

Sinal Fantasy Remix

Vol 2: Reno's Light

by Youna Yoru

Author's Note

All the characters here are of Squaresoft's FFVII RPG game except for Rane and Rynn Lockhart. This is a fictional story and does not relate to any real life situations. The name Reno Langley was adapted from somewhere else – I was surfing the net when I found the name, and realized that it fit well. Credits to the wonderful person who thought up this name.

This story is a dedication to the Turks – may they remain the best creation of Squaresoft ever – and of course, my two beautiful sisters and my beloved parents, as well as my faithful readers. Thank you to all you wonderful readers for reading this story.

God bless you all.

“Let the light guide you down the path to where your heart truly belongs.”

- Youna

Chapter One

'Getting Off The Wrong Foot'

Elena yawned as she watched, bored out of her brains, Reno downing another full can of beer after losing another round of 'Snap' with Rude and Tseng. They had been playing endless games of 'Snap' for the last two hours, maybe even more. Well, it was supposed to be a 'Snap' game, but from what Elena could see, it seemed more to her that Rude and Tseng were trying to get Reno to drink as much as possible instead, by making him lose more rounds. And all she could hear was their unsteady hands smacking down so hard on the table so many times, she expected the table to collapse anytime, and hysterical bursts of laughter after each time someone yells 'Snap' at the top of his lungs.

Another burst of laughter erupted from them, and Elena lifted an eyebrow lazily. *And they call themselves the Turks*, she thought to herself, rolling her eyes.

Rude slammed his hand down hard on a stack of clattered cards and hollered, "Snap!"

Reno groaned loudly. "Damn, man!" he slurred as he watched Rude and Tseng shoved all their cards towards him again. "Tha's unfair! I did'n win once since dis game start'd!"

"That's 'cause you suck," Tseng remarked, and snickered. "C'mon, drink up!" He shoved an unopened can of beer towards Reno.

Reno shook his head and reached out to grab the can of beer, but Elena stood up and snatched it first. He looked up at her dazedly, and slurred, "Wha' ta hell you di'dat fo'?"

Elena sighed and started collecting the unopened cans of beer on the table. "That's enough, guys. Look at Reno, he's gonna pass out anytime now, if he doesn't die of alcohol poisoning first."

Reno frowned. "Buh wha' we gonna do then?"

Elena threw him a dirty look. "Why don't you guys go get some sleep? You can help me clean up tomorrow."

"Clea' up? Buh i'm shick," Reno mumbled. "Ah don' fheel sho well."

Eleno rolled her eyes. "That's because you practically drank like three whole slabs of beer. Come on, guys, help Reno into the room. He's probably ten times drunker than you both combined together."

Reno shook his head vigorously and stood up unsteadily. "Ah non wanna shleep," he muttered, swaying dangerously. "Gimme a ...beer ..." *Wham!*

Tseng winced as he and Rude got up from their seats. "That must've hurt," he muttered as he bent to grab the unconscious Reno sprawled on the floor.

Rude snorted with laughter. "I don't think he even felt that."

Elena sighed and shook her head. She wondered why she even stuck with these guys.

* * *

Next day ...

Reno popped open one eye, and unleashed a groan as he felt the familiar hammering in his head. He felt like he had been run over by a steamroller. Every existing limb and muscle in his body ached like hell. He could hardly remember what happened last night. All he could recall was picking up cans of beer and slugging it all down in three gulps. *Incredible*. He wondered how his body system managed that. Surely he must've killed one of his internal organs with that much alcohol.

Reno heaved out an exhale as he slowly sat up. Each time he moved even the slightest bit, a jolt of pain triggered through his body. He hobbled into the bathroom, stripped off his clothes, and took a long, hot shower. Even after the shower, he wasn't feeling the least bit better. As he stepped out of the shower with a towel slung around his waist, he heard someone ramming on the door impatiently.

Reno scowled as he walked over to the door. "What do you want?" he snapped.

"We want you to hurry up, man, or have you forgotten about our agenda today?" Tseng's voice floated back.

Reno unlocked the door and opened it a little, frowning in confusion as he looked at Tseng. "What agenda?"

Tseng lifted an eyebrow. "I'll give you one hint. It starts with the letter 'B', and ends with *alamb*."

Reno stared at Tseng for a moment, his brain still boggled up from alcohol and sleep. Then he remembered, and groaned, slapping his forehead. “No goddamn way! That stupid Balamb thing! Why the hell do we have to enroll for this stupid school anyway? It’s not like we’re not professionally trained already!”

Tseng rolled his eyes. “Did you even listen in the course lecture? We’re *not* going to the school to study or whatever – we’re enrolling as instructors!”

Reno looked at Tseng dumbly. “Really?” he asked. “Well, that’s good.” *I think*, he added inwardly.

Tseng nodded, and looked down at Reno disapprovingly. “You could’ve at least got dressed before you open the door. Now hurry up. We don’t have much time left.” He turned around and headed downstairs, leaving Reno puzzled and disorientated as he absently changed into a pair of navy blue trousers, a rumpled but clean white shirt, and a navy jacket.

On the way to Balamb Garden, Reno turned to Tseng and said, “Okay, tell me once again why we’re doing this. You know, the whole instructor thing. Are we volunteering or is this a real job?”

“It’s a real, *paying* job, okay? Seriously, man, you gotta stop getting drunk so often. I don’t think you even remembered going to the instructor’s course lecture, do you?” Tseng replied.

“Of course I do,” Reno snapped indignantly, although he knew he barely remembered anything from the lecture or whatsoever. “So, we’re getting paid to train kids how to fight. Is that it?”

“No. We’re training SeeD candidates,” Rude interrupted.

Reno looked at Rude blankly. “Uh ...seeds? Wha – What – do you mean like, we’re gonna be training ...seedlings ...” he trailed off.

Tseng sighed, wondering if Reno’s idiocy was innate or had been caused by all that drinking. “SeeDs are Balamb’s specially trained mercenaries, okay? High ranking, well trained ...all we need to do is give them a dose of our medicine, and they’ll be prepared for the real world.”

“Oh,” Reno replied dumbly. “That sounds boring.”

Elena shot him a look. “Don’t look at it that way. At least we’re getting paid.”

Reno walked towards the south gate of Balamb garden, lighting a cigarette. He couldn't believe he got stuck with a teaching job. It doesn't matter if it's a paying job, it still sucks. That means he would have to have a daily routine where he has to come to this crappy garden everyday to teach lame kids how to fight.

He suppressed a groan as he pushed past the barrier and headed straight down, shoving a lock of his red hair out of his face. He could feel the overnight alcohol still infused in his brain cells as he strolled down the pathway towards the front gate.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Reno tripped over something he couldn't see, promptly losing his cool. Irritated, he snapped his head around to find a little nonsensical creature whimpering at his foot. Reno scowled, feeling even more annoyed at the stupid mutt for getting into his way and making him trip like that. Without thinking, he nudged it hard across the ground with his foot to get it out of his way.

"Hey!" an angry female voice shouted at him from behind.

Reno's scowl deepened as he turned around to look at whoever the chick was who dared to sound him like that. She marched right up to him, her cheeks flushed angrily, her chestnut hair cascading in a perfectly straight, untangled sheet down her waist, and without warning, kicked him hard in the shin, causing him to bent over grabbing his shin. "Damn, lady!" he shouted angrily.

"Serves you right! How dare you kick my puppy!" she snapped, her crystal blue eyes blazing as she quickly gathered the dumb mutt into her arms.

Reno glared back at her, rubbing his sore shin. "Your *puppy* trip me over and almost made me fall flat on my face, lady!" he shot back, his eyes blazing. "Who the heck do you think you are to kick me like that?"

Instead of cowering with fear like most people usually do when he was in *that* mode, she took a step closer and glared at him with her piercing blue eyes. "It's more like, who the heck you think *you* are to treat small animals with such cruelty!" she snarled.

Reno stared stonily at her. "Oooh, I am, like, just so nasty – I can *not* believe I kicked a stupid mutt for tripping me over! Geez, I should be whipped!" he said mockingly.

The girl's eyes darkened. "You really should be. It's a wonder someone like you is even accepted in this Garden." She threw him a dirty look, and seethed, "You may think you're all that. You'll see. I'll make you pay." With that, she turned around and flounced away.

Reno glared sourly at her retreating back, aware of the throbbing pain in his shin. He hadn't really meant to kick the mutt; it just so happened to cross his path when he was in a bad mood. Despite his sheer annoyance, he was actually surprised that the girl hadn't run away like most people would have done when they come face-to-face with a Turk. Either she had some guts, or she had absolutely no clue who he was. Well, he was going to show her that no one messed with a Turk.

Later, at the SeeD orientation hall ...

"*Instructor?*" the girl echoed, her eyes wide with shock.

Reno smiled threateningly, lightly tapping on the end of his prod. "That's right, honey. You ain't getting nowhere. You're gonna suffer."

She rolled her eyes. "Geez, I am like, *totally* scared," she said sarcastically.

Reno's eyes darkened, but his smile widened. "You want to be a SeeD, yeah? I'll make sure that by the end of this SeeD exam, you'll wish that you were never born."

She stared back at him defiantly. "We'll see. It'll take a lot to crush me, Mr. *Instructor*."

"Reno. The name's Reno Langley, babe," Reno drawled.

She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at him angrily. "I'm not 'babe' or 'honey' or whatever other stupid pet names. Unlike you, at least I show you some respect. You're a disgrace to male chivalry."

Reno snorted with laughter. "Male *chivalry*? Sweetie, would you *please*, for everyone's sake, crawl out from that moldy, stinky rock you've been living under?"

She shook her head and gave him a disdainful look. "It's a wonder someone like you can be employed as an instructor here," she muttered, purposefully ignoring his insult. "Guess you missed etiquette training."

“Guess they don’t care about those non-existent things. Apparently they recognize skills and talents when they see them,” Reno retorted back smartly.

She snapped around to glare at him. “If *you* are an example of skills and talents, I *really* don’t want to imagine how a dumb person would be.”

“Hey,” Reno snapped. “I’m still your instructor, whether you like it or not, and like I said, I’m going to make your every second in the SeeD exam a hell.”

She ignored him as she turned away.

