**Stars Brightly Shining**

Chapter One:

It was dark the stars were blinking into existence. The shadows lengthened. The woods stopped its inner chittering as a stick snapped. There were quick footfalls, the girl clothed in a tattered white dress put a fist to her mouth, so as not to cry out. Her captor was right behind her. If she didn't move he would take her back. Back to his torture chamber. How long she had been missing, she did not know. Time was meaningless. She winced as her bare foot connected with a pinecone. Her legs felt like rubber. But she exhaled and raced on. She found the dark asphalt and stood on the side waiting, hoping that help would come. A car sped right by her without slowing down. She stayed put. Finally, a fifth car, slowed down and stopped. The window rolled down and a young man took in her appearance. "Are you ok Miss?" She shook her head, her knees buckled and her knees buckled and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. He jumped out of the car as she fainted. He caught her and wrapped a blanket around her. Then he sped towards the nearest hospital. She had cuts and bruises all over her thin, gaunt body. Her hair was matted with blood, hanks of it appeared to have been cut or torn out. In short, she was in very bad shape. He entered the Emergency Room, the still unconscious girl in his arm. "Help! I need Help!" A nurse hurried to his side, and placed her on a gurney. "What's her name?" Max shook his head and replied, "I don't know." "How was she hurt?" The nurse was still calm when she asked. "I don't know!" Max said. He continued, "She was standing on the side of the highway." "Have a seat in the waiting room Sir,' the nurse said in a controlled professional voice. He nodded and found a corner chair. He sat sideways, legs hanging over the side and waited. Max Welsh wasn't good at waiting. He wasn't good at a lot of things. In fact, his mother kept telling him to get a job. Except he had a job, but painting was not her list of acceptable jobs. He tried to read; but the magazine was ten years old. Besides he couldn't concentrate. He had just picked up a strange woman on the side of the road. There was no getting over that. He settled back against the chair and waited.

It was foggy, hazy, she was floating and she felt sick; but she could not seem to get her bearings. Her eyes seemed glued together. She could hear footsteps. Oh God! He was coming from the upstairs. He was going to the basement!' She had been down in the basement for what seemed like ages. He must be drunk. That's when he played 'Special Time' with her. She wanted to move, but she felt his hot breath on the nape of her neck. He smelled of stale liquor and rank cigarette smoke. His wheezing made her skin crawl when he turned on the naked bulb above her head. Its blaze hit her full force and she closed her eyes. He pried her eyes with his thumbs and forefingers. "Oh no, you know what happens when you close your eyes. Terrible things," His laugh made her jump, she tried to struggle out of her bondages. He then grabbed her by the neck and squeezed the larynx hard. She gasped. He eyes flew open; she was not in the basement. Her right arm was attached to an IV; her mouth was covered by an oxygen mask. She wiggled it off and struggled to get out of the hospital bed. A nurse happened by, and seeing trying to get out of bed, gently forced her back onto the bed. "NO! Don't! He'll find me! He'll kill me!" She screamed out, as she feebly struggled against the nurse's ministrations. "It's all right. You're in the hospital," the nurse placed the blanket over her again. "What's your name Dear?" The nurse looked at her with sympathetic eyes. "Brie," the girl all but mumbled as the medicine took hold of her and sent her to a haze-filled sleep once again. "Sleep well," the nurse exited and found Max snoring softly in a corner chair. The nurse tapped him on the shoulder. Max awoke with a start. "Wh-What is it?" Max rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "The girl's woken up," the nurse softly said. Max nodded and stood, stretching out his arms and legs. He yawned, then spoke, "What's her name?" "Brie," Nurse Smythe answered. "Brie...." His voice trailed off. "How soon can I see her?" He spoke again. Nurse Smythe shook her head. "Only immediate family, we're tracking them down now," She finally answered. Max nodded , just as his cellphone rang. Looking at the Caller I.D. he sighed. It was Pauline. His nagging mother. He hung it up without answering, and turned his attention back to the nurse. But she was gone. He shrugged and settled back down. He definitely wasn't going to leave the girl all alone. At least he wouldn't leave until her family arrived. He picked up another magazine, and sat back down.

Brie's eyes opened again, she pushed a mass of dark curly hair from out of her line of vision. She blinked a few times, and finally was in a sitting position. She rested her head on the pillows. She was thirsty, and hungry, but she was so bone tired; she couldn't think straight. Giving into temptation her eyes closed and she was out for the count. Max's stomach started grumbling. He couldn't put it off any longer. He had to eat something. He headed for the hospital cafeteria. He got a coffee and a stale ham sandwich. Who exactly was Brie? What had happened to her? He looked up as a news broadcast came on. "This just in, heiress Isobel Anderson has been found and brought to Sinai General. Doctors are reaching to her family...." Max tuned out the news anchor, and sighed. An heiress, well if that didn't beat all.... His reverie was interrupted as a nurse headed for his table. "Excuse me are you the man who brought Ms. Anderson in?" Max nodded and answered, "I'm Max Welsh. What's wrong? Is she ok?" "She's awake and asking for her rescuer," the nurse replied. Squaring his shoulders and running a hand through his short ash-blond hair, he followed the nurse getting more and more nervous. He was hardly a Casanova. Max was tall, he had broad shoulders, and hazel eyes. He was six-feet two inches, and quite stocky. Lean and lithe, he'd played track in high school, but had been a confirmed nerd. He liked Star Wars, Star Trek, and loads of video games. He always stuttered around the opposite sex. He nearly collided with the nurse, on entering the room he was pretty much gob smacked. She was gorgeous. Beyond gorgeous. Her hair what was left of it, was curly. Her hair what was left of it, was curly. Her big brown eyes seemed to search his soul, she nodded and beckoned him with her hand. "So you're the one who rescued me?" She gave him an intense questioning look. "Max Welsh a-at your s-service," he gave a little bow. "Hello, thank you for rescuing me," Her voice trembled. "I-I couldn't leave you, you looked cared," he returned. "Petrified more like," she responded her eyes were getting teary now. But she held the tears in. "Hey, hey, don't cry," Max held out a tissue. She gratefully took it and dabbed at her eyes, blowing her nose in a sort of loud way. Brie gestured to a nearby plastic chair. He sat down and scratched the back of his neck. "S-So uh...." Brie smiled, "It's ok, you don't have to be nervous. I'm just a regular person." "No you're not," Max mentally slapped his forehead at the answer. The nurse spoke up, "Mr. Welsh was it? I need to speak with you in private please?" Max nodded at Brie and stepped into the hall with the nurse. "She's been through a horrible ordeal, she can't even recall her background. She only knows herself as Brie," the nurse started. Max was trying to wrap his head around the new information. The next thing he said came out as a question, "Brie?" "Whatever happened it seems that she's gotten herself heavily involved, and it's left deep emotional, as well as physical scars on her. It's a wonder she even remembers she has a name," the nurse shook her head. "So what happens now?" Max didn't want to leave her, especially if she was this traumatized. "Aggressive physical therapy and of course a full psychiatric evaluation," was the answer. "What about her family? Her story's on the news...." Max's voice trailed off. "And they have been appraised of the situation. Do not let on that you were informed of her true identity, at least not yet," the nurse implored. This would be a great time to walk away and forget the messed up scenario. But then his conscience chimed in about his not being a gentleman and he inwardly sighed. "I'm staying here," he insisted. "Wonderful," the nurse said, though it sounded monotone. She walked away, and he was alone. Again. He decided to call Pauline. Not that they were close or anything, but she was his biological mother after all. He dialed her number. It rang five times then went to voicemail. Typical. SHe was probably with the jerk du jour. She had always been flaky. Hell, he never knew his grandparents. Then instead of moving around again he dropped off in Boise Idaho, they barely saw each other much less talked. He'd been thirteen when he'd dropped off her radar. Just up and packed his stuff. He'd been ultimately delivered into the Juvenile system. Pocketing the phone he went back to the waiting room. "Brie...." He murmured under his breath. He shook his head and spoke again, Isobel...." Truth be told he liked both names, she was still a mystery, and enigma though. Who had taken her? What horrors had she witnessed? Why was she just now on the news and had not been reported missing prior? Surely her family missed her. He figured he would get another phone call from Pauline. Or not. Most times, she seemed to forget she even had a son. He kept the phone on. Just in case. Brie, Isobel, whoever the hell she was, would be out of his life sooner or later anyway, if her family came for her. Would seeing these people, her family send her into more of a breakdown? Max sighed again, but he was getting bored of the waiting room. He needed to stretch his legs. He went out to the smoking area; not the he smoked but he needed to clear his head. He sat on the nearest stone bench and put his head in his hands. His phone rang. Another missed call. His phone buzzed, having gone to voicemail. He ignored it, and he shut off the phone finally.

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"I-I couldn't leave you; you looked scared," Max spoke, sitting down in the hard plastic chair. "I was petrified," She answered, though her eyes were glossy. Max noticed her holding the tears in, "Hey, hey, don't cry." He held out a tissue. She gratefully took it and dabbed at her eyes, emitting a loud honking noise as she blew her nose. "He scratched the back of his neck, "S-So uh...." Isobel smiled, "It's ok, you don't have to be nervous. I'm just a regular person." "You're not," He mentally slapped his forehead at his lame answer. The nurse spoke up, "Mr. Welsh was it? I need to speak with you. In private please." He nodded at Brie and stepped into the hallway with the nurse. "She's been through a terrible ordeal, and she can't even recall her background. She only knows herself as 'Brie', whatever's happened it seems that she's gotten herself heavily involved. And it's left deep emotional as well as physical scars on her. It's a wonder he even remembers she has a name," the nurse merely shook her head at the end of her speech. "So what happens now?" Max didn't want to leave her, especially if she was this traumatized. "Aggressive physical therapy and of course a psychiatric evaluation," the nurse guessed. "What about her family? Her story's on the news..." Max's voice trailed off. "And they have been appraised of the situation. Just do not let on that you know her true identity at least not yet," the nurse cautioned. This would be be a great time to walk away and forget this messed up situation. But then his conscience chimed in with his not being a gentleman and he inwardly sighed. "I'm staying here," he finally spoke. "Wonderful, " the nurse said though it sounded monotone. She walked away and he was alone. Again. He decided to call Pauline. Not that they were close or anything, but she was his biological mother after all. He dialed her number, it rang five times, then went to voicemail. Typical. She was probably with the jerk du jour. She had always been wild. Hell, h never knew his maternal grandparents. Then instead of moving around again, he dropped off in Boise Idaho, they barely saw each other, much less talked. He'd been thirteen when he'd dropped off her radar, and ended up in the Juvenile System. Pocketing the phone, he went back to the waiting room. "Brie...." He murmured under his breath. He shook his head and spoke again, still under his breath, "Isobel...." Truth be told, he liked both names. She was still a mystery though. Who had taken her? What horrors had she witnessed? Why was she just now on the news and had not been reported missing prior? Surely her family missed her. He figured he would get another phone call from Pauline. Or not. Most times she seemed to forget she even had a son. He kept the phone on, just in case. Brie, Isobel, whoever, would be out of his life sooner or later anyway. If her family came for her. Would seeing these people, her family send her into more of a breakdown?Max sighed again, but he was getting bored. He needed to stretch his legs. He went out to the smoking area. Not that he smoked, but he needed to clear his head. He sat on the nearest stone bench and put his head in his hands. His phone rang. But he didn't answer. Another missed call. His phone buzzed going to voicemail. He just ignored it. He turned off the phone. Max decided to take a drive. He hopped in his care causing gravel to scatter as he sped off. He had no idea where he was going. Just that he had to get away from the sterile environment. He decided to go to the local barbecue steak shack called 'Chuck's Wagon'. He was friends with the owner and was a regular there. He hoped Chuck was there, he needed someone to talk to.

Chapter 2:

Brie tossed and turned. She heard activity all around her, but it was far away and muffled. A seemingly familiar voice brought her out of the fog. She tried to hone in on the voice; then opened her eyes blinking furiously. It was too bright; the lights gave her a headache. Isobel, Darling, wake up...." The voice was moving away again, it was calling her Isobel. Why? Her name was Brie.... Wasn't it? She groaned again as she was nudged and prodded. She opened her eyes and found a kindly elderly face peering down at her. He instantly grabbed her into a hug, and kissed her cheek. "Whoa!" She gasped, and he pulled away looking at her, but still holding on to her shoulders. "Who are you?" She murmured, her eyes blinking rapidly trying to adjust to the harsh fluorescent lighting. The old man, then seated himself slowly in the hard plastic chair next to the bed and started to speak. He reached for her hand, but pulled away when she flinched, tucking the hand back under the blanket. He cleared his throat and tried to speak again, "I'm your grandfather Jonah, you call me 'Grandpa Joe'. Remember?" He flinched this time when she shook her head and answered, "I-I don't remember. My name's Brie." Brie tried sitting up and was helped into a sitting position, and smiled tiredly. She continued, "If I am Isobel, how long have I been missing?" "Isobel would be twenty-eight and she wore a necklace, a thin gold chain around her neck. She, you were a bit of a wild child. Your, her fingerprints are registered with the police department," he heaved a sigh. He stiffly stood, leaning on his ornate cane. "She's been missing for ten years....." He continued speaking, "What kind of incompetent doctors work here that can't determine what's going on?! I am going to raise some complaints. And why do you insist on calling yourself Brie?" Brie blinked and spoke in turn, "Because that's my name. He told me it was." "Who told you?" Jonah demanded. "He did...." Brie's words slurred together. Jonah shook his head, and turned to the nurse. "I will be calling the persons in charge of this hospital, and see if I can get a more competent doctor to look after her." "Meantime, I will inform her mother that she's been found....alive...." Jonah finished and shuffled out. Brie let out a shudder inducing breath, "I have a m-mother?" Jonah turned and nodded, then limped out without another word. "I don't have a mother, he told me so," tears slid down her face. Her lips trembled and she was lying against the pillows again. "Who's he?" The nurse kindly asked. Brie shook her head, and with tears still sliding down her face, she fell asleep.

Chapter 3:

Max was restless again. He wanted to stay, he wanted to go. He got one more paper cup of coffee. He called his job and they gave him the go ahead to have a few more personal days. Great Now what ? He picked up his buzzing cell. He looked at the i.d., rolled his eyes and answered it. "Hey there Little Man," she said. "Pauline," he crisply replied. "Don't address me by my first name. At least call me mother," she sounded affronted. "Well, I don't think you putting me in a closet off and on qualifies you for an award," Max stated. Then he continued, "Angelique and Mario Welsh are my parents. Goodbye Pauline." He hung up and called 'Angelique's Boutique'. "Hair Today Gone Tomorrow, Angelique speaking," the chipper voice was like heaven to his ears. "Hey Mom, I have a situation," as he told her, he heard a gasp. Then he smiled as she said, "We must bring her home." "I don't know...." His voice trailed off as Angelique continued, "We must! The poor girl is all alone." Max rolled his eyes, and continued pacing. "I mean it Max, she will love it at The Villa. You know that," Angelique's voice had a plotting tone to it. "You're going to overwhelm her, I think I'll just stay here until she gets out of the hospital," Max answered. Angelique huffed and sighed, "Think about it Max-y." She hung up. "I will," he said into the dial tone. He didn't blame his adoptive mother though. She had rallied the courts and he had been taken from Pauline. He had had a happy childhood after all. Angelique and Mario were the best parents a kid could ask for. Pauline on the other hand, had waltzed back into his life at age twenty-two swearing she was different and to give her another chance. And he had given her his phone number and had regretted it ever since. Pauline was annoying, she acted like nothing was wrong, aif the whole world owed her something. He was just about to head out to Chuck's again, just for something to do, when Nurse Brown tapped him on the shoulder, "Brie's awake. She's asking for you again." "Is she doing any better?" he asked. "Much better, she's expected to get out of ICU as soon as tomorrow," Nurse Brown nodded encouragingly. "Great," he followed her back to Brie's room. He found her in a sitting position finishing her lunch. She turned as soon as she heard the knock on the open door. She beckoned him back inside with her pointer finger. He sat back down on the hard plastic chair beside the bed. Nurse Brown took the now empty tray and disappeared from the room. "So.... I have no words to describe how incredibly grateful I am for you saving my life," Brie started. Her eyes teared up again. Max reverted to his sentiment from earlier, "Hey, hey, don't cry, you did most of the work. By what I can figure out, you were standing on the side of the road already; I just saved you from splitting your head open." He gently patted her knee. She grimaced but she didn't flinch or move away. Max continue what he'd been doing, taking it as a good sign that she seemed to calm down. "Yes well, if I hadn't gotten out of there, I wouldn't have gotten out out of there, I wouldn't have been standing on the side of the road," Brie spoke. He took in her appearance once more. Her hands were bandaged, one arm in a cast, a square piece of gauze covered her forehead. Dark circles made her brown eyes seem luminous. He assumed the I.V. drip made her eyes sparkle. Her hair was still scraggly, but it seemed to be coming in soft curls, dark brown hair. He shook his head and half-heartedly returned her grateful smile. "Could you do me a favor?" She asked, making Max jump a little. THe chair's legs clattered, Brie closed her eyes at the sound. "S-Sure, what's the favor?" Max reached up to squeezed her shoulder in a comforting way. "Get me some edible food? The hospital food...." Her voice trailed off. "Any preferences? You just finished eating...." Max asked. "I know I just finished eating, but I'm still sort of hungry, I think," Brie answered. Then she continued her train of thought, "A burger? Some fries? Definitely a milkshake, make it a triple thick strawberry one." Her eyes opened and she opened them a little wider as if subtly begging him. "Sure, I'm on it. You'd better rest," he stood and started for the door. He shut the door, and headed for the car. She didn't look like she could handle a burger and fries. It was what she wanted. Hospital food did lack panache and flavor. He stopped at Chuck's and ambled inside. "Max, nice to see you again," Chuck stepped out from behind the bar. "Thanks I need your best burger some curly fries and your thickest strawberry milkshake," Max said reciting Brie's wish list from memory. "For you or a friend?" Chuck asked, as he headed for the kitchen. Max shrugged, watching as his friend disappeared from view. He looked around the rustic restaurant. It was decorated in a cowboy motif. Not outrageous cowboy not flamboyant, just some lassoes on the wall and water color paintings with cows and cowboys huddled around a campfire. He thrummed his fingers on the stained mahogany bar, he was nervous. He hoped he could sneak the food back inside the hospital. It would stink if he got busted. FInally Chuck reappeared laden with a couple of styrofoam containers and a tall styrofoam cup with a straw protruding from the plastic lit. "Your order and I put a little something in for you. Pick up the bag at the end of the bar," Chuck said, a grin on his face. Chuck waved away Max's proffered money, "It's on the house," Chuck chuckled, as Max turned pink. "Don't be embarrassed. Our women use us as gofers all the time," Chuck put the items in a paper bag and handed it to his friend; then he reached over and patted Max's shoulder. "Get out of here," Chuck jokingly admonished. Max nodded, and he went to the end of the bar. He hefted bag lifted the other bag and headed for the door. He put the bags on the passenger's seat of the car, and making sure they wouldn't spill over, he got into the driver's seat. He headed for the hospital again. He muttered under his breath, hoping he'd escape inquisitive eyes. He scooted past the nurse's station thankfully they were all busy and he was inside Brie's room once again. Her eyes opened, and he put the bags on the table. She smiled and tried to sit up.

