

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

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To be even clearer, the erotic author portrayed in this book is not a real person. If you think you know someone like him you should immediately rush to their side, hold an intervention and see that they get the counseling they need as soon as possible. If you think the author portrayed bears a striking resemblance to yourself, put this story down at once and call your therapist straight away. For your sake, I hope it's not too late. The author's name is an anagram of a real author, done with his permission and amusement. I swear he's not really like this. In addition, any slurs to the erotic and/or religious community are tongue-in-cheek. Remember, if we can't laugh at ourselves, everyone else will.

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Chapter One: Welcome Aboard

Hawk

Local erotic writer found murdered and sexually mutilated in his home. Is his death connected to the weeklong cruise for erotic writers leaving port today?

That was a good question. I couldn't decide if the newspaper article on page eight of the local Miami rag was trying to make me feel good or bad. It might be good because it was something for me to stick my nose into. Or it might be bad since it reminded me of the work I loved but had left behind for my family. Lieutenant Shauna "Hawk" Hawkins was no more. Over a decade as a cop and the last seven as a homicide detective in Houston had come to an unexpected halt when I met the woman of my dreams and we got married. The choice, though painful, had been surprisingly easy to make. Gretchen Werner won hands down. I couldn't imagine a time or situation where that wouldn't be true, and I suddenly felt myself choking up as I thought about how happy I was to have her.

Pulling myself back together, I folded the paper and stuck it into my bag on the luggage cart, deciding not to tell Gretchen. It would only make her worry, and she mothered me when she worried. I'd best keep her distracted.

"Making me watch *The Poseidon Adventure* before going on a cruise was just sick," I told Gretchen as we walked slowly through the boarding arm toward the waiting ship. I took in the swank carpeting and, through the large windows, the incredible white ship we were about to board.

This behemoth was like a floating city. It was over a thousand feet long, almost two hundred feet across, fifteen decks high and could hold six thousand passengers and crew. It gleamed the way only new cars, and apparently, new boats could. We were on its maiden voyage - like the *Titanic*, my jaded internal voice whispered.

We could've made better time if I wasn't so fat. I felt like a beached whale. I'd forgotten what my feet looked like months ago. Still, even with the bloating and back pain, being pregnant with twins wasn't as rough as I'd feared it would be. I was still able to do some things for myself, when Gretchen let me anyway, and my libido was in overdrive and showed no signs of fading.

"Oh, come on," Gretchen said with a wink as she slowly pushed the rented luggage cart piled with our bags. "You had a choice. It wasn't like I *made* you pick that movie. And you shouldn't bust my chops like this when you're making me turn down every offer of assistance with these bags because of your damned stubborn pride."

My wife could be a riot when she felt like it so I saved my glare. It would only encourage her. "Sure, I had a choice. You let me choose between *The Poseidon Adventure* and *Titanic*. Save it for someone that doesn't know how evil you are, because I've got your number. And I'd be pushing that cart if you'd let me, so deal with it."

"I still didn't make you sit there and watch it," Gretchen said piously. Then she grinned. "And taking our own bags is fine by me because it makes all the cruise people bug their eyes out."

I'd found something with the tall, gorgeous blonde that had eluded me my entire life and that even today still made my head spin - contentment. The fact that we'd never intended to marry in the first place didn't seem to matter. After seven and a half months together, we'd bonded so deeply on an emotional level that I'd even accepted that she was rich and, that as a high-priced escort, Gretchen would occasionally be sleeping with men for money. She hadn't, yet, but looking inside, I found very little jealousy or pain about the idea. Mostly, it was because I knew that if and when she did, she'd be sleeping with these men for pleasure, but I knew that that was *all* it would be. She would always come back to me. I knew Gretchen was mostly heterosexual, but I also knew it would never affect our love.

She hadn't done it yet because we'd agreed till now to be monogamous, but I could see the growing need in her. With Ted and Lisa, she could get her first taste of a man in almost a year, and I could feel a jealous bump inside me just thinking about it. A small one. I frowned as I realized that because I knew Ted, a bit of jealousy was there, whereas I felt little over the faceless, nameless men Gretchen might sleep with in the future. It made no real sense to me right now, so I filed the thought away for contemplation later. Besides, since I knew the father of our unborn children would be in my arms, too, it would be catty to get upset about it and it wasn't that much jealousy.

The thin man that pushed around us at a fast walk and bumped into me disrupted my reply. I only caught a glimpse of his face as I recovered my balance from the impact. With a grimace of distaste, I resumed my slow pace. I hated being fat and slow. Half a year ago, I'd have his skinny ass flat against the wall. Of course, back then I'd have had a badge to shove in his face, too.

That thought still brought a tingle of frustrated pain to me, but walking away from the badge was the right thing to do. I had a family now, and sharing them with the workload and stress of being a homicide cop was begging for disaster. Cops who worried about taking risks because of their family got themselves killed, and cops who didn't allow their families to get in the way of the job mostly lost those families. Neither

alternative had been attractive to me, so when the pregnancy offered me an out, I took it. Since then, Gretchen had been urging me to become a high-paid security consultant, but I still wanted to taste the streets, not protect huge corporations or the idle rich - Gretchen excluded, of course.

It wasn't as if we had to worry about money, anyway. I could do whatever I wanted regardless of the pay and still live like a queen, as if I would. I'd rather be a hog-riding, crime-fighting bitch on the streets taking down a killer. The huge trust fund that her father had started with a hundred million dollars when she was born might be nice for Gretchen but it didn't mean that much to me, even if it was now worth more than two billion dollars. Though I had to admit that while money might not bring you happiness, it sure didn't hurt.

I shook my head and cleared the cobwebs. Being pregnant had made me stupid, I think. My attention wandered at the oddest moments. How could I lose track of being pissed at the jerk ahead of us so fast? He was five ten, one sixty dripping wet, with a bad canned tan. His hair was collar length and dyed dark. The roots hinted that he was a ratty blond. He was dressed oddly for the Florida heat and humidity, wearing a wool jacket with suede elbow patches and a turtleneck sweater underneath it. The slacks he had on were dark wool, pressed acceptably well and matched his black patent-leather shoes. He wore it almost like a uniform and it suggested something to me but I couldn't quite place the look. Mostly he just looked hot - and stupid.

"Excuse me," a tired voice said from behind us. I half-turned and found a young woman in a halter-top and shorts behind us. She was in her early twenties, about 5'10", slender with a muscular tone and all in proportion - except for her breasts. They were at least a DD cup. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and emerald green eyes. She also had curves in all the right places, including some very sensuous hips. She was struggling along with three suitcases without the benefit of a luggage cart and tottering along in 5" strappy stilettos.

"Do you need some help with that?" Gretchen asked. "Put them on our cart and we'll get you to your room without a hernia."

With a grateful smile, the woman loaded her bags on top of ours. "I'll push it as my way of saying thanks. I'm Trish."

Trish looked like she needed to consider a larger tank top. Her considerable bosom put the material to a serious structural integrity test every time she breathed.

"Sure," I said. "I'm Hawk and this is Gretchen."

Trish smiled at both of us and pulled the cart up behind the jerk. The ship's officer had just finished his check-in procedure and now turned to gesture into the interior of the ship. "Welcome onboard the Imperial Caribbean Lines ship *Deep Blue Sea*, Mister Niccio," he said in a smooth, Italian-accented voice. "Have a very pleasant cruise. If there is anything we can do to help you at all, please don't hesitate to ask any crewmember."

The jerk turned with the officer, and I got my first good look at his face. He had a nose that was genetically unfortunate; it was a beak and made his already beady eyes look like they were way too close together. His tanned face didn't hide his pimples either. On the whole, he looked like a grown-up teenage geek and his attitude just screamed "snooty."

With a smile that was so fake it just made my teeth ache, the jerk shook his head. "You've just fallen prey to a common misconception, my good man. You should never use *onboard* unless you are indeed onboard. It would be more correct to welcome me *aboard*. As Samuel Clemens once said, 'The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between the lightning and the lightning-bug.' You would probably know him better as Mark Twain."

His condescending tone made me want to run over him with the cart and leave my boot prints all over his cheesy ass, so I suppose it was just as well I wasn't the one pushing it.

The officer looked nonplussed, and I thought the jerk wasn't even right. I made a mental note to check later, just to be sure, but I was sure the two words meant the same thing.

"I've checked us *aboard*, Trish," he said with a pleased-looking smirk. "Get our bags, and we'll get settled in."

Trish sighed and reached for the bags before Gretchen put her hand on top of the pile, looking a bit outraged at the jerk. "You're not going to make her carry your luggage."

The jerk smiled, seemingly immune to her anger. "I can't carry such heavy bags. I'm a writer, you see. I can't afford to put any undue strain on my hands." He wiggled his fingers demonstratively at Gretchen. "And in any case, that's one of the things my dear Trish is here for."

"Well, she's not carrying all your bags by hand across the ship," I said acerbically. "If you can't strain your dainty little hands, you'll just have to move at the speed of the slowest person with the cart. Me." I made note of his occupation and wondered if he was here for the erotic writer's convention. The suspicious part of me measured him as a murder suspect and found that it liked the view. I'd be checking up on him soon.

He shook his head, sighing theatrically. "That simply won't do. I have important people to meet and I don't have time to dawdle." He handed two room keys over to the glum-looking Trish. "Keep the key to your room, unpack my bags in my room and see that everything is put away as described in the instructions you'll find in the larger bag. Then you can return my key to me in the Camelot Club Casino on the fourth deck. Ta." With that, he sauntered into the ship's lobby without a backward glance, leaving us gaping at his retreating back.

Gretchen looked as pissed as I felt and even the ship's officer seemed stunned. The only one that didn't look surprised was Trish. She looked resigned.

"Oh. My. God," Gretchen ground out between her clenched teeth. "That so did not just happen!" She turned to Trish. "Please, the way he was ordering you around, tell me that you're not some kind of slave of his."

Trish shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I am, kind of, but it's only for the week."

"What the hell did you do? Lose a bet?" I asked. "You should've gone with being tarred, feathered and then left naked in the town square under a sign that told everyone you're a Milli Vanilli fan. It would have been less humiliating."

Trish sighed and shook her head at me as Gretchen handled getting us checked in. "No, it was nothing like that. I couldn't afford a cruise on my own, and when Mister Niccio offered to pay my way in exchange for services, I thought it was a good deal. Now, well, now I'm not so sure."

"Please tell me that 'services' don't include the more personal kind," I begged her. "I'm prone to throwing up in my condition and that's not playing fair."

"Ewww!" Trish exclaimed. Her look of horror was a relief. "That is so gross! No way!"

"Well, that's a relief, at least," I said dryly. "Then, if you don't mind me asking, what exactly do you mean by 'services'?" I watched Gretchen out of the corner of my eye and saw that both she and the ship's officer were paying some attention to our

conversation. He was also starting to frown at our cart. I'd have bet all I had, by now a considerable amount, that he had noticed which cabin we were in, and was therefore wondering why minions hadn't already relieved us of our bags. If he had known me, then he'd know it wasn't from a lack of trying on the part of the line's shore staff; I was just stubborn, sometimes. And as hot and tired as I was, stupidly so.

"I'm supposed to be arm candy for a few hours every evening while he does his writer thing," Trish said, bringing my attention back to her. "You know, smile at all the people, and make him look good."

"That won't be easy. Did you get that agreement in writing?" Gretchen asked. She had just taken our key from the officer and now gestured us into the ship.

Trish pushed the cart slowly enough that I didn't have any trouble keeping up. "No, we just talked about it. Why? Should I have gotten it in writing?"

"Well," Gretchen said, "in this case I think you're fine. He has as little proof of any agreement as you do, and he's the one who obviously now expects more than you both agreed to. In the future, if you ever agree to do anything more than basic escort work, get it in writing. In addition, get your money up front. If the client wants more than agreed to and pushes you for it, either get more money if you're agreeable to what he wants, or walk if you're not."

Trish blinked at Gretchen. "Wow. I never would have thought of all that. Are you a lawyer?"

Gretchen laughed and shook her head. "God, no! I used to be an escort before I got married, though." She smiled at me and my insides melted. I smiled back. "I suppose I still am," she continued, "but I'm more focused on my family now, so I've been taking a long break. I've been thinking about making that break permanent."

Both Trish and I stiffened in shock. Trish's eyes widened and she looked between us and blushed.

I gave Gretchen a hard, 'we are so going to talk about this later smile,' but she just smiled sweetly back at me. I shook my head and turned to Trish, smiling at her. "Yes, Gretchen and I are married. It's legal in Massachusetts."

"But," Trish said, struggling for the right words, "you're, like, pregnant."

"Really?" I looked down at my swollen belly in mock-surprise. "So I am!" I looked at Gretchen accusingly. "When did that happen?"

Gretchen laughed and covered one of Trish's hands with her own as she gripped the cart. "Don't let Hawk tease you like that. I promise, there's a man hiding in the woodpile somewhere. Come on, the elevator is in this direction."

As she walked, Gretchen looked over her shoulder at me, giving me a long look. "After we eat, I want to go see the medical department and let them take a look at you."

"Could it wait for a bit, Gretchen? I'd like to discuss something with you first." Like what in the nine hells she meant by her far too casual comment. Gretchen never let anything just 'slip,' so she had had a reason for telling me what she was thinking in front of someone else. That reason was also part of what I wanted to discuss with her.

"No, it can't wait," she told me firmly. "We'll have a chance to talk later, but I don't want you to worry about that for now. It's not a big deal, honey."

I rolled my eyes but didn't argue. Imperial Caribbean Cruise Lines had assured us that the doctor and medical staff on board had all the needed skills and equipment ready in case of an early delivery. That was good because Gretchen had threatened to put her foot down about me coming, even if it meant missing the long-delayed get together with Ted and Lisa. We saw them all the time, but this cruise was a special occasion we'd been planning since I'd gotten pregnant. We all finally felt comfortable enough in our own relationships to hook up with each other again. And this time we'd have Gretchen along for the ride. So I knew that if I wanted actually to enjoy the time we had together, I'd better do what she said.

Gretchen led the way toward the elevators. We moved past the glass enclosed, purple lit central lobby as we walked aft along the Promenade. "I asked and you're down on the second deck in the aft of the ship. We'll take you there and let you put your bag away, and then we can put ours away. We'd like for you to join us for lunch, if you feel up to it."

I shielded my surprised look and nodded. What the *hell* was Gretchen up to?

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Trish said, looking down a little. "I can afford my own."

"The meals are covered in the price of the cruise, Trish," Gretchen said, making the right hand turn in the spacious and well-appointed lobby. "All you have to pay for is any

alcohol. If you'd rather not eat with us, we'd understand, so please don't feel pressured. We'd really like to have you join us, however."

Hesitantly, she nodded. "I think I'd like to join you, but I have to unpack Skip's stuff."

"No," Gretchen said flatly, "you don't. You don't even have to take it to his room. We could simply drop his bags off at the counter and say that we think some poor passenger lost them."

Trish laughed, but shook her head. "Oh, I think that might be a bad idea. I do have to get along with him and be with him, for this week, at least. Doing that might upset him."

"Then just leave it on his bed," I said. "Let the twerp unpack his own stuff." I walked up to the bank of elevators and pressed the call button. I followed the girls into the elevator after they had maneuvered the cart inside. With me being a wide load and all, I should felt like I should beep when I backed up.

In seconds, we were on the second deck. The hall looked like any fancy hotel corridor, although this looked much newer. Trish's room and Jerk's were next to each other in the middle of a row of doors on the wall. The two rooms were to the inside of the ship, so there was no balcony for either of them. I remembered Gretchen telling me that this ship had a lot of rooms with an exterior view, and I wondered why the two of them had ended up on the inside. The Jerk was probably just cheap.

"Pick one and get your bag inside, and I'll put Skip's bags inside his," Gretchen said.

Trish shrugged and took the one closest to the elevators. I stepped inside and looked at her room as she set her bag down on the two twin-sized beds pushed together to make one larger bed. It wasn't a bad room. It looked like any number of decent hotel rooms I'd seen, though it was a trifle on the small side. It looked new and had a nice flat-screen TV. She didn't unpack, so she was ready to go before I had a chance to snoop much.

"Are you an escort, too?" Trish asked me as Gretchen came out of the other room, closing the door behind her.

I smiled and shook my head. "Not me. Before I got knocked up I was a cop."

"That sounds interesting," Trish said with a smile as Gretchen led us back to the elevator. "Were you a cop like on *Law and Order*?"

I restrained my grimace. I hated that show. "Something like that. I was a Lieutenant in Homicide."

Her eyes opened even wider than when she found out she was with a married lesbian couple, and she blushed again. "You mean you saw dead bodies?"

I nodded, letting my eyes twinkle. She was such a sweet kid. "Yeah, that sort of goes along with murder investigations."

"Oh, my God," she said with a shudder. "I'd throw up if I had to touch a body. I work at a Hooters Restaurant in Tampa and Skip is one of the regulars there. He asked if I'd trade a little escorting for him taking me on this cruise, and I jumped at the chance. With school and all, I'd never be able to afford to go on one on my own."

I recognized the unconscious need to change the subject that was driving Trish, and I went in the direction she wanted. I put my hand on her shoulder as the elevator rose to the sixth deck. "That's nothing to be ashamed of. I'd throw up if I had to dress in a Hooters' outfit, so we're even." She didn't jerk or pull away from my touch. I guessed she was one of the enlightened few who didn't think lesbianism was contagious and found myself growing to like her.

"I need to take Mister Niccio his key," Trish said uncertainly to Gretchen as we went past the fourth deck.

The door opened and Gretchen gestured out with a flourish. "I left his key in his room, so he can call a purser to let him in. If that ticks him off, tell him I'm responsible. We're in the very back."

Gretchen led us to the very back of the ship. I took the key from her and opened the door. Looking around, I let them unload the bags. The suite was magnificent. It had a monstrous living room, a master bedroom, two smaller bedrooms and a huge balcony. The suite was 1215 square feet with an 810 square foot balcony. The furnishings were very posh and they looked comfortable to me. The master bedroom was on our right as we entered, the balcony doors in front of us and the enormous living room stretched off to our left. I wished I could play the piano - that baby grand looked wonderful. Gretchen could entertain me instead.

Trish stopped dead in her tracks as she took in the living room. "Wow! This is fantastic! It must have cost a bundle!" Then she looked back at us and blushed guiltily. "I didn't..."

"

Gretchen and I laughed.

"It's okay," Gretchen told her with a pat on her cheek. "It did cost a pretty penny. Escorting can pay really well if you do it right." That put Trish in a thoughtful mood, and I didn't see the need to inform her that it also helped when my father-in-law, Hans Werner, was the majority stockholder in Imperial Caribbean Lines.

I wandered out and looked at the balcony while they unloaded the cart. The view was breathtaking, even docked. I watched the swooping gulls and listened to the relaxing crash of waves against the dock. This vacation was *such* a good idea.

The deck furniture was all satin finish, lacquered hardwood, and there was a lot of it, including a big table with seats. We could have quite a party out here. I looked up and over the side. The view was fantastic, and I knew it would only get better when we left port. We were the balcony furthest back on the ship and no one could look at us here. That could make things really fun once Ted and Lisa moved into their room of the suite.

Ted and Lisa Stansbury: a sweeter couple would be hard to imagine, and they were wonderful friends. They had become my lovers after a murder conspiracy tangled us all up and threw us together. I'd introduced the lovely Lisa to women, and Ted had shown me that even a lesbian could enjoy a man. The right man, anyway. I could even love him, in my way. Actually, I loved them both, just nothing like I loved Gretchen.

"Escorting can pay this well?" Trish asked hesitantly as I came back into the suite.

Gretchen nodded. "With your looks, combined with the right skills and connections, you could make more than enough to afford this suite. And that's without even talking about sex for money which, besides being illegal in almost every state, isn't right for everyone," she said frankly. "Though, if you do decide to add sex to the mix, it can be a lot of fun and take your income to the next level."

Trish chewed on her nail for a few seconds and then ventured another question. "If I, like, have some more questions could I talk with you?"

Gretchen smiled and nodded. "Sure. Feel free to ask me anything you like, and I'll give you the lowdown." She slipped her arm around the small of my back. "It's lunchtime. Let's go sample the main dining room and see how long it takes for Ted and Lisa to show up." Her eyes had an evil twinkle in them, and I knew what she was thinking. She

knew I'd been having dreams in the weeks leading up to the cruise, and I was still a little uncomfortable with how prominently Ted featured in them.

"Lunch sounds good," I said, ignoring her jibe. "I have to keep my strength up."

Gretchen put the cart in the hall with a laugh and came back in to get us. With her usual gregarious nature in full force, she slid her other arm around Trish's waist and led us back out of the room and toward lunch. Trish didn't object. Neither Gretchen's hand nor the mention of Ted and Lisa jarred Trish. Her thoughts were really weighing on her mind. Interesting.

Tubers Restaurant was at the rear of the third, fourth and fifth decks, and pretty much under our suite. When the three of us walked in we could tell that the crowd of passengers was picking up as the place was humming along. By the time we sailed in a few hours it might even be crowded. This line made itself different from some of the others by avoiding buffet meals. The restaurants, cafés and dining room were open 24/7. The passengers paid more for the privilege, but I think it was worth it. They also avoided the assigned and timed seating, except for dinner here.

It was a glitzy place with lots of mirrored glass and brass. Crisp white cloth and brightly polished silver covered the many tables scattered throughout the three levels of the dining room. The bottom floor was huge and dwarfed a huge restaurant like Luby's. The upper two floors were basically wide balconies overlooking the lowest floor. Uniformed waiters sped through the rooms like bees going from the hive out to various flowers.

We found a table, sat down, and promptly attracted a 'bee' of our own; a short man, shorter than me by a few inches but very young.

"Welcome to Tubers Restaurant, ladies," he said with the same hint of Italy in his tone as the officer that welcomed us aboard. He immediately handed us menus. "My name is Antonio. Here are the menus. What can I get you to drink?"

I eyed the wide selection of alcoholic beverages with regret. Gretchen hadn't let me drink since the first month I'd gotten pregnant. "Tea," I said, "with lots of lemon."

He nodded and took orders from the other two, as well. "Do you need a few minutes to look over the selection?"

I nodded. "Yeah, give us a few minutes, Tony. Say, are you from Italy?"

He nodded. "Yes, Ma'am. I grew up in Tuscany."

"Is the whole crew Italian? Not that it's a problem or anything," I said with a smile, "but it seems like there is a pattern in the accents."

He grinned at me, his white teeth in sharp contrast to his olive-colored face. "Most of the officers are Italian and a good part of the crewmen, yes. Imperial Caribbean Lines is an Italian company, and they do most of their hiring from Italy. Besides, it sounds more exotic than someone from Brooklyn."

I laughed. "Yeah, I suppose it does. Please, give us a few minutes to settle our minds on the food."

With a short bow, he hurried off, presumably to get our tea.

"There aren't any prices by anything but the drinks," Trish said, looking up. "They're free, right?"

"The food is included in the cruise price except for the items with a price beside them," Gretchen assured her. "I think a soup and salad will work for me," she concluded as she set her menu down.

I eyed the lunch selection and decided the grilled chicken salad would hit the spot. It was hard to find room for food, even though I'd discovered that I was almost always hungry now. I also needed to use the bathroom all the time. I set the menu down and stood up. "I need to go use the bathroom. Order me the grilled chicken salad with Italian dressing, please. I'll be right back."

Gretchen started to rise but I waved her back to her seat and headed for the bathroom. She was such a worrywart. "I'll manage just fine," I called over my shoulder with a laugh.

As usual, taking care of business took longer than before I was pregnant, and it was almost ten minutes before I'd washed my hands and stepped out of the restroom. As I did, a man was stepping out of the men's room. He was older and handsome in a patrician-like way. He was also familiar to me from somewhere. He was familiar in a way that made the hackles on the back of my neck rise. I professionally blocked the sensation and kept my feelings off my face.

"How long until you're due?" he inquired. "Forgive me but I can hardly imagine you being any further along than you already are." His voice triggered an emotional response but his identity still eluded me. It was the voice of a kindly grandfather, or a trusted uncle. Or a politician, my inner cynic said.

I held out my hand to him. "I'm Hawk." As he gently shook my hand, I continued. "I'm carrying twins and I still have almost four weeks until my due date. I won't be going into labor on you," I assured him.

He laughed softly and smiled. "That's reassuring, but I've seen my share of births and babies over the years. I'm not shocked at God's magnificent miracle of birth." My brain clicked and I knew who he was right before he spoke again. "I'm the Right Reverend Billy Swaggwell. I don't mean to keep you, but is Hawk a nickname?"

Reluctantly, I decided I had no choice but to give him my name, even if it was consorting with the enemy. And make no mistake, as congenial as this man seemed, he was the enemy. From his televised pulpit, he railed against the sin of homosexuality and the destruction it was bringing to the country. Admittedly, that was only one of his targets in the "war for the spirit of this great country." Gambling, cable television and its racy shows, pornography, liberalism and anything smacking of pleasure had a place right alongside me in his sights.

"It's a nickname," I admitted. "My last name is Hawkins and I'm not fond of my given name."

"Tell me," he gently commanded. He sounded like a man who was used to others obeying him.

I could have told him to go to hell, but that almost seemed redundant. It would be easier to send him on his way if I cooperated. I didn't have "lesbian" tattooed on my forehead, after all. He didn't know me from Eve.

Though some fanatics disputed my claim to being a lesbian, I wasn't going to strip myself of that label. It had been mine for most of my life. The accusations had flowed fast and furious from a very vocal minority about my pregnancy and made me ready to bash heads. However, cooler heads had held me to the floor while they hauled the activist elements away to safety.

The majority of the lesbian community had closed ranks behind me, to my surprise. A truly astonishing number of them seemed to be pleased that I was going to have a baby

and ecstatic that I was going to be having twins.

"Shauna. My name is Shauna Hawkins, but please just call me Hawk."

He nodded. "I can never argue with the wishes of a lady." Uh huh. "I should return to my lunch and let you on your way, then. It was a pleasure meeting you, and I hope we meet again."

"God's will, Reverend," I said with a straight face. "I do have one question for you, though. This is about the most fancy pleasure cruise available and you're just about the last person I would have expected to find here. Clue a poor girl in, will you?"

At the mention of God, he smiled brightly and nodded. "Even a poor minister in the Lord's service needs a break sometimes," he temporized. "And in this case, I can mix business and pleasure."

That sounded ominous. What could he be up to? "Business?" I prompted.

"God's Work," he assured me. The capital letters were obvious in his tone. "Smiting the works of the Adversary is always a cause for celebration and this ship is hosting the work of the Devil." When he said that, an almost fiery gleam came to his eyes.

Great. I was between the Devil and the *Deep Blue Sea*.

Chapter Two: Meeting New Friends

Ted

Lisa opened the door and I carried her across the threshold while she laughed merrily. The crewman assigned to help us pushed the cart loaded with our luggage into the Presidential Suite on the *Deep Blue Sea*. A quick glance at the living room confirmed Gretchen had been right to say there would be plenty of room for the four of us, even with Hawk as pregnant as a human being could get and still move.

I put Lisa's feet on the floor and she darted off to the bedroom at the far end of the suite. Turning to the smiling purser, I pointed after her. "I think we'll take that room."

