galen and Allie sat huddled together in a police interrogation room. They'd been released from the hospital after being checked over and Galen given medication that could halt pregnancy, if there were to be one. Their families had been notified once the women were returned to the police station, and as they waited, silence filled the room.

Galen sat with her head resting on Allie's shoulder. She was exhausted, both physically and mentally, feeling the strain of the past three days finally hit home. She brought up a hand to swipe at a tear that threatened to fall. "I'm sorry, Allie," she whispered.

"For what?" Allie asked, combing her fingers through Galen's hair.

"It was the only thing I could think to do." She pulled away from Allie, resting her elbows on her knees and burying her face in her hands as the tears came full on.

"Hey," Allie said, rubbing Galen's back. "Talk to me."

Galen looked over at Allie, the weight of responsibility nearly debilitating. "I took from you," she whispered. "I took something from you that is so special. Am I any better than John?"

Allie was stunned into momentary silence. "Galen," she finally managed, brushing some hair back behind Galen's ear. "You saved our lives by what you did. Don't you see that?"

Galen shook her head, snagging a tissue from the box on the table and wiping at her eyes and nose. "There had to be another way. Something else that I could have done. Something-"

"Stop!"

Galen was taken aback by the firm tone and looked at Allie. There she saw a fire shining in those gray/blue eyes that stopped her cold.

"Don't do this to yourself." Allie looked away for a moment before turning back to Galen, forcing herself to say what she was about to, as it was extraordinarily inappropriate, considering what they'd been through. "It was beautiful and it was special," she whispered. She brushed her fingertips over Galen's jaw. "We did what we had to do, and I'll *never* regret those moments with you."

Galen covered the hand that rested on her jaw with her own, moving her head to lay a kiss in Allie's palm, her gaze never leaving Allie's. In that moment, mere seconds before family and friends burst into the room, the two communicated much more than simply mutual understanding.

Allie gave Galen a bright smile, which was returned.

Cassie stood back, waiting to see what Galen would do as they entered their home. Her heart was racing relief palpable as she'd set eyes on her partner for the first time in three long and terrifying days in that interrogation room. She still didn't know what all the facts

were yet, and wasn't going to press. The Detective had warned them all to be patient and understanding.

Galen had never been so glad to see her home before, and realized just how much things could be taken for granted. At the same time, she was filled with mixed emotions, as she had come to realize in the past few days that she wasn't so sure how much her life worked for her anymore. In fact, just how *hard* that realization had hit her was surprising at best.

She walked over to the fireplace, running a hand along the wooden mantle and looking at all the framed pictures that lined it. There were pictures of Cassie by herself, Galen by herself and pictures of them together during various trips, vacations and family events. The pictures made her somewhat sad, as they certainly were indicative of happier days. Those days, Galen feared, were long gone.

"I spoke to my father," she said softly, turning away from the pictures, as they were painful reminders of a life gone.

Cassie nodded, moving over to the couch and perching on the arm. "I've spoken with him off and on the last couple days; keeping him updated, that kind of thing. Is he coming?"

Galen nodded, sitting in the armchair and hugging herself with uncertain arms. "His flight out of Edinburgh leaves Thursday."

Cassie nodded, not sure what she should say as they both sat and stared at the floor. Finally she sighed. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? Want a bath? Can I get you anything at all?"

Galen cleared her throat and let out a breath. "A bath sounds amazing," she sighed. "I want out of these clothes."

Cassie nodded and pushed to her feet, heading to the bathroom to start running Galen's bath, Galen following slowly behind. She made a pit stop in the bedroom first, removing her ruined shoes, torn and dirty pants and finally her blouse. She looked at everything in her hands and, with a pulled face, tossed them to the floor to be thrown away later, followed by her underwear and socks.

She padded into the bathroom, feeling dirty, cold and disgusting - especially as she hadn't shaved in two days - and looked on her steaming bath, mouth watering.

"I added those sea salts you like," Cassie said, pushing up from where she sat on the side of the **tub**. Her gaze scanned her partner's body, for the first time in far too long, desiring to touch Galen and be close to her. Perhaps, as horrible as this situation was, it was a good thing and could maybe bring them close together again.

"Thank you," Galen smiled, thinking that was a nice thing for Cassie to do. She walked towards the tub was stopped by a hand on her arm. She looked at Cassie with a question in her eyes.

As Cassie looked into Galen's eyes, the eyes that had been the first thing that had caught her attention four and a half years before, she knew she could find love again for Galen. She pulled Galen to her in a lingering hug, needing to feel the solid warmth of Galen's body, to know that she was really there and that she was really safe.

Galen accepted the hug and decided to return it. As she held Cassie, she wondered if perhaps things hadn't worked out for the best, and maybe this was where she was supposed to be. But then she remembered the pain and confusion of the state of her and Cassie's relationship as of three days ago, as well as she saw Allie's face before her eyes. Squeezing her own eyes shut, she let out a quiet sigh of confusion and discontent.

Allie lay in her old bedroom in the house she grew up in, her parents asleep across the hall. Part of her had wanted to go home and be alone, but then there was a bigger part of her was terrified to be alone. Roger had offered to sleep on the floor of her loft bedroom, which had been so sweet, but the comfort of her mother had won out.

She was freshly-showered and in clean clothing. Unbeknownst to her, like Galen, she had thrown everything out, never wanting the memory of that clothing again. Also unbeknownst to her, and like Galen, her mind kept going back to their time together in the shower and then later in the bed. She covered her face with her hands, thinking it was so wrong for her to wanting to go back there. A man died that night, and by her hand, no less. Yes, he was a monster, yes, it was him or them, but *yes*, he was dead!

So why was she thinking of Galen?