Chapter 4:

"Here let me help," he held her into a sitting position and slid the table over her knees, so she could eat. She breathed in the scents. "I've missed food like this," she smiled at him then dug in. Taking his cue from her, he also dug in. Chuck's burgers were the best. A few minutes later, their meal was done. Max cleared the trash and when the nurse walked in they were talking amicably. "Time for shots and medicine Brie," The nurse started. Then she turned to look at Max and spoke to him, "If you would please step outside Mr. Welsh?" "No, please let him stay," Brie begged. "Alright," The nurse shrugged her shoulders and proceeded to check up on Brie. She was poked, prodded, and she flinched as they drew blood. "A CT scan is assigned, then we move you out of the ICU," the nurse spoke again, after administering the shots. "It's about time," Max muttered for only Brie to hear and he smiled at her. Brie reached over and grabbed his hand and squeezed it in a comforting way. Wasn't he supposed to comfort her? Twenty minutes later, Max was left alone, back he went to the waiting room. So that they would come and find him. He slung his feet over the side of the chair, and he waited. Ten more minutes and a male nurse tapped him on the shoulder, "The patient is in room 227." Max nodded his thanks and went to see her. She was alone save for the blaring t.v. The glare illuminated her face, it seemed to glow. Her eyes were especially bright in the instrument's glow. She seemed to sense his presence and she slowly turned to face him, her mouth split open in a friendly smiled, "Hey you, nice of you to visit me out of ICU." "Yeah, you moved up," Max tentatively smiled back. "Sort of," her smile faltered a little. "What's wrong?" Max's own smile also slipped. "Nothing.... Well everything. I don't remember who I am; a man calling himself my grandfather came for a visit and the nurses and doctors are being way too nice," Brie's voice hitched a little as she spoke out her frustrations. Max fully entered the room the room and sat down in the perfunctory plastic chair. "Surely the nurses and the doctors being nice isn't so bad?" Max ventured. "That's not the point," Brie sounded exasperated. "Then what is the point?" Max leaned forward trying to understand this strange person. "The point is, they act like I'm a princess or something. I don't feel very princess-y. You know?" Brie was near the point of tear again, not feeling as if she could express herself the way she was trying to. Hoping that she was getting her point across. "Not really, but I think I get your drift," Max answered. "Do you?" Brie's voice was edged with hardness. "Sorry, I'm just trying to be sympathetic," Max offered once more. "It's not you. I've been thinking about going back to what's familiar. Even though it was literally killing me," Brie sighed. "You did the right thing. You got help," Max was appalled that she even was talking about going back to a place of death. "Stop thinking like that! You're safe," Max said through clenched teeth, resisting the urge to shake her until her teeth rattled in her head. "I know but I'm scared, I didn't know what I was doing. I saw my chance, and I was running. Now I find out I have a grandfather and...." Her voice trailed off. "That just proves you're gutsy; you saw your chance, and did what you had to do. That takes guts and luck," Max answered in a reassuring way. There was a deafening silence and Max got up to go. "I'll see you," she nodded and turned back the television. Max went to the nurses' station and asked to speak with a therapist. "Doctor Taryn is available," the receptionist said, as she smiled kindly at him. As he waited he wondered exactly what he would say. Doctor Taryn appeared and shook Max's proffered hand. "Nurse Bonham said you were asking for me?" She cocked her head to one side. Max took a deep breath and mutely nodded. "Maybe we'd better adjourn to my office," Doctor Taryn led him to her office. SHe at behind the desk and bade him to sit ass well. He sat in the cushioned chair in front of her desk and leaned forward. "is there a particular concern you wish to discuss?" She too leaned over, and folded her hands together, while an eager look overtook her face. "If you would like to begin?" Doctor Taryn prompted. Max leaned away from the desk and nervously licked his lips. He did not just want to blurt it out. FInally he started to speak, "I was worried about one of the patients; Brie. She mentioned that part of her wanted to go back to where she'd escaped from." Max shook his head in disbelief. The therapist nodded and put down her notebook, leaning forward some more, "It's not unusual that one years for the familiar; even if the familiar means death. " "I think I got a little angrier than she expected and I think I scared myself," Max took in a deep breath and slowly let it out, he leaned back against the chair. Doctor Taryn answered in a voice dripping with encouragement, "She will come around fully, after she sorts out that her current environment is safe. Give her some space." Doctor Taryn stood indicating their discussion was finished. "I apologize I have another appointment," She said, and gestured at the door. Ma rose from his seat and shook the doctor's proffered hand once more. He exited feeling more jumbled inside than ever. 'So give her space,' he thought to himself. He decided to go see his parents. His mother was haranguing him for another visit. He made his way to the front door and he got into his car.

Chapter 5:

Angelique was standing on the porch; dressed in a pink dress white stockings, pink heels, a strand of pearls were across her neck. And a white hair band was holding up her white-blonde hair; keeping it out of her face. She opened her arms wide as soon as he got out and was standing before her. "Max-y how are you?" She gave him a hug so tight she nearly cracked his ribs. "Easy Mom," he winced look down at his barely five-foot two mother. "Humor me, Mario's out of town, and I need someone to hug," She bantered back at him. Max smiled, hugged her back, lifting her off her feet. "There we go," he said. She reached up and patted his cheek then he gently set her down. "Aww Mom!" he grimaced. Angelique merely smile and led Max inside the house. They were seated in the living room, Angelique was perched on the couch while Max made himself comfortable in Mario's favorite recliner. "Tell me all about her," Angelique primly folded her hands in her lap. Max rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. "Go on, I want to hear all about her," Angelique would not let up. "Mom!" he huffed back at her. She leaned forward her hands still clasped in her lap. "Go on, I'm waiting. She sounds like she needs some mothering. As soon as she gets out, I'm taking charge," Angelique said in a decisive tone before Max could say anything more about Brie. Max rolled his eyes again, she always took control. She took control in his adoption, she took control in raising him. But she was a very enjoyable woman, easily relatable. He never really minded when she took charge. She reached over and slapped him on the shoulder. "Ow!" Max winced. "All I know is that she was standing on the shoulder of the highway near the woods. She fainted, I brought her to the hospital and I've been there for a couple of days," Max got up and headed for the kitchen. He needed an excuse to stop talking to his mother. He was starting to have some kind of feelings for Brie, he just wasn’'t too sure which kind yet. Angelique followed him and sat on a barstool watching as Max extracted a beer from the fridge. "Drinking's bad for you," she playfully intoned. "I'm not discussing her anymore," Max firmly stated, and took another gulp. "Fine, but I think I want to meet her," Angelique responded. Max groaned, shut the fridge, and put the beer on the counter. He tried not to roll his eyes again. It was hard to restrain himself. "I mean it Max," Angelique tried again. "You'll scare her even more," Max tried to joke. He didn't really want to share Brie at the moment. "I'll make it up to the hospital when she's discharged," Angelique said in a decisive tone. Max paused taking a swig of his beer and started coughing loudly. Angelique stood, trotted over and patted his back very firmly. He gulped in some air and finally breathed normally. "Don't scare me like that again Mom," Max sat next to her.

Chapter six:

Restless, chafing, itching, Brie was bored. The bed and room was making her claustrophobic. She looked at the I.V. attached to her wrist, she contemplated taking it out and just running. It was as confining as 'The Torture Chamber'. She pulled the covers off and swung her feet over the edge. This place was too clean too sterilized. She landed on the floor, feet first. A soft thump accompanied the landing. She held onto the edge of the bed and waited to stop wobbling. Her legs felt like jelly, she inched towards the open door. She looked up and down the hallway, it was empty thankfully. She made her way to the door marked EXIT, in capital letters. As she hobbled along, she calculated her next move; she definitely was not going back There. He would kill her for sure. She would just disappear, He would never find her again. Brie briefly looked down at her hospital gown. She would get clothes first. Before she looked up all the way, her face was rammed into something hard, yet fleshy. Strong arms stopped her in her tracks. "Hey, hey, slow down. Where do you think you're going? You're not well enough to be on your own," a deep husky voice made her look up. Slowly Brie lifted her head and met kindly teal eyes. "Max?" She could not believe her eyes. "Hey, you're not supposed to be out, you'll split your stitches," he tried to guide her back inside, but she resisted. He took in her paper thin gown and sighed, leading her to a nearby stone bench. She was beyond pale. Brie folded her hands in her lap, and Max carefully put his hand over both of her delicate ones. A curtain of hair hid her face, and he watched as tears fell from her eyes. "Is it that bad?" Max's voice made her feel safe, and she looked up at him and tried to smile. "I feel cooped up, and I feel useless," she looked back at her lap. "You're not useless," Max tried to reassure her. "I'm scared, He's still out there; He's coming for me. He won't ret until I'm dead," her answer sent chills up and down Max's spine. "You don't have to go back into this place. In fact, let's ditch this hospital; I.V. and all," Max carefully extracted the needle from her arm and helped her stand up. Taking her gently in his arms, he walked to the car. Angelique would be so surprised. "I know a safe place, my mom's been wanting to meet you," Max gently put her in the passenger's seat, making sure she was seatbelted in. He drove off without a backward glance at the hospital. Max was going to make sure nobody found Brie. He looked over at her her, and found she had fallen asleep. Good, she needed her sleep. He drove on ignoring the voice in his head that said he should have called Angelique first. Whether or not she would have approved of this scheme and he was betting she would be against it, he did not want to find out over the phone. A couple hours later, he pulled into the driveway of his childhood home. He opened the passenger's side and without waking her, gathered her back in his arms. Angelique flew out of the door nearly colliding into her son, "What in the world are you doing?! I can not believe you sneaked her out of the hospital!!" "I didn't mom. Can we please go inside? I'll tell you the whole story," Max easily answered. Biting her lower lip Angelique led him inside. Max gently laid on the sofa. Angelique got a blanket and a pillow, and helped Brie get comfortable. Putting the pillow under her head, and tucking her in, without waking her up. Brie burrowed deeper into the blanket. Angelique turned back to her son and narrowed her eyes at him. "What were you thinking you big dummy?!" She slapped him smartly across his lower back. "Ouch! Mom!" He covered his backside, just in case she went lower. "They are going to call! The police will be swarming our house! What will the neighbors think?" She was yelling and Max could barely get a word in edgewise. Max tried to explain again, but Angelique put a finger to his lips, while standing on her tiptoes. "But first, let's get her decent. I know.... I have an outfit that might fit her...." Angelique's voice trailed off as she ambled towards hers and Mario's bedroom. Max shook his head and hunkered down in Mario's recliner. He picked up the remote and flipped through the channels. What now? He really didn't want to force her to go back to the hospital, he just hoped he didn't get arrested. Angelique reappeared with a white T-shirt, blue jeans and a pair of white socks and shoes. "There we are, she'll be comfy when she wakes up," Angelique arranged the clothes on the coffee table. Her voice brought Max out of his reverie. "Thanks," he smiled over at her. "You'll thank me when you don't get me arrested, or ticketed," Angelique sat beside him perching on the recliner's arm. Max handed the remote over, he glanced over at Brie's still sleeping form. She was tossing a little and mumbling. Nothing too serious at the moment. He might as well get some shut eye and some work done. There were a couple of paintings that had to be re-done. He kissed Angelique's cheek and ambled to his old bedroom.

A Few Hours Later....

Someone was shaking him, but someone else was screaming. He had to find the one who was screaming. "Max! Maxwell! Max-y!" A shrill scream was heard. He opened his eyes blinked a few times and looked questioningly at his mother. "Brie's screaming, she's screaming for you," Angelique breathlessly got out. Max sat up fast and skidded to a stop in front of the couch. Brie hed the blanket up to her chest, her eyes wild with fear. Spying Max, her screams faded slowly and she folded her body against the couch arms. "M-Max?" She questioned. "It's me," Max knelt in front of the couch and looked deep into her eyes. "Calm down Brie," he softly said. "Who is she?" Brie asked, pointing at Angelique. "She's my mom," Max smiled gently at her. "Her name's Angelique," Max continued, and the smile stayed fixed to his face. Angelique offered a smile. Brie looked ruefully at the clothes on the ground. "I am so sorry," Brie whispered. "I understand," Angelique picked the clothes up from the floor, and handed them to the still trembling woman. Brie smiled and nodded, taking them, she exited the couch and stopped mid walk. "The nearest bathroom is down the hall on the right," Angelique offered. Brie breathed a relieved sigh and walked on. Max couldn't help looking at her when she walked away. Her gown opened a little, and he caught a glimpse of her very fine assets. She slowly disappeared and he felt a slap on his arm. "Stop looking and do something useful," Angelique's voice brought him back to reality. He looked questioningly down at her. "The lawn needs mowed," Angelique answered. Shaking his head he ambled outside.

Chapter 7:

Angelique sighed, she knew her son would not be mowing the lawn. They had a groundskeeper for that. She knew he would be out in his shed turned art studio. It was converted when he'd turned sixteen. She turned off the television, she could hear soft footfalls on the plush carpet. She turned and faced her newest houseguest with a smile. Brie shyly smiled back and settled on the couch once more. "Where's Max?" Brie softly asked. "OUt in his studio. He likes to go out when he's bored," Angelique shrugged. "Oh," Brie smoothed an imaginary wrinkle from the shirt. "Go on then, I know you want to," Angelique smiled at Brie. "He won't mind?" Brie started to rise from her perch. "He'll probably grump at first, but he'll come around," Angelique answered. She then continued, "You look nice by the way, the clothes fit you very well." Brie blushed and exited the house. Angelique grinned to herself, maybe thi frightened girl would be the one to center her stormy son. She called Mario. Brie found the shed quite easily. It was more like an aluminum barn, only bigger. Apparently they had gone all out for their son. When she approached just before she knocked on the door she heard what sounded like an argument, then a thud. After that she heard classic rock pouring out. She knocked but there was no answer. She opened the sliding heavily curtained door and slipped inside. He was sloshing paint onto a six foot high three foot wide canvas. She perched on a stool, and watched him work. The walls were covered in paintings in varying stages of completion. He didn't see her at first, until he turned to fill up his paint bucket. "What are you doing out here? You should be relaxing," he tutted. Brie silently shrugged. "Just stay out of the way. Sometimes I get really messy with the paint," Max curtly said. "I'll be careful," Brie promised. She perched precariously on a rickety bar stool with colored splotches on the legs. She looked over at a wall that seemed dedicated to portraits. Some looked almost like Picassos. Abstract shapes making up the face and clothes. They were quite good. Max had definite talent . Why hadn't he gone to art school? Maybe he had.... Her musings were cut short when Max's voice broke through her foggy brain, "Let me paint you." She quickly regained focus, "Why? I'm not pretty enough to paint. I'm plain." Max shook his head. If only she could see what he saw. "You're just right to paint. Please?" Max asked again. "I don't know...." Her voice trailed off. "Just think about it," Max continued splashing paint onto the canvas. To Brie it looked like an iridescent butterfly. "I'm almost finished," Max added a couple more splashes of paint. "I only splash paint when I'm mad at Pauline," Max told her. Her bows creased ever so slightly He smiled a little but didn't explain any further. She stood and he watched as she made to go into the house. She was absolutely sensual. Whoever that bastard was who had made her go through hell, would pay. He would see to that. Finishing up he cleaned his hands with a small amount of paint thinner. he ambled to the back of the shed and changed his T-shirt and jeans. He put on a pair of gray sweats and a tight muscle shirt. He strode towards the main house. Maybe his mom had lunch ready. He opened the front door and heard feminine laughter coming from the front room. He quietly shut the front door heading upstairs to his old bedroom. Downstairs Angelique had instructed that lunch be made. She had all of his favorites baking and simmering. A pot roast was in the oven, a salad was in the refrigerator, and potatoes were also in the oven. Green beans were were simmering on the stove, while there was pudding waiting for dessert. Angelique set the table, while Brie put out the plates and silverware. Max showered and changed into slate gray slacks, a polo shirt and loafers. Brie had changed into a pleated skirt a white button down shirt, and red flats. What hair she had, was in a low ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her hair had grown in but the bald patches were still slightly visible. He stood in the doorway admiring what he saw. She looked up and blushed. He gave his mother a peck on the cheek and he seated himself across from Angelique next to Brie. Angelique said 'grace' and then rang for the meal to be served. As Max heartily dug in, both ladies kept a quiet conversation amongst themselves. "As soon as you feel comfortable, I'm taking you on a shopping spree," Angelique started. Brie's fork clattered to the side of the plate and lowered her eyes. . Shaking her head vigorously she rose from the table and hurried away. Max started to go after, but angelique's hand stayed him. "No, let her sort herself out," she said. Max reluctantly sat back down....

Chapter 8:

A tall figure emerged from the shadows and became a solid man. His arms flexed dangerously, and he put a hand through is graying crop of hair. He'd tracked her this far, but he hated hospitals. The brightness, the sterility, the health. He liked the power of destruction. It made him feel invincible. His black jeans and long sleeved shirt blended seamlessly into the night, but here he stuck out like a sore thumb. His combat boots sounded heavy to his ears but he trudged up the steps anyway and waited for the automatic doors to open. At the nurses' station he paused and looked over the counter. He waited to see if anyone would notice him. But they were too busy bustling around. He went over to a stack of folders and thumbed through them. One particular file caught his eye. The name alone, his property. His Brie. Brie had been the special one. His pride and his ultimate plaything. She had put up the least resistance to him. Now she had done the most disrespectful thing. She had gotten away. It had been his fault. He had left the door unlocked, had left her unshackled. He should have finished what he had started; he should have killed her. He knew how to dispose of bodies very well. As he looked through the folder, he became angry. Max huh? Max would meet a timely end. He heard approaching footfalls. He secreted the folder and came face to face with an orderly. "May I help you?" He asked. Cain shook his head, "I'm just looking for the restroom." Cain started to back away towards the nearest exit. The orderly walked away leaving the man to his own devices. Cain shuffled away towards his Jeep. He spread the folder on a hothe passenger's seat. He needed a hotel room, somewhere close to Brie's temporary shelter. For it would be very temporary. She would be back in his house and under his protection. She would learn not to run away ever again. Cain would make sure she was properly taken care of. He went a few mile and came upon the 'Starry Night Hotel'. It was in the vicinity of where his property was staying. He would settle in, then fetch his possession. He parked the Jeep and went to check in.

Chapter 9:

Brie shivered. Something was wrong, very wrong. The air seemed thick and almost chokable. he coughed trying to clear her throat. She couldn't shake the feeling that Cain was close. Cain was coming for her. She washed her face and dressed for the day. Brie made her way downstairs. She was greeted by both Angelique and Max. "I've got fresh fruit and eggs and whatever else you'd like," Angelique ushered her into a seat. Brie selected some fruit and eggs, but it tasted like sawdust in her mouth. Angelique frowned, "Honey you're looking very pale. Are you alright?" Brie shook her head, "He's nearby. he's coming back for me." Angelique frowned and reached over to pat her guest's hand. Max's shoulders tightened. He set his mouth in a determined line. He would protect her at all costs. "Don't worry about anything Brie. I'm here, nobody's coming for you ever again," He said. He reached over to pat her other hand. He felt her tremble. She reached over and hugged him, and buried her face in his shoulder. He felt his shirt get wet with her tears, he slowly rocked her back and forth in his arms, similar to a mother rocking her infant. "You don't know what he's capable of. He can hide bodies; he can kill fast," she looked into Max's eyes, and he saw pure unbridled fear in her own eyes. "This place is a stronghold. Nobody's getting in here without someone on our staff noticing. You're safe,. Very safe," Max wiped her tears away with his thumb. But she was still shaking. Max held her until she calmed down. "Thank you Max," Brie slowly disentangled herself from his embrace. But she knew what she knew. Cain was coming and he would kill anybody that stood in his way. She went to find Angelique. Maybe going shopping would clear her head. She had not been shopping, ever. At least not that she could remember. Angelique was crocheting when Brie found here, and looked up with a smile on her face. "Hello Brie; are you alright?" Angelique put aside her craft. Brie slowly nodded and replied, "Fine, I was going to take you up on your offer on shopping for clothes." Brie smiled back. "Absolutely, would you like to go now or wait?" Angelique stood. "I've never had a shopping partner, the men in my life groan every time I suggest going to the grocery store," Angelique gave Brie a soft smile. Brie picked up a magazine and idly leafed through it. She spoke up all of a sudden, "Can we go now?" Angelique who had taken up her crocheting again hastily put it aside and then stood again. "I thought you would never ask. Let's go," Angelique gently pulled Brie to her feet. Luckily it was a warm day and she grabbed two pairs of sunglasses, and handed one pair to Brie. She put them on and followed into the hazy winter day. "Times like this, we need the convertible," Angelique pulled a set of keys out of her pocket and pushed a button. A powder blue Porsche's lights blinked and Angelique got into the driver's seat. Brie followed suit an arranged herself in the passenger's seat. "We're not exactly in Rodeo Drive, but we're close to it," Angelique said. Brie nodded not really understanding. "Don't worry so with the clothes we get, you'll be sparkling inside and out," Angelique said, as she reached over and patted Brie's shoulder. Angelique revved the engine and the sped off. When the car pealed out, a tall person emerged from the shrubs. He had climbed the wrought iron gate; he knew how not to trip alarms. All it took was fancy footwork and stealth. Lots of stealth. Cain was experienced at blending in when he had to. he scoured the house with his naked eye. Spying an open door,it was a long shot, but he could probably infiltrate the staff and become one of them. He came to a supply closet and ventured inside. Extra uniforms hung neatly on hooks in a row. Monogrammed for the chef and cooks, plain for the gardeners and maid. Cain chose a uniform emblazoned with the name Johnson. "Well Mr. Johnson has arrived, "Cain spoke to the thin air. Cain shrugged into the jacket and buttoned it all the way up. He hid his pants behind some mop and brooms. Put on the uniform pants and sneaked out into the inner house. He passed a staff member who barely gave him a passing glance. He looked around the upstairs rooms and saw one of the doors that were open. Making sure no eyes were on him, Cain stepped into the room. This was *her* room He could smell her. Her time was coming. She would be in his clutches again. A noise alerted him, he looked around to see if anything was lying around. A headband was on the vanity table. She was being corrupted. She was now dressing like a whore. His Brie would remain pure. Feminine laughter reached his ears and he made a hasty exit from the room, pocketing the headband on his way out. He made his way to the back door, just as he reached the landing he brushed against someone. He looked at the person, and gave a small smile before he disappeared from sight. Brie knew those eyes at first sight, she knew that sinister smile. It was *him.* She recoiled and stood a little behind Angelique. Angelique looked worriedly at Brie and back to the space, where nobody was. The door shut and the ladies retrieved their purchases and headed up the stairs once again. Angelique took Brie's hand, it was trembling just like the rest of her, and guided Brie to her room. They put the shopping bags on Angelique and Mario's king sized bed. "What did you see?" Angelique guided Brie to the foot of the bed, clearing a space for her to sit. "I saw him, I-I saw Cain," Brie's lips trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. Angelique patted Brie's hand some more. "Are you sure?" Angelique asked. Brie nodded. "I don't think he's here now," Angelique stopped patting Brie's hand and gently placed an arm around the young woman's still thin shoulders. "I have to leave, he'll come back for me. I know he will. I was his favorite," Brie took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "How did you manage to get away?" Angelique was genuinely curious. "It's a long story," Brie's answer came out in a shuddery breath. Angelique smiled encouragingly and she spoke, "All we have is time Dear." Brie took another deep breath and began her story.

