

Finding Elvis

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Homicide detective Lieutenant Shauna Hawkins is in Vegas with her friends Ted and Lisa and has to find out just who got married last night. As a lesbian, that might be awkward. A series of dead bodies makes it a lot more serious. This has a real plot and three dimensional characters. It's more than just a wanker.

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Chapter One: A Rude Awakening

I hated not knowing how I'd gotten someplace, but that's how I woke up in a Vegas shower. My name is Shauna Hawkins, or as I preferred, Hawk, and I'm a Lieutenant in the Homicide Division of the Houston Police Department in Texas. Not that I was in Houston, or in uniform, when I woke up, mind you. Closing my eyes, I tried to remember what I could.

I remembered coming to Vegas last week for a vacation my captain had "suggested," and I found the place was all it was cracked up to be, and a lot less than what I expected. Vegas was a huge contrast between high class and low life. Anything you wanted you could get, and it showed. Bright, fast and decadent: I loved it all and did it all, without doing anything illegal.

This vacation wasn't just your normal trip. The last week had been hell back in Houston. Ted Stansbury, Lisa Davis and I met, which was great, though it was in the worst possible way. Someone had tried to kill Lisa, and had killed her best friend, blowing up Lisa's car in front of both Lisa and Ted. I turned Ted and Lisa's budding relationship into a threesome when I poked my nose into the mix. The last few days had involved running for our lives and finding killers. I still wasn't sure how one white separatist group could infiltrate so many levels of the local governments back home without *someone* noticing. To my mind, there had to be more people still at work that hadn't been uncovered yet, but thankfully it wasn't my job to look into that mess. The Texas Rangers would get to sort that out.

We'd hit all the big casinos and the famous Strip. Party-goers thronged the streets having a grand time. We didn't do anything very strenuous for a couple of days so that Ted could get back up to speed. He'd been pretty banged up in the mess down in Houston last week. Then we decided to have a big night out on the town and see what we could find to do while getting totally trashed but without getting arrested.

Perhaps it wasn't the best idea we'd ever had. At least, that was my thought as I sat in the shower. I felt like I had been run over by a truck and the bathroom reeked of worship to the porcelain god. Actually, I smelled that way, too. I groaned and pulled myself to my feet slowly. I was mostly dressed but my shoes and underwear were missing. My dress was messy, but mostly intact. I licked my lips and tasted pussy, so I must have gotten lucky. Lisa, I assume. Inside, I felt very, very moist. Ted must have really given me a good ride.

I shook my head. It was still very strange how I, a life-long lesbian, had fallen even this far for a man. Life was stranger than fiction, I guess. As a lesbian, I had been with women, but never a man. Ted had changed that. Not that I was more interested in that than a fine woman like Lisa. It was just that my horizons had been expanded. While we were fighting and running for our lives, we grew closer and it just clicked. Her more than him, I admit, but I was developing a growing relationship with *both* of them. Mostly Lisa, but Ted to a lesser degree, had managed to attract me enough to overcome my ingrained aversion to men, and that still left me unbalanced. What I

couldn't lose sight of was that I was simply a guest in *their* relationship. I could tell that they loved each other and the desire to find a woman of my own was again starting to poke at my surface thoughts, conflicting with the desire to keep getting closer to them. I hadn't felt that way since my last steady left me to start a family three years ago. Whatever happened, I didn't want to spoil our friendship and this didn't feel serious.

As I climbed to my feet, I started to wonder why I was in the shower, but then shrugged. It was anyone's guess. I stripped slowly and carefully, holding onto the wall to keep the room from spinning. Turning on the water, I soaked my pounding head and scrubbed the worst of the stench off of me. I thought I had learned this lesson in college; hangovers should be avoided at all costs. I had only the very vaguest of memories of last night. Lots of drinking and walking (staggering really) up and down streets. Various clubs, cabs and throbbing music. And... I rubbed my head. And Lisa in a white dress. I bolted upright in the shower. A wedding dress! Why was I remembering Lisa in a wedding dress?

Still soapy, I turned off the water and slid into a robe before going into the main room. One of the two beds was still neatly made and the other was torn all to hell. Multiple limbs lay about the bed, tangled in the sheets. A woman's hand was on top with a gold ring on her wedding finger. Shit.

"Lisa. Ted. Wake up." I called out in a voice that made my head pound. Groans came from under the covers. I grabbed the duvet and flipped it back. Ted and Lisa were both partially naked and tangled together. She lay on top of him, her long blonde hair spread over his muscular torso. Ted had a ring on his finger, too. Double shit.

"Wake up." I shook them and they groaned. "I'm not kidding. Wake up." Nada. I pulled a mostly empty bottle of champagne from an ice bucket and set it down. Then I dumped the ice water on them. That did the trick. With screams, yells, and creative curses, both scrambled out of bed.

"What the hell was that about, Hawk?" Lisa moaned, grabbing her head. Ted didn't even try to speak; he just held his head as though it would fall off.

"Look at your hands. Both of you."

Lisa looked at her hands and focused in on the ring with a bit of confusion. "Where the hell did that come from?" Ted didn't seem to grasp the meaning of the ring either.

"I don't know, but I remember seeing you in a wedding dress last night," I said. "Did we

visit one of those speedy chapels?"

Lisa blinked at me owlishly. "I don't know," she said. "I don't really remember much after we started clubbing. God, my head's pounding. I've never had so much to drink."

I reached into the bed and picked up a used condom, with the end split, and tossed it into the trash. "Ted? How about you tell us what happened last night?" I asked.

He pulled himself together, though he was still staring at the ring. "I don't remember, either." He looked at Lisa. "Did we get married?"

Lisa picked up a towel and scrubbed her face. "I dunno, but I think the real question is *who* got married?" Ted and I looked at her, confused, until she grabbed my hand and put it in front of my face.

I stared at the same style gold ring as they wore, snuggled onto my own ring finger. Triple shit!

"Hold it," Ted said. "Let's not get carried away, okay?" He scrubbed his face with his hands. "I need to shower and then I need to eat. Then we can figure out what we did last night. Care to join me, Lisa?"

Lisa waved him on. "Go ahead. I need to sit down and think. I'll shower in a few minutes." She dropped onto the edge of the bed.

I sat down beside her and put my hand on her knee. "Lisa, this doesn't mean anything. I don't care if this *is* Vegas, you can't get married if you're drunk off your ass."

She looked up at me, her face a mask of uncertainty. "But, Hawk, I can see myself marrying Ted. I know it hasn't been very long since I met him, but I feel like I've known him forever. Even if I was drunk when it happened." She looked down at my hand. "And if I did, I don't know that I would want to back out, but what if it was you? I know you like Ted, but I can't see you marrying him. Not enough estrogen."

I laughed and instantly regretted it as my head began throbbing again. "Ohhh, Jeeze. Yeah, I'm afraid as much as I like him, or you for that matter, it wouldn't happen. You're too in love with each other and I'm not that into men, even if it is fun with Ted. In my heart I know that if I ever fall in love again it will be with a woman. I just don't have the same kind of emotional connection with men. That's what comes from a lifetime of loving women. I like Ted, but I don't love him. You do." Inside, I examined

the emotions our relationship brought up and was satisfied I was right. I didn't love Ted. I didn't even love Lisa. Well, I loved them as friends, but that was different. I was comfortable with them.

Lisa looked relieved, though she tried to hide it. I could see that she didn't want or need someone mucking up her relationship with Ted, and I had no intention of doing that to them. Sexual relationships formed in stressful situations usually don't last, but I wanted to keep the friendship, no matter how long we continued to have sex as a threesome.

"Don't stress, Kid. If it happened, I'll have it annulled faster than the Houston Texans can lose a football game," I said with a grin. "It's better odds on you and Ted getting married than me and him." I stood up and began gathering my remaining clothes. I found my shoes and underwear beside the bed and got them all together. The shoes went into the closet, the clothes into a trash bag for washing. I stood for a moment, looking at myself in the mirror. I saw long black hair and a body that was slim and muscular to the point of being more girlish than womanly. For the millionth time I wished I had bigger tits and then grinned. Where I would put them when I wasn't using them?

Lisa padded into the bathroom to clean up with Ted, and to talk privately about the situation. That was okay. I was a guest in their relationship and they had every right to be worried about this marriage thing.

I had best start getting to the bottom of this. We had been toasted last night so there would no doubt be a wealth of clues around to help us sort out where we had been. God knows I'd investigated enough crimes to know just how big a trail drunks tend to leave behind, no matter how clever they think they are. We hadn't been trying to hide anything, I'm sure, so I should be able to reconstruct our trail.

Searching around the room, as well as purses and wallets, turned up several items of interest: a memory stick for a computer (of which we had none), a matchbook from a club ironically named Memory Lane, and a receipt from Zales for three wedding bands. I whistled at the cost and the fact that the purchase had taken place at two in the morning. An all-night Zales? Only in Vegas. I set the evidence on the dresser and took a few minutes to ring up room service.

"Front desk," a young sounding man said.

"Hi, this is room 236. Do you folks have a morning after kit?" I asked.

I could hear a whisper of humor in his response. "As in a hangover remedy? As a matter of fact, we do. Water, aspirin and vitamin C. I'll have some brought up, if you like. Breakfast, too? Something light?"

"Make it for three, cure and food. Thanks." I hung up and went into the bathroom, making enough noise so I wouldn't be spying on them. It turned out that they were already toweling off.

"I ordered something for the pain and a light breakfast we can either eat or not. Ted, look, I realize that I'm a third wheel in this triangle and I don't want to lose our friendship."

He held up his hand and covered my lips. "You don't need to say anything, we'll sort this out. I like you, but I love Lisa. If it starts to be a problem, we can step back to just being friends, right? You can, too, and we won't be upset. Right, Lisa?"

With a sigh of relief, she nodded emphatically. "I have to admit that I feel really uncomfortable -- hell, worried -- with the idea that you two might have gotten married." Lisa held up a hand to silence my attempt at speech. "I know that it doesn't seem likely, but I want to be honest."

I nodded. "I can appreciate that. Say the word and I back off and we get platonic, okay? I need to finish my shower. I'll be out when I feel human again, so start eating without me."

As they went back into the main room to dress, I dropped my robe and stepped into the shower, turning the water up to the hottest temperature I could tolerate. I stood under the pelting heat, letting my mind clear.

Ted was right. This wasn't a life-ending crisis for any of us, but I was disturbed that I might have ever been drunk enough to get married to a man at all. That pointed out to me that I needed to re-evaluate who I was and what I really wanted out of life. I didn't give my word to anything lightly even when I was drunk. I had never felt so comfortable or relaxed around a hetero couple like this before. I had to be very careful if we were to get out of this as friends if, or when, we tired of the physical pleasures. This was complex and I had better keep my eye on the ball.

When I finally couldn't take the heat any more, I turned the temperature down and gave myself another good soapy scrubbing. Considering what I had looked like when I woke up, I decided to wash my hair, too. It would take a while to dry, but I bet people

would appreciate me not smelling like stale booze and worse. Once I was done, I wrapped my hair in a towel and dried off. I slipped my robe back on and went into the bedroom.

Room service had put in an appearance while I was out. Toast, eggs and juice were set out on the table and both of my lovers were already eating. A large glass of water and some pills were set beside my plate. I sat down and swallowed the pills and drank my water. I didn't know if I could finish all of my breakfast, but I had to eat something.

Ted looked a bit more human than Lisa did, or than I felt for that matter. He looked at me over his toast. "I thought our sleuthing days were over. Guess I thought wrong. So, Hawk, what do we do first?"

"The first thing we do," I said, sopping up my egg yolk with toast, "is not get carried away. I'm sure that nothing irrevocable happened. We just need to figure out where we went and what we did.

Lisa nodded. "And then what?"

"Then, I track us down. We have some clues to work with already." I gestured to the receipt for the rings and memory card. "I looked through our purses and your wallet. Nothing convenient, like a license. We'll need a computer to look at the memory card. Since I can't imagine we found a computer to haul around, it's probably from a camera. Pictures should clear this up even more. I bet the front desk can point us in the right direction."

Ted looked at the clock on the dresser. "This town is awake all the time, but the people that were out late might not be up for a while. And don't forget we have to fly back to Houston tomorrow. So, that really doesn't leave us a lot of time to find answers."

"Yeah, but let's give it a try before we give up," I said. "Eat up so we can get moving."

We finished eating and dressed for a walk around town. I snagged up the receipt and memory card. When we made it to the posh lobby, I waved the card at the desk clerk. "Morning, Sport. I need to check this card for pictures. Can you point me to where I can get a computer to read it?"

He politely pointed out into the street. "Turn left and go up two blocks, Miss. There is a CVS Pharmacy that has a machine that reads them and lets you print the pictures you

want."

"Thanks!" With that, I led the trio out and into the street. The traffic was light and the foot traffic was even lighter.

"Looks like this town sleeps in," Lisa said, smiling at the doorman.

"Yes, Ma'am. This place won't get rolling until dinnertime." He tipped his hat to us.

"Excuse me, who would have been on the door last night, late. Say a couple of hours before dawn?" I asked.

"That'd be Tim Weatherspoon, ma'am. He'll be back on shift again tonight at midnight."

"Thanks."

The air wasn't nearly as thick as the stuff we breathe in Houston, so the walk was rather enjoyable. Ted and Lisa had their arms around each other and I walked beside them. The CVS was impossible to miss. We strolled inside and to the photo department. As advertised there was a machine to check the card for pictures.

I slid the card into the machine and it brought up thumbnails of about two dozen pictures. Damned if it didn't look like a wedding to me. I had it print them all so we could look at them more closely.

Ted and Lisa crowded around as the pictures began printing.

"Oh, shit," Lisa said, seeing herself in a wedding gown. "Where the hell did I find a wedding gown in the middle of the night? And what did I do with it? It's not in the room."

Ted looked at another picture incredulously. "Is the minister dressed like Elvis? We were married by The King?"

When all the pictures were printed, it sure looked like a wedding to me. Ted and Lisa's. I let out the breath that I'd secretly been holding. Ring aside, it looked like I hadn't gotten hitched after all. Whew! That should make Lisa feel a lot better.

"Yeah, it sure looks that way," I said grinning. "I think I was the bridesmaid. I told you, Lisa, I'm going to find some nice woman to bowl over. Ted is your man, and yours

alone. You want your ring back, Ted? Polygamy *is* illegal, you know."

Ted rolled his eyes. "Keep it as a keepsake and when you do find that nice, quiet woman I'll laugh my ass off."

Lisa slapped his arm. "That's not funny, Ted!"

He raised his hands in self-defense. "Okay! I take it back! I'll just laugh the next time she gets sideswiped by something she never saw coming." Then he laughed. "Well, now what? The jewelry store or shall we start interviewing Elvises?"

"The jewelry store might be easier. We may have to come back tonight to catch someone that saw us."

We paid for the prints and made our way back to the hotel. The desk clerk called us a cab and we drove to the address on the receipt. Ted had the cab wait for us. The store was a swanky place. A man in an expensive suit met us at the door.

"Hello, my name is Charles. How may I help you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I need to know which salesperson helped us with a purchase we made last night." I handed him the receipt.

Charles looked it over and handed it back. "That looks like Carl Daniels' employee number. Is there a problem?"

I smiled. "You could say that. My friends apparently got married and don't remember it. We're trying to trace our movements last night and we may have mentioned it to him. When does he come back on shift?"

He smiled, but it was restrained. "Actually, this isn't the first time I've heard a story like this. A number of people come in under the influence and purchase wedding rings. What's odd is that it looks like you bought three rings." He quirked an eyebrow. "Care to enlighten me about that?"

"Yeah, well, I don't really know. Ask me when I figure it out." I responded.

"Of course. Come with me. I'll check the schedule to see when Carl's back on shift while we take care of this."

He checked a clipboard behind the counter and nodded. "It looks like Carl clocked out at eight am and will be back tonight at midnight. I'll call him after he has had some sleep and see if I can get you an answer before then. Do you have a number where I can reach you?"

"Call and leave a message for us at our hotel," Ted said and gave him the number. "Leave a message for Ted Stansbury."

"Of course, Mister Stansbury. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

"Do you know of any chapels where people get married by Elvis?" Ted asked.

Charles tilted his head back and laughed. "This is Las Vegas, Mister Stansbury. There are hundreds of them scattered across the city. Can you be more specific?"

Ted slid the pictures across to him and the man examined them before shaking his head. "I wish I could help you, but I'm afraid I don't know the gentleman. He does look like The King, though. The thin King."

Ted scowled, but he didn't really mean it. "Thanks for your help."

We went back to the cab and I looked at them over the roof. "Not much we can do before we get more information. If it was real, it'll be filed at City Hall, but usually they're mailed in. So, it won't be there yet. This is our last day in Vegas, and I don't think we should let this mess keep us from seeing the sights."

Lisa nodded vigorously. "Yes. Let's go to the strip and see some more and this time *no* alcohol!" Then she looked at Ted. "By the way, if we did get married, this does not count as the honeymoon, Skinflint." She grinned. "I think Niagara Falls might fit the bill, though."

Ted rolled his eyes and laughed. "Get in."

We walked the strip, ate lunch and walked some more. It felt like I was back on the beat. The whole place was gaudy, even the cheap joints. I decided it was fun to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here. Give me Houston any day of the week.

When it was getting dark, we took a cab back to the hotel and hit the desk clerk up for

messages. Surprisingly, there was one for me along with the hoped for message for Ted. While Ted called the number on his, I read mine with growing confusion.

Detective Hawkins, you don't know me, but I have heard about you. We are staying here at the same hotel. I recognized you in the lobby yesterday from newspaper articles regarding your recent case in Houston. If it is not too much of an imposition, I would like to invite you and your friends to attend a private gathering in the main dining room tonight. I would be in your debt if you humored an old man like me this once. Please, bring your friends. I would dearly love to speak with you all. Eight pm. Hans Werner.

I looked up and glanced at the clock. About an hour till then. The name was flitting around the edge of my mind. It was elusively familiar. I leaned over the desk and waved at the clerk.

"Help me out. Hans Werner. Who is he?" I asked.

"Mister Werner is involved in a number of businesses. He is very wealthy and lives in Texas..."

I held up a hand. "That did it. Thanks, it's all coming back to me now."

I remembered him now. Hans Werner, billionaire. He was almost as rich as Bill Gates, if I remembered the article I had read a few years ago correctly. He came to the USA with his parents from Nazi Germany during World War II and built a small family fortune into one of the largest business empires in the world. Very reclusive. Very high society. Why did he want to speak with a homicide cop from Houston?

Ted interrupted my thoughts by hanging up the phone. "I have it. Carl said we were going to a place called "His Majesty's" over near the business district. We can catch a cab and be there in half an hour."

The desk clerk startled a bit at the name. "I'm not sure how much good that will do you, Mister Stansbury. His Majesty's burned down some time this morning. It was in the paper."

"What?" We all asked.

He reached under the counter and set the paper on the desk. The picture of a burned out building was on the cover. I read the story rapidly. The fire started about six am. No one was injured, but the police were calling it arson.

We all looked at one another, a bit stunned.

"Well," I said at last, "I hope Elvis left the building first. I guess that we'll have to track down the owner tomorrow and find out who was working last night."

Lisa looked a bit distressed. "But we have to be on the flight tomorrow morning! I have to be back to work."

I waved my hand. "I'll move my flight back and you two can go home. I still have mandatory off time left while they complete the investigation. I can track down the details."

Ted frowned. "You're sure?"

"It's fine," I assured him. "I love a good mystery. In any case, I have some news of my own." I passed them the invitation.

"Jesus!" Lisa said after reading it. "Do you know who that is? He's richer than God!"

Ted nodded his agreement. "A very powerful man," he added.

"Do you want to go?" I asked. They nodded.

"We need to go start getting ready right now," Lisa said insistently, dragging Ted toward the elevators.

I smiled at the desk clerk. "They act so married, don't they?"

He nodded and smiled, making me laugh.

In an hour, we were dressed and outside the dining room. Lisa was in a sheath-like dress of dark blue. She looked fabulous. I was in my uncomfortable heels and the only other dress I had. A little black dress. It was slit up the side high enough that I didn't dare wear anything but a thong and the neckline plunged low enough to show off my average breasts as long as I had no bra on. Like now. I would have rather worn the other dress but it was still nasty. Ted was in his nice suit.

The door was closed with a man in a suit standing outside it. He wore a dark suit, like

the secret service wore. And he was carrying in a shoulder holster. I shook my head and took the lead, handing him my note.

"Detective Hawkins and friends. We're expected," I said confidently.

He nodded. "You're on the list, Detective. Please go right in."

"Thanks." I opened the door and we stepped inside. The room was filled with people. The glitterati. The cream of society. There were more noses in the air than I could count and my clothes seemed tawdry. Those closest to the door turned to sniff at us. I felt my temper start to fray. Lisa took my hand and led us in, looking around.

We moved into the crowd but didn't mix. Oil and water, I suppose. People eyed us curiously, and we were quickly labeled as the help. That was obvious when some dowager asked me to be a dear and run to get some more champagne from the kitchen. My snarl was cut off smoothly by an older man in a sharp gray suit.

"Lieutenant Hawkins, I'm so pleased you could join me."

"Mister Werner?" I asked, a bit more abruptly than was probably wise with someone as powerful as he is, if it was him.

"Yes," he answered, unperturbed by my sharp tone. "Please, come and join me at my table. It will be less crowded and more peaceful." He nodded to the now simpering older woman and led us through the crowd that seemed to part before him like the Red Sea. "You must be Lisa Davis and Ted Stansbury. I am so very pleased to meet you all."

The table we were going to was the only one in the room. Six chairs were set around it, but no one was sitting at it. Hans pulled out a chair for me and Ted held one for Lisa. When Hans settled, a waiter appeared as if by magic to take our drink orders.

"Can I get something to eat, as well?" I asked. "It's been a long day."

"Of course! Anything you like," Hans answered.

I ordered some wine and a sandwich. Ted and Lisa did the same. Hans ordered a brandy.

"I'd order some Stansbury wine, but I doubt it is served so far from home," Ted joked.

"I've tried it and found it very good," Hans admitted. "You make a fine wine, Ted. May I call you Ted? Lisa? Shauna?"

They nodded and I shook my head. "Call me Hawk. Only my mother called me Shauna."

"Of course," he nodded. "Hawk it is. I'm sure you are wondering why an old man like me asked you here. I must admit it is all curiosity on my part. I do hope you don't mind, but I have always been fascinated by crime and conspiracy. I've read the stories of what happened back home, and when I saw you here I simply couldn't resist asking to hear about it in person. Will you indulge an old man in his whimsy?"

I felt what heat I had melt away. He was so much like what I'd imagine a grandfather would be that I couldn't hold his curiosity against him. A glance at Ted and Lisa told me they felt the same way. I nodded my head. "Sure. For you, anything."

The next hour went by quickly. We told our stories, ate his food and answered his surprisingly sharp questions. A woman in her fifties, dressed to the hilt, short, pencil-thin and (to my mind) arrogant, walked over to the table.

"Hans, the guests are getting restless. You should wrap up your little detective gathering and see to them." Her eyes raked over me and I could almost sense a silent sneer. An instant dislike gathered in my stomach.

Hans didn't seem to notice the byplay. "Everyone, this is my wife, Kat. I actually should tend to seeing more people." He stood up and shook each of our hands. "Thank you for coming on such short notice and indulging an old man." He turned to Kat. "Have you seen Gretchen? She's very late and I do hope she won't miss out."

The cold glitter in Kat's eyes flashed and was gone. "No dear, I suppose she must have found... other entertainment." This time, she did sniff.

Hans turned red. "I won't have that! Gretchen is my daughter and ever since her mother passed away, she has been... Never mind." Then he bowed to us. "Please stay and enjoy the party. Thank you again." He stalked off.

Kat looked down her nose at us. "Yes, please stay as long as you like and enjoy yourselves. It's obvious that you won't get to mix with this class of people again anytime soon."

She stalked off at a tangent to Hans and I started forward, ready to tear a strip off her.

Lisa grabbed me.

"Let it go, Hawk. That won't gain you anything. What a bitch!" Lisa said.

"Screw 'em, let's blow this popsicle stand," I snarled, stalking back toward the entrance. People damned well got out of my way. A murderous glare pierced anyone too slow or too stupid to move fast enough.

The door opened as we approached it and I stopped dead in my tracks at who came in. Ted bumped into me and stopped to stare right along with me.

A tall woman, mid thirties like me, came in. She wore in a sheath dress like Lisa's, but in dark red. Unlike Lisa's hers was cut to flaunt her well-proportioned assets. The slits in the side came up so far she couldn't even be wearing a thong. The neckline plunged to the center of her stomach and showed a generous helping of her bra-less breasts. Generous breasts, shown almost to the nipples. Her blonde hair was piled high on her head and done in intricate rings. Her hourglass figure was hypnotizing, her legs long and shapely. Her creamy skin seemed to glow with health and she dripped sex appeal.

Lisa poked me. "Close your mouth before something flies in, Hawk. You, too, Ted."

My mouth snapped shut, but I couldn't stop looking at her. She was like nothing I'd ever seen in person. I was so blown away that I gawked.

She smiled and walked slowly toward me. The sway of her hips flashed fire in my stomach. Her smile was like the sun. "You don't look like you belong in this gathering of old sticks." Her hand took mine, though I wasn't sure that my hand was answering my brain. "I'm..."

From my left, Kat zipped into view and almost shoved me back to confront the goddess before me. "Gretchen, you slut," she hissed. "Take your whore ass right back out that door this instant!"

Gretchen just smiled. "Well, well, if it isn't the wicked bitch of the west. Why don't you just run off and make sure Daddy hasn't hooked up with someone else and dropped your sorry ass." She looked at us and said, "Don't mind my step-mother. A house fell on her sister."

Kat slapped her, hard. Gretchen turned back slowly and her eyes sparkled with hate. "If someone found you dead, would anyone care? I could kill you and no jury would convict

me." She shoved Kat and the older woman stumbled back before howling and throwing herself into Gretchen. They went down in a tumble of scratches and hair pulling.

Chapter Two: Family Counseling

I shook myself out of my stupor and grabbed Kat, yanking her back. She fought and screamed imprecations at Gretchen. Ted and Lisa held Gretchen back after she took another swing at her step-mother. It looked like they had their work cut out for them. Gretchen was really straining hard.

"Enough! *Ladies!*" I shouted, to no avail as they both continued to struggle against our restraint. Gretchen was finally pulled back by Ted and Lisa's combined strength.

Kat turned to me and hissed, "Let me go right now or I'll see you broken so badly you won't be able to get a job waiting tables! Take your hands *off* of me!"

"No," I said firmly. Kat looked shocked, so I explained the word to her. She probably didn't hear it much, after all. "That means I'm not going to do it until you behave in a civil manner. I don't care who you're married to. You don't get a free pass to brawl in public. Calm down or walk it off. I don't care. But, if you keep fighting, I'll have to make you stop. Do you understand that?"

"You low-life peon!" she snarled. "I'll crush you and your piss-ant friends like an egg! You release me this very instant!" She began struggling again so I turned and gave her a light shove into the ring of spectators watching us in horrified delight. A curl of dark amusement touched my lips. Amazing how alike crowds were, no matter their social standing. They wanted blood. It must be the human condition.

"This fight is over," I said loudly enough to cut through the chatter. "Anyone else disturbing the peace will find their well-financed asses hauled off to the lockup and I assure you that the cuisine is less than one star. Move on."

The crowd came to its senses and began moving off, but Kat wasn't done. She started back toward me, murder in her eyes, but was yanked up short by her husband stepping through the thinning crowd and confronting her.

"What in blue blazes is going on here?" he demanded of Kat. "I won't have this! These

are my guests restraining you from fighting and screaming. I wouldn't expect that kind of behavior from a common showgirl. Both of you. Stop it this instant!"

Kat turned bone white, her eyes almost bulging from their sockets, and her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Then she turned bright red, sending a scorching glare at Gretchen and myself before turning and stalking off in a snit. The remaining spectators pulled back from her like she had the plague.

Hans turned his back on Kat and went to his daughter. "Gretchen, are you all right?"

She shook off his hands. "I haven't been all right since you married that bitch, Daddy. Can't you see that she's using you? She doesn't love you! She only loves your money! She couldn't give a crap about anyone besides herself! How can you love her?" she asked with a bite of anguish.

I caught the unspoken part of that. How can you love her more than me would be more what Gretchen was thinking. I stepped back beside Ted and Lisa.

Hans wrung his hands. "It's complicated, Baby. I know she's abrupt, but underneath that she's a good person. I love her *and* you."

"She drove a wedge between us, Daddy." Gretchen stepped back. "I should have known better than to come here. She still has you wrapped around her little finger. You won't ever understand why I left or why I do what I do. Let me go, Daddy. Go back to your wife."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and she half turned before her father shouted, "Wait!"

He moved between her and the door. "I may never understand, you're right, but I still love you and I don't want to lose you again." He looked back at me and his eyes lit up in a way that filled me with foreboding. "I know what we need," he told her, his eyes lingering on me for a second more. Turning back to Gretchen he said, "We need someone to help us from outside the box. Hawk can do this for us."

My eyes bulged. "I can do *what*? Now, hold on..."

He rode right over my mounting objections. "Yes," he said with a headshake. "Perfect! She's a skilled negotiator and I think you'll find her more interesting than the last counselor."

Gretchen looked as astounded and just about as happy as I felt. "Daddy, I don't have the time to waste on working this out. I have a living to earn. Just mark it down that you tried and go back to *her*."

"No! I'll pay for your time. Your highest rate for the next seven days." His eyes glittered.

"I have clients already booked..." she started before he cut her off.

"This is business, I know. I'll pay the penalty of your choosing for you to re-schedule those commitments. I want you to spend all the time you can with Hawk. It can't make things any worse, and perhaps it might help. I'll listen to everything she has to say. You do the same." He looked up at her. "You have nothing to lose. Please try this for us?"

I tried to form words of protest. "Hold on a minute there, Buddy! I already have a job and a life of my own. I can't just drop everything I'm doing when it suits someone else and I *am not* some kind of family therapist!"

Hans looked surprised. "One call and your employer will be happy to allow you the time, I'm sure. As for the rest, I will pay very well for your..."

I cut him off, trying hard to remain polite and not lose my temper any further. I was still blunt, though. "Look, Mister Werner, I'm not for sale to the highest bidder. You can't just wave a wad of cash under my nose and have me trot off to do your bidding. I told your wife I wouldn't bow and scrape to her and I won't do it for you, either." I waved my finger under his nose. "I do what I want, not what someone else wants me to do. You got that?"

Over his shoulder I saw a spark of intrigue slide across Gretchen's face. I suppose nobody ever talked to Daddy Warbucks like that before. Tough shit.

Hans held up his hands. "You're right. I wasn't thinking. You don't work for me, but I still think we can make this right and both get something we desire. What if I find mutually beneficial ways to work with your friends and I pay you the same as I pay my daughter?" He looked at Ted. "I know that I can help Mister Stansbury expand his business and I'll wager that Miss Davis would do much better in a partnership than working for the government."

Now I saw both of my friends startle and open their mouths to protest, but I cut them off. While I wouldn't let some rich guy push me around, I also knew my price when it

was met. My friends would never ask for something for themselves and if a week of my time helped them, I'd do it. "That's between you and them, but since you'll do that for them, I'll agree. But I *do* have some business of my own to pursue. She can go with me while I take care of that, too. That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

As Ted and Lisa gaped, Hans smiled. "Excellent. Gretchen? Will you try?"

Gretchen looked at him and then back at me. She smiled. "For you, Detective Hawkins, I think I will." She looked back at her father. "I'll send the bill tonight. Payment in advance for all parties. I know you negotiate in good faith, but it's all off if they decline, so I suggest you convince these two nice people to take you up on your offer," she said, gesturing to Ted and Lisa. "And I'll get to know my new companion for the week. When the week has passed, I'll come and tell you where we sit. Deal?"

"Deal." Then Hans turned and took Ted and Lisa by the arms, dragging them back toward the table. "Come, we have much to discuss."

I chuckled at their discomfort and amazement before Gretchen held out her arm to me.

"Shall we go get something to eat and talk about this, Detective?"

I took her arm and nodded. Perhaps a little time away from Ted and Lisa would be helpful. We all needed time to think. The possible marriage, the anxiety the threesome seemed to be feeling, and this family counseling thing had happened so fast. "Let's go." The touch of her skin felt hot under my fingers and my stomach lurched. This could be a *very* interesting week.

The hotel doorman called for her car and we waited in silence, eyeing one another, no doubt wondering what we had let ourselves in for. When the car came around, it was a sleek black Ferrari of some kind. It looked pricey. The leather interior smelled new. Like any other red-blooded American, I had to fill my lungs and sigh. The seat was warm and seemed to fit my butt like a glove.

I buckled in as she started it up. The engine sounded powerful. This car could probably take my bike any day of the week. "Nice car," I said. "Looks fast and expensive."

She laughed and slid out into traffic. Even with her dress mussed and her hair a disaster, she still seemed almost unearthly in the effect she had on me. I firmly told myself that this was *not* the time to fall for someone.

"It's a Ferrari 612 Scaglietti. Just on the market." She looked over when she stopped at the light, the engine growling powerfully under the hood. "Well, maybe not *quite* on the market just yet. Soon, though. I have a friend in the business and he got me one of the first ones. It is fast *and* worth every penny."

I rubbed the console. "You must do well, then. I know I couldn't afford something like this car. We were never properly introduced. My name is Shauna Hawkins, but I'd rather be called Hawk. I'm a homicide detective from Houston."

She reached out and took my hand over the stick shift for a moment that almost made my heart stop. "Gretchen Werner, black sheep. As you could no doubt tell." She looked over at me. "You do know that this whole arrangement has less than a snowball's chance in hell of working, right? That bitch has ruined my family and my father let her do it."

"I don't know anything yet," I responded. "So, where would you like to eat? Someplace quiet so we can talk." I looked over her figure as she drove the car. She was even hotter up close. "What do you do that has an income to pick up one of these?"

She glanced over at me, her eyes light blue under her lashes. "I'm an escort. Companion, and more if I choose. It pays the bills. You can't imagine what people will pay to spend some time with the daughter of one of the wealthiest men on the planet." A hint of bitterness crept into her voice. "Not that it would do them any good. I ran off to do this and he disowned me. Pleased the hell out of that hag he's married to. Without me in the way, she gets the cash in spite of the prenup. She got the only thing that meant anything to me. She got him. I'd rather let her have the money and me have him, but he won't let her go. I wish she'd just drop dead." Her voice had trailed off to a cold whisper.

"I don't think that you should say something like that. Karma is nothing to tempt. We should probably save talking about them until we get to know each other a little bit better," I added quietly. "And to answer your earlier question, I don't expect to make much of an impact, really. I can't imagine what he was thinking. I am not trained for this." Interesting. Mommy Dearest had been insulting and accurate when she called Gretchen a whore. A rare combination in a bitch like Kat.

Her cold face lightened a little. "Well, neither can I, really. Neither one of us is willing to compromise on the one issue separating us. Kat. We've had counseling. The best money can buy in fact, but you have to be *willing* to compromise to make it work."

As she took a corner just a bit fast, I held onto the seat.

"Changing the subject again, isn't it a bit illegal to be more than just a companion?" I asked with a smile. "I'm not vice, but even I know sex for money is frowned upon. Not that I plan on turning you in, mind you," I added.

That elicited a laugh. "Actually, it's not illegal in some counties in the State of Nevada. I made an arrangement with one of the brothels that works for both of us. Las Vegas has a city ordinance covering solicitation, though. If there is going to be more than dancing and dining, I close the deal at my place. All legal."

I pursed my lips. "I didn't know that. Why the hell aren't there hundreds of bordellos out there, then?"

"Economics and political pressure brought to bear on the ones that do open. It's always cheaper to peddle less expensive nookie when you don't have the overhead of a real business. Add in the politicians and religious right and you have powerful people that can make doing business difficult." She looked over and smiled. "At least for the organized places. Most that have tried went under within a few years. People like me, well, I'm just too small to hit their radar. And, for a classy date, some people are willing to shell out serious money."

"Does it bother you sometimes? Selling yourself?" I asked.

If she was offended by my question, it didn't show. "Actually, it's more like renting myself. Surprisingly, the sex is not as big a part of my business as you might think. I'd say that less than a third of my companions ask to have sex with me, and I decide if that happens." She shrugged. "Some take it badly, but then I never see them again and they get blacklisted by the all the high-end places. With the class of men we're talking about, it's not as much trouble as it may sound." She pointed to a Denny's on the corner. "Denny's coffee isn't bad and there's less chance of someone I know overhearing us. Here we'll just blend in."

I laughed. "Like we'll blend in anywhere dressed like this."

She smiled back at me and climbed out of the low-slung car, gathering the stares of several men. I almost laughed out loud when one man's obviously peeved wife smacked him in the back of the head. Gretchen used her keys to lock the door and set the alarm.

As we headed in I looked back. "Is it safe out there? For that kind of car? Someone could take it in plain sight."

She nodded her head and smiled. "It's possible, but if they do it's fully insured. It's a nice car but it's still only a car. If they want it, they can have it. With the tracking system in it, though, it's a good bet the cops will have them inside half an hour. Or so the salesman said."

I shook my head and smiled. "How can a woman in the world's oldest profession be so naïve? Anything man can devise, man can defeat."

The server seated us and took our drink orders. Shortly, we were sipping our coffee and picking at nachos. I had used the last few minutes to try and get myself into some semblance of control.

"So, Gretchen, if you don't think this has a chance of working, why even try?" I asked. "Why not just turn up your nose and walk out? Hell, why go to that little soiree in the first place?"

She bit into a nacho chip and crunched thoughtfully. "I went to annoy Kat. I hoped for a big fight, but you spoiled my fun," she pouted before grinning. "When you put her in her place, I thought she'd swallow her teeth. She hasn't been talked to like that since she was a showgirl, I bet." Her face darkened. "Since my idiot father married her money-grubbing, power-hungry ass."

She sipped her coffee and looked at me with some consideration in her eyes. "And that is why I agreed. I've never seen anyone else willing to stand up to her *or* my father. You seem mighty impervious to being bullied. Is that because you're a cop or are you a cop because you're that way?"

I shrugged. "I've always been stubborn, so I'll have to go with door number two. My family despaired of me before I took off. Now, both my parents are gone, and I wish I could have made things better before the end." I waved my coffee cup. "That wasn't some slick sell job, by the way. This situation just brought it back into mind."

"What was the wedge in your life?" she asked quietly. "If you don't mind my asking." She had the kind of voice that inspired trust and confidence. I guess that wasn't so surprising, really, given her choice of professions.

I spent a moment gauging her before I spoke. "I came out of the closet and my parents freaked. Started thumping their bibles and even called the minister over to try and cast out the demon inside me. It was like a circus with bad clowns."

Gretchen arched an eyebrow. "Ahhh! So you play for the *other* team. Very interesting. I've only dated men, but I *was* rented to you for the week so we'll have to see what happens."

I fixed her with a stern look. "I haven't ever paid for sex before and I don't intend to start now. I think you're gorgeous and I wouldn't kick you out of bed even for eating crackers, but I refuse to pay for sex."

"So, what you're saying is that you think I'm hot, but sex is out while I'm on retainer?" she asked archly. "Interesting. I like a challenge, but don't mistake me," her expression hardened a touch, "Daddy paid for companionship, not sex. If I choose to do more, that's my decision and it won't have a damn thing to do with money."

She sipped her coffee, her expression changing yet again, this time showing just a hint of shyness and making her look younger, even more angelic. "I horsed around a little, back when I was in high school, but nothing serious. Kissing practice and such with a close friend, but never anything more than a mild grope. Not that some men haven't encouraged me to do more with a woman of their choice, but none of them ever approached it in a way to make me want to try it."

I was about to speak when her bare foot rubbed my leg, sending shivers up my spine and making my stomach do a little dance. "That's not playing nice," I grumbled. And doesn't indicate a *shred* of timidity, I added to myself with a suppressed grin.

She pulled her foot back with a laugh. "Why? Are you in a committed relationship?" How did she look so angelic even with her hair looking like she'd just been in a WWE match?

I shook my head. "No, not committed. You met my friends before your father dragged them off. I've been..."

Gretchen arched her eyebrow again. "You've been what? With her? She's really good looking," she admitted, "but he was *very* easy on the eyes, too."

I cleared my throat. "Well, not exactly." I felt a little heat reach my face. God! I do *not* blush! What the hell was wrong with me?

Her other eyebrow joined the first. "Him, too? I thought you played for the other team?" A hint of a wicked smile crossed her lips. "Or is it both of them together?"

I sighed, and matched her infectious smile. "How do I get myself into these messes?" I asked rhetorically. "Yes, I was seduced by the Dark Side, but only because he's such a sweet guy. It's okay, but not like making love to a woman."

Gretchen smiled past my shoulder and I felt my eye twitch.

"The waitress is standing right behind me, isn't she?" I asked, already knowing the answer. I turned in my seat and the waitress was blushing right behind me. Jeeze, this was Vegas. How could everyone here be so naïve?

"Um... Can I, like, get you some more coffee or something?" she asked nervously. She was young and I swear young people were getting more and more incomprehensible every year. What the hell ever happened to proper grammar?

Before I could answer her, Gretchen cut in. "Some more coffee would be good, Sweetie. I'm getting real thirsty trying to talk this pretty woman into getting sweaty between the sheets with me."

The young woman (girl, really) blushed and bolted with a jerky nod as Gretchen started laughing. I kicked at her under the table. "That was so bad," I told her, "getting that poor girl all flustered like that! It'll serve you right if you end up getting decaf." I shuddered. "No, on second thought, I take it back. No one deserves decaf."

She laughed unrestrainedly for the first time since I'd met her. "I can't help teasing the lab rats. Couldn't you tell? I always have to push and poke, to get a reaction."

I was afraid the girl would spill coffee all over the table when she came back. Gretchen was no help either, smiling seductively at her. "What time do you get off tonight, Sweetie? Want to go dancing with us?" I thought the waitress would vapor-lock. There was no shame in Gretchen.

"That's enough," I said firmly and looked at the girl. "She's just teasing you. We're going out dancing, alone, and then I'm going to drag her home, alone, to lick her like a popsicle."

The waitress stepped back and her eyes bugged. She dropped tickets everywhere while

trying to get ours. I couldn't help it. I joined right in with Gretchen's laughter as the girl rushed back into the kitchen.

"I take it back. *We* are so bad," I chuckled. "Is it the water around here? Everyone seems so naïve."

"I'm not naïve," Gretchen insisted. "I've been around the block."

"Hmmm. How much did that car cost you?" I asked.

"With or without the discount for services rendered?" she shot back, not thrown at all by my sudden change of topic.

"Fair market value, Sport," I laughed. "I want to know how much those gang bangers just boosted you for."

She stood up with a squeak and stared at her car outside, all alone and unmolested. She frowned at me and swatted my hand. "Don't scare me like that!" God, her chest was hypnotizing. "Hawk. Hawk! Yoo hoo? Up here!" I looked up and blushed. If I blushed twice in 15 minutes then this woman was definitely getting to me. Her eyes twinkled. "Like what you see? Come on, let's blow this joint." She tossed a twenty on the table. "Just to make up for teasing her like that."

We went back out to the car and climbed in. "To answer your question, it's about a quarter of a million, I think. It's a business investment, though."

As she started up the car, I raised my eyebrow in disbelief. "Really? Uh huh."

"No, really!" she insisted. "With the level of clientele I work with, showing this level of affluence actually increases business enough to more than cover the cost of this car and the ones that came before it."

With a chirp of tires, she pulled into traffic and headed towards the strip. Now that it was dark, other expensive and fast looking cars were putting in an appearance. I think I even saw a DeLorean. The ladies of the evening were starting their shift, city ordinance or no.

"How much do you pull in a year, if you don't mind my curiosity?" I asked at last.

"Let's just say I don't have to work this way and keep my class of living anymore and I

haven't for years." She glanced over. "My rates are pretty high, but I don't have trouble filling my dance card for a half the nights in a week. I have a tiered rate that runs from four thousand an hour to forty thousand for twenty-four hours." She laughed at the look of astonishment on my face. "Look on the web. Porn stars get half that and advertise for anyone to see. The really classy women ask for more and get more business. I'm double their rate and the wealthy men pay it without a qualm. Daddy will be paying my base, and a fifty percent penalty for pre-empting my schedule like this, and another fifty percent levied on the higher rate if we decide to have sex, all for you to have the pleasure of my company for this next week."

Now I almost vapor-locked. That was close to half a million dollars without sex! "Holy shit!" I exclaimed. "For that kind of cash, these guys could have women draped all over themselves. You're great looking, but why pay out that kind of cash?"

She smiled, not offended. "A few reasons. One, they think it is a rush having the daughter of Hans Werner on their arm, or in their bed if they can manage it. If I sleep with one of them professionally, it's even more expensive for them. Two, the more expensive something is, the more a certain class of men want it. Three, I'm a really good date. When I'm with someone, the world really does revolve around them. I'm interested in so many things I don't have to fake interest. I'll talk about everything from stamp collecting to bondage. And I dance really well."

She revved the car and powered across the street and into a club parking lot. She popped out of the car and handed the keys to the attendant. "Hi, Kyle! How's Jenny?"

The large black man grinned and took her keys. "Jenny's fine, Miss Gretchen. I'll tell her you asked about her."

She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "She's, what, five months along? Six? Do you know if it's a boy or girl yet?"