With a heavy sigh, she turned to her side, hands tucked up under her chin. Plans had been made between the two families before they'd left the police station that a party would be held in honor of Galen and herself, and Allie was filled with both excitement at the prospect of seeing Galen again, but not, as she had *no* desire to see her with Cassie, again. Cassie had pretty much been a wreck when she saw Galen; crying and holding Galen to her like she'd never let her go.

Allie had studied Cassie and decided she was a very pretty woman with blonde hair and rich brown eyes. She had been nice enough, though they'd not interacted much. She turned back to her side, glancing over to the other side of the bed, where Galen had been for the past two nights. It felt so strange to not have her there, though it felt even *stranger* to miss someone who'd only been in your life for a certain amount of hours. Allie had never shared a bed in her life until she and Galen had been forced together. Heck, even the first night had been on bunk beds.

She reached a hand out, palm resting on the empty mattress and cool sheets. With a heavy sigh, she turned back to her side and tried to go to sleep.

"Da!" Galen exclaimed, unable to use the American *Dad*. Her father grabbed her in a tight hug, the two not having seen each other in a year and a half. When Galen had left Edinburgh nearly twelve years ago to stay with her American-born mother who was dying of cancer, Angus had stayed back in his native land. With dual citizenship, Galen had decided to stay in the States, even after her mother died. Even still, she'd always remained close with her father.

"Ah, lass!" he exclaimed, hugging his beautiful girl tightly to him. "So good ta see ya."

Galen felt more complete in that moment than she had in such a long time. She pulled away just enough to look into his eyes, which reflected her own. "Welcome, now let's go get that Carl's Jr. that you love so much when you come here."

Angus Murray grinned big, his dimples winking. "Let us go, then."

The next day, Galen and her father sat at the apartment alone, Cassie off to work. They sat playing poker, one of Angus' favorite pastimes with his daughter. He glanced over at her, heavy brows drawing. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her. Emails had told him of the problems she'd been having with Cassie, but nothing had prepared him for the troubled soul he came across in America.

"I fold," he said softly, tossing his cards down on the kitchen table.

"Da!" Galen exclaimed, tossing a full house down face up. "You're killing me, here!"

Angus grinned. "Sorry. 'Tis what I've got."

Galen growled as she gathered the cards together and began to shuffle them.

"So, talk to me, lass. What's bouncin' 'round that head of yours?" he asked, sitting back in his chair and eyeing her.

Galen glanced up at him before returning her gaze to her task. "Just that you're a lyin' cheat who likely planned that crappy hand on purpose," she teased.

Angus broke out into rich laughter, making his daughter smile. "You're a sore loser even when you've won. But, what *I* want to know is, what's troublin' ya, Galen? I see it in your eyes, so don't think you're foolin' me, any."

Galen sighed, knowing full well she was busted, but not quite ready to lay down her full hand yet. "I just don't think I've bounced back quite yet, Da," she said quietly, continuing

to shuffle even though the cards were well and fully mixed. "After everything happened, I don't know; somehow I don't feel like me."

"Have you talked to Dr. Peaks about this?" Angus asked, sipping from his beer.

Galen nodded, as she'd spoken to the counselor she'd been seeing for the past week about everything. "She thinks it'll just take some time and effort on my part."

"And what of Cassie?"

"What of her?" Galen snapped, the conversation going in a direction that she really wasn't ready for.

Angus crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his daughter, one dark brow raised. "These Americans making you speaking to your Da like that?"

Galen sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't know about Cassie, Da. I really don't. I'm pretty confused right now."

Allie could feel butterflies beating relentlessly in her stomach as she sat with her family and friends at one of the long tables that had been set up. Her parents had reserved the dining room in a restaurant to host the dinner for Galen and herself. She hadn't seen nor spoken with Galen since they'd parted with a tight hug at the police station. The following week had been extremely difficult, trying to get back into her life with work and school, as well as her daily appointments with a campus therapist. Though she'd only been **captive** for three days, she felt as though her entire world had changed, and she wasn't quite sure how to cope or get it back.

"Are you okay, honey?" Allie's mother asked softly from beside her.

Allie gave her mother the bravest smile she could and nodded. Her attention was grabbed when she heard voices as someone entered the dining area. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Galen, Cassie and a tall man enter. Allie took a deep breath and pushed back from the table and to her feet. She couldn't take her eyes off of Galen, who looked absolutely beautiful in a simple skirt and blouse. Her hair shone and fell around her shoulders, the rich, auburn color stunning.

Galen searched the room, looking through the small crowd of about ten people for Allie, and when she spotted her, she lost her breath for a moment. Allie was even more beautiful than she remembered, and suddenly Galen's very off-kilter world righted itself. She pulled her hand out of Cassie's almost possessive grip, and hurried over to Allie, who met her halfway.

Allie clung to Galen, their bodies coming together in a desperate hug. The rest of the room, the rest of the *world*, disappeared in that moment. Allie buried her face in Galen's neck, inhaling her fragrance, her very essence.

Galen knew she should let go, but just couldn't. She felt like she was able to feel for the first time in a week, and was loathe to let that go. Finally, she did, looking into Allie's tear-filled eyes and **gave** her a smile. She didn't even **notice** those around them who looked on with tears in their own eyes for the reunited survivors.

"How are you?" Allie asked softly, her hands still on Galen's waist.

"Okay," Galen admitted. "It's been a rough week." She reached up and used a fingertip to wipe away a tear that fell down Allie's cheek. "You?"

Allie shrugged with a shaky laugh. "Life must go on, right?"

Galen smiled and nodded before pulling Allie into one more, brief hug.

As the dinner began, Allie and Galen sat across from each other, and though they engaged in conversation with everyone at the table, they continually turned back to each other, sharing small looks, needing just one more little validation that the other was actually there, and not just in a dream.