Exterior: Woods:

Dilapidated split level cabin, dark ivy covered, and the forest was completely covering what was once a lawn. Interior: It was smelly, the floorboards were broken, and missing; there was mold on the walls, there were chunks missing, the fireplace was in pieces. The only warmth came from the dying embers of a small wood stove. Shackles, and chains hung from two walls, and cages hung from the ceiling. Women in various states of dress, and undress were either chained by their wrists or shackled by their feet. Moans and groans filled the tiny living space, and then the door flew open. Hob nailed boots, pounded across the floor. He'd brought another 'playmate'. He turned and surveyed his kingdom, his playthings. He kicked the nearest body next to the stove. "Get up, make the breakfast; and get your 'sister' dressed and secure. NOW!" He bellowed. The woman shuffled as fast as she could in her irons. She got out pans, eggs, bacon and turned on the stove. "Greetings Sister," she acknowledged the new captive. Once finished with the breakfast she served everyone after serving Cain. He threw a white dress at her. "Put that on your new sister, Naomi," He said and finished eating. 'Naomi' nodded and stripped the new person down, put the dress on and expertly shackled her. Watching from the furthest back wall, a trembling figure slowly at her scraps. If she did not eat it, *HE* would notice and she would be beaten severely. Finishing up their food, dishes gathered up by another 'sister', it was time to begin the day.If Cain was in a good mood, he would go into town, after unshackling one of them, who would be in charge until he got back. Then the ***'games'*** would begin. If he was in a bad mood, the ***'games'*** would begin earlier and be bloody, very bloody. Cain thrived on the screams emitted and how much blood he took. He unshackled his favorite; Brie. She was his most compliant. He took her from a cage hanging from a hook on a narrow wall. She wasn't drugged today, but her head was lolling to the side. He slapped her to consciousness, and slowly unshackled her, then he threw raggedy dress at her. "Get dressed, watch your sisters, I'm going into town," he roughly tossed her out of the cage, and he left her to get ready for his trip into tow. Massaging her swollen wrists, she moved between the women, some of them young girls barely out of their teens. Some cowered away from her touch, the ones who had been there, al long as she had gave comforting squeezes back to her. He came back down the stairs, his hair combed back his cologne strongly clinging to him, his shirt a little wrinkled he was freshly shaved. As he walked they complimented him, and his chest puffed out with pride. What happened next Brie, for that is what he told her her name was, could not believe her eyes. He had failed to latch the door properly. She locked eyes with Nomi. Naomi nodded almost invisibly. "Go, send help as soon as you can," Naomi's voice croaked out. Brie inched towards the door, casting her eyes around the room. She would send help. Most times Cain did not return the early morning just before the sun filtered through the boarded up windows. She would wait for the cover of darkness. he made her rounds again. Doling out food, trying to make the others as comfortable as possible. Slowly the sun started to slip below the horizon. Then the stars started to prick the sky. Now it was time. The darkness would cover her. She slipped out the door, nodding a goodbye to Naomi. She ran in the direction she had heard cars passing. he fingered the thin gold chain locket Cain had allowed her to keep. Yes she would find help. Her 'sister's need her. She ran as fast as she could, her leg muscles started to burn, her bare feet were protesting the roughness of the ground. Her lungs and heart felt like they were going to burst out of her chest. But she doggedly ran on. Finally she touched the asphalt of the highway. It was time to wait. Hopefully help would not be long in coming..... "And finally the fifth car pulled up. It was Max. He asked if I was alright," Brie finished. Then she continued, "After that it goes blank, and I woke up in the hospital. "Oh you poor darling," Angelique gave her a soft brief hug. Brie tentatively returned it. Angelique stood and so did Brie. "I’ll not let anyone or anything hurt you," Angelique smiled encouragingly at her guest. Brie slowly smiled back. "Go to your room, lie down, I'll wake you when supper's ready," Angelique said, and she stood. Brie also stood, and slowly walked to the guest bedroom. Maybe having a nap would calm her nerves. Angelique meantime puttered about the house. She called Mario telling him most of the situation, but omitting the part of an intruder in the house. "No, no, don't cut your business trip short. I have Max," Angelique sighed. She checked the downstairs windows and the front door. Everything seemed secure. Besides, she had taken women’s self defense. She wasn't a black belt, but she was still well above white. Nothing to worry about. Max would be hanging around; he would help protect Brie. She felt that her son had a special chemistry with this wayward child. If she could do a little bit of matchmaking to help the process along more swiftly, maybe Max would finally settle down. Although, truth be told, Pauline did not help matters. She had him doubting himself. When it came to Max's biological mother, most times Angelique just grinned and bore it. The phone rang jarring her out of her reverie. It was Max. "Hi Honey," she tried to make her voice sound chipper. "Hi Mom, how are you and Brie getting along?" Max asked. Angelique blew out a small puff of breath before answering, "She's taking a nap, shopping really took it out of her poor girl." Max replied, "I"ll be back soon no worries." Then they said their goodbyes. She swiped her sweating hands on her pleated trousers.Max was even more worried. He hadn't been inside the house all day and had gone to the art store to refresh his supplies. Something was off. As soon as he stepped inside the house, he dropped his keys on the foyer side table. He set his purchases next to it and went to find his mother. He found her leafing through a magazine. But by her body language he could tell she was very wound up. "Mom?" He ventured, sitting down o n Mario's chair. "Mom are you alright?" Max asked. Angelique looked up and gave him a small smile and nod. A gesture that to him, meant that something serious had happened. "Tell me," he insisted. "It was nothing; poor dear got frightened while we were shopping," Angelique shrugged. Immediately on the defensive Max sprang up. "Is Brie okay?" He continued his questioning. She's fine, I think the noise and crowds frightened her," Angelique answered. "I think I'll go see how she is," Max said in a decisive tone. Angelique's smile became realer, "She's sleeping now." "I won't wake her up, I promise," Max stood and went towards Brie's room, formerly the guest bedroom. She was still sleeping. Except for the crease between her eyebrows, she looked almost peaceful. The longer he stood looking at her, and he was feeling even creepier by the minute; the more he noticed she looked less peaceful. Her whole body language shifted. She started tossing and turning. Sweat formed on her forehead and her eyes blinked very rapidly .Max stepped to just inside the door frame, so Brie would not be extra creeped out if she woke up from her, well he supposed it was anyway, nightmare. As expected, Brie jerked awake, sitting straight up gasping for breath. Her body trembled. Max fully stepped into the room. "Shh, I'm here, I'm right here," sat down on the bed, next to her; wrapping her in an embrace. "Max," She put her face in his chest and sobbed uncontrollably. "Hey, hey," Max patted her back quite awkwardly. "I have to get out of here. I can't let you and Angelique get hurt,I can't stay here anymore. I've got to burrow underground," Brie sobbed some more. Max was confused, "Mom said you got scared when you went shopping, tell me what happened." Brie tilted her head making eye contact with him. "It wasn't that. It wasn't like that at all. Your mom was wonderful," Brie started. "The what was it?" Max asked, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "It was when we got back...." Brie told him about the person that had literally run into her in the hall. "I recognized his eyes, that dark abyss...." Her voice trailed off again. "You mean the bastard was in here? We have this place safeguarded," Max mused, still holding Brie in his embrace. "Cain can get in anywhere he can do anything," Brie answered, drawing in a shuddering breath. "Sounds like a real smooth criminal," Max rejoined. "I don't know what that means, but yes he's a chameleon," Brie sniffed. "So he likes to play dress up," Max was still not convinced. "I don't remember much, I mean about when I was taken, but I do remember one thing. He was in disguise," Brie answered, drawing a little bit away from Max's chest to look him in the eyes. "Disguise like how? Fake mustache?" Max asked, slowly taking his arms from around her, and she made herself more comfortable. "No but he was dressed as an electrician. He bumped into me the same as when he bumped into me with your mother," Brie took another deep breath, and exhaled it back out in a sort of long body shuddering gasp. Clearly this was taking it all out of her again. "Don't talk anymore. Just take it easy," Max reached over and patted her shoulder. Brie leaned in a little and kissed his cheek. Max smiled a little, and he resisted the urge to kiss her back; how he wanted to do more than kiss her cheek but now was not the right time. Max knew he had to keep her safe. whoever this Cain was, he needed to be dealt with it first. Then and only then would she be safe. He wanted to keep her safe forever. "Hey as long as me and my mom are around nothing will get to you," Max promised. Brie smiled, "Thank you Max. but...." She shivered. "But what?" Max was curious, and knew he should keep her talking. "He's cold and ruthless, he can, will get me back," Brie hugged herself and started pacing. To Max she looked like a caged animal. Cain was definitely on his top ten most wanted list. He had infiltrated his sanctuary and put Brie and Angelique in danger. Mario was due back from his business trip at any moment, maybe they could amp up security and beat out this monster. "I'll let you be alone, I'm sorry this happened to you," Max spoke aloud. "It's not your fault," Brie smiled and put a blue headband in her hair and slipped a shirt on over her camisole. She walked over to Max, "I don't want to be alone, I don't know what I want after not being alone but I do feel safer with you. I mean with you and Angelique," Brie corrected herself at the end. Max nodded and stood up turning to go."I'm hungry though," Brie ventured. "On it; anything in particular?" Max asked. Brie shook her head. "Anything except for burgers. Nothing against burgers, but something different," Brie ventured again. "Ahh you want to expand your palate," Max figured out what she was trying to say. "Yes please surprise me," Brie answered "I'll be out in a few minutes," Brie spoke again. "Ok," Max kissed her cheek and walked downstairs. Brie smiled at his retreating form. She touched her cheek. It had been a pleasant feeling. Not like when Cain had forced himself on her. His kisses had been rough. She put on some black jeans and slipped on some moccasin slippers. They were soft and on her still healing feet felt good. They were lined with sheepskin, real sheepskin. She ambled down the stairs, delicious smells assaulted her nose. As she descended further at the foot of the stairs she was greeted by Angelique. "Hey there feeling any better?" her hostess asked. Brie nodded. "Good Max asked for pot roast with all the trimmings. I hope you don't mind," Angelique gave her a tentative look. Brie smiled warmly, "Sounds good to me." "Great, Gild our cook will tell us when it's ready," Angelique led her to back to the living room. "Mario called he's on his way home; you'll like him. He will definitely like you," Angelique chattered, her eyes lighting up as she talked about her husband. Brie smiled tentatively. "He seems like a nice man," Brie offered. He is; don't worry He is nothing like...." Angelique's voice trailed off. Brie smiled encouragingly again, "If you married him then he is a good man." Angelique smiled broadly the reached over and gave her a short hug. "The best," Max joined them his hair damp from a shower. He was wearing a powder blue V-neck T-shirt and form fitting black jeans, he was also barefoot. Before anything else could be said a man with an olive complexion tall about six-three and having a mop of curly black hair and, accentuating black eyes entered the room. He was wearing a bright smile and put his hands over Angelique's eyes. "Guess who's back?" He whispered into her ear. Angelique smiled broadly then pretended to guess, "Hmm it could be any number of my male suitors." "Ralph?" She guessed. A chuckle, then, "Guess again," Mario's smile got wider. "Stan?" She 'guessed' again. "Cold it starts with an 'M'," Mario kissed the nape of her neck. Angelique slapped his hands away. "I already know who it is. I've missed you," she turned to look at him and lightly kissed his lips. Mario put a hand to the side of her face blocking Max and Brie's view, then they kissed very deeply. A kiss of having missed their soulmate. Passionately. "I'm so glad you came home," Angelique said, and turned to look at Max and Brie still sharing the couch. "Mario I'd like you to meet Brie," Angelique spoke up again. Mario's face broke into a friendly smile, "Welcome to our home Brie." He extended a hand and strode over to the them. Standing, Brie also extended her own hand. They shook and Brie re-seated herself. Mario sniffed the air as he perched on the arm of his recliner. "Is that pot roast?" Mario asked. "Gilda's cooking," Max answered. "Of course! Gilda makes the best pot roast," Mario rejoined. "You're just in time for it, it should be almost ready," Angelique joined the conversation. "Good I'm hungry," Mario nodded. "Dinner is served," A musical voice chimed in. A matronly woman stepped from the shadows, and smiled at them all. "Well let's go. We don't want to keep Gilda waiting," Mario spoke again. They trooped single file into the dining room. After their meal the four gathered back in the living room. "So tell me about our new guest," Mario spoke first. "She's special," Max offered. "She needs help and our...." Angelique quieted down for a little while. Brie replied, "I'm just visiting is all." Mario nodded and yet didn't utter a word. "Can I have one explanation? I mean I'm only getting part of the story. Back to the beginning please," Mario interjected. "It was...." Max started. "It was me," Brie piped up. Mario looked inquiringly at her. "Let me start?" Brie asked. "Of course," Mario leaned forward from his place in the chair. "Go on," Mario encouraged.

Chapter 11:

"It started with a cabin in the woods," Brie started looking in Mario's direction, omitting the part where Cain had intruded in the home. After her explanation Mario leaned back and folded his arms behind his head, he nodded and 'mm-hmmed'. He sat for a moment thinking and processing. He stood, "You'll be safe here Brie, I'll see to that tomorrow. I'll make sure there's extra security, and I'll call in some favors." "I'm beat, this business trip took a lot out of me. Shall we? Mario reached out a hand towards Angelique, who was sitting on the arm of the couch now. She took the proffered hand, and the two went upstairs, leaving Brie and Max alone. "Your father was very calm," Brie started. "Nothing fazes him, not even when I started acting out getting arrested. He's the one who got me into painting. He said that I could draw...." Max's voice trailed off. "They're good people," Brie offered. "Better people than I've ever deserved," Max added, nodding. Brie yawned. "Let's get you settled in, you're beat," Max spoke first this time. He stood offering his outstretched hand. "I don't want to be alone tonight. I can't face the nightmares," Brie stood and Max put an arm around her shoulders. "Come on then," Max led the way to his room, guiding her along. When they reach his room, Max let her enter first, and and walked in behind her. She tentatively pulled the covers back on the bed then stood next to the bed waiting for the next thing to happen. Max stood too, also waiting . "I won't hurt you Brie, I promise. Hell I'll sleep on the floor, you can have the bed," Max proposed. Brie sighed and shook her head. "I know you won't hurt me, but I can't let you sleep on the floor. It wouldn't be right. This is your room. I'm only a..." She paused, as he cut her off. He gently kissed her on the mouth, the kiss was soft yet full of passion. Brie closed her eyes savoring the kiss, loving the ripples of excitement roil through her belly. Goosebumps spread across her arms and legs, chills crept down her spine. Delicious feelings. Beautiful feelings. She could stay in this position forever. Max slowly broke the kiss and he looked deep into her eyes. He saw them brighten and he smiled, as her lips twitched into a smile of their own. Brie, his Brie was happy. He kissed her again, this time it was a quicker kiss. "Get in bed, I'll make sure you're safe," Max promised. "I believe you," Brie answered and proceeded to get in the bed. Max climbed in after her. She instinctively curled up against him, he put his arm around her drawing her against his whole body. She sighed, her eyes closed. He wasn't coming for her tonight. Tonight , she was safe. Max kissed the top of her head and settled down to sleep. 3 A.M. It was at least that probably earlier, the bed was lighter. Max felt around, but her side was empty. He bolted upright, he swung his feet over the side of the bed, and went looking. She could not have gotten far. There was only so much space she could hide in. But he knew how to run and hide pretty well. She could be anywhere in the house. He jogged down the hallway, searching through the rooms on the second floor. His floor. He ascended to the third floor. Then he banged open doors, none of them containing Brie. Angelique and Mario poked their heads out of the last room down the third floor's elongated hallway. "What's going on?" Angelique asked. "It's Brie. She's gone," Max was so frantic he was breathing hard, and there was sweat dripping off his brows. "She can't have gone too far," Mario's soothing voice momentarily calmed Max down. "Yeah but she's not on the second floor, and she's not up here," Max was leaning against the wall trying to steady himself. "We'll help you find her," Mario assured him walking down the hall and resting a hand on his panicked son's shoulder. "Come on then! " Angelique broke in, her terry cloth robe tied tightly around her middle. Her curlers flying as she raced two flights of stairs looking for a scared refugee, two men running behind her. Trying to keep up with her frenzied pace. Once she reached the first floor landing, something covered her mouth. She was dragged away to a nearby waiting car. Sitting beside her with a tear stained face was Brie. "I knew it! He's got you too. I never thought...." Brie's voice trailed off as footsteps sounded close. The driver's door swung open and a head with stringy greasy hair, soulless black eyes looked inside. He smiled, and Angelique was surprised to see he had perfect white teeth. "Nice pearlies," Angelique attempted polite conversation and was rewarded with a painful blow to the face. Her nose was cracked and started dripping blood. He tied her hands together, before she could wipe the blood droplets away. "Sit still Bitches," came the sharp order, he slammed the door then,getting to the driver’s seat and he sped off. Terrified, Angelique glanced over at Brie. Brie's head was down, and her whole body was shaking. "I'm sorry Angelique," Brie whispered. "brie we'll get out of this, I'll be damned if he gets away with this," Angelique determinedly answered. "Shut up back there," His sharp voice cut into their conversation. Angelique sighed and looked out the window.

"Dad do you hear anything?" Max asked, he was ahead of Mario almost to the landing on the first floor. "No I don't, maybe they're in the kitchen," Mario suggested. "I would've smelled coffee," Max insisted, reaching the landing and heading for the kitchen anyway. Mario turned tlight on right before going to the kitchen himself. On a table he found a folded piece of paper, "Max come on out I found something. Max came out of the kitchen and Mario gingerly picked up the yellow stationery. Max hurried over to his dad, "What do you have?" He stood beside his father, reading over his dad's shoulder. Ma frowned as he read it. "He took them both?" Max couldn't believe what he'd just read. He reached for the cordless but Mario stayed his hand. "It states if we involve the police he'll kill them both," Mario's brows creased. Max swore under his breath. "We'll think of something," Mario assured him. "Mom's with that lunatic, so's Brie," Max protested. "You think I missed that part?" Mario's mouth pursed into a straight line. "You have contacts in the police force don't you?" Max urged. "I have a private detectives on call," Mario replied. "Well what are you waiting for?" Max' voice rose slightly. "I'm on it," Mario went to his room, and rummaged around for his cellphone. He raced down the stairs and went to sit in his recliner. Taking a deep breath he punched a few buttons, waiting for an answer. Too bad Mario was not a smoker, he would have been chain smoking right about then. FInally, the line connected, "Floyd I have a favor to ask. It's important, yes I know what time it is. Amgelique's been kidnapped." And so began the detective's effusive apology, which Mario cut off, "Of course we're worried. Come over as fast as you can." Mario hung up the phone and leaned into the chai. CLosing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. Poor Angelique what must she be going through? As soon as Floyd showed up they could hatch a plan. Too bad teleportation hadn't been invented. They wouldn't have to sit with their thumbs up their asses. Max started the coffee. At least that he could do. Hi mother, Brie, this was killing him. He felt a vibration in his pajama pants pocket. Frowning he pulled it out and pushed the 'Answer' button. "Did you like my little surprise? I must say getting your mother was a bonus. Angelique is a firecracker. But I'll tame the spitfire out of her. Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to my duties...." The line went dead. Max grunted he hurriedly exited the kitchen.