"Excellent choice, sir," he said with a subdued grin as he followed her with our luggage.

Shaking my head and smiling to myself, I opened the door to the balcony and was promptly impressed. It was huge. The Miami cityscape spread out before me and the view was amazing. The smell of the sea mixed with the funk of the city was incredible, but not in a good way.

I couldn't see anything other than our suite. There were metal walls blocking off the adjoining balconies and this deck extended so far back that I was almost certain it was over the water below.

I surveyed the wooden furniture and the possibilities percolated through my mind. This cruise promised to be a really fun one. Gretchen was a beautiful woman, and I would have been lying if I said I didn't want her. Hawk wasn't beautiful in the classical sense, but she was *Hawk*. Her personality was so powerful it transformed her good looks into something memorable. And the fact she was pregnant - with *my* children no less! - made her glow in a way that was indescribable.

I shook my head and walked back inside. As beautiful as Hawk and Gretchen were, they didn't hold a candle to Lisa. The sound of her voice directing the purser sent a tingle up my spine and caused an involuntary shiver. I had such a powerful, if momentary, vision of Lisa bent over the rail, me gently making love to her from behind, that it threatened to overwhelm me before I pushed it back. Oh, yes, this was going to be a magnificent cruise.

The lack of a kitchen was going to bother me, but for this week, I'd just have to get used to someone else doing the cooking. On the plus side, the master bath was awesome. The whirlpool bath was big enough to seat all four of us and still leave plenty of room for playing around.

That brought my mind back around to Hawk and Gretchen. Actually, it brought my mind around to Hawk and the impending arrival of the twins. I still wasn't sure what to call them. I wasn't sure if I would be their father, after all. Would I be Uncle Ted? Would I just be a friend of the family? Or would Hawk tell them I *was* their father? And even if she did tell them, would she also allow me truly to be a father to them? How would Lisa feel if Hawk did? And what about Gretchen? How would she feel about Hawk and me sharing this bond?

I sighed and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs in the living room, my hand

automatically finding the remote for the big, flat panel TV, clicking it on and seeing some football game. Watching TV wasn't high on my list of pastimes but it gave me a place to forget momentarily my worries. Even with Hawk and Gretchen's obvious friendship, I still didn't know how they saw me or where I stood. How we all stood with each other. This week was going to see a lot of things settled and I only hoped it settled my mind, too.

The purser interrupted my thoughts as he came out with the now empty cart and headed for the door. I tipped him and he left with a smile.

Lisa came out once we were all alone and immediately dropped into my lap, kissing me softly. "This suite is wonderful, Ted. I can't wait to make love to you on the couch," she said, her eyes twinkling merrily. "In front of Hawk and Gretchen, of course."

"Exhibitionist," I said. "You'd be happy making love in the middle of the mall, too."

"Ooooo," she said with a sly smile. "Do you think we could?"

I laughed and kissed her soundly. "That's no way for a woman running for Harris County District Attorney to talk. Or, should I say 'the future Mrs. District Attorney?'"

"Think positive," she said firmly and stood up to grab her purse. "I'm ahead in the polls by almost twenty percent, so I'd almost have to make love to you in the middle of the mall to lose. Where do you think Hawk and Gretchen are?" she asked, changing the subject.

"There's no telling," I said as I rose and we walked out the door. "This is a big ship. They might be in the mall or eating. Goodness only knows. Let's just do what we want for next few hours and we'll check back here when the ship pulls out at five. "

Lisa nodded her agreement, and we headed for the elevators.

We hadn't taken three steps when the door to the cabin next to our suite opened. A man and woman joined us in the hall, turning to walk ahead of us. I did a mental double take as I sized the woman up. She was a real looker, tall and very, very leggy with beautiful red hair in a shade a bottle could never match. Her curves made her into a voluptuous Amazon. The sundress she was wearing played very well to her assets.

Then my "man sense" kicked in and I looked away from the woman. Giving that kind of attention toward another woman would usually get me an elbow, the "look," and an

amused comment from Lisa before I could yank my eyes away. But for once, I could see that she was staring too. I knew she liked Hawk, but I hadn't seen her stare at another woman like this before. Then, with a blink, I realized she was staring at the man.

I supposed he was worth the look, if you were into guys. He was tall, dark and handsome, as the saying went. He was also large and very fit, with long black hair in a braid that fell to the upper back of his beaten leather jacket. Seeing Lisa check out his butt made me smile. I poked her with my elbow and leaned over.

"Put your eyes back in your head," I whispered.

Lisa blushed and glanced at me guiltily. "Like you weren't staring at her, too," she said gamely.

I laughed quietly and slid my arm around her waist. "We're not talking about me and my lecherous ways. Did you like how he looks?" That prompted another blush from Lisa and a hesitant nod. "Maybe I should invite the new neighbors out to lunch."

Lisa stopped abruptly and grabbed my arm. "You wouldn't..."

"Excuse me," I said loudly enough for the couple to hear me. As they turned at my voice, Lisa let me go and composed her face in a bright smile. I couldn't suppress a grin; oh, how I was going to pay for this later. I turned my grin into a welcoming smile and said, "I'm sorry if we're disturbing you, but my wife and I saw you're our neighbors, and we'd like to invite you to join us for lunch."

The man glanced at the woman who nodded, eyeing us with interest. He smiled and stuck out his hand. "I'm Keven Braddock and this is my girlfriend, Sandy Craig."

I took his hand and we shook firmly without trying to crush the others' hands. "Ted and Lisa Stansbury. It's a pleasure to meet you. Shall we go to the dining room or up to the cafe?"

"The cafe," Sandy said. "I don't feel dressed for the dining room."

I nodded. "The cafe it is."

We trooped off to the elevators with our new friends, and the women started chattering to each other like long lost friends while Keven and I rolled our eyes and shared a grin.

They were too busy exchanging personal details to notice us mocking them.

"The Saturn Grill," I said, "is located on Deck 12, aft. So, straight up we go. The map says it's like a 50's cafe."

As the elevator lifted up, Keven put his hands in his pockets and looked me over. "So, you're in the Presidential Suite?" At my nod he continued. "What does someone have to do for a living to travel like that?"

I laughed. "I'm just along for the ride. If I were paying, we'd be in third class."

Lisa fixed me with a withering stare and poked me. "Don't you lie to him! We could afford second class." Then she lost control of her mock-fierce scowl and laughed with me. Sandy and Keven smiled at each other. I could see that we were going to get along just fine.

"I make wine and Lisa is an assistant district attorney," I said giving Lisa a loving smile, "at least for the moment."

That generated a startled look of surprise on Keven's face. "Wine? As in Stansbury Vineyards?"

It was always good to have the name recognized. I grinned and nodded. "Guilty as charged."

"It's a small world," Keven exclaimed. "We're from Los Angeles and I've been a big fan of your wine since it broke onto the market. I wouldn't use anything else for cooking or for a dinner wine."

"You cook?" I asked, a note of sharpened curiosity in my voice.

"I fancy myself quite the amateur chef," he admitted. "You, too?"

"Here we go," Sandy said in a droll voice that interrupted my nod. "Men just can't help talking about themselves and ignoring the women, can they Lisa?"

Keven and I turned sharply, stung by the irony of her comment given who was ignoring whom just moments earlier. Then all four of us burst into laughter as the elevator opened and disgorged us into the open air. The cafe was right up the ship from the elevators, and beyond it was a jogging track. Lisa had to yank my hand to get me back

into motion as I stared at the unexpected exercise area.

When we entered the cafe, it did look like something I'd see on *Happy Days*, and I expected to see The Fonz pop up at any moment. A young girl in a pert uniform seated us and took our drink orders before scrambling off.

The women promptly ignored us again and went back to chattering. I shook my head and Keven smiled along with me. Making fun of us men talking like magpies wasn't going to stop them from doing the same thing themselves.

Keven and I started talking cooking and it quickly became evident that we were close in cooking ability. That was impressive in a world where few men learned to do more than basic cooking or grilling. I found out that he was an artist of some renown and blamed my lack of art-sense on not knowing anything about it. Keven didn't seem offended. Sandy, it turned out, was a reconstructive surgeon. I guessed my preconceived notions were getting in my way since I was surprised.

"So, that makes both of the women professionals and both us men artistic types," I said in a conspiratorial voice. "We use art to craft paintings and wines."

With a grin, Keven nodded. "Exactly! We fondle our muses while the ladies bring in the bacon."

I was still laughing when I spotted trouble coming into the cafe: Ken Price. The last time I'd seen him the police were dragging him off my property after he attacked Lisa and me. I felt my blood instantly start to boil at the sight of the big man.

Keven immediately noticed my expression and half-turned in his seat to stare at Price. "Friend of yours?" he asked quietly.

"Hardly," I got out through clenched teeth. "That bastard attacked Lisa and me almost a year ago in Houston. He punched her in the face."

That brought the girl's conversation to a screeching halt and Lisa shrank into me. "Oh, no!"

"What did you say," Sandy said with a tone that indicated she'd heard me just fine.

"His name is Ken Price and he's a lobbyist for the Texas Alcohol Distributors' Association," I said while watching Price sit down and order a drink. He was smiling in

our direction in a way that meant he wanted me to know for sure he was there watching me. "Then, after we subdued him and the cops hauled him away, he started suing us for everything under the sun."

Keven's eyes hardened. "I haven't had that kind of problem, but Sandy and I did have a problem with an ex-girlfriend of mine. She was a flaming bitch."

Sandy craned her neck to get a look Price and both she and Keven laughed with a grim humor.

There must be a story in that somewhere, but now wasn't the time for digging it out. "Why do you think he followed you here? It doesn't look like coincidence to me. Not all the way from Houston," Sandy said.

"There's only one way to find out," I said coldly and stood up. Lisa cried out softly and grabbed for my hand, but I stepped clear of the table before she could catch me. I marched up to Price's table and glared down at him.

"Fancy meeting you here, Stansbury," he sneered.

"You've got a lot of nerve following me around, Price. If the District Attorney had had any balls you'd be in jail for assault," I said coldly.

"Your word versus mine," he said with a smirk. "And, of course, your lovely wife."

I grabbed the table and put my face within an inch of his. "Leave Lisa out of this."

"It's a free ship and I can go where I please, Stansbury," he said with a derisive laugh. "Are you going to make me?"

"If you're not afraid of him, be afraid of me," another voice said from behind me. It was a pissed off Keven. He reached past me, grabbed Price by the shirtfront, and yanked him out of the booth. Price gave a startled squawk as Keven held him so that he and Price were face to face. "I don't like people that hurt women and from what my friend here has told me, that means I already don't like you very much."

Price struggled to get free, but Keven only released him when the waitress came back out and looked at us uncertainly.

Price smiled and brushed his shirt down. Then he tossed a couple of bucks on the table

and started out slowly. "Never mind the drink, Sister," he tossed over his shoulder. "The air in here stinks too much to drink it. And friend, you'd best steer clear of Ted and Lisa Stansbury. People around them end up dead. We're not finished, Stansbury. Be watching for me. All of you. I don't forget my enemies."

I started after him, but Keven pulled me back.

"Don't play his game," he said softly. "He's trying to get a rise out of you. Why else show himself in a public place and talk so much?"

I watched Price until he was outside and lost in the growing crowd of passengers. I felt angry and helpless. What the hell was he up to, and how could I stop him? I couldn't, I *wouldn't* let him hurt Lisa again. Reluctantly, I let Keven pull me back to the table and sat back down beside Lisa.

"What did Price want?" Lisa asked. She wasn't afraid anymore. Now she was mad. Keven and Sandy looked pretty hot, too.

"He didn't say, but it can't be anything we'd like," I said. "All he did was taunt me."

The waitress interrupted our conversation with our food. If she had any concerns over the confrontation a few minutes ago, it didn't show. As soon as we were satisfied, she departed and left us to talk again.

"What's this about people ending up dead around you two?" Keven asked.

I threw up my hand in a throwaway gesture. "About a year ago someone killed a friend of Lisa's and almost killed her." I smiled at her. "If we hadn't been in my car when her friend started Lisa's car to take it home, the bomb would have killed her, too."

Sandy's eyes got huge as she stared at Lisa. "Someone put a bomb in your car? Ohmigod!"

I nodded. "In the course of the investigation, several people kept trying to kill us, but Hawk killed them back. Unfortunately, one of the bad guys included Lisa's brother."

"Hawk?" Keven asked. "That sounds like the dude on *Spencer: For Hire*. Big, black and tough."

Lisa laughed and I had to join her. Sandy and Keven smiled back, waiting for the punch

line. This was clearing up the dark atmosphere.

"You only got one out of three," Lisa said. "Hawk is Shauna Hawkins. At the time, she was a Lieutenant in the Houston Police Department Homicide Division. She's also white, short and wiry. Tough, however, she is in spades. She saved us from a fire, and although one of the bad guys slugged her and tried to shoot her, she took them all down one by one. She didn't kill my brother, though." Lisa held up under the last pretty well. Her brother had been an ass and working for the killer, but it still had taken a while before Lisa was able to work through the guilt and get over it. "She personally took out the main bad guy and a dirty cop in two separate gun fights. She saved my life! Ted was almost killed!"

I didn't want to think about that man shooting me, so I let my mind wander back over the other, more pleasurable, things Hawk had done with us. Like slowly seducing Lisa and even making love to me. It had been Lisa's first time with a woman and Hawk's first time with a man. Without a doubt, the pleasant memories outweighed the bad ones.

"I see," Keven said, his eyebrows rising. "How does that guy, Price, fit into this?"

I snorted. "Poorly. He said some things to me most people would have interpreted as a threat, so we turned his name over to the cops as part of the investigation. They picked him up and questioned him, which really pissed him off. He came to my place spoiling for a fight. He punched Lisa in the face, and we took him down and held him for the cops. They charged him with assault and trespassing, but he managed to get the charges dismissed." I shook my head and looked at Lisa. "He's been suing both of us ever since on whatever flimsy grounds he can dream up. Each one gets dismissed as soon as it gets to court, but he just keeps on going like the Energizer Bunny."

"Hopefully that is about to come to a stop," Lisa added. "We'll find out after the cruise."

"Holy crap," Keven muttered and looked at Sandy. "I thought we had it bad when my nutcase ex-girlfriend burned down a gallery with my work in it, and then torched Sandy's house before finally trying to kill us. Safety tip," he told Lisa and me, "never hold up a Molotov cocktail and get shot with a shotgun. Flambéed ex-girlfriend. Sandy broke her left arm in that fight and I got knocked out cold."

"Oh my God! What happened? The shotgun hit her and the gas?" Lisa asked.

"Nope," Keven said with a grin at Sandy. "Missed her and hit the gas dead on, spraying burning gas all over her. Then the shotgun recoil sent Sandy backwards off the patio

rail. That was also about a year ago."

Sandy blushed and glared at Keven. "I'm getting to be a better shot," she protested.

Lisa nodded. "Me, too. After what happened Hawk strongly suggested that I take shooting lessons. Since then Ted and I got married, in a bit of a hurry, in Vegas; and I'm running for political office. You're looking at the next District Attorney of Harris County in Texas. That's another reason that I'm not going after Price legally; I don't want to give my opponent a chance to use this against me. Some people will believe anything, and my opponent will undoubtedly use the 'where there's smoke, there's fire' technique. Meanwhile, Hawk got married, in Boston, and she retired from the police force to have kids with her new spouse. We're all on this cruise to celebrate." She glanced at me darkly. "If we can."

We ate in silence for a minute, and then Sandy took control and forced a normal conversation about normal things on us. We discussed the incredible array of things to do on this ship. The list included, but was not limited to, wave boarding, ice skating, swimming, skeet shooting, theater, shopping and more. By the time we had cleaned our plates, I felt much more confident. Whatever Price was here for, we could handle it.

"We should try to find Hawk," Lisa said. "I'm sorry to eat and run. It was nice meeting you both," she said to Keven and Sandy. "I'm sure being neighbors, we'll be running into each other pretty often."

"Hold up, Lisa," Keven said. "Price threatened me, too. That affects Sandy and me. I think we should go along and meet your friend Hawk and her husband. We all need to be on the watch for Price."

Sandy whipped her eyes around to focus on her boyfriend. "He threatened you? Well, I guess that makes sense when you dragged him out of his booth." She laughed. "You really need to work on that temper." She turned her attention back to us. "You should have seen him when the gallery burned down."

"I can imagine," I said dryly. I looked at Lisa and she shrugged. Oh well, they would've found out about Gretchen before too much longer anyway. "We can all go, then."

"How do we find them?" Lisa asked. "Split up and search? Have them paged?"

My eyes twinkled as I shook my head. "You're acting like we were already at sea. And even then, I think this will still work." I pulled out my cell phone.

Lisa smacked her forehead. "Duh! Dumb blonde alert! Now that you've reminded me, I remember reading that the whole ship has wireless internet access for computers and its own cell tower."

"Don't take it too hard," I commiserated with her as I dialed. "This is the first ship with it this way. Even a few years ago, this was unheard of. Admittedly, we could probably still hit the Miami cell towers in dock," I said a bit smugly.

"Stinker," she said. She punched my arm lightly as Hawk answered. "Hawk," she said with her usual brevity.

"It's Ted. We're here. Where are you?" I asked.

"Ted!" The genuine warmth in her voice made me feel better immediately. "Grab Lisa and come down to the dining room. Third deck."

"We'll be there in a few minutes and we're bringing our neighbors with us," I said.

"Your neighbors?" she asked incredulously. "You brought your neighbors on a cruise?"

I said with a laugh. "I meant the couple in the suite next to us. I'll explain when we get there."

"Okay..." Hawk said slowly. "Knowing you, it'll be good, but I bet I have you beaten with who I ran into today. Actually, the two odd people I ran into."

"It's a bet," I said. "See you in fifteen minutes."

"You want us to order you something?" she asked.

"No, we're good. Bye now," I said and hung up. "She's down in the dining room on the third floor. Let's roll."

It had only been a week since we'd seen Hawk and Gretchen, but it felt like a reunion when we came into the main floor of the dining room. We exchanged hugs and a lot of happy grins. Gretchen introduced me to her new friend Trish, who was young and very, very attractive. I saw Lisa giving her a measuring look and I smiled at my wife. This cruise was looking to have its upside despite Price showing up. I couldn't help but

wonder what the week might have in store for all of us.

Lisa introduced everyone to Keven and Sandy. I saw at once that Keven and Hawk had made one of those snap connections, and they settled in like long-lost friends. Gretchen, Lisa, Sandy and Trish settled into a four-way girl-fest, so I just grinned and joined the men. I know that Hawk wasn't a man, but even pregnant, she so often acted like a man that it was kind of the same.

Keven looked around and waved over the waiter, and we ordered some drinks. "Do we need to wait for your husband, Hawk, or can we just get into telling you what happened upstairs?"

Hawk looked simultaneously chagrined and amused. "I see that someone," she shot me a smirk, "failed to fully disclose the facts of life to you about me. I'm married to Gretchen."

Keven was momentarily surprised but caught on quick. "Oh, that's cool. No," he grinned at me, "Ted didn't mention that to us. I'll clue Sandy in if Gretchen or Lisa doesn't. We're from LA, so it's no big deal for either of us. I'm an artist, and a big part of the artist community there is gay. No worries."

"That's good," Hawk said with a grin. "There are a number of people around here that don't share that opinion." She looked at me. "I ran into one just before you called me. I'll tell you about it after you give me your news."

Before I could start telling Hawk about Price, she held up her hand. "Before you start, I'm going to get Ted back for springing me on you." She grinned at me, and I blushed, suspecting I knew what she was going to tell him. "Ted is the missing link."

"I suspected that since I met him," Keven said slyly. "It was the sloping forehead that clued me in."

I laughed. "Not that kind of missing link. I'm the father of her children."

That surprised him. "The donor, eh? That's cool."

"Not in the way you're thinking," Hawk said with a wicked grin. "He knocked me up the old fashioned way. And Ted, I've discussed this with Gretchen and we both agree; you're not the father of *my* children. You're the father of *our* children. They're *our* children, Ted. All of us."

I felt a warm glow inside and I'm sure that my smile reflected it.

That raised both of Keven's eyebrows. "Okay, now I'm confused." He looked at Hawk quizzically. "I thought you were a lesbian."

"Mostly," Hawk laughed with a nod, "but as much as it ruins my precious self-image, I think I'm a little bi to be honest." She raised an eyebrow. "Too much information?"

Keven shook his head and smiled. "Well, I have to admit that I don't usually know so much about my newly met friend's sexual history quite so quickly. Do you always tell people you meet that?"

Hawk laughed. "No, but I've got a good sense of people and I like you. Besides," she said with that same wicked smile at me, "I owe Ted for all the embarrassment of being pregnant. You wouldn't believe what some people think about that."

"Like I said, I live in LA and know a great many people in the gay community there. I think I can imagine that certain members of that community didn't look kindly on you." At Hawk's nod, Keven looked over at the chattering girls. "I just have to ask, though; what do your respective spouses think about that?"

"Lisa was there," I said with a smile. "But, I'd appreciate it if you kept that under your hat. Her political enemies would love some dirt to throw on her before the election in a few months."

Keven made a lip-locking gesture and threw away the metaphorical key. "My lips are sealed."

"It was *before* I met Gretchen," Hawk said piously.

"By what?" I asked with my own grin. "Less than twenty-four hours?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "About that. It was a hell of a thing. I never expected to find someone that loved me as much as I loved her, much less to find it as fast as it happened. We got married just a week after we met and I'm still bowled over by Gretchen."

"Wow," Keven said. "That was fast."

"It was more by accident than intent, but we're happy." She leaned forward and waved a finger at Keven. "Never sign a marriage license as a joke and let a minister file it. That was one prank that backfired on Gretchen, and how! An Elvis, no less."

"It sounds like one hell of a story," Keven admitted, "and I can't wait to hear the details. I think Ted should fill you in on what went on upstairs first, though."

Hawk nodded and transferred her attention to me. "Okay then, spill."

"We were ambushed by Ken Price upstairs," I said without preamble. "He came right into the café and started trouble. He knew we were here."

I saw that Hawk didn't even have to think about who Price was. She'd questioned him a year ago in a police interrogation room about the murder of Lisa's friend, and the memory looked to have stuck. Or, I admitted, she might just have that cop memory thing going. She had often surprised me in her stories by recalling the names and even addresses of the most inconsequential witnesses to cases going back years.

"That sleaze? Here?" she asked with a growl. "He's got a lot of nerve showing his face around my friends, especially after all that legal crap and after hitting Lisa." The rage on her face was controlled, but I could see it peeking through.

"I don't know what he's up to," I said, "but I don't want him hurting Lisa again."

"I'll toss his sorry ass overboard if I see him," she said coldly. "You're right, Ted, this is much more important than the people I've met. An asshole writer and the televangelist from hell take a back seat to him. I'll start making some inquiries to find out where he is and I'll have a chat with the weasel before the sun sets."

"Asshole writer? Televangelist? Who have you met?" I asked curiously.

"We met The Right Reverend Billy Swaggwell and some schmuck by the name of Skip Niccio that is using Trish."

"Swaggwell!" I said sitting up straighter. "I've seen some of his preaching. He's a major bible-thumper and detests the gay and lesbian community. Hopefully you won't run into him again."

"Right," Hawk said with a sigh. "It doesn't work that way, you know. He'll find me. Count on it."

We spent the next several minutes exchanging all the details of our various encounters and sipping our drinks. Keven was the only one of the three of us that seemed cheered by the looming chaos.

"I was afraid the cruise was going to be boring," he admitted. "Now I know where to come for all the excitement."

Hawk was smirking and looking over my shoulder and suddenly sat bolt upright. "I don't fucking believe it! What is this, old home week?"

I looked over my shoulder and saw a man and woman walking into the dining room. I didn't recognize them but, obviously, Hawk did. The woman was petite, maybe four inches over five feet and was quite obviously Eurasian. She was in her mid-forties, and her long black hair made a nice frame around the enticing blue eyes that made her look so exotic. Right now, those blue eyes were widening in shock as she looked at us.

The man was taller than the woman by half a foot and built pretty well. I could see the obvious signs of age shifting weight from chest to gut, but I only hoped I was still in as good a shape as he was in ten years. He had dark eyes and Marine Corps short, sandy brown hair.

"Jo Beller? Earl?" Hawk yelled, struggling to her feet. "What the hell are you doing here?" The name rang a bell for me, and I suspected Hawk's cop memory was working its magic once again. I did the only thing I could, and helped Hawk to her feet as I turned to meet Jo and Earl.

Chapter Three: The Circle is Complete

Sandy

The arrival of the new couple turned the lunch into a celebration. It quickly became apparent that they had played some part in tracking down the man that shot Ted last year. Ted had never had the chance to meet them or thank them, and with charm and a simple sincerity, he quickly introduced himself and convinced them to accept a case of his 2000 Private Reserve as a measure of his gratitude. The Bellers were pre-Gretchen, but that didn't stop her from giving them both a hug and a kiss. I smiled wryly when

that left both the Bellers a bit breathless. Gretchen had that effect on people.

I sipped my drink and watched them all, glad for a chance to reflect. Individually and collectively, they seemed like good people, leaving aside the trouble that seemed to be following them. I'd been watching them before the Bellers arrived, and I'd already picked up quite a bit of information, both from body language and comments overheard from Hawk, Ted and Keven. As a doctor, I'd learned to keep my ears open and follow multiple conversations while concentrating on something else. That multitasking ability was now paying off.

Gretchen hadn't said anything about it, but the glances she had been sending Hawk's way had made it clear even before I was told that they were a couple and that she loved Hawk. In fact, she was obviously deeply in love. The conversation and constant casual touches Gretchen and Lisa shared also made me wonder if the two couples were sexually intimate or considering becoming so. You simply couldn't fake that level of subconscious intimacy.

Trish and I sat quietly for a bit as the new couple was hugged, kissed and welcomed in, so I decided to pump the girl for information. I smiled at her and gestured at the chaos with my drink. "So, Trish, you just met Hawk and Gretchen?"

Trish smiled and nodded. "Yeah, just an hour ago." She glanced at Gretchen and I saw something in her eyes that was equal parts confusion, desire and apprehension.

"Gretchen has that effect, doesn't she," I asked quietly.

Her eyes darted to mine, her expression that of a child caught being naughty. "What? What effect?"

It was time to be delicate. It was none of my business, and while I didn't want to offend her, some part of me understood what she was feeling and wanted to reassure her that her reactions were normal. "It's okay, Trish," I said gently, "She has beauty, money, poise and presence. She makes people desire her just by being herself."

"Oh," Trisha laughed with a blush. "Maybe I do feel that way about her, a little, but I wasn't thinking about that. I'm working up the courage to ask her to teach me to be an escort."

I'd heard Gretchen give the basic spiel about what she did for a living, although she had used the past tense as if that part of her life was now over, so Trish's comment wasn't a

complete surprise. I honestly did not understand why someone would ever want to do that, though. "Why?" I made sure there was no criticism in my voice.

Trish still looked a little uncomfortable. "A lot of reasons." She looked down into her drink and slumped in her seat. "I want to be like her. She's so confident."

"You don't have to rent yourself out to learn confidence," I said reasonably, my tone still neutral.