Reno felt his annoyance increasing, and he felt like grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her until she finally get scared of him. He couldn’t understand why this chick doesn’t seem even the least bit afraid or even intimidated by him. She was starting to get on his nerves, and he didn’t even know her name. “Fine, if you wanna be like that,” Reno snapped in annoyance. “You’ve got one second to tell me your name, or I’m seriously going to make your entire life a hell. Don’t think I won’t; I’m a Turk.”

She finally turned to face him, and when she did, she had the most effective scornful look on her face that said, ‘Puh-leeze – can you be any lamer?’ For a moment, Reno felt stupid, and that made him even angrier. She said nonchalantly, “I’m sure you’ll figure out my name. I mean, I know it’s a really tough task for someone with a brain the size of one-third of a pea, but really –” she gave him a really sympathetic nod. “ – I believe in you. You can do it.”

Reno couldn’t believe she had said that with such a straight face. The girl was really something. But before he could explode his anger, Rude came up to them with an unusually happy face. “Hey-y, Reno!” Rude said cheerfully, slapping him on the back. “Sup, my man?”

The girl flashed a final, disdainful look at Reno before turning around and striding away. Reno stared at her unpleasantly, hating himself for letting her get away like that.

“Whoa, check *her* out, man! You *know* her? Can’t believe you didn’t even intro, dude!” Rude exclaimed, practically drooling his face out at the sight of the girl’s chestnut hair fluttering lightly in the wind as she walked further away.

Reno glanced at him and shot Rude an irritated look. “Hey, man, this is the annoying chick I was telling you about, okay? Stop perving on her, it’s getting on my nerves. As if she isn’t annoying enough.”

Rude's jaw slacked as he stared at Reno in disbelief. "You're *joking*, right? Tell me you are. Because this chick is like ten out of ten on the Hot-Chick-O-Meter!"

"Yeah, but she's got a smart mouth," Reno snapped. "You wouldn't believe it when you meet her."

Rude was still staring at the girl, who had stopped to talk to one of her friends. He shook his head. "Man, she is *hot*. I want her. She's mine, since you don't seem to like her very much."

"Hey, lay off her, okay? She's not yours," Reno snapped, a little harsher than he had expected.

Rude raised an eyebrow. "Why the sudden change in attitude? I thought you can't stand her."

"Yeah, but I didn't say anything about not putting her on my list," Reno replied nonchalantly.

Rude shook his head. "You're such a player, dude. From the way I've heard about things between you two, I don't think she would wanna hook up with you at all."

"Hey, don't underestimate me," Reno replied indignantly. "I think the number of chicks I've hooked up with in a week is the number *you* hook up in a year."

"Look who's talking," Rude said heatedly. "I bet ten mastered All materias you can never get that chick to like you."

Reno glared at him. "I couldn't care less about some stupid materias."

"So, you're chickening out?"

Reno shook his head. He didn't want to do this, but Rude was pushing it too far. "Ten mastered All materias. We'll see who's laughing by the end of this, when you hand me those materias."

Rude grinned and extended a hand. "So it's a bet then? You lose, you give me that ten materias; if you manage to get her to like you *and* go on a real date, I'll give you the materias."

Reno shook Rude's hand firmly. "You said it. Don't regret this, dude."

"Oh, no, don't worry – I won't. Catch you later, dude, I gotta run." Rude began to walk away, then turned back and grinned again. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. That chick we're talking about? You know who she is?"

Reno narrowed his eyes at Rude suspiciously. He didn't like the sound of this at all. "Who?"

Rude's grin widened. "Rane Lockhart. The legendary Cloud Strife's heartthrob. Now *that's* a challenge. Have fun trying to steal her away from that blond spiky-head."

Reno was walking back home that night, after a whole, exhausting day of facing those SeeD candidates in his group. There were six of them, and the only one whose name he remembered was the Lockhart girl, Tifa's cousin. He was checking her out during the orientation, and he had to admit that Rude was right. She *was* gorgeous.

He couldn't believe his luck. Top of all, he couldn't believe Rude. That was downright dirty. How the hell was he supposed to get that chick if she already had a boyfriend? And not just *any* guys, but it had to be Cloud Strife, that same ol' dude whom the Turks had tried to kill years earlier. To make matters even worse, Reno can't imagine having a proper conversation with the girl without her biting his head off after what he did to her stupid mutt.

Maybe he could kidnap her and force her to date him.

Reno exhaled heavily. Some day this had turned out to be. He was *not* having even the least bit of fun. Right now, he didn't even have a plan on how to get back on her good side.

Well, there *was* blackmail ...Reno shook his head. He couldn't believe he was actually resorting to this sort of stuff just to get a girl. Since when did he even have to *try*? It was infuriating.

* * *

SeeD field exam commences ...

"Okay, guys," Reno shouted over the raucous noise, gesturing for his Group B to assemble aside. "After that incredibly long, boring lecture by Headmaster Cid, I'm sure y'all got the basic idea of how to survive this exam. If you had been dozing off and not listening, then, well, too bad. As you know, each group is divided evenly into six, and you guys are gonna work in pairs throughout this exam. You're *not* to change partners or swap information ..." He trailed off as his eyes scanned the group, and realized that there were only five of them.

One of the guys, Seifer, chimed in, "Tran is not showing up. He dropped out."

A girl standing next to Rane asked, "Does that mean one of us has to work alone, or there will be a trio?" Reno recognized the girl as Rane's sister, Rynn.

Reno's gaze fell on Rane, who was studying her nails intently, deliberately ignoring him. Suddenly, he had a brilliant plan. "Alright. The four of you –" he pointed at Rynn and the other three guys. " – decide between yourselves who's going to pair up with each other, then devise your strategy. Don't come looking for me for tips, because you ain't getting any. From now on, you're on your own – with your partner. And you –" He grinned meanly as he stared straight at Rane. " – meet your new partner."

Rane's eyes widened. "No way," she snapped. "You're an instructor, not a candidate. I'd rather work alone."

Reno glanced at the other four, who were talking consistently, then back at Rane. He smiled lazily. "Let me put it this way; you want to pass your SeeD exam, or not?"

Rane folded her arms crossly over her chest. "I am *not* going through this field exam with you. A partner is supposed to be someone you can rely on and trust with your life! This isn't a game! For all I know, you'll probably leave me dead at some unfamiliar place!"

"Hey –" Reno shook his head. "I can't believe you've got such a bad impression on me." He saw the look on her face. "Okay, okay – I'm sorry about that incident, alright? But this is different. You can rely on me as much as you want." He flashed her a cocky smile.

Rane scowled at him. "Whatever. As if I don't already know your reputation with girls." She flipped her silky hair over her shoulder and looked at him. "Alright, I'll accept you as a partner. But don't you dare ruin this for me. And please, for heaven's sake –" Rane looked at him up and down, wrinkling her nose in disdain. " – wear some proper, *ironed* clothes. You're supposed to be an instructor, not a street bum."

Reno glared back at her, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "Well, *excuse* me for living, but is this even *your* problem? I like to dress like this, so if it bothers you, why don't you go jump into the river with a ton of bricks tied to your feet?" he snapped back before he could realize that he shouldn't have said that.

Rane rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Just trying to improve your poor self-image," she replied, not even the least bit offended by what he had just said.

Reno was starting to realize that it was a mistake. He couldn't put up with this infuriating attitude of hers even for five minutes, let alone the whole duration of the SeeD exam. This had better work. If not, he was going to kill Rude for getting him into this in the first place. He still couldn't believe she had the nerve to talk to him that way; after all, he *was* a Turk. No one in their right

common sense and mind would dare to stick up against a Turk. That tells him that maybe she wasn't in her right mind. He shoved his hands into his pants pockets and gave her a long, hard stare, hoping to break her down. "Hey. Just wondering if you've been bashed up before," he said coolly.

Rane lifted an eyebrow lazily as she glanced at him nonchalantly. "I'm not that defenseless."

He took a menacing step closer. "Really? Does that mean 'no'?"

She frowned at him. "What's your problem?"

Reno glared down at her. "My problem, babe, is *you*. Do you know who you're talking to?"

"An airhead?" Rane guessed.

Reno glowered. "I'm a Turk, babe!" he snapped loudly. "You know what a Turk does?"

She waved a perfectly manicured hand dismissively. "I couldn't care less."

"Oh yeah? Lady, you don't know what you're getting yourself into. Right now I'd very much like to wring you around the neck as tightly as I can. And I won't have a problem with that, because I've done it umpteenth times," Reno snarled in anger.

Rane turned to him, and stepped up so close to him suddenly, he was taken aback. She stared up at him with cold, icy blue eyes. "Go ahead, then," she urged.

For a moment, Reno forgot about his anger. She was so close to him, he bet if he leaned forward an inch, he could kiss her. *What the hell are you thinking? Have you forgotten that just a second ago you wanted to strangle her for being so infuriating?* A voice inside him yelled. It was probably the sweet scented perfume she was wearing. It was captivating. God. He was being stupid. Reno stumbled back, shaking his head, causing her to lift her eyebrows at him quizzically. "What's the matter, tough boy? Can't get the balls to strangle me?" Rane asked mildly.

Reno took a deep breath and tried to look tough. "Don't think I'm joking around, honey."

She shrugged. "And you think I am? I'm not afraid of you, Instructor Langley. Turk or not, I don't care. We get this SeeD exam over and done with, you stay out of my way, I stay out of yours, get it? That's all we'll ever have in common." She gestured. "We're going to be late if we don't leave now." She paused, then looked at him straight in the eye. "If you can put up with me for the next seventy-two hours, then that's all you'll have to do. So why don't you cut that tough-boy attitude,

and get down to business.” With that, she turned around and walked off, heading towards where most of the other SeeD pairs were heading.

Reno couldn't believe it. He had let her get away with putting him down again. He's a Turk, for Christ's sakes! He shook his head. This time, there was no pity. Reno of the Turks. He had to live his reputation, if that was what it takes. He was going to make her pay for throwing him around like that.

Chapter Two

'An Inturating Journey'

On the ship to Junon ...

What a lazy, sloppy bastard, Rane couldn't help thinking as she watched Reno lounging on five seats when they were aboard the ship to Junon, pulling his shades down from his red hair to shield his eyes from the sunlight. She shook her head and decided to leave him alone as she headed out onto the deck. She really couldn't believe that Balamb would employ the Turks as instructors, what with their infamous reputation and all.

Rane knew she shouldn't be pushing a Turk too far – especially Reno. She knew all about his antics from Cloud.

Cloud.