Chapter 12:

The cabin was as Brie had described it. the smell was overpowering. Yanking them both by their bondages, Cain threw Brie into her cage and locked it up tight. "No more getting out for you," Cain laughed maliciously then turned his attention to Angelique. "I need to name you. You're one of mine. A most beautiful specimen. Much like a China doll...." He brushed a finger down her cheek, and she turned her face from him. "My husband and son are coming for you. You're dead meat Cain," Angelique dared. Cain backhanded her causing her head to wobble. "Never use my name. Speak only when spoken to," Grabbing her wrists he dragged her to wall lined with shackles, taking off the zip ties, he put them on even on her legs. They hurt like hell. "Don't move China-Doll," he walked away chuckling under his breath. He approached Brie's cage and put a finger next to the latch, "Now now My Pretty. Don't fret, you're home again. But you were a bad girl. So now strip and hand me your clothes." As instructed, Brid did as she was told "There's my girl no more dressing like a slut. I'll be back with appropriate clothes," he said and walked away. Folding her body against a corner of the cage she put her hands over her face. Angelique closed her eyes. Mario and Max would track this psychotic loony down. Help would come. She closed her mind off from the present circumstances. With the right attitude she could survive this. Just as she was managing to calm and fall asleep Cain appeared next to her. "As for you China-Doll you will get all you have on, off, and I will dress you appropriately," He maliciously whispered in her ear. "No you won't," Angelique said, though she still had her eyes closed. Angelique's head wobbled once again, as he backhanded her a second time. "Speak only when i feel you have something important to say," He ordered. "You will be sorry you ever touched me," Angelique said to Cain's retreating back.

Floyd arrived and Mario led him into the living room. Max was pacing straight line in from of the fireplace. "Floyd here's the note...." Mario's voice trailed as he handed the piece of paper over. Floyd sat down and perused the noted, "I recognize the handwriting, several notes accompanied by photos of women who were reported missing the very next day appeared at the department." "We know his name, round up the damned police force!" Max spoke up still pacing and every once in a while running a hand through his hair. "It takes time to organize the force, besides there's not enough man power, " Floyd countered. "I'll go myself," Max blurted out. "You will not Son," Mario frowned over at him. "Watch me," Max returned and stopped pacing for a moment. "Floyd get on top of it, money is no object," Mario said and strode over to his friend shaking his hand. "I understand Mario and I'll see what I can do," Floyd tried to hand the note back but Mario shook his head, "You keep it detective." "Thank you Mario I'll let you know," Mario walked Floyd to the door and returned to the living room. Max had finished pacing and was frowning into the lit up display of his cellphone. The numb came back as disconnected. "Number unknown, please make sure the number you have dialed is correct. Please try again," the automated voice said over the loudspeaker. Grunting Max punched the zero button hoping he would get a human voice that would help him out. But it just went back to automated voices. Max stuffed the phone back into his pants' pocket. Mario meantime, retreated upstairs and shut the bedroom door behind him. He sat on the bed and took a picture off the bedside table. It was the day they had officially adopted Max. He, Max was already a head taller than Angelique at thirteen. Both of them had an arm around his shoulders and all three were smiling into the camera. Besides getting married, adoption day had been the best day of his life. "We'll get you back nge, I promise with every breath, we will get that bastard," Mario re-set the picture and lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling his arms behind his head. "We're coming don't give up hope, I promise to protect you," Mario's eyes closed falling into an uneasy sleep. Ange was his life and he would get her and hold onto her, never letting her go again. He would not let her get in anymore dangerous situations ever again.

Angelique could not sleep. The sobbing was overwhelming as soon as Cain had retired, she glanced over at Brie's cage. She was now redressed in a long sleeved white dress and she was still huddled against the cage. Her arms were criss-crossed in front her. Her feet were shackled. "Brie...." Angelique was just about to speak again. "Don't talk, he'll hear us. We'll get punished," Brie briefly answered. Angelique's eye still throbbed from when she had been hit for a slight infraction before Cain had left them alone finally. Ant hat name, "China-Doll", it was degrading. Mario was tender and loving with his endearments, 'Angel', 'Ange', Sweetheart, Honey.... were just a few he used. She missed him so. They had tried to fill their house with children. When Max had entered their lives at a gangly thirteen, skittish and guarded about everything and everyone, it had been Mario's unwavering patience and she was quite sure her guidance that had seen him through his awkward phases. He couldn't see it but, Max was an amazing person, as soon as he realized the more he'd become She drifted off into an uneasy sleep, just as the crickets stopped chirping and the sun peeked over the hills. Rough hands pushed her shoulders until she woke up. Angelique blinked momentarily forgetting where she was. Then it all came back as warm rancid breath blew into her ear. "Wake up China-Doll, time for us to play," his voice grated on her every last nerve. "Get off of me, I swear once I get loose I will scratch your eyes out," She answered. "Then you get the special treatment," he answered, jerking her leg and arm chains. He'd chained her up before going to bed. She was then standing eye-to-eye well, eye-to-chest, but Cain made her look him in the eyes, "You will obey me China-Doll." "My name is Angelique, not China-Doll, not any other name," Angelique retorted. Unlocking her shackles he produced zip-ties again and tied her up. "To the basement with you, slut," he growled out. "I will enjoy scratching your eyes out and I will laugh over your still smoldering corpse," Angelique answered in kind. "Such talk from a beautiful flower," Cain responded. "Jerk," Angelique hissed out. Roughly he pushed her down some disgusting smelling stairs, "Make yourself comfortable China-Doll." She looked around the moldy basement. The rusted pipes were dripping brown water. The basement floor was littered with newspapers and rats skittered behind towering wet cardboard boxes. In the middle of the mess, there was a tall wooden chair. It buzzed and crackled with an electronic current. "Sit China-Doll," he pushed her towards the chair. There were built in hand shackles and a metal head plate hung overhead. "I said sit down! My word is Law!" He pushed her again. Deftly she turned to face him, lifted her foot and kicked in the groin. As expected he collapsed. Seizing her chance Angelique found a rusty nail, cut herself free, delivered two more kicks one to the chest, the other back to the sensitive area and she searched his pockets. She found the keys dangling from his hip in a giant round key ring. "If you move I will punch you into next Thursday. Don't test me!" Angelique warned the still downed man. She took the keys and headed back up the stairs. When she got to the top she found the door locked. Not bothering to look for the key and wasting more time, she put her training in action and kicked the door wide open.

While Angelique was fighting for her life, Max was putting his computer skills to good use. He put the number in a GPS App and it started mapping out the area. Suddenly he lout an exclamation of triumph. "I've got the coordinates," he said to no-one in particular. He printed them out and went to confer with Mario and Floyd. "Dad!" he shouted. Mario and looked up, his eyes were red rimmed. He had given up sleeping for the time being. Neither one of them could. "You look like crap," Mario tried to put some levity into the situation. "Thanks," Max replied with a half-grin. Max made two cups of coffee for them, and placed the paper on the table. "I found them, now we can go get them," Max started. Floyd held up a hand, "Slow down there Tiger. I have to convince the 'powers that be' to give me some men and we have to get there unobserved." "Like hell we're negotiating! If you don't stop sitting on your ass and do something then I will!" Max stood taking the papers with him. He turned to look at Mario and spoke again, "Can you believe this jerk?" Mario narrowed his eyes, "That 'jerk' is my friend, I know you're worried and anxious to do something, but this requires patience...." He stopped talking as Max turned on his heel and stormed off. If they thought he was going to sit there and do nothing, they had another think coming. He gathered his keys and went down the back staircase. He had also gathered the papers and put them in his pocket. He climbed inside the car and he peeled out of the driveway. He knew that whatever he found would be a piece of cake, if Brie and Angelique were still alive. He would bash in the psychopath's head and he would enjoy doing it. He white-knuckled the steering wheel, his foot pressed the gas pedal all the way down to the floor. His cell rang but he took his gaze from the road for a second and turned it off. No distractions. Everyone be damned. As he turned back on the highway he had been traveling when Brie had appeared out of nowhere, he tried to see any sort of gap between the trees. He slowed down and inched along.

Angelique went to the cage. Brie was asleep hugging herself to keep warm. "Brie," Angelique whispered. Brike awoke with a start, "Angelique?" "Yes, I've got the keys," Angelique got to work on the lock. "How did you escape The Basement?" Brie was curious now and unfolded herself from against the cage. "Mario suggested I take women’s defense class one year. I did, I loved it, went back the next year and excelled. Now once the cage is opened, I'll unlock you. Then we'll free the others," Angelique devised a plan. But the lock proved heavy, even after it clicked to the unlocked position. "Cain put a special lock on the cage, he told me it was special like I was special," Brie flatly spoke. "Yes? Well Cain's going to pay for all this, I will make sure of that," Angelique said through gritted teeth. Finally it popped off, Angelique climbed inside and took a hold of Brie's leg shackles. They clinked and fell then Brie held out her arms. Before Angelique could unlock Brie's upper irons, an unearthly roar nearly shattered their ears. "You Bitch! First you defile my temple, striking me down like a man; then you dare steal from me?" Cain was upon them again. Delivering a punch to the back of her head, he knocked her out, she lurched forward at Brie's feet. "That'll teach her," he grunted. Turning her over, he grabbed a pair of shackles and positioned her near the slatted door, then he exited carrying some chain with him. Then he secured the door leaving Angelique on a very short leash. She was able to reach the bucket inside but little else. Brie gasped. Now what? Where was a hero when they needed one? If Max was here Cain would not stand a chance. Cain put a stool and a red milk crate in front of the cage. He took out his pipe and started smoking it. The smoke roused Angelique but she could only lean because of the improvised chain leash. "Don't struggle it will only get tighter; I suggest that you calm down," Cain said, giving her a toothy grin. Angelique hissed at him, but the clinking lessened. "Good girl," Cain shifted and made himself cozy; still smoking on the pipe. With a pleased smile on his lips he tamped the pipe out and leaned his head on the back other chair, he was asleep in seconds....

Chapter 14:

Max was going so slow looking for a gap in the trees that he swore heavily when a police cruiser pulled up behind him. "Pull over," the police officer commanded. Max hook his head and continued slowly driving. "Pull. Over. Now!" The bullhorn was out. But Max was determined. Finding a crevice, he slid his car through. The forest floor was rough, sticks and branches were in the way and ge dodged the biggest ones blocking his way. All of a sudden a tire blew. Max cursed under his breath. But he kept going. Rescuing Angelique and Brie was on his top ten list. Just then he heard gunfire. They were trying to shoot out the rest of his tires. So be it, he'd go on foot. The car spun and the back end got crunched into a tree trunk. Well that was just fine with him. Tucking and rolling he opened the door and fell out of the now smoking car. The car sputtered, stalled, and was stood in the middle of the woods. Ducking behind some trees, and then he was in the midst of some bushes. Keeping an ear out for approaching footsteps he made his way to a clearing. He found a wrecked split level cabin. He heard a man yelling and he hunched over and stood against the wall. He heard what sounded like female whimpering. Brie was in there, so was his mom. He needed to get in there. But how? The direct approach would not work. Maybe if he pretended to be a lost hiker? He drew a deep breath and made his way to the front door. If need be he could always fight his way back out. He had to make sure he didn't show Brie or Angelique that he recognized them. Taking a deep breath he approached the door and knocked. He looked around taking in the scenery, noting there weren't any cameras. Apparently the asshat was definitely not that paranoid. Max knocked again. He saw a pair of scared eyes peek out the window and then quickly disappear.Max paced then finally the door opened a crack and a head peeked around the side of the door. "Yes?" She could not have been more than fourteen years old. "I'm not supposed to talk, I'll get into trouble," she timidly said. Max noted that she was on the small side for her age. "I'm lost. Can I use your phone?" he asked, trying not to scare her even more. She shook her head and started to close the door. Max stuck his foot in between the crack of the door and the inside corner. "I won't be long," He soothed. "N-No I can't," she said in a tearful tone. "Please?" Max asked. "N-No! I c-can't....Please go," the girl said again. "Kadira? Who's at the door?" A male's voice rang out. "N-Nobody," her voice quavered, as she continued trying to shut the door. Suddenly he was right behind her. He nudged the girl out of the way. "I'll take care it, just step away from the door sweetheart," he said, as he came face-to-face with Max. Kidra did as she was told and Max was finally in front of the man who'd taken his mother and Brie. The man had combed back hair and was dressed in a wrinkled plaid shirt. "May I help you?" His smile was friendly but his eyes glittered maliciously. "Yeah,' Hi. I was out hiking, lost my pack and cell and I was wondering if I could come and use your phone," Max hoped he sounded confident. "I don't think so. There's a ranger's cabin up a mile and a half up the road. I need to take care of my daughter, Kadira gets quite emotional when her mother goes out of town," the man returned. Max nodded but felt like punching the smirk off the self righteous S.O.B's mug. Yes, thank you," Max turned as if to go, but before Cain could shut the door Max turned back to face him and got him in a strangle-hold. Cain laughed and with both hands he lifted Max's hands off of his neck. "You think you can win Max?" Cain spoke, laughing still. "How the Hell do you know my name?" Max gritted out. "You dressed my prized possession like a slut," Cain ignored the direct question. Max raised a fist but Cain closed a free hand over it. "Uh-uh," Cain tsked and smiled again. He then went back inside the cabin leaving Max to himself. Max cursed under his breath. Since he could not charm his way in, he decided to back track. He pulled out his cell and dialed Mario's number. Mario answered on the first ring, "Where the hell are you? What the hell were you thinking?! Did you see your mother?" "Dad, Dad, DAD!! Stop! No I didn't see her or Brie. And I was thinking I could at least get inside the door. I wrecked the car," Max replied, hoping to calm Mario down. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "I know you did. Glad you're not hurt. Floyd told me the officer who tried to get you to pull over was impressed with your driving skills," Mario answered, and elicited a slight laugh to break the tension. Max added his own laugh to the mix and answered, "Thanks, headed home now. I'm hoofing it." "I know where you are via GPS on your phone. Meet me on the blacktop," Mario advised. Max said he would and made his way back to the highway. Max picked his way through the dense woods, he passed the still smoking car, ruefully patting the hood. He walked farther and found the gap in the trees. He found a tree stump and sat down. Waiting. He watched as the cars sped by until a black Rolls pulled up beside him. The tinted window came down and Mario stuck his head out, "Need a ride Son?" WIthout saying another word, Max hopped off the stump and got inside the car. Mario sped home and grilled his son on the way, "Who else was in there?" Mario was hard pressed to find out. "I only saw a girl who looked to be fourteen, and then I saw him," Max rejoined. "What did he look like?" Mario asked, his brows furrowing in concentration. Max described Cain to the best of his ability. "What your poor mother must be going through," Mario worried as he white knuckled the steering wheel all the way back to The Villa. "What's Floyd come up with?" Max tried to ease his father's mind a little. "Floyd is trying to round up a few people from the precinct, and convince 'The Powers That Be' that this is a worthy cause," Max sighed and hit a hand on the wheel, causing them to swerve a little. "Maybe I should drive," Max offered putting a hand on the steering wheel after Mario's hand had settled to the bottom. "I've got it," Mario swatted his hand away. "Okay, I was just thinking that maybe you could have a break from driving is all," Max muttered, as he sat back against the seat and crossed his arms. They finally made it back to the VIlla and both sloped into the house. They were quiet and reserved, they split up going to different floors of the hous. Max cracked his knuckles in a menacing way. Not only would Cain meet a timely end, but he'd do his damndest to rescue everyone in that godforsaken hell hole!!

Chapter 15:

Angelique glared, though her body was wracked with pain. After the visitor had gone, Cain had gotten even more volatile. The cabin was a shambles, furniture was broken, the shackles were re-tightened and he had come for her first. Brie had been next. She was in worse shape. He had added more cages, and put three or more people in an 8x9 space. This mad man would get what was coming to him. Max and Mario would not just stand by while this happened. Kadira's cage had been hung in the rafters, her clothes torn to shreds, her face in tatters. Her crying had yet to cease. Once everything was over, and if Kadira did not have any family, she would ask Mario if they could adopt. "Shut up you insolent Girl!!!! I told you not to open the door," an angry voice from the foot of Brie and Angelique's cage bellowed. "I-I told y-you...." She began with a sniffle. "Shut up you little bitch!" He sprang from his perch and circled beneath her menacingly. "Say one more thing and it's The Basement for you," He threatened. Kadira sniffled and closed her eyes. "Learn your lesson," he grunted and returned his chair and ottoman. Soon he was snoring loudly. Angelique started a low conversation with her cage mate, "If I can get free again, and make it out the front door I'll try and get home. Then we can get everyone else out." "You tried escaping look what happened," Brie gestured around the cage. "I know but this time it will be different," Angelique insisted. "No I won't let you risk it," Brie hissed. "Well I can't just sit here and do nothing," Angelique retorted, frowning. "You can and will. Now see if you can untie me," Brie insisted. "Are you sure?" Angelique asked. "No, but if nobody does anything we won't be able to live with ourselves," Brie answered. Angelique consented by only nodding her head. Getting as close as she could to the cage's door, Angelique put her hand through the thin gold painted bars. "No his leg," Brie watched in horrid fascination. "Shh let me work," Angelique advised. She carefully slid her fingers up his jeans pant leg, until she found the keys in his hip pocket. She, carefully, slowly extracted the key ring and proceeded to unlock their shackles. Brie quietly unlocked the cage and returned the keys. She tiptoed to the front door. If she could only make it back to Max and Mario, then they could help save Angelique and the others. Just as her hand touched the doorknob, Kadira shrieked a warning and woke Cain. Cain snorted awake, rubbing his eyes. He caught sight of a person's heel as the door closed a thud. He looked at the cage and found Angelique smirking down at him. "You fuckin' cunt," he groused. Angelique's smile grew wider, "You're out of luck Cain." Angelique turned her back to him infuriating him all the more. "How dare you ignore me!" Cain bellowed. Angelique folded herself into another corner and pretended to sleep, still ignoring her captor. Brie stood on the side of the road again, hoping it would not take so long to be rescued this time. Fortunately for her, the first car that arrived had a sympathetic looking elderly lady in it driving a big care. "Are you alright my dear?" She asked, opening the passenger side door. "I need the nearest payphone, it's urgent," Brie replied , getting inside the car. "There's one few miles up the road," the woman answered. once Brie was in the two sped away. "What's your name?" The woman asked. "Brie," Brie answered looking out the window at the passing scenery. "I'm Miria," the woman said by way of greeting. "Nice to meet you Miria," Brie sincerely said. They lapsed into silence the rest of the way. Miria dropped her off at a 7-11 "Here," Miria handed her a few crumpled bills. "No....I couldn't possibly," Brie replied, holding her hands in front her in a 'surrender' gesture. But her protests were cut short, as the elder woman shoved coins into her other hand. "For the phone," Miria added as she reluctantly drove away. Stumbling inside the store, she asked where the payphone was, the clerk giving her worried looks the whole time. She made her phone call, Max was jolted out of an uneasy nap as he reached for his phone. "H'llo?" Soon he was very much awake as a familiar voice crackled over the wire. "Max?" She was relieved to hear his voice. "Brie?" He asked in return. "I'm at a gas station," she got out in a shaky breath. She gave him directions and he got dressed and hopped into his car. He hurriedly left a note for Mario. Fortunately the gas station was only a couple of miles away. He was so relieved to hear her voice. When he got there she was waiting for him in the front. She was dressed in a similar dress he had see her in when they had first met. He parked and jogged over to her, gathering her in his arms. She buried her face into his chest. She hung on to his middle. He kissed the top of her head. "Let's get you home," he suggested. "I'd like that," Brie's demeanor significantly brightened. He helped her inside the car. "Angelique was so brave," Brie began and told him a little of their captivity. Max bit his lower lip and listened as she continued, then finished. Her eyes grew heavy and she was sound asleep in minutes. Max pulled into the driveway, Mario was anxiously pacing back and forth as his son pulled inside and pushed a button shutting the door. Brie was carried to his bedroom. He was not letting her out of his sight any time . Mario met Max in the living room, "Did she say anything?" Max nodded and relayed what Brie had told him. "I'm glad she took my advice and got defense classes," Mario nodded, though his face was solemn. Mario was smiling for a minute, then sobered, "She's a clever woman your mother." "I know," Max put a hand on Mario's shoulder patting it. "I'm going out to paint," Max ambled outside, leaving Mario with his thoughts. It was torture not being able to get to her. At least one of them was out again. He had to try for two. She needed him, he needed her.

A couple hours later, at Max's bedroom....