Galen caught Allie's eye and gave a slight indication with the tilt of her head towards the direction of the bathroom. Allie's gaze followed the nod and saw the small nook where the women's room was and nodded.

"Be right back," she said quietly to her mother, who smiled acknowledgment then turned back to her spirited conversation with Angus.

Allie waited a moment after Galen left then followed, not noticing that Cassie's eyes took in the whole thing. She pushed open the heavy wooden door and saw Galen standing over by the sinks, waiting. The look in Galen's eyes sent a little tingle down her spine, which made her breath catch.

Galen walked over to Allie and took her into a full body hug. "I've missed you," she whispered, sighing at the unbelievable feel of Allie against her.

"I've missed you, too." Allie clawed at Galen's back, trying to pull her in that much closer. "So much. Probably *too* much."

Galen smiled and pulled away, her hands coming up to touch the softness of Allie's face. "I need to see you," she said, her gaze feasting on the beauty before her. "I desperately need to see you, Allie." She met her eyes. "I can't understand it, it's like I *crave* you."

Allie gasped softly at the words, her heart racing. "I don't get this, Galen. We were only together for three days with him but... but..." she couldn't make herself admit to something that scared the hell out of her and that made no sense.

"I know," Galen whispered. "I'm so confused."

"*You're* confused?" Allie laughed. "I've never so much as really dated anybody before, and now..." She shook her head. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Does it have to?" Galen asked softly.

"No," Allie agreed, her eyes falling to Galen's lips. "No, it doesn't have to make sense."

"Will you see me?" Galen asked, her thumb caressing the side of Allie's jaw. "Spend some time with me? Ten minutes for coffee, I don't care, just anything." She knew she sounded desperate, but she didn't care.

"Yes. I have a class I have to teach tomorrow in the morning, but I'll be finished around eleven. Come to my school and we can maybe grab something to eat or something from there. Okay?" She was scared to have Galen go to her house, and she honestly wasn't sure that she'd be able to keep her hands off Galen. Seeing Cassie at the police station that first night had really shaken her, and made her realize that they were playing with fire.

Galen nodded with a blinding smile. "Yes. I'll be there."

"The dinner was nice," Cassie said as she and Galen entered their apartment after dropping Angus off at his hotel.

"Yeah. It was a nice gesture on Carol's part," Galen agreed, tossing her car keys onto the end table by the couch and heading towards the bedroom, Cassie following.

"Do you like her?" she asked, unbuttoning her shirt.

"Do I like who?" Galen asked, feeling a slight twitch in her stomach.

"Carol. Allie's mother," Cassie clarified casually, hanging up the blouse she'd just removed then unbuttoning her slacks.

"I do, she's a nice lady." Galen also undressed, tugging on a t-shirt and shorts. She used to sleep naked before the incident, but now, somehow she couldn't do it. She couldn't handle the feeling of vulnerability that sleeping naked caused. She knew Cassie didn't like it, but to her credit, she said nothing.

"Well, I know you like her daughter, so I guess it's fitting that you like Carol, as well." Cassie climbed under the blankets, turning her back to Galen, who stared at her.

"What?"

"I think you heard me," Cassie tossed over her shoulder. She was quiet for a moment then turned to her back, looking at Galen. "What happened between you two in those cabins?"

Galen blinked at her for a moment, then swallowed. Her heart was racing, but she tried to keep calm. "We did what we had to do to survive, Cassie."

"Which means what?" When Galen didn't respond, Cassie turned to her side, facing her partner. "You have feelings for her, don't you?"

"Cassie-"

"Everybody there saw it, Galen! All you had to do was look at the two of you and it was so fucking obvious. And **your** little trip to the restroom." She laughed bitterly. "Do you honestly think nobody noticed?"

Galen sighed, staring up at the ceiling with its buttery shadows from the lamplight. "I don't know, Cassie. There's so much spinning around inside of me right now."

"Well, maybe if you'd actually talk to me about what's inside of you sometimes, our relationship wouldn't be in the shape it's in."

Galen glared over at Cassie. "Don't blame all this on me, Cassie. We've been in trouble for a long time, and I assure you it hasn't been all me."

"Do you want to try and fix this?" Cassie asked, her voice sounding tired and resigned. "Do you even want to be here?"

"You know why I was at the mall the night John grabbed me?" Galen asked softly.

Cassie was thrown slightly off guard by the non-sequitur, but recovered quickly. "No, I have no idea."

Galen looked over at Cassie, staring into her eyes for a long moment. She wanted to look at her and be able to see the woman she fell in love with. She wanted to be able to see the woman who had given her such joy over the years. All she saw was a stranger. There was no love or desire in her eyes, just simply hurt and contempt.

Galen looked away, unable to face those stranger's eyes anymore. "I was there to get you a Valentine's Day gift," she sighed.

Cassie felt her heart expand slightly. "Really?"

"The sad thing was, I didn't get anything." She spared a quick glance only to look away again. "Somehow in my heart I just knew not to, as though I wasn't so sure that it would mean anything anymore."

That hurt to hear, but Cassie said nothing, as she had felt similar fears. She scooted over to Galen and rested her head on her shoulder, smiling weakly when a hesitant arm encircled her shoulders. "Let's sleep on it, Galen," she said softly. "I don't want to make any decisions when you've just gone through what you did; I'm not sure either of us are in any sort of emotional place to make a huge decision like this."

Galen nodded, knowing Cassie was right, but knowing their relationship was wrong. "Alright, lass." She reached over and turned off the lamp.

Galen blew out a breath, the late February air cold against her face as she paced in front of the fountain. She looked up into the clear, blue sky, noting the soft, white puffy clouds **that** floated by. Snow was predicted for later in the evening, but she wasn't so sure; it was too beautiful of a day.