She started to smile thinking about her boyfriend as she leaned over the railings, enjoying the feel of the breeze fluttering her hair. For some silly reasons, she missed him already. She remembered just the night before, she had cuddled up in his arms, watching TV in his dorm. Come to think of it, they spent most of the night talking and kissing instead, and she fell asleep in his arms, lying on the couch.

Rane sighed blissfully. She wished Cloud was here so she could just hold him and feel safe, and not having to put up with that Reno guy. He was such a jerk. He actually reminded her a little of Lynx Almasy's brother, Seifer, who was also in her group. But Seifer was different – she could actually hold a proper conversation with him without arguing.

But Reno was a cruel, lazy, mean, sloppy jerk who kicked little harmless animals like her puppy. She knew all about the Turks; the dirty job that they do for Shin-Ra. The last thing she would want was to get involve with any of them, and here she was, stuck with a Turk as a partner.

Rane stepped up on the second rung of the rails, held fast on the rails, and leaned over, watching the sloshing ocean water that the ship left behind as a trail. She was worried about the SeeD exam, especially since her partner was someone who had authority over her place as a SeeD candidate. She wondered briefly who Rynn was stuck with. Whoever it was, Rane was sure it wasn't as bad as *her* own partner.

Suddenly, a pair of strong hands shoved her from behind. Everything happened in a split second; Rane slipped on the rails, lost her balance, and the next thing she knew, she was falling freely into the air, screaming all the way down.

Rane crashed into the salty ocean water and sank deep, feeling her eyes stinging from the salt water. The waves crashed over her head, pushing her deep into the cold water. She scissored her legs and worked her way up to the surface, and when she reemerged from the water, her heart beating furiously, dripping wet, she inhaled deeply. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw a flash of red hair, and she turned, just to see Reno grinning at her as he swam towards her. "Hey. Had a nice fall?" Reno asked, still grinning widely.

Rane glared furiously at Reno. She couldn't believe he had done that. "That wasn't funny," she snapped angrily as she started swimming away from him. The ship had stopped, apparently noticing that its two only passengers were overboard.

Reno swam after her easily. "Sorry. Had to do it. You were mean to me."

Rane turned and shot a dirty look at him. "Hey, for all you know, I could've not known how to swim, and drowned. How could you stoop to such a low act?" she seethed furiously.

"But I jumped in right after I shoved you anyway. See, I did take precautions," Reno replied easily.

Rane stared at him unbelievably for a moment, then shook her head, deciding she wouldn't be able to understand this weird guy even if she had a million years. She swam back to the ship, ignoring him.

Back on the ship, Rane was still seething furiously when one of the ship crew handed her a towel and asked if she was okay. "I'm alright. I just wish I could kill the guy who shoved me overboard," Rane said angrily.

The crewman looked at her in surprise. "You were shoved?" he asked.

Rane shot a dirty look in Reno's direction. He was being handed a towel by another crewman. "It doesn't matter," she muttered as she went past the crewman and headed into her cabin. All the way back there, she felt rage bubbling inside her. She couldn't believe him. What a total jerk! He was the complete opposite of Cloud, and such a disgrace to the male population! Her Theta sorority sisters would have a heart attack; a guy like him was totally below their tastes. He wasn't even worth a second of their time.

Rane stripped off her wet clothes, stepped into the shower, and turned on the hot water in full blast. She stood under the warm water for a long time, enjoying the refreshing water rejuvenating her and erasing all the plots on how to kill Reno without people suspecting that it was her.

Finally she turned off the faucet, and stepped out, grabbing a terry towel to dry herself. Rane went to the fogged-up mirror, and wiped it clear, grabbing a brush from her toiletry bag and running it through her wet hair.

*Seeing what I have to go through, I better pass this exam and be a SeeD graduate. Or else ...*Rane knew who she had to kill if she didn't.

Reno hummed as he pushed open the unlocked door of Rane's cabin and entered. He chuckled at the thought of her thunderous expression as he plopped down on her bed, waiting for her to come out of the bathroom. He knew he was wrong for doing it, but at least shoving her overboard vented off some of his infuriation. She would probably never talk to him again; which was why he was there to apologize.

Reno blew a big purple bubble from the gum he was chewing, then popped it back into his mouth. He glanced around at her cabin, feeling bored. Her duffel bag was unzipped, and right on top of the pile of clothes was a framed picture. Reno leaned over and grabbed it.

It was a picture of none other than Cloud and herself. Cloud was standing behind her, his arms around her waist as she leaned back against him. They both looked happy. And contented. And very much in love. Reno felt an unexpected pang of jealousy hit him. He had never found anyone he would want to take a picture with, let alone frame it up. Usually the girls he dated lasted only a couple of days.

Rude had really pulled a fast one on him this time. Not only Rane had a boyfriend, she hated his guts too.

The bathroom door suddenly flung open, and Rane stepped out – wearing only a small towel that barely covered her body since she was rubbing her wet hair with one edge of the towel.

Reno's jaw fell open and his eyes widened at the exact moment when Rane saw him there and gasped in horror.

"Arrrgh!" *Slam!* Rane disappeared back into the bathroom in a speed of light.

Reno was still sitting there on the bed, in a numb shock. He was unable to erase the image of her half-exposed body. He felt a flush creeping up his face and a stupid grin spreading across his face.

Wham! The bathroom door slammed open again, and Rane stormed out, wearing a bathrobe, her face flushed angrily. "What the hell are you doing here?" she shouted. "This is not your cabin! You're *not* even authorized to enter this cabin without my permission!"

Reno looked up at her flushed face, and couldn't help grinning. "Hey. The door was unlocked, so I came in. I wanted to apologize for what I did."

Rane folded her arms angrily over her chest. "*Apologize?* You think saying sorry can make me forgive you for the unforgivable act? You're infuriating!" she fumed.

Reno stood up and held out his palms. "Whoa – *me?* Infuriating? *You* were the one who kept getting on my nerves and throwing insults at me. All I did was a little payback." He grinned lazily. "It's no big deal. Besides, it *is* a little too hot for comfort, isn't it?"

Rane's eyes flared angrily. "Get out of here."

"Already? I haven't even said sorry."

"You just did. Now get *out*. I never want to speak to you, or see your annoying face again."

Reno sighed, knowing this wasn't going well at all. He can't have her mad at him for the rest of the three days. He took a step closer. "Listen, I'm sorry, okay? I really am. And I'm not being a smart ass now. Let's just start anew, alright?"

Rane stared at him stonily for a long moment, then snapped, "Over my dead body." With that, she strode past him towards her duffel bag, rummaging through it to get her clothes.

Shoot. Reno shook his head, knowing she would probably stay mad at him no matter what he said. He headed towards the door, thinking he should leave her to vent off her anger for a little while. "Don't forget dinner at six," he called out before closing the door behind him.

Later, before dinner ...

Do I really have the guts to do it?

Rane was standing in the shadows, peeking out the corner at Reno. From where he was standing, he wouldn't be able to see her approaching. Rane's gaze fell on the little latch on the railings on the side of the deck. The latch can be released to open a little gateway to allow entry and exit. Right now, it was shut, but with a little maneuver, she could coax him to lean on it without realizing it. Then she would release the latch and *voilà!* Instant sweet revenge. That'll teach him for shoving her off the ship, *and* walking in on her half-naked.

But ...Rane bit her lip. She had to find a way to distract him, to avert his attention to her. She would have to pretend to act all seductive, and then secretly maneuver her hand behind him, onto the latch ...

Rane wasn't sure if she dared to do it. What if he tried to kiss her when she acted seductive? Ugh. She shuddered at the thought of his mouth that had been on God-know-what touching hers. But a revenge was a revenge. She was willing to do anything to get back at him.

Taking a deep breath, she strode out onto the deck and when she was about a feet away from him, she called his name softly. "Reno."

Reno glanced over his shoulder, and lifted his eyebrows. He obviously hadn't expected her to be talking to him first. "Hey. You ready for dinner?" he asked, his blue eyes a little wary, but at least he was being friendly. So he was a little suspicious that she was actually talking to him. She had to change that. A guy with his nature and his job would be hard to fool.

Time to launch into her perfect acting. Rane hesitated, averting his gaze. "Um, not quite yet. I want to talk to you, if that's alright with you."

Reno looked surprise. Okay, maybe he wasn't really all that quick. "Sure. What about?"

Rane hesitated again, this time, taking a step closer as she looked up at him. "Listen, I'm ...sorry about snapping at you back in the cabin. I mean, you just caught me by surprise ...that's all." She flushed, but it wasn't an act; she was actually really embarrassed that he had caught her half naked.

"Nah, I'm the one who should be sorry. I just went in to apologize, but I guess I messed things up even more." Reno paused. "I mean, if we're going to be with each other for the next three days, I don't really want any hard feelings between us, you know?"

Whoa. He was actually being serious. Rane tried to see if there was a hint of sarcasm in his eyes, but there were none. She couldn't believe it. He was making it easier than she had thought. *Here*

goes *nothing*. "I know what you mean," Rane breathed, stepping even closer to him as she looked up at him from beneath her lashes.

Reno stared at her uncertainly, obviously noticing the sudden change in her attitude. Any guy would know when a girl was hitting on them.

Rane went on, "Look, I know it's out of nowhere, but ..." she tilted her head aside seductively and stared up at him. "...I think you're really hot." *Belch!* It was all Rane could do to refrain herself from gagging, but she really had to get him to lean on the rail. One more step, and they would be less than an inch away from each other. Who knows what happens next.

Reno's eyes widened a little bit. He smiled crookedly. "That's a coincidence. Because I think you're really hot too."

What! Now *he's* hitting on her. She couldn't believe it. This was getting weirder and weirder. Rane smiled seductively as she pressed closer to him, putting her hands around him and on the rails. He was so close to her, that if he leaned down one inch, their lips would meet. She hope she would be forgiven for this one *necessary* sin that she was about to commit for the sake of her pride and revenge.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Rane whispered, her left hand slowly working to loosen the latch quietly. Their lips were two inches apart from each other. "But ...I just keep thinking about how your lips would feel on mine." Rane had to use every ounce of her strength to stop herself from jerking away from his sleazy hands that had probably touched a thousand other girls, and running away as far as she could.

Reno stared into her eyes, the expression on his face so serious, she felt as if she would burst out laughing any time. "Wanna try?" he asked softly.