Max stood in the doorway. He tried not be stalkerish, but somehow watching her seemed right at the moment. He went to the guest room to get her an outfit. He found a plush robe hanging on the doorknob. He decided that would do. Taking it off the hook he stealthily made his way back to his room. She was wide awake when Max got back, he defensively held the robe in front of him., "I brought you a present." Brie smiled and patted the bed invitingly. He brought the robe, and hung it on one of the four posts. "How are you feeling?" He got the conversation started. "Like I got beaten a few times," She put a hand on her forehead. "You'll feel better soon," he tried to reassure her. "Not until Angelique comes home," she countered. Max nodded. Shakily she stood, holding onto Max's shoulder for support. "I really need a shower, thank you Max, for everything," Brie started. "No problem Brie," he lamely answered. She lightly kissed his cheek and to his adjoining bathroom. He lay on the still made side of the bed, and listened to the shower running. He knew he liked her but he also knew that she had to know about her family, and her real name being Isobel. But not now. First they needed to get his family back together, in one piece. The shower stopped and she re-emerged Wearing the robe. I nearly swallowed her, but she looked a little better. She sat on the bed where she had been sleeping and lay down beside him. He put an arm around her shoulders. She snuggled against him, and closed her eyes. He held her closed and closed his eyes as well.

The woods:

Cain was beyond furious. Whoever had been at the front door would be back with reinforcements. He needed to be ready. He would kill them before they could infiltrate his sanctuary. He went upstairs and began to tear open drawers. There was a loud clattering as he took out bullets and opened false walls to take out some guns. Semi-Automatics, machine guns, a sniper rifle or two. He loaded up the empty ones, cleaned out the others, loaded them and began setting them up on all four corners on the outside. He set up a tripod then he started booby trapping the outskirts of the clearing. He added some booby traps inside the cabin as well. He seemed to forget the women inside. He was working feverishly to keep his kingdom from falling apart.

The Villa:

Floyd came back with some good news, he had gotten some policemen and women together and of course the S.W.A.T Team. "What if he's set traps?" Max asked as he was getting geared up. "They're trained to see traps and avoid them, he might be chicke ass crazy but we'll get him," Floyd answered. Mario nodded, shooting a side glance at Max who imperceptibly nodded back. Angelique was Mario's top priority. The sooner she was rescued the better they would all be. Mario hoped that Angelique was still whole in body, mind and soul. If not he would give her all the support she needed. Max went to find Brie, she needed some that only he could provide. He went to her room and found her with her hands folded in her lap and her head was bowed. He sat next to her and she tearfully looked up at him, "This is all my fault, if it wasn't for me...." She gave a watery shuddery sigh, and looked back down. "Hey, you stop that. My mom's a very strong person inside and out," Max countered. "She was right behind me, and he grabbed me first...." She could not continue. His heart ached for them both, but Brie needed him now. "C'mon, I want you to take a walk with me," Max stood and proffered his hand. But instead of taking it, she shrunk away. "I won't hurt you," he insisted. He had bent down and whispered in her ear. He gently grasped her hand and made her stand up. "We're getting out of here," he spoke again. "Where are we going?" Brie wanted to know. "Out, we are going out," Max kept holding her hand and led her out of the room. "If we are going to a museum or a burger place, I will kick you so hard...." Brie answered. Max grinned at her and led her out of the house. Mario found Max' note on the kitchen counter, he smiled and he went to get briefed by Floyd and his team. There was not much instruction besides stay as much out of the way as possible, stay behind S.W.A.T. and be quiet, even if he had a difference of opinion.

Meantime....

Max and Brie arrived at an exclusive art studio. Max guided her inside, placing his hand on the small of her back and leading her all the way inside the building. "What is going on Max?" Brie was intrigued and leary at the same time. "I know I kinda weirded you out about being painted just by yourself so what if I got a portrait done with you. You know together?" Max was curious about her reaction. Painting always made him feel better and he and Brie needed this distraction. Brie smiled a little, "I still don't see what you see. "Give it time and you will," Max promised as they stepped up to the sign in cubicle. He signed their names and both were led to the artists' area covered in drop cloths and paint splattered from floor to ceiling. The artist introduced herself, shaking each of their proffered hands. "Hi, I'm Tara, I was you two wanted your portrait done. So just one?" Tara tried to get the details right. Max nodded and then replied, "First paint me, then we'll take a portrait of us, together." "Of course," Tara set to work. She pointed to a generic looking metal stool, draped in a paint splattered drop cloth. "Just tell me what sort of background you'd like and I'll paint it in too," Tara suggested. Max again nodded and sat down, while Brie hovered uncertainly nearby. "Sounds good to me," Max spoke up. Tara selected an easel and various paints Brie went to look around behind the young artist. "These pieces are marvelous," Brie started. "Thank you," A lot of my clientele pay top dollar for only the very best," Tara answered without looking behind her. "You're very good," Brie answered. "Thank you," Tara replied settling onto a padded stool and setting the easel up and putting the canvas on it. She added jars of water to a shelf beside the easel. Brie found an art book and flipped through it. The colors were quite vivid, the pictures almost 3-D. She was intrigued. Cain had never let them read, or look at television. They had been completely cut off from the world. Shuddering, she focused back on her surroundings. He looked so dashing and he held himself at such a tall posture she felt as if she were looking at someone from a bygone era. She exhaled a breath that she hadn't known she was holding. He sat so still he could have been carved from stone. Before she knew it, he was standing up striding over to her and taking her hand in his. "Are you ready?" He whispered in her ear. She slowly nodded and he led her back over to Tara's main floor space. Brie asked, "She's finished with your painting already?" Max shook his head, "She'll get the basic outline but a painting can take up to several months up to a couple of years." He gently massaged circles into the back of the hand he was holding with his thumb. "Don't worry so much Brie," he whispered into her ear. "As long as you're beside me I'm alright," SHe whispered back. He chuckled, she primly smiled back. Tara situated them on a plywood bench covered in velvet and had put on two fluffed red velvet pillows. She was nestled against him, he held her close, positioning his arm over the back of the bench and over her petite shoulders. She felt safe and warm.

The Woods:

Nibbling on her already small portion of runny slimy gruel, and almost moldy bread, Angelique eyed the newly strong cage. It had planks covering the bars, planks upon planks and a tiny opening where food was roughly shoved through. Roughly if it was Cain. When he rubled off in his rusty bucket of bolts, kinder hands helped ease her troubles, she and Naomi had become good friends. Angelique promised that once this ordeal was over, that she and Mario her out in any way they could. Nomi had smiled wanly and simply nodded but her hopes had been dashed so many times, that she was beginning to believe the only real life was in the four walls of the cabin and the daily torture. Angelique had not been out of the cage since she had helped Brie escape. Had it been hours? Days? TIme was meaningless. Her watch had been taken along with her clothes. Nothing but a transparentshapeless white sleeveless shift was given to her. It had questionable spots on it. Some red, some purple, the smell alone put her off. Didn't he know how to do laundry? Maybe it was just the mundaneness of the crawling hours or perhaps it might have been caused by the fact that she might be cracking up. She started laughing hysterically. Nothing could explain why but she just kept laughing as a ludicrous thought crossed her mind. Myabe she could offer to do his laundry? Maybe she would be allowed to do chores? Her thoughts were interrupted by a harsh banging on the cage. "Wake up China-Doll, I have a present for you," his grating voice was back. She rolled her eyes at the name given to her. "I am awake," She responded. "You're awake and what's the missing part China-Doll?" "Sir and Master," again she rolled her eyes. "I'm opening the cage now, move away from the opening," he instructed. Angelique did as she was told. Reminding herself that this was only temporary. Help would be coming very soon. Mario would be her knight in shining armor. He would hold her and kiss her. She would heal in his arms.

Chapter 16:

Mario was in the middle of a group of police officers and a large S.W.A.T. team. Floyd had sheaf of papers and was handing them over to a burly man calling himself Captain Brown. before anything could be said or done, the front door opened and a more relaxed Brie and Max entered. Brie inhaled sharply and grasped Max's hand tighter. Max moved closer to her side so she would not spook further. "Dad, Floyd," Max began. Mario excused himself from the others, joining Brie and Max and leading them to the breakfast nook. "Well?" Max leaned across the table, his face taking on a worried look. Mario sighed and handed Max a piece of paper. Both he and Brie pored over it. "These are the coordinates I found on my computer," Max squeezed Brie's knee in reassurance. "That means you can rescue Angelique and the others," Brie piped up. "Exactly. Floyd and his crew are strategizing then with them back me up, I'll make the first move," Mario put in. "Not without me," Max insisted. "And what about Brie? Are you going to leave her alone and defenseless? No, you're staying here," Mario tersely replied. "I'm going too, I know the lay out," Brie started. Max shook his head and Mario stood.. "Angie would kill me if something happened to you," Mario went back to the living room. Max took Brie's hand again and also led her to the living room, joining Mario, Floyd and the others. Floyd gave Brie a cursory once over then went back to conferring with the S. W.A.T. Team. The officers were organizing all of them trooping to their cars Mario went to his own car, followed by Max and Brie. Max opened the passenger's side door of his car, and helped Brie inside. "You know we don't have go," Max started. Brie shook her head and spoke, "You can't be serious; you would hate yourself if you stayed behind. You know that." "You're absolutely right. The sooner this is over, the happier we'll all be," Max added. "I just hope Angelique, Naomi and the others...." Brie's voice trailed off and she turned to stare out of the window. "Everything's going to be A-OK very soon again," Max said in a hopefully soothing voice. "I hope so," Brie murmured. They followed the cavalcade to the woods, the police and S.W.A.T. people spread out, walkie-talkies statically came to life, voices muffled. Mario headed forward. He was determined to face the psychopath head on. Angelique was the Top Priority. Hopefully she was still alive. If that bastard harmed her in any way, the guy would be lit up like the 4th of July. There it was. He could see the gap between the trees, bigger now since he'd totaled his first car crashing through them. He idled the car, finally shutting it off completely. Gingerly he stepped out, Mario following suit and Max opened the passenger's side for Brie. Taking Max's hand and a deep breath, Brie stepped out of the vehicle. She shuddered, she was not looking forward to this. Cain would launch every weapon he had on hand, he would not care who he hurt. The females had he would use them as human shields if need be. There would be casualties either way. . Max would get hurt, possibly killed, Mario would get hurt. Nobody could do anything about it. Well she would not let that happen, not if she could help it. Max squeezed her hand in support. "We'll string him up from the nearest tree, metaphorically speaking of course," Made the last part as an afterthought. One of the officers stepped forward to the front of the cabin. Before Officer Lyle could knock, a net zoomed out of an open window, and covered her completely. The more she struggled, the tighter the next got. Suddenly darts came shooting out from another window. Max pulled Brie to safety, those who got hit fell and started seizing. Some foamed at the mouth. Suddenly the front door opened. Framed against the door was Cain, "Thought I was stupid did you? If you come any closer, I will kill all of the property that is in my house." He disappeared back inside, and came back out with one of the hostages. It was Angelique. His hand was squeezed tightly around her neck, his other hand pointed a gun at her temple. She and Mario locked eyes. Mario made to step forward, but on the officers stopped him. "Starting with China-Doll, I will start killing hostages every thirty seconds until my demands are met. He tossed a brown piece of paper wrapped in twine at the gathered officers. He went back inside, with Angelique being pulled. Brie buried her face in Max's middle and he comforted her. They opened the list of demands. At the top of the list was Brie's name. "Hell No!" Came Max's retort. His arms were still protectively around her. "Don't worry Son, we're not letting Brie back in there. We just have to get Angelique and the others out of there with no casualties," Mario replied, patting Max's shoulders. "Let's get this over with, we're calling in our department's negotiator right now," Floyd chimed in. Max looked around, various people on walkie-talkies and radios. Speaking indistinctly, animated hand gestures some were even walking around. A negotiator would take too long. "I'll negotiate with the arrogant bastard," Max started to fish around for a bullhorn in one of the police cruisers. Floy approached him and spoke, "You and Mario are too close to the situation, we need a professional." Max flipped him the bird, but slunk away from the car. "Don't do anything foolish Max," Mario's whisper brought a sickly smile to Max's face. "And how long is it going to be before he starts in on killing Mom? And what the hell kind of name is 'China-Doll'?" Max was venting but he knew physically lashing out would cause more harm. "We're waiting for the negotiator ad you're not going to do anything, I'm not losing any more of my family; your mother will back safe and sound," Mario answered in a clipped tone. "We just need to wait," Mario added. He turned away and he felt himself tearing up. But he knew he had to hold himself together for Angelique's sake, and for Max and Brie. If he was not holding himself together, then what good was he? A nondescript brown Chevrolet pulled up, its gril lights flashing red/blue. A woman in a brown pantsuit stepped out. She had brown hair in a tight bun, a yellow number two pencil behind her ear, and she was carrying what looked to be a briefcase. She went to the front of the police cars and opened the case. It was a metallic gray bullhorn. She addressed the cabin's door, "Cain, I'm Doctor Swarkovsky. I'm here to talk." A blunt object round in shape, flew through a window and landed at her feet. She stood rooted to the ground unsure of what to do until Floyd football tackled her, and moved her out of the way. The object spluttered, cracked open, and emitted smoke then sparked and the ground caught fire around it. "What was that?" Doctor Swarkovsky ask, after standing up and brushing the dirt off. "That my dear Casey was a homemade mini bomb. Apparently the perp's not feeling too chatty," Floyd answered from beside her. "I am a professional, I will try another tactic," Doctor Swarkovsky primly stated. Floyd picked up her now dented horn and he still smoking case with a hole in the middle. She stuck her nose in the air and headed for a cruiser, putting her things inside. "I've memorized the text book," she cleared her throat. She began to speak. All of a sudden a scream pierced the air, and then a single gunshot was heard. The doctor opened and closed her mouth for a second, before resuming her professional facade. "What now? Whatever we do is going to fail, if his demands aren't met," Max broke in. "How can we confirm that that was not My Angelique?" Mario was beyond frantic. "Hold still, we will move in closer," Floyd said and walked away from father and son. He approached the S.W.A.T. team. He brandished a picture of Angelique at them. Mario and Max looked at each other and shrugged. Brie was not occupying a police cruiser, she was shaking She had seen her name at the top of the list. Another gunshot and scream was heard. For Mario's sake she hoped it was not Angelique. Angelique was her friend too. This family was way too nice to have this happen to them. She put her forehead against the cool glass pane. Max found her a few seconds later, and held her in an embrace. She reached up and tentatively kissed his lips. He returned the kiss with ferocity. The kisses led to him putting a hand under her shirt, his hands finding her bra, the windows started steaming up, their breaths were rapid and shallow, Max leaned in closer, tightening his hold on her. The cardigan was shrugged out, the top buttons popped and before Brie knew it, a shoulder had popped out of the top of the sleeve. The kiss hadn't even broken, and she was groping him back, tugging at his shirt and jeans, her eyes were closed. He gently leaned her down horizontally on the backseat, he was straddling her, and was just about to go down, when a knock on the window startled them, forcing them apart. Brie guiltily looked into Mario's eyes. "Out. Out of the Car Right Now!" Mario's face had turned a bright pink. Max groaned and helped her into her clothes, and shrugged back into his own clothes. Mario turned from the car briskly walking away. Max sighed and whispered in Brie's ear, "We'll finish this later." He kissed her again and hopped out , then he helped her out as well. They stood in front of the cruiser. Brie felt safe in Max's arms as he gently held her against him, reassuringly kissing top of her head. She flinched as another shot rang out, but gasped as the S.W.A.T. Team poured into the cabin. Furious swearing erupted from within. A few more minutes later time seemed to speed up. A few women stumbled out, and were wrapped in warm blankets. Others were carried out on gurneys. Two such gurneys had sheet covered bodies on them. There was a cry of delight and Brie looked to her left. Angelique and Mario were happily reunited. Naomi was standing off to the side, the fourteen year old that Max had encountered huddled at her side with Naomi's arm around her shoulders in a protective gesture. What would happen now? Kadira would never be 'just a normal' person ever again. Angelique looked Naomi and Kadira over. "You two are coming home with us, we've plenty of room," she said in a decisive tone. Mario nodded in agreement. Angelique then walked over to Max and Brie, "Come along you two." As they walked towards Mario's SUV, Angelique turned to Max, "What happened to your car?" Max shrugged and went to his 'backup' car. He helped Brie back inside, then he hopped into the driver's side. Brie watched as Naomi and Kadira got into the back of Mario's vehicle viar rearview mirror. As they drove away and came back up to the highway, Brie started breathing easier. They had the monster in custody. But he was crafty, Cain could escape unless hee was sentenced to death. Which is what she hoped would happen. Max noticed she was quieter than usual. He reached over and patted her knee. Sighing with relief Brie held his hand and squeezed it tightly. "Hey it's okay," Max said. "He's tricky; he can escape jail. If they don't do anything permanent to him," Brie said. "You mean death penalty wise?" Max asked, still following Mario's SUV.

In The SUV....

Almost all was quiet, Angelique was tightly holding Mario's hand. Naomi still had Kadira in a comforting embrace, and watched her as she slept. "What's going to happen now? The others?" Naomi asked. "For now you and Kadira will be staying with us," Angelique simply answered. "I can take you shopping, get you on your feet Naomi. But Kadira does she have any family?" Angelique outlined her plan. "I don't know," Naomi honestly answered. "Naomi were you Cain's first victim?" Mario asked, butting in and earning a glare from his wife. "Apologies it's too soon," Mario backpedaled. "Quite alright, I was his wife," Naomi's voice came out in an almost whisper. The vehicle screeched to a halt, and Max's car nearly collided into the rear end. "You're his what?" Mario's voice raised an octave. Naomi sighed and then blew out a breath of either sadness or anger, Angelique couldn't tell. Mario started his vehicle again, and a few minutes later they all pulled into the gravelly driveway. After everyone was inside, Naomi and Kadira were ushered to two bathrooms by a couple of maids. Brie accompanied Max to this room. "Hey there...." Max shut the door and locked it. "We're finally alone," Brie conceded. Before they could really think about what they were doing, their clothes did a disappearing act. Frantic kissing and groping, clinging to each other for dear life. Relief was etched on their faces as they kissed. Max led them to the bed, and she found herself on their back, looking up at him. His hair falling into a wild fringe, across the bridge of his nose. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He straddled her, and pulled her closer to him. He entered and bucked, her back going straight as a board. She started moaning, it was electrifying. Sparks were flying and as they kissed, moaning from both became almost animalistic growls. At first Max was on top, two fingers opening up her vagina, so that he could fit inside her. He thrust into her waiting, he felt her shudder. He heard a gasp and realized it had been their combined voices. He kissed her full on the mouth, and felt the temperature rise. An hour later, they clung to each other, he had slowly pulled out of her, and they sighed contentedly cheek to cheek. Their cheeks rosey apple red and then he kissed her again and they fell against the pillows spooning. Brie closed her eyes and was sound asleep in minutes. The rumbling of her stomach woke her, and she rolled over. Feeling for Max all her fingers grasped was a cold top sheet. She sat upright and slowly opened her eyes. Just then the door creaked open, and she turned her head. "Hey there Sleeping Beauty," Max's head poked inside. "How did you know I was a wake?" She smiled at him, as he walked all the way inside. He was dressed in blue jeans a navy polo shirt and his hair was slicked back. He was carrying a tray laden with food stuffs. "I was just guessing, I was hungry so I made sandwiches," He indicated the wooden tray and brought it further into the room. She sat up straighter pulling the sheet over her bare chest. He grinned and sat down beside her. He got the tray situated and picked up a sandwich. She also picked up a sandwich and he leaned over and bit into her sandwich. She grinned, "Rude; you're supposed to ask a lady's permission." "May I have a bite?" He swallowed then grinned brightly at her. Brie felt butterflies again. She just as cheekily bit into the sandwich Max had picked up. "Sassy," he kissed her cheek. Blushing she took another bite. "Hey save some for me," Max took another bite of Brie's sandwich. After lunch, and after cleaning up Brie and Max went to the living room. Kadira wandered in followed by Naomi. Both looked less shell shocked but there were still dark circles under their eyes. "Did you eat?" Brie asked, scooting over so that the young girl could sit down. Naomi occupied Mario's recliner. Kadira merely hugged herself and tried to blend in with the couch. "Nomi spoke for the both of them, "Yes we saw the sandwiches, but we did not wish to impose...." Naomi's voice trailed off as Max spoke, "Impose?" Brie stayed him with a hand on his arm, so he would not insert his foot in his mouth. "What I think Max was trying to say is that you two are welcome to eat anything or drink anything in the house," Brie tried to make things right. Kadira sat up a little straighter. "They do not lock the refrigerator?" Kadira showed some interest. "Within reason, nothing's off limits here," Max assured the young girl. "I am a little hungry," Kadira got off the couch and ambled to the kitchen, leaving the others to talk amongst themselves. "She's sleeping a little better, still skittish," Naomi spoke up again. "You're not sleeping well," Brie looked worriedly at her very nearly sister. "I do for short periods, but I see his face, always his face...." Naomi shivered. "He's not here anymore, he can't hurt you," Max put in. "I know that my head understands, but my heart just.... I still feel like he's going to jump out from around the corner!" She said, and abruptly stood, heading for the kitchen. Alone, Brie turned to Max. "I think I'm ready," she spoke softly. "For what?" Max asked, leaning towards her a little. "I think I'm ready for that reunion with my grandfather and mother," Brie answered. "You remember that visit from when you were in the hospital?" Max looked amazed. She crinkled her brows in quite an adorable way, Max thought. "The doctors and nurses felt like it would overload you and make you have a relapse, Max replied. He leaned away from her and seemed to examine her, a thoughtful look on his face. "I'm tough I think I can handle it," Brie answered. She continued speaking, "As long as I'm not alone." Inwardly sighing with relief, Max took her hand in his, and smiled a little. "We should meet in a public place somewhere comfortable. And I need to call the hospital and get my grandfather's number," Brie outlined the tentative plan. "I'll get right on it," Max promised.