"I know, but I could use the money, too," Trish said softly. "My mom tries the best she can but..."

I nodded as she trailed off. "I understand. You don't have to justify yourself to me. I'm simply just trying to help you clarify what you want and maybe help you understand why you want it. What if the job includes more than being arm-candy? You're a very beautiful young woman, at some point, someone will almost certainly ask you to take them to bed and they will offer you money. Maybe even a lot of money. What will you do then?"

"I don't know," Trish said miserably. "That's why I need her to help me figure out *what* to *do*."

Her emphasis in that last sentence made me wonder. I leaned forward and asked even more quietly, "Trish, have you ever had sex before?"

Trish swallowed and looked both terrified and mortified. Then she shook her head. "No," she whispered. "The guys that asked me out never raised their eyes higher than my chest, and the nice guys always seemed afraid to ask me out. So I've just been waiting..."

My heart reached out to her and I felt a genuine compassion for this child in a Barbie doll body. Physically, she was everything the flat-chested teenage Sandy had wanted to be; she was tall, beautiful and busty. It was only now that I finally understood that all of those physical gifts would have been as much a curse as a blessing. I didn't know Trish, but in this moment, I decided that I would do what I could to help her. Gretchen might be better suited to helping her with many things, but as a doctor, I knew that there were things I could do to help as well. When the time was right, I would talk to her about a breast reduction, although perhaps I would want to talk with Gretchen first. I nodded to myself, my decision made.

I took her hands in mine. "Then I think you do need to talk to Gretchen and you need to be honest with her. If you really want her to help you, she needs to know that you're inexperienced so that she can guide you. Not that I have a lot of experience, but you can always come and ask me anything, too. It's okay and I would be happy to help you, too, if I can."

Trish looked at me, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Thank you," she said simply. She took a deep breath and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. I looked away so as not to embarrass her further as she composed herself.

The reunion was drawing to a close and I knew we only had a few minutes more before they sat back down with us. I'd intended just to sit quietly with Trish, but she had one more question. "Sandy, do you, like, think it would only be with guys?" she asked quietly.

I looked at those earnest young eyes and felt another stab of compassion. I shrugged. "I don't know, Trish. You'd have to ask Gretchen, but my guess is that you wouldn't have to do anything you didn't want to do."

"I've never really thought about, you know, women before, but part of me wonders what she..." Trish trailed off into silence and bowed her head with a flush.

"If you want to know, then talk with her," I said quietly. "You don't need to feel embarrassed, Trish. I find her attractive, too."

Her eyes flashed up to mine, widening in shock. "Have you..."

I smiled and nodded. "Not with Gretchen and it's been a long time, but you can ask me about that later if you like."

"Thank you!" she said again, so pathetically grateful I felt myself blushing.

Any chance for further private conversation ended when everyone sat back down. The waiter pulled another table over to give us all room. It was immediately apparent that this was a jolly crowd. The looming trouble with Price had been pushed aside for now and we were having our own little party.

Earl joined Hawk and the guys. Was a lesbian one of the guys? Gretchen wasn't a guy by any stretch of the imagination, but Hawk was kind of masculine in her mannerisms, although not as much as she believed, in my opinion. Her being pregnant muddled the

waters, more than a little, but I stood by that impression.

Jo joined us and we five settled in around the girls table.

"I'm Sandy Craig." I introduced myself. I took her small, but not delicate, hand into mine for a moment.

"Jo Beller," she answered in a voice that sounded almost like Michelle Malkin, the conservative commentator. In fact, there was some physical similarity, too. She was a very pretty woman.

Trish introduced herself and I heard her last name for the first time. Walton.

Jo got right to fitting in with a determined grin. "I'm behind the power curve here, girls," she said. "You all know each other, so fill me in."

We all laughed and filled her in on who we were and what we did for a living. She reciprocated and her occupation was certainly not what I expected. She had to explain what exactly a tree farmer actually did. I shouldn't have been surprised that people raised trees to sell, but it had never really occurred to me to wonder where my Christmas tree came from every year. Gretchen was up front about her past as an escort, and Jo nodded, seemingly unsurprised.

"I read an article in the paper about you, after all the trouble with your step-mother," she confirmed. "I suppose I never really understood why you chose that profession. I understood that your family was comfortable." I looked at Jo with a touch of surprise. Working with my clients had taught me that 'comfortable' was the word the rich used to mean 'loaded.' I wondered how lucrative tree farming was.

Gretchen laughed. "I suppose you could say that, but while I have some money now, I made it myself as an escort. My father and I only recently reconciled, and the trust fund he gave us was a surprise to both Hawk and me. Besides, it wasn't ever really about the money. It was about rebellion and doing what I wanted to in spite of what my father and his wife wanted." There was a hint of bitterness as she mentioned her step-mother.

"What does being an escort really mean," Jo asked curiously. "Isn't sex for money illegal?"

"Most places," Gretchen agreed, "but, with the right license, it's not illegal in Nevada. However, being an escort isn't about the sex. Sex is *not* a given on most engagements

and even if the client is interested, it only happens if I feel like it. It's really much more about the social aspects of interpersonal relations." I saw Trish hanging on every word Gretchen said, her eyes so intense that I had to smile.

"If you don't mind my asking, is it just men," Jo asked casually, leaning back, "or are you equal opportunity?" Even with the polite phrasing, Jo was much more direct than I would have been. I was definitely interested in the answer, however.

Gretchen laughed. "It's only been with men to this point, but I've recently had my horizons expanded. Why," she teased, "are you and Earl looking for a night on the town?"

Gretchen might have thought she was joking but I saw a flash of curiosity and desire in Jo's eyes. To the world, Jo just laughed. "I doubt Earl would say no, but this isn't Vegas, and I think I like you too much already to feel comfortable about trading money for your time."

Gretchen nodded. "You helped save the life of the father of my children, so I'd be happy to talk about something without money changing hands."

The entire conversation was a bit unreal to me and a quick look told me that Trish was a bit shell-shocked as well. Gretchen and Jo, however seemed perfectly comfortable talking in front of others about trading money, or 'something,' for sex.

Lisa laughed, seemingly at ease, and swatted Gretchen's arm. "He's *my* husband!" Her easy familiarity with Gretchen confirmed my earlier hunch. Ted may have been Lisa's wife, but it appeared Lisa was willing to share.

"I'm a professional," Gretchen assured her with a grin. "Don't try this at home."

Jo looked at Gretchen for a moment and then shrugged. "It's a bit sudden. I'll have to think about it and talk with Earl. In any case, you don't need to offer to spend time with us because of what we did. We did what we did because it was the right thing to do."

"That *was* a bit forward, wasn't it?" Gretchen laughed. "I'm getting out of practice after a year. I apologize if I've offended you. You don't need to feel obligated in any way, but the offer is still on the table. I would gladly share an evening of dining, dancing, and perhaps more, to show you my gratitude."

"I like people who speak their minds, so I'm not offended," Jo said, unable to keep a

little of her interest from bleeding through. "I'm actually quite flattered, but I need to think about it and talk to my husband."

Seizing the lull in conversation, Trish bounced to her feet. That caused her chest to bounce in ways that attracted not only all of the ladies attention but the men, too. She *really* needed to consider a reduction to avoid future back problems. I made a mental note to talk to Gretchen and mention it to her. "Gretchen, can I talk to you for a little while?"

Gretchen stood up and grabbed her purse. "Sure. Let's leave the ladies to talk, and we'll wander the ship."

Trish nodded and looked at me. "Can Sandy come, too?" she asked imploringly.

"Of course," Gretchen said with some surprise, "if she wants to."

I grabbed my purse and stood up. "Sure. Keven can talk sports without me."

We said goodbye to Lisa and Jo, and then Gretchen gave Hawk a hug and a brief explanation while I did the same for Keven. As the three of us walked out of the dining room, Gretchen gave me a curious look. "How did you know they were talking about sports?" They'd been arguing about basketball players and quoting statistics to champion their favorite. Men.

"It's one of the skills I picked up as a doctor," I said with a grin. "My hearing is pretty good, and I keep half an ear tuned in on what other people around me are talking about. Get your hands in a patient and you want to - have to - know everything that's happening around you, even when you're focused on the task at hand. It makes Keven think I have eyes in the back of my head."

"I know some teachers like that!" Trish said enthusiastically. "They know what's going on behind them and everything!"

I walked to the elevators, consulted the options and pushed the button for deck five. "We can walk the promenade while we talk. Just keep your voices down if you want to keep something secret," I said with a grin.

"Secret?" Gretchen asked with a grin of her own as we piled into the elevator. "What is it you wanted to discuss, Trish?" We were alone in the elevator so I figured this would be the best time to get the details out in the open.

"Let me," I said, cutting Trish off. "If I'm wrong you can correct me, but this way you won't feel so embarrassed, and we can say it in privacy." I looked at Gretchen. "Trish wants to become your apprentice." I almost added 'Do you think there's a TV show in the idea?' but one look at Trish and I knew she would think I was making fun of her.

Gretchen laughed and pulled Trish into a hug. "Of course I'll help you, Trish."

Trish sagged with relief. "Thank you." She let go of Gretchen and gave me a hug that raised the temperature in the elevator for me, much to my surprise. "And thank you for helping me to tell her. I almost lost my nerve."

By the time the elevator opened, the hugs were over and we walked out and into the most amazingly fancy looking mall. What made it astonishing was that it was on a ship.

There were dozens of little boutique shops with a wide marble floor stretching the length of the mall in front of them. Above us, in an open-air design were the four decks making up the Promenade. The upper three stories had rooms that looked down over us and a suspended bridge of brass and steel spanned the middle of the public area on the deck above us. The mall before us looked to stretch a good part of the deck, too. The mixture of ultra-modern and rich accents of dark wood was awesome.

I set out at a slow pace down the right side. The throng of people was about half what you'd see at a regular mall, but the ship wasn't due to sail for another hour. Tonight and tomorrow would be a better time to gauge the crowd, I was sure.

I heard Gretchen laughing at something and my thoughts drifted back to the reason why we were here. I couldn't believe that I was helping a young woman to become a woman of the night. It all seemed logical enough now that it was happening, but I was going to have to trace the events back to see why it didn't bother me as much as I thought it should.

"Okay," Gretchen said, slipping around my right side and letting Trish take my left, "let's make sure we're on the same page before we get into details. Trish, do you want to talk about just accompanying guys, or are you thinking about the whole enchilada?"

"I can say 'no' if I don't like it, right?" Trish asked nervously.

Gretchen nodded. "Of course you can and that goes for being arm-candy, too. If you decide you want to back out, you say 'no' and I'll handle any repercussions. That

includes with your current client," she said with a glint in her eye.

"Current client?" I asked. "I thought this was a new idea."

They filled me in on Skip Niccio and I disliked him immediately. "You should back out on him, Trish. The man sounds like slime."

"But I can't," she almost wailed. "He paid for this cruise, and I don't have anywhere near enough money to pay him back!"

Gretchen stopped, took Trish's hands in her own and looked her right in the eyes, calming Trish down almost at once. "I said I'd handle him and I will. All you have to do is say the word and I'll take care of him. I'll refund him his money and a fifty percent late cancellation penalty."

"But..." Trish started before Gretchen put her finger to the girl's lips.

"Shhh," Gretchen said. "If you and I come to an agreement, I'll be fronting you enough money to get everything you need anyway. By the time you pay me back, the cost of this cruise will be chump change, and you won't even feel it. With your looks and my connections, I guarantee it."

"By now he's probably searching the ship for me," Trish sighed. "Yeah, okay, I really don't want to work for him. He's a real horse's butt. I'm sure sleeping in the room next to him will be fun after this," she said morosely.

"I'll take care of that," Gretchen said firmly. "You won't have to worry about sleeping in the next room to that creep. Focus on yourself."

Trish nodded. "Okay. Well, if I, like, become your apprentice, what does that mean?"

"I'd rather think of myself as your mentor," Gretchen said warmly. "'Apprentice' makes you sound like you're my slave or something. Let's go back to the first question. Do you want to consider the full or the limited package?"

Trish looked scared and a bit torn about what she wanted, so I pulled the two of them into Ben and Jerry's for some ice cream and we gave Trish time to think while we selected some creamy goodness. The mint chocolate chip made me almost ooze to the floor in delight.

Trish tasted hers and then got back to business. "I want to learn everything," she declared. "And if it's legal, then I want to know all of it. Do all of it." She looked both frightened and elated.

Gretchen nodded and ate her ice cream in small bites. "Then I'll help you with all of it. I know you don't really have any experience with escorting men, but how much experience have you had with simple dating?"

Trish shook her head and blushed. "None. I haven't really dated."

That rocked Gretchen and her eyes widened. "But you're such a pretty girl! What about..." she let it hang.

Trish blushed and shook her head, looking down.

Gretchen took Trish's hands in her own and spoke softly. "That's nothing to be ashamed of. I can talk to you about it and help you understand what's involved. If you like, I can even help you get some 'hands on' experience," she said with a small grin.

Trish looked up and smiled shyly. "Is that all part of my training?"

Gretchen nodded. "It is if you want it to be. I can be there with you every step of the way."

Trish nodded. "Okay."

"The rest of it is pretty straight forward," Gretchen said, leaning back in her seat. "I'll make you the same offer my mentor made me. I'll provide room and board, and I'll front you the money to get all the tools of the trade and set you up. You agree to pay me back in no more than two years. There's no interest, so you just have to pay it back as you can."

Trish nodded. "But what do you get for helping me?"

Gretchen laughed. "That's the next part. I'll train you and mentor you for the next two years. That means I'll also help arrange for you to find clients that are suitable and I'll work on all the mundane details for you. In exchange for all that, I'll get a twenty percent commission for those two years. If either of us decides to break off our arrangement, the front money comes due, but that's all. You can always walk away if you decide that's what's best, and you keep everything you've earned."

Trish ate the rest of her ice cream with her eyes downcast and her face intent on thinking. I raised an eyebrow at Gretchen, but she shook her head and smiled reassuringly at me.

We let Trish consider and eat in silence for a few minutes. When she finished the ice cream, she took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. I may never have realized it before but this is what I want. So yes, I agree to everything you've laid out."

Gretchen smiled at her and took Trish's hands back into her own. "We'll get a contract written up when the cruise is done, but we'll start now. The first thing we do is shop and then we get you moved out of that disaster with Niccio."

We made our way back out and I smirked at Gretchen. "Does that make you Obi-Wan Werner and Trish your Padawan apprentice?"

"Don't make me show you The Force," she mock threatened me. "I brought my paddle along on this cruise."

"Ooooo," I smiled. "Keven would like the idea of that. I may have to borrow it."

"We'll talk," she said with a smirk of her own. Why did that simple phrase make my spine tingle?

Gretchen led the way to the far end of the Promenade and into the fashion boutique. I was surprised to see such a good selection of dresses and other fashion items. This ship was full of surprises.

A young woman named Angie came over to take care of us, and shortly Gretchen had her calling for backup as she put the shop's staff through their paces. She was selecting and rejecting dresses, shoes, handbags and everything under and in between. She kept the stunned Trish busy running in and out of the changing room. Every time she came out, Gretchen gave her a good look, made comments to Angie and either rejected the dress or let the seamstress pin it and collect it for adjustment this evening. A seamstress on a ship! I couldn't believe it.

As I saw Trish in dress after dress, I decided that Trish's figure was even more devastating than I'd suspected. She had all the curves I'd always wished I had and some I hadn't even known to wish for when I was younger. Her innocence, mixed with the raw sex appeal of some of the dresses, combined to make an intoxicating package

that few men would be able to resist. In particular, several low-cut affairs were deep enough to let me know what it felt like to stand below a dam that was threatening to give way to the overpowering pressure of a flood. Whew!

One enticing combination was a black dress with a deep plunge neckline in lacy fabric that flared and came to about mid thigh. On Trish, with her coloring, it looked wonderful.

"You'll need a choker or necklace with that one," commented another customer, a slender Nordic blonde. "It'll give the men an excuse to look at your cleavage without appearing gauche about it." She grinned. "Just be ready to accept a *lot* of compliments about whatever you have on around your neck!"

Gretchen laughed and agreed with the woman.

Another superb dress was a white number with similar lines but the fabric was almost feathery in cut and texture.

Gretchen also made a number of selections from various catalogs of items that they had aboard, but not in the shop. The one glance I took at the book let me know, at the very least, that Gretchen was talking of intimate apparel. There would have to be miracle bras to support Trish's breasts and not show in those dresses. The prices also made me wonder just how much money an escort could make. If Trish could afford to repay Gretchen in just two years, and on just 80% of her income, escorts obviously made enough money to rival many reconstructive docs!

I shook my head and forced myself to look around the shop. I managed to find a few dresses that made me drool, so I picked them up, tried them on, and at Gretchen's nod of approval, decided to take them all. What was the use of making a lot of money if I couldn't spend some of it on a dress that made Keven's teeth fall out? My middle class upbringing was screaming about the cost, but I well knew that my savings account would never notice the difference. For the first time, I had to admit to myself that Sandy wasn't really middle class any more. I wasn't "comfortable" the way my clients defined it, but I was definitely not a member of the middle class, either.

In an hour, we were done, with that store, at least. The staff was running all over trying to get things sorted out after we left. I didn't think I'd ever seen anyone leave such chaos in her wake. Trish was in shock and I didn't blame her a bit. Gretchen was a force of nature.

Gretchen told them to deliver the purchases to the Presidential Suite. Angie nodded and tasked someone else with it while she trailed behind Gretchen like the little dog following the big dog in the cartoon. As Gretchen headed into the promenade, Angie followed right along behind her. Obviously, she thought that if someone in the Presidential Suite was on a shopping spree, that she should be there to smooth the way. When I asked, Angie explained that all the store employees worked for Imperial Lines, on salary, so there wouldn't be some weird conflict between her and other employees fighting for a commission.

The next stop was the jewelry store back by the ice cream shop. "It's right next door to where we started. Why didn't we go here first?" I asked.

"Because I didn't know what kind of clothes I would be accentuating," Gretchen said reasonably. "You have to start with the foundation and build from there."

The only other customer was a well-built gentleman that was buying a set of wedding rings. He gave us an approving look and completed his purchase, leaving the salesman free for us.

At a word from Angie, the salesman, a good-looking young man named Paul, sent for more jewelry before even sitting down with Gretchen and Trish. Gretchen was doing all the talking, describing what she was looking for and rejecting most of what was in the displays as being inadequate for her needs. Trish was starting to look a little wild-eyed.

Gretchen did find some teardrop earrings that she was pleased with, and while Trish was trying them on, half a dozen crewmen carried in three large trunks under the guard of two ship's officers. I wasn't sure, but it looked like the officers had guns under their uniform jackets. They sent the crewmen out and stood unobtrusively by the entrance.

The items Paul brought out of the trunk made my eyes almost pop out of my head and convinced me that the two officers did indeed have guns on them. We had just moved into a price range starting at tens of thousands per piece and ranging up to what I would guess was hundreds of thousand per item. I thought Trish was going to faint.

When it got to the point that Gretchen thought Trish might swallow her tongue, she said softly, "Don't panic, Trish. You'll make enough to buy all of this, or you can just give it back to me and that'll cover it. Relax." I reevaluated the earnings potential of an escort several notches higher and wondered if being a doctor had been the wisest course, after all.

Gretchen picked out several high-end pieces and had Trish model each one before settling for a dazzling diamond and tanzanite choker, an exquisite petal necklace, and half a dozen lesser pieces. Gretchen set those aside, as well, for Paul to have delivered to the Presidential Suite. I felt a bit in awe myself.

The next stop was the perfume shop. It was back across the promenade from the fashion boutique, of course. Perfume, at least, was something I thought I knew a lot about. I was wrong. In the next half hour, I learned that I was in fact a rank amateur compared to Gretchen. Not being an idiot, I let Gretchen select one for me as well. The feel of her nose and lips hovering just over my wrist did things inside me that I didn't expect, and I knew Keven was going to get dragged into the bedroom as soon as we got back to the room.

Gretchen was finalizing the purchase when concealed speakers announced that the ship was now under way. The cruise had begun.

As we made our way back into the Promenade, Trish took Gretchen's hand and stopped her. "Gretchen, how much did I just go into debt for?" She sounded a bit frightened.

Gretchen took Trish into her arms, giving her a gentle hug of reassurance. "Not one penny, Honey. I promise that you'll make it back easily or I'll be satisfied with the return of the stuff."

"I know you said that," Trish said stubbornly, pushing herself back until she looked Gretchen in the eyes, "but how much did you just spend on me?"

"Give or take?" Gretchen asked. "I'll get the exact amount later, but call it somewhere in the neighborhood of hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Ohmigod!" Trish moaned. "That is so much money! That's like a house!"

Gretchen laughed merrily. "Honey, that depends on the house. Remind me to show you my car. Don't freak out. You'll make that, and much more, before too long."

"Trish! Dear God, Woman, can't you understand simple instructions?"

The screeching voice sounded like Erkel with pretensions. I saw the body attached to the voice walking through the crowd like a feudal lord with intent. Hell, "intent" was coming out of his ears like steam. Not that he looked more like a lord. He looked like

the guy at Comp-u-geek that had fixed my computer, except that guy looked more handsome and wasn't dressed like an idiot. Simple deduction told me this must be Skip Niccio.

Trish froze in place like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming diesel rig. Gretchen put her hand on Trish's shoulder and stood beside her waiting for the angry writer to stop in front of them.

He stalked up and took up what I guessed was supposed to be a regal pose, though having to look up his nose at Trish ruined the effect. "Not only did you fail to unpack my clothes as I clearly told you to do, you failed to bring me my key. I had to get one from the *help*," he sniffed. "Now I find you shopping and cavorting as if you don't have any responsibilities! This simply will not do! Come along! "

"Actually, Mister Niccio," Gretchen said in a voice a little louder than normal conversational tone, "she's decided to allow me to act on her behalf in this matter, and I regret to inform you that she's withdrawing from her agreement with you."

Niccio immediately puffed up and turned red. "This is outrageous! We have an agreement and there is no clause for such an event! She simply *must abide* by it!" He thrust his skinny, pimply chin out in defiance.

Gretchen smiled. "If you'll allow me to examine the contract, then, we'll get this cleared up."

"This is a verbal agreement," he blustered. "All fully legal."

"Be that as it may," Gretchen said, holding firm to Trish to keep her from sliding behind her protector, "without a written contract, it becomes difficult to prove your point with any certainty. In view of the lateness of her withdrawal, we will of course pay a fifty percent penalty to the costs incurred by you. That will include the cost of her cruise and her airfare. In addition, she will be moving out of the cabin you reserved for her so that if you can find a replacement, it will be available."

"You little tramp," he hissed at Trish, advancing until Gretchen stepped between them. "I'll see that you regret this. I'll take you to court and ruin you, as well."

"I'm not afraid of you," Trish said, trying hard not to look afraid. "Go away!"

"Yes, Mister Niccio," Gretchen added, pulling her checkbook from her purse, "I think it's

time for you to move along. If you feel the need to take this matter to court, feel free to have your attorney contact me at the address on the check. The amount I've made the check out for should be close to the amount you're owed. If not, please submit an invoice with receipts. Please, keep any overage with my compliments."

"I'll see you torn to shreds on the tip of my pen," he said in what I'm sure was supposed to be a menacing whisper. "I don't forget those who cross me, and better women than you have fallen, their reputations ruined by my writing and my vast fan base."

"Just what do you write?" I asked. "I can't recall ever hearing your name or seeing it on a bookshelf."

"I," he said drawing himself up haughtily, "am an erotic author with hundreds of thousands of fans around the world. I publish in something larger than the dinosaur of a bookstore. In a flash, my words come to all without the need to dirty my hands with money grubbing publishers."

"You're going to ruin our reputations with the people that read smut online?" Gretchen asked incredulously. "Who the hell even reads that crap anyway? A bunch of little boys that are too busy typing with one hand to go out and get a real woman and who are too poor to pay for one?"

Skip looked like he wanted to respond, but he couldn't seem to form words and his eyes looked like they were going to bulge out of his head.

I simply couldn't resist staying quiet any longer. "If it means getting skewered by someone that probably couldn't sell a real book if his life depended on it," I sneered, "then I'll take that risk. Take the check and get lost before I actually laugh in your face."

Stung, he sneered back at me. "My fame is already well known, and Philistines like you are irrelevant. I'll have you know my work has earned me a number of Golden Clits as well and three times that many Silver Clits!"

That actually elicited laughter from all three of us.

"That's probably the only clit you'll ever see for free," Gretchen said. "Those who can, do, and those who can't, write. By your own words, Skip, you write some hot sex. See the pattern? Come on, Trish, we're done here. We'll send someone to get your things." Gretchen took Skip's key from Trish and dropped both it and the check in front of the

angry writer. "Good day," she said as she set sail through the circle of onlookers, towing Trish in her wake.

Trish turned while Gretchen dragged her away and stuck her tongue out at Skip. I grinned at the apoplectic Skip and followed them closely.

After we had gone several stores down, he shouted after us. "You'll all pay! No one snubs Skip Niccio like that and escapes retribution. I'll denounce you in front of my loyal fans during the awards ceremony tonight in the conference room! You'll regret you ever crossed me!" His voice broke several times during his tirade and it sounded like he was almost ready for puberty. No, I made a mental note to find out when the ceremony was because it promised to be the best entertainment on the cruise so far.

Chapter Four: Reflection and Surprise

Hawk

Gretchen, Sandy and Trish had been gone for over an hour when the loudspeaker announced that we had set sail. Lisa and Jo had joined the guys and me, so the conversation had shifted from basketball to more mundane topics. The last hour had been a hoot, really. Jo was a firecracker. I'd only spoken to her for a few minutes last year. That had been during questioning her about an attempted murder. Ted's. Now I knew a lot more about her personality and I wished I'd had the opportunity to get to know her then.

Lisa and Ted were really hitting it off with Jo and Earl, too. That made me wonder how close we might grow. Keven was friendly, but reserved. I doubted he and Sandy were the wild and crazy type in general but the dynamics of a weeklong cruise weren't normal. I was willing to bet on the likelihood that we would *all* do something during the week that we'd never do in the real world. With a jolt, I realized that I even had to include myself; Keven and Earl were making me itch almost as much as Ted and that scared the hell out of me. I was a lesbian, wasn't I? Like everything else, time alone would tell.

For now, though, I had something else I had to deal with. If I wanted to see the doctor without Gretchen breathing down my neck, I needed to move now while Trish had Gretchen occupied. I smiled as I slowly stood up; Mother Hen wasn't going to be happy about not escorting me. My unintended pun made me smile even more. "I hate to run,"

I told everyone, "but I promised my wife that I'd let the doctor give me a checkup." I patted my swollen belly. "For some reason she thinks I might just drop the kids at a moment's notice."

That made them all laugh.

Keven stood up with me. "Since your wife kidnapped my fiancé, I'll fill in and make sure that you get there in one piece. Everyone, it's been a pleasure, and I hope we can keep getting together over the next week." Everyone else said hasty goodbyes and rose to go their separate ways, too.

"So, are you close?" Keven asked as we walked slowly to the elevators.