Out of the corner of her eyes, Rane could see that all she had to do was give the latch one final, little yank right before he kissed her, and Reno would be doing the same stunt she did earlier. Except with a little more flair. Humiliation. She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could even think of what to say, Reno's mouth closed over hers so suddenly, she was taken aback. She hadn't prepared for this at all. But if she resist now, he would know something was wrong. Gathering all her final strength, she responded to his kiss, and, pressing him against the rail, yanked the latch hard.

The next thing she knew, Reno fell away from her, hurtling into the air and into the water.

“Man overboard!” Rane yelled so they would halt the ship. She had to grab on to the rails to keep herself from falling. She was still shaken up by the kiss. She couldn’t believe she had done that, but she found herself grinning from ear-to-ear as she saw Reno resurfaced.

Rane grinned and gave him a little wave when she saw his piercing navy eyes glaring up at her, before strutting back into the ship’s main deck as a couple of crewman rushed out to see the commotion.

Reno was dripping wet with water and burning with humiliation at the same time as he walked down the deck and towards his own cabin.

Sharked. Again. With curses.

Reno shook his head. How could he *not* see that coming? She had a boyfriend, for God’s sake! As if she would really want him that badly and hit on him so straightforwardly.

Wouldn’t she?

He pushed open the door to his cabin, headed straight into the bathroom, stripping off his wet clothes, and got into the shower.

As the hot water hit his chest in strong jets, he couldn’t help feeling his face flushing again. How stupid can he be? He really couldn’t believe he – a Turk! – had fallen for her act. Reno tried to recall what really happened at the deck. She had seemed genuinely sincere. He had prided himself, after all these years of experience with women, that he had a sixth sense in reading female’s body language. And Rane’s body language back at the deck *definitely* told him that she was into him. It was impossible that she had tricked him.

That means, he was probably falling rusty. He really need to brush up on his experience with the female population.

Shaking his head, Reno turned off the shower and got out, grabbing a towel and quickly drying himself up. He slung the towel loosely around his waist and flung open the bathroom door, allowing a gust of cold air hitting his bare skin.

Reno was about to take another step out when he stumbled back in shock, grabbing onto the door knob to keep his balance.

Sprawled lazily on his messy bed cluttered with his personal items, flipping through a *Playboy* magazine, was none other than Rane Lockhart.

Rane's blue eyes flitted briefly to him, checking him out from top to toe. "Hello, Turk boy," she calmly greeted, flipping over the page of the magazine.

Reno gaped at her in horror. "What are you doing?"

Rane's perfectly arched eyebrow raised in question. "What does it look like I'm doing?" Her gaze wandered back to the pages of the magazine, and she wrinkled her nose in disdain before tossing the magazine aside. "Had a nice fall?"

Reno stared at her, aware of his nakedness, but he wasn't going to budge until she does. He knew what she was doing. An exact replica of what he did to her earlier. She was a real sly fox.

He folded his arms across his chest, frowning a little. "Okay. You got me. And I'm giving you extra credits, because I *totally* fell for it. But ..." His eyes trailed over to the clutter of *Playboy* magazines on his bed. "Um ...what *were* you doing with those magazines?"

Rane studied her perfect nails as she let out an exaggerated sigh. "Just a little insight of your private life, I guess," she breathed nonchalantly. "I can see that it's very ...*interesting* and fulfilling."

Reno stormed over to the bed and cursed as he grabbed the magazines roughly, blushing furiously, and stuffed them into the nearby bin. Those magazines were actually *Rude's*, but he didn't bother explaining it to her, because he knew she would just lift a perfectly plucked eyebrow and wrinkle her nose at him. Miss High-and-Mighty. He briefly wondered if Cloud was ever intimidated by her superior act. "You don't know the first thing about me," he muttered under his breath.

Rane regarded him steadily with her steely blue eyes. "Is that so?" She tapped a finger on her chin. "Let's see, hmm, what I don't know about Reno Langley. You're a Turk who does dirty, unspeakable jobs that Shin-Ra cannot touch legally, you sleep with every girl you can pick up each night in the bar, you drink booze like it's going out of fad, and who knows what else you do?" She threw her long, bare legs over the bed and stood up, staring at him. "Top of all, you don't believe in male chivalry." She tsk-tsked, shaking her head. "It's such a sad thing that your species is not extinct yet."

Reno glared at her. “Boo hoo.” Despite his sarcasm, he couldn’t help feeling surprised as he wondered how she could she know all those stuff about him and not be afraid of him. She had some guts. “That stuff you said about me may be true, but there’s still a lot that you don’t know.” He decided to do something she wouldn’t like to piss her off. With that, he casually dropped the towel around his waist.

Rane’s eyes widened, she spun around, covering her eyes with both hands. “Aaargggh! I’m scarred for life!” she cried.

“What’s wrong, honey? Something in your eye?” Reno drawled, enjoying her discomfort.

“Put some clothes on, or I’ll never let you live this down!” Rane snapped.

Reno smirked as he stepped around her, stark naked, making sure he was as close to her as possible, and bent over to grab his Turk uniform from his bag. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw her face turning beet red, but she didn’t budge. So she wasn’t going to falter. He was fine with that. He never had a problem with being naked in front of women. He put on a pair of boxers, and stepped into a pair of navy blue pants, and zipped it halfway, not even bothering to do it up properly. He whistled an off-key tune as he snatched up a rumpled white shirt and threw it on, leaving it unbuttoned. Then he pressed close to her, and asked, “Why, what you gonna do? Throw rumors in the grapevine?”

Rane turned to him and smiled smugly, looking up and down at him. “Something like that. I think my Theta sisters would *love* to know that you’re –” she smiled slyly as her eyes flicked briefly to his crotch. “– microscopic.”

Reno’s eyes widened. “I am *not* microscopic!” he snapped. “You obviously didn’t get a good look.”

She started giggling. “I tried. But I couldn’t see anything.”

He knew his face was turning red as a tomato as he racked his brain to find a good comeback. He grinned slowly. “Oh yeah? I’m sure Cloud would *love* to know how you know about my *size*,” Reno smirked. He saw the expression on her face. *Gotcha!*

But Rane rolled her eyes. “Oh please. Cloud knows I would never, ever stoop so *low*.”

How come she always get the good comeback?

Rane shook her head, and smiled, pushing her hair back. "I was just joking, Instructor Langley. I wasn't looking, okay? And I'm being honest. Thank God." She looked at him. "Come on, let's go get dinner. With all the commotion and scheming, it sure used up a lot of my energy."

Reno looked at her suspiciously. "The last time you were nice to me, resulted in my *fall*." He glared at her. "I am not going to fall for your act this time, Miss Oscar Award Winner. I bet you set up a trap for me where if I take one more step out of this room I would fall through a concealed trap and straight into the ocean. Or maybe you poisoned my dinner."

Rane propped her hands on her hips and glowered at him. "So I can't be nice, now?"

"You tricked me with your seductiveness!" Reno yelled, although it wasn't from anger. He was flushing with humiliation again.

Rane burst into a fit of giggles. "Hey, I had a right to! *You* were the one who shoved me overboard. Now *that's* pure mean!" she protested.

"At least I jumped in right after you to make sure you're not eaten by a shark or something," Reno defended himself. "Unlike you. I could've been eaten by a blue whale. You bruised my ego terribly."

"I'm so *sorry*," Rane mocked. "It's your own sleaziness. An ordinary, *non-sleazy* guy would reject me, knowing that I already have a boyfriend."

"Yeah, a guy made of rock," Reno muttered under his breath, and then realized that he shouldn't have let that out. He hoped she didn't hear that.

Rane sighed, brushing her hair back from her face. "You're just a sucker for girls, Instructor Langley, admit it."

Reno frowned. "Why do you keep calling me Instructor Langley?" He wrinkled his nose. "It sounds so dumb."

"Because no matter how annoying and infuriating you are, you still have the top hand," Rane replied with a sigh. "It's a matter of politeness, in case you don't know."

"That's probably the only and last speck of respect you have towards me," Reno mumbled.

"No way!" Rane protested. "I respect you, alright. If I didn't, I would really have taken a peek at your microscopic size. But I respect your concealing it to keep your last bit of dignity."

Reno glared at her, feeling his face flushing again. "For the umpteenth time, I am *not* microscopic! I'll flash you again if you keep taunting me!"

Rane placed a hand on his arm, trying to suppress her giggles again. "Please don't. I'd rather not." She looked up at him, her eyes twinkling. "No, seriously, let's go get dinner. No jokes this time. I'm really starving."

Chapter Three

'Paranoid Thoughts ...or Instinct?'

Last day of SeeD exam, on Gaea's Cliff ...

Too-too-too-too ...

Rane flipped her cell phone shut with a frustrated flick of her wrist and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. She had been trying to call Cloud for the past five minutes, but his phone was engaged.

She rubbed her temples with her finger as she exhaled heavily, thinking about the weird phone conversation last night. She had called Cloud last night, but instead of him answering the phone, Tifa answered and told Rane that Cloud was sleeping. They were in the same group, Tifa told her. Rane thought Tifa sounded a little bit nervous. Then again, if Cloud was sleeping, what was Tifa doing with his phone?

I'm being paranoid, Rane thought wearily. All the pressure and adrenaline from this exam is pushing me to the edge. Still, she couldn't help wondering why Cloud hadn't returned her call since. Tifa *would* have told him that Rane called while he was asleep, wouldn't she?

And now his phone was engaged.

Rane tucked the phone back into her skirt pocket, and pulled her knees up to rest her chin on as she wrapped her arms around her shins. It was freezing cold in Gaea's Cliff, so she had to wear a pair of black stockings to keep her legs warm under the skirt.

They would be going back to Balamb the next day, and Rane couldn't help feeling more than glad that she can finally get over this SeeD exam pressures. She and Reno were getting along a little better than the start, but he was still the same crude, sarcastic, booze-loving, women-loving guy that she would rather keep away from. Oh well. At least they weren't biting each other's heads off anymore.

Rane exhaled and stood up, brushing the seat of her skirt, and walked back to the cave opening. There was only one last thing to do, that is to fight the two-headed monster in the cave. She hoped that it wasn't as tough as the Emerald Weapon in the underwater world yesterday. Rubbing her shoulders, she remembered that the battle had went on for almost *half* an hour. It

was insane. She was an exceptionally good fighter, but she didn't think she could have survived the battle if Reno hadn't had his most powerful limit break.

Rane sighed again, feeling her spirits lacking of energy. As she crossed over the Materia pool, she heard Reno's familiar voice saying, "The &%^\$? As far as I can remember, *you* were the one who wanted us in on this!"