He shook his head. I couldn't tell with his skin tone if he was blushing, but I would bet money on it. "She doesn't want to know; says it would spoil her fun."

Gretchen laughed and shooed him away before she headed to the roped off area where a line of people snaked around the building. Another large black man, this one *really* large and bald as an egg, opened the rope for us.

"Miss Gretchen, welcome back to Club Gitmo! You and your friend have a wonderful

evening!"

"Thank you, Jimmy!" she said with a wide grin before making her way into the packed dance club.

"Club Gitmo?" I asked her. "Like the place in Cuba?"

She nodded. "The owners liked the name and cribbed it."

The place was as hip as I could ask for, if I were about ten years younger, but that didn't seem to bother Gretchen. She moved through the crowd like a pro of the dance club circuit, greeting people and giving hugs to more people than I knew in the whole world. How many people did she know in this town?

As if she had read my mind, she turned to me and placed her mouth to my ear. "I have a really good memory, almost perfect. It really comes in pretty handy," she told me before she turned back to meeting and greeting.

When we finally edged our way up to the bar, we were wedged together face to face. She might not have any experience with women, but she knew how to work a man and that was serving as a fine substitute right now. Her soft breath caressed my cheek while those magnificent tits were rubbing right against mine. I *know* she could feel my nipples poking through my dress. In fact, it was suddenly obvious that neither of us were wearing bras and the cloth between us was so thin and silky that I could tell she was at least interested. I grabbed my lust with both hands and forced it down. I was *not* going to throw myself at this woman! I was not! I hoped. No! I wasn't!

She leaned in and spoke into my ear again, the only way I could really understand her with all the dance music. "Drink?" Her scent flowed straight from her hair to my pussy. I was drenched and I could feel my clit throbbing with desire. Oh God, this was going to be hard.

"Yeah, good idea," I enthusiastically agreed. It might give me some space to get a hold on my rampaging hormones before I took her in the middle of the dance floor.

She ordered us two highballs and we sipped the tall glasses while I brought my body back under control. The warm feeling of the alcohol slowly spread fire along my limbs and the arousal started dampening down.

"Why are we here?" I asked her during a pause in the music. "Surfing for guys?"

She smiled that smile that made me want to be naked and rubbed herself against me. "No, silly. We're here to dance and I don't dance with other people when I'm out with someone."

My throat dried up and I had difficulty speaking. "Gre... Gretchen, this isn't a lesbian bar. They might..."

She laughed. "Silly, girls dance all the time. They even dance sexy sometimes to work up the guys around them." She trailed one finger across her pouty lips in a way that over-rode my senses and fired up my sex drive again. She leaned over and slid her lips across my cheek to my ear. "What's the matter, Hawk? Afraid you'll lose control? I can see you're attracted to me and that excites me. Dance with me!"

We shotgunned the last of our drinks before she dragged me out and onto the packed dance floor. I didn't know the number they were playing and I didn't care. It could have been a polka and I would have been out there shaking my thing with her. Maybe that drink wasn't the best idea. I wondered if what happened in Vegas really *did* stay in Vegas.

I had been right, I decided. She was a dancer, and she wasn't kidding when she said she was a *good* dancer. Her body moved with a kind of grace and ease that only many, many hours of movement can give. She danced like a kung fu master did katas, a master on the floor. She raised her arms over her head and danced seductively in front of me. I clomped and tried not to step on her feet. I felt like a complete idiot, but I didn't care. If idiocy was the price for this dance, I'd cheerfully pay it. That dress flowed around her lush figure in ways that would make a man blow his load just looking. If I'd had anything more than my thong on to give me more friction, I would have been in serious trouble. As it was, I ached with need as I watched her troll me in toward her, wrapping an arm around my waist.

Her voice in my ear raised the heat in my loins. This shouldn't be happening, not to the old Hawk. I used to do the stalking. I had been the alpha. How the last three years had changed things. Before Ted and Lisa, I had just coasted and now another woman was calling the shots. If I was going to regain my self-confidence in the dating game, I needed to get back on top. Figuratively speaking. I frowned. What had she said? Her eyes laughed at me and she repeated herself.

"You're really fit, Hawk. A hard body. I like hard bodies against my soft skin." Her smile curved her lips and she kissed my ear. Nipped it.

God! I wanted to touch myself, but I was *not* going to just roll over like this! I took charge and wrapped my arms around her, dancing with *me* controlling the tempo. She still managed to rub against me in ways that were probably illegal in public. She really *was* trying to seduce me! I felt like I was losing the control to keep from ripping that little dress off her and dropping to my knees right here with everyone dancing around us. I forced myself to pull back.

"Let's go back to your place," I said huskily. "Just to talk. I'm not this easy."

She pulled my arm close and started for the door. "You're the boss," she said back with the same heat in her voice. "And as long as you say no, it's no. But I've never had someone hold out for long when I say yes."

She leaned against me and whispered in my ear. "And just to be explicitly clear, I'm saying yes. Personal, not part of Daddy's deal."

I wondered if I had better call Ted and Lisa or at least leave a message. I wasn't sure I could keep holding out. If I caved, I wouldn't be coming home tonight. And if I *did* cave in, I wanted some time to get to know her right.

Chapter Three: A busy morning

Before heading to Gretchen's place, I asked her to stop by the hotel room so I could get my things. I left a note for Ted and Lisa telling them that I would be back in the morning to see them off to the airport. Whether Gretchen and I did anything or not, I wanted to have more than just my short black dress, and since I was already there, I just packed up all my other clothes. If I needed to, I could check into some other hotel.

The drive out of the city and to her place was an odyssey of quiet lust. Gretchen didn't tempt me overtly but her posture spoke volumes. She slumped lower in her seat than before, showing leg all the way up to her thigh. I desperately sought some means to break her hold on me. I recited the multiplication tables to myself, thought about my parents naked, and imagined Rosanne Barr without makeup *and* naked. I shuddered in revulsion at the last, but sighed in frustration as I realized the desire was still there, exuding sex and looking like an angel.

I was still wrestling with myself when my angel pulled into a driveway in front of a big brick and wood house. I shook my head. When had she become '*my* angel?' I need to get a hold of myself. Forcing my eyes away from her thighs, I looked at the house. Very classy looking.

When Gretchen unlocked the door and showed me inside, I was impressed. Tasteful elegance colored everything from the furniture to the artwork displayed on the walls. The subdued, clean and simple look spoke of a great deal of money. Our footsteps on the marble in the entryway were absorbed by the deep white carpets.

"Come into the kitchen and I'll fix us a drink," Gretchen said with a smile. "You can tell me all about your other business since I'll be keeping you company while you finish it."

I nodded. "Okay, but make mine just a beer. I need to keep my head clear around you or I might succumb to your wiles." I smiled to keep it light, but in my heart I heard the truth of my words.

She laughed gaily and led the way into a spacious and modern kitchen. Opening the wine chiller, she pulled out some wine. "I don't have any beer in stock, so you'll have to take your chances. Surely you aren't threatened by little ole me?" she asked seductively, fanning her face with her hand and smiling the kind of smile that made my panties melt.

"Yes," I said hoarsely, my smile now strained. "You are dangerous to my self-restraint. I want to say yes so bad I can taste it, but the answer must be no. I need to respect myself and you." I took the glass of wine she handed me and sipped the ruby liquid.

She nodded and sipped her wine, still standing. "You seem like an alpha type - very assertive. You are probably like that about sex, too." Gretchen set her glass on the counter and stepped into my personal space, almost making me step back. She caressed my cheek with her hand softly. "That might be a challenge for me, Hawk. You see, I'm used to being the alpha in 'personal' relations. I go after what I like and make it mine."

Her touch roused a fire inside me that I couldn't deny, but managed to force back down. My pussy became wet almost instantly but I reined it in savagely. I reached up and pulled her hand down from my face and kissed her palm before letting it go. "No, not tonight. I want to, but I won't be rushed."

Her eyes sparkled with shock, amusement and a hint of admiration. "Well, I am *not* used to being fended off. At least it isn't usually easy to say no to this." She reached up

with practiced ease and slid the dress off her shoulders, and it fell into a puddle by her feet.

My breath caught in my throat as I looked at her body. Her hourglass figure was even more devastating to my resolve than I had feared it might be. Her generous breasts were high and firm, natural looking. Her narrow waist and her flared hips framed a neatly trimmed, and natural, blonde bush. The heels that were her only garment now and made her calves look good enough to eat. Without thought, I found my hands reaching for her, and I again forced myself to step back, bringing them to grip the counter.

"Oh, God, that's simply not fair," I said, closing my eyes. "I think I better sleep in a separate bedroom. With a lock. And a heavy dresser blocking the door."

Gretchen laughed. When I opened my eyes, she had picked up her dress and was walking out. She returned in a moment, wrapped in a silk robe. "Okay, Hawk. You win this round. I'll stop teasing you and let you tell me the rest of your story." She sat at the counter on a barstool, her legs folded beside her almost demurely.

Lord, she was so sexy I almost gave in. I picked up my wineglass and sipped it, looking at her face and trying to savor my victory while my body told me what an idiot I was being. I regretted the decision already but I refused to give in. This had become a matter of pride.

"The rest of the business is finding out if Ted and Lisa got married last night," I said gauging her reaction. "We were a bit toasted and the evidence seems to point that way." I related the details and I could see her struggling not to laugh.

"I suppose I don't understand. If they were drunk, it's not binding. I know you know that, so there must be something else," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. "They don't commit lightly. If they did get married, I think they'll try to make it work. They just need to know and I'm going to find the answers for them. They mean..." It hit me like a blow to the stomach, how important their happiness was to me. "They're my friends. I don't have many and that makes them precious to me. Would you stay married if you found yourself hitched unexpectedly?" I asked, turning the tables.

She swallowed more wine and swirled the glass while she considered her response. "I've been asked to get married by more people than I care to think about. All were

men that want what they think I have, men that want to possess me or simply those that think they love me. I've grown leery of the thought of marriage." She set the glass down on the counter. "I couldn't get drunk enough to agree, and believe me, some men have tried that route, too. If I get married, I'll stick with it, though. Not that I see that in my future. Well, not unless someone as interesting as you comes along to sweep me off my feet and make an honest woman of me." She grinned. "What about you? If it had been you that woke and seemed to be married, what would you do?"

I rubbed my hand over my face. That was an interesting question. "It was almost me. It could've been me. I'm not a quitter. Marriage to someone like Ted might work for a while, but I don't love him, or at least not in the right way. I'd try to make it work, but I don't think it would last." I yawned and set the glass down. "Look, sorry to be a party pooper but I'm wiped out. Let's get some sleep and we can start again in the morning, okay?"

She rose to her feet gracefully and took the wineglass, rinsing them both out in the sink and setting them out to dry. "Let me take you to your room and you can get some sleep. I'll dream up a plan to seduce you while we sleep."

I shook my head and smiled. "You do that."

The bedroom was luxurious in a way that even the highest class hotels only wished they could emulate. Plush covers and pillows were scattered across the bed in a dark red wave. A delicate glass sculpture of a swan sat on a doily beside the mirror. No paintings, just soothing color draped the walls. The attached bathroom was a marvel all on its own.

Gretchen had mercy on me, keeping her hands to herself and her clothes on. "Goodnight, Hawk. Sweet dreams," she said with a smile that said she knew what I would be dreaming of, and then she closed the door behind her.

I slowly stripped, putting my clothes in the chair, and padded into the bathroom to take a long, cold shower. I didn't expect it to help and I was right. When I was done, it still took an hour for me to nod off into a dream-filled sleep.

The next morning, after tossing and turning, I finally dragged myself out of bed, showered and dressed before heading to the kitchen. I found Gretchen already up and sipping her coffee. Her robe from last night was replaced by sweatpants and a ragged tee shirt proclaiming the benefits of aromatherapy. I had to remind myself not to jump

her bones, because she was looking way too sexy. Her bare feet tapped on the stone floor to an oldie playing on the stereo: Jimi Hendrix asked me to excuse him while he kissed some guy. Okay, I know he said "kiss the sky", but I like my story better.

"Morning, sleepy! It's already eight am!" She beamed at me. Dear God, she was perky in the morning. Before coffee. Normally I hate perky at any time of day, especially mornings, but on Gretchen, perky just made her more human, more alluring somehow. I shook my head. I was in big trouble. "I figured we could stop by this really good kolache place I know and enjoy some good Czech breakfast," she continued. "Do you want some coffee first, though? You look... um, not quite awake."

She poured me a cup with the right amount of creamer and sweetener already inside. She did have a good memory. I retreated to my seat, like a sleeping bear that had just awoken from the winter, greedily drinking in the fine bean.

"So, what first," she asked with a grin. "Pick up your friends and get them to the airport?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I'll call them and confirm the time, but I think they have to be there by noon. The flight is at two. I'll wake their sleepy asses up after I drink my coffee." An evil idea occurred to me. "Or we could go wake them up and drag them off to breakfast."

"Ooooo! I like that idea," she agreed. "I'd like to actually talk to them before they leave. I need to make sure Daddy is following through on his word," she smiled a shark-like grin, "and they can help me understand what makes you tick. That resistance of yours only makes me want you more. You know that, right? I'm going to keep chipping away at that "no" until I get what I want." Her eyes smoked at me.

There was no chance I could suppress that jolt of lust without the conflict showing on my face. Gretchen laughed, obviously enjoying my discomfort. I drank my coffee and commanded my pussy to heel. I'd need to send it to obedience school.

"I should just toss your sexy ass onto the couch and have my way with you." She perked up and licked her lips. "But," I said over my wagging finger, "I'm not going to give in so quickly. When I strike, you won't see it coming." I grinned my own shark-like grin.

"Well! I suppose I've been put in my place!" she exclaimed with a laugh. "We'll see if you hold out or I get my way. Like I said, I love a challenge. Let me go get some clothes on. Want to come and watch?" she asked coyly.

"Go get changed. I'm not that easy and you're not that innocent."

With a distinctly girlish giggle, she swayed back to the bedroom area. I shook my head and went to wander the house. It was even swankier than I thought last night. All feminine in ways my house couldn't match. Or perhaps it was in ways I couldn't match. A home was a reflection of the owner's personality, like Lisa had told me.

Gretchen found me in a room that I would have to call a library. It had a number of bookshelves covered with hardback books on all kinds of subjects. Physics to chess and painting to auto repair. I was leafing through one on ballroom dancing when she came in dressed in a casual blouse and blue jeans.

"Ready? Since we may have company, we'll need something with enough room for everyone and their luggage. This way to the garage," she said, pointing off to the left side of the house.

The garage was much like the house, big and filled with classy stuff. All of it looked to be in great shape, but one had the hood up and a tool box beside it.

"What's wrong with the Beamer?" I asked.

"Something's wrong with one the lights. It goes out sometimes. Probably a grounding issue. I've been kind of busy lately, so I'll get it tracked down later."

I stopped and stared at her. "You work on cars?"

She stopped next to the Lexus SUV and opened the door. "Sure, the easy stuff. It's interesting and can be fun. Do you work on stuff?"

I climbed in the passenger side and buckled in. "I've done some work on my bike but not a lot. I mainly let the shop take care of most things."

Gretchen started the SUV and opened the garage. "You're a biker babe? A macho biker babe, I bet." The grounds were much more covered in plants than I had noticed when we pulled in last night. She must have a nice contract with...

I looked at her suspiciously. "You do have a yard service, right?"

Her laugh lightened my spirits a lot. "Yes, though I have planted some flowers from

time to time and I pester them shamelessly for the details of how it all works. Why? You looking to open a yard business?"

My response was cut off when she slammed on the brakes. As I was thrown against the seatbelt, I saw some guy in a brown bomber jacket standing in the driveway, snapping pictures of us.

"What the fuck?" I popped the door open and slid out, already moving around the front of the vehicle.

I heard Gretchen telling me no, but I was already out so I might as well see what this guy was up to.

"You. What the hell are you doing? Shag your ass out of the driveway," I said with the hook of a thumb. "We've got places to be."

Moron boy took some more pictures of me and then grinned over his camera. He really should look into some laser whitening for his teeth. "Is she your bitch now? What's your name? I've never seen her sleep with a woman before. It's worth big bucks. Cough it up, Babe. Was she worth the money?"

Did you ever feel like your head was going to pop off your body? My blood pressure went right through the top of my head and I started for him. "Babe? I'll give you Babe!"

He danced back into the street outside the gate, keeping the camera out of the way. "No hitting! I'm on public property! Touch me and you'll face charges!"

Yeah, right. Damn perverts. I didn't know what his game was, but I wasn't about to let him fuck with us like that. He didn't even turn to run; he just snapped more pictures as I got into his face.

"You get the hell out of here before I call the cops and have your sorry ass tossed in jail, Perv. Give me the film."

He started laughing. That puzzled me more than it made me angry. I wasn't used to being laughed at while threatening someone. "Never happen. First amendment. It doesn't matter anyway. They all got some good ones, too."

I half turned and damned if there weren't two more people across the street in a car with a camera snapping away. What in the hell was going on? The sound of a car door

slamming brought my attention back to that first guy. He was starting up a beat up Pontiac Firebird and was in motion before I could decide what to do about him.

Behind me, Gretchen honked. I gave the other camera the finger and got back into her car. Gretchen was laughing. "Oh, Hawk, that is too funny! That'll be all over the papers tomorrow morning with some headline about us as a new item."

While she pulled out and onto the street, I looked at her incredulously. "What? Why the hell would any paper do that?"

Gretchen shook her head in disbelief and smiled. "How can any cop be so naïve?" she mocked me gently, paraphrasing my own words from last night. "The paparazzi hang all over people like me. Freelance gunslingers with a camera. And if you go after them, they swarm. I hope you can live with your picture in all the tabloids as my new lover."

"You have got to be kidding me," I grumbled.

"Nope," she snickered.

"Fine, let them say what they like. It won't tarnish my image," I decided. "Yours on the other hand, might just spin in odd directions."

"Oh, please! I've been photographed with a lot of people and it's been rumored that I sleep with so many of them I can't even count the stories anymore," she retorted. "Let 'em go and just ignore them."

I shook my head. Amazing.

We were halfway to the hotel when my cell rang.

"Hawk." I said into the handset.

"It's Lisa. How was your evening?" Her voice had a sly edge to it. "Did you make a new friend?"

"It was frustrating," I answered with a smile at Gretchen. "I'm being stubborn."

She laughed in my ear. "Really? I'd never imagined stubbornness to be one of your failings, Hawk."

"Is there a purpose to this call, besides slandering me, Sexy? Did you and Ted enjoy a night away from the old ball and chain? Oh, and we're on our way over to kidnap you both to breakfast with us."

Lisa's voice got lower. "Thank you for that, Hawk. I don't want to exclude you, but I needed last night alone with Ted to ground myself. And you might as well keep driving to breakfast. We're already on the way to the airport."

"What?" I asked, sitting forward with a frown. "Why? The flight isn't until after noon."

I could almost hear her shrug. "Plans changed last night. Late last night. It's your fault, really. I don't know what you were thinking when you dragged Ted and me into this, but Hans kept hammering and wheedling late into the night. I think Ted caved just so we could get some sleep. I gave in when he did, so we're off to Boston to talk about the details. I'll get you for this, by the way. We're taking a private plane with Hans and Brunhilda. She was worse this morning than last night. I'd have called you last night, but I was worried I might interrupt something juicy. Why are you stalling on her, Hawk? She's *hot!*"

"Well, just between you and me, I've been asking myself that very question. Hard-headedness, probably. It's only made me more interesting, I think." I said, looking at Gretchen. She looked back at me and licked her lips in a way that sent shockwaves through my body.

"Ooooo, you've made yourself hard to get. That is a real turn-on, you know. Look, Hans already called my temporary boss and had my leave extended. We'll call you from Boston after we get there. Do me a favor, though, you and Gretchen have fun, okay?" Lisa asked.

"I miss you guys already. I'll call as soon as I have information. I don't think it will take too long to nail this down. Be safe and slug that bitch for me."

"Tempting. I love you, Hawk. Bye."

I was so surprised by that statement that Lisa was gone before I could respond. Lisa loved me? Surely just as a friend, I told myself. She loves Ted. I tried to remember the last time someone had said that to me. Sliding the phone back into my pants pocket, I focused on Gretchen, instead. "Hans took them to Boston. Abort the pickup and make tracks for those kolaches."

Gretchen only nodded. "He can be very persuasive when he tries. Let's get breakfast and I'll just have to meet them some other time. They seem like nice enough people, but it's really you that interests me."

She said it so matter-of-factly, I felt... I don't know what emotion it was. *I* was being stalked; and, in relationships like this, I was very much afraid she was the hunter and I was the hunted. I took a deep breath. "I'm just a cop. There's nothing special about me. You're the goddess."

She stopped at the light and looked at me. "Oh, please. I can't see one part of you that's normal or average. You're a dynamo of energy and determination. You tell people to jump and expect to be obeyed. People that cross you do so at their peril. You even stood up to Daddy and I've never seen anyone but my mother do that. You're not afraid of anyone or anything."

I blinked in surprise. "It's who I am. If I let anyone back me down, I'd be running for the rest of my life. Surely you know that just like I do."

She pulled through the intersection when the light turned green. "Sometimes. It's something I feel that we share. It's attractive. I can't wait until I wear you down and drag you off to my bedroom."

"When I make the call, we might not make it to the bedroom," I said before I could stop myself.

She smiled. "So now it's when, not if. We're making real progress here."

I covered my eyes as she pulled into a bakery parking lot. "That slipped out. Can I have a do over?"

"Nope. You're committed now. Let's go through the drive-through, and we can get working on your mystery. I'm hoping to make an early night of it." The look she sent me caused my panties to smolder, and they would have caught fire if they weren't so wet. I was very afraid that if she touched me, I would cave, but she kept her hands to herself.

Ten minutes later we were on the road, eating steaming hot sausage and cheese kolaches. Sweet bread wrapped around sausage and cheese and baked. They were very good. I'd have to start working out or I'd weigh a ton. I could *feel* my thighs growing as

I chewed.

Falling into the comfortable patterns of work, I took out my cell and started making calls. The city offices had just opened and were able to give me the owner's name and official contact business number and address. Antonio DiGeorgio. I made a side bet with myself whether it would be Big Tony or Little Tony. Men.

A call to his office got me his secretary. It seemed Mister DiGeorgio was in a meeting. Would I care to leave a message?

"No thanks. I'll call back."

I smiled at Gretchen. "Bingo. He's at his office." I gave her the address. "Can you get us there?"

Gretchen shook her head and turned on this little computer screen on the console. "GPS and directions via satellite and computer." She entered the address quickly and the little voice was directing us right to the office. I was impressed.

The office building was a little three story affair that looked normal enough. We parked and went up to suite 201. The door confirmed it was the office of GL Enterprises. Call it a hunch, but I would bet good money that stood for Graceland.

Inside, an older redhead sat at the desk typing on a computer terminal. She looked up at our entrance. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

I put on my best public relations smile. "Sure. We're here to see Mister DiGeorgio."

She kept smiling, but shook her head. "I'm sorry, but he's in a meeting. Can I take a message?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we need to see him. Tell him Detective Hawkins is here with an associate to talk about the fire at his property two nights ago." I kept that same smile in place. I didn't have any jurisdiction; but, I didn't think I would get any flack for putting a little pressure on this guy about a fire.

She blinked at me for a moment and then picked up the phone and dialed. "Tony, the police are here about the fire." She listened, and then hung up. "Go right in."

I smiled more widely. Score one for me. "Thank you. Tell me, my partner and I were

wondering, does he go by Big Tony or Little Tony?"

Gretchen cocked her head at me, but said nothing.

"Big Tony," the woman said uncertainly.

"Thank you. You've been very helpful," I said.

Knocking as I opened the door, we entered the office. It was big enough, I suppose, but all the pictures of Elvis and various people trying to look like Elvis kind of took the gravity right out. The man rising from behind the desk was big alright. Over six feet tall and going to seed. He was in a business suit a size too small, and he affected the same mutton chop sideburns as the Elvises staring at us from the walls.

Tony extended his hand. "I already talked to the police, but I'm always happy to cooperate. What more can I tell you?" His accent was more Brooklyn than Vegas. At least it wasn't Elvis.

"I'm Detective Hawkins. This is my associate, Werner. We're following up on the details. It's all routine. Can we sit?"

"Sure. Park it." He gestured to two worn chairs in front of the desk and we sat.

"Let's start off with the simple stuff first. Who was in the place at the time of the fire?" I asked in my professional tone.

"Leo Giovanni and his wife. He did the marrying and she did the witnessing." He pointed to a picture of Elvis on the wall. Like I could tell what they looked like under that getup.

"What's their story?" I asked, looking at the picture anyway.

"Good question," he answered with a shrug. "I haven't been able to get a hold of him. He doesn't answer the phone or the door to his place. Your people are still looking for him."

That was interesting. I leaned forward and fixed him with my best skeptical stare. "That's interesting timing, don't you think? A fire, and poof, they're gone? You have any ideas about why they might move out on you or set fire to your place?"

Tony bristled. "Nobody said anything about setting fires. I'm sure this is electrical or

something. I'm not sure where Leo went; but, I'm sure he wouldn't do *that* to me."

"Let me have his address again. In fact, let me have a copy of his employment application and emergency contact," I said.

Tony looked reluctant but called the secretary for the information. I asked a few other questions about the fire; but, I already had what I wanted. As soon as practical I cut the interview short with the promise to get back to him with any information I could find out, and I left with Gretchen. The application said Leo was from here in Vegas and gave several contacts and references.

In the car, Gretchen looked at me. "Won't we get into trouble for telling him we're cops?"

I grinned. "Probably not. I am a cop and I never said you were. I never said I was a cop from Vegas. For petty arson I doubt the cops here would care. Let's go check out the home address."

The apartments in question were pretty rundown. I spotted two drug dealers before we parked the car. They eyed the SUV from the cover of inter-building walkways. I climbed out and gave them my cop stare and they melted back into the darkness.

"How do you do that?" Gretchen asked. "You look at them and they run away. Like they know they're lower on the food chain than you."

"That kind can smell cop a mile away. Darwin at his worst. I just have to be me, and away they go. Come on." I led the way into building D. At D4, I knocked hard. No answer. I stepped to the window and looked in. Through the corner of the blind that was bent I could see that the living room, such as it was, was disturbed. I frowned. The place looked tossed. I knocked on the door again. "Mister Giovanni. Police. Please open the door."

While I was waiting for an answer I was beginning to suspect I wouldn't be getting, the door behind us opened. I looked back and an old Hispanic woman was coming out on her walker.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm with the police. Have you seen the Giovanni's recently?"

She peered up at me through thick lenses. "Leo and Marge? I saw them yesterday

morning, early." She had hardly any accent, but did have a tremble in the voice that some elderly people had when speaking. "I was going out to my sister's house and that nice boy from building C drove me. I just got back an hour ago. Are they in some kind of trouble?"

I shook my head. "No, ma'am. Just routine. Do you know where they were going?"

She nodded. "Marge told me that they were leaving to spend some time with her mother."

I consulted my notes. "That's over on the other side of town?"

The woman smiled. "No, I don't think so. They've lived here several years, and I've heard Marge tell Leo more than once that she should go back to her mother in Boston."

Interesting. "Do you know what her mother's name is?"

She shook her head. "No, but I know Marge's maiden name is Lebowski. They left with all kinds of suitcases; so, I think they must be planning to stay a while."

I patted her shoulder. "Thank you for your help, ma'am. Have a nice day."

We walked the woman to a friend's apartment and then went back to the SUV. Gretchen seemed more impressed than ever. "That was just like watching Dragnet. You were so cool."

I shook my head and laughed. "Just the facts, ma'am. Let me call the numbers for references while you drive us out of this dump."

By the time we were back in safe territory, I had confirmed my suspicions. All of the contact information and references were bogus. A call to information had only one listing for a Lebowski in Boston. Paul and Helen Lebowski.

I called the number and an older man answered. "Yeah?"

"Hi," I said brightly. "This is Susan. I heard Marge was back visiting you. Is she in?"

"Naw," he answered. "She's out with that no good slug she calls a husband, getting something for the guest room. Who did you say this was?"

"I'll just call back later. Let me surprise her, okay?"

He grunted, "Sure," and hung up. I smiled. Just my kind of guy. Few words and said what he meant. Odd that they were in Boston while Ted and Lisa were there; but sometimes the odds came out that way.

"Looks like we are going to Boston, if you still want to go sleuthing around with me," I said to Gretchen.

"Oh, I'm going," she answered. "Try to stop me now. Besides I can be a big help. I grew up in Boston and know a lot of people there, too."

"Then we need to pack. I'll call for flight reservations. Looks like we are going on a little trip." I started calling for tickets and she drove back to her place grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

Chapter Four: The tangled knot

The airline tickets were not cheap, but we were able to fly out that evening. Since I hadn't unpacked after leaving the hotel, I was ready to go, and Gretchen kept a bag packed at all times.

Our flight took off late, as expected, and I dozed fitfully in the first class seats that Gretchen insisted we have. She insisted on paying, too, claiming it was a reimbursable expense. It just might have been for all I knew. I decided to take her word for it. In any case, it beat the hell out of flying coach with someone else's fat ass flowing into my space.

I woke up as we began our descent toward Boston. I yawned and stretched, not as stiff as after the flight to Vegas had made me last week. Gretchen had either stayed awake or woke up before me. I glanced at what she was reading. A golf magazine.

"Golf? You've got to be kidding me," I said with a shake of my head. "I don't get that sport. Why bother? What's the attraction?"

She put the magazine back into the rack and focused her attention on me, her smile too bright for how tired I felt. "Golf is a good sport. No violence, lots of skill required, and luck plays a big role. That, and anyone can work hard and make it. Look at Dave

MacDonald from Canada. He came out of nowhere to challenge Tiger Woods."

I raised an eyebrow. "So? It's still a sissy sport. Give me hockey any... Wait a minute," I said with a frown. "There was some kid in Canada named MacDonald that was being talked about in hockey a few years back. I think he was a Dave. Is it the same kid?"

Gretchen shrugged. "Maybe. I'll see if I can find out sometime. If it is, would that make golf more interesting to you?"

"Probably not," I admitted. "I just can't imagine golf players to be a very exciting lot."

"I hear his wife is pretty nice. Maybe golfer's wives would be more fun for you to meet," Gretchen said mischievously.

I laughed. "They're probably as boring as their husbands." And I'm much more interested in someone else, right now, I added silently. "Let's worry about that if we have to storm a golf course."

"Fine," she said with a laugh.

The plane touched down and taxied to the terminal. When they let us stand up, we gathered our carry-ons and went out into the airport.

Gretchen insisted on staying in one of the attached hotels. I weighed Motel 6 against the comfortable rooms they would have here, and agreed. I wondered if Ted, Lisa and Gretchen were making me soft or just plain corrupting me, but not so much that I voiced an objection.

With my thoughts thus distracted, I hadn't paid close enough attention to Gretchen as she was reserving the room, I decided once the guy showed us in. It had a single large bed and was exactly what I'd had in mind to avoid when I had vowed to keep my lust under wraps.

"Whoa! Hold up, Sport." I fixed Gretchen with a glare. "I don't remember a single bed being mentioned."

She smiled at the bellboy, and then looked at me with a smile that sent shivers down my spine. "But Hawk, I didn't think that would be a problem. We're both girls." She fluttered her eyelashes at me. "Surely we can sleep one night together without... disturbing one another." She handed the bellboy a bill, practically shoved him out the

door and locked it behind him. She then turned around to smile at me with that air of angelic innocence that soaked my panties and set off all kinds of alarms inside me.

"You set this up," I accused her. "Dammit, I'm already having a hard time resisting your wiles, and *now* we're sleeping together?"

Gretchen crossed her heart. "I promised not to push, but give a girl her pleasure. If I can't sample the goods, at least let me tease and tempt them a little."

Gretchen looked at the clock and it was almost eleven p.m. already. "I want to take the whirlpool for a quick spin to relax before bed. Join me?" She didn't wait for me to dither. She started slowly taking her clothes off in a way that made me drool. God was punishing me for something. I wasn't sure what, but it had to be bad. My eyes clung to her body as she slowly revealed it to me, her eyes never leaving my face. On the other hand, maybe God was rewarding me. Or both rewarding *and* punishing me.

I wanted to get up and grab her right there, and I knew that's exactly what she wanted me to do. That bit of knowledge gave me strength, and I decided I would show her that I could dish it out, as well as take it. With a smile, I stood up slowly and started unbuttoning my blouse... button by button. Gretchen stood naked before me, watching with interest. When I had removed my top, I slid my jeans down and stood there in my underwear.

"Shall I get in the whirlpool like this?" I asked her. "Or do you want me naked? All you have to do is ask, and off come the clothes."

Gretchen laughed. "You aren't teasing me. Take it off, Baby!"

I unhitched my bra and dropped it beside the bed. Then I turned around and pulled my panties to the floor, giving her a framed view of my pussy. I expected some sign of appreciation, but not a wolf whistle. When she cut loose with that ear splitting whistle, I stood up and laughed. Turning slowly, I came to within a few inches of her, paused, and then headed into the bathroom. She was very good, but I could see the lust in her eyes, restrained by her will. I had her; now to not give in tonight.

Gretchen walked past me and started drawing water into the whirlpool bath. She sat on the edge as it began filling, looking me up and down like a woman eyeing various desserts on a dessert cart. I suddenly was worried that I might have gone too far, and she might just make her move.

"Down, kitty. No milk for you tonight," I said mock sternly.

Gretchen held up her hands and grinned. "I see you have nipple rings. I considered getting some once, but decided against it. Do they hurt?"

"Only when they were first done," I replied dryly, causing her to laugh "After that, they are really *nice* during sex."

She looked at my breasts appreciatively. Then she turned the conversation to bath items and the sexual tension started bleeding out of the air. None too soon, I thought.

When the tub was filled, she slid in, and I joined her. The added element of slipperiness threatened my resolve. Her feet seemed to accidentally brush against my legs, but I was sure that it was intentional. I found my hand caressing my mound and had to force it away before I slipped all the way down the slope. Admittedly the hot water made my muscles relax. After twenty minutes, I stood up and started using the shower hose to rinse off.

"I'm beat and we have work to do in the morning," I said.

"You go to bed and I'll be along in a few minutes. I want to soak just a little bit longer."

I nodded and stepped onto the bathmat to dry off. Wrapping the towel around me, I went back into the bedroom and considered whether or not to wear anything to bed. Dropping the towel on the floor, I slid between the sheets, deciding to sleep in the nude. If she made a move, I'd be in trouble, whether I had something on or not.

Rubbing my hands along my body, I decided to take a few minutes for a quick orgasm to take the edge off. I rubbed two fingers along the length of my slit and closed my eyes. The vision of her standing in front of the tub swam into my thoughts, and I brought my other hand to my nipples. Twisting and pinching them, I sighed. The ramp up to orgasm came slowly at first, and then like a freight train. I clamped my mouth shut to strangle the groans as I arched my back and came. After a few moments of exquisite pleasure, I collapsed back onto the mattress.

When I opened my eyes, Gretchen was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, her towel on the floor at her feet, watching me with eyes that smoldered. I jumped a bit at the surprise, and she smiled. Smiled like a hunter, lazy and arrogant in her supremacy. "I think that we won't make it back to Vegas before you give in to your desire, Hawk. Do you want me now? You can have me."

It was harder this time. Much harder, but I shook my head. "No sex for you tonight. Into bed, little slave girl. I flipped her covers down and scooted over to my side.

Gretchen swayed over and sat on her side of the bed, staring at me with an interested look. "Slave girl, eh? Should I start calling you mistress? Wear a collar in public? Let you discipline me?"

My eyes widened fast. This had just taken a turn to the kinky. "Ahhh..." Then I started thinking about what she said and I flushed. Leather I was into, but kinky sex games? "I, um, have no idea."

"If I was a bad girl, would you handcuff me and make me service you, mistress?" she asked in a sultry voice that shot a bolt of arousal through me. "Or sometimes I've found that those in positions of authority like to be dominated. Should I order you around in the bedroom? Make you serve *me* in private? Or should we take turns being in charge?"

I shook my head. "I've never tried any of that, and I don't know if I'd like it. Let's just table this, okay? I'm asking you not to push. Please."

With a throaty laugh, she turned out the light and slid under the covers. "I can wait, good looking. By the way, I enjoyed the show and can't wait to see you do that little dance under my hands."

I shivered and poked her in the side. "Play nice!" All that did was make her laugh harder.

Gretchen finally let me be and snuggled into her pillow. She was softly snoring in less than five minutes. It took me much longer to go to sleep with her on my mind, but I managed it somehow.

When I woke up the next morning, I was briefly disoriented. It took a full minute for me to remember where I was. A glance beside me told me that Gretchen was gone. She was an early riser.

I stumbled into the bathroom to take care of the morning rituals, and she wasn't there either. A quick shower and I dressed up in layers. It had been cold yesterday when we flew into Boston, and I'd bet it would be cold today. I might need to see about getting a coat. Vegas hadn't prepared me for this.

As I was tying my shoes, the front door opened, and Gretchen came in, dressed in that same ratty tee shirt and sweats from yesterday morning, but this time covered in sweat.

"Morning!" she said. "I've been working out. I missed my aerobics yesterday so I hit the gym. Be back in a bit. Order something for breakfast!" She dodged into the bathroom and I heard the shower kick on.

By the time she was done cleaning up, I had room service on the table. We chatted about Boston as we ate and I started noticing a pattern. She was much more sexually aggressive at night than in the morning. There were no attacks on my virtue over breakfast. I filed that away for later use.

Throwing her napkin down on the table, she looked over at me with an evil twinkle in her eye. "I'd like to stop somewhere and do something that'll set Brunhilda off like a bottle rocket."

I narrowed my eyes. "That sounds ominous, and it's bound to be harmful to any possible reconciliation. Spill it."

Gretchen rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll just give it to Daddy as a practical joke and then tear it up, if you insist." She leaned forward and grinned. "I want to stop by the county clerk's office and get a marriage license."

I raised an eyebrow. "Going to just pick some guy off the street and convince him to sign on the dotted line? That will take some powerful persuasion, even for you, Doll."

"Nope," she said getting to her feet. "This is Massachusetts. I'm planning to have you sign on the dotted line."

I knew that Massachusetts had legalized gay marriage, but this surprised the hell out of me.

"Me?" I squeaked. "We've only just met!"

She held out her hand, palm out. "It's just a license. It doesn't mean anything if we don't get it signed by a minister or justice of the peace and get it filed. It's not getting married. Your story yesterday put the germ of this in my head and I just *have* to see *someone's* eyes bug out."

I held her in my suspicious gaze as I stood up. "You're a practical joker, aren't you? I know your type, always doing something to set other people off balance. I should have figured. If we do it, will you sit down with me and talk about your Dad and his relationship with you?"

Gretchen scowled. "He doesn't have one with her in the picture."

"Bullshit. You two could have a relationship that doesn't include her, but it would take both of you agreeing to have time away from her and leaving her *out* of the picture while you're together."

I forestalled her objection with my hand. "Just let it stew. You agree to think about it, I'll agree to help you play your joke. But no saying "I do." I'm not willing to go that far in helping the prankster out."

She perked up. "Deal. Where to after that? Finding your missing Elvis?"

"Yes, but first I think I need a coat. Let's find one on the way to get your silly license."

I tried to convince Gretchen that I didn't need an expensive coat, but that turned into a whole 'nother discussion when I found out she wasn't recommending an *expensive* one. The issue seemed to be that we had differing definitions of inexpensive. I wanted to get something for less than a hundred bucks someplace like Wal-Mart. She wanted something more in the four to five hundred dollar range. I stuck to my guns and we soon had a perfectly serviceable coat for me at my price.

The next stop was the county clerk's office. Never having gotten a marriage license, I wasn't sure how many hoops would have to be jumped through or if we needed blood tests and stuff. It turned out that the process was simple to the point of being ludicrous. Fill out a simple application, pay the nominal fee and walk out with a license that was valid after a three day "cooling off" period. Gretchen folded it and stuffed it into her coat pocket.

"Now, we have to find your dude. Lay on, MacDuff," she said with a grin. We waved down a cab driven by a nice Jamaican guy named Devon and headed for the address I had for our Elvis. Forty minutes later we pulled up to a small two story house just like all the other houses on the block. They sure did build small up here. I could barely imagine two people living in them, much less a family. I handed the cabbie his fare and a nice tip. "Keep the motor running and we'll be back out in a bit."

"Follow my lead," I told Gretchen as we stepped out onto the narrow sidewalk. "They might be resistive."

She nodded and we walked up to the front door. I knocked and put on my cop face. With a creak, the door opened and an older man looked out at me suspiciously. "We already have some."

He started to close the door, but I held up my hand. "We're not selling anything. Paul Lebowski? I'm Detective Hawkins and this is my associate. We're looking for your son-in-law, Leo Giovanni."

Mister Lebowski stopped closing the door and snorted. "Why am I not surprised? I've told Marge she was an idiot for marrying someone like him, not enough forks in their family tree, if you know what I mean, but she ignored me. Like she always does. Comes from her mother's side of the family."

"Is he here, sir? May we speak to him?" I asked.

The old man sighed. "I wish he was. I'd like to see you grill the bastard, but he and Marge got all worked up last night when my wife told Marge that some old friend had called for her. Scooted right out the door like Satan himself was right behind 'em. Left most of their stuff, though. Figures. They're probably staying with some friends, cause they ain't got hardly no money till they get work. Even when they do, he pisses it away gambling." Belatedly, he frowned. "Can I see your badge?"

I nodded and pulled it out, displaying it for him. He pursed his lips. "Houston? You're a long way from home, Detective. What did Jackass do in Houston? I can't say as I've heard he was ever there."

I quirked a smile. "Actually, it's about one of the marriages he might have performed in Vegas. I just need to get some clarification."

"That seems a little odd to be a police matter."

"It involves some friends of mine," I said, glancing with a twinkle in my eye at Gretchen, "and my partner and I have firm ideas about getting married. Where is he, sir?"

The man shrugged. "I'll bet he's holed up some place with one of his old pals. He's from the *less savory* side of town, so I don't know, and frankly, don't really want to know."

"Does he have family here, other than you?" Gretchen asked.

"Sure. His momma lives over there, too, poor woman. I pity her for having had to raise a snake like him."

"Can you give me her address, Mister Lebowski? The sooner we can find him and clear this up, the better for all of us," I said.

"Let me go get the address," he said and closed the door.

I looked at Gretchen. "You think they ran to his mother's? That seems too simple to me."

She shook her head. "No, but if they're short on cash, he'll turn up there sooner or later. Besides, a stake-out sounds like fun."

I laughed at her. "That is so untrue. A more boring time you couldn't imagine. It might be days before we get a nibble. Still, it is the best lead we have. If we don't contact her, they might come to her after they get less spooked." I nodded thoughtfully. "You know, that's a good idea. We can spend the time talking about you and your father," I paused, "and about each other."

Her smile soured a little. "Let's talk about division of time. I'd rather talk more about you and less about Daddy. We do it in dribbles, okay?"

"Deal."

The door opened and Mister Lebowski handed me a torn sheet of paper with an address written on it. "There you go. Would you please give the bastard the rubber hose treatment? Maybe at least threaten it?"

I smiled at the old man. I was right, he was likable. "Count on it. If they call, don't tell them we were here, and we'll have a better chance of giving him what you want."

He grinned and nodded. "You bet. Good luck." He closed the door and we headed back out to the cab. "We'll need a car of some kind. Preferably something that will fit into the area and not raise eyebrows. Let's take a drive by the address and see what kind of rental might work."

Gretchen nodded and we slid back into the cab. "Okay Devon, take us by this address

and slow down, but don't stop when we get there. I need to get the lay of the land."

He grinned back at me, his dark face split by a brilliant white smile. "I thought you tell your friend to keep her hands to herself, Miz Hawkins. Surely one of you two fine ladies be de lay you be talkin' 'bout."

I fixed him with a scowl, but Gretchen's laughter took all the sternness out of it. "Do all you cabbies spy on private conversations? Hmmm? You just never mind about us and drive, Romeo."

"Yes, ma'am, Miz Hawkins!" he sassed me, not intimidated in the slightest.

"You just want to watch us make out in the back of your cab, you pervert," I grumped back at him.

"Wantin' to watch two fine women make out be no perversion! It be natural for a red-blooded mon! You two feel free to make out all you like, and pay no mind to Devon."

Gretchen giggled. "You'd wreck the cab trying to watch us, so you'll just have to wait till you drop us off, and then that can be your tip."

My eyes slewed around to her and I opened my mouth to protest, but she cut me off.

"Now, Hawk, Sweetie, I've been a good girl and not molested you, so you be good and help me tip Devon for all his dedicated driving," she ordered with a superior smile. One small step after another, she was getting me closer to what she wanted. Like taking a wild horse and getting it to let you pet it, one small gesture at a time, wearing down resistance and making it more comfortable until you're finally close enough to touch it. These last few days, she had subtly been coming closer and closer, circling gently but steadily closer. I had to turn the tables on this fast, or she would have me right where she wanted me before I made my move!

I smiled. "You're absolutely right, Gretchen. He's been great and deserves it after we get done. On the other hand, after that step-up in our relationship, I think we need to agree to be hands off until the stakeout's done."

She blinked back at me in surprise. "Why?"