"Yep," I grinned. "Close enough. It's about a month to the date my doctor pulled out of the air, but with twins and a first birth, you never know. It might be a couple of weeks if they come early. Oooh, they're moving! Feel!" I pulled his hand to my belly.

He felt the twins moving around and smiled at me, pulling his hand back. "Any chance they might come on the cruise?" he asked. He seemed a little nervous. Moving babies probably did that to men.

I stepped into an elevator and pressed the appropriate button. "It's possible," I admitted, "but not really likely. Maybe if there were a lot of activity or stress. I wouldn't worry that you're going to have to deliver them right here in the elevator."

Keven laughed. "Delivering babies would be more Sandy's lot than mine. She's the doctor. How did Gretchen take the news that you you're having twins?"

"With entirely too much enthusiasm," I muttered.

"Tell me about it," Keven said.

With a shrug, I gave in. "When Alice, my OB/GYN told me, I was instantly in a state of shock. It was the whole deal: mouth gapping, eyes wide, and me completely at a loss for words. If I hadn't been lying on my back with my feet in the stirrups I would have fallen down. Gretchen was at no such loss of words or motor function." That was true in spades.

"She literally started bouncing up and down and running in little circles in front of us, pumping her arms into the air in some kind of primitive victory dance, screaming

'Twins!'. She grabbed my arms and shook me so much that I was afraid that the table wouldn't keep me from falling. She was exulting that she'd have two little babies to be Daddy to."

I shook my head. "I considered slapping her because she was becoming hysterical but it probably wouldn't have helped. Knowing Gretchen, she might even have liked it. I settled for sighing dramatically and I told her very clearly not to go there. Let me be clear now, Keven, I'm *not* the wife and she's *not* the Daddy. We're both the Mommy. Apparently," I added with a bit of a grimace, "Gretchen didn't read the memo." Keven laughed and I shot him a dirty look. It got him to stop laughing but couldn't quell the grin on his face. After I bit, I couldn't help but grin back. Keven, I decided right then, was dangerous.

"In any case, Alice told us the twins were both healthy and Gretchen immediately started demanding to know what sex they were," I said. "It took me half an hour to convince her that I didn't want to know and that I wasn't giving in to her tantrum. Gretchen is the world's worst gossip, I swear." I fixed him with a stare. "Not about secrets or her escort work but about something like *this*? It would have been all over the universe before I got home."

He nodded at me.

"They wanted to talk me out of coming on this cruise entirely. Alice pointed out that twins normally come four to six weeks early and at seven and a half months I now have only a couple of weeks till I get to the inner edge of the zone. Any normal woman would be 'sensible', but I'm a bit stubborn," I admitted.

Keven smiled at me. "Really? *You*?"

"Yeah, and I'm sure you know all about that condition, don't you?" I snorted. "You and I are more alike than I think either of us realize. In the end, my penalty for being stubborn is to see the doctor every day."

"That's just being prudent," Keven said.

"Gretchen was all worried that sex was out of the question," I continued. "Alice set her straight. As long as it's not too rough, I can if I want to, thank God. I'm horny so much now."

"Lucky Gretchen," Keven grinned.

"Among others," I answered with a matching grin. "This is going to be an interesting cruise."

Keven laughed. "That's a hilarious story. You and Gretchen make quite a pair and you both seem really happy together. If you don't mind my asking, how do you do that with Ted and Lisa in the picture?"

The elevator opened and we walked out and toward the medical center. I knew the beans had already been spilled, but Lisa's hopes of winning the election could be hurt if word got out into the general public. I had to tread carefully and I needed to know how Keven was going to handle our situation.

"Ted and Lisa were intimate with me before I met Gretchen," I said, paying close attention to his reactions. "In fact I was pregnant before I met her, though I didn't know it at the time. Gretchen not only accepted my pregnancy but ever since we got married, she and I have been talking about getting together with Ted and Lisa; and, they'd been talking about it themselves. I realize that causal sex isn't for everyone but we're going to try it this week. I think everything will be fine." I winked at him. "Why, are you lusting after my wife?"

Keven laughed. "Hawk, the only men who don't lust after Gretchen already have boyfriends." That startled a laugh from me, as well, and I determined to remember that line. "Seriously, though," Keven continued, "Gretchen is a beautiful woman and I won't lie to you about looking, but I don't know if that's right for Sandy and me. We've been talking about getting married."

"Love and sex don't have to be the same thing," I said. "But I'm not trying to lure you into the sack." I blushed, given my earlier thoughts, and I only hoped Keven would misinterpret my embarrassment. "Since we were talking about my sex life, it seemed only fair to ask you. Sandy kept looking at Trish and unless I miss my guess, Gretchen will be taking on a trainee. That opens up all kinds of possibilities if your lovely wife wants to get to know Trish a little better. If she did, would you object? A lot of men fantasize about multiple women."

Keven nodded. "I saw her looking but she's never mentioned anything about being bisexual. If she asks me, I'll consider it, but I won't bring it up myself."

"But you're not opposed to the idea in principle?" I pressed.

"I'm not jealous that way," he said with a shrug. "If I'm there, it's not cheating. I don't want either one of us sneaking around or for something like that to happen all the time, but I wouldn't object to an occasional romp in the hay." He grinned at me. "Why, are you interested in Sandy? Or even me?"

I laughed to cover my moment of shock. This was hitting entirely too close to home. "Obviously I've had sex with Ted. I don't know if I want to have sex with another man," I said honestly. "My self-image as a lesbian is already in crisis." That was truer than Keven knew. Once again, I felt like I had no idea who I was or what I wanted. Keven and Earl were attractive men, but did I want to sleep with them? I shook my head.

"None of us are stereotypes," Keven told me bluntly. "There are no absolutes in being human. We're *people* and that means that we have to accept that we don't always fit comfortably into neat little boxes. If you like women more than men, so be it. If you enjoy an occasional encounter with a man in a safe environment with your wife, that doesn't change who you are."

"Have you ever had a man?" I shot back with a little more heat than I intended. I held up my hand before he could speak. "Sorry, that came out sounding a little more abrupt than I meant it to. You don't have to answer that."

"No, I haven't and I'm not offended," he assured me. "I'm a pretty blunt guy on occasion. Ask Sandy. She'll tell you I'm passionate and sometimes too free with allowing my emotions to run. When I get angry, I get close to the edge. I almost punched out that Price guy when I found out he'd hit Lisa."

"Really?" I asked with a purr in my voice. "Me, too. I made him fall over in a chair in the interrogation room. I wanted to beat the crap out of him. Keven, my friend, I think we'll get along just fine. Maybe we can track that slime down and double-team him?"

Keven stopped outside the door to the medical center and grinned. "Deal."

The checkup was thorough but a bit impersonal for my taste. I couldn't fault the doctor on his skill, but I'd always been more comfortable with people that had a personality. Give me a doctor like *House* any day of the week. Keven waited patiently in the small waiting room for me to finish. I nodded to the young black man sitting there reading a magazine and let Keven escort me out of the medical center.

Something about the young man raised a flag for me, though. He had been looking

more at Keven than reading the magazine he was holding. I suppose he could be a people watcher but I was suspicious by nature.

"You talk much to that guy in the waiting room?" I asked Keven as we stepped into the elevator.

He looked at me curiously. "We talked a little bit. Why?"

I shrugged. "I don't really know," I admitted. "Something about him set off my cop-sense. Did he come in with someone?"

Keven nodded. "A young white girl. The nurse took her into the back just before you came out."

Okay, so the guy wasn't alone. Maybe I was being paranoid with Price and the Right Reverend around. Still.

"Was there anything odd in the conversation?" I asked in spite of my own doubts.

"We talked about the ship and all the stuff to do," Keven said. "He did seem kind of curious about all the stuff Sandy and I intended to do. It didn't seem odd at the time."

"He knew about Sandy?" I asked sharply.

"Well, he did after he asked if I was on the ship with someone," Keven admitted. "I told him nothing more than her name. His was Cal Washington and his girl is Nancy Armstrong. She was feeling a little queasy and wanted something for her stomach."

"Did he ask about me?" I asked quietly.

Keven nodded. "I told him you were here for a pre-natal checkup. He didn't ask anything more about you than that. I didn't even tell him your name, so he might think you're Sandy. He was really just interested in the kind of fun we intended to have on the ship."

I nodded and forced my paranoia back into its kennel. This was probably nothing. I stewed on it until we got back to my suite. This was going to bounce around the back of my brain until I did something about it, I knew.

When I walked in, I found a clothes party in progress. Gretchen and Sandy were sitting

on the couch, and Trish was modeling a sheath dress in deep green. The somewhat innocent girl was gone and in her place was a sophisticated young woman. At least she seemed that way until she saw Keven and blushed. Gretchen was going to have her work cut out for her with Trish.

Gretchen leaned forward. "Trish, you're going to have to accept that men will see you like this and not let it rattle you," she said gently. "It's normal and part of your new job. Revel in it. Be sensual. Be seductive. Be a little slutty when the time is right."

I pushed Keven into the room and into a comfortable seat before sitting down heavily beside Gretchen. She turned and kissed me and it wasn't just a peck on the cheek. She was feeling it, too. I returned her kiss with enthusiasm but broke it off before our passions carried us away. "I saw the doctor, as per your orders, Ma'am. He said everything's fine."

"That's Daddy to you, Wench," Gretchen said with a grin. "Ma'am is for you, Mommy." Then I saw the rest of the message hit her. "You went to the doctor without me? Are you crazy?"

I hid a grin as I turned and nodded towards Keven. "Don't worry, pretty Mama," I told her. "Keven was kind enough to waddle with me to the doctor."

Gretchen gave me a long look and Keven a longer more appraising one. She smiled and her eyes twinkled as she abruptly stood up and pulled me to my feet. "Excuse us for a little bit," She told the three as led me into the master bedroom.

A thrill raced up my spine and I closed the door behind us. Gretchen melted into my arms and I kissed her softly. "We have guests," I whispered into her ear.

"I know," she whispered back. "They'll have to make do because I've been wanting you all morning." Her lips found mine again, this time hot and aggressive.

I sat gently on the bed and we necked like teenagers. Time seemed to slow to crawl as I focused on the electricity shooting between us. I was overwhelmed with a hot mixture of love and lust. At last I broke our mad kiss.

"I've wanted you since we came on board," I said, my voice husky with desire. "This cruise might be for exploring but you're what's really important to me. You're the one that torches my panties like an arc welder."

Gretchen laughed gaily. "That's just how I want it and I want everyone to know how my wife fulfills all my deepest dreams."

"Not all of them," I said, poking her with a smirk. "Don't think I missed how you were looking at Trish. You want her."

"Pots and kettles," she said with a smirk. "That's lust and this is love." With that, she started unbuttoning my blouse slowly, her fingers caressing my breasts as she slowly revealed my bra. Her touch sent lightning bolts of heat through my belly all the way to my toes. The rush of love for her overwhelmed me in a bright tide of emotion.

I pulled her face to my neck and sighed. God, she knew just how to get me going. She pushed me down until I was on my back. Then she pulled aside the cup of my bra and began sucking on my engorged nipple. The nursing pad that kept my early lactation from soaking my blouse fell to the bed unnoticed. Early lactation wasn't exactly normal in a pregnancy but it wasn't unheard of. So, since everything else about me being pregnant was going to be different than everyone else, why not that too?

As she drank from me, I felt the mixed blast of love and peace that always accompanied this kinky sex-play. It was a delicious confusion inside me. She stripped me of my clothes and kissed her way onto my belly. It wasn't easy but her fingers found my swollen clit and began gently rubbing me, raising my temperature even higher. Lesbian sex wasn't easy while pregnant but it wasn't impossible. Part of my mind was already getting ready to get on my knees so she could eat me. It wouldn't happen soon, I suspected, because Gretchen was taking things slowly, always letting me see what she was doing to me. She wanted me to watch.

Then she wrapped her lips around my protruding belly button and sucked. I felt her lips all the way down to my ass and writhed in pleasure. When I was good and wet, she slid between my legs and dipped her head to taste me. She sure had learned a lot about eating pussy in eight months. Her lips and tongue tortured me and I was a little upset that I couldn't watch her. All I could see was my stomach.

I clenched the sheets in ecstasy as she sucked on my clit with two fingers plunging deep inside me and I knew without looking that she was fingering herself like crazy. I wasn't that far from coming myself. I moaned and called out her name as I gave myself to her. In a sudden rush I was there, clamping my thighs around her head as I came with a scream.

Gretchen crawled back beside me with a smug grin, her lips shiny with my juices. "*That*

is what I've needed. She kissed me but not with the heat that carried things forward. I knew that kiss. She wanted to cuddle and I was happy to do so.

"Do you want me to make love to you now?" I asked, looking deeply into those green eyes of hers.

"Not now," She said, helping me sit up. "I just needed you right then. We should go out before our guests think we've abandoned them."

"Like they won't know what we were doing," I said with a smile as I sat up and began dressing.

"I wanted them to know," Gretchen said simply. "I love you and this is one of the things that make us a couple. I love you."

My heart melted all over again and I stood up, pulling her into my arms. "I love you, my heart."

Gretchen picked up my nursing pads and slipped them into my bra with a grin and buttoned me up.

When we came back out, Trish was in a new dress. It was black and slinky. Very sexy. It was obvious as we sat back down on the couch that she'd been waiting for us. Sandy grinned at us and Keven looked like he was going to explode out of his pants.

Trish took a deep breath and reached behind her, trying to unzip the dress in a slow and seductive way, her eyes on Keven. Keven froze in place, gazing at Trish.

Sandy smiled at Keven and shook her head. "Let me help you, dear." She rose to her feet and stepped behind Trish. With a grin at Keven, she slowly unzipped the dress and stepped back. I saw her hands twitch and almost run along Trish's waist. Sandy was further along in considering things than Keven was. I knew with sudden insight. She'd been with a woman before.

Meanwhile, Trish was wriggling in a way that made me warm inside, sliding out of the dress. Her blush was deep but her eyes sparkled in a way that told me she was getting off on exhibiting herself to a group of strangers. I'd have to have Lisa talk with her. Exhibitionism was her specialty and it looked like Trish might share it.

Trish's dress fell into a dark puddle at her feet and she stood revealed in a matching set

of sexy red underwear. The bra was lacy and somehow managed to hold in her magnificent breasts while still emphasizing her cleavage. The French cut panties left little to the imagination and suited her lush hips. I noticed she was a natural blonde right away. She'd need some trimming to wear those panties properly. She stepped out of the dress and Sandy picked it up and gently laid it on the table.

The high heels Trish had on accentuated her calves and legs so well that I felt myself starting to dampen with desire once again. Almost defiantly, Trish stood there displaying herself for Keven. She was breathing heavily and her eyes were wide open. I wondered what was happening and when Sandy or Gretchen would put a stop to it. The heat was so palpable that the very air crackled with possibility.

Gretchen sat back and said nothing. She smiled at me and rested her hand on my leg. She wasn't going to interfere.

Sandy finished laying out the dress and stepped back behind Trish, looking over her shoulder at Keven. "Do you want to see more?" she asked her boyfriend in a husky voice. She glanced at us and Gretchen nodded at her.

Oh, shit. Sandy wasn't going to turn back. My eyes swiveled to Keven and I waited to see which way he jumped. My mind was awirl with confused thoughts. I knew we'd be sleeping with Ted and Lisa but despite my earlier thoughts and my conversation with Keven, I hadn't *really* believed that he and Sandy might be on the menu. This could get complicated fast. Should I stop this now? Could I stop it without consequences?

Keven looked at Gretchen and then at me. With a smile, Gretchen began running her hand along my thigh. That sent another bolt of electricity through me. His eyes returned to Sandy. "Only if that's what you want."

"Gretchen, Trish and I've been talking and we've decided that what happens on the cruise stays on the cruise. You can tell me if you want me to stop." Sandy took a deep breath of her own and unhitched Trish's bra with a twist of her hand. She was much more experienced than she looked. As Gretchen had found out, that took a good deal of practice.

Trish's hands cupped her breasts and held the material to cover herself. Maybe she was too nervous. She looked at Gretchen with a question in her eyes.

"Only if you want to, Honey," Gretchen whispered. "I'll be right here and only what you want to happen will happen. It's okay to say 'no' now or at any time." Trish's awakening

was turning me on but I nodded my head in agreement.

With a sweep of her hand, Trish uncovered herself and let the bra fall to the floor. Oddly, I found my eyes drawn to the fluttering fabric rather than her breasts. The slow fall of the bra seemed so sexy. I could hear Keven's sudden inhalation and knew that he liked what he saw.

Trish's breasts were as fabulous as I'd suspected. Firm with youth, they stood proudly out from her chest without sagging. Her areola was about the size of a half-dollar, a couple of inches across, and her nipples were stiff. Since it wasn't cold, I had to assume that she was as excited as I was getting.

"Do you like what you see?" Sandy asked Keven, letting her hands rest on Trish's hips. "Do you want to see more?"

"Yes," Keven croaked. He adjusted his seat to try to find a more comfortable position for the rather large erection he was sporting. "If you're sure."

Sandy's answer was to reach around Trish and cup her breasts. Trish gasped and trembled under her touch but did nothing to stop her. Trish locked her eyes on Keven. Sandy kissed Trish's shoulder softly. "Trish, tell me to stop and I'll stop."

For an answer, Trish pulled Sandy's hands further up until her palms were rubbing across her nipples.

Sandy sighed and kissed Trish's neck; I swear I could see the goose bumps from here. Their bodies seemed to melt together and Trish trembled under her touch. Sandy motioned for Keven to come to them with one hand and I watched them in fascination.

Keven stood and stepped beside them, obviously unsure what to do. His cock was tenting his pants in a way that told me what he wanted to do.

Sandy released Trish and slowly knelt beside Trish. "Come down here and let me show you what a man likes."

Almost like she was in a trance, Trish knelt beside Sandy and her eyes were huge as she looked at Keven's cock inside his pants.

"Touch it," Sandy commanded her. "Feel it. It's okay."

Trish unzipped Keven's pants under Sandy's expert guidance and Sandy fished Keven's cock out of his pants. It was a big one. It was thicker and a bit longer than Ted's. Since I didn't have a lot of experience to fall back on, I'd have to ask Gretchen later how it stood up to the average cock.

Sandy smiled at Keven and ran her tongue along the underside of his cock. He gasped and it jumped under her touch. Trish was looking on from less than a foot away, her eyes locked on the scene in front of her as she panted. Her hands twitched at her sides as she tried to figure out what she was supposed to do.

"Lick it," Sandy commanded Trish at last. "Taste him."

Hesitantly, Trish leaned forward and touched her tongue to the head of Keven's cock. The taste obviously agreed with her as she put a hand on his leg and began running her tongue along his length, her eyes locked on his for approval. I felt like I could visually take his pulse from the throbbing of his cock.

"Keep licking his shaft," Sandy encouraged her young friend. I think she liked being in control. Maybe that was a doctor thing. With no further warning, Sandy took the head of Keven's cock into her mouth and started bobbing gently. Her cheeks collapsed as she sucked on the head of his cock.

Keven was having a hard time standing but he wasn't complaining either with those two women orally pleasuring him. This had to be one of the two great male fantasies that Sandy and Trish were fulfilling for him right now. Perhaps they would fulfill the other one later. That would be watching two women make love, of course. He let one hand tangle in Sandy's hair and forced a little more into her mouth as he thrust.

Sandy groaned and let him fuck her mouth while Trish pulled back and watched avidly as he fucked Sandy's mouth. At last, Sandy pulled her mouth off his cock with a wet sound that drove a shiver of lust up my spine. I moaned and sighed. Sandy turned to Trish. "Are you ready?"

Trish stiffened her spine and nodded. "What do I do?"

Sandy gave her the same kind of talk that Lisa had the first time I went down on Ted. Cover your teeth with your lips and use your hands to keep his cock from going deeper than you want. Trish drank it all in like there would be a test. I supposed there would be.

When Trish opened her lips and took Keven inside her mouth, I thought he might lose it right there but he somehow kept control. His hands tangled in her hair but he didn't force her. He let her control the speed and depth and just threw his head back in pleasure. Even in the midst of his passion, he was a gentleman.

Sandy was hurriedly shedding her clothes and I let my eyes drink in her body. Slender and sexy, I bet she would be a real firecracker in bed. Her tits must have been about a C cup and I wondered if she'd had them enhanced. If they were, I couldn't tell from here. A closer examination would be in order, if the chance presented itself. As she turned, I could see her carpet matched her red drapes. That was so sexy.

Sandy knelt beside Trish and leaned down, taking her nipple between her lips. Her hands were running up and down Trish's body.

Trish gasped but didn't take Keven's cock from her mouth. She sucked him harder, if anything. I didn't know how long he could hold out under that assault. Trish caressed Keven's legs as she bobbed her head energetically.

Just when I thought he was starting to lose control, Sandy stood up and rapidly stripped the clothes off his body while Trish watched hungrily. Sandy laid him down on the carpet, positioned herself over his cock and slid herself onto him with a groan. Then she turned her attention to Trish, kissing her on the lips for the first time.

Trish didn't resist at all, instead kissing Sandy back enthusiastically. I guess that answered the question. Trish wasn't going to be afraid to swing both ways.

Sandy broke the kiss at last and pulled Trish toward Keven. "Sit on his face and you won't regret it. I didn't bring any condoms so that's it until later, though. I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Trish said with a smile, stripping off her panties. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that anyway. Thank you. This means a lot to me."

Keven helped guide her until she was kneeling over his face and kissing Sandy again. The three of them writhed in pleasure while I watched.

I could see his cock plunge into her every time she sat on him and it excited me, although I was more fascinated with the reaction of her pussy than I was in the motion of Kevin's equipment. I got even more excited when Trish bent down and began sucking on Sandy's breast. Sandy threw her head back and moaned in pleasure, holding Trish's head right where she wanted it.

Trish came first, almost screaming as Keven ate her to orgasm while she ground her pussy into his face. That pushed Sandy over the edge and she fucked Keven like a madwoman. She seemed to glow as she thrashed in her orgasm.

Sandy slid off Keven and took him back into her mouth, obviously intent on sucking him off in front of Trish. Trish slid down beside her and watched her closely. Sandy's eyes locked on Trish as she pulled Keven close to the edge. Then she pulled her mouth off and Trish leaned forward to take the head of Keven's cock into her mouth.

Trish licked and sucked for less than ten seconds when she pulled back in surprise. The second jet of his come splashed on her face just before Sandy captured his cock and finished milking him dry with a groan. Of course, he was writhing and groaning, too. I think he must have come really hard.

Sandy climbed up Keven and smothered him in kisses while Trish looked at me.

Trish looked incredibly sexy with his come dripping from her chin. She swallowed once noisily and licked her lips. "That wasn't so bad," she admitted aloud.

"Well," a surprised female voice said from the front hall. "I think we found the Orgy Suite." The voice was familiar to me and it wasn't Lisa.

We all whipped our heads around and stared in shock. Standing there were Ted, Lisa and our new friends, the Bellers.

Chapter Five: Outrages Abound

Lisa

The shocked tableau held for a few critical seconds until Trish abruptly turned beet red and scrambled for one of the small bedrooms with a loud squeak. Oddly, it wasn't her nudity that struck me most deeply. It was her ankles, made even shapelier by those high heels she was tottering away on. She had the kind of legs I only dreamed of having. The slam of the door behind the escaping woman jarred the rest of us out of our paralysis.

Hawk and Gretchen grinned from the couch and didn't look one bit disturbed at us

barging in. Keven and Sandy, on the other hand, were obviously embarrassed. They laughed about it, though, and started scrambling into their clothes in a big hurry.

Ted was grinning like the proverbial cat that ate the canary, so I poked him in the ribs. I glanced and saw that the Bellers looked more amused than shocked. Interesting. Combined with the conversation Jo and Gretchen had shared earlier, I felt sure that Jo and Earl would be joining our fun eventually.

"The Orgy Suite," I chimed in following Jo's comment, "where you check in and everyone else gets to check you out. And the room assignments can get a little hazy, too."

Jo laughed and threw her arm around the grinning Earl. "Shall we leave and let everyone get dressed in peace?"

Earl pretended to consider while he ogled the women slipping into their clothes. "Naw, it looks like everybody's decent now."

Gretchen chuckled. "Hardly that, Earl. We're just dressed."

Hawk smacked her wife on her shapely ass. "You're as bad as Lisa about waving your assets around, Smart-ass."

The sexual tension drained out of the room as Keven and Sandy finished dressing. I gestured to our guests to have a seat at the table while they excused themselves to go wash up. Jo leaned over and whispered to me. "Are they always so quick on the draw? I thought you just met Keven and Sandy."

I nodded my head and smiled at Earl, letting him know this wasn't a private conversation. Ted went into our room following Keven and Sandy.

"We did just meet them," I said with a level voice. "I'm not sure what happened, but obviously they hit it off. Maybe what happens on the cruise should stay on the cruise."

Earl laughed a belly laugh and Jo smiled. "This is going to be a very interesting cruise, I think," Jo said. "What did Hawk mean about waving your assets around?"

I blushed but didn't let myself get too embarrassed. As an exhibitionist, I knew damn well that Hawk had me pegged. "I think if you hang around us long enough, you just might find out," I said with a grin. "I won't ruin the surprise."

Jo nodded, a thoughtful look on her exotic face.

Hawk came out of the master bedroom and settled at the table with the rest of us. "Gretchen's trying to talk Trish out of the bathroom, so she may be a while. I swear if there was a chandelier, Trish would be hanging from it."

"Or from the ceiling like a cat?" Jo suggested with a smile.

"Or that," Hawk agreed with a grin. "Well, she wants to be an escort like Gretchen, so she's going to have to get used to not being embarrassed so easily."

"Easily?" Jo said with a gasp. "Good Lord, perfect strangers walked in on her having sex! That sounds like a lot to me!"

Ted and Keven coming out of our room interrupted Hawk's reply. Ted walked up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. "Keven and I are going to give you girls' some space and see if we can pin down where Price is staying. Then we'll find something to keep us busy while you all talk."

Earl grunted and stood with a nod. "That sounds like a damn good idea, boys. I think I'll just mosey on out with you and let the little lady talk without making me blush." He grinned as Jo swatted him, and he walked out the door laughing with the other men.

Sandy walked into the living room as we burst into laughter. She smiled and sat down. "What did I miss?"

"We were just laughing at the men being men," Jo said. "They're off to beat their chests and track Price down. I think they're going to overwhelm him with testosterone."

"I hope they do," I said. "Price just pisses me off. We have a motion in the courts to stop his harassment, but it won't be heard until next week. Our lawyer says we have a very good chance that everything will be dismissed and Price will be barred from suing us anymore. I can hardly wait. It's gotten quite obvious that he's only doing it to mess with us."

Sandy nodded and looked around the table at all of us. "By the way, I'm sorry we got carried away. I didn't realize that you all were going to walk in on us. Frankly, I'm still a little unsure how we got started."

I laughed and patted her hand. "It's okay to get carried away sometimes. I'm not offended. Ted and I are fine with you having sex in front of us." My eyes gleamed with a shiver of lust. "In fact, I look forward to returning the favor, if that's okay with you." I widened my gaze to include Jo. "And I'd be a poor hostess if I didn't invite you to the party, Jo. You and Earl both are invited, unless that's going too far for you. If so, I understand."