Pushing thoughts of the weather out of her mind, she glanced again at the clock face of the huge campus clock tower. Allie had gotten out of her class three minutes ago, and should be down within another three, according to Allie's calculations the night before. Knowing her wait was almost over, Galen stopped her pacing and perched on the edge of the cement lip of the dry fountain. She imagined it was quite beautiful during the spring and summer, full of water and likely pennies.

"Hey."

Galen nearly jumped out of her skin at the soft voice, she'd been so distracted. She smiled wide when she saw an uncertain Allie standing before her, bundled up just like she was. "Hi."

A moment later, Allie found herself in Galen's arms, though the hug was somewhat awkward around the layers of clothing they both wore. Even so, it felt amazing to be in Galen's presence, which both incited emotions and calmed her soul.

After a long moment, Galen pulled away, unable to stop smiling. She was so excited to be with Allie, and to know that they'd be able to spend time together was almost too much to handle. "God, it's so good to see you."

"You, too. I had trouble concentrating **on** my students today, I was so excited," Allie admitted, naturally and instinctively grabbing Galen's gloved hand in hers as they walked towards the parking lot.

"So, I know of this great little Italian place on the 16th Street Mall, if you're interested," Galen offered.

"Ohh, I *love* Italian!" Allie crowed, excited.

Galen laughed. "Good. Then Maggiano's it is." They reached the parking lot, their hands swinging playfully between them. "Your car or mine?"

Allie chewed on her bottom lip for a moment as she looked into Galen's questioning face. "Why don't we do this," she blurted, "you drive your car to my place and then we'll take one car from there."

Galen nodded. "Okay. Sounds like a plan. I'll follow you."

Allie pulled into the driveway of her small house, Galen pulling to the curb. She stepped out of her car and walked over to Galen's red sports coup. "Do you want to come in? See where I live?" She had absolutely no idea why she'd just made the offer, and she assumed it showed on her face because Galen gave her a soft, understanding smile.

"Sure," Galen agreed.

With slightly shaking hands, Allie unlocked the door and pushed it open, allowing Galen to walk in ahead of her. She watched as the redhead walked to the center of the living room, Allie closing the door behind her and leaning on it.

"It's very neat and clean," Galen noted, seeing books and CDs perfectly in place, smiling when she realized they were all alphabetized by author or artist. "God, I wish my collection was this ordered," she said, walking over to Allie's DVD cabinet, all title again alphabetized.

"I've worked in libraries since junior high and then all the way through college until I started teaching last year," Allie explained sheepishly. "Guess it's just kinda ingrained in me, now."

"I'm sure it makes it easier to find things," Galen tossed out, turning her focus to the fireplace and row of trophies and ribbons. "Quite the little spelling champ, aren't you?" she chuckled, reading the engraved fronts of the gold statues.

Allie smiled, feeling shy and silly. "Yeah. Brain Bowl, too. I was never into sports, so academics caught my eye, instead."

"Married to your academics," Galen reminded, glancing over her shoulder at a sheepish Allie. "Hey, nothing to be ashamed of, lass. It's very impressive."

"What about you?" Allie asked, stepping further into the room. "What were you into in school?"

Galen sighed, smiling as she took a framed picture of a very young Allie in hand. "You haven't changed." She smiled. "My schooling was complicated."

"How so?" Allie asked, stepping up beside Galen. She glanced at the picture she held and rolled her eyes. "God, you *would* pick that one to look at."

"Why not? You look adorable with your face painted like a fox." Galen chuckled at the second eye roll she got. "And, how so was because my parents split up when I was 10 years old, and my mum moved back to the States. I stayed with my Da for another couple of years in Edinburgh, but then I decided to become an absolute pain in the ass." She smiled at the memory. "I was shipped out right quick to live with my mother." She sighed as she leaned against the wall, looking off into a distant past as Allie looked at her. "I hated her new husband, so I began to act out again. She sent me packing back to my Da's, where I stayed until mum got sick."

"Oh no," Allie breathed. She could see the pain in Galen's eyes. "If you don't want to talk about this..."

"No." Galen gave her a brave smile and shook her head. "It's okay. So, at 18 I came back to Colorado to take care of her. During that time, I got a job with the airport, which at that time was Stapleton of course, and started a life here. So, after we lost her, I decided to stay. All the years bouncing back and forth between America and Scotland cost me a good education. I suppose no more than I deserve for being such a pain."

"You were a child, Galen. You can't look at it that way; I doubt your father does."

"No. He's a good Da and a good man." Galen let out a cleansing breath. Even Cassie didn't know that much of her past. "Tell me about your house."

Recognizing a change of subject when she saw one, Allie nodded with a proud smile.

"Well, I'm very happy to say I own my own house by age 25. Well," she amended, leading Galen into the kitchen, "me and the *bank* own my first house at age 25. I like it here."

"This is nice," Galen complimented, looking around the small space. It was definitely a starter house, but very well kept and obviously loved. "Next?"

"Follow me." Allie led Galen back through the living room and to the third, unused bedroom. "This bedroom is a little too small to do much with. Probably make a good nursery, but that's obviously not something I need." She smiled, closing the door on the unused room and moving across the hall to Roger's bedroom. "This is where Roger sleeps."

"How long has he rented from you?" Galen asked, giving the messy room a cursory glance.

"Too long," Allie joked. "He's such a sweetheart, but a total slob. I tell him as long as he doesn't get me bugs, I don't care what he does in here."

"Well, we all have to have ground rules," Galen smirked. "Why the roommate at all?"

"Well," Allie explained as she led Galen to the stairs, which would lead to her loft bedroom and home office. "When I was in the beginning stages of my doctorate, I really needed to concentrate on that. I was teaching, but had to cut back, so I needed the extra income."