"A stakeout requires attention, and we need to be focused on catching up with Leo. If we're necking," I said glancing up at Devon in the mirror, "or more, he might slip right

by us." Devon just grinned and kept driving, listening.

Gretchen pouted, but nodded. "Okay, if I simply must, but I'll be thinking about it."

If anything, the neighborhood where Leo's mother lived was even worse than I expected from talking to his father-in-law. The cars were so low end, I didn't know if any rental place would have a car that wouldn't stand out. The house in question was part of a tenement row and was indistinguishable out from its neighbors. The street in front of it had a bunch of younger kids playing ball with a broom handle and what looked like a tennis ball. The next block up, some gang bangers eyed the cab going by with interest, the kind of interest that told me a stop would get me an offer of drugs. Some kind of place to grow up, with the dreary layer of poverty settling on everyone like smog.

"Devon, you know of a rent-a-wreck place? Some place that rents cars and that might have an old one that would fit in here?" I asked as we pulled out of the area.

"Sure, Devon help you find a good car to fit in, Miz Hawkins. I know just de mon and I get you de best deal."

Gretchen looked out the window as we drove, abnormally quiet. I finally had to put my hand on her leg to bring her attention back inside. "What's the matter," I asked quietly. Her eyes seemed a bit teary.

"I bitch about my problems, but they live in places like that. I'm such a hypocrite. I'm a little rich girl, whining about her Daddy and step-mother, while they live with gangs, drugs and poverty. I really am out of touch with the world." She wiped her eyes with a tissue from her purse. "I grew up in the lap of luxury, all my needs taken care of before I even felt them."

I nodded. "So you did. We don't get to pick our families and our childhood. You aren't defined by that, but rather by what you do. You don't like something? Try to fix it. Try to help someone. We might be the sum of our past, but the future is in our hands only if we reach out and take control."

Lisa called while we were halfway to our destination. She and Ted were settled in, but Hans had their time scheduled out pretty tightly. I decided not to let her know we were in Boston with them, since I knew that she would want to help. She and Ted had enough on their plate for the moment, so I'd just take the yelling when she found out.

The call lasted fifteen minutes, and she sounded pretty happy, all in all. After the call I felt pretty good, but I missed her badly. The last few weeks had bonded the 'us' so much that I was only starting to realize how much a part of my life they had become. And I felt more than a little guilty at how rapidly I was becoming attached to Gretchen. Logically, I knew that it was a good thing from Lisa's perspective, but it was still emotional.

Gretchen was silent and thoughtful all the way to the used car lot. Devon pulled in and talked to a man that might have been his brother, dreadlocks and all. A little arm waving and both of them looking us over while they talked seemed to settle it. Devon waved us out.

"Dis be my cousin, Dio. He has some old cars dat he can rent you dat will fit right in, don't you Mon?"

Dio nodded. "And I be happy to help you ladies. Come on into my office, and we talk."

I smiled at Devon and made my move. "You've been a big help, Devon. Let me get your tip." Without waiting, I struck, wrapping my arms around Gretchen and pulling the surprised woman into a powerful kiss. She melted into my embrace and wrapped her arms around me, our coats making noise as they rubbed together. I kissed her aggressively, almost possessively, my tongue prying her lips apart to taste her and invade her. She didn't object. Far from it, she kissed me back with a passion that surprised me. I needed to make my last move and leave her wanting. I was tired of her having the upper hand in these games.

My lips left hers and I kissed down the angle of her jaw and onto her neck. The goose bumps told me that she was very sensitive there and I used my advantage ruthlessly, kissing, licking and biting her slender throat gently. Her body began to twitch and she moaned softly in pleasure, her fingers entwining in my hair. Perfect.

I broke off my attack and she groaned, trying to pull my mouth back to her skin. I grinned at her. "Nope, that's all until the stakeout's done."

Her pupils were wide with desire, but she let me go. "Oh, you *can* fight back, I see. The tables are turned on the hunter, but I haven't given up the chase yet, Dear. I'm going to have you and it *will* be on my terms!"

The sound of one of the men clearing their throat startled both of us. We'd been so focused on each other that we'd forgotten where we were for a moment. Gretchen

laughed. "We've got it bad. You satisfied with the tip, Devon?"

"Hell yes!" he exclaimed with a grin matched by his cousin's. "I drive you where you like and you can tip Devon like dat anytime!"

She slapped him on the ass. "Go on, get back out in your cab and make some more money." She opened her purse and tipped him a Franklin anyway. He started to decline, but she shook her head. "That really was my pleasure so it can't be your tip. We'll call if we need any more driving around."

He pocketed the bill and handed her a card. "You call me direct if you need Devon and he be dere." When he drove off, we made our way inside with his still grinning cousin. In fifteen minutes, Gretchen had left a deposit that was probably worth more than the heap itself.

The only thing holding the beat up Oldsmobile together was rust and Bondo. The interior looked like it had been used as a cage for a pit-bull and the smell seemed to confirm that theory. Dio started the car up and I thought it had exploded from the loud 'bang' and the huge cloud of oily smoke that belched from the tailpipe. I'd have been tempted to say it was running rough, but that would've been too generous. I think it was missing on at least one cylinder and it acted like it would seize up.

"Dere you go, ladies! Dis car be de right one to fit in to dat neighborhood," Dio said as he climbed out and left the door open for me. "If she die, you just call Dio and he come get you."

"You're a real champ, Dio. Thanks." I slid behind the wheel and let it warm up.

Gretchen slid in the other side and wrinkled her nose at the amazing smells coming from under the seat. Or was that from the seat itself? "You're safe from me making any moves on you in this thing, Hawk. I'd be afraid to take my clothes off. I might catch something. Speaking of clothes, I think I'll burn mine when we're done with this, um, car. People really drive pieces of crap like this?"

I grinned and nodded. "Hell, this is better than the first undercover car I had. It smells better, too."

She shuddered. "Ugh!"

I looked at the dash and decided the car was as warm as it was going to get. When I

put it in gear, I thought the transmission had fallen off or the driveshaft had blown a U-joint, but apparently that was just its way of finding first gear. We lurched off the lot and out into the street.

When we arrived in the neighborhood and had parked, I started worrying that this was too low rent to really fit in, but decided I was just being critical. I parked up the street where we had a good view of the house. Gretchen rolled the window down, despite the cold.

"Maybe the stink will freeze out of the air," she said optimistically.

"Dream on," I said. "If that doesn't work on something like a dead body, how could it work on something this much worse?"

"Shit," she said disgustedly. "I guess you're right. How long do you think it will be till he shows up? Tonight?" she asked hopefully.

"I doubt it. More likely tomorrow, or the next day. Good thing we have a lot of talking to do."

She sighed and accepted it. "At least we're being paid well for it, though after considering this car, I think he's getting off cheap."

She did get her way about that stupid prank, though. She pulled it out and dithered about letting it touch the dashboard before signing it on her knee. I rolled my eyes, shook my head and signed the paper. I eyed the form dubiously. At least no one would be signing the officiator and witness spots, so it wasn't any more than just a prank.

We talked late into the night, until it was clear Leo wouldn't be along. Gretchen was very disappointed to have another day in the car from hell. We drove back to the hotel and the doorman offered to have it towed to a salvage yard for us. I had to park it myself *and* pay him extra to make sure it didn't get towed.

After the day we'd had, even Gretchen wasn't feeling too much like teasing. We scrubbed clean and put the clothes in three trash bags, one over the next. Gretchen mumbled her hope to wrap it up the next day and fell into sleep. I actually followed her swiftly into dreamland.

My estimate on the time required was low, but at least we got some serious talking

done. I don't know if I helped with her and her father's problem, but I knew more about her than I knew about any friend I'd ever had. And that is what she was, I realized by the second day. A friend. I shared things with her that I had only shared with my former lover, Sharon, and then with Lisa.

We were sitting in the car on Friday morning when a car that made ours look like a limo bounced up on the curb by the mother's house. The doors opened and a man and woman climbed out. The mutton chop sideburns made me sit forward.

"Whoops! Here's our boy and the missus, unless I miss my guess. Showtime!" I crowed.

Gretchen looked at me, her eyes eager. "Do we go and confront them now?"

With a shake of my head, I dashed her hopes. "No, we wait for them to come out and then we follow them back to their lair. Then we corner them. I'd rather not have a protective mother interrupting us."

Very reluctantly, she agreed. Very reluctantly indeed.

Leo and his bride were inside about half an hour before they came back out, looking a bit sullen. At least he looked sullen. His wife just looked tired. When they started driving away, I knew we were in good shape to follow them unseen. There was no way they could see us through the cloud of smoke his car was puffing out.

To my surprise, he headed downtown and into the county annex parking area. As they parked and both got out of their car, I made a left and parked in a no parking zone. "Let's go."

She looked at the zone as we climbed out. "We could get towed."

I nodded. "It could happen. At least we could take a cab, then." That possibility cheered her up considerably, and we moved out at a brisk pace, entering the building behind the couple by a minute or so. It should be easy to spot him in that canary yellow windbreaker he was wearing.

"We may have to split up to find them," I told Gretchen. "For God's sake, whatever you do, keep that marriage license in your coat pocket; it might get filed by mistake."

Gretchen laughed at me and unzipped her coat. "You're so funny! Unless it's signed by a minister and witness it's not valid. Stop being so worried, Hawk, it's just a joke. You're

safe."

I unzipped my own jacket and turned to tell her it wasn't funny when I saw Marge Giovanni coming out of one of the small offices behind us, close to the entrance to the building. She was getting into the elevator right across from us. With a nudge, we slid into the elevator with her. There was no sign of Leo, but he might have gone upstairs already. It didn't matter. If we followed Marge, she would lead us back to her husband. I suppose she could answer our questions just as well, but I'd rather ask them both before they knew we were after them.

She got out on the second floor and spent a few minutes looking at the directory of offices on the floor. It made me even more nervous when I remembered this was the same floor as the county clerk, but I dismissed the feeling as unwarranted paranoia.

When her cell phone went off, she pulled it out and turned to move down the hall briskly, faster than the flow of traffic, listening to whatever her caller was telling her. I bulled ahead as she walked around slower people. Her back was to us so she would be none the wiser.

I had just passed the tax collector's office when she sped up to a jog. I cursed and sped up. She couldn't be onto us, she hadn't even looked back. There was a crash behind me and the squawk of a woman. A glance back showed me that some guy in a black coat that was too big for him and a watch cap had came out of the tax collector's office and bowled Gretchen over. I almost stopped, but he was already helping her to her feet with profuse apologies, dusting off her coat while she sputtered and tried to get past him to catch up with me.

That made it easier for me to forge ahead and follow Marge into the county clerk's office. She hung up her phone and stepped into line behind half a dozen other folk. A quick check of the line showed no Leo, so I stepped into line behind her. Gretchen came just after that in a huff, muttering under her breath about inconsiderate men.

"You still have the license, right?" I asked, my paranoia showing. With a roll of her eyes, she reached into her coat and we could both hear the crinkle of paper. I sighed in relief.

She shook her pretty head and laughed at me. "You're so funny. Don't worry! It's all safe with me."

In ten minutes the line was down to one person in front of Marge. She pulled out her cell and dialed. "Honey, you need to hurry up. I'm almost to the counter." Her voice was

moderately pleasant. She hung up after a moment and looked back at the door. Leo walked through it in his ugly yellow windbreaker and jointed her as the next window came open.

We pulled out of line, but stayed close enough to listen in on them. We'd be able to corner them as soon as we were done. He reached inside the windbreaker and pulled out three or four marriage licenses. I could tell from my recent brush with one. I knew his wife was from here, so he must have graduated from some school of divinity around here and was probably licensed *before* they moved to Vegas.

He grinned at his wife and slid one over to her. "You forgot to sign this one. It's not valid without all the signatures and it would be a cruel prank to play on those poor young people to let that slip by."

She grinned back at him and signed it. Then she slid all of them to the clerk. He stamped them and signed off on them.

"I'll want a certified copy of that last one. I need to make sure they have it as soon as possible. You won't believe how excited they'll be when I give it to them. Right, Baby?" His wife nodded and the clerk could care less.

He was paying the clerk and she whispered in his ear and headed back toward the exit. Gretchen started to follow her and I shook my head. "Let her go. He's the important one. We don't need to split up now."

Gretchen nodded and let her go. It seemed like Leo couldn't count as it took an inordinately long time for him to pay the man. Finally done, he headed for the exit, slipping the copy he requested back into his jacket.

I stepped in front of him and blocked his exit.

"Leo Giovanni, I'm Detective Hawkins. I'd like to have a word with you about an incident in Las Vegas."

He looked surprised, but I didn't get the rabbit-eyed, searching-for-escape look that I expected. "Sure, I'd be happy to talk with you, but I have to hit the can right now or there's going to be an accident. I can't wait another second." He bounced from foot to foot and I wavered.

I remembered there were bars over the windows outside and slowly nodded. "Okay, but

please make it quick. I'd like to get this taken care off as fast as I can."

With a smile that seemed a bit more than grateful, he stepped into the men's room right across the hall. I leaned against the wall on one side and Gretchen leaned against the other. "This is almost over," I said with a smile. "In a few minutes I'll have the real story of that night. It feels good. How did you like your first bit of police work?"

Gretchen raised her eyebrows. "Except for the car, it was great. With the car involved, it goes down to barely tolerable."

I laughed at her and leaned back, waiting. When it hit five minutes, I was starting to get worried. He should have been out by now and he hadn't snuck by us. I stopped the next guy to head for the restroom.

"Excuse me, our friend Leo is still inside and it's been a bit. Would you ask him how long he's going to be?" I asked.

The man nodded and went in. The door had barely closed when he opened it back up. "Nobody in here. Maybe he went out the other door."

With a cry of outrage, I pushed past the surprised man and through the second door into the men's room. Bigger than shit, there was a door on the other side of the restroom. A quick look around showed no one else there, though a suspiciously familiar black coat and watch cap were on one of the sinks, with an envelope on top of the neatly folded pile.

"Gretchen, look through that stuff and meet me at the car!" I ran through the other door. Another fucking hall! Shit! I hauled ass back down to the stairs and got outside in time to see them accelerating away from the curb, with Marge in the driver's seat. Leo waved cheerily at me as I judged if I could catch that piece of crap on foot. No way.

I ran for our car and heard Gretchen calling from behind me. I could listen when I was starting the car, so I kept going. That plan was squashed when I got around the corner and saw the car was already hitched to a tow truck and was being lifted.

It was hopeless, but I knew I had to try. I got in his face and sputtered, "Jeeze, put the damned thing back down. I'm a cop."

He chewed his tobacco and spit on the car. "So?" The spit was probably an improvement for the car.

I showed him my badge. "I'm not bullshitting you. I'm really a cop, so drop the car back down."

He reached around and scratched his ass. "Hell, I believed you the first time. Still not gonna drop the car. You can pick it up at the county lot. Or save the money. It looks like it's worth less than the fees."

Gretchen huffed around the corner and leaned against the back of the car. "Dammit Hawk, I said stop. This is important!" Then she noticed the tow truck and shook her head. "Figures."

"This dick is towing us," I snarled, "and that asshole, Leo, is getting away!"

Gretchen stepped over to the tow driver. "If I pay you two hundred dollars will you drop the car and head on out?"

He looked at her and shook his head. "She called me a dick. That costs you an extra fifty." I ground my teeth, but held my temper as she paid him off. He stuffed the money into the back pocket of his coveralls and started dropping the car. Gretchen leaned her head against the wall while we waited. She looked... I'm not sure what she looked like, but she looked very unsettled, still breathing heavily. She should have caught her breath by now. I was about to put a hand on her shoulder when the rattle of chains drew my attention back to the tow truck. Our car, such as it was, was free.

I walked around and climbed in the driver's door. Gretchen opened her door as the tow truck drove off, taking a deep breath and getting in. "We won't catch them now, it's been too long. I'm not sure what just happened, but something tipped him off. I've never been ditched so professionally. The thing I don't understand is why he even let us catch up to him, if he knew we were following him."

"I know why," she said, looking over at me. The look in her eyes scared me. Anxious, upset, embarrassed and angry. Those emotions and more. I was filled with dread.

"Why?" I asked already knowing I wasn't going to like the answer.

"To make sure to get something filed. I'm just not sure how he knew. It's all my fault." She covered her face with her hands.

"What?" My eyes widened. "No," I said in a choked whisper as it dawned on me. "It's

not possible."

She looked back up and pulled an envelope from her purse. "This was on the pile of clothes in the men's room." She handed it over to me.

A scream of... Well, I don't know what of, ripped from my throat as I yanked the contents of the envelope out and stared at it. A certified copy of that damned marriage license signed by Leo Giovanni and witnessed by Marge Giovanni. All notarized and filed. Legal. There was also a note.

Go back and tell your boss he'll get his money when I'm damned good and ready. And a piece of advice for free. Don't tail someone smarter than you and then tell a licensed minister how to screw with you while he's in the office right behind you listening. One of you likes practical jokes? Now the joke's on you. Go home and have that honeymoon you've always wanted. Elvis.

I stared back at Gretchen in shock. She laughed without humor. "Well, I never thought I'd be a virgin when I got married, but life's funny that way. Which of us carries the other over the threshold?" She pulled a folded piece of paper from her coat. A blank piece of paper folded up. "He switched it and I never suspected."

"Oh, my God!" I felt nauseous. "That bastard married us! We're married!"

Chapter Five: When it rains

I was still in shock when Gretchen leaned over, took me into her arms and held me. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I never thought... I never thought this would really happen. It was just supposed to be a joke."

My thoughts ran around the inside of my head, like a dog chasing its own tail; going nowhere, but getting there really fast. I covered my eyes with my hands and pulled myself together. I needed to think, clearly and logically. Leaping up and trying to run away from this would be worse than useless, and panicking would solve absolutely nothing.

I took a deep breath. "I know," I said simply. "Neither of us thought this would happen to us, but it did." I fought down the frustration. "Frankly, neither of us thought, period."

I knew that guy who bumped into you was probably trying to steal something, but it didn't dawn on me that it might be the license. I should have come back to help you. I should have been more concerned about that bump, and more suspicious of him, even if I didn't think he had a reason to be up to something, much less run. God! Who puts two doors going into a *bathroom* of all places?"

With another deep breath, I uncovered my eyes and looked at the woman holding me. Her eyes dripped tears slowly onto my shoulder. Forcing myself to relax my taut muscles, I wrapped my arms around her and held her. "This isn't the end of the world. Shocking, surprising, yes, but fate sometimes plays tricks on those of us who think we're clever. That's us, by the way. You should have known better than to play this game. I should have known better than to let you, but I allowed my desire, for your body, and for you, to overrule my brain. This is my fault as much as it is yours." I frowned to myself. Why had I made a distinction between Gretchen and Gretchen's body? I filed that tidbit away for the moment.

Gretchen rested her forehead on my shoulder, missing my subtle distinction. "What do we do now, Hawk?"

I kissed the top of her head. "We pick ourselves up, and we sort ourselves out. I guess that conversation in Vegas was a bit prophetic: now that we're here, married, we both already know that we'll try to make this work. Right?"

There was a flutter in my stomach as she looked back up at me. I didn't know if I wanted her to back out or not. I was afraid she would say 'yes,' and maybe even more afraid she'd say 'no.' I really didn't want to examine those feelings right now. I had said I would try, so dammit I would try. If she said 'no,' then...

Gretchen raised her head and nodded. "I don't quit. You're right, this isn't a disaster. I mean, it's not like one of us is pregnant or anything."

"Right," I laughed. "That would be a little much, all things..." A vision of that split condom on the bed in Vegas flashed through my mind. A moment's consideration and I dismissed the odds.

My hesitation was short, but not short enough. Gretchen's eyes widened. "You don't think..."

I cut her off with a wave of my hand. "No," I said firmly. "I don't think so. Ted always used condoms. He's a thoughtful gentleman."

"Oh, Hawk," Gretchen said, pulling back and giving me a serious look from across the seat, "condoms are good, but they aren't a one hundred percent barrier. You're on the pill, too, right? You use spermicide? Condoms sometimes break or leak."

"Well, no. I react funny to the pill, and it never seemed like something I'd have to consider, until just recently," I admitted. "I tried taking them to regulate my period for a while and gave it up. And spermicide tastes nasty, doesn't it? I wouldn't do that to my sexual partners. I don't even remember having sex the night before I met you, and that's the only time I've even seen a broken condom. Even if it *was* in me, the odds of getting pregnant are..."

"One per customer," Gretchen said as she rolled her eyes and shook her head. "That was what, six days ago? That might be long enough for an over the counter pregnancy test."

"I don't need a test," I objected. "You and I have more important things we need to be doing."

"No," Gretchen said firmly. "More pressing, perhaps, but never more important than life. I'm invoking spousal privilege. We get this checked, and we get it checked now, not later."

"Spousal what?" I asked suspiciously. "What the hell is that?"

"Well," she began reasonably, "we've already established we're married. If one of us has something important going on, the other has a right to know about it. Besides," she added with a twinkle in her eye, "since you're the one that might be pregnant, that obviously makes you my wife. So as the husband, the head of our little family, I get to..."

"Oh, no you don't!" I half yelled. "You *are not* getting over on me so easily. You aren't my *husband* and you aren't in charge of this relationship! I *do not* concede 'alpha' status to you. You can be the wife and *I'll* be the husband."

She pulled out a tissue from her purse and wiped her eyes dry, laughing. "Now I know we'll be okay. If we were to go by money or social status, I'd still be the senior partner," she held up a hand before I could speak, "but you're right. None of those kinds of things can matter between us. Neither one of us can be in charge. We're either going to be partners, or this won't work." She smiled with that twinkle back in her eyes. "But, I'll

still tease the hell out of you about it. In public when I can."

"You can take the money and that social crap and toss it right out the window," I retorted with a small smile. "I don't need your money *and* I settle social issues with a taser."

A tiny smile that mirrored my own flitted across her face. "Well, if you're my wife, then guess what? My money and my social status are part of the package. The flip-side is that, as your wife, I have to deal with you being a cop. I've watched enough TV to know that isn't easy, but I accept that you being a cop is part of your package." She looked at me with an intensity that made me squirm, and I suddenly realized that Gretchen and I had done something important, something exhilarating and terrifying and utterly wonderful; we had come to an understanding. I wanted to hold this moment, savor and extend it, but Gretchen wouldn't let me. "It's okay, though, Hawk," she told me, "I know all about cops. I watch *Law and Order*." One look and I knew she was serious.

"Dear God, help us," I moaned and covered my face with my hands again.

"What?" she asked indignantly.

I argued a little more about taking the test, but it was just a formality. Call it reflexive resistance. Gretchen had already won this round, and I was going to get a test. It couldn't hurt because I wasn't pregnant, so I figured it was best to just give in, get it done and move on to more important things.

Gretchen insisted on getting that crappy car back to Dio's lot and having Devon meet us first, though. With all that was going on, I had forgotten how bad it was in this car. She could have this round, too. I didn't even *try* to argue about getting rid of it.

Devon was waiting at the lot, chatting amiably with his cousin. When we pulled in and the car wheezed to a halt with a clatter, he looked in the window, his eyes wide with shock.

"Jesus wept, Dio! How you give dem dis... dis ting?" Devon demanded of Dio. "I give dem my good word!"

Dio held up his hands. "Dey say dey want low end. It don get more low end than dat! Dey could always tell Dio no."

I climbed out and gave the door a good slam. Rather than closing, it bounced back open and fell onto the ground with a crash. I considered giving it a kick, but I was afraid the whole thing would fall apart. Turning to Dio, I shrugged. "Sorry."

Both men burst out laughing. They were laughing so hard, they were holding each other up. I rolled my eyes in disgust before stomping past them and into the warm office. Gretchen followed me in and headed right for the restroom.

"I'll be back. I need to ritually cleanse myself. We'll end up owning Devon *and* his cab with the fares we pay before I get into another junker like that!" she said, defying me to argue.

Not that I had any intention of arguing. "Fine by me. We can lease him or something. It would be cheaper than buying another car. Besides, aren't we supposed to have a driver?" I teased.

"You only *think* you're funny," she said and closed the door behind her. Firmly.

The outer door to the building opened and the men, still laughing, stumbled through. I laughed sarcastically back at them. "Ha, ha. Very funny." Dio slid behind the desk and grinned at me while Devon parked himself on the couch.

"Dat is *very* funny," Dio insisted. "It was so funny, Dio won't even charge you for de damage."

"Charge us for..." I sputtered. "You should be so lucky," I finally laughed, shaking my head. "Gretchen is cleaning up, and then we'll be on our way."

Still laughing, he returned the deposit, minus fifty bucks. Reasonable, considering the car, I suppose.

When Gretchen came out, she smelled better. Not clean, but better. I hoofed into the restroom and stripped off, doing my own whore bath. I stopped dead at that thought and then shook my head. Gretchen and I were going to have to talk about that business of renting herself, and I needed to get *that* word out of my vocabulary.

When I dressed and came back out, Dio was smoking a huge cigar and listening to Gretchen and Devon talk. The two were seated on opposite ends of the couch, facing each other.

"Three months," Gretchen said.

"Dat's too short to be worth all de hassle," Devon responded. "Dere be a lot of disturbance to my life. One year."

"Six months," she countered. "We don't know how things will be until then."

"One year," Devon said firmly, "but wit a one week trial period. If you don't know by den, you not be de kind of woman I tink you are."

Gretchen pursed her lips as I sat on the edge of the desk and looked at Dio. "What's going on?" I asked him.

"She be hiring Devon to drive de two of you around," he said with a shrug.

"For a year?" I asked incredulously. "We won't be in Boston nearly that long. I have a job in Houston."

Gretchen looked at me and with a smile that was pure defiance, she nodded. "Done. You start now, Devon. We'll be picking up a car, and you can drop your cab back off at the, um, place where cabs go."

"Gretchen!" I screeched. "What are you doing?"

She smiled lazily at me. "Hiring a chauffeur. We'll be needing one."

"For a year?" I demanded.

"At least," she said seriously. "Though we still haven't talked about the little details like who will move where and how we're going to manage living together. Oh," she said with a smile, "I went ahead and told them we were married."

I choked and resisted the urge to strangle her. "You what!?!"

Gretchen held up a hand. "Stop. Part of you has it accepted it, but you need to get this through that stubborn head of yours. For better or worse, we're married, and I'm not going to hide it from the world. I mean it. This'll get out even if we say nothing, and I refuse to cower from the world. I take the lumps for what I do. Isn't it worth it to you?" Her eyes weren't teary now. They were hard and bright. She was pissed off.

I bit back the instinctive response and shook my head, backing down. She was right. "I didn't mean it that way. I still haven't thought it through that far," I got off the desk and moved to her, "but I'm not ashamed of you."

"Good!" she said perkily as she bounced up from the seat. "Then to get back on subject, we will have to have a driver wherever we move."

"Why?" I asked. "Neither one of us had one before."

"Neither one of us was married before. Now that I'm settled down, I need a driver," she insisted. "Besides, you told me we needed one just a few minutes ago."

"I was joking," I groaned.

"Well, I'm not," she said with a saucy smile. "Now, Dio, if you will excuse us, Hawk and I have a lot to do and a short time to do it in."

Devon drove us to an upscale rental place, and Gretchen swished inside to rent a car. When the attendant pulled up with a black H2 Hummer, I shook my head. Low profile was not in my friend's personality. My wife's personality, I corrected myself with a self-conscious smile. That was going to take some getting used to.

Devon walked around the Hummer and whistled appreciatively. "Dis is very nice! I tink Devon will like driving you around." He popped the door open and looked at the instruments. I would have mocked his male habit of looking over the hardware, but I was too busy craning my neck to peer past his shoulder for a look myself.

Gretchen popped out of the front door to the rental place and waved us inside. "Come on. They need your information so you can drive that hunk of metal."

"Why a Hummer?" I asked as we stepped into the classy lobby.

"I never miss a chance to thumb my nose at convention, and here in Massachusetts wasting gas is a sin. I," she said with a grin, "am a sinner with a capitol 'S'."

We handed the nice young man our licenses and in fifteen minutes, we were done. I followed Devon while he drove his cab back to the cab lot. He pulled up to the building and took a few minutes to show off his new toys to the men there. That would be the

Hummer, us and his new salary. Men.

Eventually, the manly chest-beating ritual was done and Devon strutted to the driver's door. I climbed out and shook my head at him impishly. "So, were they more impressed with the car or with Gretchen?"

"What do you tink?" he said through a grin as he buckled in.

I climbed in the back, and Gretchen joined me, stopping to adjust her sandal strap to the awed stares of her crowd of new fans. I could tell that she was gently shaking her ass at them before she stood up, as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

Gretchen smiled at me and looked at Devon through her eyelashes. "I think I know what they admire more now." She looked back at me coyly. "Your ass. I carry it around, but it's yours. Shall we make out in the backseat while Devon drives us to the pharmacy?"

"Pharmacy?" Devon asked, looking at us through the mirror. "Is one of you sick?"

"No," I said firmly. "It would just be a waste of time anyway. We've got a lot to do so let's just go to the next item on our list, Gretchen."

She shook her head. "Oh, no you don't. We have things to do, alright, and we've already been through this. The pharmacy first, and then off to see Daddy." Gretchen slumped into her seat. "If I can face him and tell him what happened, you can humor me in this one thing."

"What one ting?" Devon asked as he pulled out onto the street like a tank, dominating the road.

"Never you mind," I said waspishly. "Girl stuff." Deep down, I felt the small voice of fear. I didn't want to face the possibility that I was pregnant. That would be a disaster of the first order. If I thought some segments of the lesbian community had rejected me for sleeping with Ted, that would be only a mild shockwave compared to the nuclear blast I would face if they found out I was going to have a baby. Thank God that was so unlikely.

I wasn't so sure twenty minutes later when Gretchen was reading the instructions on various over-the-counter pregnancy tests. She stood up from her kneeling position, a

grin of triumph on her face.

"This one says it can detect pregnancy six days after conception. That's today if he knocked you up the night before we met."

I winced. "Can we try something else other than 'knocked up'? That phrase makes me queasy."

"Sure, how about 'with child', 'expecting', or 'in the family way'?" Gretchen grinned sweetly. "I've got it... You've got a bun in the oven."

"You're a riot," I muttered. "Let's get this over with. I have more important things to do than waste time on fantasies." I snatched the box from her hand and stalked past her, ignoring her laughter behind me. I laid the box on the counter and smiled a strained smile at the woman pharmacist.

"Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?" the woman with the tag that identified her as Linda asked.

"A boy!" Gretchen answered before I could respond. "We'd like a big, healthy baby boy!"

"I am *not* pregnant! Jeeze! Why does everyone want this but me?" I complained, tossing money on the counter to pay for the test kit and stalking toward the ladies room. Gretchen skipped - *skipped* - along behind me and snatched the box back out of my hand.

"I get to read the instructions!" She said, ripping the box open and handing me the contents. "It says you pee on it and then close the little cover. In you go!" Gretchen shoved me into one of the stalls and I almost fell over the toilet.

"Jesus, woman. Will you calm down? You're getting all excited over something that *isn't* going to happen," I said as I dropped my trousers and sat on the can.

"Midstream," she advised me through the door. "Get a clean hit in the middle of the stream!"

Muttering imprecations, I doused it and closed the cover. I then stared at it while I finished my business. "What am I looking for here?"

"If it stays clear after three minutes, you're not pregnant."

After an hour, I looked at my watch and two minutes had passed. So far, so good. It was looking clear. Wait... Was that a line? No, it was just a smudge on the paper. Right?

"Ohmigod!" I felt my stomach fall through the floor. "A fucking line."

"Woo Hoo!" Gretchen squealed. "I'm going to be a daddy! I need cigars!"

"You are not the freaking daddy!" I shouted. "Jesus, I am not the beta in this marriage!"

"Hey, all I know is that mommies get pregnant, daddies get to brag and I'm bragging!"

Was she dancing out there? She was! The woman was *dancing* over the worst disaster I could have imagined. I put my head in my hands. Pregnant and married. Dear God in heaven, what was I going to do?

"I can't wait to tell Daddy that he's going to be a grandpa!" She said, rattling the door.

"Hold on, hold on," I said, cleaning off. When I pulled my pants back up and opened the door, she yanked me out and spun me around squealing. "How long till we know if we have a boy or a girl?"

"How the hell should I know? Months, I'm sure. This stupid thing is probably broken. I'll test again later."

"Pessimist," Gretchen said, skipping back out the door and into the pharmacy. The pharmacist quirked her eyebrows and Gretchen gave her the thumbs up. I almost went over to beat her up when she started clapping.

"Do we have to do this?" I complained. "I don't want to do the happy-happy, joy-joy dance."

"Shut up and get out to the car, Little Woman. I get to do my dance cause I'm married and gonna be a *daddy*!" she crowed.

I pulled my hair and almost ran out to the Hummer. I slammed the door behind me and locked the doors. "Don't you dare unlock the door, Devon."

Gretchen tried the door and squawked in protest, knocking on the glass and demanding entrance.

Devon raised an eyebrow. "Don you put Devon in de middle of your lover's spat! Let de poor woman into de car!"

With a scowl, I unlocked the door. "Nobody better give me any shit about this."

"Devon! I'm gonna be a daddy!" Gretchen said with a grin as she climbed in. "I need a box of cigars! Go to a place that sells good ones."

"Congratulations! Devon take you der right away!"

"This is out of control! Let's just let this go and pretend it never happened," I begged. "I should never have agreed to that stupid test!" I felt the edge of something. A feeling I rarely experienced. Panic.

Gretchen stopped and put her arms around me. "Shhh. It's okay. I'm sorry. I'll cut back." She held me as the shakes finally came over me.

"Oh God, Gretchen!" I sobbed onto her shoulder. "This can't be happening! I'm not ready for this! I don't know how to have a kid!"

Gretchen rocked me slowly and whispered comfort into my ear as I cried. I felt the car stop, but didn't pay it any mind. By the time Devon got back in the car, I had cried myself out. I felt drained, empty.

"Go to this address," Gretchen said to Devon, handing him a card. "And let's ease off on Hawk for a bit."

Devon nodded and started driving. Gretchen handed me some tissues and I tried to clean up.

"I don't know what to do," I told Gretchen. "This scares me like nothing else ever has. What if I screw up?"

"Then you'll be like every other parent out there," she said and blinked in surprise. "Well, I guess Daddy and I do have some talking to do."

The drive to the estate was quiet as we all were examining our own thoughts. When the Hummer pulled up to a massive stone and steel gate, I forced myself to focus on what

was happening around me. There was time enough to panic later, in private.

Gretchen told Devon the code to punch in, and the gate swung open ponderously. The sculpted drive made all the ones I'd ever seen in movies pale in comparison. Then the house came into view. Dear God, it *was* a mansion. It was huge. Huge and elegant, with the kind of aura that only age and money can give a pile of rock.

Devon parked in front of the wide stone steps and opened the door for Gretchen. I slid out behind her and straightened my coat.

Gretchen walked up the steps and was almost to the door when it opened on its own. I gritted my teeth when her evil stepmother came out onto the broad porch of stone. This was all I needed.

"Well, well," she sneered. "The tramp and her common little friend. You just turn right on around and get off our property. You're not welcome here."

Gretchen tensed up, but I pulled her back before she could tear into Kat.

"Don't even start," I warned her. "Today has been the day from hell, and if you say one more thing, I'm not responsible for the bodily harm that befalls you. I *mean* it."

She chuckled in a throaty kind of laugh that just dripped contempt. "You think because you're getting paid like this whore it makes you something? You're trash and will always be trash."

I took a deep breath and half turned to look at Gretchen. "See how lucky you are that I'm here to keep you from doing something precipitous?" Then without further warning, I rabbit punched Kat right in the gut.

With a whoosh of air, she doubled over and I grabbed her by the lapels and dragged her face to within an inch of mine.

"That's my *wife* you're talking about, bitch. Keep a civil tongue in your head or I'll teach you a lesson that you'll never forget," I said in a voice so cold I was surprised her hair didn't turn into icicles.

Kat's eyes widened and she struggled for breath. "No! You can't be!" She grew so pale I thought she would faint. Good. She yanked herself away and rushed back into the house like the hounds of hell were right behind her.

I frowned. "I can be scary, but not that scary. What the hell is going on?"

Gretchen snatched me into a hug. "You hit her! I'm *so proud* of you!"

The sound of footsteps on the foyer floor pulled both of our attentions as her father came into view.

"What in the hell is going on here?" he asked, a confused look darkening his face. "Kat just ran up the stairs like she'd seen a ghost."

Gretchen let go of me and held her father in an unexpected hug. "Oh, Daddy. I have such great news!"

He blinked in surprise, but his arms wrapped around Gretchen, a look of genuine pleasure on his face. "Tell me."

"We just got married and Hawk is pregnant!" Gretchen said as she kissed his cheek.

Chapter Six: Coming out

To say he was surprised would be like saying that linebackers were a bit bigger than me. He didn't let go of Gretchen, but he did look like a fish out of water.

"Jesus, Gretchen! You're going to give him a heart attack!" I said with a shake of my head. "Look Hans, I realize this is a shock, but it just sort of happened. Are Ted and Lisa still here? This will be easier if we just go through it once."

Gretchen laughed gaily in her father's ear. My father-in-law, I thought to myself; this was going to take some getting used to. Hell, it would be easy to accept compared with getting used to the Wicked Bitch of the West as a mother-in-law. That went way beyond 'getting used to' and into the realm of 'life changing miracle.' I wonder how many other newlyweds took a poke at the in-laws on the same day they got married.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," Gretchen said, looking not a whit contrite. "I just couldn't help springing it on you like that," Gretchen laughed again. "Oh, you should have *seen* your face, Daddy!" She didn't give Hans a chance to respond, but turned and waved at Devon to join us. "Daddy, this is Devon, my new driver. Devon, while we talk, why don't you raid the kitchen for something."

Hans rolled his eyes heavenward, as if begging for strength. He placed his hands on Gretchen's arms, gently turning her back to him. "Hogwash, Gretchen," he said to her face. "You simply can't resist trying to shock me. You've been playing this game with me ever since you were a little girl, although I have to admit this is over the top, even for you. One of these days you'll find out that you've gone too far." He let go of Gretchen's arms and nodded to Devon. "Devon."

"I think we passed 'too far' several hours ago," I muttered to myself as I started past them and walked into the house. Stopping just inside, I looked around in a mixture of awe and mild repugnance. The entryway was marble, leaded glass and a mixture of antiques even I knew should never be in the same house, to say nothing of side by side in the same room. The difference between Gretchen's house and the entry was that a lot more money had been spent on just the entry and none of it showed the least bit of taste. While I was sure that every single piece was one of the finest of its kind, and that each likely cost more than I made in a year, the room as a whole clashed so violently that it looked gaudy in a way that made everything within seem cheap and showy.

"Who does your decorating? Anna Nichole Smith?" I asked, still turning my head from side to side. It was so awful I couldn't stop myself from staring.

Hans chuckled and shook his head. "No, Kat picked everything out. I admit it's a bit overdone for my taste, but I've learned to live with it."

"It looks like a Turkish harem scene in a sci-fi movie," Gretchen said with a sniff. "A bad movie. Done by people who think the Shriners are authentic Turkish." She stalked into the house like she owned the place, past the monstrous central staircase with the obligatory chandelier, veering to the right of the stairs and into a more intimate room. Hans and I followed her, eyeing one another curiously. Hans somewhat absently pointed Devon toward the kitchen, and he headed that way.

The room we entered was much more tastefully done. Dark leather seats were scattered around the room with small tables at strategic points. Gretchen picked up the phone and waited for a moment before speaking.

"Ivan," she said, "I need you to bring Ted and Lisa to the Brown Room. Thanks." She hung up, went to a bar and started pouring drinks. "That was Daddy's butler, Hawk. His name is spelled I-v-a-n, but pronounced 'Evon'."

"This will best be discussed over a drink. Daddy, I'm making you a single malt whiskey.

I'll make it a double. I think you're going to need it. What do you want, Hawk?" Gretchen asked me with a raised eyebrow.

I sat down in one of the seats and sighed. It was soft and comfortable. The dim lights in the room contributed to making me feel more relaxed. I thought I could learn to really like the Brown Room. "I want the entire bottle," I told Gretchen, "but I don't think I should be drinking."

Gretchen nodded emphatically. "Right, I wasn't thinking. How about a soda?"

"Yeah, toss me a diet cola," I said with a sigh. I was really, really longing for a shot of something, anything, but with a baby inside me that wasn't going to happen. I stared at the can in my hand. This sucked.

A tall, almost cadaverously thin man, in his late thousands and dressed like Lurch, opened the door and led Ted and Lisa in. "Here they are. Welcome home, Miss Gretchen," Ivan said, in a voice from beyond the grave. He then wordlessly backed out and closed the door behind them.

Ted and Lisa smiled at me in surprise, and my stomach did a slow, queasy roll. Lord, this could go wrong in so many ways. I might be about to alienate my best friends forever.

Lisa came over and hugged me. "Hawk, I didn't expect to see you up here!" She sat down in the chair that shared a table with mine. "I thought you were in Vegas looking for Elvis, but I'm glad you came to Boston. I bet you found out what happened, like we did just an hour ago." Ted sat across from us and crossed his legs, watching quietly. Gretchen took their drink orders and leaned them toward heavier stuff before sitting down next to her father.

"Yeah, well that's a story all its own," I said to Lisa, my eyes shadowed. "You first."

Lisa's eyes opened wide with concern. "That sounds ominous. Well, Ted's been calling the county clerk back in Vegas every morning to see if anything has been filed. It looks like a marriage certificate arrived by mail this morning. What would you do if I told you that Ted and you are married?"

"Throw up," I said sickly. "Please tell me you're yanking my chain."

Lisa threw her head back, laughing. "Relax! You're safe. It looks like I need to get used

to being Mrs. Stansbury and you can stop looking for the missing Elvis. Ted and I have been talking the situation over and mutually decided to see how it works out."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that I can stop looking for Elvis just yet," I said quietly. "I need to find him so I can kick him in the balls. Well, I have some good news, some bad news and some *really* bad news. Which do you want first?"

Lisa's brow knitted in a frown. "That doesn't sound promising at all. Let's start with the good news, then."

I looked at Gretchen and Hans. She was posed in a relaxed posture, but I could see her fingers turning white with tension as she tightly gripped the glass. Hans was leaned forward, waiting. His eyes were bright, but I couldn't read emotions in them. I took a gulp of my diet cola and set it down on the dark stone coaster.

"The good news is that I got married to Gretchen this morning. I suppose it's a good thing I wasn't already married."

Lisa leapt to her feet, squealing, and yanked me to my feet and into a wild hug. "Ohmigod! Ohmigod! I never thought it would happen so quickly!" Then she held me out at arm's length and scowled at me. "Why wasn't I invited?"

I hung my head. "Because it just sort of... happened. I have a confession to make to both of you. Elvis ran here to Boston with his wife, and Gretchen and I followed them. We've been here looking for them for almost a week."

Lisa's mouth dropped open and she made an indignant noise. "Why didn't you call us? We could have helped you find him!"

"That's why I didn't call you," I admitted. "You two had enough on your plates without me disrupting you. I'm sorry."

Lisa shook me a little. "I'm not happy with that answer, Hawk. You should have called us anyway." She sat back down and wagged her finger at me. "Now, tell me all about your wedding and why we weren't invited. And you better make it good."

I looked at Gretchen for a moment, but she was no help. I threw up my hands in surrender. "We were going to play a prank on Hans," I said tiredly. "We picked up a marriage license to scare him with on Monday. It turns out the prank was on us. We tracked Elvis to the county clerk's office." I rubbed my face tiredly, wanting this be over

and knowing I hadn't even gotten to the hard part yet. "Somehow, he spotted us and was listening when I told Gretchen not to lose the stupid license. His wife distracted us while he took it out of Gretchen's pocket, and they signed the damned thing and filed it *right in front of us.*"

"Holy shit!" Lisa exclaimed with a shocked expression on her face. "Are you going to get it annulled?"

I shook my head and looked at Gretchen, feeling a smile come to my face for the first time. "I don't give my word lightly and my word is what signing that paper meant, regardless that I thought it would never get filed. We talked, and we agreed that we would give this a try." I looked at Hans, who looked like he had been run over by a truck. "Hans, I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you had in mind when you hired me to talk to Gretchen. Forget the fee. I'll understand if you're pissed as hell about this."

"Screw that, Hawk!" Gretchen objected. "You did exactly what Daddy asked you to. You convinced me to make a real effort to make up with Daddy, and I will not see you toss your pay away on principle."

Hans shook his head. "No, Hawk, Gretchen is right; a deal is a deal. Do you know what the most common trait shared by the wealthy people that made their own fortunes is?"

I shook my head.

"Integrity," he said firmly. "When I make a deal, I stand by it even if it works out differently than I'd hoped." He looked at Gretchen, and his voice softened. "I'll be honest; I don't know how I feel about this. It's too sudden, too much for me to absorb quickly. What I do know is that I won't argue with you about it, no matter how I decide I feel. It's your life to do with as you choose. I think I've learned that much. I lost you once because I tried to make you see things my way, do things my way, and I'll not do that again." He looked back at me. "I'll welcome you to the family, Hawk, though I don't think Kat will be very happy."

Gretchen tossed her head and snorted. "Daddy, nothing I do will make her happy, so it's just something we'll have to deal with. You and I have both let Kat come between us, but Hawk has convinced me that we can make our relationship work if we focus on just you and me and not try to include her. I have to accept that Kat is a part of your life, whether I like it or not, and you have to accept she's never going to be any part of mine. If we can do that, if we're willing to try, then we'll make it." Gretchen looked so fragile right then, and I wanted to reach for her, comfort her. There would be time for

that later. Right now, she needed to mend this fence, alone with her father.