Rane lifted an eyebrow, and, not wanting to seem like she was eavesdropping, she sat by the Materia pool to restore her HP and MP. She really needed that. Perking up one ear to listen in on Reno's call, she pulled her knees up and lowered her head on her knees.

Reno let out an angry exhale. "Yeah, whatever." A pause. "Man, I thought we're over all this shit ...what with Shin-Ra dead and all ...why the %*^& we're still doing jobs for them? Can't Reeve get this job done himself? Geez, we're not their lapdogs, y'know."

Rane froze. This was news. With Shin-Ra corporation down and deceased, she knew that the Turks no longer had a proper job. Which was probably why they found themselves all the way here in Balamb. Now it seems like they were working for Reeve.

"Aw, *&% that, man ...Yeah, you wanna know why? Because I'm sick of taking orders from these guys ...yes, even if it's Reeve! Damn, man, we're freelance now, we don't have to go back to Reeve and Rufus ...Wutai's an effing mess now, why the heck do we need to straighten things out? You know how much I hate that place." Another exasperated, angry exhale. "Fine. Yeah, I'll talk to Rufus. ..."

There was a loud snap as Reno hung up the call abruptly.

Reno appeared from behind a jutting rock, an unpleasant scowl on his face. He noticed her sitting across the pool, and asked, in a surprisingly normal voice, "You ready for the battle?"

Rane looked at him and smiled. "I guess so. I'm sure it won't be as tough as the Emerald Weapon yesterday."

Reno chuckled as he shoved his hands into his pockets and walked over to her. "That was a real b***h. I swear I was going to give up and take off, if you hadn't hit it with Knights of the Rounds. That was a hell of a show."

Rane smiled widely and shook her head. "I didn't even noticed. I think I was too glad to see the Weapon finally on its last legs."

Reno grinned and raked a hand through his red hair. "So, ready to jump on this two-headed monster?" he asked, extending a hand towards her.

Rane looked at his hand, then up at him, and smiled as she took his hand. He helped her up. "Sure. You got the Dragon Armet on?"

Reno nodded. "Of course. I'm not going in there being breathed upon by fire then blasted with ice the next second without the armet to reduce the damages. I'll probably fall dead after the second hit without it."

"No, you won't," Rane replied. "You've still got me. I'm not going to let you take the pleasure of being unconscious through the whole battle while I fight the horrible monster myself. I'm going to make sure you're always up and ready at 'em."

Reno grinned and shook his head. "Ouch. You're just using me. And I thought you really cared."

"I do care!" Rane protested.

He snickered at her reaction. "I'm just messing with ya. Come on. Let's hit 'em."

After the battle ...

"There you go." Reno carefully laid Rane down on the Materia pool, making sure that the magical light hit her. "Feelin' better?"

Rane winced as she tried sitting up. The pain in her ankle was almost unbearable as she gently edged her foot towards the light to heal it. She waited for a while, and the pain decreased a little, but when she tried moving it, a sharp pain jolted up her leg.

"Ouch!" she cried in reflexive response as Reno moved closer to examine her ankle.

"I think it's broken," Reno said, biting his lower lip thoughtfully. "The Materia pool can't heal broken limbs, although it speeds up the recovery process."

Rane leaned back on the cold ground and groaned. "Great. How am I going to climb back down this stupid cliff?" she moaned.

Reno was quiet for a moment, then he looked at her. "I know this would be against the SeeD exam rules, but since I'm an instructor ..." he grinned lazily and took out his phone. "Let me make one call."

Rane looked at him quizzically as he punched in a number from memory. She could hear the ringing although she sat a feet away from Reno. The ringing cut short after the third, and someone apparently answered.

"Hey, man," Reno said, grinning. Rane heard a tinny male's voice, but she couldn't make out the words. "Not so hot ...Actually, I need a favor."

Rane frowned, wondering what Reno was about to do.

He sniggered at something Rufus said, and went on, "Yeah, we're stuck in Gaea's Cliff ...think you could spare us a helicopter? ...Junon ...We gotta catch a ship back to Balamb ..." Reno snorted out a laughter. "...Nah, man, just temporary ...We'll be back soon, after this blows over ...yeah? Alright, cool. Thanks, man. Be seeing you soon." He hung up and turned to Rane, grinning. "Guess what? I just saved you from an impossible hike down the cliff. Just make sure you don't breathe this to anyone, because I won't."

Rane smiled and shook her head. "You better hope we won't get busted, or there goes my SeeD chances down the drain."

Reno placed an open hand over her right ankle, and gently cast a Cure 3 on it. "I won't let that happen. You better believe you're going to be a SeeD." He looked at her and grinned. "After all this, I'm not letting anyone else steal your spot."

Rane chuckled. "It's not really all that important to me. I wouldn't exactly die even if I don't graduate as one."

"After all you've been through?" Reno asked.

Rane hesitated. "Well ...maybe. I mean, I was coming along fine even before I joined Balamb ...and I don't think I'll have any problems going back to that lifestyle." She gingerly touched her ankle as she shifted her uncomfortable sitting position.

Reno cast another Cure 3 on her ankle, then looked up at her. "So ...if you didn't pass this exam, would you stay in Balamb?" he asked.

Rane thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think so. Well ...it depends. Right now, I'm not even sure what's going to happen five minutes from now, let alone five days."

Reno smiled mischievously. "Five minutes from now, I'll be scouring this place for monsters while you sit here by the Materia pool alone. If I don't, we'll be starving until the helicopter arrives."

Rane stared at him in horror. "You're joking, right? You mean you're going to *eat* those creepy creatures for dinner?" she shrieked.

Reno laughed. "Relax. As if. I'd rather live on booze than gross monsters."

Rane rolled her eyes. "Like that is such a sacrifice for you."

He groaned. "I know. Speaking of booze, I haven't had a single sip of alcohol or even a drag of cigarette for the past four days. I wonder if it's bad for my system."

Rane couldn't help laughing. "Right. I believe you would die if you don't fill your body with hard liquor and your lungs with disgusting black smoke." She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Reno grinned. "I know, I know, guilty as charged. You hate drinking and smoking. What *do* you do?"

Rane looked at him with a raised eyebrow, then sighed as she tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Surprisingly, there *are* a lot of other things that you could do without alcohol and cigarettes," she said dryly.

Reno smiled. "Humor me."

"I'm the founder and president of Balamb's sorority club, Theta, so, most of my free time is pretty much used up organizing campaigns, parties, and stuff like that," Rane replied.

Reno's eyes lit up. "Parties?"

Rane laughed. "Non-smoking party. We are probably the last non-smoking sorority sisters left on the Planet."

"Aww, but what do you guys do, then?" Reno asked, frowning his brows.

Rane shrugged. "Usually, our parties are usually in a posh and classy manner, and it's strictly invitations only. We even have Balamb's security personnel guarding our parties in case anyone

causes trouble. Believe it or not, everyone loves our parties, although it's alcohol-and-cigarettes free." She smiled at him.

"So, if you throw a sorority party, can I come?"

Rane chuckled. "It depends. If you behave."

"What do you mean, if I behave?" Reno echoed. "Of course I can. You'll be surprised to know that I can survive one night at a party without smoking to have fun."

Rane gazed at him, and smiled widely. "See, you're learning already." She turned away, letting her hair cascade loosely down her face as she sighed. "I'm so tired. And I don't think I can feel my ankle anymore."

Reno looked at her in concern. "Does it still hurt?"

"Hurt? I can't even feel it anymore," Rane replied dryly.

Reno scooted closer to her, and, grabbing a white shirt out of his bag, gently wrapped it around her ankle. Rane looked at him, and said, "Isn't that your Turk uniform?"

"Yep. Who cares. I've got like a million of these shirts," Reno replied simply, tying a knot around her ankle. "There."

Rane winced a little as she lifted her ankle a little, and then she smiled. "Hey. Looks and feels nice." She turned to him and flashed a smile. "Thanks. I guess maybe you *do* have a heart, after all, Reno Langley."

Chapter Four

'Between Love and Game'

Days later, back in the Turks' quarters in Balamb City ...

Reno tossed ten shiny orbs onto Rude's office desk. "Here you go." He perched on the edge of Rude's desk.

Rude stared at the orbs, then glanced up at Reno. "What the hell?"

Reno exhaled slowly. "I'm calling off the stupid bet."

Rude stared at him for a moment, then leaned back in his chair and smirked smugly. "Oh, I get it. You can't steal her away from Cloud, can you? I told you it's going to be a tough challenge."

Reno looked at his stoic friend, and shook his head. "It's not that."

"It's not that?" Rude echoed. "Dude, you had five *whole* days alone with her, and yet you couldn't come up with a move. You must be falling rusty."

"No, I'm not," Reno snapped, annoyed at Rude's snide remarks. He took a deep breath. "Look, you win, okay? You got those ten mastered All materias you want so badly, go grab 'em, sell 'em, and be a rich man. I don't care what you do. But just leave this whole bet thing alone." He jumped off the desk and started to leave.

"I'm not accepting them," Rude called to him.

Reno scowled and turned around. "Why not?"

"Because it's too easy. I wanna know why you want this bet called off. Something obviously happened."

Reno glared at his friend. He wasn't going to tell Rude. He can't. He wasn't even sure himself. All he knew was that whenever he looked at her genuine smile, he felt his insides being eaten up by guilt. He couldn't do it even if he wanted to. He had liked a lot of other girls, but ...the feelings for her were different. He couldn't explain it. Especially not to Rude. He'll only burst out laughing. "I

just don't want to bet on her, okay? Take the damned materias." With that, he turned around and left the room with a huff before Rude could protest anymore.

Reno walked out to the verandah of the quarters, holding a bottle of beer he had retrieved from the refrigerator. He tilted the bottle and took a long swig. The cold liquid felt good on his throat, although it was a cold day.

Exhaling heavily, he leaned his elbows on the railings, looking out at the far ocean. The quarters were on a good location; right next to the beach, and the scenery was more than pleasant.

He heard footsteps, but didn't bother turning around to see who it was. A moment later, Tseng leaned on the railings next to him, following his stare out into the ocean. "Something on your mind?" the Turk leader asked mildly.

Reno glanced at Tseng briefly. "What makes you think so?" he mumbled.

"I overheard your conversation with Rude. Didn't seem like a pleasant one to me, I think." Tseng paused. "This about Cloud's girlfriend?"