Galen listened and tried not to notice the gorgeous behind in front of her as she and Allie climbed the steep staircase.

"Roger was one of my students at one time and we really hit it off, so," Allie shrugged, reaching the top of the stairs. "It seemed like a good idea, and it's worked out pretty well."

Galen nodded in understanding as she looked around. The space was **deceptively** large, with a queen sized bed and all the trappings of a bedroom, and then a nook which was fitted with a desk, computer and printer. Like the downstairs, everything was neat and in its place. "A nice little hideout up here," she commented, scanning the space.

Allie followed Galen's gaze, trying to see her room through Galen's eyes. "I guess so. I pretty much have everything up here that I need, save for a kitchen and bathroom."

"Do you spend a lot of time up here?" Galen asked, walking over to the bed and sitting down. She bounced a few times, testing the mattress, wondering how comfortable it was for Allie to sleep there.

"Yes. Either here or I'm at school; pretty much the only places to find me." Allie felt her heart skip a beat to see Galen sitting on her bed. She took a deep breath and walked over towards the bed, staying out of reach of Galen. "Can I admit something to you, Galen?"

"Of course." Galen looked up into Allie's eyes, seeing a stormy sea there.

"It's been so strange." She nodded towards the bed. "Without you here with me. I know it's really crazy and stupid. I mean, jeez, I've slept alone my entire life, and it was only two nights really, and it's just stupid-"

Galen pushed up from the bed and walked the few steps to Allie, laying two fingers lightly against her lips. She shook her head. "It's not crazy or stupid, Allie," she said softly. Her laugh was bitter and rueful. "Even with someone in my bed this past week, I felt so alone."

Allie tried not to react to Galen's stinging words, as she had a sudden image of Cassie, in the position that Allie, herself had been in on that bed in a remote cabin in the Colorado Rockies.

"Hey," Galen said softly, noting Allie's sudden detachment. "Please don't go anywhere." She grabbed Allie's hand, trying to get her emotional self back through physical touch. "Please."

Allie looked at her, eyes filled with the sadness of realization. "Galen, you've got Cassie waiting at home. You should go home to her."

Galen looked at her, shaking her head. "No. I have no idea what I have waiting at home. It doesn't even *feel* like home anymore. Allie, things were falling apart before John."

"But am I making them worse?" Allie asked, her voice barely above a whisper. She took a deep breath then spoke again, meeting Galen's gaze. "You know, I had you meet me at the school today because I was worried about this."

"Worried about what?"

Allie squeezed her eyes shut then, not allowing herself to think, she grabbed Galen's face and kissed her, forcing the kiss to deepen, even as Galen's surprise would have pushed her away. Allie buried her hands in Galen's hair, holding her to her. Quickly, she felt Galen relax and return the kiss.

Galen gave in, not entirely surprised. She snaked her arms around Allie's waist, pulling their bodies together. It was the first time they'd kissed since the night they escaped a week before, but it felt like a lifetime ago. After a long moment, Galen pulled away, both breathing heavily. She looked into Allie's eyes, seeing her own desire reflected back at her.

Galen caressed the side of Allie's face before her attention turned to her jacket. She gently pushed the heavy material from Allie's shoulders, the coat falling to the floor with a heavy flop. Next, she grasped the hem of the sweater Allie wore, tugging it up and over Allie's head, never leaving Allie's eyes. Once it was clear and Allie had shaken her hair free of the static from the passing wool, she focused on the tiny buttons of the white blouse worn beneath the sweater. One by one they were undone, the loosening ends of the shirt exposing pale skin and the white satin of Allie's bra.

Allie felt a nervous tickle race down her spine, but knew she wanted this, so pushed it aside. She pushed Galen's jacket off, Galen removing one hand from Allie's blouse at a time to slide her arms out of the sleeves. Once the jacket was gone, Allie pulled Galen to her again for a breath stealing kiss.

"You are so beautiful, Galen," Allie murmured against Galen's lips, her hands sliding up underneath the long sleeve t-shirt Galen wore. She moaned as Galen began to kiss a fiery trail across her neck, her head falling aside to allow for more access. She gasped when Galen's hands found her breasts, cupping them over Allie's bra.

Galen couldn't get enough of Allie's smell as she nuzzled her neck as she massaged her breasts. It didn't take long before that wasn't enough. She pushed Allie's shirt off her

shoulders, revealing the beautifully delicate structure of her shoulders and throat, her favorite part of a woman's body, and particularly beautiful on Allie's. She brought her hands up, fingers tracing the lines and soft skin.

Allie's eyes slid closed as Galen's mouth followed the trail of her fingers, Galen's hands moving to unhook Allie's bra. A shiver passed through Allie as the satiny material slid down her arms. Left bared to Galen's attention, Allie felt tremendous trepidation, which she knew was ludicrous. She and Galen had been naked together in the shower, but somehow, this was different and she felt shy and incredibly uncertain.

"Shh," Galen whispered, cupping the side of Allie's face. "You're trembling."

"I'm nervous," Allie admitted with a small smile.

"We can stop if you want," Galen offered, brushing some strands of black hair out of Allie's face.

Allie shook her head, taking a deep breath. "I don't want to stop. I just don't know what I'm doing."

"It's okay." Galen smiled, feeling her emotions swell for the incredible person Allie was. "We'll make it work, don't worry."

Allie decided to take a step forward and grabbed the hem of Galen's shirt and whipped it up, surprising Galen as it exposed her midriff. Galen raised her arms, allowing the shirt to be removed, followed swiftly by her bra. She looked at Allie with surprised eyes. The surprise quickly melted into uncertainty as Allie studied her breasts, raising her hands to cup them.

"Wow," Allie whispered. "So soft." She ran her thumbs over the nipples, delighting in their instant hardening. She looked to Galen's face, curious of her reaction, only to find Galen's eyes closed and her head **tilted** slightly back in pleasure.