Hans slowly nodded, thoughtful. "I think I can do that," I could see Gretchen let out a breath, "but there will be times that we'll be together, Kat and me, while you are there. I can't tell *her* what to do, anymore than I can tell you, so what should I do?"

"Let us settle it ourselves," Gretchen said bluntly, any hint of fragility gone. "She and I will never get along. And she will never accept my wife," she said with a smile at me. "We'll argue, we'll fight. That's obvious to anyone that knows the two of us. You'll *have* to stay out of it. I promise I won't start trouble, but I won't let her push me too far; and heaven help her if she pushes Hawk. Hawk pushes back."

Hans winced. "After last week, I don't doubt you may fight. Do try not to leave any permanent injuries." A smile ghosted across his face. "I'd like my wife back in roughly the same condition as you find her."

"Done," Gretchen said with a laugh before turning back to me. "Sorry for the interruption, Hawk. Go ahead."

I smile at her affectionately. "Thanks." I looked at Lisa. "Ted, Lisa, this might be awkward, but you have a right to know this, too. There's no easy way to say this, so... I'm pregnant."

For a moment, Lisa frowned as though not understanding what I was saying. Then her eyes flew wide in shock and she leaned back as though shoved in her chair. "What?!? You mean..." Lisa stared at Ted, whose open mouth spoke of his shock, as well.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "That's the really bad news. Ted is the father."

The silence in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife until Ted cleared his throat. "Well, this is a shock, but it was a possibility from the very beginning, I suppose. I guess one of the condoms didn't work as well as we'd hoped."

"I found one in the bed in Vegas after the night you two got married. It was split, but we had other things on our minds, if you recall. Lisa, I'm sorry." I looked at her beseechingly, feeling more vulnerable than I had thought possible. "I don't want to lose you as my friends."

Hans really looked bowled over, looking at each of us in turn, but saying nothing.

Lisa looked really troubled, but came over to kneel beside my chair. "I don't know how all of this will affect us, but I do believe that you don't want to come between Ted and me. You're going to have the baby, right?"

I closed my eyes. "Of course I am. Abortion isn't something I can do." I looked at Gretchen. "Even if I weren't married, I would have this baby. Since I'm married, Gretchen would chain me to the bed for nine months to make sure everything went well."

"Damned straight," Gretchen said firmly. Then she smiled slyly. "Not that I promise not to chain you to the bed anyway."

Hans rolled his eyes, this time his prayer for strength aloud. "Dear God, help me. Please, no details on your sex life." Gretchen just laughed.

Gretchen looked back over at me. "Hawk and I do have some negotiating to do about that, but we'll keep the details mum, Daddy."

"So, when you have the baby, then what?" Lisa asked again.

"If you're asking if I want child support or something, the answer is no. If you're asking if I want Ted as more than an occasional lover if everyone agrees, the answer is no. I still would like to be part of your sex life, but no more than you are willing to allow and only if Gretchen approves. Like she said, we have some negotiating to do. On the flip side, though, I'll be raising the baby. Ted and you can be part of his or her life, in fact, I would want you to be, but it's *my* child."

"*Our* child," Gretchen said. "I'll tell you both the same thing I told Hawk; I'm the daddy, and I am as much a part of this as Hawk is."

"You *aren't* the daddy! I'm the alpha!" I retorted.

Gretchen just grinned and continued. "Look, if we can agree right now that no one is going to horn in on the other's relationship, I think we can settle the details when this all has time to soak in. Hawk and I will not be a wedge for you, and you will not be one for us. Agreed?"

Lisa looked at Ted and slowly nodded. "That, 'driving a wedge,' as you put it, was what I was really worried about. I can agree with your suggestions." She looked back at me. "I don't want to ruin our friendship either. I think we can make this work, as long as we

all respect each other's boundaries we agree to."

Ted nodded, still obviously mulling fatherhood.

I almost collapsed with relief. "Thank God!" Climbing to my feet, I pulled Lisa into a hug. My legs felt all weak and wobbly.

"Shhhhh," she whispered in my ear. "We'll make it. Sit down, and we'll fill you in on what's been happening with us."

I sat back down heavily and took a sip of my diet cola. I *really* wanted a whiskey. Sighing in frustration, I made a face. "Maybe one drink?"

"Oh, no you don't!" Gretchen said. "It's no booze and a healthy lifestyle for you, or I start looking for good chains, my pretty."

"Feh," I said sourly. "This is going to get tedious. Well, Ted, how are things on your end?"

"Could be worse," he said with a smile. "I could be pregnant."

"Bastard," I mumbled and bounced the cola cap off his head. "Keep working it, and we'll see whose ass gets kicked. I meant how are thing with Hans, bright boy."

Ted looked over to Hans, who nodded. "Well, we're still working out the details, but it looks like Hans will be funding a very large distribution deal for Stansbury Vineyards. Along with that, he's going to make a sizeable loan to expand the growing acreage. A lot. It takes seven years before new vines are really producing, and then it takes time to craft a fine wine, so he's making an investment that will pay off in a decade or so. I'm pretty pleased, since I have a new wife to keep in the fashion to which she'd like to become accustomed."

Lisa shook her head. "Funny man. On my side, Hans is making me a sweet offer of either a partnership in a very prestigious law firm in Houston or backing me in a run for the District Attorney's office in Galveston or Houston. Thus far, I'm still resisting his blandishments, but I'm weakening. He's playing me like a fish on the line."

"That's great!" I said. "You two deserve it." Then I looked at Hans. "Now what?"

He smiled. "Now I get my revenge for you both springing all this on me. I'm having a

social get together here tonight for an old friend who's running for the US Senate. I want to announce your marriage and pregnancy here tonight."

Now it was my turn to goggle. "Why?"

"That's simple," Hans said. "First, because it will get out anyway and it's always best to be as up front as you can be. If you two are not ashamed of it, I'm not going to be either. Second, I have wanted to see Gretchen married for years and I'm getting to be an old man." He smiled at Gretchen. "I was beginning to despair at ever having a grandchild. I'll be the first to admit that the, um, *complexity* of the parentage may present some interesting challenges, but I believe it can be worked out."

Hans looked over at Ted. "Depending on a number of factors, I suspect that the media will dig you out as a likely candidate for being the father. It might be for the best if that were disclosed up front. That sort of thing is done on occasion. From a legal standpoint, I believe you should make clear what limits you all wish concerning the child."

He looked around the room at all of us and smiled dryly. "I suppose with all these surprise weddings, no one has any prenuptial agreements?"

We all shook our heads.

"Then that makes things very interesting on a number of fronts for Gretchen. And in the spirit of all the surprises today, I think I'll announce my surprise after we make your announcements," Hans said with a smirk as he stood up. "It's only fair, really. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some things to get ready for the party tonight. Dress up."

I expected Gretchen to hound him for the details, but she just shook her head in exasperation, letting Hans escape.

After he closed the door behind him, I threw up my hands. "Why didn't you tackle him and ask what that means?"

"Because I know my father, and I know it wouldn't do any good," Gretchen said, rising to her feet. "He is as stubborn as I am and if he says he'll announce it tonight, torture won't drag it out any faster. So why fight the inevitable? Besides," she smiled mischievously, "it's only fair to let him have some fun, too."

I leaned back in my chair. "I'm doomed to a life filled with pranksters for family," I moaned.

Gretchen gave me a wicked grin, but ignored me. "Ted, Lisa, I know we'll have many more chances to get to know each other, but I need to take my wife shopping. We simply have *nothing* to wear. Daddy can turn you loose in one of his cars and you can find some good places to shop here in Boston."

"Why can't they come with us?" I asked. "There's plenty of room in the Hummer."

She shook her head and looked at me pityingly. "Because they need time and space to talk about all this privately, Doofus. Not everyone is like you, bulling their way through it all in one sitting. Let them have some space to think things through without us breathing over their shoulders. Right?"

Ted and Lisa both nodded. "She's right, Hawk," Lisa said. "Ted and I need to talk about it so that we can be frank with each other, and that means we need to do it privately. You can take us shopping together later. Right now, I need to do this my way." She pulled me to my feet and kissed me on the lips. "It doesn't mean anything bad. I still love you. Don't over-analyze."

"Pots and kettles, Lisa!" I said.

Lisa just smiled. "Give Ted a kiss and get out of here. We only have a few hours to shop. Though, if you don't see us at the party until later, don't worry. We might be late."

Ted kissed me while Gretchen and Lisa embraced in a hug. "Don't worry, Hawk. Everything will be fine," he whispered in my ear before releasing me and giving Gretchen a hug as well. "You two have fun. Be back here before seven. That's when the party kicks off." They opened the door and walked out, arm in arm.

"You think it'll be that easy?" I asked Gretchen.

She pulled me into a hug and kissed me lightly. "You think this is easy? This is the most complex, unlikely chain of events I could have ever imagined. Life *is* stranger than fiction. Come on. Let's go pry Devon out the fridge and get a move on. We need to get your hair done, find the perfect dress and go shopping for shoes." Then she kissed me again, but this time deep and hard, leaving me breathless. "And we need to stop at Victoria's Secret, too. Tonight's my wedding night and I want it to be perfect."

"My hair? What's wrong with my hair?"

The next few hours were a blur of motion and people. Gretchen took me to an upscale salon where she seemed to know everyone by name. It was like some kind of reunion. Everyone was hugging and laughing. When she told them I was her wife, and that we were going to a social to announce it tonight, everyone stopped in shock. Then she told them we needed to be dazzling and dressed *fabulously* before seven.

I have never seen people bustle into motion like that. Before I could protest, I was dragged off into a side room and my clothes were virtually ripped off my body. Measurements were taken and I was given a robe to wear. A man that triggered my gaydar off the scale came in and blanched at the sight of me.

"What?" I demanded.

"Oh, dearie, I need two weeks, not two hours."

He started running his hands through my hair and tisking. "You don't get your hair done, do you, darling?"

I snorted. "No, I just use scissors to take it off when it gets too long."

"Yes, that's obvious," he sniffed. "Well, thank God it's long enough to do something with. I should be able to make this work without losing more than a couple of inches in length. You should be glad Vanity is here to save you from yourself, Hon. Even then, it will take all my skill to pull this off."

I frowned at him. "No one else complains about my hair, and what the hell kind of name is Vanity?"

"That's because they're terrified you'll break them, you sweet brute. Gretchen told me how you punched her mother-in-law. I wish I'd been there to see it. In any case, I'm called Vanity because it's what I am and what I do." He struck a stereotypical gay pose, right down to the tilted head and limp wrist. I laughed, and after a moment, Vanity joined me. "Now, darling, you sit down here so I can salvage *something* from this."

I'm surprised I wasn't chained to the chair. He and his assistants, who seemed to ghost in and out, did *things* to my hair. Then they were rubbing my face down with something smelling of lime and almonds. When my robe was pulled open, I tried to balk and was told that he was gay and my virtue, such as it might be, was safe, "so shut up and let me make you beautiful for your wedding night." More lotions were spread over my skin,

and I couldn't believe I actually sat still as he trimmed my bush while chattering away as though everything was perfectly normal. Perhaps it was, for him.

When Vanity was done, women started in with clothes. First the frilliest set of black panties, that looked like they were made of silk, and a matching half-cup bra. Then came a parade of dresses, all in dark colors. Vanity kept saying no to perfectly good dresses, including a few that made me drool. None met his 'vision,' though, and I was about to put my foot down when he finally found one he liked. A little black number that looked too small for me.

"Put that on, Hawk. I think we can work with it," he said critically.

I was afraid I was going to tear it when I slid it down my body. It dropped down to my mid-thigh and emphasized my smaller than average chest. I looked in the mirror and liked what I saw. "This works," I said, putting my stamp of approval on it.

Shoes and purses came next and shortly the ensemble was complete. Makeup and the final touches were quickly applied and everyone except Vanity made their escape.

"You look delicious, darling!" he exclaimed. "If I was even a little straight, I'd be drooling all over myself. Let's go show you off to your wife."

He led me out from the back room and into the main salon. Gretchen was sitting there in a sea green sheath of a dress and her hair was piled up on top of her head. The way her eyes lit up and then devoured my body made me shiver with need.

"God, Hawk, you look good enough to eat. I think we should just skip the party and go somewhere private to talk about our honeymoon," she said huskily. Then she stood up and came for me, her hands reaching to touch me.

"Oh, no," I said, grabbing her hands. "You told Hans that we would go, so go we will. But, you can dance with me till your legs fall off."

Her laughter gurgled in her throat. "Oh, this is going to be fun." She waved at Vanity. "Thanks, V. I don't know what I would do without your genius. Bill me!"

When we arrived back at the mansion, the party must already have been in full swing because there were cars and people all over the place. Uniformed young men and women parked cars and were keeping the drive clear for new arrivals.

Gretchen climbed out and looked back into the Hummer. "Go out on the town and have a good time on us, Devon. We'll be staying the night, so you can call my cell tomorrow afternoon if you haven't heard from us."

"Have a good evening, eh," he said with a grin and drove off before someone tried to wrest the Hummer away from him.

At the door, we were checked against a guest list and admitted without incident. My sharp eyes picked out a couple of inconspicuous guards inside the door. Likely a ready response team in case someone tried to crash the party. I cataloged the heat they were packing with approval. I'm sure there were others scattered through the house, among the guests and out on the lawn. They probably had us identified before we stopped in front of the house.

Lurch was waiting just inside the door, as well. His eyes hinted at his disapproval before they moved over to Gretchen. "Miss Gretchen, Miss Shauna, the main party is in the Crystal Room."

"Hawk," I told him. "And don't call me Miss."

He sniffed at me. He *actually* sniffed at me. "I don't use nicknames, Miss Shauna. It shows an inappropriate familiarity."

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away before I could grind my teeth down to the nub. I could tell that we were going to have trouble, and I didn't know what to do since he was too old to just beat into shape. Gretchen didn't even seem to notice how it riled me. She took my arm and virtually dragged me off behind Lurch.

The Crystal Room was huge and, as expected, glittering with crystal. An obnoxiously large crowd of men in penguin suits and women that were dressed to the hilt maneuvered in some complicated dance of conversation, dominance and challenge among each other. The women were a mixture of matrons with a haughty air and young women that fit more into the category of mistresses or escorts. That brought my eyes back to Gretchen.

She smiled back, misinterpreting my glance. "Don't worry, Hawk. I know this looks intimidating, but it's not that bad."

Then Lurch cleared his throat. "Miss Gretchen Werner. Miss Shauna Hawkins."

I started to turn on him, but Gretchen just grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. "Did you hear what he just did to me?" I snarled, exasperated. "Now *everyone* will be calling me Shauna!"

"So," she asked with a smile as we started mixing with the other people. "It *is* your name, and I think it's very pretty. Like you."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "I'm doomed."

A cheery man with short brown hair and a genuine smile stepped up to us and threw his arms around Gretchen while she made happy noises.

"Uncle David! I didn't know you would be here! This is Hawk. I have the most amazing story to tell you, the best news!"

He laughed and kissed her cheek. "No time, Gretchen. The matrons are right behind me and I have to meet with the guest of honor."

He held out his hand to me and smiled.

"David Stein. Gretchen's mother was my sister. It's a pleasure to meet any friend of hers." He kissed her cheek again and let her go with a wave as he dodged back. "Wait for me after the party."

Her response was cut short by the arrival of a herd of older women with young men in tow. Almost ruthlessly, I was split away from Gretchen and by some process of crowd movement I didn't quite catch, shuffled to the outside of the group. Gretchen squawked, and I started back in before it occurred to me what this was. These old women were trying to foist their sons on what they thought was a very eligible woman.

With a grin and a wave at her, I let the eddies at the outer edge of the whirlpool push me clear. She rolled her eyes at me before succumbing to the people talking to her. I bet that would keep her busy for a few minutes. With a half turn, I spotted the wet bar and started for it before stopping in my tracks with a curse. No booze. I kept forgetting.

I was still weighing my options when a woman in her late thirties or early forties stepped up beside me and handed me a glass of champagne. I turned and looked her over as she smiled at me. "Good evening," I said with surprise that someone in this crowd would even talk to me.

"Good evening. I'm Vanessa, Hawk. You don't mind if I call you that, do you? I'm Hans' chef. You've met my father, Ivan. I brought you a diet Sprite so you would have something to drink."

With a sigh, I sipped the Sprite. "Thank you. Yeah, I've met your father. Forgive me, but he seems to enjoy irking me."

Vanessa quietly laughed. "He does that with everyone. Contrariness was invented for him. Still, he has a good heart under that stony exterior. You'll see. Hans wanted me to make sure that you knew he was planning on making the announcement about fifteen minutes after you arrived."

"I really wish we didn't have to do this," I muttered. "Fine, that will make me a really popular person, I bet. I don't see this crew taking it too well."

While we were talking, a nice looking man in his mid-thirties stepped up behind Vanessa. "Your canapés are divine, as always, Vanessa. I'll have to keep working to get that recipe from you." His voice was a nice, deep tenor.

Vanessa turned with a wide and genuine smile. "Kirk, you devil. You know it's a trade secret, but I'll tell you what. If you win the election I'll give it to you with my compliments."

"Actually, I was hoping to make an attempt at getting it over dinner tonight, after the party," he said silkily.

She laughed delightedly. "Kirk, you're the most eligible bachelor here at this party. Why would you want to go out to dinner with me? You must have asked me a dozen times in the last month."

"And you keep saying no. I'm not used to such stiff resistance and it entices me."

"You, of all people, should know why I've been hesitant about dating," she said with a little strain in her voice.

Kirk's eyes glinted and his jaw firmed. He nodded. "Yes, I suppose I do." He half turned and looked over at the edge of the room at someone. "And believe me, there are ways to deal with people like him."

Looking over Vanessa's shoulder, I saw Kat locked in earnest conversation with an older man. They were hunched over a small table by the wall. He had distinguished silvering in his hair and an imposing face. His suit bulged around his waist, but it was obvious he used to have a decent figure.

Vanessa turned and followed my gaze. "That's former Senator Cartwright. A very powerful man in some circles," she said without inflection as he looked back over the crowd with a predator's smile. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking in Gretchen's direction. Uh, oh. That didn't look promising. "Personally, I'm not very fond of the old bastard," she said. "He took me out once and it was not something I'd care to repeat."

"And if I have my way, you never will have to," Kirk said coldly. "That man is a blight on the face of the Earth and we would all be better off if he met the fate he so richly deserves. Don't judge all men by him, Vanessa."

Kirk shook it off and turned to look at me with a smile, reaching out to shake my hand. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Kirk Craig and I want to be your senator." That last was delivered with a smile and bit of ironic, tongue-in-cheek wit. I liked him.

"Then you better get ready to move to Texas, Kirk. I'm Hawk."

"I thought Ivan said you were Shauna," he asked, casually slipping his arm onto Vanessa's shoulder. She didn't shrug him off.

"Yeah," I muttered darkly, "he and I are going to discuss that later. Good luck on your run for senate."

When Cartwright excused himself from Kat's table, she had a smile of evil triumph on her face. Whatever she just did, it did not bode well for Gretchen, or me, I was sure.

"Excuse me," I said to Vanessa and Kirk. "I see trouble coming. You should go tell Hans that sooner might be better than later on that announcement, Vanessa."

Without waiting for a reply, I dove back into the swirl of people around Gretchen and fought the current to swim deeper into the swirl. Outraged squeals and exclamations trailed in my wake. I ignored them and forced my way in.

Through the crowd, I could already see that the Senator had cut through like a bullet through ballistic gel. He expertly plucked Gretchen from the clinging women and deftly guided her clear. He moved her to the far side of the group, of course, which only made

it harder to force my way through. I set my drink on a passing tray and pressed on.

In the minute it took me to wade through them all, Cartwright had pulled Gretchen over to the more dimly lit area near the wall and was talking with his back to the room, blocking my view of Gretchen. As I approached, I could hear Gretchen responding to something he said.

"No, Everett, I won't. I'm not here to be your plaything and upping the amount of money won't change my mind. Just because we've had a professional relationship in the past does not allow you to put your hands on me and demand sex. Please take your hand off my breast." Her voice was calm and distant, with no anger. Firm, like one spoke to a dog.

I felt like I had caught fire with anger. No one touched my wife like that. I grabbed his arm and spun him around with a cry of surprise ripping from his throat. "Didn't you hear the lady?" His hand was still on my woman, but had been pulled back to her shoulder. "She said back off. If you want to keep all those fingers, you pull that hand back right now."

Perhaps that was the wrong way to speak to the rich and powerful, but I've never really been good at knowing when to back off or be subtle. Cartwright only tightened his grip on Gretchen's arm. "This is between her and me, young lady. Go back to whatever man brought you here and mind your own business."

"Take your hand *off* of her," I growled out through my clenched teeth.

Gretchen wrenched her arm free and slid between us.

He glowered like a boxer in the ring. "You haven't seen the last of me. I get what I want and no two bit tart tells me no. There will be consequences." He stalked off and Gretchen held me back.

"No, Hawk. Fighting here isn't worth it. I'll deal with him, and he won't like it," she said with a cold look in his direction. "Besides, I can guess who set this up. I'm going to kill Kat for this."

I let her start calming me down. "I don't know about this, though, Gretchen. The thought of you sleeping with him makes my skin crawl. We need to have a long talk about your job."

She raised her eyebrow. "Certainly, Darling. We can talk about yours at the same time."

"My job?" I asked incredulously. "What does my job have to do with this? This is about people like that porking my wife. Being a cop doesn't compare with something like that."

"Doesn't it?" she asked with a serious look. "You could come home dead some day. That seems to affect me a lot more than what I do affects you. People like him won't be *porking* me, as you call it. He's blacklisted as soon as I make a phone call. The other few I do have sex with are purely professional. Will you be having any sex with the father of our child and his wife? Will we? Hawk, I won't sleep with someone you object to, but I won't be told to change my life by someone else. Not Kat, not my father, not even you. You knew who I was, and what I was, when you met me."

"My job and your job aren't the same," I grumbled, "and neither is my sleeping with friends and you sleeping with clients."

"No," she agreed. "They aren't. But we're both very stubborn people, so let's not start with demands and ultimatums. I said we'll talk about it and we will. We have a party and our wedding night to get through first, though."

"Fine, I won't make demands, but we *are* going to talk about this," I said.

It was more like half an hour before Hans was tapping a glass at the head of the room to get everyone's attention. My gut was clenching and I sipped at the latest in a row of diet Sprites that Vanessa had delivered to me. I was going to have to make a trip to the can soon, and I wished Hans would get moving.

"Everyone, I have several announcements to make this evening. May I have your undivided attention? Thank you!" He said, beaming at the crowd.

Off to the right, I could see Kat glaring at us in sullen anger. What did Hans see in her? I smiled back at her, earning a snarl. She truly was the in-law from hell.

Hans drew my attention back as he began speaking again. "You all know my daughter Gretchen." A murmur of agreement came from the crowd as he motioned for her to come up front with him. He slid an arm around her waist as she stepped up beside him. "I am pleased to tell you all that she was married earlier today in a private ceremony."

A flood of chatter and surprise came from the crowd as they did a collective blink and

began looking for the spouse. I hid a grin about the rest of what Hans had said, because he was right big time. The ceremony didn't get more private than when even the happy couple didn't know.

"Allow me to introduce her spouse," he said with a smile at me.

I walked up and stood beside Gretchen, putting my arm around her waist with her father's. Hans was about to continue when Lurch stepped up and raised a glass.

"A toast for the happy couple! To Gretchen and Shauna Werner!"

The crowd was dutifully repeating that outrageous toast and drowned out my protest. "I am not her *wife*, you cretin!"

His self-satisfied expression told me that it didn't matter how much I objected. He had planted the seeds and I'd be weeding the garden for the rest of my damned life, curse him.

I waved my arms until the crowd calmed down. "We are not..."

Gretchen smoothly cut in and over-rode me. "What my beautiful wife means is that we haven't made a final decision on whether to share a last name or not. Let's just stick with Shauna Hawkins for the moment."

"Hawk!" I protested. "My name is Hawk."

"Not in this crowd," she murmured back. "They're as bad as Ivan. Good thing you have a nice first name. It'll be all over the social pages in the morning. You'll be lucky if you aren't Shauna Werner, too."

I groaned and covered my face. "That bastard. How does this stuff happen to me? What have I done to deserve this, God?"

Gretchen quirked an eyebrow at me. "I assume that was a rhetorical question?" she asked.

"Everyone," Hans said again, cutting off any reply I might have made "I'm not done yet. I have a few more important announcements." The crowd quieted down, wondering what other news could top Hans' first bombshell. I saw Senator Cartwright in the crowd, glaring. Surprisingly, it wasn't us he was glaring at. He was shooting daggers toward

Kat who ignored him with more aplomb than I would have been able to.

"The next bit of big news," Hans said, "Is that they are expecting! Shauna is pregnant!"

"Hawk," I protested into the confused good wishes. "My name is Hawk!"

"The child is obviously one that is provided via an alternate fertilization process, but it will be welcomed and loved by all of us as Gretchen's child of the flesh!" Hans exulted.

The crowd was looking less and less certain as the facts started sinking in. This might be the state where it was legal, but I could tell that it wasn't universally accepted. Murmuring was breaking out as they talked about us with each other. I wondered what rumors would be started before dawn.

"And last, but not least, I have one final bit of good news for the happy couple," Hans said, slipping in between us and sliding an arm around each of our waists. "I made a promise to myself a long time ago that when my little girl finally got married, I would show her and her spouse how much I was pleased to see it happen. At that time I had a trust created and I made arrangements to name them both as co-trustees of that trust this afternoon."

I frowned, not really understanding what he was talking about. Gretchen obviously knew more than I did, as she gawked at him in surprise. Whatever a trust was, that seemed to make up the minds of the crowd as they surged forward to heap congratulations on us both.

I fended off the first couple and stuck beside Gretchen with a grip of iron as Hans abandoned us to the sharks. My mind rapidly became numb from all the smooth blather. It was only when I heard a nasty voice that I focused back in on the people around us.

Kat leaned in and hissed at Gretchen. "Enjoy it while it lasts. I know something that will destroy your life and this cow's, too." She deftly avoided Gretchen's grab and pulled back into the crowd. Gretchen bulled after her and I tried to follow, but the people were too thick.

It took me several minutes to finally fight clear and by then, neither of the women were anywhere in sight. I roamed the room, looking without luck. Then I spotted Vanessa talking with Lurch, who was drying his hands with a towel. She looked worried. He buttoned the sleeves on his shirt and slipped his jacket back on as I walked up to them.

"Unbuttoning in a crowd? Pretty informal, Jeeves. Have either of you seen Gretchen or Kat?" I asked.

"I spilled something on my shirt," he sniffed. "The mistress went upstairs a few minutes ago," Lurch told me. "I'm not sure about Miss Gretchen."

I managed to nod my thanks and went out into the hall and up the stairs. This house was so huge; I still might not find them easily. I had just reached the second floor landing when I heard a blood curdling scream from down the hall to my right. I reached for my weapon, which of course I didn't have, and cursed. Then I bolted down the hall and to the only open door ahead.

Inside the bedroom, I saw Gretchen. Her back was to me and she was backing up.

"Gretchen?" I asked, looking around. She was backing up from the door to the attached bathroom.

Gretchen half turned and my blood ran cold. In her hand was a kitchen knife. A long, bloody kitchen knife. Her face was white with shock, and she dropped the knife from her bloodstained fingers. I stepped up beside her and looked into the bathroom, my face grim.

Inside, lying on the floor in a pool of blood was Senator Cartwright. He had been stabbed in the chest. To make a bad situation worse, Kat Werner was sprawled beside him, also stabbed in the chest. Both of them had their eyes open, staring in death with a horrified expression on their faces that I had seen in far too many murder victims.

Chapter Seven: Fighting the system

A shiver of horror washed through me as I turned back to Gretchen. Her right hand was smeared with blood and she was as pale as a ghost. My first thought was personal: how the hell do I get myself mixed into these unbelievable situations? I shoved that thought away. There would be time for personal thoughts later, but right now, as much as I wanted to sweep her into my arms to protect her, Gretchen needed Hawk the cop, not Hawk the wife. I shook my head. I couldn't believe I even *thought* of myself as the wife. Gretchen moved, stepping back again and reaching to cover her mouth. That focused me instantly.

With a quick step, I snagged her arm before she got blood on her face. Her eyes held panic and terror. "Gretchen, look at me," I said calmly. "Focus on me. Don't touch anything with your hands."

She swallowed and visibly brought herself under control.

"What happened here?" I asked, my cop voice cutting through her panic.

"I... I don't know." Gretchen tried to look back toward the bathroom, but I shifted a half step and blocked her line of vision. I needed her to focus on me, to tell me what happened, and I knew we didn't have much time. "I came up here to tear a strip off of Kat for that stunt she pulled with the senator. The door was open, so I came inside, ready to fight."

"Where did you get the knife?" I asked.

"It was on the floor beside the door," she said, looking at me trying desperately to control her panic. "Hawk, I didn't do this! I didn't know what was happening. I just picked up the knife and found them when I came in. I didn't kill them. I swear!"

An instinct I didn't even know I had within me wanted to grab her, protect her, and reassure her. The sound of running feet in the hall saved me from this new feeling, and a moment later one of the guards was at the door.

"Stop!" I told him before he could step inside. "This is now a crime scene. Call 9-1-1 and tell them two people have been murdered. Don't let *anyone* in here without my say-so, and lock down the house. No one leaves. Understand me?"

The guard nodded, pulled out a radio, and spoke softly into it. Guests started coming into view in the hallway, but there was nothing I could do about that from in here, so I turned back to my wife.

"When the police come I want you to cooperate, but do *not* answer questions until you have a lawyer. If Lisa and Ted are back, she can fill in as counsel until you hire one." I said softly.

"But Hawk," she protested, "I didn't do this!"

"Keep your voice down, Gretchen!" For a moment, the cop and the spouse battled, and

I allowed the spouse out for a moment. "Honey, I believe you," I said reassuringly. I sighed. That was all the time I could give to the spouse. "Unfortunately, the police won't believe you right away. Two dead bodies and you found standing over them with a bloody knife looks *really* bad."

She looked like she wanted to collapse, so I put my arm around her. "It's not going to be fun, but we can get you through this, if you listen to me."

A commotion at the door signaled the arrival of Hans, who tried to push past the guard and looked angry at being stopped. "What the hell is going on in there? Let me through."

"Let him through," I told the guard, "but clear these other people out of the hall and back down into the Crystal Room." Other guards courteously began herding the guests back out of the hall as I stopped Hans from going any further than the doorway.

"Hawk, tell me that this is not as bad as it looks," he said, looking at Gretchen who was trying to stand and keep her hand well away from her body. "Is someone hurt?"

"Yes," I said, grabbing him by his shoulders and turning him towards me. I hated this part. Regardless of how I felt about Kat, I had to remember that Hans loved her, and there was no easy way to tell someone that a loved one had been murdered. Without thought, I fell back into cop mode. "There's been a murder, Hans. Two murders, actually. Hans, I'm sorry, but someone has killed Senator Cartwright and Kat."

For a moment, he didn't understand what I had said. Then he puffed up and tried to get past me. "That can't be! I just saw her fifteen or twenty minutes ago."

I held him, keeping him from coming in. "Don't fight me on this, Hans. She's gone and I can't let you contaminate the crime scene."

Hans took a deep breath and tried to force his way past me again, so I pushed him back out into the hall. "You're lying!" he shouted. "Gretchen, tell her that she's wrong!"

"Oh, Daddy," I heard Gretchen sob from inside, "I'm so sorry."

Hans bent over like someone had punched him in the gut. I held him up, my arms going around him. "Nothing I say can stop the pain, Hans, but you're not alone. The person that did this will be found."

He blinked and looked up. "Please. Please tell me it wasn't Gretchen. Please, Hawk."

"It wasn't Gretchen," I told him. "The police will probably treat it as though she did, at first, but I don't believe she did it for one second. You need to make a choice right now, Hans. Your little girl is in the worst trouble she has ever been in, and you need to decide if you believe her. Someone killed your wife, and fingers will be pointing at Gretchen as soon as the police get here. I'm a homicide detective, and I'm telling you that I have looked at the crime scene, and that I know your daughter. Given those two things, I don't think she did it. I believe her. Do you?"

He held his hands over his eyes for a moment and nodded. "I can't believe she would do this. Fight with Kat, yes. Kill her, no. And kill Senator Cartwright, too? I just can't believe it."

"Then tell her that," I said forcefully. "Right now she feels all alone and is afraid you'll think the worst. You two need each other now more than ever. Tell her you believe her. Tell her, and then let someone take you back downstairs. She is going to need a good criminal lawyer fast. I'm sorry, but Kat is gone. You need to focus on the living."

His jaw firmed through the despair. "Yes." He stepped around me and to the door of the room. "Baby, I know you didn't do this. We'll fight this together. I love you."

Her face streaming tears, she started for the door and I had to keep her in the room. "I'm sorry, Gretchen, but you can't leave. Not yet."

To my relief, Ted and Lisa arrived at the door just then. "Thank God! Ted, please take Hans downstairs and help him. Lisa, we need you now, and we need you badly." Ted led the now stumbling Hans away.

I quickly filled Lisa in, and she bore up under the shock pretty well.

"You deal with your end, Hawk. I'll deal with protecting Gretchen. Now, shoo."

I left her talking earnestly to Gretchen and walked to the doorway. Kneeling down, I could see some blood on the carpet beside the door. From the general appearance, I guessed that this was where Gretchen had found the knife, just like she said. It looked to have been dropped here by someone on the way out the door.

I stepped over to take a good look at the supposed murder weapon. A large bladed kitchen knife with a rough, easy grip handle. Zero chance for prints on that surface,

though if the killer cut him or herself on the blade because of a slip, there might be some DNA.

Walking back to the bathroom doorway, I looked over the dead bodies with a professional eye. I was already walling off the feelings, the emotion. It didn't matter that I disliked both of them. It was my job to see justice done. Or, it would have been if this was my turf, not that I intended to let their killer escape just because it wasn't. It all depended on who the cops were that caught the case.

Without touching anything, it was hard to get a complete picture, but it looked like Kat went down first as her arm was under Cartwright. She had been facing the shower, I thought, from all the blood on the floor on that side. My take was that she fell and bled out in seconds.

Cartwright had been turned mostly toward the wall away from Kat. At least, the way the blood spatter on that wall and portion of the ceiling were consistent with what I'd expect to see if he had been turned that way. CSI would be able to tell for certain.

I shook my head. Kat looked to be the first victim, but that just didn't sound right. Cartwright was a sizeable man, why kill Kat first? Also, if Kat had been killed while Cartwright was in the room, normal human instinct would be to turn toward the disturbance, not away from it. It just didn't seem to add up

My thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the police. A uniformed woman came into the room and took in the scene at a glance. "Miss, please step away from there," she told me, and I didn't argue. She kept the scene clear until the detective arrived. He was a small black man in his late forties, his thinning hair turning gray.

The detective gave us a cursory look and then looked at the bodies. "Officer Brighton, secure the crime scene and get all these people separated for questioning." He looked like a burn-out, one of those homicide detectives that had seen too much and were on their last legs. The kind of person that pigeon-holed people and didn't dig too deeply for facts. Someone looking for an easy solution. I hoped I was wrong.

Lisa started the ball rolling by refusing to leave Gretchen. "I'm her counsel and where she goes, I go."

The still unidentified detective put his hands on his thin hips and cocked his head at Gretchen. "That's fast. Look here, girl, lawyering up is the worst thing you can do. Just cooperate and we'll get this sorted out. If you start off with a shyster, it only makes you

look guilty."

"I don't think so, detective," Lisa said coolly. "Shall we let your people look her over so she can wash up?"

"In good time," he answered her huffily. "Officer, take this other lady out," he said pointing at me.

"Sorry," I said, "I'm her other counsel and her wife. I stay."

He gave me a pissed look. "What is this, argue with the police day? Just go with the officer."

"I'm with her. You drag me out of here and you're looking at a shitload of trouble from her lawyers about stripping her of counsel," I said, crossing my arms.

"I'm not questioning anyone yet," he said, peeved. "I have the scene to look over, and the techs will be here to go over all of you." He threw up his arms. "Fine, we'll start by questioning her, but not in here. Come with me."

He led us back into the hall that was rapidly filling with police and into another bedroom. He set one of the wooden chairs out so that Gretchen could sit in it. "You two sit on the bed."

I gave in and sat on the bed where Gretchen could see me, but Lisa pulled up another chair and sat beside her.

The detective pulled up a chair and flipped it around and sat with the back between his legs. A position of intimidation. "You three are getting on my last working nerve."

Lisa smiled at him. "I'm Lisa Stansbury, this is Gretchen Werner. The lady on the bed is Shauna Hawkins. Who are you, detective?"

"Detective Sergeant William Sweeny, Miss Stansbury. Now, Miss Werner, tell me how you got that blood on your hand?"

Gretchen stumbled through the same story I had gotten from her with Lisa keeping her to just the bare bones and blocking any more-in-depth questions.

When she told him I had come in right after she found the bodies, Sweeny looked at

me, his eyes hard.

"It doesn't sound like you're counsel, Miss Hawkins. You smell like a witness to me," he said.

I opened my purse and pulled out my badge. "I'm on the job in Houston."

He took it and looked it over, his eyebrows rising. "Pretty odd that a homicide detective happens on a murder scene right after it happens."

I shrugged and took my badge back. "Call it a gift. Look, it's been an odd week. You've got her initial statement. Let the crime scene boys take her and get what they need. Then, you can grill me."

"Well, Lieutenant Hawkins, that's my call to make, not yours," he said, leaning his chair back. "I say when this is over."

He turned back to Gretchen and made her go through everything he had just heard. I know he didn't expect to get something new right now; he just wanted to prove his dominance. Gretchen held up better this time and went through it like a champ.

When she was done, he turned her over to the techs, and Lisa went with her. I got up, flipped another chair around in front of his and matched the position of his seat, robbing him of his posturing. With the dress on, though, I had to sit side saddle. "Shall we take turns pissing on each other to prove how manly we are, or can we cut to the chase?"

Sweeny stood up abruptly, his face clouding with anger. "Don't you dare try that shit with me. Your wife is in a world of hurt, and you know I'm going to book her pretty little ass on two counts of Murder One. If the evidence plays out like I think it will, she'll go down hard. It looks open and shut to me, Miss Texas detective, so you go on back downstairs, and I'll try not to let your bullshit piss me off any more than it already has. And, you're out as counsel." He held up a hand to shortstop my objection. "You're a witness, pure and simple. Don't push me on this or I'll toss you in with her. Get moving and let me process *my* crime scene."

"Bullshit. The spatter evidence by itself points at another person as the perp," I snarled in exasperation.

"Tell it to the judge. Now get out," he huffed, rising to his feet.

Gritting my teeth, I backed down and walked out of the room. This wasn't going to be easy. Dick Cheese already seemed to have made his mind up. That meant he wouldn't be looking for evidence that pointed at anyone but Gretchen. In fact, he might suppress any exculpatory evidence he did find. Some people were like that. I needed to get on this right now. Time to talk to my father-in-law.

The guests had apparently already been processed and funneled out of the house. At least, if they hadn't all been processed and were still in the house, they weren't in plain sight. All the people that were visible were cops, medical examiners and a pair of people just coming in the front with crime scene jackets on. CSI... Crime Scene Investigators. Not as high speed as the television show make them out to be, but still damned impressive, when they put their minds to work and their tools to good use.

I stopped them just shy of the stairs and showed them my badge. "Excuse me, but one of the deceased is my mother-in-law, and the detective looked like he had already made up his mind. Do me a favor: look hard, and look twice at what's up there. I want to see the guilty person pay, whoever that turns out to be, but I don't want to see it done so fast that we miss something that doesn't fit the moment's favorite story. Okay?"

The two, a young Hispanic man in his twenties and an older white woman glanced at each other and then back at me. "We don't rush to judge, detective," the older woman said. "Rest assured that we'll do our best and we'll be thorough. The facts will speak for themselves."

I nodded. "That's all I wanted to hear. Thanks."

After they went upstairs, I started searching around and found Hans in the Brown Room with Ted. Hans looked like hell and I couldn't blame him. Ted had placed a stiff drink on the table in front of Hans, but it looked untouched. When Ted looked at me, I gestured with my head for him to give me some time with Hans. Quietly, he slipped out, leaving us alone.

I knelt in front of Hans and took his hand in mine. God knows I wished I had less experience in dealing with people who had just suffered a terrible loss, but in this particular case I was damned glad that I did know how to deal with Hans and how to help him get things moving.

"Hey. How're you holding up?" I asked gently.

"Not very well," he admitted, squeezing my hand a little. "I don't believe it. I keep telling myself that it can't be true, that it's all some terrible joke. When it sinks in, I don't know what I'll do." He laughed, a hint of despair creeping into his voice. "I'm lying. I don't know what to do even now. If I do what I did when my first wife committed suicide, I'll be angry with everyone soon enough. I prayed I would never have to go through this again."

"Look," I started slowly, "I'm not going to sugarcoat this. It's going to be worse this time. The detective is an asshole, and he's going to charge Gretchen. He might hem and haw, but he's already made up his mind that she's the killer. Gretchen is in the worst spot she's ever been in, and no matter how much we do to help, she's all alone in the crosshairs. Hans, I need to hear it again. Did you believe her when she told you she didn't do it?"

Hans stared into my eyes, his jaw working. At last, he nodded. "I know it looks bad, but I just don't believe she would kill two people. No matter how much she hated Kat, I just cannot accept that she would kill her even in the heat of the moment, much less go get a knife and track her down. And I know of no reason that Gretchen would have to kill the senator. Gretchen is innocent. I'm sure of it."

I felt a huge weight lift off my shoulders. If he thought she was guilty, this would be much harder. "Then we need to get busy because the clock is ticking. Right now, CSI is upstairs gathering evidence, probably from Gretchen. As soon as they finish, Detective Sweeny will tell her he's taking her to the station to take her statement. Or, if he's a major asshole, he'll just arrest her now. Either way, she won't be leaving the precinct house except to go straight to jail. He flat out told me she would be charged with two counts of murder in the first degree. I'm not sure about here, but in Texas that means the death penalty is on the table."

He shook his head. "Not here in the bastion of the left. I believe they have mandatory life without the possibility of parole. You can thank the kind of people that would elect someone like Cartwright."

"That's still nothing to court, if we can dodge the bullet. By now, the news media is on high alert and rushing here, if they aren't here already. They have some of the story, though probably not many particulars. We need to do something I never thought I would do. We need to spin the press before the police or district attorney has a chance to do it. You need to make a statement to the press telling them what happened and explaining about the terrible circumstances Gretchen is in. If you sit back with a 'no

comment', the DA will fry you in the press. Start it off with how the police already suspect Gretchen, how you *know* she didn't do it, and how you're afraid that they will go for the easy target and charge her simply because you're both rich and famous. Play the Hollywood angle: the famous get charged so the DA can make a name for himself and run for Governor."

He blinked at me in surprise. "But, then we'll be at war with the district attorney."

I smiled sourly. "You think you aren't? Ten to one he's already been called and is on his way downtown. He'll be calling a press conference as soon as Gretchen is charged. He *will* want her. She's his ticket to fame. Take the initiative while you can."

He nodded.

"Second thing, call the biggest name lawyer you know and get him down there. Gretchen needs to have a herd of high-priced lawyers breathing down the cops' necks. If they want the time of day, they need a warrant. Everything she says goes through them, but they'll already know all that. Get them there before they have a chance to start questioning her. Have them push hard for bail. It won't be cheap or easy, but with connections, deep pockets and luck, we might get her released tonight. Speaking of connections, if you know people in power, call them. Have them all start putting pressure in various places. That might help tilt the judge that makes the call."

I shook my head and picked up his untouched drink. "To hell with no booze. I'll take my chances, and Gretchen can yell at me later. I'll drink this, but no more." It burned my throat in a comfortable way as I sipped it. "I'm telling you to do everything I always hated the defense doing: trying the case in the media, blocking the investigation, making me work for every lead. Isn't that just ironic?"

"While I do all that, what will you do?" he asked finally.

"I'll be making life a pain for Detective Sweeny. I'm going with Gretchen and I'll delay the proceedings as much as I can until her well-compensated mouthpiece gets there. Then I get busy in the morning tracking down the killer. Wish me luck." I tossed back the rest of the drink and set the glass on the table. Time to go find Gretchen and Lisa.

When I caught up with Lisa, she was waiting for Gretchen to dress, and a police technician was already bagging my wife's clothes. After the tech left, Lisa shook her head. "It's not good."

"No," I agreed. "Once she gets dressed, they will either take her into custody or take her down to the station for questioning and then take her into custody. I have Hans calling people and doing things."

"Hawk," Lisa said quietly, "this is bad. I'd charge her and go for the conviction."

"She's innocent, Lisa."

"Are you sure?" Lisa asked worriedly. "Hawk, you only just met her last week. I know you're married, but this is..."

I cut her off with my hand. "I know murder and I know people. I can read people pretty well and Gretchen is not a murderer. I'd stake my career on it. Besides, from the little I saw, I think the forensic evidence may help us, too. I need you to back my play, Lisa. Trust me. Trust her."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at the bathroom door. "Lisa, I know you're not licensed here, but I'd appreciate if you'd stick with her until her merry band of lawyers get there."