For some reasons, Reno felt annoyed that Tseng had referred to Rane as 'Cloud's girlfriend'. He snapped, "She has a name."

Tseng lifted an eyebrow at Reno's sudden harshness. Not like he wasn't used to it. "Okay. I'm not leaving until you tell me what's up."

Reno shoved his hand through his red hair, and exhaled. "Nothing," he muttered. "Rude and I had this stupid bet that if I could get Rane on a *real* date with me, he would give me ten mastered All materias." Now that he was saying it, Reno felt stupid. He couldn't believe he had accepted the bet in the first place. As if Rane was some kind of object. She was far from it. Only he didn't see that at the first place.

"So what happened? You lost the bet?"

"No. I gave him the ten materias and told him to call it off."

Tseng observed Reno carefully. "Why?"

Reno was quiet for a moment. Why? Why did he call off the bet? Why did he feel like a jerk every time he think about how he had so readily accepted Rude's stupid bet? "I don't know," he said

quietly, with truth. "Maybe because ...I can't do it. She's not just any ordinary girls. She's ..." he trailed off.

Tseng stared at him a moment, then said quietly, "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Reno snapped his head around to look at Tseng in shock. "What? I'm not!" he said defensively, although he wasn't sure what he was being defensive about, his face burning suddenly.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Reno," Tseng said dryly. "Let me tell you something; when you're in love with someone, you start being defensive about her, you notice every little quirk she does that you never noticed before, you feel lonely every time you're not around her, and ...in your eyes, she's perfect."

Reno thought of Tseng's words, and felt a dull pang in his heart. *Is it true? Can it be true ...that I'm really in love with Rane Lockhart? Me, the guy who can never stick to one girl for more than twenty-four hours?* Tseng's words left him speechless for a moment as he tried to think of something. "That's silly," he coughed out a nervous laugh. "I only knew her for less than two whole week. And I didn't even like her when we first met. She was nasty to me, and ..." *Because I kicked her dog,* he silently added.

"Nasty? That's probably because she didn't like your sorts."

Reno swallowed and glared at Tseng. "Thanks a bunch."

Tseng cracked a smile. "Just joking. But ..." his expression turned serious. "Does she know about your ...feelings?"

"Are you kidding? Of course not," Reno responded, making a face. "Do you think I'd go up to her and tell her I love her, what with her having a boyfriend and all?"

"Then what do you want to do?" Tseng asked quietly.

Reno sighed. "Beats me. I'll just ...wait. And see. I don't know, maybe this will blow over."

"If you wait for it to blow over, I guess you'll be waiting your whole life." Tseng nodded his head towards the beach, drawing Reno's attention. "Speaking of the *angel* ..."

Reno followed Tseng's gaze, and his breath caught in his throat. Sitting alone on the beach, in the far right of the sandy strip, was *her*. With her puppy. Alone. Without the spiky-head blond. He inhaled sharply, observing her quietly.

Tseng saw his expression, and urged, "Go talk to her."

Reno didn't need anymore persuasion. He set the beer bottle on the railings and left the verandah just as Elena headed past him. He stopped for a moment and turned slightly, watching Elena walk over to Tseng, who had his back to her, and placed a hand on his arm. Tseng turned, and broke into a wide, contented smile when he saw her. They hugged blissfully.

Reno turned back and headed out of the quarters. He was envious of Tseng and Elena, and wished his own love life wasn't that complicated.

He shoved his hands into his pockets as he strolled down the beach, keeping his eyes drawn on Rane's back all the time. When he was a few feet away, he stopped, and observed her carefully. She was wearing a short denim skirt over a pair of black stockings, with a fawn-colored suede jacket. Her glossy chestnut hair tumbled in a perfect, straight sheet down her back, fluttering lightly in the salty breeze.

Taking off the red scarf he had slung around his neck earlier, Reno walked over to her and gently put it around her neck, causing her to turn in response. "Thought you could use this," Reno offered as he plopped down on the sand next to her.

Rane looked at him, and smiled. "Thank you. Although I think it clashes with my outfit, and suits your red hair much better," she said playfully.

Reno chuckled. "Nah ...you can keep it. It looks good on you, trust me."

Rane wrapped her hands with both corners of the scarf, looking down at the red material. Her puppy started sniffing her hands, and she laughed. "Gizmo, stop it! You're getting your drool all over me!" she protested, but even as she said so, she unwound her hands from the scarf and hugged the little dog. "You're impossible to get mad at, and I love you still."

Reno smiled at the sight, and for one wild second, he wondered if she would ever say that to *him*. *Yeah right*, an inner voice scoffed. *As if. You're not her type at all.* "I feel left out," he said dryly.

Rane turned to him, and smiled widely. "I'm sorry. I –" She looked down at Gizmo, then back up at Reno. "Actually, you *have* met. Under very bad circumstances." She cradled her puppy in her arms, and looked at him with a smile, holding out one paw towards Reno. "Let's start over again, shall we?"

Reno couldn't help laughing. He took the puppy's paw with his thumb and index finger, and shook it gently. "Alright. My name is Reno. What's yours?"

"I'm Gizmo," Rane replied, a mischievous smile spreading across her face as she shook Gizmo's paw in a gesture of waving at Reno. "Nice to meet you, Reno."

"Nice to meet you too, Gizmo," Reno replied with a grin as Gizmo poked out his nose and sniffed his hand. "But it's even nicer to meet your mistress."

Rane glanced up at him suddenly, her eyes meeting his, then she lowered them as her cheeks flushed pink. She set Gizmo down on the sand and petted his shiny coat. Then she turned back to Reno. "What are *you* doing here, huh?" she asked, her eyes twinkling.

Reno gestured back at the Turks' quarters, turning his body a little. He saw two figures out on the verandah, undoubtedly Tseng and Elena. "I live there," he replied.

Rane looked at him in surprise. "Really? That's so cool! Right next to the beach!" she gushed.

Reno laughed. "It's not like you don't live next to the beach either."

"Yeah, but that's different. You have such a gorgeous view of the ocean," Rane sighed, almost wistfully.

"Well, you're always welcome at our quarters," Reno offered.

"Our?" She looked at him. "You live with your friends?"

Reno nodded. "Yeah. It's the Turks' quarters." He smiled. "So it's kind of a mad house."

Rane laughed. "I can imagine." She pulled her jacket around her tighter, and wrapped the scarf neatly around her neck, as she wrapped her arms around her knees and huddled close to herself. "The scarf is so warm. I didn't even know you own any other piece of clothing besides your uniform," she teased.

Reno chuckled. "Yeah, well. It was a gift from my –" he broke off, dark thoughts returning to his mind as he remembered.

Rane turned to him. "From your?" she prodded.

Reno was silent for a moment as his mind allowed the memories of the past to return. *Keep this, it looks good on you, doesn't it? It matches your hair ...so red.* His mom. He still remembered her scent, how her loving hugs felt when he was little. "What's wrong? Your mood seemed to dissipate all of a sudden," she said quietly.

Reno sighed and stared ahead. "Nothing. Just thinking. That scarf was my mom's. She gave it to me before she left." He ran a hand through his messy red hair.

"Well ...do you want it back? I'm not really frozen, you know. I know you think I'd be freezing in this skirt ...but really, I'm quite warm," Rane said, a little hint of teasing note in her voice.

Reno glanced at her, and chuckled, a mischievous smile slowly spreading across his face. "Actually, I do have a problem with your skirt. It keeps averting my attention to your legs."

Rane swatted his arm lightly. "Shut up," she muttered, blushing.

He grinned for a moment, then said quietly, "You can keep the scarf. It looks good on you. Better than it does on me."

Rane giggled softly. "I'm sure. I'd prefer this scarf on you, though. Besides ...your mom wouldn't like it if she found out you gave away something that she gave you."

Reno's expression darkened as he turned away. "I don't think she'd even noticed," he muttered under his breath.

Rane observed him quietly for a moment, then pushed her hair over her shoulder and said softly, "Where's your mom, Reno?"

Reno stared at the sand, his elbows propped on his knees. "She's gone," he said flatly. He was silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts, then went on in a bitter voice, "She left my dad and I when I was five for another man. She gave me the scarf and promised me she would come back but she never did. I wasn't a good enough reason for her to stay and neither was my dad."

Rane was silent for a moment, and it wasn't until she placed her hand over his fist that he realized that he had been clenching his fists hard. "That's not true, Reno," she said quietly, easing his fingers free.

"Yes, it is," Reno retorted, almost angrily, clenching his fists again. The anger and hurt that he had kept bottled up inside for all these years were suddenly gushing out. "I was such an ass to

my dad, that instead of helping him get through my mom leaving us, I joined a gang and got into so many fights it's a wonder I'm still alive. My dad ..." he paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, he felt his voice thick with emotions. "He died when I was seventeen, and the last words I ever spoke to him were in anger. If Tseng hadn't pulled me off the streets and whipped my ass into shape, I'd have been lying in a gutter somewhere, dead, a long time ago." He paused again, then said bitterly, "The only reason I joined the Turks was because I had nothing else left in my life."

Rane sat there quietly for a moment, watching him wordlessly.

Exhaling softly, she took off the scarf around her neck, and wrapped it around his neck. "Yes, you do, silly. You still have this scarf," Rane said lightly, trying to ease his anger.

Reno stared into her mesmerizing crystal blue eyes. "Like it means anything," he mumbled. "Like it would change anything."

Rane placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Your mother left you this scarf so you wouldn't forget her, Reno. You're right; it won't change anything. But it *does* mean something. She gave it to you in hope that your love for her would never die. Just like the love she has for you," she said gently.

Reno snorted. "If she loved me so much, why would she leave in the first place?" he retorted bitterly.

"We all can't always be there for the person we love, Reno," Rane said quietly.

Reno was quiet as he stared out at the far horizon, thinking of what she had just said. *We all can't always be there for the person we love ...*

Rane observed him, then quietly exhaled, suddenly feeling poignant and sad. "I don't like seeing you sad, Reno," Rane said softly, trying to lighten the atmosphere between them. "What happened to the cocky, arrogant, annoying Turk that I first met?"

Despite his dark mood, Reno smiled a little as he turned to her. "He's still here. He just doesn't want to come out, that's all."

Rane smiled as she tilted her head aside. "Why not?" she asked playfully.