Chapter 17:

Chuck's Wagon was buzzing with the lunch crowd. Looking at his watch again, and tapping is foot he tried to keep his face neutral. She did not look nervous, in fact, she seemed perfectly poised. Maybe from her earlier training being a debutante or whatever. Brie was so nervous, but amazingly she was not breaking a sweat. Jonah had seemed nice, and if he was nice then perhaps her mother was the same? Unless... Brie ever so slightly bit her bottom lip As if sensing her discomfort Max placed his hand over hers. "Maybe rich people don't make it a point to visit barbecue joints," Max started. Brie smiled a little and answered, "You're rich and you frequent barbecue joints." "I wasn't born into it. I was a rebel," Max tried to joke. Before Brie could say anything more, Jonah dressed in a wrinkle-free gray suit, white button-down shirt, and matching tie accompanied by a perfectly coiffed woman in a ruby dress and a string of pearls around her neck and a pair of diamond studs in her ears appeared. She had Brie's features and her smile was quite bright. Standing, Max signaled the two over. Jonah steadied the cane against the leg of the sturdy wooden chair, and gingerly sat down. Max, still standing pulled out a chair for Brie's mother. After giving their orders, the three started talking and Brie's mother introduced herself, "My name is Edana." She looked more at Max than at Brie when she said that. "Pleasure to meet you," Max answered smiling graciously. "Thank you for saving our Isobel," Edana smiled back and glanced over at Jonah then she reached over and patted Brie's hand. "As a matter of fact, we wish to offer a reward before we all depart," Jonah suddenly made all table talk cease, and everyone felt very uncomfortable. 'There goes his Grandfather Of The Year Award', Brie thought to herself. "Leaving?" Max's voice rose an octave or two. "Of course. We'll be wanting to take Isobel with us as soon as possible," Jonah continued still smiling though it looked sharklike at the moment. "If you three want to get reacquainted, my mom invited you over," Max interrupted, sensing Brie's discomfort. Edana smiled and replied, "I think that's a great idea. What do you think Father?" She looked questioningly at Jonah, who seemed to be contemplating the entire situation. "Of course no sense in overstimulating my granddaughter's senses," Jonah finally responded, his smile went back to friendly. "So we can go back and ge ac...." Max vice trailed off as their food arrived. They dug in and there was blessed silence. Max felt Brie's hand squeeze his knee. He put his free hand over hers, returning the gentle squeeze. No way were these strangers going to just whisk her away and make her forget him. No way in Hell was he going to let her go that easily. That was one promise he could keep. After the meal they arrived back at The Villa. Jonah and Edana following in the black limousine with tinted. It was a stretch limo, only the best it seemed. Angelique having received Ma's phone call was waiting on the porch a big smile plastered on her face. If anything Angelique liked to entertain. Having a house full of people put her in her element. As soon as the cars were parked Angelique led them all inside. "I have coffee and a few refreshments laid out. Come sit I'll have Lucinda serve us coffee in the parlor. Come, come," Angelique spun on her heel and led them down the hallway. The parlor was, of course, tastefully decorated. Two overstuffed leather couches sat against two opposite walls facing each other. An antique chair was on the side of one couch. Velvet curtains held back with gold tassels hung from the cathedral like windows. Pulling a tassel that was hanging over the antique chair, a maid hurried in with a coffee platter. She put the tray on a nearby table and dole out the coffee. Angelique spoke up, "I must say that Brie has been a pleasure and she is welcome to stay as long as she likes." "You have a lovely house did you have a decorator or did you peruse swatches?" Edana questioned. "Both," Angelique amicably responded, sipping her coffee. Edana seemed nice, though somewhat more of a snootier personality. Brie spoke up and blushed as all eyes turned to her, "I have been having a wonderful time." She picked up a cookie and delicately bit into it. Though she was still stuffed from lunch, then she sipped her coffee again. A few minutes later, Angelique helped Jonah and Edana settle in. Guests were always making things more exciting around the house. Angelique sighed and found Max and Brie cuddled on the couch, Kadira was flipping through channels and Naomi was knitting. She noticed that Brie was a little tenser than usual. She spoke, "I can't believe my grandfather. Thinking I'd just rush back to their house. I don't even remember them yet." Max nodded. Nothing he said would make things better. "You'll get to know them, just tell them that you want to get reaquainted with them," It was a feeble suggestion but the only one they had at the moment. "I'll do that I want to take it slow," Brie decided. "Good idea and maybe you can say that you want to be called 'Brie' instead of Isobel at least for now," Max suggested. "For starters I'm feeling out of balance again," Brie sighed and leaned against him. Wrapping her in an embraced he kissed the top of her head. He said, "Your life is really topsy-turvy now." Brie stood and walked towards the window. "You haven't met Pauline yet now she's interesting," Max changed the subject. "Who's Pauline?" Brie was intrigued. "A most enigmatic woman alive. Bent on, well making things topsy-turvy," Angelique spoke, startling the couple. "Hey Mom, I didn't hear you," Max said. "Speaking of, Pauline called," Angelique answered. Max groaned and facepalmed. "Will you explain her to me in full context?" Brie attempted. "Later," Max shrugged it off. Brie let out a mock exasperated sigh and shook her head at him. She walked away from the window pacing. "I know you're agitated, but if you met her, you would understand why I don't want you two coming face-to-face," Max opened his arm again, hoping that Brie would settle down again. "Let's just concentrate on your mother and grandfather, get to know them more then when you're ready, I'll see if I can introduce you to her, I promise," Max rejoined. Brie mutely nodded and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Shh...." He kissed her cheek. She smiled a thin smile up at Max and laid her head against his chest. She let out a contented sigh. Naomi sensing their need to be alone, motioned for Kadira to follow her. Naomi went in search of Angelique who had quietly slipped away, while Brie and Max were talking between themselves. Both of them found her in the garden, replanting a small sapling. "Hello welcome to my piece of heaven. Dig in, I've been needing help," Angelique wiped dirt on her old jeans. She discarded the straw floppy gardening hat and turned around facing them with a smile. Kadira smiled nervously and Naomi put on a pair of nearby gardening gloves. Kadira followed Naomi's example, and inspected the sapling. It looked so fragile, Kadira almost felt sorry for it. It was spindly and the bark was thin and flaky, peeling off. The leaves were yellow, but Angelique was carefully digging a hole and then she carefully extracted the plant and carefully put it in the ground. She patted the dirt around it and added water. "Don't worry the plant is going to survive, they’re tough and once past this stage, grows heartily," Brie assured Kadira. "How tall does it get?" Kadira asked, curiosity lighting her eyes. "They eventually become gigantic, but the first year is usually the hardest," Angelique smiled at the young girl. Inquiries were slow; even in this fast paced world, Kadira was fourteen beyond that the information stalled. As long as she and Naomi were with them, Angelique and Mario would not give up. As with Brie, Kadira did not remember much of her past. Even though Angelique had been witness to Cain's Chamber of horrors, she was loath to ask what had happened before she herself had been abducted. Naomi went to inspect the other plants, and was handed a spray bottle. "I've been neglecting them," Angelique said shaking her head. "They're all hearty looking plants," Naomi casually observed. "All babied along, I enjoy it though. Marcus our groundskeeper, tends the rest of the grounds." Angelique shrugged and watered the plant next to the one Naomi had just watered. Just then Mario ambled outside, his eyes lit up and he quickened his pace. Angelique noticed the smile did not quite reach his eyes, and reached a hand out to him. He grasped it as soon as he was within reach. "We're going to have another visitor," Mario announced. "Who?" Angelique swung their entwined hands a little. "Pauline's dropping by, Max stormed out with Brie in tow, of course," Mario answered, and heaved a sigh. "Of course. When?" Angelique replied. She had a resigned tone in her voice making Naomi and Kadira glance at each other. Naomi motioned towards the house with her head. Kadira nodded and followed Naomi up the path to the house. Alone, Angelique let out a long suffering sigh. Max placed his other arm around her shoulders. "Maybe she'll only stay one night this time," Mario soothed. Angelique's face twisted into what she hoped was a passable smile. Pauline. Being a lady, prevented her from bad mouthing Max's biological mother. "Always criticizing how I raised him, being snide about how we live...." Angelique's train of thought derailed, and she pasted a smile on her face. Thought it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'll keep her out of your hair," Mario promised, grabbing her hand and squeezing it gently. She returned the favor, and still holding hands decided to walk the grounds. It was starting to get a little monotonous. But Angelique wanted to talk. She was still interested in adopting Kadira. "You're far away," Mario put an arm around her waist. "We need to talk about Kadira," Angelique had to talk about something else. "What's on your mind?" Mario turned a concerned eye to his wife. "Has your detective been able to find anything on her family?" Angelique returned. "Floyd's told me he's still on the trail, so far nothing. What's on your mind Angie? Thinking of keeping another stray?" He tried to make a joke and laughed. But it was a kind laugh not a humorless one. "She's a year older than Max was, but she's got a kind tenderness that Max did not have when he arrived," Angelique explained. "She's just a girl, whatever she's been through I can't imagine. It must have been Hell on earth for you all," Mario reached over and stroked her cheek. "She needs love she needs us," Angelique frowned, but had leaned in to Mario's caresses. "As soon as we cut through the bureaucratic red tape, she'll be with us permanently, for now all she and Naomi need to do, is rest and recuperate," Max patted her cheek this time. "I want her as much as you do, in a wy she reminds me of you," Max smiled. "I was never scared though," Angelique smiled back. "Fire cracker is more like it," Mario conceded. Angelique just kept smiling. It was hard not to smile at Mario. They finished their walk, Kadira and Naomi were back in the garden. Angelique broke away from Mario and he strode into the house, and into major chaos. Broken dishes on the floor, curtains were unhung and cushions were ripped off the couches and chair. Someone was having or had a tantrum and Mario was not putting his money on Brie. This took him back to when Max was fifteen. When Pauline had crashed his birthday party, yelling screaming, and broken things had ensued. Luckily Pauline had been smart enough to duck out, but not before telling them that they were not raising her son right and was the only one who knew him inside and out. Angelique had bitten her tongue, but she had been vibrating with anger. "Max!" But as expected Max was gone and Brie would be too. He picked up a couch cushion then he picked up the other one and placed them both on the couch. Then Mario when to inspect the kitchen. It was in shambles. The staff was carefully trying to put it back in order. Mario tried to help, but he was distracted by his wife's cry of outrage. "MAXWELL!!!!" With quick apologies Mario went to find her. "He pulled a Houdini," Mario said as he skidded to a stop inside Max's room where his wife was standing in the middle of the floor hands on her hips. "I thought he'd outgrown this foolishness," Angelique shook her head in disgust. "They've always had a volatile relationship," Mario replied, putting a yellow comforter in its rightful place on the bed. "Yes, thank you," Angelique pulled out her cellphone punching in a few numbers harder than was necessary. She frowned when it went to voicemail. "This is your mother, call me back," Angelique hung up the phone and shoved it into her jeans pocket. "I hate when he pouts," Angelique stated as she tried to put Max's room back in some semblance of order. "Pauline brings sunshine wherever she goes," Mario spoke up avoiding his wife's swat to the shoulder. Just then a voice rang out, "Helloooo is anyone home?" Pasting a smile on her face, Angelique turned and headed down the stairs. Just as they met in the middle of the foyer, Pauline opened her mouth to criticize, "What a mess I thought you had a staff to keep the place in order?" Placing a warning hand on his wife's arm, Mario smiled and answered, "Let me show you to your suite. It's been prepared for you. All aired out and everything." Taking one of her suitcases Mario led the way upstairs. "It had better be in better conditions than the rest of the house. You rich people should learn how to keep a clean house...." Pauline's voice trailed away as she was expertly whisked away. Angelique sighed in relief. She tried Max's number again. It went to voicemail. "Dammit!" Angelique gritted her teeth. Where was he? Pauline and Mario descended the stairs, for the rest of her luggage. There were at least ten bags. Sighing Angelique picked up a couple, rang for a butler, and followed Mario back up the stairs. The bags were heavy; what did she put in there? Bricks? Probably a whole arsenal. She was probably a hired assassin here to kill them all in their sleep.Angelique shook her head her imagination was quite adept at running wild at times. Finally after pinpointing Mario's voice, she found in a guest bedroom decorated in pink. Pink curtains, pink comforter, matching pillows, everything was pink. It made Angelique's eyes water a little. "Hello, hello, I brought more of your luggage," Angelique made her presence known. "Just put them over there," Pauline pointed to an overstuffed chair. Angelique rolled her eyes and deposited the bags at the foot of the chair. The butler came in a few seconds later with the rest of the bags, depositing them where Angelique had put hers. "Mario?" Angelique tilted her head towards the door. "Excuse me," Mario smiled politely at Pauline and beat a retreat to the hallway. "So did you find out her secret agenda?" Angelique pressed. Mario sighed, rolled his eyes and replied, "I don't think she's here for a hostile takeover." "Shows what you know. She's here for a nefarious purpose," Angelique huffed back. "She's here to see Max," Mario tried to use his soothing voice some more. "I'm still waiting for the good part to happen," Angelique retorted. "When she leaves," Mario smiled back. "Have you gotten a hold of our son yet?" His wife asked. "Brie left a message, said she's trying to convince him to come back, but so far no luck," Mario answered his wife's question and took her hand, steering her downstairs. "Let's call him again, use your 'Mom Voice' this time. He'll listen to that tone," Mario assured her. "Fine keeps me from wanting to run back upstairs and strangle the woman who just insulted my housekeeping skills," Angelique pulled out her phone. She forcefully pressed buttons and spoke into the receiver, very commandingly, "Get your yellow butt home right now!" She hung up and smirked at her husband. "Nice 'Mom Voice', now we wait for them to show up an minute now," Mario replied. "He'd better come out of hiding or I will drag him back here by the ear," Angelique decided. Mario smiled and replied, "I will lock the doors and windows, the escapes will not be available." "That's the spirit," Angelique said and went to the living room. Kadira was reading and Naomi was playing with a skein of yarn. ALmost cat like as she threw and caught the yarn, batting at it. The television was low and no-one seemed to be watching it. Kadira looked up and gave Angelique a small smile. Before anyone could say anything a car sounded on the graveled driveway. The front door banged open, and Max stormed inside. Brie was hovering close behind him, Max's face was clouded over. "That was a low blow Mom, using your 'mom voice' like that. I don't want to be here. I don't want to see her," Max crossed his arms over his chest. "Too bad. She's your biological flesh and blood and you are going to suck it up whether you like it or not. Starting with cleaning up your gigantic mess in the kitchen first," Angelique countered turning to face him, crossing her own arms in turn. Nodding Max went to the kitchen. Brie sat next to Naomi across from Kadira and Angelique. "I'm sorry for the mess," Brie started. "He's done this sort of thing every time Pauline decided to show up on our doorstep," Angelique waved the apology away. "He was so cold, so angry, with Pauline he's always like that," Angelique offered an explanation. "WHy? Who is she?" Brie frowned. "Why Sweetie I'm his mother," came a sacchrine sounding voice. Turning to find a turbaned middle-aged woman in a gauzy kimono like outfit who barely glanced at Angelique and Mario. Brie furrowed her brows further, just as Max emerged from the kitchen.

Chapter 18:

"She not my mother. Angelique is my real mother," Sounding angry and nearly five years old again, Max slumped against the wall. Both women turned to look at him. Brie blinked and cleared her throat. "I gave birth to you," Pauline started, but Max ignored her and went to sit on the couch, motioning for Brie to sit beside him. Warily edging away from the woman, Brie sat and held Max's hand. "See? You've poisoned my son against me, I knew you raising him was a bad idea," Pauline sniffed. Reminding herself that she was still a lady despite what had just transpired Angelique took an overstuffed chair and Mario took his recliner. "I gave you life," Pauline added her two cents in. "You shoved me in a few damned closets," Max pointed out. "When?" Pauline demanded. "Whenever your asshole boyfriends showed up, and you didn't want me 'underfoot'," Max narrowed his eyes at her. "I came to your birthday party," Pauline defended herself. "I was sixteen! You crashed my party, I had a restraining order on you," Max exclaimed. "Max, calm down," Mario tried to intervene. "I'll calm down when she leaves!" Max stood and walked out. Brie following soon after. It became very uncomfortable in the room, Pauline turned around and glared at Angelique and Mario. "This is what happens when a snooty, upstart couple thinks they can raise kids. They just have no idea how to be parents is all," she turned on her heel to go. "Excuse me?" Angelique's eyebrows raised almost to her hairline. This was the second time in one day that Pauline had insulted her and Mario's parenting skills. "You heard me, you wilting flower debutante," Pauline answered, turning about and facing Angelique. Mario opened his mouth, "You're a guest in this house and you will refrain from insulting my wife and myself. Do I make myself clear?" Pauline's mouth clamped shut, and she drew herself to her full height and nodded. "Very well, excuse me," she disappeared up the stairs. "I was this close to snapping her neck," Angelique put her thumb and forefinger close together. "Angie...." Mario warned. "Sorry, it's just...." Angelique finished lamely. "Shall I ring for tea?" Angelique spoke again, taking a calming breath. "I'll do it," Mario offered and rang the tasseled bell. Angelique leaned against the back of the couch, "I need strong tea with a hint of cognac. Mario smiled and reached over to pat her knee. She smiled wanly over at him. "If I snap I'm taking you down with me," Angelique closed her eyes. Tea arrived on an antique cart laden with all kinds of goodies, pastries, tarts, and even cookies. Mario stood and whispered in the maid's ear. She nodded and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. "Help yourselves ladies," Mario said to Kadira and Naomi.

Meanwhile....

Brie and Max were in his room, she was pacing and he was sitting on the bed, elbows on his legs and head in his hands. "Your mother?" she asked. Max grunted and shook his head emphatically. "She brought me into the world, Angelique and Mario raised me. Simple as that," Max finally answered. Brie stopped pacing and leaned against the nearest wall, arms still crossed. "You want the whole story or just the cliff notes?" He asked. "Cliff notes," Brie answered and sat down beside him, she took his hand and then leaned her head on his shoulder. She was listening, and Max took another deep breath and started, "Pauline was a teenage mother. She didn't want me in the first place. But her parents kicked her out she stole their car and took me with her. Pauline never stayed in one place for more than a quick lay. Hustling for money and foisting me on willing strangers while she opened her 'goody bag' for any hapless male that got caught in her web," Max's recounting was hard for him to bear. But Brie needed to know why he loathed her. "Sometimes if I was there, she'd shove me in a convenient closet while she got down to business," Max finished. "She did what?" Brie narrowed her eyes and she let out a breath. "I am so sorry," Brie stroked the back of his hand in comforting circles with her thumb. It was her turn to comfort him. "For the most part, I've gotten over it until she shows up like she owns me," Max groaned and stood. "I'm going to painting Feel free to come with," He turned to go. Brie shook her head and answered, "I want to learn about the computer." "Alright, I'll see you in a while," Max grabbed his black hooded sweatshirt and strode out the bedroom door. Brie abled into the living room. Mario was reading the paper, Angelique was napping and Kadira and Naomi were noticeably absent. Shyly approaching Mario she tapped him on the shoulder. Mario smiled and spoke, "Yes Brie?" Brie silently pointed to the desktop computer. "You want me to show you how to work it?" Mario guessed. Brie nodded. "Okay follow me," Max got up from the recliner and walked over to the desktop.