She nodded. "I'll stick by both of you. I promise. Where did Hans and Ted get off to?"

"Hans is in the Brown Room. Ted left us there alone to talk for a bit, but I bet he's back there now."

"Good," Gretchen said, coming out of the bathroom dressed in blue jeans and a tee shirt. "Daddy needs someone with him."

I stood up and took Gretchen into my arms. She held me and then pulled back, scowling. "You've been drinking! Hawk!"

"Cut me some slack here, will you? This has been the day from hell," I said with an eye roll.

A knock at the door interrupted her no doubt hot retort. The door opened and a female officer looked at us, and motioned Detective Sweeny in. He upheld my low opinion of him by pulling out the cuffs with no foreplay.

"Gretchen Werner, you're under arrest for the murder of Senator William Cartwright and

Katrina Werner. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney..."

He continued to read her rights as he cuffed her. She stood there stoically, looking regal. Several officers came in to escort her out.

"Chin up, Gretchen. We'll have you out fast," I told her.

She blew me a kiss on the way out the door. "You better."

Sweeny swaggered up to me as Lisa followed Gretchen out. "I need you to come down to the station and answer some more questions, Hawkins."

I stuck my index finger in his face. "That's Detective Lieutenant Hawkins, Detective Sergeant Sweeny. Let's not get too familiar. I'm coming down to the station, but not to answer your questions. You have my statement and that's all you get until my wife's arraignment."

He sneered at me and poked me in my chest. "You'll do what I say or I'll haul your southern ass in as an accessory to murder."

Swatting his hand back, I poked him in the chest twice as hard as he had poked me. "I'm not your little push-over, burnout. Nothing I say or do will make this situation any better with you. If you could arrest me, you would have. You might be able to awe some society bimbo with that gold badge, but you don't impress me one little bit." I leaned in, glaring into his face. "I'll find the real killer in spite of your lazy ass. Get in my way and I'll walk all over you."

I left him standing speechless as I turned and stalked past the awe-struck uniforms.

By the time I got downstairs, Gretchen was being put into a squad car, and Lisa was getting into a car that Lurch had brought out front. I slid into the passenger seat and buckled in wordlessly.

We made the trip to the station in silence, each of us preparing for battle in our own way. The police station was like most of its ilk: drab and worn.

Police streamed in and out of the front as we came in from the parking area. They kept us cooling our heels while Gretchen was processed in. They were taking her picture,

getting her fingerprints and gathering basic information. They then parked her in a holding area to stew. It seemed that keeping everyone waiting was almost universally normal police procedure. I'd done it myself many, many times. Surprisingly, this gave me a sense of patience I normally didn't have. I was so intimately familiar with the process that my estimate was within five minutes of when they came to escort us back.

I half expected Sweeny to try and block my presence, but he didn't. The interrogation room felt as comfortably familiar to me as my house. Of course, I was the one usually asking questions. Gretchen was now dressed in an orange jump suit and shackled to the floor. No doubt that was to unsettle her and me. It didn't seem to be working on either of us.

She smiled at me as if we were in a diner. "There you are, Hawk. I was getting worried."

"No need to worry," I assured her. When we sat down on either side of her, I tipped back in the chair just a bit and smiled at Sweeny. "Time's short, little man. If you want to ask some questions, let's get started."

The flush of anger told me that he was not happy to have the rhythm of the questioning broken and his initiative taken away. "You'll be here until I say we're done." I could hear the unspoken "Dyke Bitch" at the end of that sentence. Good. I liked having an adversarial relationship with this guy.

"Wrong," Lisa said. "As soon as I say we're done, we're done."

The glare between them was interrupted by a knock at the door. A uniform opened the door and let in a portly man in his late fifties. He looked a size too big for the suit and had the air of someone who was a bit disorganized. That was obvious when his briefcase popped open and dumped papers all over the floor.

"I beg your pardon," he said as he set the briefcase down and started gathering papers. "I'm Danny Zieter, here for the defense. One of you two ladies is Hawk and the other is Lisa, right?"

I stood up and helped him gather up papers. "I'm Hawk. You can have my seat. I'm used to standing up and walking around in places like this. It helps me think."

He laughed. "I like that. Hawk, we shall get along just fine."

Sweeny interrupted our little meeting with a snarl. "I don't care who represents who.

Fine, Daddy Warbucks sent you. Let's get back down to business."

Zieter smiled at Sweeny in a friendly way. "Oh, I'm afraid not, detective. My client stands on her privilege to remain silent and we have an appointment in Judge Masters' chambers in half an hour. The District Attorney has already been notified. Here are the papers to present Gretchen Werner for her arraignment at that time."

Sweeny looked as surprised as I felt. In addition, he looked monumentally pissed. "That's crap. Masters is a day judge."

"I know," Zieter said with a smile. "He has agreed to come in and hear the argument for bail in this very delicate matter. Amazingly enough, District Attorney Danforth had almost the exact same reaction to the news. Thank you, Detective. I'll be consulting with my client now."

After he stomped out, Zieter laughed. "I love that. Pissing them off like that. No offense, Detective."

"You just go right ahead and piss them off as much as you like. I'll handle it," I said, already liking him. "What's the plan?"

"You two can step on out and harass the good sergeant and I'll talk with my client alone for a bit, if you don't mind."

Lisa and I were both used to this from differing viewpoints, so we weren't offended, and we left them alone. Sweeny was gone, so I couldn't piss in his Wheaties. Pity.

In ten minutes, Zieter was bustling out and herding the two of us toward the far end of the hall. "The judge's chambers are through here and up two floors. When we get there, just let me handle it."

"Will we get her out?" I asked, showing some of my worry.

"Maybe, maybe not. It depends on all kinds of things, and I won't promise anything except to try my very best. I can assure you that my best is pretty good, though," he said with a wink.

The chambers were cozy, like those of most judges. The judge, on the other hand, didn't look like most judges. He looked like a quantum physicist, with a tweed jacket,

bow tie and older suit. He looked like a geek that had let middle age catch up with him.

The other man there looked like a used car salesman. His hair was slicked back and despite the grease, was a flat black that screamed bottle job. To top it all off, he looked smarmy, and arrogant. His stare at us spoke volumes. He felt like he had the upper hand and was going to crush us. An officer came through the other door with Gretchen in front of him.

Once we were all seated, the judge spoke with a voice so deep, I had to look again to make sure it was him speaking.

"Gentlemen, ladies, it's late, and I'd like to get back to my wife, so let's hear the arguments in a concise and brief manner. Save the grandstanding for a jury, and just lay it out clean and fast."

"Your Honor," said Danforth, "the facts couldn't be clearer. Gretchen Werner was found by her own wife standing over the bodies of her victims, with the murder weapon in her hand. Open and shut. The People request she be denied bail and remanded into custody immediately."

"Thank you, Mister Danforth." Masters looked at Zieter. "Your turn."

"Let me be just as concise, your Honor. My client did not kill anyone. She found the knife and then the bodies. That will all come out if this ever makes it to trial. My client is like anyone else, innocent until proven guilty. We ask she be allowed to surrender her passport and present reasonable bail until the police realize they have the wrong person."

"That it?" the judge asked both of them. "Fine. The court sets bail in the amount of ten million dollars, and Miss Werner will surrender her passport. Don't leave the area, Miss Werner."

Danforth looked like he had swallowed his tongue. "Your Honor, this is unheard of! Ten million dollars is like pocket change to her family. She is a serious flight risk!"

The judge shook his head. "Not that her record shows, Counselor."

"Her record? Let's talk about her record, your Honor. The woman is a prostitute, pure and simple. Anyone that would sleep with men for money is not the bedrock of society," Danforth said with a sneer.

"Your Honor," Zieter said with a shake of his head, "Counselor Danforth surely knows that as an escort in the great State of Nevada, what she did or did not do in her professional capacity was completely legal and has zero bearing on this matter."

"Agreed. Counselors, we will expedite the process and get this case on the docket as soon as possible. Have a good night." With that, he rose and exited at the door in the back of the room.

The look that the DA gave us as he rose didn't bode well for our chances to get on his Christmas list. "I don't know who paid him off, but I'll see this overturned tomorrow." With that, he stalked out the other door. The police officer took Gretchen out, but Gretchen was smiling and gave us a thumbs up.

"Ladies," Zieter said with a smile, "this is why I love the law. Let's get your wife free and back home where she belongs." I shook his hand and hugged Lisa. This could have been so much worse, and I was thrilled with the ruling.

The police dragged their feet, and it was almost two hours later when we finally arrived back at the house with Gretchen. In the privacy of the back seat, she finally broke down in my arms and cried while Lisa drove. None of us felt like talking, so I just held her.

Lisa brandished a key to the front door and let us all in. "You two go get some sleep. Tomorrow we need to plan what happens next."

Gretchen nodded.

"Thank you, Lisa. I won't forget your help. Come on, Hawk."

She led me up the stairs and to one of the guest rooms. "I don't keep anything here, so this room is as good as the next."

She held me and whispered in my ear. "I'm so sorry that I dragged you into this."

Softly, I kissed her cheek, finally allowing Hawk the cop to slide away. Gretchen had needed me to be the cop earlier. Right now she needed me as her wife and friend. "We'll make it, honey. Let's just get what sleep we can, and tomorrow will get here when it does."

Gretchen nodded. "I just need to hold you now."

We stripped slowly and slid into bed. I held her in my arms as she cried again. It was almost half an hour before she finally dozed. Long after that, I lay with her head cushioned on my breast and stared into the darkness at the ceiling, thinking. I never felt it when sleep took me.

Chapter Eight: Cementing the relationship

When I finally woke up the next day, I was alone, again. Gretchen must have slipped out while I slept. That woman was entirely too quiet.

I staggered into the bathroom and through a hot shower. When I was done, I found the new toothbrush left for me by the sink and finished my morning cleanup by making sure my breath didn't kill someone.

That thought brought back all the memories of the previous day.

I didn't have any clean clothes, so I slipped into a robe and made my way downstairs, looking for the kitchen. I needed coffee and I needed it now. Then I needed clothes and food, in that order.

When I finally found the kitchen, I saw that it was as ridiculously huge as the rest of the house. All I noticed was stainless steel appliances, large swathes of marble counter tops and gleaming floors. I doubted I'd find anything in here at Sears or Home Depot. I more than half expected to find Lurch there, but he was nowhere to be seen. Vanessa, however, was there, putting some spices in a rack. She looked up and smiled at me.

"Good morning, Hawk. Can I fix you something to eat?" she asked.

I sat down on the bar stool and shook my head. "Coffee, please. Black with two sugars. Where is everyone?"

She busied herself with putting some coffee in a single cup brewer. "Gretchen is in the gym. Or at least she was half an hour ago. Hans is still asleep. His doctor gave him something and told me that he would be out most of the day. I haven't seen Ted or Lisa today."

I looked at the microwave, and it told me that it was almost one in the afternoon.

"While we wait for the coffee, would you mind if I asked you some questions?"

Vanessa set down the rag she was cleaning the counter with and nodded. She tapped her fingers on the counter top in a soft tattoo. "Sure. I assume you want to ask about what happened last night, but I don't know how I can help. Since you saw, I mean, since you were there, I'd think you'd already know more about it than I do."

I laughed to myself. Unlike what you saw on TV, most people just couldn't bring themselves to talk directly about murder, especially if it was someone they'd known. As always, I was going to have to be the one to bring it up. "How was Kat as a Mistress of the house?"

Vanessa shook her head. "I don't want to speak ill of the, well, of her."

"You were going to say 'speak ill of the dead,' weren't you?" I asked gently, "but how can that hurt Kat now? Look," I said more bluntly, "I know it's hard to talk about, but someone killed her last night. It wasn't Gretchen. So that means I need to know who else she offended. Would you rather save her name or give Kat the justice that even she deserves?"

Vanessa looked indecisive for a moment and then nodded. "Well, that was plainly said, and I guess I have to agree with you. All right, then: Kat was a terrible boss. When Hans was around, she would be mostly tolerable, even to the staff, but when he wasn't there, she was a royal bitch to everyone."

I nodded. "I guessed that much. She and Gretchen didn't get along, I know. Who else did Kat have less than cordial relations with?"

Vanessa took my cup from the brewer and mixed in the sugar before handing it to me. I sipped it and gave her time to think about my question. She picked the rag back up and bunched it in her hands.

"Well, she didn't get along with my father, but he didn't kill her," she blurted.

I nodded. "I don't get along with a lot of people yet I don't end up killing them. All I'm working on is a list of people with information, and I'll talk with your father in due time. What about Kat and Cartwright? Did they know each other well?"

She nodded. "The Senator was a frequent visitor out here when he was in office. Courting Hans and Kat for donations, I think. Hans would be able to tell you more."

"Did they spend much time together?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"Like without Hans around. Was Kat sleeping with him?" I asked bluntly.

The lack of an immediate response told me the answer wasn't "no". After a moment, she shook her head and told me "no" anyway.

"Look," I said, "let me remind you that we aren't going to hurt her anymore by talking about her. I suspect Kat might not have always been loyal to Hans, just from her personality. If Hans knew about it and was okay with it, that's their business. I'm not making a moral judgment here. Even if you don't know it for a fact, do you think that she might have been friendlier with the Senator than Hans would approve of?"

She bit her fingernail and looked at the door worriedly, and then she nodded to me. "She might have been. The Senator had a way of putting his hands on women that he's been with, and he was pretty comfortable touching Kat."

Recalling how he groped Gretchen, I gritted my teeth and nodded. "I know he did, and I'll be looking into who might have wanted him dead, too. Either one of them might have been the target, after all. Anyone else get it on with her or get into it with her on occasion?"

Vanessa shrugged. "She spent a lot of her time out, so it's possible. Other people got into it with her on occasion, though it would be faster to list the people that didn't tangle with her than the ones who did. That woman was a viper."

"Ah, we must be talking about the dearly departed," Gretchen said from the door. Vanessa jumped and got busy with the counter again. "Don't worry, I won't tell. Vanessa, that coffee smells wonderful. Would you make me a cup?"

"Of course," Vanessa answered, getting another cup from the cabinet. She was obviously still embarrassed that Gretchen had overheard her final comment.

Gretchen was dressed in a robe just like mine. We'd both need to make a trip to the hotel to get some clothes.

I reached out and took her hand. "How do you feel today?" I asked quietly.

"Better," she admitted softly. With a glance at Vanessa, she said even more quietly, "Yesterday seems almost like a bad dream, Hawk, though I know it's all too damn real. I feel badly that I'm not the least bit sad she's dead, even though Daddy is hurting so terribly, but a really big part of me is genuinely happy to see her gone. Cartwright was an ass, but I'm a bit sorrier to see him dead than Kat."

"That's straight from the heart," I agreed, "but don't ever say that to anyone else. The police already are focused solely on you as it is. Now, their blind stupidity doesn't mean I won't find the person responsible and see that they take the fall for what they did. As of now, Elvis is officially on the back burner. The police won't be looking for someone else, so I damn well better be. Besides, even Kat and Cartwright deserve justice. After all, if being an asshole or bitch was reason enough to be killed, I'd have been dead a long time ago."

Vanessa set Gretchen's coffee on the bar and bustled out of the room.

Gretchen's face was momentarily haunted, but she visibly forced it off while taking a sip of her coffee. "I need to believe that the evidence will prove me innocent and that you'll find the person that did this. I have to believe that you'll save me, or I'll make myself crazy."

"I will," I assured her with a small smile, "but not dressed in a robe. We need our clothes."

"I already asked Ivan to go pick ours up," she said. "I expect he will be back in a little while."

I stared at her. "Ivan is handling my underwear? Ewwww! God knows what that pervert will do with them."

She laughed. "Ivan isn't a pervert! I don't know why you don't like him. He's a big teddy bear."

"He doesn't like me, and I don't like him. I think the two of us can work within those boundaries," I said. "You're obviously too accepting of some people, which is a good segue into another subject: you sleeping with people for money."

Gretchen rolled her eyes. "Be honest, Hawk. It's my sleeping with people you don't *approve* of for money."

I sighed, and then nodded. Never push an argument you know you can't win. "Okay, yes," I told her, "that's exactly what I mean. I don't want you sleeping with scum like Cartwright. You're my wife, right? I assume I do get some say in this?"

"Yes," she said, "you do get a say. As long as you don't lay a blanket statement on me, we can negotiate. Don't you know women are born negotiators? Toss anything out, and women will at least talk about it. So, lay it out and let's see what we can come up with."

I didn't expect to get into this so soon, but I turned in the stool and crossed my legs. I knew I'd have to pick my words carefully. "I think you know what I mean, Gretchen. I don't want you having sex without my agreement." I saw her face begin to cloud in anger, and I held up a hand. "That works in the reverse, too. You have a say on what I do there, as well."

Gretchen didn't appear entirely mollified, but she said gently, "I appreciate that you're willing to make this a two way street, honey, but there is a difference between who you sleep with and who I sleep with. The difference, Hawk, is that you know my sleeping with someone else is part of what I do for a living. And, I'll admit, I do it because I enjoy it. So, how about this for a compromise; if you say 'no,' it's no."

"Why can't it be, if I say 'yes', then it's okay?" I asked, almost petulantly. I sighed to myself. I knew I wasn't going to like the way this turned out, just like I knew I would accept it anyway.

"Because, that's you giving me permission and not just vetoing," Gretchen said patiently. She must have thought she saw something in my face because she said almost pleadingly, "I'm coming part way here, Hawk. Meet me. Please."

I opened my mouth to say something more, but closed it without a word. The outcome wasn't in doubt, so what made me want to prolong this? I threw up my hands. "Fine, but if it's someone you even *think* I might object to, you have to run it by me."

"Deal," Gretchen said with a smile. "Thank you, Hawk. Now, on yet another related subject, I'm sorry that I don't feel like consummating our marriage. I just don't feel like making love to anyone right now, but I've wanted you for a week, and even last night doesn't make that go away forever. I admit I'm highly sexed, and sex is comforting to me." She ran her knuckles across my cheek. "I suspect that sex with you will be so far beyond mere comfort, and after all this shit, I'll know that I need that. Not feeling like it, even with you - *especially* with you - is upsetting to me."

"Gretchen, honey, please don't worry about that. I want you, too," I admitted, "but the mood happens when the mood happens and not a minute sooner. Let's just strike when that moment hits us. If that's tonight, I'll be ready. If not, I won't be upset," I assured her.

"If I can interrupt, I have your clothes in your room," Lurch said from the door.

Gretchen seemed almost grateful for the interruption. She didn't like feeling vulnerable, and I could tell she wasn't entirely comfortable showing that vulnerability to me yet. "Thanks, Ivan," she said. "Come on, Hawk. We need to dress, get something to eat and then get busy. What's first? Who do we grill?"

I shook my head. I could see that my solitary, lone wolf days were long gone. I was surprised to find that it didn't bother me as much as I had thought it would. Still, there were appearances to keep, so, "I'd argue, but I know I'd lose," I told her. "I suppose we'll do this together, but it's under my rules. I grill who I like. I looked at Lurch, "and I like you right now, Ivan. I have some questions for you about last night."

"I have a number of things to do today," he said with a sniff. "However, I'll make time to allow you your questions."

"That's damn big of you, Sport." I said, climbing to my feet. "We'll be back down after we dress. We'll eat first and then come looking for you."

He gave me another sniff. "I can hardly wait," he said as he strode from the room.

"See?" I asked Gretchen. "He doesn't like me."

"Gosh, I can't imagine why," Gretchen said dryly. "Come on, let's go dress. I'm getting hungry, and we have things to do."

Those 'things to do' were turned on their head when we came back downstairs. Detective Sergeant Sweeny was standing in the hall scowling at us. I scowled right back.

"You again? Gretchen has nothing to say." I told him.

"You know, I have a real problem with some dyke bitch from Houston coming up here and sticking her nose into police business," he snarled.

"Oh? Too goddamned bad," I said airily. "You have me and that means it just sucks to be you."

"Hawk! Detective! Enough!" Gretchen snapped from the stairs. "Detective, you know I'm not answering any more questions, so why are you here?"

Sweeny scowled at me again before stepping around me. "I'm here because I have a problem, and you're part of it. If you'll call off your attack dog, I'll tell you what it is."

"You have a lot of nerve, coming in here and talking to me and my wife like that," Gretchen replied with some heat, coming to my defense. "You've got ten seconds either to change my mind, or to get out."

"Ten seconds? Okay. Yesterday I had you in cuffs, and I thought you were a killer. Today, I think that you didn't kill them. My problem is what I think today doesn't change a damned thing," he said.

"What?" Gretchen said.

"What?" I echoed, a bit more upset than Gretchen.

"Ain't it a bitch?" he asked Gretchen, ignoring my outrage. "So, do you want to hear it all, or shall I leave you two alone to do whatever carpet-munching, legally married women do?"

My outrage didn't like being ignored. "How about I just beat the hell out of you now, and we call it even?" I asked, yanking him around and balling up my fist.

Gretchen slipped between us and forced him back. "No! Jesus, you two! Can we please reduce the level of testosterone in the air?"

I let her push me back and just glared at Sweeny, who was glaring right back. Inside, I almost laughed. Gretchen was right. We did look like a couple of dogs who wanted nothing more than to piss on something to mark our territory. "Okay Gretchen," I said. "If he'll stop that 'bad cop' bullshit, then I won't stuff my fist down his throat."

Gretchen looked at him. "Can we lay off the offensive comments?"

"Fine, for now, but it doesn't change facts," he said with a shrug. "In any case, CSI told

me that they didn't think the evidence supported you as the killer. They actually said the evidence supported Cartwright killing Werner before he was killed by someone else, but, that doesn't matter because the DA is ignoring the evidence and proceeding with the case."

"What?" Gretchen asked with a high-pitched voice. "Why would he do that?"

"Because you're his ticket into the Governor's office," I said from behind her. "He's a political animal and you're a once in a lifetime target. He couldn't ask for better media coverage. 'Rich hooker, married to lesbian, kills Senator and step-mother.'" I looked back at Sweeny. "So, what will the police do?"

"What can we do?" he retorted. "Charges have been made, the suspect arrested. That's it, unless the DA drops the charges. Will he win? Damned if I know. Juries are notoriously unpredictable. Officially, we have no choice but to continue to process the evidence and let the DA do his job."

Sweeny looked at me and gave me a crooked smile.

"By the way, Hawkins, the DA has an even lower opinion of you than I do. He's all bent out of shape from what I hear. He said he has proof that Judge Masters was paid off and is going to move to have him removed and have the bail revoked. He will be at the State Appeals Court first thing in the morning."

Gretchen looked at me. "Can he do that?"

"You'd have to ask your lawyer," I said, "but he can try. Your man will be there to contest it. I don't think the DA will have much luck."

I gave Sweeny a gimlet eye. "We'll never like one another, so why are you telling us this? What is Gretchen to you?"

"An innocent woman," he said after a moment. "That burnout comment of yours really stung, Hawkins. Maybe it's truer than I want to believe." He shrugged. "You're right. I don't like you any more than you like me. I don't like what the two of you stand for, or the mockery you're making of marriage, but even then I couldn't stand back and say nothing. I figured I had to at least give you a heads up before I get back on the clock." He got up in my face, although the aggression was toned down. "Make no mistake, though," he told me, "the DA is going to have me digging for more evidence that supports his conviction rate, so get used to seeing me around." He backed off, and in a

more conversational tone, added, "Oh, and one other little bit of news to add to in the mix; even before all the guests were identified and released, the guest of honor wasn't among them. Our wannabe senator had already split before the house was sealed. Interesting, huh?"

Sweeney finally swaggered out a few minutes later, but not before he'd turned yet another day of our lives upside down. There's nothing quite like being told you were innocent, but still going to be prosecuted, to get you nice and mad, and Gretchen was really mad. She stormed up the stairs, crying. Somehow, I thought the tears just pissed her off even more. She really didn't like looking weak in front of anyone.

I expected her to go into the bedroom, but she went up to the third floor instead. The room she went into was a large office, very modern in appearance. Clean, bright and although I had no idea why, totally enraging to Gretchen.

"Goddamn that bitch! How the fuck could she do this to me?" She snatched up a little crystal statue and smashed it against the wall.

I grabbed her hand and spun her to face me. "Gretchen what's wrong? What the hell are you talking about? Who did what to you? I thought you were pissed at the DA and Sweeny."

Gretchen clenched her fist and pulled her arm free. "Oh, I am, but right now I'm even more pissed at Kat." She waved her hands at the room "This was my mother's room, Hawk, the last little bit of her in this whole house! That bitch Kat took away *everything* that was my mother to me and turned the room into a fucking office for herself! This was the only place I could go to feel my mother near me when I was a little girl, and she's ruined it!" She bit out each word, working up her fury again. "That *fucking bitch* ruined it!"

She grabbed another little crystal thing from the desk and was about to smash it when I grabbed her again. Gretchen struggled, and I used my training to push her against the wall. She hit a bit harder than I intended, but I needed to break her anger. "Gretchen, stop it! You're out of control!"

Gretchen fought to break free, and her angry eyes smoked at me as I used my body to hold her pinned against the wall. Then the look in her eyes seemed to change, and she stopped struggling as she dropped the statuette onto the carpeted floor. "Who do you think you are, telling me how to feel?" Her voice still held anger, but now it was tinged

with something else.

I relaxed my hold. "I'm your friend, and I'm your wife," I said, looking into her eyes. My own eyes widened as the change in her eyes suddenly became clear to me. She was aroused.

Before I could say anything more, Gretchen grabbed my hair with her off hand and pulled my mouth to hers in a sudden kiss. A flash of heat rose inside me, matching her need, but I quashed it. This was not the time or the place for this, and angry sex wasn't good, right? I forced myself back from her lips.

"No, you don't..."

Gretchen surprised me, pushing me back and twisting me until she was holding me against the wall. "There you are, telling me who's the Alpha again." She pushed herself against me, the heat of her body completing my arousal. "I have some news for you, Hawk. In this relationship, I'm the sexual Alpha and the sooner you accept it, the happier you'll be." She smashed her lips into mine, forcing her tongue into my mouth insistently.

My belly turned to molten heat, but I wasn't her plaything; she was mine. I forced myself away from the wall, not breaking our kiss, and her ass slammed into the desk. I heard something fall and didn't care. Gretchen growled into my mouth and grabbed my hair, twisting me around and sliding me onto the desk, sending half the contents of it crashing to the floor before climbing on top of me.

"Oh, no you don't. I know you want me as much as I want you," she said huskily. "And you..."

I knocked her elbow out from under her, and we rolled off the desk and, with a squeal of outrage from Gretchen, crashed to the floor. We scrambled to our feet and I grabbed her, clamping my lips to hers. Together, we crashed into the filing cabinets, knocking more papers to the floor and causing the smaller one to go over with a "whoomp" even the thick carpeting couldn't quite muffle. I pinned her and took her mouth with mine. I *would* have her on my terms!

"Mine," I said. "You're mine."

"Yes," Gretchen whispered. Then she half tripped me and sent us tumbling back into the desk. With the sweep of her hand, she sent the remaining stuff on it crashing to the

floor while her hips pinned me to the desktop. "You know, I always thought my first time with my husband would be gentle and soft. I think I like this fire with my wife much, much more."

Gretchen grabbed my shirt and ripped it open, the buttons flying in every direction. Her eyes drank in my small, bra-covered breasts and she almost drooled with desire.

I grabbed her hair and pulled her mouth down to mine, tasting her lips and forcing my tongue inside her mouth - not that force was really required. The exquisite dancing of our tongues stoked the furnace inside me, but I felt another emotion rising with it. Love. How I could be so attached to a woman I'd just met boggled my mind. I couldn't understand it, but I couldn't deny it, either. I'd have to figure it out later. Much later.

Gretchen's hands fumbled clumsily at my bra, a growl of frustration building in her throat. Dammit. I was falling back into the Beta and that simply wouldn't do.

"Let me get it," I told her. She let me have some room and that was all the leverage I needed to send her tripping backwards. I was off the desk in a flying pounce, sending us both staggering into a fake tree, causing it to fall onto a no-doubt expensive glass table with another loud crash. Using my knee, I forced her into the wall with an almost bone-jarring "thud".

Gretchen's air whooshed out of her lungs and I used the momentary advantage to rip her expensive blouse down the middle and expose those lovely breasts, clad in a silk-looking black bra. As she struggled with me for control, I used one hand to reach around her and unsnap her bra with a twist. Some skills just had to be practiced until they became so natural that you could do them under any circumstances. Gretchen's weakness was that she simply didn't have that experience with women.

"What in the devil?" asked an incredulous male voice from the doorway. Both of us froze and then whipped our heads around to stare at Lurch, who was staring at both the destruction and our partly-clad state.

In tandem we shouted, "Get out!" And Gretchen added, "Please. And close the door behind you, thanks."

The goggle-eyed Ivan opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water for a moment and then he turned red, right before backing out and shutting the door.

We both burst into laughter, but in Gretchen's case, it was half ruse. While I was

distracted, she hooked a leg around mine and sent me crashing to the floor. The carpet was half covered with various objects and I felt my hip bruise on something. The floor driving the air out of my lungs took the fight out of me for the moment.

Gretchen straddled my waist and whipped off her ruined blouse and her bra. Then she captured my hands while I caught my breath. Her blue eyes sparkled at me, as she bent lower and let her breasts sway across my nipples, through the bra I was still wearing. It felt like someone was twisting my nipples lightly.

"I could still unseat you," I said hoarsely.

Gretchen laughed. "You could, but I think we're almost done with foreplay. You like it rough. I've never been into that before, and it'll be hell on the furniture, but I think I can get used to it."

"I'm not done with foreplay yet," I said and leaned forward, catching her nipple between my lips, sucking it and starting to nibble gently. A shudder of pleasure went through her body and a sigh escaped her lips.

"Yes..." she hissed. "That's it, suck my nipple."

Her hands loosened around my wrists and I took control away from her in a second, releasing my lip lock just long enough to roll her over on her back and slid one knee between her legs. I swooped back down and recaptured her nipple between my teeth and nipped her not so gently.

"I'm the Alpha here," I growled and rode her as her body arched, not in an attempt to knock me loose, but in reaction to my attentions on her. She liked it a little rough, even though she might like to tell me that it was my kink. Some women liked their nipples in clamps. I did, sometimes.

"Shut up and bite my nipples," she growled. "We aren't going to settle this today."

With a gurgling laugh, I gave her what she wanted. I licked and sucked on her tender tit-flesh. They were so much larger than a mouthful, but I made sure my mouth made the circuit all over them and then, to test my theory about whose kink it really was, I leaned forward and clamped my teeth at the point where her neck met her shoulder and bit down gently.

Her hips jolted upwards and her sex rubbed against my well-placed leg. With a groan

that was half pain, half pleasure, Gretchen began wildly rubbing her pants-covered sex against me. Her hands fumbled again with my bra and finally got it loose.

I sat back up, looking down at her. That long blonde hair was wild on the floor, her body flushed pink in arousal. Her breasts were capped with eraser-like nipples, hard and ready. The thing that held me, though, was her eyes. Ice blue and wild. Crazed with desire. Her pupils were fully dilated and she was panting like a steam engine.

"I love you," she said with those red lips, before she leaned forward to suck my nipple. My back arched and I fed what little breast I had into her mouth. My hips began to undulate in time with hers as we pleased ourselves on each other's legs. Her eyes stayed locked with mine as she used my nipple ring to great effect, twisting her head from side to side gently. The stabs of pain and pleasure bled into one another and I threw my head back as the stabs traveled in a sharp, fast strike to my groin.

While my eyes were crossed with pleasure, she rolled me over and attacked my pants like a starving woman. She ripped the belt off and threw it across the room. Something broke, but we didn't care. I lifted my hips in willing surrender as she pulled my pants down. She stared at my cloth covered mound and licked her lips.

"I've never tasted another woman before," she said, her eyes bright. "I come to this, our wedding bed, a virgin for the pleasure of my wife." She bent down and inhaled my musky scent through my soaked panties. "You smell like me, a slut in need. That's what I am, you know. Your slut and I'll do whatever you want. Tell me what you want, Wife. Command me."

I groaned and arched my back. "Stop talking and make love to me!"

Like a striking cobra, she attacked my stomach, her tongue doing perverted, wonderful things to my bellybutton. When she sucked on it, I felt the sensations all the way down my ass, and I groaned. Gretchen pulled my panties down and I helped her, wriggling my ass.

Then I watched as she kissed her way lower until her lips were hidden by my freshly trimmed bush. Her hot breath sent jolts through me all the way up my spine. "Do you want me to kiss you?" she asked, her eyes aroused and needy on mine. "Tell me to lick your pussy."

"God!" I screamed in a mixture of desire, arousal, love and frustration. "Lick my pussy, Gretchen! Eat me!"

Gretchen kissed me full on my lower lips, her mouth opening and her tongue sliding inside me, exploring me. Her face was instantly drenched in my nectar. I don't know that I've ever been so aroused before.

"So sweet," she moaned into my sex. "Yes..."

She dug into me with her tongue and then slowly began working first one finger and then another inside me. Her lips teased my clit while her fingers rubbed my G-spot.

I didn't even have time to build up before I exploded in her face. She rode my wildly convulsing body and just kept going.

"Stop," I pleaded, "let me catch my breath."

"Oh, I don't think so," she laughed before licking my sensitive clit again and diving back in. Quickly, she had a chain of small orgasms shooting through me, one after another, each a little bigger than the one before. Not that I was in a position to judge, but for a virgin, it seemed her technique was improving really fast.

Just when I didn't think I could take it anymore, she slid her finger out of me and slowly worked it into my ass, sucking, biting my clit. My body went insane. I thought I'd had a stroke. My vision faded and the room was plunged into darkness, and the most intense orgasm of my life picked me up and threw me into the ceiling. I felt like I was in freefall, and then with a full-body shudder, I blacked out.

I know I wasn't really out, but I didn't remember her coming up to gently kiss my face, whispering that she loved me in my ears so softly that I was afraid I was hearing things. I could see her now, her face totally soaked in my juices, her blond hair in wild disarray.

"Did you like that?" she asked, a hint of devilry in her voice.

"You know damned well I liked it, Wench," I panted at her, before kissing her deeply. Pulling back, I found myself so hungry for her that I didn't even want to cuddle. "I need you, right now. Strip and climb aboard."

She laughed again and stood up gracefully. With her eyes never leaving mine, she slowly stripped herself of pants and the little black panties that matched the bra. Even from here, I could see the drops of moisture on her swollen labia and trimmed blonde muff.

Gretchen swaggered over to me and swung a leg over my head, kneeling. "Now it's my turn. Eat me." She lowered her soaked sex into my face and I drank from her like a woman dying of thirst in the desert. Her clit was so large when it was aroused; it was like sucking a tiny little penis. I bobbed my head and blew her with my best technique. I had a stray thought that my time with Ted wasn't entirely wasted.

She shuddered over me and her hands tangled in my hair, grinding her sex on my face. I lost myself in the moment, and when she came, it surprised me. She threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lungs, her back arching spasmodically and her hips grinding us together like she was riding a wild bronco.

Like her, I decided not to leave it with one orgasm, so I continued eating her with all my skill. Finally, she pitched forward onto her hands and knees and I slipped out from underneath her as she panted. I buried my face back into the sweet, sweet pussy from behind, making her moan in tortured pleasure.

Then, I had my revenge. I slipped two fingers inside her tight pussy and then buried my face in her ass, my tongue rimming her sensitive asshole.

"God, yes! Fuck me. Lick my ass. Fuck my ass." She groaned in need.

"Maybe next time," I murmured, "when we get some nice strap-ons. Now, shut up and come for me." I licked her wildly and pistoned my fingers into her until her breath caught and she wailed her pleasure again, this time not stopping until she collapsed in front of me.

I slid down beside her twitching body and held her as her breathing slowed. I kissed her face and whispered into her ears what she had said to me. "I love you, Gretchen, wife of my heart."

For what could have been minutes, or an hour, we lay sprawled together, spent. At long last, she levered herself to her elbow. "God, I can't believe how good that was. Thank you."

We kissed and held each other for a moment, and then she climbed to her feet and helped me up. "Now I'm thirsty and totally ravenous."

Looking around us, we both stopped in amazement. The office was devastated. It looked like a tornado had gone through it. Things were smashed, scattered and one

filing cabinet was on its side, papers spilling out.

Gretchen laughed. "I meant to trash the place, but this was better than anything I could have planned. Kat would have a shit fit if she were here, knowing how we did this. Thank you, wife of my heart."

We dressed as well as we could, with our destroyed clothes, and slipped out of the office, bolting back down the stairs to our room and giggling like two wayward children.

Chapter Nine: Taking control

When we were finally cleaned up and back downstairs, it was time to look for Lurch. Having Lurch catch us in flagrante was going to make questioning him one of those interesting experiences I usually tried to avoid, but there was a price to be paid for anything worthwhile. The sex had definitely been worthwhile; hell, the sex had been both fun and fantastic, but there was a killer on the loose, and events were proceeding whether we liked it or not.

I turned to Gretchen and gave her my cop face. "Honey, I love you, but this is *my* interrogation. My rules, my way. Do *not* try to fight me on this. If you want to help me, keep him on the fire while I grill him. If you can't do this, go into the kitchen and talk to Vanessa, because I'm going to hit him a lot harder than Sweeny hit you. I'm going to be everything I'm not with you: I'm going to be offensive, hurtful, and unrelenting. You need to decide right now: are you in or out on the questioning of people you know?"

Gretchen swallowed hard. "I'm in. I won't interfere and if I can't help, I'll keep quiet or leave the room. Hawk, Ivan wouldn't do this. He couldn't. Look how old he is. Cartwright would twist him into a pretzel."

I stopped and put my hands on her shoulders. "Get that out of your head right now, Sweetie." I sighed and pulled her into a gentle hug. Pulling back, I said, "This is why I asked if you could stand being with me when I questioned people you know, and care about. When I interrogate a suspect, when any homicide cop interrogates a suspect, they are guilty until the facts rule them out. If you are going to be with me when I talk to them, you are going to have to accept that. I've seen old people who have killed before, and killed people that you wouldn't expect. It happens when this old, non-threatening person surprises them, and, Honey, Lurch moves more quietly than most. We have no choice but to grill Ivan and the rest of them."

Gretchen sighed, and then met my eyes. At her nod, I kissed her cheek and went into the main part of the house. "Ivan," I shouted. "Where the hell are you in this pile of rubble?"

"I'm here, Miss Shauna," he said from the doorway of the Brown Room. He had a duster in his hand, an apron around his waist and looked completely ridiculous.

"Fine," I said brushing past him. "This will work fine. Gretchen, please close the door." I arranged the seats so one was away from a table, in the open and exposed. Two others went behind a small table. Emotional leverage. "Please have a seat. I'll try to keep the impact on your time as minimal as possible."

Stiffly, almost daintily, he sat upright in the seat, only occupying the forward edge. "I have already given a statement to the police, Miss Shauna, so I am uncertain what more information I can provide."

I tapped the table lightly with one fingertip. "I may not be on the clock, but it feels like it, so let's keep things more formal. I'm Detective Hawkins this morning, and we'll be going over that night from the beginning. Since I have no access to the official police records. What is your full name and where were you born?"

"Ivan Orlov, Detective," he sniffed. "I was born in Moscow, Russia, in 1936. My parents immigrated to the United States that same year."

"Fine, Mister Orlov, let's get down to brass tacks. After the announcements, I saw Kat and Cartwright, still in the room, so they must have left sometime after that point. Where were you after Hans finished speaking?"

Ivan adjusted his seat slightly and cleared his throat. "I returned to the serving area to make certain that the staff was prepared to serve the guests."

"Isn't that your daughter's job?" I asked.

Ivan shrugged, looking a bit more human with the simple gesture. I pushed that thought away and refocused. "No, not really," he said. "Vanessa prepares the food, and I see that the staff does the work required in a timely fashion. However, she was there."

"Did you see either Kat or Everett Cartwright alive after that?"

"Yes," he said testily, "I've already told you I saw Mistress Kat go upstairs several minutes before she was found dead."

"So you did," I agreed. "You also told me you spilled something on your jacket. Let's hear about that in more detail."

"One of the hired servers spilled champagne on my back, the clumsy oaf," he said dismissively. "It's a constant problem when dealing with temporary workers."

I leaned forward, lacing my fingers on the table in front of me. "The jacket is still here, I assume. I'll need to see it after we finish talking."

"Talking," he sneered. "We're not talking, *Detective*. You're questioning me in an effort to see how I fit as a suspect. Let's not be coy."

"You want plain talk, fine." I slitted my eyes and pierced him with a stare. "You look good for the part to me, Lurch. You had access to the murder weapon, and full run of the house. You also have a damned good motive."

"What motive would that be, Detective? Find me one person, other than the Master, who could stand the woman. You'll have far better luck finding ten honest politicians. To know her was to *hate* her."

I smiled without humor. "Oh, I believe you when you say you didn't kill Kat, Ivan. My instincts, and the evidence at the scene, support that Senator Cartwright killed Kat and then someone killed him. A source in the local PD tells me that CSI is backing that view of events. That still begs the question, how did he get a knife from the kitchen? Did someone get it for him and then follow him upstairs to finish him off after he did Kat? Was that you, Lurch? Did you give him a knife to get rid of a bitch you disliked and then kill the man that raped your daughter?"

He paled and recoiled from me, slipping back into the chair. Gretchen wheeled and stared at me. All in all, it was a good response to an educated guess. His reaction confirmed it, and Gretchen's told me that she had never guessed.

"What?!?" she exclaimed. "He did what?"

I tilted my head and looked at Gretchen. "Why don't we let *Ivan* explain that to you." Then I skewered him again with my glare. "Why don't you fill Gretchen in?"

"Because it's none of her business or yours," he snarled back at me, his calm façade not completely shattered. "What that bastard did to Vanessa has required years of healing, and I will not see her dragged back into that morass of despair again."

"It's too late for that," I assured him. "His death makes both of you very nice suspects, so if you hope to clear yourselves, now is the time to be open and honest, at least with me. The sooner I can clear you two, the sooner I can find the killer. If, indeed, you are innocent."

He exclaimed something in Russian that didn't sound very complementary as he rose from his seat, his face a mask of rage. "How dare you come into this home and treat me and mine like this? You don't know us!"

I looked up at him, towering over me and smiled that cop smile. "I *dare* because it's what I do. Get off that fucking high horse of yours, give me some reason to clear you and you can get this pushy, lesbian bitch off your case. You don't want to tell me the details? Fine. General terms, then. What did Cartwright do to Vanessa?"

Lurch stalked over to the bar and poured himself a stiff drink. As we waited for him to make up his mind, the door to the room opened and Vanessa came in.

"I'll tell you what you want to know," she said, her voice low.

Lurch spun and stalked over to her. "No! I won't have you put yourself through that again for this fucking bitch voyeur. Let her rot!"

Gretchen started to say something, but I put my hand on hers and shook my head. This wasn't the time to interject ourselves. Vanessa would more than likely bring Lurch around.

"If not for her, then for Mistress Gretchen, father." Vanessa's voice faded as she lowered it and pulled Ivan further away. Vanessa and Lurch argued quietly for a minute before he threw up his hands, took a stiff shot of the drink he'd poured and set the empty glass on the table. Vanessa sat in the vacated seat and Lurch stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders.

Vanessa's eyes were dark, I noticed. A match for the dark brown of her hair. She folded her hands in her lap and looked between Gretchen and myself.

"This isn't something I ever wanted to have publicly aired out, but I can't let my father

shield me from everything," Vanessa said quietly. "If I tell you, then you can move on and find the real killer, but I'll tell you now that the world is a better place without those vipers." All that was said in the same matter-of-fact, monotone, without heat.

"I don't want to hurt you, and I'm sorry," I said gently, "but we have to know what really happened."

Vanessa sighed and closed her eyes. "It was two years ago. Cartwright had been coming to see Hans for several months about something political, and he kept talking to me so nicely. When he asked me to go to dinner with him, I was thrilled."

She wiped tears from her eyes and Gretchen rose to get her some tissues. Vanessa took them with a polite "thank you" and blew her nose. Gretchen knelt beside her and held her hand. She was so much better at the feminine support than I was.

"Dinner was wonderful," Vanessa continued, "but on the way home, I started feeling drowsy. I wasn't really sure what was happening when he detoured to a motel, but I didn't seem to have the energy to even talk. He... he got a room and carried me inside. I wanted to tell him 'no', but I seemed so disconnected."

Vanessa looked up at me, her eyes sparkling with the first anger I had seen in them. "Then he raped me. I screamed 'no' in my head, but it never came out. When he was done, he dressed me, carried me out to the car and drove me around a while until I started regaining some control. He kept telling me how I should just accept it, that no one would ever believe me and that he would just claim it was consensual sex."

Her father massaged her shoulders and glared at me. "That bastard raped her, Detective, and if I had killed him, I would shout it from the rooftops, proud of it, not hide it from you."

"I made him swear not to do anything when I finally told him last year," Vanessa continued. "It wouldn't help anything. It would only hurt him and me. No one would believe us."

"You also told Kirk, correct?" I asked gently.

Vanessa nodded. "He's really a bright man, and he knew something was wrong from the way I reacted to Cartwright. He wheedled it out of me over a several month period. Since he already guessed everything, it didn't make much sense to deny it. And still he keeps asking me out, knowing how afraid I am."