Jo shrugged. "I'm not offended, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't arousing. Watching is just fine, but I don't know about involving anyone else, though. I need to think about it and talk to Earl."

Hawk shook her head. "We're still working on that, too. Either one of you might get jealous if you saw the other having a good time with someone else. Though I'll go out on a limb and bet that Earl won't have any gas if you want to play with the girls," she added dryly.

Jo smiled. "I'm sure you're right. That's why I was dickering a bit with Gretchen earlier; I think both of us would be interested in something with her." She blushed, but didn't seem to be terribly embarrassed about what she'd just admitted.

Hawk gave Jo a sharp look. "You were talking to Gretchen about hiring her as an escort?"

"Well, we talked about it some, but I told Gretchen that I liked her too much already to feel comfortable exchanging money for her time."

Hawk's face relaxed into a smile. "I think friendship and respect will be a much more cherished currency, Jo, and much harder for Gretchen to resist. I also don't think Gretchen is the only one interested in you and Earl! So talk to Earl, because you both are more than welcome."

Jo gave Hawk a long, measuring look. "Well, I'll talk to Earl, and if you don't mind a pair of old fuddy duddies watching, at least, I think you can count us in. We may be interested in more, but we'll have to play it by ear."

I turned to Sandy and smiled conspiratorially. "So, fill us in on what we missed."

With a sly grin, Sandy asked, "So, you want a blow by blow description of our antics?"

We all groaned, and Hawk muttered something about "another damned pun," but

waved off my questioning glance.

As Sandy described the action, I felt my stomach flutter. It sounded like we'd missed a real show. Part of me was already looking forward to what would likely happen tonight. The vision of Ted laying me on the table and taking me in front of everyone instantly made my center hot and gooey. There was something about the idea of doing this on a cruise among strangers that was liberating. It made something that I wouldn't have considered doing outside of my deepest fantasies a real possibility. Not that I'd held back from sex in public before, but I'd never contemplated anything like what we were talking about doing here. This could turn into an orgy. An honest to god orgy. And that took my breath away. I had difficulty even believing I'd brought the subject up.

When Sandy was done, I pressed her. "So, you two enjoyed sharing Trish. What about others?"

Sandy shook her head. "We've never shared before, but I think we liked it. Keven said that so long as we were together, and we both agreed, then we could do more." Her eyes looked at me in a way that made my chest feel tight. "Like Jo said, we'll play it by ear, but I think we're *all* going to have a fun cruise."

A glance around the table almost made me laugh. We were all almost licking our chops in anticipation. Sandy was dead right, I'd bet.

"Well, we have to put that off until after dinner, I'm afraid," Sandy said. "We have another bit of fun to attend to, first."

I blinked in surprise. "Why? What's up?"

Sandy filled us in on the confrontation with Skip Niccio and his threats to poison pen them this very evening. She was right; it did sound like a lot of fun.

Hawk picked up the phone, made a call to the central desk, and grinned shortly, hanging up with a polite "thank you." She waved something she'd jotted down on a notepad at us. "The ASS Newsgroup annual awards ceremony will kick off in the main conference room in less than half an hour."

I blinked. "Okay, now I'm confused. The ASS newsgroup? You mean they're like AP or UPI? I thought this was some kind of internet porn thing for socially inept boys. What the hell does ASS stands for?

"Alt Sex Stories," she smirked back. "The woman said it was some internet thing, so I think you're right, Lisa. Personally, I think they just had to make up something with the word 'ass' in it. Men!" she said with a roll of her eyes. General laughter greeted her comment. "We need a plan to infiltrate this gathering."

"Why?" Sandy asked with a shrug. "Let's just go see what's going on, and if Skip starts something, we'll deal with it. It's not as if this is something dangerous, or even all that serious. It's just some grown-up, adolescent-minded jerk talking shit. We can take that."

Hawk considered that and nodded. "Good point. I'm making this more complicated than it needs to be. Let me tell Gretchen where we're going, and we can hit it."

The noise overwhelmed me when we walked into the convention room. I'd expected something like a couple dozen "grown-up, adolescent-minded" guys, but the room was packed. There must have been several hundred people here. I stopped just inside the door and gawked at the crowd.

Also, the people mostly looked so normal that if I hadn't known who was meeting here I wouldn't have given them a second glance anywhere else. Every age and, surprisingly, both genders greeted my astounded gaze. In fact, there were more than a few women present. A solid minority.

The room was broken down into a long series of tables near the far wall and dozens of smaller, round tables in the rest of the room. The long tables held several dozen men and women, as well as a podium with a microphone.

Hawk spotted Skip and pointed him out to me. He looked as bad as advertised. He was in a small group of men near the head table and he seemed to be sneering something at them.

"He's never seen you or Jo," Hawk said to me. "Why don't you both go scope him out? We'll find a table and hold your seats. God knows I want to know who's around me when the lights go out in this place." She shuddered slightly.

I laughed softly. "Come on, I hardly see any over-developed right arms in here. I'm thinking Skip may be the exception rather than the rule. Keep an open mind."

"You're telling *me* to keep an open mind," Hawk said with a gasp. "You've got to be kidding me!" Then she scowled at my smirk.

"Come on, Jo," I said as I stepped into the swirling crowd, heading toward the podium. She fell in beside me, and I slid to the left to come up on Skip from his rear. Despite the no smoking rules inside the ship, he had a lit cigarette dangling from his lips and it bobbed and spewed ashes as he struck a pose before his admirers. At least, it looked like he thought they were his admirers. To me, they just looked shocked. I wondered if he even noticed when some of his ash fell into his martini.

"Frankly," Skip droned on, "I'm amazed that anyone reads the drivel he writes at all. I wouldn't be surprised if he used throwaway internet accounts to vote for his own stories. His characters are two-dimensional, his plot lines are lame and hackneyed, and he repeats himself. If he wrote anything fresher than what he does now, he would be using cuneiform." His listeners seemed stunned at his vitriol, with several shaking their heads in disgust, but Skip took it as incomprehension. "Oh, come along, gentlemen! Look it up on your own time! I can't believe anyone with any taste whatsoever has ever read *The Cuba Tales*."

One of the men was clenching his fists and glaring at Skip. He was tall, slender and not too bad looking. Brown hair trimmed short framed a nice face: a face now filled with rage.

Skip seemed oblivious as the man forced himself to turn around and stalk away. A few others followed, but the rest of the listeners looked like they were watching a train wreck, or a rerun of the *Anna Nicole Smith* show. It was so bad you just couldn't take your eyes off it, even though it horrified you. Skip, however was oblivious, and he just continued to drip venom on whoever Southland38 was.

Jo winked at me and followed the man that had left. She'd no doubt get the dirt on what this all meant.

Apparently tired of ripping into someone else, Skip started talking about himself and his own work, using the most ridiculous levels of hyperbole I'd ever heard. While he started comparing the nuance of his work to that of Hemingway, I was trying to figure out how such a skinny guy could puff his chest out so much. As a well-dressed gentleman began telling everyone to take their seats, Skip whispered conspiratorially to the group. "Listen up for some good news in my speech."

As Skip sauntered to the head table and the crowd broke up, I heard more than a few people mutter less than appreciative thoughts about Skip. It rapidly became apparent that the man that walked off was none other than Southland38 himself! I snorted

quietly to myself; Skip sure seemed to have a way with people.

When about half the people had resumed their seats, I spotted Hawk and Sandy sitting with a man that looked to be in his late thirties and an attractive dark-haired woman. The woman was chatting with Sandy and the man was jotting something down on a notepad as Hawk spoke to him.

"...and you don't mind if I get some background material from you? I'd rather write an entertaining story that wasn't completely off the mark," the man was saying. "And it sounds like being a cop and a lesbian might make for an interesting story. Or perhaps a whole series of stories."

"I don't mind giving you some background information on the lesbian or cop communities." The man beamed, and Hawk held up her hand. "However, before you write a single word that even vaguely resembles my life, even if you change the names, I want to read some of your stuff. And, even if I do agree after that, I want to have a chance to approve what you write first."

The man nodded and looked at me curiously as I took a seat. "Of course. I'd never write anything about someone, even with the names changed, without giving them the chance to clear it or change it, even, before I published it."

"Good, then I think we can talk," Hawk said, turning to me. "Lisa, this is Wine Maker and his wife. He somehow thinks a pregnant lesbian ex-cop is story worthy." She snickered softly to herself. 'I think he's crazy,' was left unsaid, but was quite obvious.

I gave her a warning look and smiled at Wine Maker.

He held out his hand to me. "A pleasure."

His wife introduced herself, and I shook her hand as Wine Maker continued. "My wife edits my work. And I promise that if you're part of Hawk's story, you'll get a chance to approve anything involving you. Think of it like Doctor Watson chronicling the exploits of Sherlock Holmes. I'll protect any detail that you wouldn't want known publicly, but I promise I'll still figure out how to tell the story in an interesting way."

"As long as my name is changed, and the city and state where I live and work are changed, Hawk can speak for me. I'm Lisa. If you don't mind my asking, why the fake name? I noticed that others seem to do the same."

Wine Maker laughed. "Writing erotica seems to make people worry. I'm not ashamed of what I write, but this being the internet; at least a little bit of caution is a good thing. Now maybe you can satisfy my curiosity; what brings a bunch of people who have never written, or apparently even read, internet erotica to the awards banquet?"

I gestured toward the head table. "We know someone that knows Skip Niccio, and Skip was threatening to trash her reputation in public, so we decided to come listen to him. Is he going to win an award?"

Wine Maker shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first one he's won. He writes some good stuff, and he knows how to keep the fans begging for more. He uses two tricks that I can see: he never answers questions about his stories and he quite effectively verbally eviscerates anyone who is critical. Belittling his fans like that seems to make him even more popular. I'm not sure why. His major story is going to be four books long, and will probably wind up longer than the Lord of the Rings, from what I hear. He's finished posting all but the last book, and he has his fans wildly speculating about which of the girls the 'hero' ends up married to at the end and which one of the girls will end up dead."

Hawk seemed dubious. "I've met him. I can't believe he writes that well. The man is slime, and slime is the one thing a cop does know something about."

Wine Maker shrugged. "Writing is often a solitary pursuit. Not many of his fans know much about him at all. I didn't even know what he looked like until tonight."

The speaker was finally getting the crowd into their seats when Jo wandered back up and took her seat. I introduced her to Wine Maker and his wife and let them chat while I focused my attention on the awards ceremony.

"To everyone that made it here to the Alt dot Sex dot Stories First Annual Awards cruise, I say 'Welcome!' I'm Night Stranger. I'll just leave it up to you to guess which one."

Everyone laughed, but I didn't see what was so funny. I hated inside jokes.

"We hope to be able to make this trip an annual event," Night Stranger continued. "Now rather than blather on and waste your good cruise time, let me cut to the chase. There were a lot of good stories this last year and I realize we've tortured you all terribly by withholding the names of the winners of last year's Golden Clitorides but the time is here to pass out some well deserved accolades."

He held up an envelope. "Each one of us at the head table has an award to present this year and it is my pleasure to start off the parade with the Best Erotic Story of the Year." With a neat twist of his finger, he opened the envelope and pulled out a card. "The winner is... Outside Paris, Book 3: Kena, by Skip Niccio!"

With a smile that told the world that he wasn't in the least surprised, Skip strutted to the podium and smirked at the crowd. He pulled something from the inner pocket of his jacket and set it on the podium before clearing his throat.

"I've never had the opportunity to directly accept an award before, and I must say that it's a more moving experience than I'd anticipated," he said with a knowing grin. "I knew my story would be popular but you've all exceeded my expectations. Thank you."

From the murmuring, the crowd thought that was somewhat a backhanded a complement. I restrained the laughter that wanted to bubble up to a chuckle. Maybe I was wrong about him being mostly an ass; he just might be a complete ass instead.

"I'd like to take a moment to pass along some good news to you, my adoring fans!" Skip continued. "After several months of intense negotiation between my agent and a certain unnamed publishing house, I am now in a position to sign a three book publishing deal for a new series. The package is worth six figures!"

That brought the crowd to its feet and I rose reluctantly along with the rest, clapping politely. Skip held onto the podium and I thought he was going to bow or blow kisses for a second. He let the crowd cheer for a moment and then gestured for quiet. I resumed my seat and listened while trying to figure out how a frog like him had ever gotten a publisher to agree to anything. Didn't they actually speak to the authors?

"That bit of good news comes along with a sad note," Skip continued. "I'm afraid that to cinch the deal, I was forced to grant the publisher her wishes in some other areas. I realize it's not going to come as good news to many of you, but she didn't like the fact that my name has been associated with erotica. That means, unfortunately, that Misty," he brandished a floppy disk that must have come from his jacket pocket, "the just completed Book 4 of Outside Paris, will never be published."

The crowd briefly blinked in confusion and then rose to their feet again, this time with a howl of outrage and anguish. Skip looked completely taken aback at the roar of objection from all sides.

I looked around and started feeling nervous about all the people. These people looked pissed. I felt an impending sense of doom.

Hawk looked at Jo and me, slapping the table. "That's it. Time to go."

Skip was shouting and trying to talk over all the people that were crowding the podium, but all I could hear was something about "having no choice" and "having already pulled the other books from the web."

It was getting even uglier than I'd feared. Some of these people were really angry, shouting things like "sellout," and "traitor." Someone shouted that if Skip followed through, he might just kill his sorry ass. Wine Maker and his wife waved at us as we departed, maintaining their seats amidst the chaos. Wine Maker was busy scribbling notes while his wife just shook her head at the swirling swarm of erotica writers.

We were almost to the door when it burst open and another group of people rushed into the room. The distinguished looking gentleman at their lead looked vaguely familiar to me, but Hawk obviously knew him since she abruptly stopped in her tracks and started backing up.

"Oh, shit!" she said as the man speared her with a righteous glare from less than ten feet away.

"I am sadly disappointed to find you here, Hawk," he said sadly, shaking his head. "You've let sin take over your life if these are the kind of people you choose to associate with. What would your husband say?" The other people spread out behind him and I realized this must be the Right Reverend Swaggwell.

"I don't need to explain anything to you or your kind, Reverend," Hawk said defiantly. "For your information, I don't have a husband. I have a wife. I'm a lesbian."

My stomach tightened at the flash of anger in the depths of Swaggwell's eyes. They were the eyes of a fanatic. I grabbed Hawk by the shoulder and started pulling her back.

Swaggwell shifted his angry gaze to me. "The two of you are abominations against God, and you'll burn in Hell. Still, it's not too late to turn back from the gates of Hell. Pray to God for forgiveness and repent." Then he stalked past us, with the crowd at his heels glaring their hatred at all four of us as they passed.

"Pornographers!" Swaggwell shouted at the crowd, quickly getting their full attention.

"Sodomites and sinners! With every filthy word, you condemn yourselves to everlasting damnation! Repent," he commanded in a stern voice. "Repent before God strikes you down wherever he finds you!"

"Oh, shit, is right," I said weakly. "Let's get the hell out of here right now!"

Hawk was all for wading back into the developing brawl but allowed the three of us to drag her out the door to the sounds of a riot growing behind us. A crewman was standing in the hall talking on a cell phone in Italian, gesticulating with both hands. I wasn't sure how that helped the person on the other end of the connection understand him, but I could make a good guess at what he was calling about.

We passed half a dozen crewmen running toward the convention room as we got to the elevators. We'd escaped just in time, it seemed.

Over the next few hours, we changed, tracked the men down and made arrangements to get a larger table for all of us at dinner. It was amazing what pull having the Presidential Suite had. Our serving time started just after dark.

Gretchen even coaxed Trish out of the bathroom to join us. She was still blushing prettily, and I gave her a warm smile to offset her embarrassment.

With our new friends, that made nine people, so one of the big circular tables was perfect. As we were ordering our drinks, the dining room started to fill up with well-dressed guests, and the babble of voices was actually relaxing.

Hawk told the rest of our friends about the details of the riot and had everyone's undivided attention. At least she did until Skip Niccio walked in, huffed his way over to a small, two-person table about twenty feet away and glared at Trish.

I put my hand on Trish's leg under the table and she relaxed at once, smiling her thanks at me. She proceeded to pretend Skip wasn't there while I returned his glare with a big smile. I could see it was infuriating him further, and that made me feel perversely pleased with myself. I looked over at Hawk to share my amusement, but she was glaring at something to my side.

When I turned and looked, I was less than pleased to see the Right Reverend staring at us as though he was going to drive the sin right out of us from his own small table. He was glaring at me in particular. I wondered why until I remembered that I had my hand

on Trish's leg, and he thought I was Hawk's wife. I was a lesbian, and perhaps even worse in his eyes, a promiscuous lesbian.

Well, I figured I was pretty much damned in his eyes now anyway, wasn't I? I supposed this also meant I was off his Christmas fund raising drive for sure, so maybe there was an upside. The little devil inside me started whispering that sometimes already being damned could be a big plus.

I looked back over and made sure that Skip was still glaring at Trish and then took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Then I slid my hand further along Trish's leg, to the hem of her skirt.

Trish gasped slightly and turned her head to gaze at me in surprise.

I smiled at her and raised an eyebrow questioningly, giving her the option to tell me no.

Trish blushed prettily and looked to Gretchen, but she was engaged in an animated discussion with Hawk. Probably about the Reverend. She did catch Sandy's attention, though. An unspoken communication of looks and head gestures took place in seconds. A man would never have understood Trish, but Sandy just looked stern, almost commanding, as she nodded to Trish.

When Trish looked back at me, the blush had faded into a flush around her neck and chest. Her pupils had become a little unfocused with arousal, and she nodded to me.

I leaned in and kissed her cheek softly. "You don't have to," I whispered. "I just thought it would tweak Skip and the Reverend. And because I find the thought of touching you in front of all these people, with none of them knowing what's happening, erotic. It turns me on like a firecracker."

"I want you to," she whispered back. "I'm still not sure what I'm doing, but this excites me. It excited me when Sandy told me what to do. I know I can say no, but when it looks like she's making me do something, I get all hot inside."

"Then we need to talk about what submission is later. For now, try to not scream or moan. I want you to come but not let anyone else even know. Do you understand?"

Trish nodded dreamily. "I'll do what you tell me to do, Lisa."

By now, Gretchen and Hawk were looking at us. A glance told me that everyone at the

table was, and a bit of a blush rose in me. Sandy was grinning like nobody's business. She must have narked me out to everyone else. I looked to Gretchen to see if she was going to wave me off.

Gretchen was watching Trish like a hawk, and an unspoken communication seemed to travel between them. There weren't even the facial gestures that she used with Sandy. With a smile and a nod, Gretchen also gave me the green light.

With a last glance at the Reverend, I shifted my gaze to Skip. "Trish, honey," I said in a normal voice, "I want you to look at Skip. Keep your attention on him and tell everyone what I'm doing. Keep it low enough that only we can hear you. If a server or someone else comes up, you stop talking and play it cool. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Lisa," Trish said in a dreamy, but understandable voice. "Lisa has her hand on my leg, with her fingers just under the hem of my skirt. Just thinking about it has me all wet inside."

I focused my attention on Skip and smiled at him again. I let my hand begin to wander up Trish's thigh and listened to her as if she was describing someone else doing what I was doing. The split perception of doing something and hearing a description of it from her was making me so hot.

"Now she's sliding her hand up my thigh," Trish said, "Her fingers are just barely touching the hem of my panties." Her eyes moved along from person to person at the table making eye contact. They all seemed riveted, leaning forward to listen to her every word.

Gently, I slid the fabric of her panties aside and began tracing my fingertip up and down the slowly swelling lips of her pussy. She breathlessly described the incredible sensations she was feeling and her words lit a fire inside me. I slowly slid a finger between her labia and rubbed her clit.

Trish's eyes tried to roll back into her head but she kept control with a shuddering breath. "God, Lisa's rubbing my clit. I feel like a volcano is erupting inside me." She focused her eyes on Keven. "It's not as good as when it was your tongue, but it's here in front of hundreds of people. Skip is watching me. I can tell he knows what Lisa's doing, and that alone makes it somehow more intense."

Trish was right about one thing. She felt hot enough for a volcano to be erupting between her legs. I twisted my hand and gently slid two fingers inside my new friend. It

was like slipping my fingers into liquid metal. She was hot and dripping wet. I felt a matching heat blazing between my own thighs as the exhibitionist in me realized what a show I was putting on.

Now Trish's eyes did roll back into her head for a moment and she gasped. Not loud enough to garner any fresh attention, but the matching looks of outrage confirmed that both Skip and the Reverend knew exactly what my hand was doing between Trish's legs.

I leaned against Trish again and kissed her neck softly, whispering into her ear. "You're losing concentration, Trish. Pull yourself together and look at Skip."

Her eyes fluttered open and she tried to focus on Skip. I doubt she was really looking at him, but she was at least looking toward him.

"Lick your lips slowly," I commanded her. "Let him know exactly how much you're enjoying me finger fucking you. Tell me you like it."

"God, I love it," she said. "Your fingers feel so good inside me. I'm so turned on that I could come just thinking about it. I love you telling me what to do."

The tablecloth hid most of the action and I gave into temptation and slid my own skirt up onto my lap, pulling Trish's hand between my legs. If Trish was going to have a good time as a submissive, then I had a duty to see that she explored that side of herself fully.

"Do to me what I'm doing to you," I told her firmly.

Trish never even hesitated. Her fingers were a bit awkward when she slid them into my pussy, but she picked up the rhythm almost at once.

"Trish is sliding two fingers inside me right now," I told everyone. "Watch her make love to me in front of Skip and Swaggwell." I might have started behind Trish, but she had me squirming in my seat as badly as I had her in seconds.

Skip had his eyes locked on mine and he seemed paralyzed. I smirked and let my gaze wander around to see if anyone else had noticed our antics. I did see Price, but his angle was too bad to see anything at all. He was spending his time staring at Ted. The only other person watching our table was a man dressed impeccably in a dark suit. His gaze fell on me and almost knocked me out of the moment. It was his eyes. They were so cold and unemotional. Then he smiled thinly and looked away, seemingly splitting his

attention with everyone around him, though he could have been looking longer at Price, Skip or the Reverend. It was hard to say.

I looked away from him and forced my eyes back to Ted's. "Trish is going to make me come, Ted. Right here in the middle of a packed dining room. Does that excite you?"

Ted nodded, his eyes bright with a mixture of lust and love. "Oh, yes," he said. "Tonight, you get rewarded, Sweet Lisa. But you have a problem."

Trish was starting to lose her battle to keep her face from showing her excitement and I knew she was so close to coming that it would only take another minute to push her over the top.

"What problem is that, Sexy?" I asked him huskily.

"Okay, which of you has the lobster and baked potato?" the voice of our waiter asked from right behind me.

I almost flew out of the chair in surprise and flushed deeply as I smiled back at him. "Sorry, that's me." My voice sounded guilty, and it also sounded like I was being fucked. Which I was. Trish never even slowed down pumping her fingers inside me. Oh, God. I could feel my internal heat soaring as she did me right in front of this stranger. I had to break her attention, or I was going to shoot off like a bottle rocket. I buried my fingers inside Trish and started rubbing her G spot.

Trish was barely able to tell him that she was also having lobster before her eyes seemed to lose focus again. Luckily, he was already past her and dealing with everyone else, who were doing their best to distract the server's attention.

Trish stiffened and gasped softly. Keven immediately focused the server's attention on himself, taking him to task for some imaginary defect in his meal while Trish's hot sex began rhythmically clamping down on my fingers as she humped my fingers and came in a rush.

That pushed me over the top and I had to clamp my jaws almost painfully as I came all over sweet Trish's fingers. Together we writhed in our seats for what seemed like minutes but had to have only been seconds. I almost gasped as Trish slid her fingers out of me with a wet sucking feeling that I could almost swear I actually heard.

I swallowed and sat back in my own chair, fumbling to get my underwear back across

my throbbing sex and my skirt down. I was weak from the force of the orgasm and Trish didn't look much better. Frankly, she looked like she'd just been fucked senseless. I wondered if I looked any better. Probably not.

With a wicked grin at Trish, I brought my hand to my face and took a deep breath, breathing in her scent. How could the server miss smelling aroused female at this table? Maybe he was gay?

Trish blushed deeply and brought her own hand to her lips. I watched her take a deep breath of her own, and then her small, pink tongue began licking my juices off her hand while her eyes smoked at me.

Trembling with an aftershock of passion, I joined her in cleaning myself with my tongue. Admittedly, the only pussy I'd ever tasted beside my own had been Hawk's, but hers seemed as different from Hawk's as Hawk's was from my own. Still, it seemed to taste like innocence. She tasted crisp and sweet, like an apple straight from the tree.

"I've never tried this... sauce... before, Lisa," Trish said with hardly a tremor in her voice. "You were right. I think I could become very used to something so good. It's not like the... steak sauce... at all."

Her knowing smile made me laugh. She was teasing me!

"I'm more partial to the steak sauce myself, but Hawk swears by the lobster dip," I quipped back.

"It is finger-licking good, isn't it?" our server asked with an unknowing grin as he finished setting the last of the food on the table. "Though I agree with you about the steak sauce being better."

Everyone at the table burst out laughing and the server let his eyebrows climb with confused amusement and made sure we had everything we needed. Then he pushed the cart away, shaking his head at our antics.

"You're so bad!" Jo said with a wild grin. "That was incredibly risky! What if someone had seen something?"

"Someone did," I smirked, looking over toward Skip's table. It was empty now. That made me laugh even harder. We'd run him off! "Skip was watching. And the Reverend."

"He's gone now," Hawk said with a wry smile. "I didn't see him go, but you must have driven him crazy. God knows you drove me crazy." Her eyes glinted with lust. Then she kissed Gretchen thoroughly.

That set off a wave of hot kisses between the committed partners. Ted's hot mouth devoured mine and my heart was a trip hammer in my chest. I knew I couldn't but I wanted to take him right here.

Finally, he let me up for air and pulled my hand to his lips. He sucked at my fingers, his hot and agile tongue reminding me of the pleasures he would be giving me tonight. He sucked my fingers like he was giving me a mini-blowjob, stripping the last of Trish's juices from my hand.

"Trish wants you," he said with a smile, and then went back to his loving task.

I turned my head and she was right there, clamping her lips to mine in a hot kiss that reignited the furnace from earlier. It was intense, but brief. I think I'd have to get Gretchen to let me help with the kissing lessons.

"Thank you," she said too softly for anyone but me to hear. "Thank you for knowing what I wanted, even if I didn't."

"We'll talk about it some more after dinner," I assured her. "Thank you for making one of my wildest fantasies come true."

The kissing finally ended, and we all looked around guiltily to see if anyone else had noticed. The few smiles that came our way were of the amused kind. So, they'd noticed the kissing but missed the mutual masturbation. That filled me with an incredible feeling of power and control.

"For some reason I'm starved," I told everyone.

They laughed hysterically, and we all dug into our food as though we were starved.

An hour later, we were sitting among the wreckage of dinner. We'd wolfed it all down and done serious damage to the desert cart, too. I'd need to settle my dinner down before I could even think about raping Ted.

I pushed my chair back and stood up. "I don't know about all of you, but I need a walk

in the moonlight to clear my head and put dinner to rest."