In the Shed:

He opened the door and kicked over a bucket of opened paint. "Tsk, tsk, I would never have let you make a mess," an unwelcome female voice spoke up. Max grimaced. "Get out of my studio," Max glared at her. "You know I could have my boyfriend Larry make you something a whole lot better," Pauline scoffed not moving an inch towards the front door. "I don't care . Get Out!" Max tried again. "No thanks, I'll stay," She made herself more comfortable on the stool. "Fine then I'll leave," Max turned to go but was stopped as Pauline cleared her throat, "You hurt me when you disappeared." "Why do you think I disappeared in the first place?" He countered. SHe shrugged and picked at some invisible lint. "I keep telling you I left because you dated asshats," Max prompted. "They were nice to me," Pauline shrugged. "That's because you couldn't keep your legs together," Max frowned, walked around her and picked up some paint supplies. He walked over to a drop cloth with an enormous paintboard on it. Setting it upright he balanced it against an easel. "Just don't talk anymore," He pried open a couple of paint cans, he stirred the paint then proceeded to throw the paint against it. Angry splashes streaked across the board, most of the colors were in oranges and blues and blacks, dismal colors. Streaks not even a portrait. Pauline was bored, but she didn't rise. If she did he would win, she was not about to let him win.

Chapter 19:

He could feel her eyes boring into the back of his neck, but he still refused to speak to her anymore. He wouldn't let her take control of his life again. It was a mistake to let her have his phone number, hell maybe he should just chuck her luggage and her body out of the house once and for all. She was a big pain in the ass. Pauline cleared her throat and Max tensed even more. "I feel like you're ignoring me," She started. Max gritted his teeth of course he was ignoring her. She just didn't get it. She had been the one who had dragged him through hell. They weren't exactly close from before either. She always yelled at him for one infraction or or other. Some real, some imagined, and the end result was always the same. Him huddling in a dark closet. "Well?" Her voice brought him back to reality. He turned to face her, " I have nothing to you. You are a bad mother, and I have no feelings for you. So get the hell out out and don't bother me or my family ever again. Capiche?" "I have right," Pauline spluttered out. "Not anymore I'm thirty-three years old and I don't need you around," he answered. He went over to where she was sitting and menacingly leaned over her while pointing to the door, "Out! Now!" "I'm a guest here," Pauline spoke again. "Not for long and not if I have anything to say about it," Max promised. "OUT!" His voice rose and he was still pointing at the door. She still refused to move from her seat. Just as he was about to forcibly remove her from her seat, Brie strode in and his eyes lit up. "Here there what's going on?" He asked. Brie briefly glanced at Pauline before speaking, "It's my grandfather and my, the woman who was with him." "Your mother?" Max asked. "Yes," Brie answered and nodded at the same time. "Go on," Max prodded. "I've been invited to spend the night and catch up," Brie added. "And?" Max asked in turn. Brie shrugged. "Don't you want to go?" Max wrapped his arms around waist. She leaned against his broad chest and closed her eyes sighing heavily. "Honestly if I remembered them just a little, I would be happy to go. I'm feeling confused and nauseous at the moment." "Come on it won't be so bad. They love you," Max assured her. He deftly took her hand and led her out of the building. "Don't tell me you're scared?" Max questioned. "Nervous, agitated, confused. I'm a roiling ball of emotions," Brie smiled wanly then wrapped her ms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. "Okaayy do you want me to go with you?" Max asked. "It would help," Brie looked up into his eyes and smiled. He returned the gesture and hugged her close against him and kissed her lips. "I mean they seemed to like you when we went to lunch a couple of weeks ago," Brie tried to sound as convincing as she could. Max answered, "I'll be there." She breathed a sigh of relief and then took his hand in hers, "Let's get get as far away from here as we can." "Sounds like a great idea. Let's go to Chuck's," Max agreed and they walked to his car. Pauline decided to poke around the studio. This painting thing' wa just a hobby, not a real job. Larry could take the kid off his high horse very quickly. He came into the world spoiled and now he was even more spoiled because he thought he was about his station. She opened a drawer in a desk and pulled out a sheaf of papers held together by a rubber band and tucked them under her arm. She exited the shed and proceeded to the house and up to her suite. These foolish finger paintings would be nice revenge fodder. He would never miss these, she called Larry and arranged a place and time to meet.

Meantime....

Brie was on the phone with Jonah. She was asking if Max could join them at their place. "Edana and I would be honored," Jonah replied. She hung up the phone and nodded at Max. "Jonah said yes," she repeated to him. "I won't get in the way, promise," Max held up a hand keeping the other on the steering wheel. They pulled in

She hung up the phone and nodded at Max. "Jonah said yes," she repeated to him. "I won't get in the way, promise," Max held up a hand keeping the other on the steering wheel. They pulled into Chuck's a few minutes later and that was when Brie replied, "I don't want you to be bored out of your skull." "I won't be, I'll be your bodyguard in case anything goes wrong," Max decided as they entered the restaurant. Chuck led them to a table and took their orders. They settled into the booth. "I'm not terrified just unsure is all," Brie twisted a napkin around one of her fingers then proceeded to shred said napkin into miniscule pieces. "I'll just be in the background, signal me if you get overwhelmed," Max tried to be extra reassuring. Brie smiled nervously at him and nodded. He reached over and stilled her hands. "Don't worry Brie, they just want to get your memory jogged, get you to remember them," Max soothed. Brie silently kept nodding. Their orders arrived and Brie tried to eat but the food felt like lead in the pit of her stomach. Max also ate subduedly. He was just as nervous what with his mother and Pauline under one roof and Mario trying to run interference. It was very disconcerting and he felt jumbled inside. He could see by her face she felt the exact same way. They ate what they could and took the rest back in styrofoam containers. "When do we go to their place?" Max asked on the drive back. "Tomorrow evening, supper I guess," Brie shrugged leaning her head against the cool pane of glass. She briefly closed her eyes and opened her eyes when the car stopped at Mario and Angelique's. Max carried the containers inside and Brie followed. What made Max head for the living room first, he didn't know. But something pulled him towards it. What they saw made Max drop what he had in his hands. Pauline and someone, a man, was next to her at the fireplace. Both were shredding papers into the fireplace. "What The Hell?" Max's anguished cries rent the air. "Those Are Mine!" He yelped again. Pauline's shoulders stiffened and she nudged the man next to her. "It's too warm for a fi..." Brie's brain caught up with the situation, and she tried to rescue some of the bundle while Pauline feigned innocence. "They were old papers, fire hazards Sweetie," Pauline turned to face the couple now. Brie brought what she saved over to Max who held them protectively in his arms and against his chest. "Those were my paintings Pauline. How dare you take them and burn them!" Max exclaimed again. Max's face turned bright red and he starting shaking hard. "Go!" He yelled. Pauline defiantly stood her ground. "I Said Go!" He continued bellowing. And then he turned to leave. "Hold it right there you can't just barge in here and start yelling at this sweet lady. She didn't do anything wrong," the mousey man beside Pauline spoke up. "Who the hell are you?" Max turned his anger on to the grungy stringy grey haired man in a denim jacket. "I'm Larry," the man answered. Larry was pretty tall himself, and held out his hand. "Pauline who is he?" Max asked, refusing the hand and looking angrily at her. Pauline replied, "He's my boyfriend." She smiled brightly at them both. "You brought your, him over to burn my paintings and act so nonchalant about it?" Max was beyond furious. Brie was behind him now, and looking at the yelling match going on. Fear evident on her face. Hoping that no blows would break out. "Oh ho, look who's talking above his station," Pauline cackled. "My station? What the hell? This isn't the sixteenth century. Pauline explain yourself," Max spluttered out. "You, you're 'Mr. Hoity-Toity' your nose is so stuck up in the air you can't see the people beneath you," Pauline replied. "What?!" Max and Brie's mouth fell open and both shared a look. "But why are you burning my paintings?" Max asked, trying to calm down, and breathe at a reasonable rate. "Because you're not one of Them! You're one of US and you putting on airs like you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, you weren't you're like me. Exactly like me," Pauline smirked up at him. "I'm nothing like you, I'll never be you. GET OUT!!" Max pointed to the front door. "No thank you," Pauline's smile became shark-like. Max steeled himself and turned on his heel so as to not commit matricide. "This isn't over yet 'son'," Pauline's comment dripped with malice. Max and Brie went to find Angelique and Mario. He found them in the garden, Mario digging in the soil, while Angelique was furiously pulling weed. "Mom! Dad!" Max yelped. Angelique wiped a hand across her forehead, leaving a streak of dirt on her forehead. "Max? What is it? Are you okay? What's happened?" Angelique stood, as did Mario. Max let out an angry breath, "She's finally done it." Max started to breathe in some air trying to calm himself. "Sit on the bench over there," Angelique pointed to a nearby bench. SHe signaled for Mario. Angelique sat beside him, as did Brie on the other side. "Go on tell us," Angelique was all ears. "She burned some of my paintings," He looked like he was five years old. "What?!" Angelique stood up so fast she kicked over a potted plant. "Never mind I shouldn't have told you, I sound like I'm six or something," Max stood up too ready to make an exit. "Look Max we're here for you. You're an adult . Deal like you want," Mario spoke up. "Anyway just thought you'd like to know why the fireplace's got a fire in the middle of a heat wave," Max stood and went back inside the house. "That woman has got to go!" Angelique wiped her hands on her gardening apron. "Maybe she'll explain?" Marie suggested as Angelique fixed him with a glare. "Or maybe not...." Mario's voice trailed off, as he followed his wife inside. "What is wrong with that woman? Thinking she can steamroll us in our own home? Don't answer that!" Angelique marched inside the house and up the stairs. Arriving at Pauline's suite, she barged in foregoing the knock. Pauline and Larry were making out and jumped apart. Pauline put a hand to her heart in mock surprise and widened her eyes extra wide in feigned innocence. "What is wrong with you?" Angelique demanded. Mario was standing just inside the room, letting Angelique angrily go off on Pauline. "Whatever do you mean?" Pauline asked, taking Larry's hand, defiance flashed across her face. Then Angelique did the unthinkable. She raised her hand and slapped Pauline's cheek. "You....You...." Angelique struggled to control her temper. "You Bitch! What'd you hit me for?" Angelique was shaking with anger and Mario was physically restraining her from the other woman. "Pauline it's time for you to go," Mario spoke up. Pauline blinked, her mouth opened and closed a couple of times then she replied, "But why Mario?" Angelique made a noise and rolled her eyes. Then she tapped her foot noisily. "I think you know why. First all, you show up and assume that I'm a devil woman, then you burn Max's paintings," Angelique leaned against Mario more to stop her shaking than anything else. "I think I'm go to stay, I'm not ready to go," Pauline countered and smirked. "That's called squatting and I will get the police involved. We want you out. Now!" Angelique countered. But Pauline just stood there with her arms crossed and narrowed her eyes at Angelique. "I don’t think your clean hands want to dirty themselves with the poor man's police," Pauline said. "Wanna bet?" Mario's voice came out in a low growl. "Get off our property," Mario continued. "No," Pauline retorted. Mario pulled out his cellphone and started dialing, "Floyd? This is Mario. Would you send a couple of officers over to my place? I need help removing a squatter." He hung up the phone as soon as he'd gotten a response. "I Am His Mother!" Pauline screeched out, as Angelique started throwing Pauline's things haphazardly into the suitcases. Mario went downstairs to get reinforcements from the staff to carry Pauline's stuff down and out of the house. "You're a menace and you will leave my good hearted family alone. Do you understand me?" Angelique said, as she pointed to the door. "Now get the hell out!" Mario spoke up. Angelique started to literally push her out of the room, amid her loud protests and squeaks of disapproval. Once at the bottom of the stairs, Angelique opened the door for Pauline, "Don't let the doorknob hit you where the good Lord split you." Presently Mario and a couple of men from the staff came with her luggage and Larry in tow. "here take these with, I took the liberty of calling a cab," Mario said. "You haven't heard the last of me," Pauline promised just as a police cruiser and a taxi pulled up. "Go," Mario firmly spoke again. "I'm gone come along Larry," Pauline picked up the luggage. Larry followed suit. After getting a restraining order from the police and putting their statements in, the offers drove away leaving Floyd alone with the couple. "Did she do anything else?" Floy asked. "Besides destroying property?" Mario asked of Floyd in return. "And getting her commuppence?" Angelique put in. "Yes besides that," Floyd looked slightly amused. "No," The two chimed in at the same time. "Okay then, carry on. IF she comes back give me a call," Floy d said and drove off. "Well let's get Max back again," Mario suggested, squeezing her shoulder affectionately. Angelique breathed out a sigh and nodded. "Don't be such a worry wart," Mario brushed a piece of hair from her forehead. Angelique dialed Max's number, "It's safe you can come home again." She said into his voicemail. Once she hung up Angelique became furious again. "I knew she was flaky, but burning his paintings?" Angelique was now pacing back and forth with ferocity. "it over now Angie don't think about it anymore," Mario wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Angelique nodded and went to clean up. It was over for now. Angelique bit her lip and helped her husband with the tasks ahead. Max and Brie arrived a few minutes later. Max's face was stony. He glanced at the fireplace, still glowing red and pieces of ash flitting around inside it. "She's gone Max," Angelique assured him. "For how long?" Max asked finally glancing at his parents. Mario spoke, "I have Floyd tailing her. One more wrong move and he's got her mainly for 'destruction of property'." Max used the iron poker and poked around inside, getting some ash out onto the carpet. Brie quickly cleaned it up. A little while later, He and Brie turned to leave the room. They had to get ready to go to Jonah and Edan's estate. Jittery and fumbling with her things, the suitcase just would not open. The clothes continued dropping here and there on the floor in puddles. As if the sky were raining clothes. "Dang it!" Brie gritted her teeth and tried again to open the suitcase. "Here let me try," Max was suddenly at her side, he coaxed gently at the suitcase taking it from her. She obliged and watched as he started filing both of their suitcases after deftly opening hers with a flick of his fingers. Finally they were both ready to go. Jonah and Edana would be picking them up shortly. As they waited in the foyer for her mother and grandfather, Brie tapped her fingers against the side of the suitcase. This was nerve wracking. A knock sounded and Max opened the door and an imposing man in chauffeur's garb complete with white gloves held out his hands. "our luggage please," he said in a somewhat stereotypical snooty voice. Once the pieces were handed over the man sid one last thing, "Follow me." Raising his eyebrows and exchanging looks and a shrug with Brie followed him out to the waiting limousine. The side door opened and Edana's head popped out, "Come along you two." She smiled up at them. Brie and Max entered the car and situated themselves across from Jonah and Edana. "You look petrified Isobel," Jonah said, leaning a little towards the two. "Just, um, curious," Brie answered, and swallowed. Edana spoke, "You will be alright. We've left your room exactly as you left it." Brie nodded uncertainly, and leaned closer to Max. Max wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in tighter. The ride was a little uncomfortable, and very very quiet. Gravel crunched beneath the tires as they approached the residence. Bigger than Mario and Angelique's place, rolling hills complemented the front of the house. The house's front had climbing ivy against the red brick and rosebushes were in full bloom. A shined knocker was nailed onto the spotless varnished white door. A woman in a smart business skirt suit, holding a clipboard to her chest and her hair in a ster bun opened it, nodded curtly at the young people then approached Edana and Jonah. "Sir, Madam, everything is prepared," she said. "Thank you Gretchen," Jonah answered, then turned to Brie . "Gretchen runs the whole staff. Been with me for years," he said. "Follow me you two have adjoining suites," Gretchen turned to young couple once again, then turned on her heel and marched back inside. "Well I guess we follow her," Max side whispered to Brie, making her giggle a little. He took Brie's hand, and followed Gretchen up the stairs. She led them to a gargantuan set of oak doors with double brass rings and opened them, separated by a swinging door were the two bedrooms. The middle was the living room, a couch and television, with a side table and a blue carpet covering the floor. "Well, I guess we settle in," Max spoke up and picked up their suitcases after Gretchen had exited the room. They made their way to the sitting room, via another butler. How many butlers did they need? Angelique and Mario had a small staff because she liked to be hands on. These people looked to be of "old money" "How your room look?" Mario asked. "Yellow gingham and pink," Brie made a face. "Yours?" She asked Max. "Boring white and beige," Max replied. "Sorry," Brie said, as max shrugged it off. "There's pictures. Apparently I was good at track and volleyball," Brie said. "You remembered?" Max asked. "No, but it was nice to see pictures. I'm glad Mother and Jonah kept them for me," Brie said. "Me too," Max enfolded her into a hug. She put her arms around him and sighed. "Although I do remember something," Brie suddenly perked up and looked into Max's eyes not letting him. go. "Oh and what's that?" Max asked raising an eyebrow. "I have a favorite band I like," Brie said. "Really? Never would've figured you liked bands, symphonies the ballet...But not a band. What band?" Max spoke up, and grinned widely at her . "I think I was rebelling, behind my door," Brie answered, thankful she could remember a shred of her former life. "So what's the band's name?" Max prompted. "OH! Right! The Monkees two e-es not k-e-y-s," Brie clarified. "you're kind of young to know about them," he mused. "I believe a much older cousin got my interest piqued," Brie said. "I saw them a long time ago in reruns," Max obliged. "I liked them all," Brie answered. " I liked Micky he was so goofy," Max said and grinned at her. "I think Davy Jones had that accent," Brie answered contentedly loving their closeness. Max led them to the sofa in the middle of the room. Max pulled her into his arms and she nestled against him, arms still around his waist. He kissed her lips. "Don't fall asleep. I'm sure they'll frog march us to the dining room," Max put on his best snooty voice. "I look forward to it, I just don't think I can fit in with them anymore. I wish I could remember...." Brie sighed against him. "That's why I'm here. To help you make a smooth transition," Max replied just as his phone rang. He looked at the caller i.d. and answered his arm disentangling from behind Brie, making her sit up. "Cal mdown Mom. Okay, Okay take deep breaths. You say you've already called an ambulance?" Max got up and started pacing. Brie started to get worried. "Maybe she'll be alright.... Okay. I'll be there soon. No, no, of course I'll talk to her. Alright by Mom. Stay safe," Max finished the phone call. "I-I have to go. Family emergency," Max started. "What happened?" Brie went to stand beside him. "Kadira locked herself in the bathroom, and when Naomi knocked on the door there was no answer. Nomi tried the door but it wouldn't budge. So she got Walter. He's pretty strong, he's a bouncer then ended up as Dad head of security. Anyway Walter broke down the door, and Kadira was lying head first against the bathtub. She'd slit her wrists," Max was visibly shaken, and torn. He didn't want to leave Brie but this was a family emergency. Seeing his dilemma, Brie spoke once word, "Go." "Are you sure?" Max asked. Brie silently nodded. "Okay this is why I love you!" Max kissed her and then went to pack again, just as a butler appeared to announce the evening meal. "Max has to go, I'll follow you," Brie said and made to go. Max came out of his room a bag slung over his shoulder. Jonah and Edana bade him goodbye. They turned their attention to Brie. "Come along Isobel," Jonah spoke up after Max had gone. Brie silently nodded hoping Kadira would be alright. Why had Kadira slit her wrists though? But Brie figured it out. after being captive for as long as she had maybe Kadira could not quite believe she was really free. "Isobel?" the woman claiming to be her mother spoke, breaking through worried thoughts. "Sorry, it's just Max got a disturbing phone call from home," Brie offered. "I see," Edana signaled for the first course. Except for Jonah the two others chit chatted. Brie's mind prickled a little. Bringing back a sliver of a memory. A happy memory. A mother taking time out to be with her daughter. To laugh and play with her. Being an attentive person. Though Jonah had been more standoffish, he had taught her to ride horses . She spoke, "I remember a little something." "Do you?" Edana looked very pleased, and even Jonah offered a sliver of a smile. "You coming into the room and talking to me. We were best friends," Brie said. "That's right and what about Grandpa Jonah?" Edana asked. "Grandpa Joe taught me to ride my first horse, Princess Honeysuckle, " Brie said. "Indeed," Jonah gruffed. "You were young when I was born," Brie addressed Edana. "Seventeen," Edana's voice was barely above a whisper and she glanced over at Jonah, before making eye contact with Brie again. "Grandfather thought I would be loud, that's why you would come into the nursery after he'd gone to bed and I could be loud then," Brie continued. "You were full of energy and when you got older, Papa bought you a horse," Edana supplied. Brie nodded. Her memory was starting to catch up. "Princess Aurora Honeysuckle, Grand Champion," Brie remembered. "Also we hired a trainer on your eighteenth birthday," Jonah put in. His voice turning gruffer with emotion. Edana wiped her eye with the corner of a napkin. Brie shudder. "Arthur Cannis," Brie whispered this time. Cain's name as a horse trainer. He had come to their house under the guise of a horse trainer, and had taken her. The conversation stopped abruptly as emotions were roiling through the air. The meal resumed. Afterwards there was coffee in the lounge and a more relaxed conversation was going on. More reminiscing and then the television was turned on for the news. Brie and Edana occupied the loveseat and Jonah a leather chair.

While everyone relaxed at Brie's....