"Perhaps it's because he cares and wants to help you," Gretchen said quietly.

"So, knowing this," I asked, "why are you and your father a bad bet on this murder? Let's say Kat and Cartwright got into a fight and Cartwright killed Kat before his killer killed him. Catching him crouched over her body, why not pick up the knife and kill the man who raped you?"

Vanessa gave me a feral smile. "Because, if I had caught him, I'd have screamed my head off and gotten him caught with blood all over himself. I'd have seen that bastard dragged through the mud and locked away for life by the state. All that pain and the media circus would be a hell of a lot more satisfying than this," Vanessa spat. "I don't believe in killing, even scum like him. I'd have wanted him to be raped every day for the rest of his miserable life in prison. Death was too good for the likes of him."

I couldn't argue with that logic. I believed her. That still didn't clear Lurch.

"And why not Ivan?" Gretchen asked, surprising me. "He could have done it in anger. I know I could have, knowing what I know now."

Vanessa looked at Gretchen and squeezed her hand. "Because he was in the serving area the whole time where I could see him. Servers went in and out, but I was there the whole time. I know he didn't kill Cartwright. If you believe me at all, you'll just have to accept that."

I debated that inside and decided, for the moment, to believe her. "Okay, if that's so, how did Cartwright get one of the kitchen knives? Or Kat? One of those two must have taken the knife up there."

Vanessa shrugged. "People were in and out of the serving room before and after the announcement, and in the kitchen, too. It's not like we were telling everyone to stay out. I don't know where the knife came from, but I'd be willing to bet it came from the kitchen proper just because there would have been fewer people in there after the food was ready."

I stood up and walked around the table, taking her other hand. "I'm sorry I had to drag you though this, Vanessa, but I had to know. I won't ask you to forgive me for hurting you like this, but I hope you understand why I did."

She looked up at me and smiled a small smile. "I do understand. It's because you love

someone very much."

My lips quirked a smile and I looked at Gretchen. "That's true, but that's not why I did this. I *had* to do this because only the truth would let me look past you to others. Go ahead, cry, shout at me and hate me. I'll understand."

Vanessa rose and pulled me into a surprised hug. "I don't hate you." And as quickly as that, she turned and fled from the room.

Lurch glared at me and followed after her, stopping halfway out to turn and sniff at me. "I am not as forgiving as my daughter, Detective, and I promise nothing. We will finish this at a time of my own choosing and in a manner that I find suitable."

Then he stalked out, his back stiff and vibrating with energy like a plucked guitar string.

I shook my head and smiled, looking at Gretchen. "See what I mean? I just have a way with people that makes me so popular. You meld with them, draw them out, and I confront them and make them hate me so much that they spill the beans."

She stood behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her face in my hair, kissing the back of my head. "My job is compassion, yours is confrontation. I'd make a lousy detective, and you'd make a piss-poor consort."

I laughed. "That's blunt, but so damned true, love." My laughter died and I smiled ruefully. "I think I've cemented my piss-poor relationship with Lurch, for sure."

"Give him some space," she suggested. "He may come back around once this is all over."

"I'm not counting on that," I assured her. "He'll be looking for payback, and after all the grief he gave me last night, when he didn't have the same reason to dislike me, I can only imagine what form that payback might take." I shook my head. "In any case, we need to go make a house call on Mister Craig. Since he skated out before the place was sealed, I have some deep, burning questions for him."

Gretchen called Devon and had him pick us up in the Hummer. He looked somber in his new duds as he opened the door for us.

I looked over the black slacks, shirt, tie and jacket. The polished black shoes completed the outfit, though they clashed pretty well with his dreadlocks and black shades.

"Dressing up?" I asked him with a grin.

"I was tinkin' dat I should upgrade," he said. "Devon hear about de whole ting on de news. I be so sorry, Miz Gretchen."

She shook her head and smiled for him. "You don't need to dress up, Devon. Just dress like you did before, and we'll be fine. If we need fancy, I'll take care of it ahead of time. And don't worry about me." She took my hand and kissed my fingers. "I'm in the best hands in the world."

I flushed with pleasure at the compliment and slid in back with Gretchen. "Thank you," I whispered in her ear.

"It's the truth, silly," she said with a smile.

Devon turned in his seat after he buckled in. "Dere be lots of people outside de gate. We have to make de run tru dem so strap in."

He was right; there were a lot of press out there. I pulled Gretchen down so that her head was in my lap as we made tracks through the flashing bulbs and talking heads.

"Ooooo, I like this," she murmured. "This has all kinds of possibilities." Her hands reached for my belt and I pulled her up, laughing.

"You're such a horn dog," I chided her. "This isn't the time or place for fooling around."

Gretchen melted against me and kissed my neck in a way that did all kinds of things to my stomach. "Oh, it might not be the time, but it is the place, I think," she whispered in my ear. "I think we should go out one night and see what kind of show we can put on for our loyal retainer."

"Ha! He'd wreck the car," I snorted. "Or want to join in. Or both."

"I don't know him well enough for that, yet, but we'll see," she confided.

"Gretchen!" I said, blushing. "Don't be a slut."

"Oh, but I am a slut," she said seductively. "I'm your slut. I told you I'd do anything for you, but you're right," she said, sitting back up.

I exhaled in relief.

"We still have to have a foursome with the father of our child and his wife first," she continued in a quiet, wicked voice. "We have to keep our priorities straight."

"Gretchen!" I hissed. "Not so loud!"

"Devon not listening," Devon said breezily. "He be driving."

"You *were* listening!" I said hotly. "Don't you pull that silent servant thing on me!"

Gretchen started laughing and I fixed her with a glare. "You think you're funny, but you're not."

"Oh, Hawk, you are *so* easy!" she laughed at me. "I can say the most outrageous things and you believe them all."

"So," I said with a squint, "you're joking about Ted and Lisa?"

"No," she said, "but I am joking about having sex with Devon. Sorry, Devon," she said more loudly, "but I don't want to make our relationship that murky. However, I do promise to see that you meet some nice girls on occasion to make up for it."

"Devon knew he be gettin' some serious perks, but dat be nice. Tank you," he said from the front seat while I blushed.

"This is all a bit more open than I'm used to," I complained. "What if Lisa or Ted don't want to?"

"Silly girl, then we don't. But knowing you, I'd doubt it. Let's worry about that later."

"Dere be a car followin' us," Devon said, looking into the mirror.

I looked back and saw a familiar sight behind us. A beat up Pontiac Firebird. Our photographer friend from Vegas was back. With a smile, I sat back facing the front. "Devon, stand on the brakes."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Stomp the brakes *hard*," I said again.

He looked pleadingly at Gretchen in the mirror.

She smiled wolfishly and nodded. "Do it."

"Okay..." he said and stood on the brakes with no warning as we were cresting a hill. The tires howled as we slid to an abrupt halt.

Looking back, I saw the guy's eyes bug out, and the cigarette between his lips fall into his lap, as he stomped on his own brakes. That was gonna hurt. The Firebird screeched to a halt just a few feet behind the Hummer and I popped out the door and ran back. He was too busy swatting at his pants to pay me much mind when I got to the door and smiled in the open window.

"Hey!" I said brightly. "Fancy meeting you here!"

It looked like the cigarette was smoking under his butt from the way he was bouncing around.

"Goddammit, woman! What the bloody hell are you doing?" he snarled when he had put out the smoldering embers. Good thing he'd never notice it in that car. His pants, on the other hand, had some nice burns. I was right, that had to have hurt.

"Since you were following us, I decided it would be neighborly to stop and say 'hi'. You know me, now who are you?" I asked in that same perky, fake-sweet tone.

"I don't have to..." he started and I just reached in and grabbed his shirt and dragged him halfway out of the car.

"Let's not be shy," I said to his face. "If we're going to keep bumping into each other like this, I want to know whose name to put on the marker when they bury your dead ass."

He blanched and struggled to get loose, but he just didn't have the leverage. "Luther! Luther de Silva! Let me go!"

"Luther," I crooned. "That's a really nice name for a piece of shit like you. You're getting on my nerve, Luther, and since it's the last one I have that still works, I'd rather not burn it out on an ass pimple like you. I can't stop you from following me in public, but if

you keep getting within arms reach, I might just feel compelled to pull a Sean Penn on your scrawny ass. Am I getting through here?"

"Let me go, you crazy broad!" he shouted before I stuffed him back into the car.

Leaning in, I smiled a shark-like smile. "Do be a stranger, okay?" I stepped back as he threw his wreck into reverse and sped backward. It was a great escape attempt, right until the rear of his car slammed into the police cruiser that was just pulling up behind him. When the airbag in the cop car deployed, I had to laugh. He was screwed whether he ran for it or not.

I sauntered back to the Hummer and slid in. "That went well, don't you think?" I asked Gretchen.

"Ohmigod! He hit a police car! Should we run?" she asked, her eyes huge.

"Nope. Devon, take us on out at a normal clip," I said, never taking my eyes off the scene playing itself out behind us. The uniform was out of his cruiser and pulling the hapless Luther out of his Pontiac. I strapped back in and laughed. "I love being me."

Some judicious calling around garnered the location of Senatorial candidate Kirk Craig. He was just wrapping up a speech at a rally on the far side of Boston, but would be back at his office in about an hour. I looked at my watch and smiled at Gretchen.

"We have a little time to burn, so I think some shopping is in order," I purred.

Gretchen frowned. "Shopping? At a time like this?"

"I am shocked," I told her. "I would expect a woman like you would always be open to the notion of shopping. Oh, and speaking of shopping, I need to stop at an ATM and check my balance."

She shook her head with that gleam in her eyes that I had learned meant 'watch your ass, Hawk.' "You might just be surprised," she told me. "Daddy said he transferred your pay yesterday, so the balance is probably a bit higher. Since we got married, I decided not to hit him up for the sex fee."

I shifted uneasily in my seat. "Gretchen, I really don't know about this. I don't think I should take the money. It feels crooked."

She rolled her eyes and took my hand in hers. "Hawk, did you hear Daddy mention joint control of a trust fund last night?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but I don't really know what that means."

"It means that he set aside a lump some years ago and has been the trustee until he decided to pass control of it along to us," she said. "I can assure you that you have much better odds that the trust fund has more money in it than your back account. Honey, you married into money and it's always going to be floating around. I'm not going to make a big deal of it and I don't think you should, either."

I felt my stomach do a slow roll. "Lord, I didn't need to hear that. How much money are we talking about? I know you told me how much was going to be paid, but other than remembering it was a lot of money, I've forgotten."

"I'll put in a call while you get Devon headed where you want," she assured me, "but it's not an issue between us. I'm well-to-do, too."

"Yeah, but that's your money, not mine."

"Yours, mine, ours, it's all the same," she assured me, that gleam back in her eyes. That didn't help make me feel better, at all.

While she was talking on her cell, I told Devon to head to the nearest ATM, Bank of America preferably. He nodded and took a left at the next light and went several blocks before pulling up to the busy curb.

I hopped out and stood in line at the ATM, whistling nervously. When my turn came up, I slid my card in and entered my pin number. Selecting the balance, I tapped my foot anxiously. I wasn't sure why this was rubbing me the wrong way. Shouldn't I be happy to not have to worry about money as much?

When the ATM spat out the piece of paper, I snatched it and looked at it. I blinked. That couldn't be right; someone had made a mistake, and Hans needed to call his accountant.

The guy behind me shouldered past me to the ATM, reminding me that I needed to get the hell out of his way. I stumbled back to the Hummer and slid in the back, feeling a bit like I was floating. I knew the feeling, it was shock. Too damned many of the things

that happened to me around Gretchen made me feel like that.

"You look pale," she said, looking at me worriedly. "Did he not make the deposit? I can call someone and get it fixed," she assured me.

"Something's wrong," I agreed, "but it's an error on the plus side. Some bean counter added a zero or two. My account has just over a million dollars in it. Gretchen, this really makes me feel funny."

"Well," she said calmly, "let's see, what you should have had was seven days times forty thousand with a surcharge of fifty percent. In my head, that comes out to four hundred and twenty thousand. Let me call Daddy's accountant and see what the mix-up is. Devon, Hawk wants to go shopping, find out what she wants and get us there."

As she talked on the phone, I leaned forward and looked at Devon. "Devon, tell me I'm not losing my mind."

He grinned. "Hawk, you already lost your mind. Anybody dat know you know dat. You listen to Devon and he tell you how it is."

I took a deep breath and nodded, resting my arms on the seat in front of me.

"People, dey search all dere lives for love," he continued in a serious tone. "You done found dat, or so it looks to dis mon. Everyting else, dat be beside de point. Don let money make you lose sight of the woman back dere."

I blinked and chewed on that thought for a moment. Then, slowly, I nodded. "Thanks, Devon. That's exactly the perspective I needed. I need to sweat the big stuff, and the money is the least important thing here, not even close to qualifying as 'big stuff.' You've got a good eye for the ball. Tell me, why are you single again?"

Devon laughed. "Cuz no woman be crazy enough to keep Devon!"

I shook my head and laughed. "Fine, point made. Now, I need to find a place that caters to ladies' more intimate needs."

"Dere be all kinds of places like dat. Clothing, toys, people, video or gynecologist?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Toys," I said.

"Devon know just de place," he assured me and pulled out into traffic.

I slipped my seatbelt back on and watched Gretchen as she listened to the voice on the other end of her call. She nodded occasionally and finally said, "That makes sense. I'll tell her. Now, can you give me the details on the trust fund?"

The voice buzzed for a minute with Gretchen's eyes growing huge and her hand clutching mine. "Are you sure about that," she asked, her voice choked. "I think there's a number out of place."

After a moment more, she nodded and thanked the person, hanging up. "Okay, now I know what you feel like."

"That sounds ominous," I said, narrowing my eyes. "Just what the hell does that mean?"

Gretchen took a deep breath. "Well, first things first. The deposit to your account is for services rendered and a success bonus, so the amount was correct. One million dollars. I suggest we let the family accountant help us with our tax return or Uncle Sam and the Commonwealth of Taxachusetts will eat us alive."

I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath of my own. "I won't let this be an issue, Sweetie. You are what's important, and if that means dealing with the stupid money, then I will." I opened my eyes. "Now, what has you in a tailspin?"

She nervously licked her lips. "I'm glad you aren't going to let money be an issue between us. I'm really glad, Hawk, because Daddy one-upped that deposit."

"What," I asked slowly, dreading the potential answer, "does that mean?"

"I can't really get my head around it, but he made a trust for me and my family when I was a baby. He seeded it with a lot of money and it's been off making little baby dollars ever since," she said, obviously stalling.

"Stop dithering, Gretchen. Just come out and tell me what has you off your feed about it," I said practically.

"Well, in the last thirty years, it's done really well for itself and us," she said, looking out the window.

"Gretchen!" I said, exasperated. "Just put it on the table." I was beginning to worry about what amount of money could possibly make my rich wife dither.

Gretchen turned back to me and put her hand on my knee. "Hawk, the trust fund is worth a lot more than I have socked away. The two of us are joint trustees of a fund with more than two billion dollars in it."

Chapter Ten: Shopping trip

I blinked. I blinked again. "Two what?" I asked Gretchen.

"Billion. Two billion dollars. In the trust fund," she said in a small voice.

I stared blankly for a few moments as I tried to get an idea of that much of anything. I finally gave up and turned back to look at Gretchen. "That's actually not as much of a problem for me as a million dollars. Two billion is so big that I can't get my mind around it. It's just not real. Let's just let things settle down and deal with the issues at hand, then."

Gretchen took a deep breath and nodded. "That's probably best. So, where are we going while we wait for Mister Craig? His campaign office?"

I shook my head and grinned. "Nope. Shopping. For marital aids."

"Ooooo!" She grinned and nodded. "That sounds like fun."

Devon picked a nice place with a decent selection, and giggling like schoolgirls, we walked down the aisles looking at the various possibilities. It was like a Sex-Mart or a sex superstore. I wouldn't have been surprised if they had blue-light specials.

When we arrived at the "marital aids" section, the selection was incredible. Every shape and color was represented, as well as different materials that ranged from glass to silicone to hard plastic to "flesh-like". And then there were the specialty items.

"I never imagined that there were so many options," Gretchen admitted to me a bit wide-eyed. "Big, small, long and short. It's my turn to goggle; I can't get my mind around *this*. I think I'll leave this to you, Love. Surprise me."

"Don't tell me you've never used one." I said, putting on my most innocent tone. I thought I might be able to pry out a little information from her about some of those "business relationships".

"Oh, I can't say *never*," Gretchen replied with a smile. "Just not *often*." She raised an eyebrow.

I laughed at getting caught, and picked up a fair sized double dildo. "Ever had two guys at once?" I asked slyly.

She took it from me and shrugged. "Professionally? No. Those have all been one-on-one."

"That makes me curious about your pre-business days," I said with a laugh. "Just how wild a girl were you?"

Gretchen laughed. "I had my share of boyfriends and some experience. I'm not asking about your previous lovers, though, so I'm not sure I want to tell you everything."

"Come on!" I said, grabbing her hand. "Give me a clue here. We're in the right place to get some gear if you have some, you know, kinky desires, 'fess up." I was surprised to find how much her answer meant to me.

Gretchen seemed to sense that, too, as she lay her other hand on top of mine. "Hawk, my work involves making other peoples' fantasies come true, both in bed and out," Gretchen said seriously. "I've never done anything that I didn't want to try, though there are some things that I wouldn't want to try twice. You get what *you* want to make your fantasy come true, and I'll tell you if it's something I'm not interested in."

I thwacked her on the head with the gel dildo I was holding.

"Owww!" she said, grabbing it from me. "What was that for?" She smacked me back on the top of my head.

"That was for insulting me, twice; you've already made my fantasy come true just by being here with me, and I'm not one of your clients. I want *us* to live out *our* fantasies, together." I said, snatching the dildo back. "I can't do this, and I'm not going to do this, in a vacuum. Maybe I shouldn't have been nosy, but neither should I have to pry your sexual history out of you. I don't want names; I just want to know what you've done,

and what you like."

She was looking at the floor. "I'm sorry, Hawk. I'm not good at letting others in, letting others do for me what I do..." She stopped and looked up, her eyes bright with unshed tears. Then she gave me that predator smile that set off my alarms. "Do I get to ask the same questions?" she asked. "Quid pro quo?"

I stared at her for a heartbeat. For just a moment I had seen a tiny sliver of a different Gretchen than the one I had been getting to know, a more vulnerable one. Then the wall came back, as if she felt she needed to protect herself. I wanted explore this sudden vulnerability she had shown me, but something warned me not to push her about it. Not now at least, I told myself. Later, on the other hand.... I nodded firmly to myself. Oh yes, there would definitely be a later.

I would play along, for now, and fall back on the skills my job had taught me to get another peek behind that wall. "Sure," I grinned. "I'm a wild and kinky girl. Let's start with your deepest, darkest fantasy."

Gretchen quirked an eyebrow and her smile widened for a long moment, and then she pursed her lips. She took her time, appearing to actually consider my question. "Well, I'm still getting used to the whole girl-girl thing, so my fantasies at this point all seem to be man-oriented. Which do you want? With you or in general?" She wore a serious expression on her face, but her eyes gave her away. The damned minx was still teasing me!?

"In general," I replied blandly. Two could play at this game, I thought. "Don't worry, Honey, because you're not going to hurt my feelings. I asked and I want to know. You can toss in variations with girl on girl, if you like." I paused for half a second. "Or I can make suggestions, if you don't have the imagination for it," I added with a sly smile."

Gretchen gave me a very unladylike snort as she tossed her hair and looked around. No other shoppers were too close, but she lowered her voice anyway. "Okay, unimaginative me will just have to talk about a male-oriented fantasy then," she said. A smile told me she wasn't really insulted. She leaned in closer to me and said, "I really liked the sex we had in my Mom's old room, but I've been having hot flashes wondering how that scene would play with a man."

I blinked. "You mean fighting like we did? How we got physical, even a bit rough? Or are you talking about that? Rough? Or something more? I've heard of women that like to, you know, act like they're being forced."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not into the rape fantasy thing. I had a client that liked that, and it didn't do anything for me. Fighting for dominance and control, on the other hand, really torched my panties."

"So, you want to force..."

She vehemently shook her head. "No, I'm not into being the rapist, either. I'm talking about wanting sex, and then vying for control with your partner, trying to be the one who dictates the pace, the way it happens."

I let out a relieved breath. "That's kind of like domination. You're talking about more of a mental domination, a mind game that excites the body. Now that we know what we both mean, maybe we can just call that rough sex."

Gretchen nodded her agreement. "And it's not something I'm looking to get a lot of. A little would go a long ways, I think. I'm also not sure that my fantasy would work with a man, since men are so much stronger than women - tough ass, man-eating, female detectives excluded, of course." She gave me an openly teasing grin. "Okay, now it's my turn. What is your latest fantasy?"

I felt the heat crawling up my neck. "Ah..."

"You're blushing again!" Gretchen crowed, a touch of wonder in her voice. "What fantasy could ever get you to do that? What is it? Tell me!"

I mimicked her side-to-side glance, looking for people close enough to hear. When I did speak, it was even quieter than her confession had been. "You know when I said I wasn't looking to have Ted bend me over a desk? Well, I've had my own little hot flash thinking about just that. But," I said with a finger up in the air, "that is not my deepest fantasy, just the most recent. Since you asked."

Gretchen pulled me into a hug. "You don't need to be embarrassed to talk with me about sex, Baby. I'm not jealous. I will admit that my mind's-eye view of that excites me. I'd like to hold you and kiss you while Ted fucks you." She whispered in my ear even more quietly, "and I could slide under you and we could sixty-nine while he's inside you. I could lick his cock and your sweet pussy at the same time."

That lit a major burn in my pussy. I knew that my eyes were starting to lose focus in lust and I had to yank myself back under control. "I'm not embarrassed by the sex act,"

I protested, "I'm embarrassed because it's sex with a guy that I'm fantasizing about, and I'm just not used to that yet. We can talk about it with them - I *really* want to talk about it with them! - but we're getting off the subject. Next question: I'm sure you've given head and done all kinds of regular sex, but what about anal sex? If so, did you like it?"

"That's two questions," she said primly. "So I'll answer the last one. I liked it the one time that I agreed to do it. He was smaller than the average bear so I felt brave when he asked for it and agreed. It's not that it was more pleasurable than having a cock inside me the regular way, but it added another element. I felt like I was being dirty, slutty, letting a man fuck my ass. It also had an element of being under his control, but it was okay. I felt a little humiliated and used, but it only made me hornier. I'd do it again, though I'm not sure I would if we were talking about a big cock."

"I think we could find one that fits okay," I said with a smirk. "Your turn."

"Has Ted taken your ass?" Gretchen fired back.

I shook my head. "No. Not that I think I would mind, but we just never got around to it. I've had some lovers that used a strap-on to take my ass and I liked it a lot." I grinned. "Pretty much for the same reasons you just gave, as a matter of fact. Where do you draw the line? What do you not want to do?"

"Well," she said, her finger tapping her chin, "I draw the line at scat or watersports. Keep the bathroom stuff in the bathroom. I'm not into kiddies, baby-play, rubber, piercing, major bondage or pain, either. Though," she said with a twinkle in her eyes, "the little pain in the process of the office scene was just fine, and I really love your pierced nipples and labia." She shrugged. "If something else comes up that I'm not in favor of, I'll let you know. What do you not like?"

I shrugged. "Your list sounds about like mine. Though, I think a little pain can be a good thing. I like some twisting on my piercings. Other than that, put me down for the same as you, piercings excepted. Though, thinking about bodily fluids, I need some clarification. Does that count as an extra question?"

"Hit me with it and I'll let you know."

"I can't believe I'm asking this, but since I'm pregnant - which I still cannot believe! - that brings up the question of lactating. Are you going to want to not have sex with me when I'm fat, ugly, and leaking?"

Gretchen hugged me again and kissed me soundly. "That doesn't count as an extra question, because mama needs some reassurance. I won't shy away from you because you're pregnant, Baby. I don't know if I'll like milk right from the source, but I'm willing to give it a try. The one thing I do know is that I will not be put off because you're pregnant. That's *our* baby in there. You are the mother of my child and I will make love to you anytime you'll let me, right up to the day of delivery."

"I may be the mother," I growled, mock shoving her back, "but I'm still not the wife."

"We haven't looked in the paper, so we don't know how you're listed," Gretchen said sweetly. "My turn again. Since we dodged around your deepest, darkest fantasy, what is it? If you could do or have anyone, what would it be?"

I felt my face burst into flames. "I... I don't know if..."

Taking my face in her hands, she kissed me soundly. "I've heard it all, Lover. What was it you said? 'I want to know what you like and what you want to do with me?' Just tell me, Hawk, so I can do my part."

Taking a deep breath, I let it out in a rush. "I want to make love to you, Lisa and Ted all at the same time. I want all of you at once. I want to be sandwiched between two of you and have one of you in my mouth. I want to be the filling in the cake."

Gretchen smiled widely. "I think I like that plan. If they agree, I think we can make that fantasy come true. In fact, I think I might get in line for a serving of that. Maybe Lisa would like some back door action, too."

"I'll ask her. Gretchen, you mentioned being a slave earlier. Are you really into that?" I picked up a ball gag and butt plug with a horsehair tail and waved them at her.

She shrugged. "I've never tried it, either from the domination or submissive side, so I don't know. The gag I can figure out, but what's the other for?"

I caressed her face with the hair. "It's a plug you wear in your butt for pony play."

She looked blank. "Pony play? Like riding me around or something?"

I nodded. "Nothing I've tried, but there's a community for that kind of stuff."

She shook her head. "Pass on that, but we can try some of the restraints if you like. How about you for bondage or domination? After all, you *do* have your own handcuffs," she said wriggling her eyebrows at me.

I laughed and shook my head. "No, I've never even considered it before."

"Then we'll give that a try sometime, but I think we have enough information to make some purchases, don't you?"

With a grin, I picked up a pair of strap-on harnesses that allowed for differing sized dildos. I added three pairs of heads for them in small, regular and large. And to the growing pile in the cart, I added a selection of toys for some mild domination. The final items were a small butt plug - no horse hair, thanks! - and a box of condoms that would fit Ted.

"It's a little late for those, don't you think?" Gretchen asked dryly, tapping the condoms.

"For me, but not for you," I said.

"Maybe I'd like to be pregnant, too," she said in a voice that sent a chill up my spine.

"Why?" I asked, a little freaked out. "We're already going to have a baby."

She looked deeply into my eyes and smiled. "You never wanted to be a mother, I think. On the other hand, I've wanted it for as long as I can remember. I've always been afraid I'd never get to be one. It's close to my time, so it might happen. If it does, I get one of the long-held desires of my heart to come true. It's not like another child is going to cause us to starve, and besides, it's all in the good column for you. If it happens, I couldn't say I was the daddy."

I wanted to argue, but she shushed me with one finger and put the condoms away.

When we got back out to the Hummer, Devon tried to grab the bag, so I snatched it out of reach. "No peeking. This is official married people stuff," I growled.

Devon grinned and started driving. "Unless you gonna take dem into de office, Devon goin' to see dem anyway."

Eyes huge, I considered my options and with a snarl, I tossed the bag in the front seat. "Fine, but I don't want to hear *one* word about them!"

They both laughed at me as we drove on. Devon's smirk told me he was going to ignore my warnings, and honestly, I didn't mind. His sense of humor appealed to me.

Kirk Craig's office was festooned with red and blue election posters of the candidate. It was also filled with dozens of young people copying papers and rushing about as we walked in. I snagged one.

"Kirk's office?"

"In the back," she said, before rushing off to do whatever unknowable task she was doing.

Gretchen followed me, and I waded through the people to the offices in the back. A woman in her early forties manned a desk with a computer and phone. She gestured to us to wait while she talked with someone on the phone.

Looking past her, I could see Kirk in one of the offices talking on a cell phone. I waved and he motioned for us to come on back. When the woman turned to stop us, he waved for her to back off with a smile.

His office was covered with pictures of him with various people, including Hans and the deceased Senator Cartwright. Thankfully, there were no Elvis pictures. He gestured for us to take seats and continued his conversation. It quickly became apparent he was finagling a large contribution from someone. When he apparently had an assurance of a donation, he grinned boyishly at us and said his good-byes, putting the phone on the desk and sitting on the edge of it himself. His expression sobered as he looked at Gretchen.

"Gretchen, I'm so sorry for the situation you're in," he said. "I know you didn't do this and if you need anything, all you have to do is ask."

I used my foot to push the door closed. "Since you're offering, I have a few questions, then, if you don't mind. Starting with why you ducked out of the house at the first sign of trouble. Why the fast escape?"

Kirk shrugged his shoulders. "I'm running for public office, Shauna." I winced, but said nothing. If he wanted to talk, I wasn't going to let my name interrupt. "It's a tight race for me, especially since I'm running against an incumbent from the other party. The last

thing I need is to have my name associated with murder. Any murder."

"You didn't like Cartwright, did you?" Gretchen asked. "I noticed some tension, but I wasn't sure why."

"He was a long-sitting Senator from the other party, and he had a lot of personal habits I found troubling. We've argued about a number of things over the last year."

"But, you have a more personal reason to hate him, don't you?" I asked. "Vanessa."

His face hardened. "Leave Vanessa out of this."

I leaned forward. "We're talking murder here, Kirk. Nothing is off the table. We've already spoken with Vanessa about this, and she told us what happened. How Cartwright used her. Raped her. This isn't about her. It's about you."

"Me?" he asked in a surprised tone. "You don't think I had anything to do with this, do you? Damn you! I don't like to have people come into my office and imply I had anything to do with a murder," he said angrily, rising to his feet. "This isn't about me; it's about you wanting to clear Gretchen. We both know that, so don't try to turn this all on me. I'm not the one the police are drooling all over themselves trying to hang."

"No," I said, letting some of my frustration creep into my voice. "They want to fry an innocent woman, and you're here stonewalling. If you didn't kill him, tell us what you do know. Put us on the right track. Do you think Gretchen did it?"

Kirk stopped by the window and looked out. He ran a hand through his hair, the tension in his body obvious. He blew out a breath and slowly shook his head. "No," he said. "Beating Kat to a pulp and shoving her head in the toilet, yes. Killing her or someone else? No."

"Why don't you tell us what happened that night," I said quietly.

"Maybe I should keep my mouth shut and call my lawyer," Kirk muttered.

"Feeling guilty?" I asked him. "If not, please, just talk with us. With what Cartwright did to Vanessa, I can understand how much you'd hate him. If you killed him, I'd really understand."

Fire was building again in Kirk's eyes, but before he could answer, Gretchen cut in,

undermining my whole drive to get him pissed off enough to lose his temper. "You love her, don't you?"

His hot retort to me was sidetracked by Gretchen's question. It took the wind right out of his sails. Kirk slumped a little on the edge of the desk. "Yes. Yes, I do. Cartwright hurt her so badly she won't even consider going on a date with me."

He looked back over at me. "I hated him, Shauna, and I'm glad he's dead. He was a monster that thought his political power, money and family connections protected him from any consequences. Whoever killed him was doing the world a favor."

"Did he know how you felt about him; about all of this?" I asked him.

Kirk shook his head, that hint of a grin back on his face. "I'm a politician, so I can smile to his face, shake his hand and hate his guts all in the same moment. He may be in the other party, but I still have to deal with those in power or with political backing."

Gretchen leaned forward in her chair. "The DA is going to try and pin this on me, Kirk, even though the police have evidence that says I didn't do it. Can you tell me if you know of anyone else that might have wanted to kill either Cartwright or Kat? Or even just hated either of them really badly?"

He smiled a lop-sided smile at Gretchen. "As you no doubt know, the list of people that despised your step-mother was long and distinguished. Cartwright came in a distant second. Frankly, I'd have much more expected Kat to be murdered than Cartwright. What do the police have that the DA is ignoring?"

"The CSI's opinion is that Gretchen was not the killer due to evidence at the scene and on her person. Or rather, what was not on her person. There wasn't any blood on her, except where she picked up the knife," I said. "The DA is, however, a politician himself and will be trying hard to ignore that bit of evidence so that he can save the prosecution."

"I can't point you at a suspect," Kirk said, "but I can bring some pressure to bear on the DA. That might help."

"Thank you, Kirk," Gretchen said, rising to her feet. "I appreciate your help."

He looked indecisive for a moment and then spoke with a lowered voice. "Kat and Cartwright had some dealings. I wouldn't be surprised if you found something in her

office."

I stood up and walked with Gretchen to the door. "We moved some things around in there earlier. We'll take a more thorough look tonight. Thank you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gretchen blush.

When we were back in the Hummer, Gretchen asked, "Do you believe him? You weren't as hard on him as you were on Ivan. You actually looked like you believed him."

I shrugged. "I don't know enough yet, but he's still my favorite by a long shot. I was easier on him because he wasn't as confrontational as Ivan was. He also doesn't get on my nerves as much. As far as trusting him, well, he said it himself. He's a politician who can smile and lie to your face." I shook my head. "No, it all comes down to motive. I'll still be digging for a motive, and once we know what that is, we'll know who. Motive is a lot easier to discover than guessing 'who' without knowing 'why'. Though," I said with a mild glare, "you weren't supposed to interrupt my questioning and throw me off stride."

"Sorry, I just got sucked in. Do you have someone else in mind to look at next?" she asked.

"Actually, I think we should search Kat's office next. See if we can find anything in the Kat litter."

Gretchen laughed. "Kat litter? That's just wrong. Do you mind if we make a stop to talk with my Uncle David? He lives over on this side of town, and I never really got a chance to talk with him that night."

I nodded. "That's fine. He's on my list too, but not nearly as high."

Gretchen shook her head. "Is everyone a suspect? He's my uncle, Hawk."

"More murders are committed by relatives than you might expect, Honey. And since we're talking about your life, I'm not leaving *anything* on the table. It usually takes a strong emotional connection to kill someone. Like I said, he's not my favorite. Give 'The Great Devon' the directions, and let's go do this. Another thing I want to do is get together with Ted and Lisa."

Gretchen gave Devon the directions and then leaned back against the door, looking at

me. "Do you think they know something more?"

I shook my head. "No, I just miss them. I want to sit and talk."

Gretchen smiled a wicked smile. "I bet talking isn't all you miss. Especially with that hot little foursome fantasy number you cooked up."

I rolled my eyes. "You really do have a one-track mind. Come on, Gretchen, I'm not panting to have Ted bend me over the desk and service me, if that's what you're getting at." Actually, I felt my sex moisten at the thought and firmly told it to heel.

"Uh huh," she said with a twinkle in her eyes. "That's okay, like I said earlier, we need to talk with them anyway and work out the boundaries between the father and mother of our child. And their spouses. Speaking of our child, you need to go see a doctor about that and make sure everything's okay."

I felt my face redden. I couldn't believe I was embarrassed about Gretchen working out the details of our sex life, but I was. "Fine, you can talk to them about how they want it. I'll abide by whatever makes them happy. As for a kid doctor, why? It's only been a week. What can a doctor tell me?"

"He or she can tell you what you need to do and what you don't," Gretchen said. "Do some blood work or something. It just seems like the right thing to do."

"Fine," I growled. "I'll see a blooming doctor."

She grabbed me into a hug and kissed me. "Thank you! I love you so much!"

Those unexpected words made me go all warm inside. "I love you, too."

When we pulled up in front of David Stein's house, it was readily apparent that he was firmly middle-class. After all the gargantuan mansions, it made me feel better.

David opened the door at my knock and had one of those mixed expressions on his face. Pleasure and pain. He rushed outside and enfolded Gretchen in his embrace.

"Gretchen, I'm so sorry," he said. He pulled back and looked into her eyes with sadness. "After all this, I can't believe you even want to see me."

Gretchen held his hands and smiled at him. "I can't imagine anything making me feel that way toward you. You've always been there for me and I love you. Even this won't change that."

He shook his head. "I never imagined you taking it so well. Come inside. I'm sure you have lots of questions."

I looked at him and smiled. "Most people aren't so eager to have those kinds of questions asked, David. May I call you David?"

He nodded and led the way back into the well-decorated house. It was homey and well-lived in. Definitely not a show home. Pictures of people were everywhere. On the walls, on the tables, virtually every flat place.

I stepped over and looked at one of a much younger David and a woman that looked almost exactly like Gretchen did now. A glance at Gretchen confirmed it when she smiled.

"Yes," she said, "that's my mother. I definitely took my looks from her."

David opened the door to the kitchen and ushered us in. "She looks just like her," he avowed. "Sit down and we can talk. Coffee?"

"Always," I said. "You don't seem surprised to see us and that has me curious. What made you expect us?"

Now he looked surprised. "I've been expecting you ever since this morning. I didn't figure it would take long for you to hear about my visit to the DA."

Gretchen's head jerked up. "You visited the DA? Why?"

David stared at her. "You didn't know? I never..." He shook himself and took a deep breath. "I went to the DA and confessed that I killed Kat and Senator Cartwright."

Chapter Eleven: Cleaning the Kat box

"What?" Gretchen exclaimed. "That's preposterous. Why the hell did you do that?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," he said with a shrug.

I leaned my elbows onto the counter. "But, did you kill them?" I asked quietly. Admittedly, there were a few people that killed and that I missed as suspects, but David just never pinged on my radar. Frankly, I wondered if he was one of those who loved so deeply that he would confess to a crime he did not commit. I had seen it more than once.

"Oh, yes," David said with a nod. "Not that that cretin in the DA's office believed me." He looked at Gretchen and took her hand. "That woman your father married after your mother died. She killed your mother. I know it wasn't suicide. I've known it all these years, but I just could never do what needed to be done. Not, till that night."

Tears streamed down Gretchen's stricken face. "I don't believe you. You're lying to try and protect me. You couldn't hurt a fly and we both know it." I nodded to myself; Gretchen's words confirmed that David was indeed someone who loved Gretchen deeply enough to try and take the fall. The question was whether he *was* trying to take the fall, or if he really was the killer.

I had to find out. "If that's why," I said, "then tell us how you did it. And why do it with Cartwright there?"

"I saw Cartwright man-handling Gretchen earlier at the party," he said quietly. "I saw Kat send him over to Gretchen, and I knew she was trying to ruin her life. Again. After all the announcements, I saw them go upstairs, and I stopped by the kitchen. With everyone going in and out, it was simple to slip a knife into my jacket. Then I followed them upstairs."

"So you decided to kill them both?" I asked. "Right there on the spot?"

"That's right," he agreed calmly. "I found them arguing in the room upstairs, in the bathroom. I was into the room before they saw me and I stabbed Cartwright before he knew I was there. Then I killed Kat while she stared at me in shock. It was in revenge for my sister."

I reached under the table, took Gretchen's hand and suppressed a smile. The details I had seen at the crime scene told me Kat went down first, and like most cops, I trusted my instincts. "What direction was Cartwright facing when you stabbed him? Where did you hit him with the knife? And Kat?"

"I stabbed him in the chest, just like Kat. He was facing me in the doorway. Kat was behind him after he went down."

I did smile then. "I know why the DA sent you packing, David. The crime scene details tell a different story. What if I told you that Cartwright was stabbed in the back and Kat had her throat cut?"

He looked at Gretchen and shrugged, seemingly unruffled by my revelation. "It all happened so fast. Maybe he was facing away from me and I only thought I stabbed Kat. You're right, that's what happened. I'll have to amend my story with the DA."

Gretchen laughed and cried all at once, relief and anger warring on her face. "Liar! You are such a liar! That isn't what happened, and you didn't kill anybody!"

David deflated. "Why can't a man just confess to a crime and be done with it?" he grumbled. "Why the hell do they need all these stupid details? Can't you just accept I did it and move on?" Then he yelped as Gretchen kicked him hard under the table. "Yeow!"

"You're just saying this to try and take the blame away from me," Gretchen said, suddenly fully angry. "Goddammit, you're all that I have left of Mom, and you want to do this? I won't let you!" She leapt to her feet, yanking her hand out of his, and the chair she'd been sitting in crashed to the floor. "I won't let you!" Her hands were clenched into fists and her eyes streamed tears. "You take it back!"

I stood up and enfolded her in my arms. "Shhh. It's okay, Baby. He won't get blamed for this." I stroked her hair softly and kept her there with me. Today had opened my eyes to the fact that there was a woman Gretchen carefully hid away from the world. A younger, more vulnerable one that hid behind the hard shell the world saw.

Without warning, I found myself holding that hidden Gretchen, as she collapsed into my arms, her face burying itself in my hair. The emotion inside her came boiling out, and she cried. Her sobs tore at me in a way I never expected, had never experienced and had no defense against. Her pain ate at me, and I cried with her. This wasn't right. I was a cop and cops didn't cry like this. At least I didn't. Still, the ache inside me called back to her pain and we held each other.

Then David pulled Gretchen out of my arms and held her. A flash of anger and jealousy ripped through me, but I forced it down. I might love Gretchen and be married to her, but David was her family in a way I would never be. Blood and water. Inside and

outside. I was used to being the outsider, but for the first time in a long time, it hurt.

"I'm sorry," he told Gretchen, taking her face in his hands. "I was trying to save you. I didn't want to hurt you." He was crying himself.

I turned away from them, hiding my face from her. I didn't want Gretchen to see me this way. I knew inside it was wrong, and she didn't need me adding to her problems. Right now, I had to be strong for her. I knew that, but it didn't make it hurt any less. I poured a cup of coffee and swallowed hard, finding a cloth to wipe my eyes.

When I had my face under control, I turned and watched them hang onto each other, using my coffee cup as a prop to keep my hands busy. They were speaking to each other, but too softly for me to hear. I had never been as close as they obviously were with any of my family. My parents had always been distant, even before they had known about my sexual preference. After, they had grown cold and even more distant. The little girl in me would have cut off her own hand to be loved by someone the way that David loved Gretchen.

I needed to get out of here, away from the raw emotion still spilling from them. The way I was feeling wasn't right, and I had to stop it and wash my face. I set my coffee down on the counter and handed Gretchen the rag on my way past her. "Here you go. I need to use the can, so I'll be right back." I said it with my head turned so that she couldn't get a good look at me, but also so I wouldn't have to see the love on their faces.

Locking the bathroom door behind me, I ran some water and splashed my face. The woman peering back out of the mirror at me had eyes red from crying and pain lines all around her mouth. The eyes could stay, but the lines had to go. I grabbed a towel and held it to my face, my hand guiding me to the toilet to sit on the closed lid. One deep breath followed another as I forced myself to distance these feelings. Hot tears burned my eyes and fought my control. I was such a heartless bitch to feel this way.

The rattle of the doorknob startled me so much I almost dropped the towel. "I'll be out in a second," I said, wiping my eyes again.

"Hawk, what's the matter?" Gretchen asked, her voice muffled by the door. "Let me in."

I got up and straightened my clothes. A glance in the mirror told me that my face was composed enough. I unlocked the door and opened it. Yeah, I looked better than Gretchen did, but not by much.

"I was just cleaning up."

Gretchen blocked my exit and held my shoulders, looking into my face. "There's more to it than that. Was it me? Did I upset you?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm fine. I..."

"Stop," she said, her eyes sparkling dangerously. "I don't want you to do what David did. Don't lie to me. Never lie to me."

My hard-fought control went up in a puff of smoke. "Don't you dare accuse me of lying," I snarled, pushing her back, fighting for the hallway. Trying to, anyway. She forced me back into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her, falling back against it.

"Then don't make me call a spade a spade," she sparked back. "I can tell there's more to this and I want to know what upset you."

"Well, I don't feel like talking about it. It's not anything you did. It's my own problem, and I'll handle it myself."

"Bullshit," she spat. "If it affects you, then it affects us. Then it's *our* problem and *we* need to talk about it."

I gritted my teeth and stepped into her personal space, poking her generous breast sharply. "That's a big, steaming pile of bullshit, too! *You* feel free to hide behind your whoring around to hide something you don't want to talk about. You don't think I saw it in the store?"

She looked completely taken aback for a moment and then poked me back, a matching snarl on her face. "That was before you and me and has nothing to do with anything you did. And I'm not a fucking whore and if you call me one again, I'll kick your skinny cop ass. Do you fucking hear me, Hawk? Do you fucking hear me?"

With my face an inch from hers, I laughed mirthlessly with an intense pressure building inside me. I knew I was making a mistake, but at that moment, I didn't care, and couldn't have stopped myself if I had. "Oh, I hear you. What makes you think it has to be about you? Does everything have to be about you? Can't I have my own pain? Does the world have to be all you, you, you? I can take care of my own damn self without a

fucking therapy session every time you think I have to share my goddamn feelings!" Fresh tears spilled from my eyes, and I shut up to try and hide. Hide the pain they represented.

Gretchen wasn't having any of that, though. "Then if it's not about me, tell me what it is?" she demanded.

"I..." Wiping away hot tears, I spun away from her. "Crap, this is so stupid. I was fucking jealous."

"Jealous?" she asked incredulously. "He's my uncle. I never slept with him!"

I laughed and the tears escaped my control. "Not that." I was on the razor's edge of hysteria. I took two gulping breaths to pull myself back from that edge, and then barely more in control said, "I never had any family that loved me like that. Never. It just hit me all at once and it's really fucking stupid." It came out angry and bitter.

Gretchen spun me around and I flinched, more than half expecting a slap. Instead she threw her arms around me and squeezed me with gorilla intensity. Part of me struggled briefly and then the floodgates opened and it was her turn to hold me while I cried. Her movements mimicked mine earlier, her hands caressing my hair, her voice whispering in my ear.