Acting on a lark and curiosity, Allie bent her head down and took one of Galen's nipples into her mouth, testing the flavor and texture with her tongue. She felt a hand on the back of her head, encouraging her exploration, which added to her confidence. She opened her mouth and sucked in as much of Galen's breast as she could.

"God," Galen whimpered, eyes closed as she concentrated on the feelings Allie was inspiring. Suddenly, she gently pushed Allie away and brought her in for a rough kiss before pushing her back towards the bed.

Allie found herself on her back on the bed, the kiss never breaking. She pulled Galen to her, moaning at the feel of the unfamiliar body weight on her own. Finally the kiss broke and Galen looked down at her, their heavy breaths mingling. In the look they exchanged, Allie gave Galen permission for any and all.

Galen gave her a quick kiss then pushed up to her knees, working to untie and pull off Allie's boots, as well as her own. Allie's slacks and Galen's jeans were next, quickly followed by panties and socks. Both fully naked, Galen lay herself down between Allie's legs, both sighing at the sensation. Galen found Allie's mouth again, the kiss slow and sensual.

Allie buried her hands in Galen's hair, her hips pushing subtly against Galen's as the kiss continued. Finally, Galen broke away and began to kiss her way down and across Allie's jaw and neck, finding her way to full breasts. Allie hissed in approval, her hands pushing against the back of Galen's head, encouraging her exploration. Never before had anyone seen her naked, let alone touched her in this way. Her nervousness disappeared, replaced by the rapture of Galen's touch.

Galen spent ample time on each breast before moving her way down Allie's body. In truth, she kept seeing John before her mind's eye over and over again, but she kept pushing him down. She knew instinctively that Allie wouldn't be able to touch her today, but that was alright; she'd make today about Allie, and about their reconnection.

Galen used to her tongue to create a center line down Allie's torso, sliding her body further down Allie's **until** she was between her legs, her arms wrapped around slender thighs.

Allie gasped, her back arching and hands pulsing in Galen's thick hair when she felt a tongue run through her need. She closed her eyes and saw nothing but sparks of pleasure as she was relentlessly feasted upon. When she felt a hand grasping for her own, she desperately and blindly grabbed for it, holding Galen's fingers within her own in a painfully tight hold.

Galen felt Allie's hips begin to buck and knew she was close. She also felt her own need surge, which she knew there were very few ways she trusted for it to be quenched. What John had done to her still rung within her being, and she knew it would take time to both emotionally and physically heal from it. Right now, however, she could think of a way that would bring them both to final release.

Allie was lost in a haze of sensual pleasure when she was interrupted, Galen's tongue stopping all movement. She whimpered her protest, but that whimper soon became a moan when Galen climbed back up her body and positioned herself against Allie, her hips cradled between Allie's spread legs.

Galen could feel the tremendous heat coming from Allie and knew there was a small window before Allie lost the edge she teetered upon. She quickly positioned herself and began to rub herself against Allie, both groaning **aloud** at the feeling. She rested on her elbows, moving her hips in quick, tight thrusts to keep the surface area small and specific, knowing that within a few thrusts they would both fall over the edge.

Allie reached down and grabbed handfuls of Galen's flesh, encouraging her to thrust quicker and harder as she felt herself rising, her heart racing and pleasure about to crest. Within moments, she cried out, her release washing over her in a torrential wave, Galen's cry of release following moments later.

Galen buried her face in Allie's neck, her whimpers muffled as her body tried to calm itself down. She felt comforting hands wash across her back, her own cupped around Allie's shoulders. After a moment, she placed a kiss to Allie's neck then lifted her head, looking down into the flushed face of the woman beneath her.

"Hey," Allie breathed, brushing Galen's long hair to the side of her neck and out of both their faces.

"Hey." Galen placed a kiss on Allie's lips. "That was incredible."

Allie nodded, her nerves long gone. She ran her hands up and down Galen's back, feeling the soft skin there. "Having sex is really beautiful, isn't it?" she asked, immediately feeling like a dork. She looked away.

Galen smiled, placing a kiss on Allie's cheek. "It can be." She started to move off Allie, but was kept prisoner when strong thighs held her in place as Allie wrapped her legs around Galen's waist.

"I want you to stay."

Galen cradled her head in an open palm looking down at Allie. "You know, you truly are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," she said conversationally.

Allie grinned, her fingers continuing to run over Galen's back. "I think you're just saying that because you just got lucky."

Galen smirked. "I just 'got lucky', huh?"

"Yes, you did," Allie confirmed, playfully smacking Galen's bare behind.

"Maybe I did, but I still feel that way." She placed a soft kiss on waiting lips. "I also think the unthinkable, crazy, not likely has happened."

"And what's that?" Allie questioned, falling into Galen's playful nature. She grinned as her fingernail trail up Galen's back sent shivers down the redhead's spine.

"Well," Galen drawled, pressing her hips into Allie's to quell her torturous fingernail play. "I think I've fallen in love with you."

All fun and play stopped, Allie could only stare at Galen. Though it was what she'd been worried about for a week from her own heart, it was shocking to hear it from Galen's lips. "How do we know?" she asked softly.

Galen was surprised to hear the simple question, but then she had to remind herself that Allie truly had no idea and no experience. "That's hard to say, Allie. I guess all I can ask is what do you feel? For me?"

Allie pulled Galen down for a deep kiss that had nothing to do with seduction but everything to do with emotion. "I feel that," she said against her lips. "I feel you inside me, and I want you near me."

Galen was left breathless, both from the kiss as well as from Allie's words, which were so simple and honest. "Then I'd say you know what falling in love is," she said softly.