"Good idea," Ted said. "Let's go out to the railing and maybe watch the moonlight on the ocean? The sun's been down long enough that it should be nice and dark out." There were nods all around the table, and we all got up and made our way out of the dining room.

Not only was it dark out, but the moonlight glinted beautifully off the rolling ocean below us. It was incredibly romantic, and I pulled Ted into a deep kiss. His arms molded me against his body, and it was almost like we were making love in a pool of the silver light. The fact that the overhead lamp was out, and the only strong light we were getting came from the moon, added to the surreal nature of the kiss. I would have let him do anything to me for as long as he wanted, even though I longed to drag him off to the suite and out to our private balcony to make love to me.

However, that moment was so perfect it couldn't last. "Hey, someone left their jacket out here," Trish said.

I pulled my lips away from Ted's as Trish came out of the pool of darkness that filled the forward-most corner of the observation deck. The jacket looked damaged. Someone must have left it out on one of the seats.

"Let me see that," Hawk said abruptly. The strum of suspicion in her voice hit me like fingers stroking a harp sharply. That was her "cop" voice.

Hawk took the jacket from Trish and waddled toward the closest working light. She stopped under the light and looked the jacket over closely. Trish had been right about the jacket being torn. One sleeve had been almost ripped off.

"This is Skip's jacket," Hawk said coolly, professionally. "The sleeve is almost torn off and the inner pocket is missing. And there's blood on the lapel."

"If this is Skip's, then where is he?" Trish asked in confusion.

We all stared at Hawk as she looked over the rail at the sea. A cold wind seemed to blow through the tropical heat and straight up my spine as I realized what she was thinking.

Chapter Six: Moonlight and Gravity

Gretchen

Needless to say, the bloody jacket derailed everyone's plans for the evening. Hawk charged off to find someone in authority to report what she suspected. I agreed with her trying, but I held little hope it would do any good. The odds that they would turn the ship around for a search and rescue mission were almost non-existent. Hawk would be lucky if they searched the ship for him.

Most of the group went with her, but Hawk asked me to keep an eye on the crime scene. That was good, both because she asked, and because while Hawk didn't need my help on this, Trish and I needed to talk.

I put my hand on Trish's arm and shook my head when she started to follow the crowd. "Let's find a place to sit where we can talk quietly."

Trish tensed up and nodded. She walked over to the closest lounge chairs that were under a working lamp and sat down. The inky pool of darkness was about twenty feet away but the combination of the moon and the man-made lighting made me feel safe enough.

Slipping into the chair next to her, I smiled. "There's no need to be so tense. It's just time to start talking about what's been going on and where the two of us go from here. Relax."

The young woman sighed and visibly relaxed. "I thought you were going to tear a strip off me for what I did during dinner."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why would I do that?"

Trish shrugged in a teenage fashion that I was really going to need to work on eliminating. "I don't know. Maybe because I was doing stuff that you didn't tell me to do."

My smile widened. "Trish, I'm your mentor, not your parent. As public displays go, that *was* pretty daring, and I personally think Lisa took more of a chance than she should have. However, she has her own kinks, and sometimes that makes her take what I consider to be unreasonable chances. However, that's not to say that I haven't done things that were chancy. Public sex has a thrill all its own. The things I've done in movie

theaters would amaze you."

Trish nodded but didn't say anything.

"The important thing was that you looked to me for direction," I said seriously, "and you kept everything under wraps. If I'd thought it was getting too obvious, I'd have put a stop to it. Or, rather, I'd have asked you to stop. The question I have is *would* you stop if I told you to?"

She nodded back to me without a smile. "I'd do whatever you told me to do."

I chuckled. "That's another thing I think we need to talk about. I'm starting to pick up a trend in your sexual behavior, and if I'm right, we'll need to take some special precautions and lay out some ground rules."

"Like what?" she asked curiously. "Lisa said she thought I was submissive, and she wants to talk with me about it, too."

"I think Lisa is dead on the money," I said with a nod, "but I'd like to ask you some questions about it first. Let me start with saying that if you are a submissive, that isn't a problem for an escort so long as we take it into account during your training."

Trish looked relieved and watched me expectantly.

"In general, do you like doing what people tell you to do?" I asked.

"Not always," she said with the same offending shrug. "Sometimes it's something I don't want to do."

"Do you always do what you're told to do?"

"No," she responded. "If I really don't want to do something, I don't do it. If it's too much trouble to argue about, then I just do it to avoid fighting about it."

"Okay," I said with a nod, "when you get forced to do something, does it make you feel excited?"

Trish blushed and shook her head. "Not really. At least it never has before today, though this really wasn't force."

"So," I said slowly, "you get excited being told what to do during sex, but being forced to do something outside of that doesn't turn you on?"

She nodded. "Right. Like I told Lisa, something about being told what to do during something sexual turns me on. I think I'd say no if I really didn't want to do something, though. It's not like I *have* to do what I'm told."

That gave me enough information to start working on the bare bones of a training plan. "Then I think we can call your personal life more passive than submissive. There are going to be aspects of that we can work on to make you more assertive."

"You mean like helping me keep people like Skip from bullying me?"

I nodded. "Exactly. There's a time and place to stand your ground, and we'll help you find that backbone. The second half of what we're talking about now is sexual submission. That's also not an issue that will keep you from being an escort, as long as we get the boundaries set up right. Are you ready for a frank discussion about your sex life?"

Trish blushed again and nodded. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

I laughed. "Oh, give me a few months, and I'm certain that I can make you more ready to talk about sex."

She grinned prettily and nodded. "Probably."

"Sexual submission can come in a lot of flavors, but there is always the other side of the equation. The dominant. That's the person that tells or makes the submissive do what he or she wants to do in the first place. This is important because the real person in control is the submissive."

Trish blinked and opened her mouth to speak, but closed it in silence, thinking.

"If you look at it from the right way, you'll see what I mean," I said. "The dom is doing what the sub wants done for the sub's enjoyment. While some doms are sadists, those that are typically find subs that are masochists. A dom should be looking for any sign that the sub really doesn't want to do something. To help make that crystal clear you need a safe word."

"What's a safe word?" Trish asked.

"A safe word is something other than 'no' or 'stop'", I said, "because part of a submissive's enjoyment might come from being seemingly forced to do something while 'pleading' for the dom to not do whatever it is. So, the safe word needs to be something that isn't like that. An example could be the word 'orange.' There's not many chances that word's going to pop up during sex, so if you tell someone 'orange' then they know that you really don't want something to happen or continue and role-play stops."

"What's role-play?" she asked.

"Things like pretending to be forced into doing something. For example, at dinner you wanted me to tell you to do what Lisa wanted. You could've made that decision yourself, right? Why didn't you?"

Her face scrunched up as she considered. "Well... Part of me wasn't sure I should be doing it, and I needed my mentor to tell me if I should stop."

"Okay, I agree about that but you said it was only part of the reason. What was the rest of it?"

Trish sighed. "I wanted to feel like I wasn't in control," she said

"And the sex in the suite?" I pressed. "Sandy was directing you pretty firmly. Did you do anything you didn't want to then?"

She shook her head. "Well, maybe I wasn't quite ready to have Keven come in my mouth, but I don't think that counts since I wasn't really forced. If she'd told me to have real sex with Keven, I might not have wanted to do that."

"What would you have done then, if she had?"

"I don't know..." Trish said. "That's like peer pressure. I've never been good at resisting peer pressure. I'd have to have decided if I wanted to go on."

"Now you know when a safe word would come in handy," I said with satisfaction. "Orange is your word, and I'll make sure it gets around to all the people that you might play with. If you choose to have sex with someone else, I want you to tell me first, so I can talk with you. And, I recommend that you get into the habit of using a condom. That's critically important, and you must be firm. No condom, no sex."

Trish nodded and blushed. "I don't think I'm ready for that yet." She didn't sound too sure though.

"Perhaps," I admitted, "but if you change your mind a condom might be the last thing you're thinking about. That's why it's important to think about ahead of time. You've had sex twice now, and you didn't know it was coming, so to speak, either time."

Trish laughed at my pun, but nodded. "I just went with the flow."

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I asked quietly.

She promptly nodded her head. "Oh, yes. Both times, I got so hot I thought I was going to catch fire. Once I got past the initial uncertainty, I had a really good time and I don't regret either of them."

"Once was mainly with Keven. The other was solely with a woman. Are you attracted to both?" I asked.

"I never expected to get the chance to be with a woman, but I've had fantasies. You..." Her voice trailed off, and she swallowed, looking down.

"What about me?" I asked gently, lifting her chin. "It's okay. You can tell me anything."

When she answered, her voice was so quiet that I had to strain to hear it. "You're so beautiful. I was watching you from behind before we met and I thought my heart would stop. And since then, I've seen how much poise and confidence you have. That's very attractive to me and... it's one of the reasons I want to have you mentor me. I want... to be with you." By the time she was finished speaking, she was again looking down at her own lap and whispering.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it. "Look at me," I said firmly.

She pulled her eyes up to meet mine and I could see the mingled fear and desire in her gaze. She was so beautiful herself. And so innocent. No, innocent wasn't the right word. Innocent girls didn't glorify in sex like she did. Sheltered would be better.

"You've done nothing to be afraid about or ashamed of," I said firmly. "I'm flattered that you think I'm beautiful and I think you are as well. In fact, there are many men who would find you much more desirable than me." Trish started to protest, but I placed a finger on her lips.

"Am I right in guessing that here were plenty of women at the restaurant that would have come with Skip?"

"Well, sure, most of them would have, but...." I cut her off.

"And are they all pretty?"

"Oh, yes! Most of them are much prettier than I am!"

"Really?" I asked. "Then why do you think Skip chose you, Trish?" She opened her mouth, but closed it slowly without saying a word. I could see her mind pushing rapidly down the road I had set her on and I saw the moment when realization hit her eyes.

"Yes," I confirmed, "Skip chose you because you really are that beautiful, that desirable. I really hate to say anything nice about that worm but he does have good taste in women and he is not the only one to find you beautiful or desirable." She read the message in my eyes and her own eyes widened. I nodded. "We will be together before too long, I think," I assured her. "We have a lot of training to do, much of it with it being just us, alone, and I wager you'll have a rollicking good time. But, that will happen when the time is right and at the speed you feel most comfortable with. If you feel rushed, all you have to do is tell me. If you feel like you need something else, tell me that, and we'll see about adding it to the training."

Trish smiled and nodded her head. "Thank you for taking the time to explain everything to me, Gretchen, and thank you for telling me that I am beautiful, too. I'm going to have to think about everything you've said, but I trust you, and if I'm going to believe everything you tell about becoming an escort, then maybe I'll just have to believe you when you say I'm beautiful, too!" Trish pulled me into a quick but intense hug, before pushing back, embarrassed, I thought. Instead, she gave me a smile so pure and so beautiful that my heart melted. I returned her smile and pushed back at the wave of emotion I felt.

"Leave everything to Gretchen," I joked.

"You have no idea how much of a relief it is to know I can do just that," Trish teased back. In spite of that teasing tone, I could sense the serious relief behind her words. I could tell that she wanted to change the subject, too. "What else do you want to know?"

"Well, since we're on the subject..." I said, allowing my voice to trail off. "This is more of

a curiosity question," I said with a smirk, "so tell me it's none of my business if you like. You seemed really to be giving Hawk some interested looks."

Trish blushed again. "I like Hawk but it wasn't like I was all hot for her from the start or anything. I'm still trying to figure out why I'm attracted to women at all. Don't tell her," she begged, with tears starting in her eyes, "but she seems to be something between a man and a woman. I just had trouble nailing down my thoughts about her."

I zipped my lips symbolically. "She's a study in contrasts," I admitted. "It took me a while to pin down exactly how I felt, even though I love her dearly. She can be very man-like in some ways and surprisingly feminine at times. She's changed in the almost eight months I've known her, allowed her feminine side to develop, or maybe just displayed it more often, and relaxed more into that man-woman you saw a bit of. In some ways, loving her is like having the best of both worlds."

Trish smiled gratefully. "You're not mad?"

I laughed merrily and pulled Trish into a hug. "No. I'm glad you love Hawk. We all do, for our own reasons." I pushed her out to arms length and looked into her eyes. "Love is a wonderful thing, to be rejoiced over when anyone is lucky enough to have found it. So long as you don't try to come between Hawk and me we're going to be just fine."

Trish hesitantly pulled me into a kiss. That hesitation vanished as our lips melted together and I took control and kissed her long and thoroughly. When she finally pulled away, I was breathless.

"My, you *are* a good kisser!" I complimented her. "Thank you!"

"Thank *you*," she said shyly. "You're really good yourself. What do we do now? Wait for everyone else? Go back to the suite?"

"For now, I'd like to just lay back here with you and listen to the ocean," I said softly. "Do you mind?"

Trish shook her head and slid over to make room on the lounge. She looked uncertain of the logistics of two women sharing a lounge chair.

With a smile, I slid down beside her and put my right arm under her head. That gave her a reference point that she *was* familiar with, and she immediately curled up beside me with her face on my right shoulder. Her body molded against me and those

magnificent breasts pressed solidly against me. Her soft, sweet breath tickled my cheek, and I firmly had to remind myself that I didn't need to get carried away and start necking with her again. That would come in good time.

I remembered having Hawk in a very similar position many times, but Hawk preferred to be in the one in position of being curled upon. I sighed and smiled at the memories and the bright emotions they raised inside me. Belatedly, I realized that I was stroking Trish's hair. I almost stopped, but in the end, I let myself go that far.

The silvery, rippling shimmer of the moon on the water calmed me, warmed me. The moon was like a part of all women and I, too, felt it's siren call. The face of the moon wasn't full, but the crescent still took control of my senses. The connection was almost palpable.

I was about to comment to Trish about how the moon touched women in such a primal way when I heard her first soft snore. Lying curled against me; her hair spread all across my shoulder, my apprentice had gone to sleep.

In the silence, I held her and let the peace and trust lay across us like a blanket. It wasn't that I loved her like I loved Hawk. It wasn't even close. My love for Hawk was a towering pillar of strength, but it didn't engender the kind of gentleness I was feeling right now. In my mind, I heard a song. The hauntingly beautiful voice of Enya sang *May It Be* to me, and I felt my soul soaring. Softly, I mouthed the sweet words to the night and to the dozing Trish.

I'd almost dozed myself, warm in a sleep haze of satisfaction, when I heard a noise. It was the scrape of a deck chair on the deck. I rolled my head to the left, and there was a young black man, dressed in dark shorts and a similarly dark tee shirt. He was good looking, in a young way, though he could lose those birth control glasses and be better for it.

"Excuse me," he murmured, walking past us with a smile that seemed... unnatural. Too normal for the long glance he gave two women cuddled together in a lounge. Men were pretty predictable when you got down to the basics of how they reacted to women in various settings. Most men would stare, like he did, but with a lot more of a smile. Two women together touched some genetic trigger in them and they couldn't help but show it. The ones that would smile politely, also promptly looked away. This guy did both.

I mentally shrugged. I was probably an idiot even to think I understood anything about men. I should just be happy he didn't denounce us on the spot or ask to join us. That

brought a smile to my lips.

Then I heard the deck chair move against the deck again. I frowned and looked back to the left, into the dark where the lamp was out. I guess the noise hadn't been the other guy. The moonlight relieved the darkness there enough that as I focused, I finally saw a figure on its hands and knees on the deck, moving slowly around. What the hell?

"Trish," I whispered.

She didn't even twitch. Great. I couldn't wake her up without alerting whoever that was over there looking around what might be a crime scene. Hawk would have a cow if someone screwed it up while I was watching. She'd damned well want to know who was over there, too. That person had either missed us lying here, or thought we were asleep or didn't care if they spotted them. What the hell were they looking for?

Gently and slowly, I slid out from under Trish and put one foot on the deck. I slid my shoes off so I could move quickly. So far, the lounge hadn't made any noise, but I knew that would change when I got up. It was going to make more than enough noise to alert whoever was in the dark when I stood, so I'd better be ready to haul ass.

The lounge creaked loudly as soon as I stood up and the figure's head came up sharply. I broke into a run toward him or her. "Hold it right there!" I shouted. "Don't move!"

The figure's head turned, looking for an escape route but there was no way out that didn't include crossing through the light where I could see them. I'd trapped them! Hawk was going to be so pleased with me!

My glee faded when I slowed to a stop at the edge of the darkness and the figure exploded into motion, grabbing a lounge chair and using it as a wedge to slam into me while denying me any view of him or her. The force of the impact sent me staggering backwards into the rail. I grabbed for the rail as I slammed into it and screamed as the force of the impact smashed the top bar into my lower back, and I rolled backwards. The world rotated crazily and then all my breath whooshed out of me as I slammed into the rail and the side of the ship.

The impact knocked one of my hands loose and I twisted crazily in the wind, hanging over the dark water by one hand. My left arm refused to do what I told it and it hurt like crazy. My fingers were slipping and I knew I was going to fall. I was going to die.

I screamed again as my fingers slipped and I began the long plunge to the sea.

I had a split second of incredible fear while I watched Trish throw herself headlong at the railing. She made a slide across the deck that destroyed the front of her dress in a desperate bid to catch me. Her head smashed into the metal rail as I fell past her, and suddenly she had me by the wrist.

When I jerked to a halt and slammed into the side of the ship again, my breath exploded out of me. I struggled to hold onto her hands even as I slipped until her hands were only holding my fingers.

"Hold on!" Trish screamed through clenched teeth. Her face was pale and a ribbon of blood was coming from her hairline across her face. "Don't let go! Pull yourself up and grab something! Hurry!"

It wasn't going to work. My left shoulder was on fire and I couldn't make it reach up to grab anything. My fingers were oozing out of Trish's desperate grip despite my best efforts.

Then the railing jarred again as the young black man in the dark shorts slammed against it at a run and heaved his arm between the rails to grab my wrist below Trish's hands. While Trish's grip had seemed strong, his was a vice of steel around my wrist. Even when I slipped out of Trish's grasp, I was able to wrap my fingers around his wrist and it was like we were bonded together with super-glue. His eyes were wide against his dark face and I realized he'd lost his glasses.

Inch by inch, grunting with the strain, the man pulled me back up enough for the bleeding Trish to get her arms around me and get me back over the railing. All three of us collapsed on the deck in a bleeding, sweaty, screaming pile of flesh. He was sweaty, Trish was bleeding and I was screaming. My left shoulder wouldn't move properly, and it hurt worse than I could believe.

The man extracted himself from under the pile and laid me out on my back while Trish held my head in her lap. In an oddly focused moment, I felt the blood dripping off her nose and onto my face. Her bodice had been totally ripped open and only the tremendous effort of her bra kept the tide of her breasts from washing me away. I noted there were little red scratches all over the tops of them. God, they looked magnificent.

I could hear other people running from further down the observation deck, but I felt so detached from the events that were taking place. Detached and receding.

The man looked down into my face with worry. "Are you okay?"

No, I was screaming because I felt fine.

I tried to speak and was finally able to whimper something. "My arm..."

"Let me get a doctor. Don't move," he said, trying to smile reassuringly. "You're going to be fine."

"Clear the way!" a familiar voice shouted. "Doctor coming through!"

Sandy's face replaced the man's as she bumped him clear and hovered over me.

"Where do you hurt?" she asked, the calm voice of a doctor asked me.

"She said her arm hurt," Trish said, almost crying. "And she wasn't moving her left arm at all. Is she okay?"

"I think so," Sandy said. "Gretchen, tell me where you hurt."

While I tried to make my mouth work, the rest of the group slid around me, and Hawk finally arrived, kneeling beside me, her face a mask of emotion I'd never seen on her face before. Terror.

Her fear triggered something inside me, and I started wailing. I tried to grab her but my left arm wouldn't cooperate and Lisa had my right hand in a grip of iron.

"Hawk, calm her down," Sandy commanded, trying to hold me down. "She might hurt herself worse. She's going into shock. I need a blanket and someone to call for help. Use one of the ship's phones. Now!"

"Got it," the black man said running back into the ship.

As suddenly as it had arrived, the terror flowed out of me and the world seemed to be slipping into a kind of tunnel vision. "Shauna..."

"I'm right here, Baby," she murmured in my ear. "Don't move. Don't talk. It's going to be okay. "

"I love you," I whispered.

With her eyes bright with tears, she kissed my cold face. "I love you, too, and..." she slipped into her Ricky Ricardo imitation, "Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do."

I wanted to laugh but I couldn't seem to get the coordination to do so.

Sandy gently touched my left shoulder in a couple of places and I tried to slug her but Lisa wouldn't let go of my right hand. "Hurts..."

Sandy nodded absently at me and looked at Hawk. "Her left shoulder is dislocated. The longer we let it stay out of the socket, the more chance of permanent injury. I want to put it back into the socket right now."

Hawk nodded. "Do it."

"I need everyone to help me hold Gretchen down," Sandy said as she stood up. "Don't let her move." She sat down on the deck at my left side, took my limp, pain-filled arm into her lap, and planted her feet against my side before leaning over and looking me in the face.

"Gretchen, listen to me," she said, catching my wandering attention. "This is going to hurt like fifteen motherfuckers but it has to be done. Your arm is out of your socket and I'm going to pop it back in on three. Are you ready?"

"Three," I mumbled. If this was being in shock, it sucked.

"Hold her firmly, everyone," Sandy said as hands grabbed me everywhere but my left shoulder and held me to the deck.

"One... Two."

As soon as the word "two" started to form on her lips she pulled my left arm straight out from my body and it moved in a way I couldn't describe, as unimaginable pain lanced through me and I screamed at the top of my very healthy lungs. Then I started cussing her. Or trying to. The pain was subsiding into a dull ache.

Her smile as she leaned over me was a mixture of satisfaction and an evil glint. "I know, I went on two. Sue me. At least you didn't tense up."

"I'll get even later," I mumbled as the sound of more running feet announced the arrival

of some ships officers. In a jiffy, they had a blanket around me and were asking me questions. I didn't even try to answer them. All I had eyes for was my wife beside me. "I love you," I repeated.

That was how it stayed until a paramedic arrived with a gurney, and everyone helped move me onto it. The fiery pain in my shoulder had damped down and I could move it a little. That was better. I needed both arms to hold my wife and, soon, both of our babies.

With my hand in hers, Hawk walked beside me all the way to the medical center.

Chapter Seven: Obstruction

Hawk

By the time we got to the medical center, Ted had to help me walk. I didn't fall behind Gretchen and the paramedics, but I would've without help. Gretchen went straight into the first room, and the doctor consulted briefly with Sandy before he came in.

"Miss Hawkins, I didn't expect to see you quite so soon," he said blandly.

"You're not seeing me," I pointed out. "You're seeing my wife. That makes me Mrs. Hawkins. So, let's cut the chit-chat and get focused on the right patient, shall we?"

"Oh, I will," he said, "but I'll be checking you again before you leave. Stress can accelerate labor."

I rolled my eyes as he helped Gretchen sit up and he gently felt her shoulder. "I think if I was in labor, I'd notice," I said dryly. "Focus on Gretchen, and let me worry about myself."

"Gretchen," he said, ignoring me, "Doctor Craig told me that she reset your shoulder. How does it feel now? Can you move your arm? Do you have any pain?"

Gretchen was able to get full motion out of her arm but her face grimaced in pain. "I can move it, but it hurts. My back hurts a little where I hit the railing and my ribs are sore where I hit the deck."

"I'll want some x-rays to be sure you have no fractures," he said in the same monotone he seemed to speak in all the time. He put his stethoscope on and listened to her heart and breathing. "There's no sound of fluid in the lungs. That's good. I'm going to have the nurse come and take you to x-ray now. If there are no broken bones, you'll still be sore all over tomorrow. Actually, you're already starting to come up with what I suspect will be a set of spectacular bruises. I'll have some pain medicine ready for you when you get back."

Gretchen didn't argue with him, and that, more than anything else, convinced me that she was in more pain than she had just implied. The fear - no, the absolute terror - I'd been feeling was changing into rage. Someone had tried to kill my wife, my lover, my best friend, and I was going to make them pay for that.

The doctor stopped me from following Gretchen as the nurse that came in and wheeled her bed out. "I need to check you over, Mrs. Hawkins. It will only take a few minutes."

I ground my teeth in frustration. I didn't have time for this. The real question was 'would it take longer to fight about it or just to give in?' Knowing the answer, I grudgingly gave in. "Fine, just *please* make it snappy. I have places to be and people to deal with." Gretchen would be happy, I thought. I'd actually said please. She'd been trying to convince me about how useful the word could be, sometimes.

As boring as the doc might be, he didn't waste more time yapping at me. His exam told him I wasn't in labor. Duh! Didn't I just tell him that?

When he was done, I very politely said 'thank you,' walked out into the hall and started in the direction that the nurse had taken my wife. There was a waiting room on the right hand side of the hall and I saw everyone else sitting there. They weren't alone, either. Several of the ship's officers were asking questions of Trish, who was sitting there with all the women in support around her. Someone had cleaned the blood from her face and done something for her cut. It might not have been bad enough for stitches, though. Even minor head wounds bled like someone had taken a machete to you.

I felt a deep sense of gratitude to her. The tangle of emotions that I couldn't readily put a name to had me all mixed up. One thing I did know was that I owed Trish big time. I'd seen the looks she'd been giving Gretchen, and I knew something would likely happen between them. That had initially raised my jealousy bar about as high as it could go. However, that wasn't true any more. Whatever reservations I'd had about Gretchen taking her on as a trainee were gone. She could have anything I could give

her, including time with my wife. Now was the right time to thank her, but I wanted to be with Gretchen, and those cops - what else could they be? - would corner me if I went in now. I hurried to try to get by unseen.

Ted, Keven and Earl intercepted me before I could slip by. Since Ted knew me, the other two deferred to him, but I could see that they all shared the same rage that burned in my heart. "Trish said someone tried to shove Gretchen over the side of the ship," Ted said grimly. "She said they were looking for something, so we're going to get a light and see if we can find anything."

"Let the cops handle it," I said, taking a deep breath. "They have the training, and you don't."

Earl snorted. "Hellfire and damnation, woman! I don't think those yahoos are gonna be of any help. I can tell they don't believe the girl. They think it was some kind of accident and Gretchen is just too embarrassed to own up to it."

The part about Gretchen making it up made my blood boil even more, but the rest matched all too well with their reaction when I brought Skip's jacket in to them. They weren't ready to believe someone went overboard just because someone tore up his jacket. They dismissed the blood out of hand. "It could've ended up there by accident," they said. The best I could get out of them was that they would call the ship behind them and have them look out for anyone in the water. Like I expected him to be still floating.

"Fine," I growled, more frustrated by the events and ship's idiots than Ted, Keven or Earl. "Go keep an eye on the place and get some lights, but *do not* go into the dark area until I get there. If these bozos won't take care of this, then it's my case, but we'll give them a chance first."

"I don't understand how they can be so good in everything else and then be this thick-headed about a serious crime," Keven complained.

I laughed humorlessly. "Gretchen did some research, and you'd be stunned at how often people vanish at sea. Every single cruise line seems to come up short when there's a serious crime committed, or possibly committed. Give them something simple like contraband or theft and they're all over it. Rape, homicide and anything else dunks them pretty fast. Add to that the facts that the lines don't want bad publicity and that it's happening in international waters. That provides incentive to not look too hard so that they can either avoid any hue and cry or hush up what they can't avoid."