"That's over," she said so softly I almost couldn't understand her. "You have a family that loves you now. I'm your family, and I love you."

"You keep me out, too," I sobbed. "This isn't fair, Gretchen."

"Somebody once told me that life wasn't fair, but you're right," she admitted, kissing my wet cheek. "We're the same, you and I, hiding our hurts behind a tough and worldly shell. I'm worse off than you and for almost the same reasons." She wiped her own face. "I don't want to talk about it either, Hawk, but you're my wife, and you deserve better than that from me. We'll talk about this later, when we have more time. I won't promise to tell you everything, but I do promise not to lie to you. Will you promise me the same, Hawk? Promise with me that we'll never lie to each other."

I swallowed and nodded. "I promise. No lies with you."

"Now, we need to go out and finish talking with Uncle David," she said pulling back and opening the door. She paused. "First, though, there is one last thing I need to do to

clear the air. Will you try to understand why and not get pissed off right away?"

Warily, I nodded, wiping my eyes and tossing the towel on the counter. My makeup was a loss.

Gretchen gave me a tender smile. "I love you." Then she slapped me. It wasn't really hard, but it caught me completely off-guard.

"Owww! What the fuck?" I asked, holding a hand to my stinging face.

"Wife or not, *nobody* calls me a whore. Don't ever do that again," she said firmly, pointing a well-manicured nail at my nose.

The anger that had been building swerved in a direction I wasn't expecting and didn't exactly welcome. I was still angry, but now I was aroused, too. This was too much like foreplay now. I *really* needed to figure out why I was reacting this way to rough stuff.

"Okay, I won't, but you better not ever slap me unless you're ready to deal with the consequences," I replied with a shark-like smile.

Gretchen's eyes grew huge, and she fled toward the kitchen with me hot pursuit. She never had a chance, really. I took her around the waist within five feet and took her down. With an "oof" I landed on top of her and pinned her voluptuous ass to the carpet, crouching over her stomach. I leaned over and licked her neck.

"No working me up where I can't have you," I purred.

She laughed and I found myself joining her.

"Am I interrupting," David asked dryly from the door to the kitchen. "Do you two newlyweds need a room?"

I looked up at him and smirked. "No, not if she can stop hitting me, and hitting on me, in public." Since I had her pinned, I kissed her deeply and thoroughly before climbing off her breathlessly. Then I helped her to her feet and straightened my clothes. We looked - mussed.

I sighed. "We'll take care of that room thing later. For now, if we're all finished with the theatrics, let's sit back down and get on the same page." I gestured for David to proceed us and followed him with Gretchen, our arms wrapped around each other's

waist.

David slumped back into his chair, his momentary chipper mood evaporating. "What now? I tried to help and that didn't work."

"I'm sorry, David, but that wasn't helpful," I said firmly. " I appreciate that you thought you were helping Gretchen, but we don't need that kind of help. First, it gives the DA another card to play in front of the jury: 'Gretchen was so obviously guilty that her own uncle tried to cover for her.' Second, there is still a murderer out there and having a fall guy just lets him or her off scott-free."

David looked stricken. "I never meant to hurt you, Gretchen," he began.

I held up my hand. "That's water under the bridge now. We can't change it. We can only fix this by finding the real killer." I shook my head. "Look, with so many people in that building, it could have been almost anybody. So as I told Gretchen earlier, it all boils down to motive. Cartwright killed Kat. Of that I'm pretty damned sure. The real question, then, is who killed him and was he the target or just in the wrong place at the right time? The killer didn't bring the weapon to the scene, either Kat or Cartwright did, and I'm leaning toward Cartwright. Someone came in, found him over her body and took the knife and stabbed him. Pretty ballsy."

I rinsed out my cup, poured us each another cup of coffee and sipped mine, leaning against the counter. Now that we were back to talking about murder, my stomach settled and the uncomfortable emotions slipped back into the background. I shuddered a bit at the thought that they weren't going to stay there, but I knew Gretchen and I needed to air them out. Just not right now.

"Either Cartwright never saw his killer," I said after taking a sip to refocus, "or he trusted him or her. The blood patterns suggest to me that Cartwright was either turning away from where Kat fell or had already done so. That CSI report would be really helpful right about now."

"How can we get it?" Gretchen asked. "Can't my lawyer demand to see it?"

"Oh, he can demand it," I snorted, "it is exculpatory evidence, but that doesn't mean we'll see it any time soon, or even see all of it, for that matter. If it was Houston, I'd have a source on the inside to leak it to me." I smiled at Gretchen. "That's a big part of what I do, having a network of sources and stoolies to dig where I can't to get information. Here, I've got nothing." I tossed my hands in a throwaway gesture to

emphasize my point. "I can't think of a way to get a copy out of there, but if I do, we'll give it a whirl then."

"Now what?" Gretchen asked.

"Now we say our goodbyes and go look through Kat's office. She might have pissed off someone other than Cartwright to the point they were willing to kill her, and Cartwright just beat them to it. Or, Cartwright and Kat could have been in something together that torqued someone enough to kill them both." I shrugged. "We may not find shit, but we won't know if we don't search the Kat litter."

David chuckled. "Kat litter. I like that."

Gretchen rose to her feet and hugged her uncle tightly, not allowing him to stand. "I'm still pissed at you," she told him, the mildest hint of anger in her voice, "but I love you anyway. Don't worry. Hawk will sort this out."

When she let him go, David stood up and held out his arms to me. I started at him, uncertain of what to do and Gretchen pushed me into his hug. Awkwardly, I hugged him back. At least he didn't kiss me.

Back in the Hummer and on the way to Hans' place, Gretchen and I eyed each other from our respective seats. I wasn't ready to talk, so I kept my mouth shut. It looked to me like she felt the same way. Devon must have sensed our need to be quiet, because he didn't even make a single rude comment about the goodie bag. That fragile peace felt like thin ice over a frozen river, but I thought it was strong enough to last out the ride.

It lasted until we pulled up to the gate to the property. "Is that..." Gretchen started.

"Stop the fucking car!" I shouted at Devon. He stood on the brakes and I popped out my door before we were even fully stopped.

Parked right there, beside the gate, was fucking Elvis, Leo Giovanni, leaning against the door to his piece of shit car. His grin at seeing me lasted right up to the point I punched him in the mouth. With a squawk, he bounced off the door to his car and fell over sideways. Then I started kicking him, though he used his arms to good effect in blocking me.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Stop!" he shouted.

Strong arms grabbed me and dragged me back from the bastard before I could give him the ass-kicking he so *richly* deserved. A glance told me it was Devon.

"Let me go," I growled. "I still have the rest of my can of whoop ass to hose him down with." Belying my words, I didn't struggle to get loose.

Devon held on and just laughed. "Hawk, you need Devon to protect you from yourself! I just hold on here a bit."

"Just watch where you put your hands, if you want to walk away with all your fingers," I said. He just laughed again, and I turned to give him a cold stare. He just grinned, shaking his head. I was growing soft, I thought to myself.

Gretchen stepped up beside us and crossed her arms, glaring at Leo dangerously. "You've got about ten seconds to convince me not to turn Hawk loose on you and then join in myself. You turned our lives upside down, and now you're here to what? Gloat? Do you realize how much trouble you've caused us, you sonuvabitch?"

Leo sat up slowly, wiping off his split lip. "You sure don't hit like a girl," he complained at me.

"Let me go, Devon, so I can show him what a bitch-slap really is. I promise I won't hurt his candy ass *too* bad," I assured Devon. Devon laughed again, but didn't let me go.

"Five seconds to pain," Gretchen told Leo.

"Okay! I'm sorry!" Leo exclaimed, raising his hands to ward off violence. "I didn't know who you were. I thought you were working for a guy I owed some money to and that it would be a kick to hitch you up."

"I'll show you a kick," I muttered and shook myself loose from Devon, though I didn't go after Leo just yet. "Is that it? You're sorry? That means *so* fucking much to us. Thanks."

"I'll make it up," Leo said somewhat desperately. "I'll do whatever I need to do to make this right. My wife was already pissed for talking her into doing this, and then she read that those two people died. She told me that if my prank had anything to do with it, she'd leave me! I'll do anything! Just tell me what I can do."

I started to tell him that he could go to hell, and that his wife would be better off if she left him, but Gretchen waved a hand and cut me off.

"You want to know what you have to do to make this right? I'll tell you what you can do to get a full pardon from Hawk and me ," Gretchen said.

"Fuck him!" I snarled. "I don't..."

"Hawk," Gretchen interrupted, "listen first! You might like this." She turned back to Leo and squatted, bringing her face closer to his level. "Here's what you have to do to get that free pass you're looking for, Elvis. I want the police file on this murder case, including the full crime scene report. All of it."

Leo blinked. "How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

Gretchen shrugged. "That's your problem, not mine. You told us not to play with the master, so here's your chance to amaze and astound us. Prove to me that you're the best con artist in the world by getting what I need to clear myself. That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

Standing up, Gretchen didn't wait for a response from Leo or me before walking back to the Hummer and climbing in. I think both Leo and I were about equally stunned. I recovered before Leo, spat on the ground and jerked my head at Devon. "We're outta here."

Leo was still sitting on the ground, staring at us stupidly, as we drove through the gate and to the house. I looked at my wife with new respect. "That was good. No, that was better than good. We come out ahead whether he gets the stuff or not. I like it."

She grinned back at me, breaking the ice that had formed on the drive here. My heart did that little flippity-flop only Gretchen could get it to do. "I learned hardass from the best," she said humbly. Then her smile was back and she added, "besides he really pissed me off."

I laughed all the way to the front door while Gretchen gave some instructions to Devon, and he drove off. She bounded up the steps beside me and it was like it had been before the fight.

"I let Devon go for the day," she told me. "Either we'll be here for the rest of the day, or we'll find another ride." She glanced at her watch. "Dinner will be served in about an

hour, unless the schedule went totally to hell. If so, we'll just have to make something for ourselves."

"That gives us some time to make a start on the Kat Box," I said with a smile. I opened the door and almost bounced off Lurch. "Jeeze, don't you ever make noise? Gretchen, can we please make a bell a required part of Lurch's uniform?"

Ivan sniffed. "Your hearing disorder isn't my problem, Miss Shauna," he said, echoing Gretchen's turn of phrase from outside the gate. That gave me a sudden insight that chilled me to the bone. I had no idea if I was completely off my rocker or not, but I suddenly realized that if she had been estranged from her father as a girl, Lurch must have filled at least some of the father role for her. My throat suddenly dry, I swallowed as he continued. "What *is* my problem, is what to tell Vanessa about your dinner plans. Is it too much to ask for you to call?"

Never in my life had I had anyone - not friend, lover and certainly not my parents - expect me to call and tell them if I was coming home for dinner. This was so outside my range of experience, I deferred to Gretchen.

She bowed her head and nodded, almost like a child caught being bad. "You're right, Ivan. I should have called. I..."

He rested his hand on her shoulder momentarily. "Don't be concerned, Miss Gretchen. You're under a lot of stress. I had expected someone else to take some initiative and think ahead." He glanced at me and sniffed again. "I was obviously attributing too much forethought and courtesy to the whole issue."

That pissed me off. "Like we don't have more important things to worry about than your bleeding cooking schedule. Should I just call you and give you our itinerary for the day, every day and adjust it as we go?" I asked sarcastically.

"That will work acceptably well," he sneered at me, turning on his heel. "If you can manage to remember. Dinner will be served in one hour at seven pm sharp. I won't ask that you dress up, but I do expect you to at least dress."

"Why that..." I said as I started after him, balling my fist as he escaped through the door toward the kitchen.

Gretchen laughed and held me back. "Hawk, he's baiting you! That's a good thing! He only teases people he *really* likes."

I turned and gave her the gimlet eye. "It looks like he feels about me like I do him," I said, not wanting to admit that I enjoyed a good rivalry. "He just wants to bait me. You don't really expect me to actually call that old mummy every day, do you? I'll shave my head before I just give in to him."

Gretchen laughed and started up the stairs. "It's going to be fun watching the two of you spar."

I followed her, finding my eyes naturally gravitating to her shapely ass. The sway of her hips was almost hypnotic. I was suddenly hungry, but it wasn't for dinner. I needed to distract myself, or we wouldn't get any searching done upstairs. "What's with him and you, anyway? You two look bonded in a way that's just creepy."

She stopped at the second floor landing and waited for me. "After Daddy married Kat, I pulled back from him, and Ivan was the only adult I would have anything to do with. I followed him around and he helped me through adolescence. I suppose I picked up a lot of his ideas and values."

"So," I said with a sudden wicked smile, "that explains some of your more spectacular differences from society as a whole? Ivan laid the foundation and gave you the direction for your life? I would never have imagined he was a supporter of your work."

Her mouth dropped open and I danced past her with a laugh. "You!" she said and chased me up to Kat's office. It was still in the same disarray that we'd left it hours ago. The subtle smell of arousal permeated the air, still. I stopped dead in my tracks and took a deep breath, a low fire rekindling in my belly.

"We don't have time for that," Gretchen said with a laugh. "If you're a good girl, we can try out your new toys tonight."

Slapping my hand over my mouth, I stared at her. "Crap! We left them in the Hummer!"

She shook her head and pointed into the room. "You start looking, and I'll call Devon before he gets too far away. I'll just have him drop the bag back off."

"Oh, no," I said with a headshake. "He has to bring it in and put it somewhere safe, somewhere Lurch can't find it. I do *not* want *him* poking through it." I cocked my head to the side as a thought suddenly occurred to me. "On second thought, you're right. Have him drop it off, and make sure he delivers the bag to Lurch personally. That's a

much better idea. You're a genius!" I gave her a quick smooch and turned back into the room to start looking while she laughed harder and called to make the arrangements.

The search of the room took most of the hour and I still couldn't believe how badly we'd trashed the joint. Broken crystal, fallen furniture and disarrayed paper littered the place. Thankfully, most of the paper was still in the filing cabinets. I had to get Gretchen to help me set the fallen one upright.

The interesting moment came when we broke into the locked desk. There were several file folders with detailed notes, receipts and even pictures of her meeting with several men at various places, including some motels. The men included Cartwright.

"Blackmail material," I said, looking at Gretchen. "That's enough of a reason to get killed. The question I have now is, why? She had access to more money than all of them put together."

Gretchen pointed to one of them. "That's the Governor. The others are political figures of one kind or another. I'll bet that whatever it was she was getting, it was about power, not money."

I looked at my watch and pointed to the door. "Time to go wash up for dinner. We need to eat well, because I think we might be needing our strength tonight." I grinned devilishly and visibly shivered at the possibilities.

With a matching smile, my wife led me out of the room to clean up and dress.

Chapter Twelve: Run over by the wagon

The main dining room looked as ritzy as the rest of the house, and of course, had crystal and silver all over the place. The polished table could have seated twenty people, but today only had four places set out. Ted and Lisa were seated close together on one side and the other settings were across from them.

Grabbing my chair in one hand, I moved my things so that I was sitting at the corner nearest them and Gretchen pulled hers next to mine. That put us at a comfortable distance from them when we sat down.

Lurch brought out the food, starting with a serving of baked fish. He rolled his eyes at our rearrangement of the seats, but said nothing. The fish was divine. With a wave, I

pointed at my glass. "How about some wine?"

"What vintage would you prefer?" he replied in that snooty voice that implied I wouldn't know a fine wine from Mad Dog 20/20.

My smile widened and I gestured at Ted. "Work it out with the vintner, Lurch. I'll take whatever he thinks is good. And no substitutions or additions!" I warned him sternly. Gretchen laughed and added her vote to mine, as did Lisa.

Ted made a quick query and selected one wine from the short list Lurch gave him. With a glance at me, he smiled at Lurch wryly. "Bring two bottles, and we'll open them ourselves when we're ready."

After Ivan was gone, I looked at Gretchen. "See? Ted doesn't trust him, either. It's those beady eyes of his."

Gretchen shook her head. "You guys! And don't think I didn't notice you slipping the wine in, Hawk. You really shouldn't but I won't scream about it *this* time." Then she looked at Ted and Lisa. "The short story about us is that we're making progress. What have you two been up to today?"

"Ted spent the day with Hans, working out the final details of their agreement and getting the papers written up to the lawyer's satisfaction." Lisa grinned at her husband. "I'm glad I missed it."

Ted rolled his eyes with a smile. "I think we could review everything one last time for you, just so you don't feel left out."

"Bite your tongue," Lisa said, making a cross of her fingers and holding them up like she was warding off a vampiric attack. "I've got no desire to be buried in contract law." She looked back at us. "I spent the day in contemplation. I went to the park and wandered around, trying to decide what I want to do with the offer Hans made me. After a lot of soul searching, I decided I want to run for District Attorney in Harris County," Lisa said, glancing back at Ted, "so that I can be closer to home. I've decided to sell my house and move to the vineyard when we get back to Texas."

I nodded. That made good sense and Lisa would make a great DA. "You have my vote. Will you be moving your mom closer to you?"

Lisa's mother had been injured in a car accident a few years ago and was comatose,

being cared for in a long-term facility. This trip out of Texas was the longest Lisa had been away from her beloved mother since the accident.

"I think it would be best to find a good place closer to Ted's home, our home - that is going to take some getting used to - so that I can visit her as often as I need to," Lisa responded. "Hans said he knows of some very good doctors that owe him some favors, so he will be getting some second opinions from them for me. It would be wonderful if she woke up," Lisa said wistfully. "I know it's not likely, but I can't give up hope."

I reached over the table and took her hand in mine. "Never give up, Lisa. In this life, anything is possible, and we have to believe that miracles can happen." It did for me, I thought to myself, and she's sitting right next to me. I gave her hand a final pat and let go. "If the deal is settled, though, then what's next for you two? Back to Texas?"

Lisa looked at Ted, obviously conflicted. "We want to stay here and support you and Gretchen, but at the same time I really need to see mother, and Ted has a vineyard to look after. I'm not just saying that I want to stay, either. I want to be here for you both, really. We both do."

Gretchen waved her hand. "I'm in good hands here. You two have your lives to get back to, so don't let us stand in the way of what you need to do. Hawk has a really good handle on things. Given your druthers, when would you head back?"

We were interrupted by Lurch bringing in wine and Ted pouring us glasses as Lurch left disdainfully.

"Tomorrow," Ted said softly. "I won't lie about it; we already have the plane tickets. We *do* want to stay, but we can't. I'm sorry, Hawk."

I smiled and shook my head. "I, of all people, understand that you have business to take care of at home. I'm getting closer to torpedoing this case against Gretchen every hour and I'm sure we'll beat it. I'll miss you guys, though."

Ted and Lisa looked at each other and then uncertainly at me and then Gretchen.

Gretchen smiled at them and sipped her wine. "If you two want to have Hawk to yourselves tonight, I understand. I can find something to do for the evening." Her voice was light, but I heard some pain in there.

"Actually, we're not looking for a way to lure Hawk off to have sex, Gretchen," Lisa said

uncomfortably. "Ted and I talked about this for hours last night, and we decided that we need to get used to being married, having it be just the two of us."

Both of them were focused on Gretchen, and they didn't see how stricken I must have looked before a cold ache settled over me and I wiped the sudden pain from my face. My ears were filled with a roaring sound that had to have been coming from inside of me, since no one else seemed to hear it.

I swallowed and forced a small smile onto my face. Three years ago I'd lost my best friend when she left me for a man, for a family. I hadn't listened to all the hints she'd no doubt dropped me, and I'd lost her as a friend as well as a lover.

It was all happening again, and this time I knew I'd better be able to handle the transition from lover to friend or I'd lose Lisa. And Ted. I'd screwed up again, somehow.

It dawned on me as I took a drink to clear my throat of the massive lump in it that the issue must be the baby. By getting pregnant, I'd made them feel threatened. Oh, God.

It took a couple of sips before I felt like I could speak in a normal voice. "I understand, Lisa, and it's okay."

Lisa smiled at me. "Thank you, Hawk. I do love you."

Yeah, as a friend. I got that. Life sucked. Taking another sip to give me room to maneuver, I put up a wall between the hurt and me. I needed to get away before I did something else wrong.

"I need to hit the ladies room," I said with the best smile I could muster. "I'll be back."

I avoided looking at Gretchen as I rose and stepped out of the room. Not that it mattered, I thought gloomily; she'd use that damned emotional spidey sense and be pounding on the bathroom door before I could pull myself together. I needed to be where she wouldn't find me.

Making up my mind quickly, I dodged into the Brown Room and closed the door behind me. The lights were off, and the room was completely dark except for the moonlight coming from the window between the partly closed drapes. The room had an almost surreal air about it.

I walked to the window and stood there, bathed in the moonlight. It wasn't really a

window I found, but a pair of glass doors that opened onto a small garden. The grounds were that ghostly shade that the moon gives the earth, washed of all color. The mansion blocked a good deal of the city lights.

For a few minutes, I watched the small trees blow in the breeze and let my mind empty. In the city, I was never alone. Even when I was home, the sounds of neighbors and passing traffic always intruded. Turning back into the room, the sudden lack of light turned everything into a deep, impenetrable gloom.

Feeling my way, I found the bar and grabbed a bottle of something. I didn't even bother to try and read the label. I could have my own pity party and let the others get to know each other without me. That would probably make it easier. Once they got to talking, they wouldn't even notice I was gone.

I opened the terrace doors and stepped into the night, closing the drapes and then the doors behind me. Once more, I was part of the night. Once I was outside, I saw a small table with some comfortable looking lawn furniture on the other side of a couple of trees. I hadn't been able to see them from inside the room. That was even better. The temperature outside was cold, but not freezing. The temperatures had risen some during the day. It was now in the fifties.

Not that someone hadn't thought ahead, I discovered when I set the bottle on the table. There were a couple of blankets in a zippered plastic holder in one of the chairs. I guess even in this weather someone liked being outside. If I got too cold, I could use one.

Taking the bottle in hand, I tried to read what it was, but the light was too dim. I did see that it was 25th anniversary, so it was probably expensive as hell. I pulled the cork out with my teeth and spat it out before taking a swig. It was some kind of whiskey. Smooth. Gretchen was going to be pissed.

I sat down and took a deep drink. These last few days had been so confusing. It had to be because I was out of my element. In a strange place. I shouldn't be having all these feelings. That wasn't me, wasn't the hog-riding Hawk with an attitude. That thought reminded me painfully why I was here, though. I had been an idiot to even shelter the notion that Ted and Lisa would want a third wheel in their relationship, much less a fourth one. Normal people wanted a husband or wife and a family, not someone hanging on from the outside. I was a threat to Lisa, and she'd had to make a choice. Not that I could blame her.

Taking another deep swallow, I felt the warmth inside start to push the chill out of my body. It wasn't so cold out here after all. I leaned my head back and looked at what stars I could see through the light pollution of Boston. It was about as bad as Houston, I decided.

Ted made Lisa happy, and I had a real bad track record with relationships. I'd be lucky if Gretchen stayed with me, really. She didn't know the real me. The pressure that my work put on everyone I knew. She wanted a child of her own. When would that come into play? Lisa and Ted wouldn't let that mistake happen again. I knew now that Lisa regretted it happening at all. That had probably been the deal breaker for us as a trio, and if I'd had my head out of the clouds and in the real world, I'd have known where this was heading. Where it had to head. Lisa and Ted were leaving me, and Gretchen would soon tire of me. As the desire for a child grew stronger, she would leave me, too. Leave me in search of a man that could give her what I could not.

Over the next half hour, I drank half the bottle and was filled with a warm glow. It wasn't real, I knew. But for now it would keep the pain at bay. Lord knows I should know that for a fact. I held up the bottle, feeling a little disconnected from my own body. This was therapeutic, medicinal.

A light came on somewhere behind me, probably in the Brown Room, but I knew I was safe in the shade of the trees. No one could see me out here. Not from in there, anyway. A small voice whispered how they were worried about me, but I dismissed it. It was probably just Lurch counting the bottles of booze. I grinned at the thought of how upset he would be when his count came up a bottle short. It would probably ruin his whole evening. After a moment, the light went out, and I was once more alone with the night. My grin faded with the light, and the dark again took over my thoughts, seeped into my soul.

The sound of a bird flapping its wings disrupted my ever gloomier thoughts. I looked around for it and finally spotted golden eyes looking at me from the tree across the glade. I had no idea what kind of bird it was, maybe an owl, but it was big. I raised the bottle to it and drank a salute.

"To us," I said, hearing the slur in my voice, "creatures of the night. Solitary huntresses!"

"Hawk?" A female voice called from somewhere around the house.

I clapped my hand over my mouth. Solitary hunters needed to remember that they had to keep their damned mouths shut, I thought quietly, hunched low in the seat. Maybe

they would miss the table out here in the trees and go back inside. Go back to the laughter and warmth. Leave me alone to feel sorry for myself and the mess I'd landed my sorry ass into.

The sound of footsteps on the grass behind me told me that my luck had run out.

"Hawk! What are you doing out here?" Lisa asked, reaching down to touch my shoulder. Her fingers felt hot, like those of a lover. Like a ghost of what once was. "Oh my God, Hawk, you're freezing! Come back inside."

I shook my head and pulled the bottle from the table, taking a gulp that burned going down and exploded in my middle. The shaking my head part may not have been the best idea, because the world didn't really seem inclined to keep to strict up and down. "No, I'm fine. You go on back in and leave me be," I said carefully, so I wouldn't slur and make her worried.

"You're solid ice," she told me sternly and took the bottle from my numb fingers. "You've been drinking? You drank all this in the last half hour? Gretchen's going to be furious. What's gotten into you? Come inside. Now."

"No," I said mulishly. "I'm just in the way inside. Go back to Ted and forget about me. I'm sorry I screwed everything up, and I just want to be alone."

Lisa picked up the blankets and unzipped the bag, the noise incredibly loud in the quiet night. "If you're not going in, at least you can have a blanket to keep warm."

I didn't resist her covering me. I didn't feel cold. When I reached for the bottle, she picked it up and moved it out of my reach.

"You've had enough," she said firmly as she sat down, wrapping another blanket around herself. "Now, what are you all twisted into a knot about? Is it because we don't want to have sex with you tonight?"

"I drove you away just like I did Sharon," I said, leaning forward and snaring the bottle before she could get it back after putting on the blanket. I got one good slug before she again took it away from me. "It was getting pregnant," I assured her, so she would know I understood. "I know that frightened you, and now all you want is to be friends. I'll deal with that because I don't want to drive you completely away like I did Sharon." My eyes began misting and I suddenly couldn't see her clearly anymore. "You're my best friend. My only friend and I can't stand the idea of losing you."

I felt her arms wrap around me as the tears came. "Oh, Hawk, that's not what's happening. I'm not rejecting you. Ted and I just need space to get used to the idea of actually being a couple before we move forward. The whole way this developed - Vegas, Elvis, you and Gretchen, this thing with Hans and the murders - we didn't exactly have a chance to think about being married, to accept it in our hearts and in our souls. We know that you and Gretchen are a part of our lives, but Ted and I have to build a foundation for our relationship, our marriage, and define ourselves as the primary couple in our lives. To get an identity that is all us. We need to be the couple, you and Gretchen need to be the friends with benefits, and Ted and I have to know which is which. Then we can be with you and Gretchen. I wasn't saying no, Hawk. I was saying not right now."

Pushing her back, I wiped my eyes and stared at her. "You're still my friend? You still love me?"

She smiled through her own tears and nodded. "You're an idiot," she said tenderly. "A big, loveable, drunken idiot. If I didn't know about Sharon, I'd feel really pissed and uncomfortable, but I do understand. You need to do the same with Gretchen before you have sex with someone else, too, you know. Bond with her. Let your relationship become the center of who you are. Then you can open your arms to us and not be afraid."

I snorted and tried to get the bottle, but Lisa set it on the ground away from me. "She has sex with people for money." I said petulantly. "How does that fit into this mess?"

"Does it bother you?" Lisa asked, sitting back down, but keeping my hand in hers.

"Yes. No. Some," I admitted.

"Then ask her not to," Lisa said. "Ask her not to until you feel comfortable with it."

"She'll fight me on that," I laughed. "She said I knew who she was when we met and I can't tell her not to do it."

"She will if she loves you," Lisa said. "We talked about why we were saying no after you left and she agreed with us, so she does understand. Did you ask her to stop for a while or did you tell her to stop?"

I stared at her. "What's the difference?"

Covering her eyes with her hand, she laughed. "Hawk, I am at a loss. You're just you, and that's a fact. The difference is in how you approach the issue. If you tell her what she has to do, she's going to resist you. The harder you push, the more she'll resist. She's just as stubborn as you are, and it's a fair bet that she has some issues at the root of her behavior. Those are issues the two of you need to talk about honestly."

"Asking her not to sleep with others is different, though. You are asking her for the time and space you need. Time and space to accept each other, establish your own foundations in each other, to become one with each other. She loves you, Hawk, with a depth of feeling I don't think you can even understand or believe in yet, and because she loves you, she will give it up without a second thought or moment's regret. But only if you *ask* her."

She stood up and tossed her blanket onto the table. "But you don't need to talk about it tonight, you certainly don't *want* to talk about it tonight, or you're going to get into a screaming argument. I'll talk with her before we go to bed. Before she goes to bed with you."

"I'm not going to bed," I protested, resisting a little as she pulled me to my feet.

"Oh, yes you are," Lisa said firmly. "You're staggering drunk, and when Gretchen finds out, she'll go from worried to death to pissed off in about three seconds."

"Well, then she can just suck my dick," I said blurrily. "I'm a big girl now, with big girl panties."

Lisa laughed and slid an arm around my waist. As we started walking, it quickly became evident that I wouldn't pass a field sobriety test. "You don't have one. I know. So don't fight about it tonight, Hawk. Promise me."

I mumbled something, but she shook me a little. "Speak up, Detective. I didn't quite hear that."

"Fine," I grumbled as she held me up with one hand and opened the door to the Brown Room with the other. "I promise. Unless she jumps my shit, and then all bets are off and I take her sexy body down hard. She'd like that," I assured Lisa. "She likes it rough. And I do have one. I bought us some toys at the store today. Back when I'd hoped..."

"Does she now?" Lisa asked as she closed the door behind us. "I'm glad you picked up

some toys. Toys are fun. I'll hope you haven't broken them all when we get together in a few months."

"It's too hot in here," I complained as she helped me stagger toward the interior door, turning us in a half circle as I tried to escape back to the lawn. "Let's go back outside."

"No!" Lisa said and wheeled me around and back into the room. The darkness overwhelmed me and I almost fell over before she got me back upright. "You're half-frozen and completely drunk. That is not a good way to be outside when it's going to be freezing soon. Remember, you're pregnant and you don't want to risk hurting the baby."

I pulled her to a stop and half fell against one of the seats before sliding into it. Lisa made sure I didn't fall out of the chair and put me down firmly into the seat, leaning me slightly so I could rest against the arm of the chair.

"Will you love it?" I asked, wishing I could see her face. "Tell me you won't hate me."

"Oh, Hawk." She knelt beside the chair and kissed me. Not like a friend, but like a lover, her tongue hot and alive inside my mouth.

I grabbed her hair and kissed her as though I were a woman dying of thirst in the desert, just handed a cup of water to drink. When I came up for air, she pulled away.

"That's as far as we go tonight, but I do *not* hate you," Lisa whispered in my ear. "In a couple of months, as soon as Ted and I feel comfortable, and as soon as you and Gretchen feel comfortable, I promise we'll get together and do everything in bed you can think of. I love you Hawk. Not the same as I love Ted, but except for Ted, you're my best friend, too."

She stood up and caressed my cheek with her hand. "I'm going to go get Ted and Gretchen to help get you to bed. Don't you dare go back outside and no more booze for you. I don't want you falling over something and hurting *our* baby. Yours, Gretchen's, Ted's and mine. Our baby."

I swallowed and started crying. Dammit, I was a sloppy drunk.

Lisa kissed my forehead and went out the door. The light from the hall hurt my eyes, so I turned away and curled myself into a ball, crying in relief.

A few minutes later I heard the door open and could now see enough to tell it was Ted

and Lisa. Lisa was speaking into his ear, softly but urgently. He nodded in agreement with whatever she was saying.

Then I heard Gretchen in the hall. "Where is she? Is she okay? Lisa?" The door swung wide and she hurried in, looking around. "Why are the lights out? Hawk?"

Suddenly, the room was filled with blinding light and I clapped my hands over my eyes. "Argh."

Gretchen snagged me half off the chair. "Oh my God, I was so worried! Where have..." She pulled back a little. "You smell like a brewery! Have you been drinking?"

"Gretchen," Lisa said, "Don't climb her ass tonight; she's been suffering from a personal crisis of her own. I'll explain what happened while Ted gets her into bed."

"Wait," I said, my voice sounding odd even in my own ears. "I have to say something." I uncovered my eyes and I could see Gretchen, kneeling in front of me, a mixture of worry and anger on her face. I took her hand in mine.

"We talked about each of us having our own problems," I said, hearing my voice slur and having to focus on speaking slowly and carefully, looking her in the eyes, "and I was run over by one of mine tonight. It's not about you. It was never about you. I'm sorry. I fell apart over a misunderstanding and the pain in my past. I understand you're mad. I deserve it. I deserve everything you do to me, but I need to know that you love me."

Gretchen's eyes widened and she pulled me into a hug. "Never doubt that I love you. I don't know why sometimes, but I love you and I'm loving you more every day. I don't want you to ever wonder about that." She pulled back and glared at me a little. "Even when I rake your ass over the coals for getting shit-faced and shutting me out. And for endangering our baby."

"Our baby," I said, waving an arm around and trusting the chair to catch me when the room spun. "Do you see the baby as all of ours?"

Gretchen quirked a smile. "Yes. All four of us. Lisa and Ted talked with me about it when you left for the bathroom and we're all on the same page." She blinked in surprise. "Is that what this is all about? You're upset because they won't sleep with us right now?"

Lisa stepped in smoothly. "That's enough for right now. I'll explain while Ted gets Hawk put to bed. He has some experience getting her in bed drunk."

"Too bad I won't get the same entertainment as last time," I said grumpily.

Gretchen searched my face and slowly nodded. "Okay, I'll tear a strip off her tomorrow." She leaned forward and kissed me even more thoroughly than Lisa had. "I love you more than anything or anyone, Hawk. Remember that when you pay the piper tomorrow, because we're going to hash this out. I won't have you running to a bottle and away from me. We're in this together."

Gretchen stepped back and Ted slid his arm around my waist and lifted me off the chair and into his arms.

I put an arm around his neck and protested. "I can walk."

Ted laughed and started out into the hall. "You're lucky I don't put you in a fireman's carry and paddle you after the scare you gave us."

I blinked back more tears and looked at his face as he carried me. "I can see some shircum..." I stopped and spoke slowly. "Cir-cum-stances. Times I *might* let you do that."

Ted just laughed harder and carried me up the stairs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an upside down image of Lurch. I think he was scowling at me.

"Stop here, Ted. I need to throw up on Lurch."

"We'll make a stop in the bathroom, but you be nice to Ivan," Ted said reprovngly. "He has your bed all ready for you."

"Be nice to him?" I asked. "Are you drunk, too?"

That burst of laughter kept Ted amused until we were in Gretchen's and my room. He set me on the bed and I promptly fell over onto my side. Undeterred, he started taking off my shoes.

"Will you take advantage of me?" I asked. "I think I'm properly drunk."

He smiled at me and slid his hands up my legs in a way that made goosebumps spring up all over my body. "No, though I wish I could. Hawk, Lisa's right. Once you're sober,

you'll realize it, too. It's not forever. It's just a couple of months to let Lisa and me settle into our relationship, and to let you and Gretchen settle into yours. Gretchen's already agreed we can all take a cruise or something in a few months and make a big deal out of getting to really, *really* know one another. I'm not rejecting you and neither is Lisa. We love you, but what you have with Gretchen is special, and deserves to be treated as such. For this to work, Lisa and I have to be secure in our love for each other. Once we have that that, having sex with you and Gretchen will be about friendship and having fun."

I groaned and covered my eyes with my hand. "But Ted, it's just so... You're friends and you're family. I wish I knew what to do."

All the while he was talking, he continued to strip me out of my clothes, moving me as required to get everything off. When I was naked, he leaned over me and kissed me deeply, letting his hand dip between my legs to caress me gently once, lighting a low fire inside me that I wanted to quench.

"That's not nice," I complained, "if you're not going to ravish me."

Ted grinned at me and helped me stand up. "Time to go potty. You can dream about me bending you over a desk for a few months and that will just have to tide you over."

"Gretchen told you?" I asked, aghast. "That's not very fair." I let him help me into the bathroom and hold me upright while I peed.

When I was done, he took some toilet paper and wiped me clean, restarting all those warm, squishy feelings low in my belly. Although still woozy, it struck me as especially intimate. I opened my legs wider, but he stopped.

"You stopped," I complained again. "No fair starting and stopping."

"Any more than two shakes or five wipes is playing with yourself," he quipped. "Do you need to throw up?"

I shook my head and smiled at him. "No, I need to get off."

Ted helped me up and back out to the bed. He slid me between the sheets and gently covered me up with the blanket. Then he kissed me deeply and let his hand wander under the covers, to my sex. He kept kissing me hotly and used his fingers to good effect, rousing me higher and higher. In just a few minutes of panting, moaning and

kissing I came with my back arched high.

Ted held me while I calmed. "I shouldn't have done that," he admitted, "but I needed you to be sure that there isn't a problem between us."

"If it's going to cause trouble..." I started before he shook his head and cut me off.

"No, openness and honesty is the only way. I'll tell Lisa and Gretchen," Ted said. "You go to sleep and dream of Gretchen. She loves you a lot. You know that, right?"

I nodded, already feeling the arms of Morpheus pulling me deeper into some warm realm where I was comfortable and safe. "And I love her. And I love you, Ted. Just like I love Lisa. My family, with benefits."

Ted kissed my forehead and turned out the light. After the door closed, I drowsed and the world faded away into a cloud of peace.

Chapter Thirteen: Reap the whirlwind

It seemed like I'd only just fallen asleep when the house exploded in light and noise. It was after I sat bolt upright in bed, I discovered that it was only my head that exploded. I winced in pain and covered my ears as some horrible cacophony, at what sounded like 150 decibels, blared from the portable CD player sitting on the dresser. Standing next to the open curtains and window was Gretchen, dressed in her ratty workout gear. She grinned evilly at me.

"I'm working out in here this morning," she shouted. "Hope that's okay."

I stumbled out of bed, and the waves of noise - was that country music? - washed over me, driving me back at the same time I was trying to move forward. Gretchen's grin didn't waver as I reached her, but she looked confused when instead of searching for the off switch, I picked it up by the handle and staggered back to the wide open window letting in about three million candles of early morning light. Without further ado, I tossed it out the window and there was a crash, followed by blessed silence. Then I closed the curtains, shutting out that damned star.

"Hey!" she objected, "I liked that CD!" Then she rushed to the window, leaning out to

look down at the rear patio, the curtain swirling around her. "There are other people around here! You could have killed someone!"

"Better them than you," I growled. I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to hold my pounding head together with my hands and sheer willpower. "Tell me it was Lurch. Please. I need to start off today on a more positive note than I've had so far. And playing loud music when I feel like this - if you can call *that* music - is not being very considerate, given my head this morning."

Gretchen sat down beside me. "Well, you weren't very considerate last night, running out on me and getting drunk. Bad behavior shouldn't be rewarded and I *won't* enable you!"

I looked up at her astringent tone. Yeah, she was still pissed. Her smile looked too brittle to be real. This was still about last night. I sighed and covered my eyes. "Gee, Doctor Phil, do we really have to do this right now?" I muttered. "I feel like shit."

"Do you want fake sympathy or honesty?" she countered.

"Can't I have both?"

Gretchen took my hand into hers, turning my face to look at her. "Last night really upset me, Hawk."

"Me, too," I said, "but I know that's not what you mean."

"Dammit, we need to talk about this," Gretchen said quietly. "I don't like you shutting me out of your life when you're hurting. I don't like you drinking like a fish when life throws you a curve ball, either. Especially with you carrying our baby."

I took a deep breath and reigned in the initial urge to just lash out. "You're right. You don't deserve that. I could just clam up, but I won't. However, I don't feel like talking about it while my head's pounding. Your little demonstration of the pitfalls of getting sloppy drunk was effective, but it doesn't make me feel especially cooperative. So, you're just going to have to be satisfied with talking about this, and some of *my* concerns, when both of us are in the mood. Maybe tonight?"

She looked at me, her eyes opaque, telling me nothing, but then she nodded. "Tonight. Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. We each get to unload about what we need out of our relationship, and we get to ask questions with a reasonable expectation they'll get

answered. Deal?"

I nodded and felt like my head was going to fall off. "Only if I can get rid of this hangover. I'm going to shower."

Gretchen bounced to her feet. "I'll go bring some food back to the room so we can eat in peace."

"I'm not hungry," I grumbled, rising slowly and heading for the bathroom. Stopping in the doorway, I turned to look at my wife. "I love you."

Her smile lit up her face as bright as the dawn outside the window. "I love you, too. Oh, and Ted told Lisa and me that he, um, got you settled in to sleep. Don't worry about it. I'm not upset, and neither is Lisa."

I searched my foggy memories and then it came rushing back to me. His hand between my legs, fingers inside me, and his mouth on mine as I writhed under his touch. I flushed and looked at my feet. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it, but I didn't ask for that."

Gretchen took me into her arms and kissed my cheek. "I know, Hawk. Everyone's okay with it. Besides, I think you needed that reassurance as much as he did." Wrinkling her nose, she pushed me into the bathroom. "Go shower. You smell awful. I'll have something out here to eat when you're done. Take your time."

"I'm not hungry," I repeated. "Just bring me some toast." Then I closed the door behind me and turned the dimmer switch for the lights to its lowest setting.

In the artificial twilight, I showered in the hottest water I could stand, for as long as I could take it, and then climbed out, dried off and sat on the can. The steam made my head feel better. A little.

The knock at the door jarred me awake. I'd apparently dozed while sitting on the toilet. Pulling off some paper, I cleaned myself. "I'll be right out. Hang on."

When I came back into the room, the drapes were only partly closed now and the lights *almost* dim enough for my eyes. A small table with two chairs had been brought in from somewhere, and there was coffee. I could smell it. The life-giving elixir of the gods. The steam rising from the cups beckoned me closer, like a siren luring sailors to their deaths. The hidden rocks that destroyed the sailors' ships were the various other foods,

and they made my stomach do terrible things when I smelled them.

I snared my coffee and retreated from the table to sit on the bed. I gestured to the food. "That's making my stomach flip-flop. I just want toast."

"You need to eat something more substantial than toast, Hawk," Gretchen protested. "You've got to eat for two."

"When my stomach feels up to eating more, I'll eat more. Right now I want coffee, toast, aspirin and water." I sipped the coffee and let the taste and smell of it calm my roiling belly. "When are Ted and Lisa flying out? I'd really like to tell them goodbye and apologize for how I behaved last night."

"Don't I get an apology?" she asked with a harrumph, one hand firmly planted on her hip. "They have an early afternoon flight so I agreed to have you presentable by nine. That gives us about half an hour for me to eat and for you to absorb something." She took a small plate and put some toast on it, with grape jelly spread on it.

"What if I don't want anything on my toast?" I grouched. "Dry is good."

"Eat the toast, Baby. You'll need the energy before we're done today."

She was probably right.

Half an hour later, we came downstairs and walked into the Brown Room. Ted and Lisa were there and so was Hans. I hadn't seen him since just after the murder, and suddenly I felt guilty for it. I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around him. "I haven't come to see how you're doing. I'm sorry."

Hans gave me a smile that had no life to it, but hugged me fiercely. "I've been working, so I've been avoiding everyone. I'll just stagger along until I get my feet back under me." He let me go and gestured for everyone to sit down.

I smiled at Ted and Lisa before pulling a chair next to Gretchen and sitting down gingerly. The aspirin was working, at least to the point that I didn't feel like someone should be chasing me with crosses and trying to drive a stake through my heart - with me more than willing to cooperate. Gretchen crossed her legs and took my hand in hers, paying attention to her father.

"I spoke with Gretchen's attorney this morning, and the news is mixed," Hans said. "The move to overturn bail was denied, obviously. However, he is still unable to shake any information loose from the police. Oh, and that police officer was by early this morning, and I sent him away rather than let him disturb you both."

"What more could he want?" Gretchen asked, exasperated. "Really now, what part of talk to my lawyer did he fail to understand?"

"He just wants to irritate you and piss me off," I assured her. "Standard procedure's to keep a suspect off guard. What I really need, Hans, is to get a look at the crime scene reports from the CSIs. Gretchen has one feeler out, but I don't consider it very likely to pan out. Is there any chance you might be able to get a copy?"

Hans shrugged. "Perhaps. I'll make some phone calls and see if someone might be able to help, but I'm not overly hopeful. If you can't get those reports, what's your plan?"

"The same as every day, Pinky," I said. "We try to take over the world."

Hans blinked at me and Lisa giggled. "Can we have a puppy, Brain?" she quipped.

I shook my head and promptly regretted it. "Just kidding. The plan is to dig deep into who might have wanted to kill either Kat or Cartwright, starting with a more in-depth look at Kat's office and its contents. Did she have a safe or safe deposit box?"

Hans nodded. "She had a wall safe installed and hidden behind one of the paintings. It seemed a bit melodramatic to me, but she wanted it. I have the combination in my office. Let me go get it while you say your good-byes in private." He walked over and shook Ted's hand and received a hug from Lisa before leaving us alone.