"I'm not so sure that's a good thing," Allie responded, looking into Galen's eyes. "You're not exactly mine."

"No?" Galen asked, pushing her hips into Allie, pulling a surprised, pleasure-filled gasp from her.

"No," Allie defended, her hands running up and down Galen's back. "You belong to Cassie, Galen."

The mere mention of Cassie's name threw a bucket of cold water onto Galen, making her stiffen and look away. The momentary tense silence was broken when Galen's cell phone chirped to life from her coat pocket on the floor. Galen's eyes squeezed shut, as she knew who it was on the other end of the line. She let it ring, knowing she couldn't answer.

"She doesn't know you're here, does she?" Allie asked, her movements stopping. At the silent shake of Galen's head, she unwrapped her legs from around Galen's narrow hips. She wasn't surprised, but had allowed herself to get so wrapped up in the emotions and need that she'd tossed out all logic or conscience.

Sensing the huge shift in the room, Galen moved off of Allie, resting on her back. She stared up at the ceiling. She hadn't allowed the guilt to encroach, but as she felt Allie's recrimination, she could feel nothing but.

"She knows," Galen said softly. She turned and looked at Allie's profile when there was no answer. "She asked me if I had feelings for you after the dinner last night."

Allie met her gaze. "And what did you say?"

"What does it matter?" Galen asked softly. "My relationship was just about over before I met you, Allie. I know that and Cassie knows that."

"But," Allie said, her eyes squeezing shut, feeling horrible.

"But, what?"

"But, does she know you're here?" Allie wanted to smack herself for her sudden puritanical sensibilities, but it was what it was.

Galen sighed and sat up, shaking her head. 'No. Obviously I didn't plan to be *here* with you," she said, indicating the bed and their naked bodies. "But, no, I didn't tell her I'd be spending time with you today."

Allie sat up, pulling the sheet to her breasts, covering her nakedness. "I figured as much," she said softly. She looked at Galen, her heart breaking. Turning away, she grabbed her discarded blouse and tugged it on as she gained her feet. "If I was about to lose you," she said softly, "I would want to know." She walked to the stairs and spared a glance to Galen. "She deserves to know, Galen," she said softly. "Please don't come back until you've made up your mind one way or the other."

Galen watched as she Allie made her way down the stairs, feeling like an ass. She let out a loud sigh. "Shit."

Dressed, Galen headed to the first floor, not sure what she'd find. Seeing a quiet Allie sitting on the couch, she felt like the biggest asshole that ever existed. Tugging her jacket on, she stood just inside the front door.

"I'm going to head out," she said quietly. Seeing no difference in Allie's position, she sighed. "Allie, I didn't mean for this to happen."

Allie took a deep breath then turned tear-filled eyes to Galen. "I know," she said, giving her a weak smile. "I don't mean to make you feel bad, Galen. I know this deals with both of us. I guess I just don't want either Cassie or I to be played for a fool."

Galen looked away, trying to fight her anger. Her jaw worked as she held in what she wanted to say. Within a moment, her anger won out. "Damn it, Allie!" she exploded. "I didn't set out to fall in love with you! Yes, Cassie and I were struggling *long* before you and I met, and sure as *hell* long before anything happened between us." Her eyes were on fire as she met an **unflinching** gaze. "But I never meant for this to happen. I never meant to hurt anyone." She reached into her jacket pocket for her car keys, no longer meeting Allie's gaze. "I never expected any of this, including John."

Now it was Allie's turn to feel like an ass. She let out a shaky breath then pushed up from the couch and walked over to Galen. "I'm sorry," she said softly, keeping her physical distance. "You're right: this is nobody's fault, and I was wrong to blame you." She was quiet for a long moment, unable to hide the rueful smile. "Makes you wonder what purpose John played in our lives, doesn't it?" Getting no answer, she tugged her blouse closer around her. "Right or wrong, I love you, Galen." Galen met her troubled gaze then.

"Do the right thing, whatever that is. Please don't come back into my life - if you do," she amended, taking a deep, painful breath, "until you've made up your mind about what you want."

Galen studied her face and eyes for a long moment, as though taking all that Allie was, in. Finally, she nodded. "Alright." She moved to hug Allie but decided against it, turning and walking out the front door.

Left alone, Allie broke into the tears that she'd been holding back for the past five minutes. She was startled when she heard Roger's bedroom door **open** and yelped in panic as she grabbed a throw from the back of the couch to cover her half-naked body.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded to a very sheepish Roger.

"It's Friday, Allie," he said, sitting next to her on the couch. "I'm always home by two on Fridays."

Allie nodded with a sigh. She buttoned up her blouse and ran her hands through her hair. "I'm sorry if we bothered you," she said quietly.

Roger was quiet for a moment, not really sure what to say. He'd never seen Allie cry before, and *certainly* had no idea she was a lesbian. "That was Galen, wasn't it?" he finally said.

Allie blew out a breath. "Yes."

"And," Roger cleared his throat, nodding at Allie's blouse that was half-hazardly buttoned and the throw that covered her lap. "I take it you two are kinda *close*."

Allie smiled at her roommate and friend's attempt at subtlety. "Yes Roger, we're *close*."

"Um," he said, clearing his throat. "Isn't she kinda married, essentially?" Allie buried her face in her hands and nodded, the tears coming again. "Ah jeez, Allie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry." He was shocked when suddenly he found himself with an armful of sobbing Allie. He held her and let her cry.

Galen wiped at her tears but they kept falling. Finally, she pulled over into a parking lot, as she was beginning to have a hard time seeing the road. She cut the engine and let herself cry. She felt like her heart had been broken, and like she'd just left what would have been the greatest thing in her life. She felt like she'd hurt Allie deeply, as well as Cassie. She knew what she had to do, but had to make sure that any step she made right now was for the right reasons.

