

Tuesday, February 28, 5 p.m., Tracy family penthouse, New York City.

Dianne stood at the door to the games room of the penthouse. It wasn't as extensive as the room back at the Villa; Tyler wasn't there often so there were no pinball machines or video games. The pool table dominated the center of the room and she looked at it, tears in her eyes. She walked over to it and rolled the cue ball back and forth absently as she remembered a turning point in her life. A turning point that involved a game of pool. Her eyes became unfocused as she reminisced.

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Dianne focused on the white ball and its trajectory. She slid the cue between her fingers once, twice, and then hit the ball with controlled force. It traveled along the path she had envisioned, striking the five ball where she wanted it to, and sending that ball into the side pocket. She straightened up, bringing the cue to attention, and sighed. She had come down here to distract herself with the game while Jeff and Penelope went for a walk on the beach.

"What's up, Doc?" came the now familiar query. Dianne turned to see Gordon lounging in the doorway, leaning on the doorjamb, hands in his pockets. "Whatcha doing?"

"What does it look like Ah'm doin'?' Ah'm improvin' mah pool game," she retorted, a slightly irritated tone to her voice.

Gordon sauntered into the room, pulling one hand from a pocket and inspecting his nails. Dianne went back to shooting pool.

"I don't think so."

"You don' think so? Then what do y'think, Mistah Gordon?"

"I think you're hiding. I think you're hiding from Penelope."

"Hidin'? Whatevah gave you that ideah?" Dianne laughed. "Why would Ah want to hide from a li'l slip of a thing like her anyway?"

"Well, you know Penelope's gone for a moonlit walk on the beach with Dad." He made it a statement and not a question.

"Yeah, so?"

"You know what she's gonna talk to him about."

"Mebbe."

"You know. I know you know."

"An' how exactly d'you know Ah know?"

"Tin-Tin told me. That, and your drawl is showing. That only happens when you're angry or upset."

Dianne stopped potting pool balls and looked over at him, then straightened up. A sly smile briefly crossed her face. "Mistah Gordon, theah are othah times that mah drawl becomes pronounced," she informed him. She leaned back over the table again. "Not that you'll evah know...."

Gordon snorted. She put the eight ball in a corner pocket. He took down the rack and began to pull the balls from their resting places at the end of the table.

"Rack 'em up," he said, pulling a cue down from the wall. "Let's see how much your game has improved."

Dianne smiled grimly and put the balls into the triangle frame.

They played for a while, quiet with each other except when calling a shot. Gordon was still the better player, but he could see that she was releasing her frustrations with every ball she sunk. Finally, he took the eight ball and the game was over.

"Rack 'em up again?" she asked. He nodded, and then as she was busy with the balls and rack, he looked over to the door. She didn't notice him hand his cue off to someone who had quietly come in, in fact, she didn't notice him leave until his replacement came up to her and asked in his deep voice:

"Mind if I play?"

Dianne stood up, startled at the sight of Jeff standing by the side of the table. She recovered her composure and motioned towards the cloth.

"Be mah guest."

Jeff broke the formation, and Dianne took the turn from him. He watched her carefully line up a shot, take it, and miss. His turn, and he took advantage of her missed opportunity.

Very casually, he said, "I took a long walk on the beach with Penelope tonight." He put another ball in the side pocket, and then moved around the table. Missing his shot, he straightened up and watched her as this time she took advantage of his flub.

"So Ah heah." The heaviness of the drawl caused him to raise an eyebrow. She made her next play and sank a ball, then studied the table.

"She asked me to marry her."

If he was hoping that there would be a huge reaction to his statement, he was disappointed. Just a soft snort of air from her nostrils, and she leaned across to try another shot, missing. He studied the balls and saw an opportunity.

"And?" was her query.

"I said no, I couldn't marry her," was his response.

This caused a reaction; he could sense it even if he couldn't see it. He lined up his shot and winced when it went wide.

"Cayah to tell me why?" Her next sally was picture perfect and she took another turn, flubbing the ball on the second go.

"She's younger than Scott. For as old as she acts and sounds, I just can't get my head past the age difference. I feel like I'd be robbing the cradle." His shot was close, so close that it elicited a loud "Tch!" from him as it stopped right at the edge of the pocket.

"Hmmpf." Dianne took advantage of the strategically placed ball and sank it. She moved around the table to see what shots were available. Shaking her head, she attempted to put a ball in the side pocket, but it went wide and wild. Jeff, who had been leaning on his cue watching her, now moved in.

"She went on a bit of a rant after I said no, I'm afraid." He sank the ball that Dianne had tried for and went after another. "She ranted for a while about you."

Dianne watched him sink another ball. He stood up and looked over at her, their eyes meeting.

"What did she say about me?" she asked, a challenge in her voice.

The game was momentarily forgotten as they faced each other. His blue eyes met her brown ones frankly.

"She said you were in love with me." Jeff moved closer to her. They stood there silently for a bit, then he asked, "Are you?"

Dianne looked away, drawing a breath in through her nose and letting it out through her mouth in a heavy sigh.

"That, suh, is a loaded question." She looked back at him again.

"Well?"

She swallowed and licked her lips. "Ah'm very attracted to you, both physically and intellectually. Ah have great respect for you and your work. Your presence lights up a room for me and your voice sends shivahs down mah spine. Ah miss you when you're gone. The thought of you with her Ladyship made mah blood boil." She paused. "Even though Ah've tried to keep things cool and professional between us, it's been increasin'ly hard to look at you in a merely clinical way."

Dianne laid her cue across the table. "Ah guess what Ah'm tryin' to say is that if Ah'm not in love with you... Ah don't know what Ah am."

She walked over to him and reached up to his face. Cupping one cheek with her hand, she gently

kissed the other, then turned and was gone, leaving Jeff holding his hand to the cheek she had kissed and staring after her, an unreadable expression on his face.

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The tears fell as the memory faded, and she felt a welling up of both pain and love. Pain for the situation as it stood. And love for the man whose presence she missed so very, very much.

She looked at the balls, racked up so neatly on the table. Then, tossing the cue ball up and down once, she put it on its spot, picked up her favorite cue, and started to play.

Post by Tikatu on 05/07/2004

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