A moment of awkward silence filled the room as I wondered what to say to make it right, to take us back to where we all should be. Lisa, in her usual straightforward manner, just walked over and gave me a hug.

"Don't obsess, Hawk," she said with a smile. "We talked last night and it's all okay. Just give us, and yourselves, some time and space. Get to know Gretchen and get her out of trouble. Then we can all take a cruise together and see what happens, okay?"

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her cheek. "I don't deserve such good friends. I really do love you both."

Ted pulled Gretchen to us and we had, of all things, a group hug. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever envision myself in a freaking group hug. There was just something *wrong* about the whole concept. What was even worse was how much better it made me feel.

Finally, I pulled back and wiped my face. "I'll miss you both. Call me when you get home, and then every night, so I can give you the scoop on what's happening here."

Ted grinned "Count on it." Then he furtively looked at his watch. "Lisa, we need to get moving if we're going to get to the airport on time."

They both kissed me deeply and left me breathless. Then they repeated the process and kissed the shit out of Gretchen.

Gretchen was still flushed when we saw them out to the car where Lurch first held the door and then got behind the wheel to drive them to the airport. We stood there and watched them until they were out of sight. My wife kept her arm around my waist and hugged me tightly when they were gone.

"I already miss them," I complained.

"Stop whining," she said with a kiss. "You still have me. Come on, let's go see what that safe has in it."

Gretchen led us to her father's office, and we picked up the combination. The only problem was that when we tried it upstairs, it didn't work. Both of us tried it several times with the same results.

"Are we screwing this up, or is it just not working?" Gretchen asked.

I put my hands on my hips and stared at the recalcitrant door. "It's not working. I think it's different than the one she gave Hans. That makes the contents even more intriguing to me. We either have to guess the numbers or call a locksmith."

"Or see if it's hidden in here," Gretchen suggested, surveying the still rumpled office. "I can't see her memorizing squat. I really have to wonder what can be so important that it needs a safe with a secret combination. It's obviously more explosive than the blackmail materials she kept locked in her desk, but what could beat that?"

"Good question," I admitted. "Let's see if we can find a number written down or taped

up somewhere. It's probably out of sight but not too far from where she sat."

It took almost an hour, but our perseverance paid off. Gretchen found the combination written on the back of a business card for the safe company in Kat's Rolodex.

When Gretchen opened the safe, we saw that it had some boxes of jewelry, some cash and a large manila envelope. I took the envelope and opened it, pulling out a sheaf of papers. They were notes handwritten on very nice cream colored paper.

The contents, however, were far from pretty. Written on the expensive bond paper were detailed notes on how to commit murder, followed by an after action report on how the plan had worked out. Gretchen was looking at the jewelry, bitching that it was probably her mother's. I was grateful for having a few minutes to get my mind around what I was reading. Kat had written down her plan: to kill Gretchen's mother and slide into Han's life. She had used access to the house through someone in the maid service to poison her and make it look like a suicide. Bribed a maid for access. I hoped Hans was using a different maid service now, but I made a mental note to check. The after action report was written like a diary entry, with her gloating over her success. I couldn't imagine why she would have kept these, and I wished to hell that she hadn't.

Part of me wanted to hide this from Gretchen, to shield her from the pain this was going to cause, but she deserved to know the truth. It turned out that Uncle David was right all along. That moved him back up in my sights as a prime suspect.

"Baby," I said, "sit down. I have some bad news"

Gretchen frowned at me and sat. "It can't be too bad. Hagatha is dead."

I handed Gretchen the papers, stood behind her, and put my arms around her as she read. She became more and more distraught as she read. I held her through that long, painful ride even as my head threatened to explode. When she reached the end, Gretchen turned in my arms, burying herself in my embrace. She railed against Kat, and then she cried like the little girl that had just lost her mother to a soulless beast. When her initial emotions were spent, I just held her.

"This hurts," Gretchen said, "but it doesn't really *change* anything. I already hated her, and she's *still* dead." Gretchen's voice was flat, emotionless now that she had cried herself out. I could feel her defenses going up to keep the world at bay. I guess we each had our own way of dealing with pain. Tonight, we'd talk about this, too.

"It changes one thing, Baby," I said quietly. "Your mother didn't leave you by choice. She was *taken* from you. She didn't just abandon you to take her own life. Keep that with you, please."

"And it means we have to take a closer look at David. He was sure she did this. What if he knew for certain? Giving the wrong details in a confession to a DA that wants to believe you're innocent goes a long way to providing cover. We'll *have* to talk to him again."

Gretchen stood up and hugged me. "I don't believe he did this, but if he did, I don't care. She deserved to die."

I couldn't argue with her about that. If anyone deserved a knife in the heart, Kat certainly did. "Let's call Devon and make another house call on Uncle David."

We went back by David's, but he was out. A call to his cell netted only his voicemail, so I left a message. Gretchen was abnormally quiet, sitting in her seat, brooding.

I put my hand on her knee and squeezed. Leaning over, I spoke softly enough so that Devon couldn't hear us. "I'm sorry, Baby. I wish I hadn't showed you that. Giving it to you didn't do anyone any good."

Gretchen swallowed, but shook her head. "No, I needed to know. It hurts now, but I'll be better for it later. The person we don't need to tell is my father. This would *destroy* him."

I sighed and shook my head. "I'm not going to fight you on this, but he deserves to know what happened. I won't tell him. Whatever you decide to do is how we'll play it."

She smiled at me through her fresh tears. "Thank you."

Tapping Devon on the shoulder, I pointed forward. "We might as well head home, Devon. This looks like a dead end."

"How is de search goin'?" Devon asked as he pulled back into the street. "De papers are still harpin' on Miz Gretchen and printing all kinds of garbage."

"It feels like we're close," I said, "but there's still some information missing. When I see it, I'll be able to point at the real killer. Until then, I can only stumble around a little."

Find a paper stand, would you? I want to see what the news hounds have dug up. Every once in a while they have something useful."

Devon popped out of the Hummer, picked up a few papers and brought them back for us. Gretchen and I started scanning them, looking for information.

I had just finished the local paper when Gretchen started laughing. I looked over at her, surprised. I didn't think she'd be laughing for a while. "You got something?"

Her eyes twinkled at me as she handed a paper over. "Sort of."

It was the interior of one of the tabloid rags. A two-page, full color spread had almost nothing but pictures. Pictures of Gretchen and me, both together and alone. From all over Boston and the mansion. From my dress I could tell that some were from the night our nuptials had been announced. Someone had gotten inside the house.

The text of the article was suitably inflammatory and sensationalist. It said that she and... I clenched my fists. "I. Am. Not. Shauna. Werner. I'm going to kill Lurch, that skinny old bastard, as soon as I see him."

Gretchen pulled me to her and caressed my hair. "Now Hawk, let's not get too carried away."

As she held me, I kept reading about all the chaos of the double murder and all the slanderous innuendo about Gretchen. Then, with a growl, I went back to looking at the pictures more closely. One at the bottom of the second page made me curse.

"What?" Gretchen asked, looking at the picture.

It was of the stairs and showed me charging up. It had to have been when Gretchen screamed. I pointed to the lower left corner of the picture. Clearly visible, facing the camera, were Uncle David and our charming senatorial candidate Kirk. They were sipping champagne and just starting to turn toward the trouble. Their shirts and hands were plainly visible and blood free.

"That screws up my entire set of theories," I said. "These two were my strongest suspects, and now there's proof, in blazing color, that they didn't have blood splatter just after the murders. So, the CSI evidence excludes you, though we haven't seen it yet, and this excludes Uncle David and Kirk. Your father was with a crowd at the time. So that drops us back to Lurch and Vanessa, and I really don't think either of them did

it. That leaves us with only the people who were being blackmailed. Shit! Shit! Shit! I *hate* having to start over."

"We'll figure this out," Gretchen assured me. "There has to be evidence that'll point us in the right direction. We just have to find it."

On the drive back to the mansion, we scrutinized every photo in the paper. It took me a minute, but I finally noticed that the reporter was the jerk who had been stalking us. I really wasn't sure if I was pissed about him getting in or pleased that he had given us evidence I'm sure he would rather not have let slip.

As we turned into the drive, I saw that Elvis was back. Man, that guy sure didn't learn quickly. "Let me break him this time," I snarled at Gretchen. "I *really* need to hurt someone and he's looking *real* good."

"Let's see what he's here for first," Gretchen said, opening her door. "He might *actually* be here with something *useful* and not excuses."

Leo held up his hand, trying to ward me off when I climbed out. "Keep her back!"

Gretchen struck a pose that was both superior and arrogant, looking down her nose at him. "Give me a reason, Leo. She really wants to kick your ass, and I need something good to keep her on a short leash."

Leo yanked open his car door and pulled out a cardboard box. "Here! Everything you asked for."

"Give me that," I said disbelievingly as I snatched the box away from him. I set it on the hood of the car and started going through the folders inside. I stared back at Leo, shocked. "It's a full set of CSI files, including pictures and notes, all photocopied. How the fuck did you get these?"

"I know you're not bitching 'cause I got what you wanted," he said with a little of his original cocky attitude. "Does it really matter? I delivered the goods. Hell, I probably got more than you expected." With bravery I would never have expected, he turned his back on me and faced Gretchen. "Are we square? Would you tell my wife that we're good?"

"What?" she asked.

"My wife won't believe me," Leo said, "but she'll believe you. Can you call her on your cell phone? Please? I'd really like to get lucky again and she hasn't let me touch her since this all blew up."

Gretchen looked at my still stunned face and nodded. "Fine." She pulled out her cell and called the number Leo gave her. I assume Mrs. Elvis answered, because she told someone that everything was kosher now.

When she hung up, I had to snatch the box as he virtually dived into the car and started it up. He took off quickly, spraying us with dirt. I guess he wasn't as brave as I'd thought.

"Is it really all the crime scene information, Hawk?" Gretchen asked, looking into the box I was holding.

"Yeah, it is. Let's get inside and start looking over what the experts have to say."

We looked at reports for hours. Copies of crime scene photos and preliminary autopsy reports. I was so engrossed, I didn't object when Gretchen put food in front of me. A Big Mac and large fries with a monster coke. I should have been asking why the hell she had that here in a place with a cook, but I was just happy to see something familiar. I devoured the cop fare while trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

The initial summary said exactly what Sweeney had told us. The CSI team said the blood, or lack thereof, on Gretchen was inconsistent with her being the killer.

As for the rest, too much of the report was still preliminary. Toxicology showed that Kat was doing some recreational drugging. More than a trace of cocaine was in her system along with all the alcohol she could drink. I'd be surprised if she even felt the knife go in. Cartwright was drunk, but otherwise clean.

I picked up the snapshots taken of the scene and the bodies in the morgue. The photographer was good. It was almost as good as being there. I reached over blindly and grabbed some more fries. "I don't know what they put in these fries, but they are the best. Thank you for the food." I sat up and looked at her. "Hey! I said I wasn't hungry."

She smiled like the cat that ate the canary and pointed to the papers spread across the bed. "I know. Now, what does all *that* tell you?"

"Well, it's got some confusing stuff in the reports," I said, allowing myself to be distracted again. "Other than saying you didn't do it, the ball is still up in the air. However, all we really need to do is *exclude* you as the perp."

Gretchen vehemently shook her head. "No. I've already been convicted in the press, so I'm guilty until proven innocent. You know how this works. If I want my life back I need to be able to point at the guilty party."

I nodded and pulled a picture of Kat lying naked on the stainless steel slab closer to my face. "Do you have a magnifier? I need to look at this one closer." When Gretchen handed one to me, I looked closely at the picture of her chest. The ugly wound above her doctor-enhanced breast looked wrong somehow. Was it the wound or the blood? Both could tell me something about the height of the killer, if I looked at it right. This one looked like...

Abruptly, I sat straight up as the wrongness transformed itself into a theory.

I looked at the pattern of blood on her chest and then looked at several other photographs of her, including ones of her hands. I found nice deep gash on the inside of her right pinkie and ring finger. Then I looked at the same array of pictures for Cartwright.

I stood up and began sorting the pictures and reports into the folders they went in. "I need to fax these to a friend in Houston and make a call."

"Did you find something?" Gretchen asked eagerly.

"Maybe," I said cautiously. No need to get her hopes up if I was wrong. If I was right, the killer has been right in front of us all the time.

It took an hour before all the information had been sent, and I was stalking around the house waiting on a call back. I took the time to also make copies to take to the DA. Hector Santos, one of the Medical Examiners I worked with in Houston, was looking over the data and was late calling me back with his off the cuff assessment. I snarled my frustration and grabbed my coat.

"We're going to confront the bear in his den. Call Devon. We're going to the DA's office. Call your attorney while we drive. I've got enough here to get him off your back and the other will just have to wait."

She grabbed her phone. "Give me a hint!"

"Not till I know for sure. Come on." I almost dragged her out of the house to meet Devon. Once we were in the Hummer and on the way I set the box of copied evidence in my lap and closed my eyes. I was taking a real chance here. This could all blow up in my face.

We were pulling up to the DA's office when my cell rang. I handed Gretchen the box and opened the phone.

"Hawkins," I said, trying to hide the eagerness of my tone.

"Santos. You're still the queen of the crime scene, Hawk. Your read on the evidence matches mine. You owe me dinner."

He disconnected as I grinned wolfishly. Time to go pin the tail on the killer.

Gretchen ragged at me in the elevator for details, but I just smiled at her. "I'm only telling this once. It won't be easy to snap the cuffs on the killer, but I think it can be done. Let's hope your mouthpiece is here."

When we got to the tenth floor office, Zieter was sitting there, waiting. He raised an eyebrow and stood up. "I got him to see us, but he's not very happy about it. He thinks we're here to cut a deal. Are we?"

I smiled at him and shook my head. "Nope. We're here to get all charges dropped and put the finger on the real killer."

That got both his eyebrows up. "You think this is a crime TV show? You either have a signed confession in that box, or he'll laugh us out of his office."

"Close enough, Mister Zieter. Close enough. Let's go."

The secretary rose to stop me, and I just bounced her off my shoulder with a casual "Sorry" and opened the door. Danforth and Sweeney were sitting at the desk, and both startled at the door bursting open.

"I'm on time, right?" I said with a smile as Danforth reddened in fury. His secretary tried to explain, and he waved her out. Sweeney just smirked, a faint hint of approval in his eyes.

"This had better be good, Hawkins," the prissy DA said, sitting down without bothering to offer us seats. "Are you ready to cut a deal and save your *wife* from life in prison?" The word "wife" came out very distastefully.

"Nope. I'm here to put this case to rest." I tossed the box onto the desk in front of him and dropped into a chair, planting my feet on the arm of Sweeney's chair. "I have all the evidence I need to not only *prove* Gretchen innocent, but to also tie the killer up with a neat little bow for you, if you can figure out how to get a grand jury to indict. Although I've heard a decent DA can indict a ham sandwich, I'm sure even *you* can get one here."

Danforth snarled and grabbed the box, opening it and first growing pale and then red with renewed fury. "This is crime scene evidence and classified police reports! How the hell did you get this? Now you'll go to prison with her. We're done here. Detective, take her into custody."

"Hang on a second," Sweeney said with a quelling look at Danforth. "I want to hear what she has to say. Why is Gretchen Werner innocent? And who killed Senator Cartwright and Kat Werner?" His eyes showed some satisfaction, some curiosity, and... Did he just wink at me? He already knew Gretchen didn't do it, but the real story was going to surprise everyone.

"I know she didn't kill anyone because that's what your own CSI team says," I said with a shark-like smile that I turned on Danforth.

"You have exculpatory evidence in your possession that you haven't turned over to me and you're still hounding my client?" Zieter asked with a frown. "Danforth, you've got some serious explaining to do."

Danforth glared at us as though he would be able to incinerate us all on the spot. "I don't give a rat's ass what that report says, it's just an opinion."

"An expert opinion shared by at least one other Medical Examiner," I said to Zieter. "That part is firm. No way, no how, did Gretchen kill anyone."

Zieter glared back at Danforth, his fierce expression at odds with his usual laid back appearance. "I can have a motion to dismiss in the hands of the court in less than half an hour and I'll make you look like more of a fool than usual for your prosecutorial misconduct. Unless you drop all charges immediately."

It looked like he was eating glass, but Danforth nodded. "I suppose I don't have a choice." He picked up the phone and dialed an extension. "File a motion to dismiss the indictment against Gretchen Werner."

"I'll want a copy before they run off," Zieter said, settling back in his chair as the unwilling Danforth passed that along.

When he hung up the phone, Danforth snarled at him. "Satisfied?"

Sweeney cut in. "Not yet. If she didn't do it, I want to know what you saw in that evidence that we missed. Who *is* the killer?" He leaned forward, almost eagerly.

"The man in your lab is right when he said that Cartwright killed Kat Werner," I said smugly, "but he missed some subtle evidence that points right at Cartwright's killer."

I paused for effect and Gretchen smacked me on the back of my head. "Don't do this to me, Hawk. Who killed Cartwright?" she asked, exasperated.

I turned and looked at Gretchen and smiled. "Kat did."

Pandemonium erupted as everyone started yelling all at once and it took me a minute to get everyone to stop screaming that I was an idiot so that I could explain. I pulled the picture of Kat's chest out of the box. "The evidence is right here." I set it down in front of Sweeney. "Look at that knife wound. Cartwright is right handed. See how the knife went in? The edge is down and toward the center of Kat's breastbone, following the curve of her ribs. If the taller Cartwright pulled that knife out, why is the wound cutting down and twice as wide as the blade? The non-cutting edge would be taking the force if Cartwright pulled that knife out. It was pulled out from the left side, or in this case, from Kat's right hand. She reached up and yanked the knife that killed her right out of her own chest and stabbed Cartwright. She was so hopped up on coke that she probably didn't know she was dead till she hit the floor."

Sweeney picked it up and waved Zieter and Gretchen back so he could see it. Danforth shook his head. "That is the biggest bullshit story I've ever heard. You can't possibly expect anyone to believe that?"

I smiled sweetly at him as the door opened and the secretary brought in a paper and gave it to Zieter. "Since Gretchen has been ruled out as the killer, I don't really care what you think. I'm telling Gretchen what happened, and I'm just being nice by sharing

that with the police." I turned back to Sweeney. "Look at the blood splatter on her upper chest. She was showing some nice cleavage that night and the rest of the evidence is on those fake tits. The size of the drops is consistent with splatter from a distance, not with blood from her own wound."

"Sure," Sweeney agreed. "She was laying on the floor when Cartwright bought it. The blood fell on her from above."

"If she was lying on the floor, then why," I asked, my expression victorious, "do the blood drops impact her breast and flow against gravity toward the nipples? If she were supine, the blood should flow towards her chin. But it doesn't, which can mean only one thing. She was standing when that blood hit her. She was stabbing Cartwright back even as she was dying. The evidence tells the story, if you want to read it. Those two sorry excuses for human beings killed each other."

"That is total crap!" Danforth snapped, standing up. "No one is going to believe that."

"Ask Sweeny what he has seen people hopped up on coke do. I've seen someone shot in the heart take the gun away from his killer and empty it into his murderer before he, himself, fell down dead. It's more than possible. I can see it in my mind's eye as clearly as if I were sitting there when it happened. Cartwright is humiliated again, this time in public, by Kat. He slips into the kitchen and hides a knife in his coat. He asks her to talk upstairs, and she agrees. They argue, he tells her what a bitch she is, pulls the knife and plunges it into her chest. Then, as he stares in smug anticipation, she gets pissed and pulls it out and plunges it right back into the drunk bastard's chest."

Danforth was obviously not buying it, but Sweeney looked thoughtful. It took almost an hour and a number of phone calls, but we walked out of that office with everything I wanted going in. Total victory.

Chapter Fourteen: The finishing touch

Sweeney walked out behind us and made eye contact with me. He jerked his head to the right and raised an eyebrow. I nodded and followed him, leaving Gretchen to settle the final details with her lawyer.

He stopped a few doors down and leaned back against the wall. "That was an

interesting show, Lieutenant. You really think that's what happened?"

I shrugged. "It's the only story that fits, so I'll run with it."

He nodded and mulled a question before asking, "What would you have done if the evidence said she did it?"

"Thank God it doesn't," I sighed. I thought about it for a moment, but I already knew the answer. "I'd have hated it, but I would've turned it over to you."

Sweeney smiled and planted his foot against the wall. "I figured you would. It's good to know that you're a good cop. It makes me feel better about breaking the rules to see you get what you needed."

I narrowed my eyes. "What are we talking about? Telling us the report cleared Gretchen? That's more of a bent rule."

"Nah. I caught your boy, Leo, nosing around the precinct looking for information," he said with a grin. "After I sweated him a bit, I realized who he was, why he was hanging around, and what he was looking for. So I gave it to him and kicked his sorry ass out the door. Not that I'll ever admit it."

"Elvis?" I asked incredulously. "*You* gave the CSI stuff to Leo?" I wasn't easy to surprise, but Sweeney had just surprised the hell out of me.

"Yeah, I did. Otherwise you'd still be twisting in the wind, waiting for Jerk-off to hand it over. Hell, you'd be waiting for it for a long time. He really wanted this trial. Now he just looks like the idiot he really is."

"Yeah," I said, suddenly uncomfortable. Partly because I understood why he'd done it; Sweeney reminded me a bit too much of myself, a good cop pushing back against burnout. And partly because I dealt better with people when I didn't owe them. I liked it much better when they owed me. "Thanks. I won't forget it. If you need something, give me a call, and I'll see what I can do to even us up."

"We'll see," he said. His grin didn't waver as he pushed off the wall, and I realized that he knew exactly what I was thinking. He confirmed it when he added, "I like being in the plus column, so I'll just let it ride for now." He stared at me for a moment. "Don't make the mistake of thinking this makes us pals. I don't like you and I don't like what your kind are doing to the concept of marriage, but I couldn't let an innocent woman

take the hit. You go home and take care of her. Remember her, and don't get screwed up at home like most cops do. Spend time with her. You've seen the job destroy relationships. It'll happen to you, too, if you aren't careful."

I stared at him, totally at a loss for words. He fired off a casual salute, sauntered to the stairs and was gone before I could figure out how to respond. I shook my head as I realized I actually liked the son of a bitch.

Gretchen tapped me on the shoulder and I turned to look at her. "Zieter went back in to get certified copies of everything. He said he'll have them to us by tomorrow, and we can go home." She pulled me into a tight hug. "I'm so proud of you. You showed all of them who's the top dog."

"I just spotted the inconsistencies," I said with a shrug. "The CSI unit would've pulled that out in the final report. At least, I'm pretty sure they would."

"Well, I don't care about them," Gretchen said with a kiss, her eyes smoldering. "You're the one who found it first. You're the one who saved me, Hawk. Thank you. Now, let's go home so I can show you exactly how grateful I am. It's time to celebrate, honey!"

That sounded just right.

We were walking in the door when Lisa called to tell us they had made it home safely. She was ecstatic when I told her the case was closed and Gretchen was off the hook. She, just like Gretchen, told me she was sure I'd solve it. It was embarrassing.

I had just started to give Lisa the details when Hans came out and Gretchen rushed into his arms.

"Daddy," she called, "Hawk did it. She solved the case! It's over!"

Hans held her and I told Lisa and Hans what happened at the same time. Hans was obviously overjoyed that Gretchen had been cleared, but I could tell that the news about Kat killing Cartwright weighed on him, too. Gretchen must have seen it, too. With a look to me, she pulled Hans into the Brown Room - to talk, I expected. I was glad to see them taking the first steps towards repairing their relationship. It had taken years to destroy, and would certainly take some time to heal.

After another minute or two, I told Lisa goodbye and wandered up to our bedroom. I

sat on the edge of the bed and thought about what Sweeney had said during his parting comment. Cop marriages broke up on such a regular basis, it was almost a given, a cliché. Homicide was among the worst for it, too. The days and nights were long, and family time was sometimes hard to get on a consistent basis.

I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, frowning, thinking. I was still there when Gretchen came in a little later. She sat down next to me and reached out for my hand.

"You look like you've been thinking," Gretchen said, her eyes twinkling. "Haven't you done your share of that today?"

I rolled over on my side and shook my head. "No. I've only just *really* started thinking."

"Well, *that* sounds ominous. Why don't you elaborate on that."

"We were going to have our talk tonight, but I think I'm ready for it now," I said. "Something Sweeney said got me thinking about what I want and what's really important. I want to have my say before we start arguing."

"Are we going to argue?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we're going to argue, but probably not what you're expecting us to argue about." I sat up and pulled her into my arms and kissed her softly before I pulled away and got a chair to sit on. The back of the chair was placed defensively in front of me.

"You don't have to move," Gretchen objected. "We can both sit and talk on the bed."

"I want to be able to focus on what I'm thinking and saying, and I want us to have a good view of each other," I said. "Body language and all. The first thing I need to explain is what happened last night. Three years ago, I was in a committed relationship with another cop, Sharon. We lived together until she left me for another cop - a man - I think she'd been seeing him on the side for awhile. She wanted a family, and I couldn't provide that for her. I'm sure she dropped hints, but I just wasn't ready to listen. Or I didn't want to believe what I was hearing. When she left I was lost - adrift and devastated. I tripped over those emotions again last night."

Gretchen's eyes misted, and she nodded. "Lisa told me about Sharon. You felt rejected again."

I smiled sadly. "I should have known better, but I let my desires get in front of what was best for everyone. I wanted so badly to have all the people I love together and, in my usual way, I just bulled ahead until I ran into a wall."

"It'll happen when the time is right," Gretchen reassured me. "Lisa's right. We need to establish ourselves as a married couple just as much as they do. Then, when *we're* solid, we can have sex with them, and it'll be about fun and friendship."

I nodded. "I know, but you deserved to hear *me* tell you about Sharon, about why that landmine from my past went off last night." I felt tears sting my eyes and looked to the floor. Quietly, I added, "And part of me worries that one day you'll find someone to give you a family and leave, too."

"Oh, Hawk!" She jumped to her feet and pulled me into her arms. "No, don't go down that road. You're my family now, and you have *our* baby inside you. If you're worried that I might want my own rug rat, one way or another, I can get pregnant without having to be without you. I know it's hard to understand, even for me. Even though we only met a few weeks ago, even though I'd never considered a lesbian relationship, I love you. I love you so deeply that I can't imagine living without you."

I felt my stomach unknot slowly. I hadn't even realized it was all clenched up. Fighting back my tears, I held her and kissed her. "I suppose once bitten, twice shy," I said softly into her ear. Then I pushed back and looked into her eyes. "You thanked me for saving you, but Gretchen, in truth, you're the one who has saved me. Thank you for loving me, for telling me, for talking to me."

Gretchen hugged me tight for a long, long moment, and then she let me go and sat back down on the edge of the bed. "If we're having problems, Hawk, you won't have to guess. I'll be telling you, screaming at you, hitting you over the head if I need something or want something, and I expect the same in return. No psychic estrogen 'you should have known' or subtle hints. We both have to promise to just come out and tell each other what we're feeling."

I sat down again and gave her a lop-sided smile. "You've been less than forthcoming in the last week about some of the things driving you and so have I. I think the idea of either of us spilling our guts just because of *this* is wishful thinking. We've both built walls to protect ourselves and we're going to have to work our way past them."

"One step at a time," Gretchen agreed. "We each need to pick a place to start and let each other in as fast as we're comfortable with. Now's my turn. I know you have issues

with me sleeping with my clients."

I nodded. "Yes, I do, and you have issues with me telling you what to do about it. Well, I spoke to a friend," I paused, smiled as I realized how warm that word made me feel, "someone who loves me, and this friend explained something important to me. I'm not going to demand, but I do want to ask, *ask* you to not have sex with anyone but me until we are settled, until..."

"Okay," she interrupted me.

"Okay?" I parroted stupidly.

"Yes, okay" she affirmed. "I won't sleep professionally with anyone else from now on. Though, like Ted and Lisa, I hope we can find some interesting people to share with each other on occasion. I *do* like men, too, and I know I'm not alone in that," she added with a wicked smile. "I'll cut back on my client list as well. Maybe even quit entirely someday."

I stared at her, my mouth agape. "Honey, that wasn't what I asked for! I..."

She placed a finger on my lips. She smiled serenely at me. "Shhh. It's okay, Hawk. I never would have offered it as long as you demanded it, but you trusted me - loved me enough to *ask*. I've never had anyone love me that much before. My clients will have to learn to live without me in their beds."

"Honey, I do love you, but I don't understand," I said. "Still, I don't think you need to make radical, life-altering decisions like this on the spur of the moment. Let's just go with things as they are for a few months and then talk about it again."

Gretchen said nothing for a moment and then nodded. "Okay. We said we would find someplace to start letting the other inside our walls. This is as good as any. You see, all my life, someone was telling me what I had to do, how I had to behave. When I was a kid, it was my mother and father and I did what they wanted, what they told me to do. Later it was Kat, and my father caved to whatever Kat wanted to do for the sake of peace." She wiped her face and stared at the ceiling. "I slept with one of my friends when I was fifteen. I discovered that I could get affection and feel loved even by someone I wasn't *in* love with. It became a means to control my own life, at least the aspects I could control. Defiance and connection; I had one only with the other."

I slipped off the chair and sat beside her, taking her into my arms. She wept softly, but

she didn't break down.

"When I graduated from high school, I moved out and went to Nevada to put my mouth where my money was, so to speak," she said through the tears. "Just like you have associations with being a cop and they are important to you, being an escort has some for me. In a lot of way it was the happiest part of my life, until I met you."

"And that's fine," I said softly. "Some things are too important to force on someone else. I'll support you in whatever you want to do in life, unless you plan to be a felon and then I'll beat you."

Gretchen laughed and hugged me again. "I'm sure you would, too."

Kissing her forehead, I pulled back a little. "That brings me to the next thing I've decided. You don't need to move to Houston, if you don't want to. I'm turning in my badge."

"What?!?" she said, alarmed. "You don't need to do that, Hawk. I'll worry, but I won't ask you to give up what you love. You don't have to do this just because I'm going to quit my job! Didn't you just say we shouldn't make rash, life-altering decisions?"

"I did, but you don't know what it's like being married to a cop," I said. "The hours I put in are killer. I've seen people who love each other get torn apart because of it, and I won't do that to us. There is nothing else I could do that's more important than us." I took a deep breath and covered her lips with mine as she started to speak. I kissed her enthusiastically and thoroughly, but I didn't let the kiss deepen or linger. When I broke off, I said, "No, it's the right decision, and it has nothing to do with what you decide to do about your job. I'd already decided before you walked in the room. I can find something else to do. I have a private investigator's license in Texas and can probably get one like it in Nevada. Vegas is your home and it's going to be ours as well. I won't ask you to leave it for me, even though I know you would."

"Well, I guess I can't make you," she admitted, "but I don't want you to resent me for this. If you do, I bet we can find something more classy than following cheating husbands around and taking pictures of them at sleazy motels. We can make this work in Houston, or you could transfer to Vegas and stay being a cop."

I shook my head. "No, since I'm going to have a baby, it's the right time. I could ask for a desk job and get it, but I'd rather walk out at the top of my game. If you want to stay in Vegas, we need to make a trip down to Houston so I can get some of my things and

pack up the rest. And you need to see Ted's vineyard. That and meet his family. His brother, sister and host of nephews. Plus I've got a few *friends* to introduce you to, just so you have an idea of what being a 'lesbian' is like."

"That should be educational. You don't need get rid of anything. Vegas will always be there and I'd rather live with you in Houston near our friends. We'll find a bigger place there and you should keep your place as a security blanket. God knows we all need a place to get away to at some point or another."

I laughed. "You haven't seen my couch. I think most of the furniture needs to be donated to Goodwill, even if we do live in Houston. There are some pieces I want to keep and some clothes and knick knacks. And my Harley. It's no sports car, but it's mine."

"Should I get a leather jacket or a shirt that says 'Hawk's Bitch'?" she asked with a laugh. "Or get my own bike and learn to ride? A tattoo, maybe?"

"I have one at home that says 'If you can read this, the bitch fell off'," I said with a grin. We laughed for a moment and then Gretchen surged to her feet.

"I think this is enough serious conversation for one day," she said imperiously, pulling me to her. "It's time to celebrate. Now we can get to know one another without some crisis over our heads. I told Vanessa to take Kirk out to dinner. I told her that he loved her and she needed to take a chance. It took half an hour of cajoling, but she's going. Then I told Daddy and Ivan to get out. Devon is off for an evening on the town with an old friend of mine that I think he'll find entertaining, so that's everyone. We're here all alone. If the phone rings, we ignore it."

"Just one question. How's your father doing?"

Gretchen sighed. "Not great. He is overjoyed for me and distraught over Kat. The fact that she could kill is making him second guess everything he ever thought he knew about her. The one thing I know about my daddy, though, is that he will work through it and come out whole. It helps that I'm back in the house, and happy." She cocked her head and looked at me. "We're all going to be happy, Hawk, and if you'll just shut up, I'll show you just how happy you can be right now!"

I felt my heart skip a beat and then speed up. A familiar warmth began seeping into my belly. "That sounds very promising. Did you get our bag from Lurch?"

Gretchen laughed. "Yes, and he was horribly embarrassed. You got him dead on with that call. I had him put the bag in the closet, right behind you."

"Then, let's get it out and give our toys a test drive," I purred. "I'm not letting you go for quite a while."

Gretchen grabbed the bag and set it next to the bed before taking me into her arms and kissing me deeply and thoroughly. Our bodies molded together tightly and I let my hands roam across her back and down to her firm ass. Her kisses became more heated and more aggressive as our embrace continued until I thought I was going to run out of air.

I finally had to force her back so I could breathe. "God, I'm on fire," I moaned. "I want you so badly. I need you. I love you."

Gretchen took my face between her hands and kissed me softly. "I never expected to love anyone," she whispered. "I love you, Shauna." I decided then and there that Gretchen had an exemption to the 'No Shauna' rule. Hearing her use my name made me ache for her and turned me on even more.

With a slow certainty that hadn't been there the first time, Gretchen began unbuttoning my blouse, kissing down the side of my neck as she exposed my chest. Then she kissed down to the top of my bra-covered breasts, making me pant with desire.

"Let's see if I can manage this right this time," she said with a sly smile. Her hands encircled me and she had the bra loose in a few seconds.

"Passable," I conceded, "but you need to practice until you can do it one handed in the dark with your mouth full."

"Full of what," she asked, a glint of devilishness dancing in her eyes.

"This," I said, grabbing her and kissing her hard, my tongue forcing it's way in past her soft lips to possess her mouth, dueling with her lightning fast tongue. One of my hands pulled her blouse partly up and made room for my other hand to snake back and pop her bra loose with a practiced twist of the fingers. Then I let those same fingers trail up and down her spine, raising goose bumps and spawning delighted shivers throughout her body.

"You know just how to light my fire," she groaned, breaking our kiss to pull her blouse

and bra off, showing me those wonderful pink-tipped tits.

"Now, I'm going to make love to you slowly until I have you screaming for me to let you come," I said reaching over for the bag. "Close your eyes and give yourself to me," I whispered seductively.

Gretchen smiled and closed her eyes. They stayed that way right up until I slid the padded handcuffs through the headboard and snapped them around her wrists. Then her eyes popped open in a hurry.

I smiled my predator's smile, powerful and sure. "My, my, look what we have here - a beautiful woman totally under my control." The momentary tension in her body melted at once.

"Oh, please, Mistress Shauna. Don't hurt me," Gretchen said with feigned terror. "I'll do whatever you tell me, just don't hurt me."

"I'll do whatever I like, and you'll enjoy it," I assured her. "But there is one rule. If you want me to stop something, we need a safety word. The word for tonight is 'orange'. That way you can have all the fun you want playing the scene and still stop me if you're uncomfortable. Okay?"

Gretchen swallowed and nodded.

"Now," I said getting back to business, "the first thing I'm going to do is have my fill of these nice, firm breasts."

I kissed my way down her chest, using my teeth to gently nip her and my warm breath to tease her. I sucked her nipples to hardness and experimented till I found out just how hard to bite them to make her thrash around the bed and start begging me to do more.

"Oh, God!" she moaned, her head going from side to side, putting her hair into a state of wild disarray and her back arching with need. "I need you now, Hawk. Take me!"

I laughed throatily. "I don't think so. You're completely in my power, and I'm not ready to let you come just yet."

She groaned in anguished need. "But Hawk!"

"Is my little slave girl going to be bad?" I asked sternly. "I don't think she wants Mistress Shauna to punish her, does she?"

Gretchen laughed and shook her head. "No, Mistress Shauna. I'll be good, but I need..."

I silenced her with a kiss. "This isn't about what you need, my little slave. I'll tell you when I'm ready to see you come, and it won't be anytime soon."

That elicited another anguished groan that I made louder by going back to her sensitive breasts.

By the time I was done with them Gretchen had her legs clamped together and was thrusting her hips to get friction against her pants. I judged she wasn't too far from reaching glory, so I kissed my way down her belly and undid her snap with my teeth. As I pulled her zipper down the same way with an almost cruel slowness, she writhed uncontrollably.

"Yes! Oh, yes!" she said hoarsely, her eyes wild in the tangle of blonde hair. "I'm so close!"

I chuckled evilly and took off her shoes, pants and panties. "I bet you are, but I'm not ready for you to come yet." The truth was, the scent of her arousal was making my mouth water and my clit throb. I wanted to dive in between her legs so badly that I almost gave in. But I didn't.

"Before I allow you to come," I continued, "you'll be seeing to my pleasure. Then, if you do well enough, I might, *might* let you come."

"Oh, God!!!" she almost screamed. "Hawk, please! Please?"

"Bad little slave," I said. "I'm not Hawk. I'm Mistress Shauna and while those restraints are on, you better keep that in mind." I stood up and stripped all my clothes off slowly while she watched me through lust filled eyes, panting heavily. My panties were so wet they clung to me.

Once I was ready, I climbed back on the bed and sat gently with my butt on the top of her breasts, my knees straddling her arms and head. I reached down and grabbed her hair with both hands and pulled her face to my sex, being careful not to hurt her.

"Eat me, slave," I commanded. "Make me come hard enough and you'll get to come."

Fail me, and I'll just leave you chained up for the night."

Gretchen dove in tongue first, more ferocious than I expected. Her eyes burned into mine as she dug as deeply inside me as she could and then did all kinds of things to raise my heart rate.

I threw my head back, grinding her lips into mine, mouth to sex, and rode her unabashedly for my own pleasure. In what seemed like less than a minute, I was struck by lightning, my body trembling convulsively as I came. As it steamrolled over me, I looked back down into her blue eyes, and she saw all the way into my soul.

Gretchen's head fell back to the pillow and she panted right along with me. Never taking my eyes off hers, I licked her neck and started kissing my way down her glorious body. "You've done well, my loyal minion, and now you will be rewarded," I purred.

Her entire body twitched under my touch as I made my way south with glacial slowness. As I settled between her thighs, Gretchen arched her back and thrust herself at me, groaning again with need. I kissed her inner thighs and damp mound. The heady scent of her arousal almost made me groan.

Spreading her labia with my fingers, I slowly ran my tongue from the base of her sex to her clit. I don't know what word to use for the sound she made, but I was willing to bet it meant she approved. When I slipped two fingers inside her and began thrusting, I discovered she wasn't just wet, she was soaked. I grinned as I continued giving her head. This was what it was all about. The feel of her heels rubbing my back and urging me on was the stuff dreams were made of.

Taking my time and slowing as necessary, I made sure it was a long, slow climb up the mountain for my wife. I wanted her to think she'd had a stroke when she came. She begged and pleaded with me, but I stuck to my guns. When she finally came, her heels beat a tattoo of unimaginable pleasure on my back; I thought her thighs would pull my head off my shoulders. She screamed and her body went crazy, twisting and trembling.

When she collapsed, I didn't give her any peace. She told me to stop, but I sucked my way through her sensitivity and brought her to a simmering boil again and again. The orgasms coming one after another until she was in the groove and having the proverbial multiple orgasms. Then, after she was a pile of raw nerve endings, I kissed my way up her body and reached for the keys. She didn't resist as I freed her from her bondage or do more than make mewling noises when I took her in my arms to kiss her softly.

After a little while, when she could finally speak, Gretchen murmured in my ear. "I had no idea you could do that to me, Lover. If that's the reward, I'll be your little slave girl any time you like. That was mean, tying me up like that. I thought when you said some mild bondage, you meant me tying you up."

"Variety is the spice of life," I quipped. "You get to have your revenge the next time and tie me up for your pleasure."

Gretchen got up and stretched like a cat, and then pounced on me with all the energy that great sex can give a woman. Surprised, I struggled, but she had my hands locked cross-wise in the restraints before I could get any leverage.

"Next time is now," she purred in her own pleased tones. "I'm not done with you yet, my pretty."

I watched her climb off the bed with some alarm. The cuffs didn't hurt, but I wasn't used to being helpless. Inside, part of me started to panic a little bit, but I quashed it. I trusted Gretchen with my life. The part of me that was used to being in control gave way to another part of me that wanted - no, needed - her to take me, to use me.

"How does this thing fit on?" Gretchen said, picking up the mid-sized strap-on dildo. "Ah, I see. Never mind." She slid it on and stood there beside me, her artificial erection bobbing gently near my head.

Gretchen grabbed my hair and used her other hand to rub the latex across my lips. "Suck my cock, Bitch." She said, both calmly and with a thread of lust in her voice. "Suck it like it was Ted's. Make it nice and wet, because in a few minutes, I'm going to fuck you with it."

I opened my mouth and took it partway in, making it slick with my saliva. The nerves that ran between my mouth and my pussy were working just fine, as I was suddenly on fire again. I bobbed my head and quickly found myself lost in the sensation of giving head. I was so into it. I was surprised when she pulled back and got on the bed. She rolled me over, so that the cuffs were uncrossed and I was on my elbows and knees.

"Now, my love, now I get to fuck the shit out of you," Gretchen said as she settled in between my legs. "I bet you thought you would get to use this first, didn't you? Well, turn about being fair play. I thought I would learn all about this myself."

She worked the head of the lifelike dildo slowly up and down the length of my sex,

thoroughly exciting me. Then, gently, she inserted it into me an inch at a time, one slow thrust after another, until its length was buried deep inside me. I found myself thrusting back against her and my internal muscles grasping the welcome intruder. Her hands grabbed me by the hips and she began fucking me.

The sound of her hips slapping against mine sent a blast of heat through me and I lost control. The feeling of being bent over and used was both humiliating and incredibly arousing. She kept up a running commentary on how sexy I was, how she enjoyed being inside me, how she was going to make me come so hard that the top of my head was going to explode.

She got her revenge on me for making her come again and again by fucking me right through my orgasms. Riding over my groans to take me higher and higher until I was on fire from the hair on my head to my toes. When she finally slipped out of me and allowed me to collapse, I was a twitching mass of flesh.

I could hardly focus on her, but I saw her standing next to the bed and tried to raise my hands, to let her set me free.

She leaned over and kissed me gently. "I see you want loose, but I'm not done yet. How can guys do this for so long? I have muscles aching that I didn't even know I had. This fucking business is more work for guys than I gave them credit for."

Watching on in a pleasure fogged, but confused state, I wondered what she was talking about. Gretchen pulled off the strap-on and replaced the thrusting head with the small one. My eyes widened in shock. She was going to fuck me up the ass!

"Uh, Gretchen..." I started.

Gretchen covered my lips with her finger. "I'll be gentle, but right now, you don't have a choice. You're mine to use as I see fit. You're under *my* control, Hawk. Unless you'd like to call an 'orange' about it."

Her voice rekindled the lust in me and I nodded, though I still had my misgivings. I'd taken it up the ass before, but it had been a while. She stepped into the bathroom and came back out with some water-based lube, using her hand to cover the small prick completely and jack off for me at the same time. "I want you to feel as good as I do, Hawk, and for that, I want to leave you so sated that you can hardly walk."

As she moved back behind me, I buried my face in the pillow. Either I was going to

scream in pain or pleasure. Maybe both.

I jumped a little as her cold, slick finger worked inside me, lubricating my ass for her. I focused on relaxing the rings of muscle for the ride ahead. I blanked my mind and was pretty open when she began working the small dildo into me. The sudden feeling of fullness and her control made me groan in pleasure, but she instantly stopped.

"Are you okay?" she asked with some concern.

"Yeah, never better," I husked. "Go slow, but don't stop. I'll tell you when to go faster.

Gretchen worked herself into my ass one thrust at a time until she was all the way inside me. Then she began slowly thrusting into me, letting me adjust to the feeling of fullness.

In a few minutes, I was telling her to go faster and faster until she was pounding me hard and deep. The wild mixture of feelings that were rushing through me, along with the amazingly pleasurable sensations, made me do something I'd never done before, though I'd seen Gretchen do it. I threw my head back and screamed my pleasure.

My wife kept riding me, going so far as to reach up along my back and take two handfuls of my hair and pull my head back.

"Take me," she screamed. "Take all of my love!"

The next orgasm, when it rolled over me, made my vision dim with its intensity. I collapsed under Gretchen and when I could finally focus, she had me out of the cuffs and into her arms.

"Ohmigod, Gretchen," I whispered. "I've never felt like that before." Looking into her eyes, I smiled, at peace. "I love you."

She kissed me softly on the lips. "I love you, Shauna, wife of my heart. Now and forever."

And that was just what I needed and wanted to hear. I was home at long last.

The End