They all looked pissed as hell, and I thought it just as well to get them out of here and give them something to do. With a nod, Ted led them out, and I made my way to the x-ray room. It was clearly marked and had a sign that told everyone, especially pregnant women, to stay the hell out of there. I parked my wide load in the chair by the door and waited.

My conscience nagged me. I should call Hans and let him know that his little girl was hurt. That didn't mean I didn't dread doing it. She was all he had left in the world, until the babies got here. He was going to freak out. I sighed and pulled out my cell phone. There wasn't any use in avoiding the inevitable. I hit the speed-dial and waited.

"Werner residence," the stilted tones of Ivan, the snooty butler answered the phone. Great.

"Evening, Lurch," I drawled. "Is the boss in?"

Ivan sniffed disdainfully at me. I could see it in my head as if I was standing right there. I still wondered what kind of relationship the two of us had. I respected him as a man, and he loved Gretchen like his own daughter, but I just couldn't get past the need to spar with him like this. I doubt either of us really thought the barbs we traded were serious. It had become a game by now, and I wondered if that meant we actually liked each other on some level. Where the hell these weird ass stray thoughts kept coming from was enough to drive me crazy. I only hoped to God that it was just because I was pregnant.

"Mister Warner is always in at this hour, Detective," he said haughtily, thankfully interrupting my train of thought. "But he's busy with dinner and can't be disturbed. Important guests, you see. Perhaps you should call back in a few hours."

I sighed. It wasn't fair to have to use the easy way through him. I wanted to make him give up, and he wanted to dominate me into backing down. I was going to violate the rules and part of me didn't want to. "Not this time, Ivan. This is serious and I need to talk to him right now, no bullshit."

His voice sharpened with worry. I never missed the chance to argue with him. Never. "What's wrong? Is there something wrong with you or the children? I knew you should never have gone on this foolish trip."

That left me speechless. He'd never shown any concern about me or the children

before. Well, sure, he bitched about me never taking care of myself and doing things no normal woman 'in my condition' would ever consider, but I'd thought it was all a way to poke at me. I guessed I was wrong. In one minute, my world was once again tossed upside down. My desire for Keven and Earl, my jealousy about Ted, my whatever it was about Trish, the stupid puns and goofy ponderous thoughts: every time I turned around there was something there to upset the way I saw the world. Now even Lurch was concerned about me. I shook my head and forced myself to focus. I did *not* have time for this crap.

"No, the three of us are fine," I said, avoiding the usual counter attack. "It's Gretchen. She's going to be okay, but there was an incident."

"Tell me," his commanded, his voice filled with worry.

On any other subject, I'd have reacted to that tone like a cat to a dog, but not about Gretchen. She was sacred ground for both of us.

"I can't go into the details - I don't have some and don't have the time, regardless - but she almost went over the side of the ship. I'm still waiting for the doctor to look at the x-rays, but her shoulder was dislocated and she might have cracked some ribs. Maybe I should wait until I have more information to give Hans before I worry him," I said with uncertainty.

"No," Ivan said firmly. "He needs to know now. The details can come when they do. However, I do think you should cancel the trip and return home at once. Gretchen will need someone to care for her as she recovers, and you simply are not in condition to do so."

That got my back up. "I *can* so, and if I need help I have Ted and Lisa and some other friends, right here. We're not running away. You got that, Lurch? Get me the big cheese and go do whatever butlers do. Butle something."

"Ah," he said with satisfaction, "there *is* some kind of trouble. A simple accident wouldn't be something the vaunted detective would be 'running away from', now would it? Some human agency is involved." The line filled with a pregnant pause. "And the great detective wouldn't be afraid to leave a simple assault behind her, either. She would let the authorities have the scoundrel. There's more, I believe, than you've told me."

I'd thought I'd be the one not playing fair, but so far, Ivan was one keeping me on the

defensive. He implied he cared about me, and then he deduced my real reason for wanting to stay. He was one smart son of a bitch! I felt adrift and reverted back into my 'game' mode with him. "Of course there's more than I've told you. I don't go around explaining my actions to the hired help. That and I told you up front I wasn't going into details with you. Hello? Are you listening to me, Lurch?"

"How could anyone avoid hearing you when you raise your voice?" he snapped at me. "There's been a killing, hasn't there? And Gretchen is involved." He gets me to start playing the game again, and then he jumps back out of game mode. I was out of practice against this guy.

I thought maybe Gretchen's ideas about winning friends and influencing people might help. "I'm sorry, Ivan, I said, firmly bringing my voice back to a normal tone. "You're right. To answer your questions, there may have been a murder and no, Gretchen had nothing to do with it. But that's beside the point. I need to tell her father about what happened and you're holding me up. Get the old man on the horn and you can drag the details out him at your leisure."

I grinned to myself. I wondered if it was shock over my apology, or a measure of his concern that Ivan didn't argue with me. He had Hans on the phone in less than a minute.

"Shauna, how is the cruise?" he asked jovially. I'd tolerate that name from him and Gretchen, but I still didn't like it. I pushed the sensation I'd felt when Gretchen used it to tell me that she loved me to the back of my mind.

"There's been some trouble," I said without preamble. "Gretchen's a bit bruised and battered, but she'll be okay." I filled him in on the particulars and could hear his growing fear and anger in his questions.

I'd just finished relating the basic details when I saw the two detectives coming out of the waiting room and walking up the hall toward me. "Hans, I'll need to call you back. The detectives are here."

"No," he pleaded. "Just set the phone down and I'll listen in. When they leave, I'll still be here. I want to hear what they have to say."

"Okay," I agreed. "Hang on." I slipped the open phone onto the seat beside me and watched the men as they approached.

Their Italian heritage was obvious at a glance. Olive-skinned and dark haired, they might have exchanged their uniforms for those of Roman Centurions without looking out of place. Perhaps the boys were mistaken and they'd only heard the detectives making sure that there was nothing hinky going on. We'd see.

"Miss Hawkins?" One of them asked politely, his voice only mildly accented. "I'm Lieutenant de Luca and this is Lieutenant Colombo. We'd like to ask you a few questions before we speak with, ahem, your *wife*."

I was about to go on the offensive when the second man's last name threw me off. "Excuse me, did you say Lieutenant Colombo?"

The man in question barely restrained a sigh of exasperation. "Yes," he said, his voice surprisingly deep for his size. "It's not an uncommon name in Italy. No, I'm not related in any way with the *fictional* television character."

"I know that," I said with a small smile. "It just startled me. I'm sure you get a lot of ribbing, so I won't make any of the same tired wisecracks."

"Thank you," he said. "Now, Miss Hawkins..." he started.

"Mrs. Hawkins," I said firmly without rancor. "I'm married, as you've already said. She's Mrs. Werner. I realize it's complicated, but it's what we decided to go with."

De Luca nodded. "Of course. You came to the Passenger Safety Department with a coat you claim may have indicated that someone met with foul play?"

"That's basically correct," I agreed, "except I didn't 'claim' that it might indicate a crime. I said it."

"And then your wife and her friend supposedly see someone at the scene of this 'so called' crime and he tries to throw her overboard?" Colombo asked.

Their keywords were starting to steam me. "'Claim' implies I'm making this stuff up. So does 'supposedly' and 'so called.' Are you insinuating that Trish and my wife lied? Because that would *really* upset me." I fought the growing urge to get really pissed off. "The jacket was definitely indicative that someone was attacked; and since I know who it belongs to, and what a jerk he is, the possibility can't be ignored." I shifted my cold gaze to de Luca. "And if Trish said Gretchen was attacked, it happened. There's no reason to make up that kind of shit."

De Luca smiled, a trace of condescension in his eyes. "I'm sure it must seem that way to you, Mrs. Hawkins, but until we get to the bottom of what the facts tell us we cannot allow ourselves to be swayed. Perhaps your young friend and your wife got into a scuffle and now they're embarrassed."

"Bullshit! That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," I snarled. "A four-year old might do that, but not these two, and you *should* know better."

That wiped the smile right off his face. "I think that we have more experience in such matters than you, Mrs. Hawkins. I'm sure that this seems very complicated..." he said before I cut him off.

"Don't even go there," I said coldly. "I'm not the pregnant 'little woman' all blown over with hormones. Let's set the record straight, shall we? Until I got pregnant, I was a Homicide Detective in the Houston Police Department. Seventeen years as a cop and seven of those in Homicide. Most recently as a Lieutenant in said Homicide Department." They both recoiled in surprise. "I know what is and what isn't a crime scene and I sure as hell know if someone is trustworthy or not. Let's not compare body counts and conviction rates."

"I see," de Luca said with neutral nod, his expression closing up. "Be that as it may, there's still no evidence that any homicide has occurred. As yet, there's no body. We'll investigate what happened and if we determine there was a crime, we'll attempt to locate the party responsible. We'll then deal with this situation according to the appropriate laws. Thank you for your time."

The anger in his voice was subtle, but it was there. Rent-a-cops hated the real deal confronting them. These rent-a-cops might dress well, but I could tell that they didn't have the experience to deal with this crisis, even if de Luca thought they did.

"And you think you'll find something before someone has a chance to get off the ship?" I asked, the disbelief I felt coloring my tone against my will. "We dock in San Juan, Puerto Rico in just a little more than a day and a half. Three PM, the day after tomorrow, to be precise. If you dick around, whoever did this will walk off this ship, and you'll never see them again."

"Mrs. Hawkins," he almost sneered. "Please don't presume to tell us how to do our jobs. This matter will be dealt with in a speedy and efficient manner. I recommend that you focus on your wife, and your obvious condition, and we'll deal with this issue."

I sneered right back. "I'd tell you how to do your jobs, except that I doubt either of you are smart enough or humble enough to learn anything from me!"

His anger was now plainly evident and I kicked myself for not listening to Gretchen's lessons on courtesy. I certainly hadn't made any friends today. Whatever retort de Luca was going to make was interrupted by the sound of the x-ray room's door opening.

The nurse was about to wheel Gretchen out when Abbott and Costello stopped her. I rose to my feet as they went in, but Colombo stopped me. Unlike de Luca, he didn't seem quite as angry, but I could tell he wasn't going to do me any favors, either. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hawkins, but I'm sure you understand that we'll need some privacy to question your wife. I promise that we'll be brief." He closed the door in my face, and I snarled wordlessly, smashing my fist into the back of my chair, sending my phone clattering to the floor. Assholes.

I managed to pick up the phone without falling over myself and brought it to my ear. "Hans? Did you hear that?"

"I certainly did," he said coolly, "and I'm not pleased about it in the least. My dear, it sounds like you have your hands full, so I should let you go. I'll be making some calls to see if I can motivate more cooperation from the cruise line. I'm the majority shareholder and if I can't get some action I'll see heads roll. If Gretchen is able to, I'd like her to call me, no matter the time. If not, please call me as soon as you have a full diagnosis of her condition."

The old man was a tough bird, I thought with a wry grin. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of his next phone call. "Hans, she'll be alright. One of us will call as soon as we can. And," I said, allowing my 'cop voice' to seep in, "one way or another, I promise you that I'll find the scumbag that hurt my wife and make them pay."

"Good," he said with satisfaction. "I'll wake some people up and see that no one tries to stop you." He hesitated, and for a moment, I thought he was going to simply hang up. Then he said, "Shauna, you probably know this, but I need to say it aloud. I've had my reservations about Gretchen marrying you."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "I'd have been an idiot not to suspect you might have reservations. I'd have had a hell of a lot of reservations if I were you. Not just over the whole girl-girl thing, but about how fast it happened, and yeah, most especially about my motives, whether I was actually in love with Gretchen or with her money. So,

yeah, I understand your reservations. They don't bother me, not coming from you. We both love your little girl, we both want to protect her and we'll manage."

"Yes," he said, "we'll manage, but I wanted to make sure that you knew that over the last eight months or so, you've more than allayed my reservations. I know that the two of you truly love one another, and that's the *only* reason you're with her. I've even realized that I don't have to understand why or how you love one another. All I need to understand is that you make my baby happy, and that she does the same for you. With that, I'm content. Do what you have to do to protect *our* girl and I'll do the same."

My throat closed and I couldn't speak because of all the emotion running through me. His unexpected words arrowed through me and left a warmth I never expected to feel. He was everything I wish my own father had been. I swallowed heavily and coughed. "That means a lot to me, Hans. More than you can know. I'll *handle* this. You have my word."

"You have my love as does Gretchen," he said quietly. "I'll be waiting for your call."

I swallowed again. I was going to have a lot of thinking to do about Hans and me. I wanted to tell him I loved him back, but the words seemed to stick in my throat. I wasn't sure why, because I more than suspected that when I dug down I'd find that I did love him, in a fatherly way. I just couldn't force the words out.

"Thank you," I finally managed. "We need to talk more, but I need..." I struggled in vain to find the right words to tell him how I felt without offending him. I wished I had paid more attention to Gretchen's lessons on how to talk to people. This was one time where I didn't want my lack of diplomacy to screw things up. This was too important.

"I understand," he said, gently cutting me off. "We don't have to force or rush things between us, Shauna. When you're ready to talk about anything at all, I'll be here. Take care, my dear."

"I will," I said hoarsely. I swallowed again as I put my phone away and sank slowly into the seat. What had just happened? I felt almost befuddled at the shock of emotion running through me. Then it hit me. Hormones. It was just hormones from the pregnancy making me crazy. I sighed with relief. I wasn't losing my mind. I could blame all my befuddlement on being pregnant. I just hoped I could convince myself that was all it was.

Only a few minutes had passed when the two detectives came out and nodded to me as

they silently left me sitting there. I guess they thought they were through with me. Idiots. I levered myself up and out of the chair as the nurse was pushing Gretchen out of the x-ray room, and I gave her face a good look. She looked tired and annoyed, but her smile at seeing me lit up my heart.

"I see that you got run through the ringer by the local dicks," I said as fell in beside her. The nurse was kind enough to slow down for me and I smiled my appreciation at her.

"Those two..." Gretchen said, anger tingeing her voice. "They all but said I made the whole thing up. I smell a cover-up in the making. I don't think they want to dig too deeply."

Gretchen and I were on the same page, then. Those guys might or might not be smart enough to handle this, but I was starting to think that there were some things best looked into by someone that wasn't a company man. They had a vested interest in making the line look good and, no doubt, they would have superiors breathing down their necks if they made too many waves. Management idiots were probably a lot like political idiots. They didn't want someone upsetting the masses on their watch. They just wanted things to be smooth and look good.

Well, I'd taken heat from people more powerful than this before. I quirked my lips in a smile. Since I didn't work for them, I had a lot more freedom to dig after the answers and ask troubling questions. And when I stepped on toes and people started screaming, I'd deal with that, too. This time, I knew I had backup *and* friends in high places.

"Hawk?" Gretchen asked, knocking me out of the little world I'd wandered off into. I was doing it again. Focus, dammit!

"Sorry," I said apologetically. "I wandered off for a second. I think this requires a more experienced, outside approach."

She shook her head. "Oh, no! This isn't your fight. I'll live and you're not a cop anymore. I can't risk you or the babies getting hurt."

I grabbed the bed and stopped it in the hall. The nurse looked at me with wide eyes and I gestured for her to go on. "We'll be along in a second. You just go on ahead." I watched the defiant resolve in Gretchen's face, and the tinge of worry that she probably didn't expect me to notice. Or, at least hoped I wouldn't see.

"That comment about me not being a cop is playing dirty, and I refuse to let you drag

this argument down into the muck, Sweetheart," I said with as neutral a voice as I could manage. "They made this my business. I can't stand around and let someone get away with murder, even if I can't stand the victim. And I'll be damned if I let someone try to kill you and have them walk away." I put my face in front of hers and glared at her coldly. "Don't try to head me off by making me feel guilty or worried about the babies. I'm not going to back down to you, either. I love you with every fiber of my being. I love our children just as much, but I'm who I am. You knew that when you married me, so don't try changing me now."

Gretchen broke our locked gaze with a nod. A tear slid down her cheek and she closed her eyes. "You're right. I'm sorry. I love you. I don't want to see you get hurt."

I put my arms around her and kissed the tears away. "I'm sorry, too. I could've said that better and not have been such a bitch. I guess I'm not housebroken yet, or I'd be a dutiful wife and do as Daddy tells me to."

She laughed in spite of herself and smiled at me. I knew she forgave me even before she spoke. Once again, the almost uncanny connection between us was back in full force. We might fight, but we never stayed angry for long. "Don't think you can call me Daddy once and then back up, Mommy. Now you've done it."

I chuckled in spite of myself. She was right. I'd slipped up there, and it was too late to back up. "Ah, well. At least I'm Mommy until we get you knocked up. Then I can take back my alpha status."

"Are you planning to get me knocked up soon?" she asked with a smirk. "Lisa might object."

"We'll see," I said. "That's one of the things we *all* need to talk about. Do you want to be pregnant?"

Slowly she nodded. "I think I do."

"Then we'll all talk about it this week." I said and hugged her. "You don't need to do that just for me."

She laughed. "I want it for myself, too."

"Come on," I said, grabbing the bed and wheeling it down the hall. "Let's get you out of here and back to our room."

The doc looked over the x-rays and pronounced her battered and bruised. He gave her some pain medication and told her to rest for a day and then to take it easy. He didn't know her like I did. She'd be up tomorrow as sure as anything.

Sandy and the girls took her back to the suite, and I made my way back to the scene of the crime. The boys were sitting in the chairs and keeping an eye on the darkened area. They stood when I arrived.

"They never came back down to look the place over," Ted said disgustedly.

I nodded and picked up the flashlight from the table. "They don't take this as seriously as I do. Stay behind me and if you see something, tell me. Touch nothing."

Clicking on the light, I started quartering the area, starting with the lamp that was supposed to be illuminating the area. The bulb was broken. Not burned out. Broken. As clear a sign of something hinky as you could get.

With the boys help, we shortly had the area searched. When we got near the rail, Ted pointed. "There!"

Lying on the deck was a pair of glasses. I pulled a handkerchief from my purse and picked the glasses up gently. They were ugly. Black plastic frames and clear lenses. We used to call them 'birth control glasses' in high school. They differed from the standard by having a watch battery on the inside of one of the earpieces.

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion and took a closer look at the front of the glasses. Sure enough, there was a tiny lens on the nosepiece.

"Well, well," I drawled. "What have we here?"

"What is it," Ted asked, peering over my shoulder.

"Spy glasses," I said, looking into the lens coldly. "The kind that let someone else see what you're looking at. Like the ones Tom Cruise had in Mission Impossible. Pretty unusual stuff."

"What do we do with it?" Keven asked.

"We find the other end." I put the lens close to my face. "I don't know if you can hear me or not, but I'm coming for you, you bastard."

Chapter Eight: Wakeup Call

Sandy

We took Gretchen back to our suite in a wheelchair and I tagged along to give her a more thorough examination of my own. We girls stripped her down in her bedroom. Given the already visible signs of bruising, it was obvious that Gretchen would be a sight in a few days. Unfortunately, it wasn't going to be her usual beautiful one.

I sighed and shook my head. "I'm sorry, Gretchen, but there's going to be some bruising. You must have bounced all over the side of the ship because you have bruises everywhere. They aren't huge, but some of them look pretty deep. I hope black and blue are your colors. If not, there'll always be green and purple," I smirked.

Gretchen smiled weakly. "You have a terrible bedside manner, Sandy. Hearing about my bruises makes me feel *so* much better." Amazingly, she managed to sound tired and sarcastic at the same time. "I'm going to look like hell, and *that* ruins more than half of my clothing plans."

"Maybe," Jo said uncertainly. "We might be able to conceal some of it with makeup."

"There'll be time tomorrow to see about that," I said standing up. "We need to get you into a gown and then get you medicated. Sleep is the best thing for you right now."

Gretchen shook her head mulishly. "I'm not going to sleep until Hawk's back."

I considered pushing the issue but decided deception and misdirection would work better. "That's understandable, but there's no reason to be in all that pain, is there? At least take the pain medication."

At her nod, I opened the pill bottle and sent Trish off for a glass of water. When it arrived, Gretchen took the pills without complaint, and we got her into bed.

Trish sat on the floor with me while Jo took the chair. We talked in low tones about the events of the evening. It took a bit more than half an hour before I saw Gretchen's

eyelids start to droop. I suppressed my smile and kept up the low conversation with the others while she slid slowly into the arms of Morpheus.

When she was asleep, we went into the living room. I closed the door quietly behind me. "That worked out well," I said smugly.

"Did you slip that poor woman a Mickey?" Jo asked with an evil twinkle in her eyes. "She's going to be vexed with you."

I shook my head. "Nope. I just talked to the ship's doc and made sure that the pain medication also had something in it to make her drowsy. In the state she was in, she needed the sleep."

"Tricksey little Hobbit!" Lisa said, standing up with a soft clapping of her hands. "Remind me to watch you more closely. I need a drink," she declared. "Name your poison! Drinks are on the house."

"I'll just take a coke, if you don't mind," I said. "I'll be keeping an eye on Gretchen tonight and I don't want to muddle my thinking."

"Make mine a scotch on the rocks," Jo said.

"I really haven't tried anything like this before," Trish admitted. "I only turned twenty-one a couple of months ago. What should I try?"

Lisa considered that. "I think something fruity." She marched off to the bar and started mixing drinks. "If you're going to keep an eye on Gretchen, you can take the bedroom nearest the master."

I nodded. "For tonight, I think that's best. When the boys wander back in, I'll tell Keven we're having a sleepover. With all that's happened, I think circling the wagons might be a good idea. There's safety in numbers."

Jo looked around the sumptuous living room and the moonlit deck. "I don't suppose there's room for Earl and me?"

Lisa brought us our drinks and Trish sipped on hers. "Ooooo. I like this," Trish said. "It tastes just like a fruit smoothie. Jo, I don't need a whole room to myself. I'll sleep on the couch and you and Earl can have the room right over there." Trish pointed to her room.

Jo smiled her gratitude. "Thank you." I smiled to myself. I'd always liked people who knew how to simply say 'thank you' without going through the whole 'are you sure?' routine.

Trish took a deep drink that told me she was in for a lesson tonight about alcohol. I made note to keep an eye on her. I caught Lisa's eye, held up three fingers and pointed at Trish. Lisa nodded her understanding. There would be a three-drink limit for the buxom young woman.

We sipped our drinks and watched Trish get tipsy with amusement. She was a cheerful drunk, I decided. Not that she was really that drunk. Lisa searched around and found some extra pillows and a blanket for Trish, then put them on the couch.

The boys came in while Trish was off undressing for bed and brushing her teeth. Well, the boys and Hawk. I knew the news wasn't good from the looks on their faces. I knew it *really* wasn't good when Hawk headed for the bar.

"Where do you think you're going," I asked as I cut her off.

"This has been the day from hell," Hawk complained. "I need something. Just a small one."

"I'm betting that Gretchen would pitch three kinds of fit if she saw you try," I said while crossing my arms.

"Well, she's not here right now," Hawk said, trying unsuccessfully to slip past me. "Someone tried to kill my wife, someone probably *did* kill that putz Skip, and my back is killing me. Cut me some slack."

"You want some slack, I'll give you some slack," I agreed. "No hard liquor, but you can have a glass of wine or a beer."

"I can?" Hawk blinked at me.

"Yes," I said with a grin. "While you shouldn't drink at all, a glass of wine or a beer this one time won't harm the twins. So, if you like, I'll get one and you can tell Gretchen about it tomorrow."

She scowled at me. "That's playing dirty." With a sigh, she lowered herself into a chair.

"I'll just have something non-alcoholic. Surprise me."

I dug into the bar and found some cold diet drinks. While I was there I filled drink orders from the boys, and we listened to Ted as he filled us in on the details. Trish came out and lay down on the couch in a charming, if clingy, flannel nightshirt. That made her the center of attention, much to her embarrassment.

Lisa updated everyone on the sleeping plans. Earl and Keven went to get some clothes and bathroom gear. They got back just as I finished showering.

I pulled Keven into my arms and kissed him. "Go take a shower and I'll put this stuff away. Then we need to get some sleep because I'm going to be getting up every few hours to go check on Gretchen."

He nodded and in twenty minutes I had the alarm set to give me a couple of hours of sleep and we drifted off to dreamland.

I shut off the alarm before it woke up Keven and reset it to go off in another two hours before padding into the living room. Trish had kicked off the blanket and was shivering a little, so I pulled the blanket back over her with a smile. She looked deceptively innocent laying there. Of all people, I knew firsthand that she had a bit of a wild child inside her that was dying to get out.

In the master bedroom Gretchen and Hawk were curled together, fast asleep. I stood beside their bed and Gretchen seemed to be sleeping normally, so I tip-toed back out and closed the door softly.

Trish was sitting up on the couch blinking at me sleepily. "Is she okay?"

I nodded my head. "She's looking fine. Go back to sleep."

Her face twisted into a troubled expression. "I'm having the same dream over and over. I'm trying to hold onto Gretchen and she keeps falling into the ocean no matter what I do. I hate bad dreams."

I sat down beside her and took her into my arms. "It's only natural with the shock you've had. Try to remember that you held on and you helped save her. That might help with the dreams."

She looked deeply into my eyes. "I don't want to sleep alone. Can I sleep with you?"

The bed was big enough for three. "Of course you can. Come on."

Trish grabbed her pillow and we left the blanket on the couch. Keven was still sound asleep and I prodded him until he moved over without waking up. I was going to slide in and let Trish have the outside but she shook her head. "You have to keep getting up. I'll sleep in the middle." She blushed. "I'll keep my hands to myself."

I laughed softly. "You might, but there's no telling where Keven's might end up. But if you want to take your chances, be my guest."

When she was laying beside Keven, I slid in behind her and draped my arm across her midsection. "Good night."

"Good night," she murmured back, already drifting off.

I woke up when someone shook my shoulder gently. Peering over the bed in the dim light, I saw Keven grinning at me.

"I see we have a guest," he whispered.

"She was having nightmares," I said. "I told her it was okay."

Keven shook his head. "I can guess what kind of nightmares she might be having." He shook his head again and then smiled. "Sleeping right next to me might have led her to a different kind of dream, though," he said roguishly. "I might have had my hands all over her when I woke up."

I laughed softly. "She said she'd take her chances, and I doubt she'd find your hands anything but a heaven-sent dream. In fact, they might even help chase those bad dreams away."

"Want to help me?" he asked seductively. "We could pick back up where we left off yesterday."

That woke *me* up. The thought started spreading heat into my belly. I looked at her measuringly and nodded after giving it some thought. "If she says stop, though, we stop."

"Of course," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder and gently rolling her onto her back. "Help me."

I took her breast in my hand and began gently rubbing it through the flannel. Her nipple was extremely responsive and hardened right up. A glance told me she was still asleep.

Keven slowly unbuttoned her nightshirt and exposed her magnificent breasts to me. Oh yeah, her nipples were like pencil erasers. A smile was tugging at her lips and her breathing was getting a little faster.

The memory of sucking on them yesterday made me wet. It had been a long time since I'd had sex with a woman. It hadn't happened since medical school. I'd had a torrid affair with one of the other students. It had been a real eye-opener.