Reno turned and gazed into her beautiful eyes, feeling a dull ache in his ribs as he realized that she had absolutely no idea about his feelings for her. He mustered a smile. "He needs a rest. He has been in control for way too long," Reno replied quietly.

A smile spread across her face. "So who am I talking to now?" she asked softly, her crystal blue eyes gazing deeply into his.

"Um ..." Reno trailed off as he realized his thoughts were in a mush from the way she was staring at him. "...just another part of me that no one has seen before."

Rane gazed at him, then smiled softly. "Is that so?"

Reno nodded slowly. "Yeah. He hasn't found the right person to reveal himself to." As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized that he shouldn't have said that. What was she going to think now?

Rane looked at him uncertainly. "I think it's just you who doesn't want people to think that you actually have feelings," she said softly. She shook her head, then smiled at him. "You look so serious."

Reno chuckled. "Are you surprised?"

"Of course. You were never serious before," Rane replied lightly. "Guess what? The Thetas are throwing a sorority party tonight, and you and your friends are invited," she said, changing the subject.

Reno looked at her. "Really? Hey-y, party! That's cool," he grinned.

"Yes. But remember it's a non-smoking party," she teased.

"Hey, I can live with that," Reno assured, starting to smile. *As long as I can be with you ...*

Chapter Five

'Betrayal is more than a Sin'

At the Theta party ...

Nine-thirty, Rane thought, glancing at her elegant silver watch with a sweet purple face. The party had started two hours ago, and she only had barely enough time to say hi to Cloud because she had been busy making sure everything was perfect. Now he was missing. She wondered where he was.

Brushing away a loose chestnut strand that had fallen from her sophisticated French bun, Rane sighed and was about to walk over to the verandah of the Theta's house when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around and found herself staring into a pair of twinkling deep blue eyes. "Reno!" she breathed, breaking into a wide smile.

Reno grinned at her, his eyes roaming over her simple but sexy red dress. "Hey. You look breathtaking ...and red. Like my hair."

Rane giggled, shaking her head, and looked up at him. "Thanks. You look ..." she trailed off as she took in his attire. He was still wearing the same navy jacket and pants, and white shirt, but this time, they were neatly pressed. "...neat," she finished, not being able to resist a smile.

Reno laughed. "Thank you," he said modestly. "I bribed Elena to iron these clothes for me."

Rane laughed and shook her head. "That's a change," she teased. "Oh, by the way, help yourself to the refreshments, but please remember your table manners, okay?" she said playfully.

"No! You mean I can't eat with my fingers?" Reno asked, pretending to be aghast.

Rane laughed and swatted him on the arm. "Go ahead. I'll be right back." She gave him a little wave, then hurried off towards the verandah. She didn't think Cloud would be in the verandah, because it was freezing cold outside. Almost everyone at the party was dancing inside, and as she stepped out onto the verandah, she could see that there was no one there. A gust of cold wind blew past, and she shivered. Just as she was about to turn around and escape from the cold, she saw a glimpse of blond hair out of the corner of her eyes.

Rane turned back, and, moving out a little further, straining her eyes in the dimmed verandah, she saw her boyfriend. She took a step further, breaking into a relieved smile. "Cloud –" She stopped dead in mid-step when she realized that her boyfriend was not alone. A shocked gasp escaped her throat before she could stop herself.

Standing in the dark corner of the verandah, was her boyfriend Cloud Strife – in a tight clinch with Tifa – kissing passionately. At the sound of her gasp, they both jumped apart, their wide eyes and shocked expression clearly reflecting her own.

Rane stared at Cloud, her whole body numb. *This can't be happening to me. Not here. Not at my sorority party. My boyfriend and my cousin? No, it can't be. This must be a nightmare*, her mind was chanting over and over. Cloud ...her best friend for four years, and boyfriend for a year ...kissing Tifa, her cousin. Something struck her suddenly. Tifa who had answered Rane's call instead of Cloud and how she had sounded nervous.

The awful realization sank deep in her like a ton of bricks thrown into the water, and her hand flew to her mouth as she tried to keep the tears from spilling down her cheeks like Niagara Falls.

Cloud, pale-faced, took one step towards her. "Rane –"

The first thing that she wanted to do was break down right then and there and slap him. But she didn't. Rane stood her ground and stared at Cloud, trying not to show any sign of weaknesses. She couldn't let them see her cry. She couldn't let them bruise her pride like this. And although she didn't turn to see, she knew there were some witnesses hanging around the verandah now, obviously noticing the sudden change in the party.

"I think you both know the way out," Rane said in a calm and steady voice that surprised even herself. She sounded calmer than she had expected, and she was glad. She wasn't going to bawl her eyes out and make a huge scene right in the middle of this party.

Cloud stared at her, his eyes filled with emotions. He looked as if he was about to say something, but Rane looked away stubbornly. Knowing better than to make a scene, Cloud turned silently and pushed past her sorority sisters who had gathered at the entrance.

"You too, you backstabbing b***h," Rane heard her sister Rynn calling out to Tifa in an indignant voice. "Get out of here."

Rane closed her eyes, and she felt hot tears burning the back of her lids. She felt cold all over, but it was not because of the weather. She was cold inside. She still couldn't believe Cloud could

have done such thing to her. And Tifa too. Two of the people she loved and cared about. How could this happen?

“Rane, are you alright?” she heard her sister asking as she put her arms around Rynn’s shoulders.

Rane opened her eyes and a tear rolled down her cheek, which she quickly brushed away as she nodded. “I’m fine.”

Rynn hugged her tighter to her side, and gently led her away from the cold verandah. “Come on, it’s cold out here. Let’s go in.”

Rane shook her head and ignored everyone else who, she knew, were looking at her. She pulled away from Rynn and took a deep shaky breath. “I’m not staying here. I need to ...” Without waiting for another word from her sister, Rane pushed past the throng of dancers and left the Theta house through the back door which leads out onto the beach.

The second she got out of the house and into the cold darkness, the bottled up emotions and tears exploded out of her uncontrollably.

“Aren’t you going after her?”

Reno snapped his gaze from the back door where Rane had ran out, and turned to see Tseng looking back at him. “She ...” he trailed off. The look on her face ...he didn’t think anyone could have been so *hurt*. And the way she told Cloud off ...it must have taken every ounce of her strength not to burst into tears. He exhaled. “She needs time alone.”

Tseng sighed. “When are you going to learn? Go after her, Reno,” he prodded gently.

“What if she yells at me to piss off?” Reno asked doubtfully, although he wanted to run after her.

“She won’t. She’s too hurt,” Tseng said simply. “Trust me.”

“While I go talk to her, are you going to hunt down that cheating bastard and kill him for good this time?”

Tseng looked at Reno. “Are you sure ...”

Reno sighed. "Of course. But I wouldn't want to cause a huge commotion in this school." With that, he headed towards and out the back door. The cold breeze bit his skin as he walked down the sandy beach, searching for Rane. He walked on a bit more, feeling uncertain, then he saw her sitting under a palm tree, knees pulled up, her head buried in her arms. From a few feet away, Reno could hear her quiet, heartbreaking sobs.

Reno carefully sat down next to her, taking off his navy jacket, and putting on her. Rane looked up, and gazed at him through tear-filled eyes. The usually twinkling crystal blue eyes were filled with so much hurt, that Reno felt his heart twisting painfully.

"Hey," Reno said softly, reaching out on an impulse to brush away the tears from her cheeks with his thumb.

Despite her tears, Rane gave him a small smile, and Reno couldn't help marveling at her surprising inner strength. She took a deep, shaky breath, and closed her eyes, pressing her forehead back down on her arms which were rested atop her knees. A quiet sob escaped her throat, and she started crying again.

Reno reached out and tentatively placed his arm around her shoulders, trying to comfort her. The sound of her sobs made him feel sad. He didn't think anyone could cry that much over someone. She must have loved Cloud a lot, and the bastard did this to her. If *she* had been Reno's girlfriend ...he would never even think of doing something like this. As Rane sat there sobbing her heart out, Reno sat there not knowing what to do, except plotting a hundred ways to make sure Cloud suffer as long as possible before he dies. He regretted that those times when the Turks were dispatched by Shin-Ra to hunt Cloud and his friends down and terminate them, Reno and his friends had let them go – only because they were off duty. He wished he had killed him then and there. That would've saved much.

After a long time, Rane finally calmed down a little. She lifted her head and wiped her tears away, executing a soft sigh.

"I can't believe you sat here listening to me bawl my eyes out," she said softly. "When the party is still on. I didn't know the party was *that* boring for you."

Reno hesitated, carefully choosing his words. "No, it's not boring. I just ...well, actually ...I'd prefer being with you," he replied lightly. "Even if you soaked my shirt and my jacket with the tears you've cried."

Rane let out a quiet laugh in spite of herself. "I'm sorry. And you even got these pressed." She shook her head and sighed dejectedly. "I'm hopeless."

"No, you're not. You're just perfect." Reno clamped his mouth shut as soon as he said that.

Rane ran a hand through her silky chestnut mane and exhaled, closing her eyes. "I wish."

"You *are*," Reno said firmly, taking her hand away from her head. "Maybe you don't see it ...but I do," he said quietly.

Realizing what he had said, Rane slowly turned to face him. "Where did that come from?" she asked softly, once again mesmerizing him with those blue eyes.

"From ..." Reno stopped himself before he could say, ...*my heart*. He couldn't reveal his feelings to her. Not now. Not tonight. Not after what she had been through. He would only leave her in confusion. He smiled lightly at her. "From what I've seen of you. I know."

Rane gazed at him, her eyes sad. "You're so different now that when I first met you," she said quietly.

Reno lowered his eyes. "How so?"

Rane shook her head a little, and smiled softly. "You were so rude, harsh, impatient, and stuck-up ...when I first met you. I'd never thought I'd come this far with someone whom I first thought was a complete jerk."

Reno chuckled. "Thanks."

"That was before." She smiled. "Now I have a different impression on you."

Reno met her eyes. "Is it good, or bad?"

She gazed back into her eyes for a while before replying softly, "It's good enough for me." She closed her eyes momentarily, and when she opened them, she stared out at the dark ocean in the distant, a tear escaping from beneath her eyelid. "I feel like I'm in a ...nightmare. I just want to wake up." Tears rolled down her cheeks so silently, Reno wouldn't have known she was crying if he wasn't gazing at her.