She grabbed a package of Kleenex from her glove compartment and used two tissues to clean her face and blow her nose. Pulling herself together, she started the car and headed home. Just when she thought the day couldn't get any worse, however, when she entered the apartment, she saw Cassie curled up on the couch, a cup of coffee cradled in her hands.

"Hey," she said, her voice more chipper than she felt. "What are you doing home so early?"

Cassie studied her for a long moment before she set her coffee aside and pushed up from the couch. "Where have you been?" she asked, voice quiet yet tense.

"I went out," Galen said, not wanting to hurt Cassie anymore than she already was.

"Clearly. You never ignore my calls, Galen." Cassie walked over to her partner, and suddenly her stomach dropped as she could see the turmoil in her eyes, and she could smell perfume on her, and it wasn't the kind she or Galen wore. She turned away, tears in her eyes. "You bitch," she whispered, feeling like she was about to throw up.

Galen paled, knowing full well she was busted. "I'm sorry." She ran a nervous hand through her hair. "I'm so sorry, Cassie."

"What is wrong with you, Galen?" Cassie raged, turning on her with murder in her eyes. "What the hell happened during those three days you were gone? Were you even truly kidnapped or did you and that bitch just plan a getaway?"

"That's not fair and you know it!" Galen exclaimed. "And, don't talk about Allie that way, this isn't her fault."

"No, it's *yours*!" She shoved Galen, her anger and hurt out of control. "You *bitch*!" She tried to lash out with her fists, but Galen caught them, easily holding them captive. "Let me go!"

"Stop it!" Galen yelled. "Stop! I fucked up, okay, but I did *not* end this relationship! This fucking thing has been dead for *years*, Cassie."

"But he had a second chance!" Cassie screamed, then pulled away from Galen and walked a few feet away, back turned to Galen. She wiped angrily at her tears as they flowed freely down her face. Who had a second chance?

"Cassie," Galen said softly, trying to be as comforting and understanding as possible. "We had a huge scare when everything happened last week, but that scare was not enough to keep us together. Our problems are deep and aren't going away anytime soon."

Cassie let out several heavy breaths as she got herself calmed down. "I know." She turned and looked at Galen. "Are you going to go to her, now? Did I lose you to her? Did she win?"

"Cassie, there are no winners or losers, here. All that remains is what is left of our relationship, which is really nothing. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to hurt Allie."

"So what does that mean?" Cassie sniffled.

"It means I'm going to try and figure out what I want, and how to be happy. I have to do that alone."

Cassie nodded and turned away. "I'd really like you to move out, Galen," she said quietly. "The sooner, the better."

Galen nodded. "Alright."

The early September day was beautiful, as summer warmth was still hanging on. The campus was abuzz with students and faculty alike, the grass green and lush. Many of the students enjoyed it as they lounged around or played football. Soon enough, it would turn crunchy and yellow.

The fountain outside Allie's building gurgled cheerfully, a couple of birds deciding to take a dip. Allie shrugged her laptop case higher onto her shoulder as she trotted down the cement stairs that led down from the building her classroom was in. It had been a long time coming, but she'd finally managed to finish with her doctorate and was offered a position at the same college. All in all, her career was going great.

She reached into the pocket of her skirt and found her keys, bringing them out into the bright sunshine. She looked forward to a quiet evening at home, especially quiet since Roger had moved out three months before. She had rented two movies the night before that were waiting at home to entertain her during the long, Labor Day weekend.

"Dr. Callaghan?"

Allie was surprised to hear her name, and it snatched her from thoughts. She glanced over to the fountain and the source of the voice, stopping dead in her tracks. She stood there, stunned for a full ten seconds. "Galen."

Galen smiled and pushed off the fountain and walked over to Allie. "Hi."

Allie accepted the hug that was offered her, filled with mixed emotions as she was held. Finally, she pulled away and took Galen in: casual jeans - she still felt nobody looked better in jeans than Galen - and a v-neck t-shirt. She had to admit to herself that Galen looked absolutely beautiful. She noticed a glow to her that hadn't been there in February.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Galen said simply. She looked Allie over, a soft smile coming to her lips. "You look absolutely beautiful."

Allie smiled, a bit sheepish. "Always the charmer, aren't you?"

Galen grinned. "Listen, I came to ask if you'd be willing to come over to my new place and let me make you dinner."

Allie's heart began to race. "New place?"

"Yeah. Well, I guess if you can still call a place new when you've lived there for six months."

Allie was stunned. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. It took some getting used to, living alone again, and I had more than one night sleeping with the hall light on, but," she shrugged. "It's the best gift I could have given myself."

Allie gave Galen a smile that could light up an entire city block. "I'm really proud of you," she said softly. "Truly."

"Thank you. I followed your advice and figured something out," Galen said, her own heart beginning to race, as she knew it was a complete gamble, coming to Allie after so long. She just prayed she wasn't too late.

"What did you figure out, Galen?"

"I figured out that I *really* want to make you dinner," she said easily, making Allie smile. "So, um," her nerves *really* began. "Um, are you free?"

Allie was overwhelmed with joy as she grabbed Galen into a painfully tight hug, then placed a soft, lingering kiss on her lips.

"I take that as a yes?" Galen asked against her lips.

Allie smiled. "I'm *very* free."

Galen grinned, shaking her head. "I don't think you will be after I make you dinner."

Allie threw her head back and laughed, still in the circle of Galen's arms. She actually *felt* free for the first time in her life. "Chain me down. Just don't use handcuffs."

Galen kissed her, a soft kiss, which almost immediately was deepened. **"Incredible that captivity for three days in February can set you free for a lifetime, isn't it?" she whispered. Awesome statement.**

Allie nodded. "Incredible," she agreed.

The End