Max was at the hospital with Mario, Angelique and Naomi. Nomi had tears streaming down her cheeks. "She was having nightmares and I tried to be there for her," Naomi wrung her hands. Angelique pulled her into a fierce hug. "Nomi this isn't your fault. None of this is," Angelique reassured her. But Naomi's tears didn't abate. Soon the doctor came in. He was very somber. He had his hands behind his back. "There is a very traumatized young lady bandaged up. She's scared and she keeps mumbling about a person named Cain. I have no idea what's happened to her, but I recommend deep counseling," the doctor stated. "She's been through a horrendous ordeal.," Angelique spoke up as she stopped hugging Naomi. "Care to enlighten me?" the good doctor took a seat. Naomi opened her mouth and started, "Cain collected females he didn't care what age. As long as they were pretty, he brought them back to the cabin and Kdira was the youngest. She was ten when she was brought," Naomi continued. Outlining the various tortures not going into much detail. "But this where Mario and I come in. We have a stable home for her, them both," Angelique piped up as soon as Naomi finished the account. The doctor, having nodded spoke, "Have you started any sort of legal proceedings?" "Just getting her through this has been time well spent. She, well we thought, was doing well. Progressing I mean," Mario spoke up. "I suggest you start filing papers to become her guardians. Otherwise the state will step in," Doctor Morris continued. "Absolutely," Angelique agreed. "Nomi is it? Have you any other family?" Doctor Morris asked. Naomi slowly shook her head. "She's staying with us too," Mario answered. "For how long?" Doctor Morris asked. "As long as she wants," Angelique replied, as Naomi shot her a grateful smile. "Okay having satisfied my curiosity, you may visit Kadira," Doctor Morris allowed. "One at a time," he added in. Naomi, Max and Mario hung back. Angelique strode in nd she sat next to the bed. Kadira looked so vulnerable hooked up to IV's and the incessant beeping of the heart monitor was the only loud sound. At least the young girl was breathing on her own. Angelique reached for her hand, and caressed the top of it. She spoke, "Mario and I have a surprise for you; but you need to wake up." Kadira's eyes fluttered but she didn't fully wake. "Mario, Max, even Naomi are here, we're just waiting for you. Be the fighter I know you are," Angelique stated, kissed the girl's cheek and got up from the chair. Nomi entered room next. SHe also took vigil next to the fourteen year old. Angelique stood between Mario and Max. Each patted her on a shoulder.

Chapter 20:

Jonah's estate was winding down for the night. Brie was sitting on her bed with the phone to her ear. Angelique had given Brie her own phone. "Right now, she was being caught up on Kadira's condition. "How bad?" Brie's voice slightly trembled. Kadira was like her sister. "She's unconscious," Max's voice was a little shaky as well. "how's Angelique?" Brie felt it was a safe question. "Mom's beating herself up about it. But she says I can go back to Jonah's estate," Max offered. "Do what you think is best," Brie answered. "You know you like it, that I'm not underfoot," Max feebly joked, making Brie chuckle. "FUnny, I do miss you though," Brie truthfully answered. "I'll make a final sweep, and come back, if Jonah doesn't mind," Max's tone held expectation. "I'm sure I can convince him," Brie answered. They said their goodbyes and Brie went to find her relatives. Jonah and Edana were in one of the parlors. both were reading but looked up as she entered. "How are you finding things?" Edana stood . "Everything's still a little fuzzy," Brie admitted. "It will get better, now where is that young man?" Edana continued. Brie told them his whereabouts, leaving out Kadira's suicide attempt. "And if you and Grandpa Joe don't mind he'd like to come back," Brie finished. Jonah glanced out the window at the inky expanse. The stars were starting to show themselves. Much to his chagrin he'd never been able to deny Edana or Isobel/Brie anything. "He did rescue you after all," Jonah answered turning back to look at his granddaughter. "Papa it is much more than that," Edana gently prodded as Brie blushed. Jonah grumbled though he was very affectionate, and he nodded. Speaking he motioned for Brie to sit, "I will be eternally grateful to him for returning our lost child to the fold." Brie now seated by her mother, felt tears slide down her face. Edana gently brushed the tears away giving her a tentative hug. "I love you Darling," Edana whispered in her ear. Jonah seemed to hear and limped over to them both. He enveloped them in a loose hug. Everyone was where they were supposed to be.

Chapter 21:

Max made sure he wasn't needed and after conversing with everyone prepared to call Brie back. Kadira was still unconscious. He waited for her to pick up. SHe picked up on the second ring sounding a little odd. "Have you been crying?" Max asked. "Do I sound that bad?" Brie countered. "Not bad just stuffy. Are you okay?" Max answered. "I'm fine, the family and I had a meeting. We ended up hugging and Max I remembered some more," Brie's tone changed to slightly more chipper. "That's great," Max was enthusiastic. "Is Kadira going to be alright?" Brie was sober again. "She'll survive but she's not awake yet," he sounded unsure of himself now. "Kadira's strong," she sympathized. "I think so too. Mom's worried and so is Naomi," He exhaled. "I see," Brie answered. "They don't need me here after all, since they're pretty confident Kadira will recover," Max hedged. "Please come back to the house. Grandpa Joe won't mind. He said so," Brie gave the answer Max had been hoping for. "I'll be there shortly," Max answered with a small smile on his face. They hung up a little while afterwards. Jonah and Edana were still awake, but preparing to go up the stairs to sleep. Brie relayed Max's plan and said she would wait up for him. Jonah gave his okay, s did Edana. They both went upstairs to their rooms. The days were touch and go for Kadira. Though her external wounds were healing quite nicely, she was still not waking up. Naomi and Angelique were stationed by her bed, holding her hands and speaking encouragement. "Don't give up," Naomi was whispering in the young girl's ear as Angelique combed her fingers through Kadira's hair. Both women looked helplessly at each other. Nomi squeezed the fourteen year old's hand once more, before letting go. Mario peeked his head around the door that was now open "I brought lunch," he stepped fully inside the room, carrying a white carry out bag from Chuck's. 'Thank you!" Naomi said,. "You're so sweet," Angelique kissed him and took the bag from him setting it on the roll-away table. Mario doled out the food. He sat next to Kadira Then he turned to his wife and Nomi. Naomi shook her head as she briefly glanced over at Kadira's sleeping form. "Nothing?" Mario's worried voice kept in time with his creased brows. He took over vigil from the two women as they slowly consumed their food. Mario glanced at his wife and turned to the girl in the hospital bed. He took one of her delicate small hands between his own big hands. He sat down in the plastic chair and stared thoughtfully at her, as if willing her to come out of her coma. "We're rooting for you," He whispered softly. Angelique took her place next to her husband. "I've started legal proceedings," Mario managed as he momentarily looked over his shoulder at his wife. "She'll make it," Mario soothed as he led Angelique from the bedside. "i hope so," Angelique answered. "Let's get you out of here, I'm sure Naomi won't mind staying here," Mario suggested, as he looked over at Naomi. She looked up and over at Mario. "Do you mind staying here while Angelique and I get out of here?" Mario asked. "Of course not," Naomi obliged. "You see? She's fine with it," Mario answered, squeezing her hand in a comforting way. "Then let's go," Angelique answered, and the two exited. When they got to the car, Mario opened the passenger's side, and Angelique slipped inside. Mario started the car, and he turned back to Angelique, "Where to?" "Excuse me?" Angelique blinked. "Where are we going? Ice cream? Museum? Movies?" Mario named off the options. "Movies," Angelique answered. "Movies it is," Mario agreed and they headed towards the theater. Once at the theater, they went to get their tickets, and ventured inside.

While Mario and Angelique were out on their date, Naomi was holding Kadira's hand, and whispering more encouragement. She felt a twitch and a slight grip on the older woman's hand. "Kadira? Sweetie?" Naomi's hushed voice sounded rough. Kadira's eyes fluttered but she did not open them. She merely moaned and fell back into a restless sleep. "We're all waiting for you. We miss you," Naomi spoke again. Not knowing what else to, Naomi stood and went to refill the small water pitcher. "N-Naomi?" The voice cracked a little and she turned away from the sink and sat back down next to the fourteen year old. "I'm here Kadie," Naomi answered. "I-Is he here?" Kadira's voice cracked a little more. "No he's been sent away," Naomi soothed. "Good," Kadira tried to swallow . Naomi went to the sink and filled a cup with water from the pitcher. She helped the girl sit up and helped her drink. "Mmmm thanks," Kadira softly said. "Just happy to see you awake," Naomi spoke up. Kadira blinked and answered, "I really tried to...." she trembled. "Don't ever do that again," Naomi chided. "Where are Angelique and Mario?" Kadira tried again. "Out, Mario took Angelique out on a date," Naomi answered. "Angelique's been by your side the whole time with me," Naomi answered. Kadira smiled a watery smile. "I'll call her phone if you'd like," Naomi offered. Kadira swallowed then slowly nodded yes. Naomi picked up the phone and dialed Angelique's cellphone.

At the theater....

The movie was really good, but Angelique's mind was still on Kadira and how she was faring. Once they got out of the theater, her phone started vibrating. She looked at the number and answered it. She picked it up on the second buzz. Mario looked quizzically at her. "We'll be right over," Angelique said into the phone, then she ended the called. "Who was it?" Mario asked hoping it was good news. "Kadira's awake," she answered, her eyes shining with happiness. "Well what are we waiting for? Let's go," Mario's face also lit up and the two made it to the car and hopped inside.

At the estate....

Brie was waiting for Max on the front stoop a white sweater hanging loose on her shoulders. Her arms were hugging her chest. She could not wait to see Max Finally headlights shone down the expansive driveway. The car pulled near the house, he parked and deftly hopped out of it. Seeing Brie his eyes lit up and he wrapped her in a very snug and loving embrace. "God I've missed you," he whispered into her ear. "You've only been gone a few hours," she laughed against his chest. He put her down and took her hand in his. "You're chilled let's get you someplace warmer," Max replied and he she gripped his hand and led him inside. They sat side by side on the couch, Brie listened to his account at the hospital> Nodding in all the right places. "What's been going on since I left?" Max asked. "I started remembering more about me," Brie started. "What'd you remember?" Max prompted. "I finally remembered Grand Jonah, rather Grandpa Joe and more about my mother. And when I was younger," Brie said, snuggling even closer to him and Max wrapped an arm protectively around her waist. "Mother was a young single mother and Grandpa Joe took us both in," Brie said. "Anything else?" Max asked, genuinely curious as his own relationship with his mother had been completely impossible. "For the most part, at least until I reached my teen years," Brie responded. "How so?" Max's interest was really piqued now. "I was almost sixteen, Grandpa Joe spoiled me. Mother did too, although she mostly disciplined. Anyway Grandfather bought me a horse because I asked for one. More like demanded one," Brie chuckled a little. Max mutely prodded her on with a nod of his head. She continued, "Hiring trainers, horse trainers that is, wasn't easy. Despite Mother's discipline I was headstrong, strong willed and I think a little snobby," Brie tried to collect her her rambling thoughts. "I had rejected everyone that came recommended. So out of frustration , a little desperation, Grandpa Joe ran an ad in the local paper. He stated money wasn't an issue and many trainers applied," Brie gave a gut wrenching shuddering sigh. "It's okay if you don't want to remember it. You've been through a very horrific situation," Max reassured her. "It's best I get it out in the open," Brie tried again. "Take your time, if you feel like you can go on at any point in the story you and can sit here like this or we can head for bed," Max decisively said. "Maybe I'll feel like telling you tomorrow then," Brie's voice became softer and she smiled up at him. "C'mon then," Max got out of the embrace and then stood up, propping Brie up as much as he could against the cushions. He then gathered her in his arms and she wrapped her arms around his neck and placed her head in the crook of his neck. She closed her eyes and softly snored. Max meanwhile carried her to her bedroom and tucked her in. She opened her eyes as he lovingly kissed her forehead, and turned to go.

Chapter 22:

"Don't even think about it, you're staying right here," Brie folded the blanket back and moved over so that Max could climb in beside her. "Better?" Max asked. "Much," Brie murmured and fell asleep, resting her head on his stomach. He wrapped his arms around her and they settled in for the night.

Back at the hospital....

Kadira was sitting upright in the bed on either side of her almost like bookends, were Mario and Angelique. Naomi had gotten a magazine and was sitting in the only chair in the room, giving them all space. "We've been very worried about you," Angelique stroked Kadira's hair. "Sorry," Kadira mumbled. "Mario and I have a surprise for you," Angelique changed the subject. Kadira looked up with a puzzled glance. "We want to adopt you," Angelique squeezed the girl's shoulder in a comforting gesture. Kadira furrowed her brows and shook her head, "Why? I'm damaged goods, I just tried to kill myself." Her eyes filled with unshed tears. "But you're still with us. You're a fighter and a heck of a young lady. Strong, independent and a lovely personality. You're pretty, you're talented, I could go on and on," Angelique chimed in, making Kadira blush. "I've already begun legal proceedings," Mario started as he gingerly hugged Kadira. "What about Naomi?" Kadira asked. "She's staying with us, and even more, I have a job all lined up for her," Mario answered making Nomi gasp a little. "Really?" Kadira looked between Angelique, Mario and over at Naomi who gave her a very encouraging smile, and a thumbs' up. "So how about it? Do you think you could live with us for a while?" Angelique questioned, a sparkle in her eyes. "We'll make sure Max isn't too jealous of having a sibling," Mario joked eliciting a chuckle from the three females in the room. They chatted for a while and a nurse came in and checked the fourteen year old over. Her vitals were very good, the nurse then changed the dressings and gave Kadira some pain pills. "Visiting hours are almost over," she announced. "I'd really like them to stay," Kadira's lips trembled a little. "I'll ask if they can," she replied and exited the room. A few minutes later three Army cots with a pillow and a blanket on top of each one appeared. "Whenever you feel like it, turn off the lights and settle in," another nurse had appeared and instructed them, then had exited just as quickly. Left to their own devices Kadira yawned as the pills took effect. "Let's turn in," Angelique suggested. "Agreed," Mario said. Naomi turned off the lights. Except for the beeping of the heartbeat monitor machine, it was quiet. The three went to their cots. Kadira closed her eyes but found it difficult to actually fall asleep. She shifted positions and turned halfway onto her side. She placed her hand under her cheek slowly drifting off to sleep. Naomi, got up and checked the window and pulled the curtains over it. She made sure the window was locked tightly and was looking for anything that might be out of place. Any shadows that didn't quite match up with the natural surroundings. Nothing stood out as spooky so Naomi laid down and put her hands behind her head. Nighttime was especially difficult as thoughts just whizzed through her head. What if Cain came back? Before he'd begun his 'collection' he'd been to jail on numerous charges. Assault and battery among them, even up to assaulting police officer as he resisted arrest. When she'd met him he'd just gotten out of his second stint in jail. She had been so young, nearly seventeen, he'd been about twenty-two. He'd been quite the charmer, taking her out, treating her like a princess. Six months later, after her eighteenth birthday, and after they'd started dating he'd asked her to marry him. Excitedly she'd agreed, they had a small intimate ceremony, it had started out to be a blissful union, living in that cabin out in the woods, just the two of them. He would gather wood, and she would do the cooking. Life was great. There was even a job with an affluent lumbering family. The patriarch, grandfather had given Cain the job to teach his granddaughter how to ride horses. Under an assumed name,, Arthur Caniss, which being so young Naomi had dismissed as another interesting facet in her new life. Things were fine for a few weeks until the fateful day he'd come home and had brought in a person with a burlap over their head, their hands were duct taped in front of them and there was nothing Nomi could do as Cain pushed her onto the ground as she'd protested. He then bound the captive to the chair he'd pulled from the dining room table. "Naomi this is our new housemate, say hello," Cain's voice was soft but had a sort of malicious tone mixed in with it. That's when Naomi grew really afraid of her husband. But she tried to keep it hidden for her sake, and the person before her. She complied the sack had come off and a scared young lady of about eighteen, her own age stared back at her her with wide brown eyes. "Cain, Honey...." Her sentence was cut off abruptly, as a sound slap across her face stun her into silence. "Go make some dinner, I'll show our guest the house. Don't interrupt," Cain had said. Shaking herself out of the reverie., Naomi calmed her very fast beating heart with simple breathing exercises and she went to her own Army cot pulling the blanket over herself.

Jonah and Edana's estate...

The next morning dawned with gray clouds but a little bit of sunshine pouring through them every so often. Yawning and rubbing at his eyes, he felt something grab his waist and he looked over at Brie's side of the bed. "Morning," Max said and grinned when she gave him a half sleepy smile. "Good morning Handsome," Brie replied and grinned over at him. they kissed and both stretched then they went to get ready for the day. Jonah and Edana were awake and sipping coffee in the breakfast nook. After their shared shower Brie and Max were drying off and were having a spirited towel fight. Although Max was still being extra careful with her. Having lost her to Cain and then maybe losing her again joining her biological family family was something that was hard for him to process. He hoped that Jonah and Edana would let him continue seeing her. Just then a small gasp brought him to his senses and he dropped the towel ."What is it?" He was at her side in an instant. "I remembered something at least I thought so. Never mind," Brie wrapped a towel around her damp body and strode to the bedroom. Presently coming into the nook and sitting down opposite of Jonah and Edana. "I trust you slept well?" Jonah asked. "Not too rough of a night?" Edana gave her daughter a slight smile. "No, no everything was fine. I couldn't have asked for a better night's sleep," Brie answered as Max fidgeted beside her. Sparing him a glance she turned her attention back to her mother and grandfather. "So have you decided?" Jonah pointedly asked as Max cleared his throat quite loudly. "Something bothering you, young man?" Jonah's brisk tone made Max stop but he stared intently at the older man. Edana and Brie tried to sip their coffees and tried to be normal. "If there's something bothering you spit it out," Jonah insisted. "You can't take her from me!" Max blurted out, causing Brie to splutter and choke on her beverage. She wiped her mouth with a nearby napkin. "Whatever are you insinuating?" Jonah stood as did Max. "Don't try and play dumb," Max answered Brie stood also and put a hand on his forearm. "When we first met you made the assumption that Brie, Isobel, would assimilate back into your family life," Max started. "She's an Anderson, of course she'll re-assimilate," Jonah huffed out. "So you're taking her and leaving me shut out. All alone!" Max responded angrily. "Excuse me?" Jonah's temper was starting to rise to the surface as well. "You're going to take her away and she'll forget all about me," Max's voice trembled with a mixture of emotion. "That's preposterous!" Jonah harrumphed. "Is it? Your lost lamb returned to you... And then...." Max's voice faltered, as he trembled with a lot of pent up emotion. Jonah's eyebrows raised and he exchanged a 'help me out here' look with Edana. Edana cleared her throat, "We will not keep you apart, we aren't those kind of people." "But you said..." Again Max grasped at what he wanted to say. "I know what we said, but Isobel loves you and we’ll do anything for her. We won't keep you two apart," Edana stated once again. Max's face turned crimson and he slowly sat back down as did Jonah. Brie let go of Max's arm, and she resumed her seating. In a way Brie was pleased with Max's show of devotion, but he did scare her when he showed his temper. Grandpa Joe would have given in and let her have her way. Like he'd always done. Edana seemed to like Max as well and it made r very happy that she had told Max that they wouldn't keep them apart. However she knew she couldn't stay with Jonah and Edana forever. Although Max had his own place, maybe they could find their own place. She would discuss things with him in private, after breakfast.

Epilogue:

Isobel looked around the new apartment. It'd been several months since that breakfast blowout and afterwards they'd all four had a deep discussion and they'd pored over the classifieds. But then Jonah had a great idea. Calling up Angelique and Mario the six of them talked some more and Jonah spoke his idea. he had a place that was like an apartment situated in the rustic outdoors, with a town close by, and it had been a sort of hideaway for him. He'd give them the apartment rent free. It was quite a spacious place. Plenty of grounds to walk on. Twenty acres with green rolling hills an attached studio for Max's paintings, a detached two car garage. There was a barn complete with horses. Isobel was back to riding, Max was back to painting and had a gallery opening in a couple of days. He was feverishly working on a huge painting at least twenty feet tall. She was banned from the studio, so she had no idea what was going on in there really. Just her wild guesses taking over. Max came in paint splattering his clothes, hair spiked in all different directions. He smiled at her. She smiled back and went over to him. They kissed and Max went to clean up.

At the opening....

The painting wasn't twenty feet tall. In fact it was barely five feet. But it was unveiled, and was of Isobel. He called it 'Brie's Way', it was of her riding through a field with butterflies and dragonflies encircling her. Towards the end was an even bigger surprise. After his speech Isobel was called onto the stage. Max hugged her then got down on one knee. "Isobel, Brie, will y-you m-marry me?" He stammered out, ignoring the wolf whistles, the claps, and the cheers from the people in the audience. Angelique was jumping up and down with glee, and both Mario and Kadira, now fully adopted into the family just looked on with smiles on their faces. She nodded yes, tears spilling down as he took the ring out of the black velvet box and slipped it on her finger. Then he rose and they kissed again.

THE END.