Reno didn't know what to say. He hesitated for a moment, then reached out and put a soothing hand on her arm. "I can't tell you that you're only dreaming ...but if I could, I would wish that you are."

Rane closed her eyes again, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Yeah. I would wish that too," she whispered softly.

Chapter Six

'A Turk's Confession'

Three days later ...

Guess I'm really going to be leaving this place without telling her, Reno thought to himself, a pang of sadness hitting him as he walked into the Balamb Garden. But then again, how the heck am I going to let her know? And besides, it's not like she's going to jump with joy when she hears what I have to say.

Reno sighed as he shoved his hand through his red hair. *To tell or not to tell ...that is the question ...he thought sourly. Where did hell did that come from? I didn't even know I actually knew a phrase from Shakespeare's work ...I must be going crazy. Either that, or an alien has invaded my body and gradually changing me inside out ...*

Reno stopped when he approached the dormitory. He stared at the pathway ahead. *Should I go see her?* He knew around this time, she would be in her dorm, studying. So completely unlike him. She would probably scoff and laugh in his face if he tried telling her about his feelings. Or worse, she'll probably slap him. Or worse, she would order her Gizmo to attack him as a revenge for what Reno did the first time.

He decided to just drop by and ...well, say hi. Then he would leave. Maybe. If she didn't invite him in. Taking a deep breath, Reno walked into the dormitory, and towards her room.

As he walked down a hallway that led to Rane's dorm, he could hear someone pounding insistently on a door. *What the hell?* Reno thought absently, irritated. *What is with these people? Don't they know how to respect other's privacy?*

Suddenly, he heard a very familiar male voice calling, "Rane, open the door! I know you're there!"

Reno froze and his eyebrows shot up. He could recognize the stupid voice anywhere. Not wanting to waste anymore precious time, he hurried over to Rane's room, and surely enough, Mr. Can't-Get-The-Clue-That-Rane-Doesn't-Want-Him-Knocking-On-Her-Door was there, banging on her closed door as if he would die if he didn't break down the door first.

Reno frowned unpleasantly when he saw the blond-haired jerk at Rane's door. He casually walked up to him. "Don't think she wants you anywhere here at all, so why don't you take your sorry ass and beat it?" Reno asked mildly.

Cloud turned and glowered at Reno. "Who the hell do you think you are?" he snapped. "Go shove a beer bottle down your throat and stick your nose somewhere else! This is none of your business."

"Oh, believe me, I was going to do that, but then I couldn't find the bottle, and I realized that maybe *you* took it, had a sip, and *that's* why you kissed Tifa, right? I mean, you can't possibly have done that *consciously* ...or can you?"

Cloud's expression turned stormy and his eyes darkened, but before he could even open his mouth to retort back, the door flung open, and Rane stood there, her face calm as if she was at an art convention instead. Reno felt his heart lifting as she looked straight at him, completely ignoring Cloud. "Hey ...what are you doing here?" she asked in a normal tone.

"Rane –" Cloud started.

"Just came by to talk to you," Reno replied with a smile. "*Privately*," he added with an emphasis.

Cloud turned to Reno and glared at him. "Hey, do you *mind*? I think what *I* have to say is much more important than what *you* have to say," he snapped.

"You mean, important for you or for her?" Reno asked calmly.

"I don't want to hear what you have to say, Cloud," Rane said quietly, not looking at both of them in the eyes.

Cloud turned back to her, and took a deep breath. "Look, Rane, please. Just hear me out, okay? It's been three days."

Rane closed her eyes for a split second before opening them again. She looked as if she wished she was anywhere else except standing in front of them both. She looked at Reno. "Reno ...do you want to go make yourself a cup of tea and wait inside? I'll ...talk to you after, okay?"

Reno shot Cloud a smug look before nodding. "Sure." He pushed back Cloud and stepped into the dorm, leaving the door ajar so that he could eavesdrop and make a cup of tea or whatever at the same time. He went to the fridge and pulled the door open, scanning for an alcoholic

beverage. *None!* He realized in horror. *How can she live without alcohol?* Shaking his head, he just grabbed a glass off a cabinet and filled it with cold tap water, heading out to the living room and choosing a spot on the couch closest to the door so that he could listen in on their conversation.

Cloud was saying, "...I know what you're thinking, but it's not like that."

Rane was quick to answer. She snapped, "Really? You could've fooled me. You sure looked like you were kissing. And not for the first time."

Reno flinched. *Ouch.* He really couldn't imagine how she had felt when she caught them kissing. It must have been horrible to her.

"That was the first time, Rane, I swear. And – she was upset!" Cloud protested.

Reno snorted a little too loudly, then he quickly regained his composure and cleared his throat. Really ...that was some *lame* excuse.

"Are you telling me that you kissed her because she was upset?" Rane's voice was full of anger. And hurt. Reno could tell.

"No! Look ...uh ...Vincent dumped her, and she was crying ...and ...Rane, I know how this sounds, okay, but please, I know it was a mistake. I'm sorry, I really am, Please, just –"

"I don't believe this," Rane muttered. "Don't get me wrong. It's not that I don't feel bad for Vincent leaving her, Cloud, but that still doesn't mean you have to resort to this kind of ...betrayal. I know she's upset, but ...what about *my* feelings? Did you ever stop to think about me?" Reno heard her voice trembled a little. As if she was trying to hold back the tears. "It's bad enough that you ...kissed her, but at *my* sorority party? What were you trying to prove, Cloud? Did our relationship really mean that little to you?" Her voice was tearful now, but still angry.

Reno took a sip of the water, then shoved a hand through his red hair. As much as he didn't want to eavesdrop, he had to listen to what the stupid dope gave as an excuse.

"It's not that –" Cloud began, but Rane interrupted him.

"We went through so much together, Cloud," Rane said softly, her voice steadying a little. "Four years of friendship, a year of relationship ...how you can even *think* of actually doing this to me is

really beyond me. I really don't understand. I don't care about your explanation ...it won't change anything. We're over."

"Rane, listen." Reno heard a rasping noise that sounded as if Cloud had grabbed her arm to stop her from leaving him. "The whole thing with Tifa ...I know that was a mistake. I shouldn't have done that. But ...it was only a kiss."

There was a pause, and Reno held his breath.

"I love you, Cloud," Rane said in a low, shaky voice. "I love you so much, it hurts me to leave you, but it hurts me even more to stay with you knowing what you did. How could you have done that to me?"

"Rane, I love you. I really do ...and I'm not lying. You mean a lot to me, and you know that. I don't want to lose you, lose what we had ...because I love you so much. Can't you see that?"

There was a short silence, then Rane replied in an almost inaudible voice, "See? You wanna know what I can see? I can see you and Tifa in each other's arms, lips-locking like there is no tomorrow. Is that enough? Or do you want to know more? I can see that you obviously don't have any loyalty and faith to me. I can see that you don't love me the way I loved you." Her voice sounded as if she was in tears. "I can see that from now on, I don't know of any Cloud Strife in my life. And I don't want to. It hurts too much."

"Rane, don't do this, please –"

"You want to go back to how we used to be, Cloud?" Rane interrupted. This time, Reno was sure that she was crying. "I'm going to be completely honest with you. I really don't think we can. You wanna know why?" There was a pause, and a soft snuffle. "Because you were the only person I've ever loved so deeply, the only person that I actually gave my heart and soul to, the only person who could shatter my heart so terribly." There was another brief pause. "And ...no one can mend that. Not even you."

"Rane, please! Please ...don't do this to me. To us. Are you ...really going to throw our relationship away like this?"

This time, the silence stretched for so long, Reno thought they had left. But then he heard her voice. "It wasn't my choice. It was yours. Good bye, Cloud Strife."

Reno quickly grabbed the newspaper off the coffee table as he heard Rane pushing the door open as she came in, then locking it as quickly as she can before Cloud could do anything else. He carefully peeked over his shoulder, and saw her sitting with her back against the door, her knees pulled up to prop her arms as she buried her face in them.

He waited for five seconds, making sure that Cloud was really gone, then got up and walked over to her. "Hey," Reno said gently, crouching as he put a hand on her shoulder. He heard a quiet sob, then she lifted her head, inhaling deeply as she wiped away the streaks of tears on her flushed cheeks with her fingers.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you have to always see me crying like a baby," Rane said tearfully, sobbing.

"Hey, why are you apologizing to me for? You haven't done anything wrong. It's okay to cry, Rane. I don't care if you cry a whole bucket of tears each day ...I'll stay by your side and you never have to say sorry for that," Reno said quietly, moving closer to her.

She sniffed and closed her eyes momentarily as if trying to push away the pain. "I feel so stupid, Reno. How could ...?" she trailed off as tears choked her throat.

"Shh, it's alright," Reno assured soothingly.

"I wish I could just run away, Reno," she whispered despondently. "I don't even want to live here ...anymore."

Reno gazed at her silently for a moment. "Do you really want to run away?" he asked quietly.

Rane nodded without hesitation, taking another deep, shaky breath as she closed her eyes. "Yes," she whispered. "I do."

"With me?"

Rane opened her eyes and turned to him.

Reno cracked a smile reassuringly at her. "Well, actually, I came here to tell you I'm going back to Midgar. And ...since you said you want to run away ...if you want to, you can always come with us Turks. With me. I won't complain about that."

Rane stared at him for a moment, different emotions going in and out of her crystal blue eyes. Then, after a long silence, she said, "You mean ...go back to Midgar and leave this place, with everyone else behind?"

Reno hesitated. "Yes." *I'm such an idiot. I shouldn't have asked that ...now she'll probably feel disgusted with me for trying to take over Cloud's place.*

"Of course I'd love to."

Reno looked up at her in surprise. "You – what?"

Rane took a deep breath. "I can't live here anymore. Going back to Midgar would be a good change."

Reno felt a stupid grin spreading across his face. "So ...you're coming with me?"

"Sure ...whether you like it or not," she said with a small smile.

Reno gazed at her, into her crystal blue eyes reflected with a sheen of tears, and as she gazed back at him, he told himself that if he could be with Rane, there wasn't anything else in the world he would want. "Of course I'd like that," he said firmly.

The corners of Rane's lips turned up slightly into a faint smile, and as she closed her eyes tightly, she exhaled and relaxed against him. Then she breathed, in a voice barely audible, "You're the best, Reno Langley. You're my lifesaver."

Reno pressed his lips lightly against her hair, and replied quietly, "And you, Rane Lockhart ...are my light."

* * * *The End* * * *