With a saucy grin for my fiancé, I leaned forward and sucked her nipple between my lips. The taste of her skin was clean, fresh, and exciting. Using my teeth, I gently nipped her and began using my tongue to arouse her further.

Keven's eyes were locked with mine as he lowered his mouth to her other breast. How well I knew the magic he could do with that nasty mouth of his. Together, we suckled on our new friend.

Trish's head began moving from side-to-side, and she moaned softly. Her eyes were moving rapidly under her eyelids and I could only imagine the turn her dreams must have just taken. Then her eyes opened and she blinked at me in confusion.

"Good morning," I whispered huskily. "Keven and I want to pick up where we left off in the living room. Do you want us to stop?"

Trish smiled shyly and shook her head. "Oh, no, don't stop."

I ran my fingers down her belly, raising goosebumps in my wake. Her soft curls wrapped around my fingers, alerting me to the fact that our little morsel hadn't worn any panties to bed. That shot a bolt of lust through me. Had she known what would happen? Had she hoped we would have sex? I slid my hand between her legs and cupped her sex.

Trish arched her back and groaned. She opened her legs, giving me all the access I could want. In the dim light, her skin was almost golden with a light sheen of

perspiration. Between my fingers, her labia parted and I could feel her hot arousal. The girl was smoldering.

Keven mirrored my kisses as we began to travel down her body, our kisses moving in tandem across her rippling stomach. Taking one leg each, we opened the present we were about to give ourselves and began raining kisses and little love bites along her inner thighs.

The scent of her sex was almost as arousing to me as seeing Keven's face beside mine as we reached the center of her together. Her slit was parted and damp. The hard nub of her clitoris proudly stood out from her flesh, beckoning us to partake of her nectar.

With an unexpected eagerness, I ran my tongue along her length and circled her hardness, watching as Keven sucked one of her labia into his mouth to gently massage it.

Our attentions had an immediate reaction from her as she arched her back again and moaned loudly. Her hands crept down and found our heads, entangling in our hair and needlessly holding us to our task.

The taste of her flooded my senses, sweet and slightly metallic. I gave reign to my lust and sucked her clit into my mouth, using the tip of my tongue to ravish her. Keven's face brushed mine as he dug his tongue as deeply inside her as he could wedge it. His jaw worked as he brushed her insides all around as I moved up to give him room.

"Unnnngggggg," she groaned, thrashing about even more violently. "Yes..."

I looked up and saw her watching us eat her. Her eyes were alive with her own need. I let my lips go wild on her nub and was rewarded with both her hands moving to grip my head.

"Dear," I murmured, "I think Trish might like another go at that wonderful cock of yours."

With a grin Keven abandoned his labors and crawled up the bed to kneel beside her head. She stroked him gently and then took the first few inches of his cock into her mouth with a sigh. He threw his head back, his hands pushing himself into her hot, sucking mouth another inch.

Trish settled into a rhythmic bobbing of her head to fuck Keven with her mouth. The

sight of her cheeks bulging with each downstroke excited me, and I settled more deeply between her legs.

I used my tongue to retrace the route Keven had been going, and Trish's juices covered my face as I pushed myself as deeply inside her as I could reach. I was rewarded by a delicious tremor throughout her body and her thighs closing on my head. Her hand dragged me back up to her clit and I began sucking her in earnest. I wanted her to come and come hard.

As her body started to buck underneath me, I slid a finger inside her. It was like pushing my finger into a hot, velvet-covered vice. I smiled into her bush when I felt the partial obstruction of her hymen. She hadn't been kidding when she said she'd never went all the way with a man. Part of me lusted at the thought of Keven working his way into this woman. Only when she was ready for that, of course.

Then, with a cry of pleasure, she let Keven's cock slide free with a wet "pop" and both her hands grabbed my hair. She rode my mouth as I sucked the nectar from her sex.

"Oh... Oh... Ohhhhhhh... Arrrggghhhhh!" she cried as I felt her internal muscles grab my finger and try to pull it inside her. The pulsing of her pussy around me told the tale I already knew. She was coming like a dragon. I dipped my head and caught the flood of her juices as my mouth replaced my finger, sucking hard on her opening. I created a vacuum and my mouth was flooded with the taste of her. She arched wildly at the new sensation and ground my face deeply into her sex. Then she collapsed into a heap of sensitive nerves and pushed me away from her.

I grinned at Keven and he grinned back.

"You're drenched," he said. Then he pulled me up to him and began licking her juices off my face. The wet rasp of his tongue cleaned me even as he kissed me. His kisses drove me mad with love for him. My man. My lover.

At last, he pulled back enough for me to see his entire face. That devilish grin tortured me. "I want to make love to you."

My heart skipped a beat. It always amazed me how just the sound of his voice could make me whole. I almost pulled him onto me right then, but the soft rustle of Trish moving against the sheets stopped me. I looked at her, lying there all drenched in sweet sweat, her legs splayed for the entire world to see. Her eyes watched us with a deep and abiding lust. She wanted more. Maybe she was ready after all.

"Maybe you should see to our guest first," I said huskily. His eyes lit up and he looked at her, his cock throbbing against my belly. "Are you ready for that, Trish? Do you want to feel his hard, thick cock slide inside you?"

Her expression was a mixture of lust and a bit of trepidation. I watched her wrestle with the thought and then sigh. "I want to, but Gretchen told me I had to use a condom and I don't have one." The regret in her voice was palpable.

"Then it must be your lucky day," Keven drawled. "It just so happens that I picked up a box of condoms while I was out. They're in the nightstand. Say the word and I'll get them."

"Yes..." she said, her lust again taking control of her body.

"No," Keven said as he climbed off the bed and walked to the nightstand. "Tell me what you want."

I curled up beside Trish and watched him take out one of the condoms and tear the wrapper with his teeth. I felt myself throbbing inside as he slowly unrolled it down his already wet cock.

"Fuck me," Trish whispered. "Take that big cock and make me a woman." I could feel the tension in her leg and her voice trembled.

"I'll talk you through it," I whispered into her ear. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Keven is a gentle lover. A *great* lover. I know what to expect and you won't be going through this alone. Okay?"

She nodded her head jerkily, but kept her eyes glued to Keven's bobbing cock as he knelt between her legs. "Will it hurt?" Her voice sounded so vulnerable that I almost told Keven to wait, but the look of longing on her face held me. Right now, Trish wanted it, and I was here to help her.

"It will hurt a little at first, and you'll feel stretched, but that will fade quickly. Then you'll feel the most wondrous sensations you've ever felt. I'd describe it, but words wouldn't do justice to that moment. Trust me, he'll do exactly what I tell him to do, and he'll stop whenever you say." I turned my gaze to my lover. "I want you to do what I tell you."

Keven nodded and waited more patiently than I might have in his place. His latex-sheathed cock hung down, pointed at Trish's center.

"Run yourself along her length," I said, "but don't go inside her. She's a virgin in every sense of the word and you have to go slowly."

His eyes, hot with desire, widened a bit at the news that Trish was a virgin, but he only nodded. With one hand, he grasped his cock and began rubbing her slit with it. His body was a taut cord of tension and controlled lust.

Trish moaned and raised her hips, forcing him to pull back a little. She groaned with disappointment.

"Patience," I whispered wickedly. "Good things come to she who waits."

When she stopped her thrusting, I looked back to Keven. "Put the head of your cock into the entrance of her pussy." He slid a little forward and I felt her twitch against me. I wrapped my arms around her and looked into her eyes. They were dreamy with need.

"Slowly push into her until you feel her hymen," I instructed him, not taking my eyes off of her face.

Her eyes grew huge and her mouth started working, but nothing came out at first. Finally, she whispered, "I feel like he's going to tear me apart." The fear was now dominant in her voice.

"Relax," I commanded her. "Just settle back and let yourself get used to the sensation. Your body is made to take a man. He'll fit just fine."

She breathed deeply and closed her eyes. The tension that had built up inside her slowly drained out and she opened her eyes again. "Okay."

"This is going to hurt," I said gently. "It'll be a quick, sharp pain and he'll stop as soon as it's done so that you can work your way through it. Are you ready?"

Jerkily, she nodded her head, her eyes wide with apprehension. Her golden hair was spread across the pillow in such a sexy way.

"Now."

Her back arched and her face was contorted with pain. "Arrrgggg," she cried out as I held her, whispering in her ear.

"It's okay," I said reassuringly. "It's over now. Let the pain go. Relax and breathe deep."

Slowly, her face relaxed. "It hurt, but now it's more like an ache. Is that normal?"

"Perfectly normal," I said with a nod. "Your hymen tore and now it's not going to be hurting much longer. Even the ache will go away in a few minutes. Are you ready for him to start?"

She nodded without saying anything. Fearful, but resolute.

"Keven," I said, "push yourself all the way inside her and hold your cock there for her to get used to you."

Trish's eyes rolled back into her head, and she started panting as Keven pushed himself into her an inch at a time until he was balls deep. "Oh God, he's tearing me apart. I feel so full."

I kissed her neck. "That's normal, Baby. Relax and breathe."

Under my kisses, her pulse thundered through the artery in her neck. I ran my tongue along it and was rewarded with a shiver. I pulled back, looked at her sweetly parted lips, and swiftly covered them with my own. I thrust my tongue into her mouth and took her attention fully onto myself.

All thought of Keven vanished as I kissed her deeply, her tongue coming to life against me as we kissed. In seconds, her hands pulled me against her and she was returning my kisses with hot desire.

Surprisingly, she pulled away and panted. "Now," she moaned. "Fuck me. Take me now."

I felt the bed move as Keven began slowly fucking Trish and dipped my head to capture her nipple between my lips. Now my attention was on Keven as Trish slowly loosened her titanic grip on his cock and he fucked her. His face was a mask of animal lust, but he was in full control of his movements. I watched his cock come almost out of her, covered in her juices and a trace of red and then slowly sink back into her fully.

Entranced, I pulled back and let him settle his length upon her. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, grinding her sex into his thrusts. He couldn't hold out long against that kind of magic.

As the minutes flew past, I grew more and more impressed with his control. He was holding back, wanting to make her first time special. My heart felt like it would burst with pride and love. As they fucked, they also kissed deeply and passionately. From personal experience, I knew she was getting the ride of her life.

Trish did come first, clutching Keven tightly as she screamed out her climax. Her body undulated against him, a contrast of her softness and his firm body. When she collapsed bonelessly, he kissed her again and pulled back, his cock sliding free with a sexy "slurp."

"Time for the main course," he told me, pushing me onto my back and peeling the rubber off in one quick motion. With one thrust, he was buried to the hilt inside me and I arched my back to meet his insistent and needy thrusts. After fucking Trish, I knew he would beat me to the top of the mountain, but I didn't care.

"Trish," he said, looking at her. "Climb on and let Sandy lick you. I want to see her make love to you again."

Before I could blink, Trish had settled her legs around my head and sank down. Her pussy looked wonderful, all freshly fucked and gaping wide. I dug right in and the taste of her blood, though not powerful, added to my lust. Maybe I was wrong. I might just make it there first after all.

I ate her like I was starving. Wrapping my arms around her hips, I tried to lick and suck every part of her hot pussy. She ground down against me in renewed need. I felt Keven shift and I knew they were kissing passionately as I tongued her. The first small orgasm ripped through me and began driving me higher.

Keven buried himself in me with an almost anguished groan and I felt the hot, liquid feeling of his come pumping into me. I clamped my pussy around him and milked him as his length pulsed inside me. God, this was what it was all about. I was so close.

Then he pulled out of me and pushed Trish's head toward my sex. "Do her," he commanded.

Trish dove down on me like a swooping falcon. Her tongue ran along my length as she tasted her first pussy. She must have liked it because she moaned and buried her face

between my legs. Her technique was non-existent but she made up for that with incredible enthusiasm.

"Do what she's doing to you," Keven advised. "You know what feels good. Try it on Sandy."

"I can taste your come inside her," Trish moaned. "Oh, God."

"Suck it out of her," he said. "Drink my come from her hot pussy."

The sudden suction as she clamped her mouth across my entrance took my breath away and I arched my back madly. I could hear her sucking and swallowing his seed straight from inside me and that made me crazy.

The world exploded and I could hear the thundering of my heart as this sweet girl brought me off into a massive orgasm.

Trish was insatiable, and she kept devouring me. I gloried in it, returning to her pussy with renewed lust. Together, we ate each other for what seemed to be an eternity. First one, then the other coming hard. I wasn't sure we would ever stop.

Then the sound of a third set of female moans finally pierced my awareness. I realized that I'd been hearing them for a while. Trish and I disengaged, exhausted, and I searched for the source of the groans.

Standing in the now open doorway, watching us with eyes half-lidded with lust, was Jo. She was dressed in a sheer nightgown that showed her small breasts off to perfection. The matching set of panties was pushed down past her knees and she was fingering herself wildly.

As we watched, she fell against the door frame and buried her fingers inside herself. Then she arched her back and came.

Keven was lying beside us, watching this stranger pleasure herself while slowly stroking his cock while she watched him.

When she came down from her high, she licked her fingers and smiled wickedly at us. "I think I want a wakeup call like that sometime."

I laughed and rose to my feet, padding over to her and kissing her deeply. The taste of

her on her own lips made my sex twitch. "I think we can work something out later," I said as we broke our kiss.

"I'll hold you to that," Jo said solemnly.

Chapter Nine: Legwork

Lisa

I woke up in the warm and secure embrace of my husband and smiled sleepily at him. Last night, I'm not sure exactly when, we woke up to the sounds of someone else in the suite getting very lucky. At least, the lady in question *sounded* like she was having the time of her life. That sparked a divine early morning lovemaking bout of our own. Afterwards we curled up against each other and went back to sleep.

Without waking Ted, I gently disentangled myself, slipped out of the bed and padded quietly into the shower to get ready for the day. Twenty minutes later, I was out and dressed. I considered waking Ted up but decided I'd go scout out the suite and see about ordering breakfast first.

The first thing I noticed was that Trish was no longer on the couch. Her blanket covered the cushions but the pillow was gone. That was interesting. I wondered where, and more interestingly, who she'd slept with last night. I grinned and decided that I'd find out in good time. It sure appeared that Trish was spreading her wings, though.

There were no other sounds of movement so I figured I must be the first one up. I called room service, ordered a meal big enough for everyone in the suite, and walked from door to door, knocking and announcing that I'd ordered breakfast. Then I stepped out onto the balcony and sat down to watch the sea.

The sun was barely over the horizon and the light made everything seem perfect. The sharp scent of the sea tickled my nostrils and I lost myself in the solitude. In the ship's wake the sea was churned, white on blue. The sky was almost a match, in spirit if not color, with the thin white clouds painted on a cerulean background.

A single gull followed in the air behind us, forlornly looking for a handout. It reminded me that even if I couldn't see the land, it was somewhere close. The engines were surprisingly quiet and I gloried in the peace this wonderful scene raised in me.

My thoughts strayed to the events of last night, and I sighed to myself. Even retired, Hawk seemed to be a magnet for trouble. Although she always came out ahead, I wished for a more peaceful life for my friend. That drew another sigh from me, as I knew that Hawk would be crazy bored by a life like that. I wondered how Gretchen was able to accept that part of Hawk's life. Thinking of Gretchen made me smile, in part out of relief that she had come out of her ordeal relatively unhurt, but more because she was the really great thing that had come out of Hawk's last adventure. In fact, as I thought about it, every Hawk murder case led to someone finding their heart's desire, someone they could love, marry and grow old with. I wondered if this case would have a similar ending.

Everyone was finally coming out of their rooms when the buzzer broke my reverie and announced breakfast. Trish came out of Sandy and Keven's room and helped me take everything to the table on the balcony. I kept casting curious smiles at her, and it only took a minute for her to start blushing.

"Did you hear the screams this morning?" I asked innocently.

Her blush deepened. "Ah, yeah. I'm sorry about that."

I laughed. "Don't be. It sounded like you had a wonderful time."

She smiled at me. "I did. Keven and Sandy were terrific."

The others joined us in pairs and we all dug in. Gretchen looked like she was feeling a little better. Curiously, it was Hawk that looked like a truck had run over her. Sandy and Keven distracted me when they each gave Trish a good morning kiss that left no doubt in any of our minds that some of us had indeed gotten closer. Gretchen smiled at Trish with unabashed pleasure.

I smiled, too, as I turned back to Hawk. "Are you okay, Hawk?" I asked.

She waved an English muffin at me. "The twins gave me hell last night, I had stupid dreams about Skip, and my back is killing me. Other than that I'm fine."

"Foregoing the caffeine before bed will stop the dreams," Sandy advised, "and a heating pad and a massage at the spa will help your back. No hot tub, though. That would be dangerous for the twins."

"I don't have time for any of that," Hawk said, taking a bite of her muffin. "I've got a killer to track down and a mystery to solve."

"Are you sure that's smart, given your condition?" I asked, taking a bite of my own food. The eggs were wonderful.

Gretchen jumped in before Hawk could reply. "What would you do first?" she asked. I shot her a look of surprise, but she just gave me a tiny shake of her head. I couldn't believe that Gretchen, of all people, was okay with this.

"This all revolves around Skip," Hawk said, giving me a smug smile. "I need to start by finding out who he knew on this ship. I remember that he was meeting someone in the casino. Then there are the erotic authors: one of them may know something."

"Then Ted and I can ask the questions," I said reasonably. "I *do* know how to question people."

Hawk didn't look happy at that. She looked even less happy when Gretchen nodded.

"That's an excellent idea," Gretchen said. "I could go with you."

"No," Hawk bristled, "you can't. The doctor told you to take it easy and I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Then I could join you in the spa for the massage," Gretchen purred, springing her trap. "That way you can keep your eyes on me."

Hawk flushed and everyone else laughed.

"You walked right into that one," Jo crowed. "I saw that coming a mile away."

"Very funny," Hawk muttered. "Okay, you win. I'll let you do the initial footwork. What'll everyone else be doing?"

"Well," Jo said, "I don't have any skills that would help in that, but I'll drag Earl along and we'll keep you two company, and since I'm not pregnant, I think a hot tub sounds wonderful."

"As your physician I need to keep an eye on you, Gretchen," Sandy said piously. Then she grinned. "A tub and massage does sound wonderful." She looked over at Trish.

"Come with us Trish."

The girl smiled and nodded. "You guys sure know how to enjoy yourselves."

"Okay," I said with a smile at them all. "You go have a good soak, a massage and let the spa give you a mudpack while Ted and I get the questioning started. We'll try to catch up with you before you're done."

The girls all looked excited about the spa, but the men looked dubious. That sparked even more good-natured laughter and teasing. All in all, the breakfast was a resounding success.

An hour later, Ted and I were in the casino. It was similar to the ones in Vegas, but simultaneously more classy and less glitzy. Maybe there was a sliding scale on how that worked. The tables and fittings were all brass, dark wood and glittering crystal. The whole place just screamed "money."

If I expected it to be empty of people, I was sadly mistaken. While it was far from full, there were at least a hundred people there gambling. Looking at them, I judged that they were the last of the late night crowd, and they looked tired.

The staff was alert and professional, though. I cornered one of the waitresses and asked her how I could find out who was on duty here yesterday afternoon. She pointed me to the bartender.

When I walked up to the bar, the man smiled at me and stopped wiping the counter down with his rag. "What can I get you, Miss? Of course, I'll have to see some ID because you don't look old enough to be drinking."

I laughed at his rakish compliment. "Flatterer! I'm looking for someone who might have seen a passenger in here just before we left dock."

The man performed a bow with a flourish. "My pleasure. As to the passenger, I was here yesterday afternoon for a little while and I might be able to help you. What does this passenger look like?"

I described Skip and the bartender snapped his fingers. "I did see that guy. We weren't open to gamble yet, but he was in here meeting another man. They sat at one of the tables against the wall and were bent over like they were discussing state secrets."

We couldn't be this lucky. Nonetheless, it was hard to keep the eagerness I was feeling from coming out in my voice. "Can you describe the man he was meeting?"

The bartender shrugged. "I wasn't watching them that closely, I'm afraid. I can tell you he was normal sized and had dark hair. They were here, I don't know, maybe half an hour?"

I hid my disappointment and smiled at him. "That's been very helpful. Thank you."

Ted slipped a bill into the tips jar and escorted me back out of the casino. "That wasn't very helpful."

"Sure it was," I disagreed. "We didn't know if he was meeting a man or a woman before. Or possibly several people."

Ted shrugged. "Sure, but how can we know who he met?"

I thought furiously. "Well, if Hawk can get some help from Hans, she could get the camera footage from the casino."

Ted rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's true, but it's a big if. What now, O great investigator?"

"We need to talk to some of the erotic authors," I said, heading for the ship's courtesy desk. "We might be able to get a list of people that signed up in advance for the awards."

The girl at the help desk checked for me, but could only tell me the name of the man that paid for the room, Stan Bombeck. I asked her to call his room for me and she pointed at the courtesy phone and dialed on her system. I picked up the phone and listened to the tones as she dialed.

A sleepy sounding man answered the phone on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Mister Bombeck," I said, "My name is Lisa Stansbury. I'm sorry to wake you so early but there was an incident last night involving one of the authors at the awards ceremony. Can I meet with you to discuss it?"

There was a muffled curse and then a sigh. "Sure. How about I meet you somewhere

where I can get some food in about half an hour?"

"That's perfect," I said. "We'll be in the dining room on the main floor." I described Ted and myself so he would be able to find us and politely ended the call.

"You're a genius," Ted assured me.

I smiled in pleasure, and we went to get some coffee and wait.

Stan Bombeck came up to our table almost half an hour later. He was in his forties and a bit portly, but not an unhandsome man. He was dressed in shorts and a tee shirt that proclaimed the benefits of aromatherapy.

"Mrs. Stansbury?" he asked. At my nod, he sat down and shook our hands. "That coffee looks good. Do you mind me ordering something? I'm starved."

"Go right ahead," Ted assured him. "We've already eaten so don't mind us."

Shortly he had ordered and had a coffee of his own that he held up in reverence before sipping. "Coffee, the nectar of the gods." He set the cup down and sighed. "Okay, lay it on me. What did they do? Get into a fight? Moon someone? Get caught having sex on the Promenade?"

"If only it were something that easy," I sighed. "I think one of your authors was thrown overboard last night."

Stan blinked at me, obviously taken aback. "What? Thrown overboard? This is a joke, right?"

"We found Skip Niccio's jacket on the deck by the rail last night," Ted said. "It was torn to shreds and bloody. Obviously if he was thrown overboard, there wouldn't be an easy way to prove it, but it sure looks that way."

Stan looked at both of us in shock. "Well, I certainly *hope* you're wrong, but if anyone was going to be thrown overboard, it would be him."

I glanced at Ted and then spoke softly. "Why do you say that? I've heard he was a bit temperamental, but that's certainly not enough motive for killing someone."

"Until this cruise," Stan said, accepting his breakfast from the server, "I'd never met him in person, but I'll tell you that for all the exceptional writing he produced, he also produced a lot of ill will. Frankly, though, I don't think he was targeted for being an ass."

He dug into his food and waved his fork at us. "I really should have canceled this cruise for the ceremony with all the other trouble."

"What other trouble?" I asked, sipping my coffee.

"The murders," he said mysteriously.

"There've been more?" I asked, shocked.

Stan nodded. "If I'd heard about the one in Miami before we set sail, I'd have jumped ship myself. I can't take credit for figuring it out, though. Some reporter did. Over the last four months, according to the news report, someone has killed four erotic authors scattered all across the country. Skip would make five, if he is dead."

Ted frowned and glanced back at me. "You're taking it pretty calmly. Wouldn't such a small community notice some of their own dropping off the radar like that?"

"Just because I eat when I'm worried doesn't make me calm about it," Stan retorted to Ted. "Until right now, I wasn't sure that the reporter wasn't just wacky. All of us use aliases, and you wouldn't believe how often an author, even a well-known one, just drops off the face of the earth for a while. I can't even put the names in the paper to the screen names of any authors."

"What name do you write under?" I asked, trying to move back to a less confrontational tone.

"Night Stranger," Stan said, digging in even more deeply to his food. "Though I'd appreciate you not being too free with my identity."

"That's an interesting name," I said brightly. "I'll have to try and find some of your writing. Back to Skip. Is there anyone here that you know of that has an issue with him?"

"Something worth killing over?" he asked. Then he shook his head. "Even after that fool stunt of his last night, telling everyone he wasn't going to post the conclusion to his saga, I can't see anyone throwing him off this ship. When all is said and done, it *is* just

a story. Given that it's posted for free, more of an internet ego thing for those of us who write, there isn't even any money involved."

"Maybe it was an accident," Ted said. "Perhaps they fought and no one ever intended to do something so drastic."

Stan nodded his head in agreement. "I can see that possibility, although I wouldn't downplay the power of ego. You see, he stepped on a lot of toes with that crazy announcement, and I can't help you with any names there, but he did single out one other author to tear to shreds in group-discussions. Right in front of him, as it turns out. If that isn't a blow to the ego, I don't know what is. Southland38. I don't know his real name but I may have his room phone or something in my room."

"If you could help us out with that, it would be a big help," I said.

"Oh, I guess I should have asked, but you're with the police, right?" he asked.

"Close," I said. "I'm an officer of the court and I'm assisting in an investigation into the incident." That was true, even if the court had no jurisdiction here.

"I see," he said, not really seeing. "If you'll give me a number, I'll call you as soon as I get back to my room."

"Perfect," I said. "We appreciate your cooperation, and we may be getting back in touch with you for more information at a later time."

"I'll be happy to help," he said. "I may not have liked Niccio, but I want to see this turn out right."

I rose to my feet and we shook hands before Ted walked out with me.

"Can't you get into trouble for that?" Ted asked.

"Yelled at, perhaps," I said with a grin. "Anyone can ask questions, and if you think about it, I didn't lie to him."

"You bent the truth into a pretzel," Ted accused me.

"Yup," I admitted with a grin, "but if you ask Hawk she'll tell you that all's fair in questioning. At least as far as deceiving the subject."

"Do you believe him?"

I shrugged. "One thing I have learned is that people lie. He did take this awfully well. Don't worry. Hawk will open him up if he's playing some kind of game. Now the next item on the agenda."

"Oh," Ted asked suspiciously, "what's that?"

"Getting into Skip's room for a look around," I said.

Ted frowned at me and shook his head. "Let Hawk try to get some leverage first."

As much as I wanted to go and look, I reluctantly decided he was right. We should run it past Hawk before I did something that drastic.

Stan called while we were discussing it and gave me the phone number to Southland38's room. I called but no one answered. I'd have to try again later. At least with the number, I could probably track down his name.

"Fine," I conceded to Ted, "you win this one, but that just means you get to go to the spa with the rest of us. I think a seaweed wrap will do you some good." I said wickedly.

"Only if you're a mermaid," he said with a kiss.

With that, we headed to the elevators to find the rest of the group.

The spa was a very modern looking affair of marble and chrome. The almost overwhelmed staff bustled through the bright and airy lobby. They escorted us into gender-separated rooms to undress after I explained we were catching up with our party. I locked my clothes and purse into a locker and pinned the key to my robe.

Once I was in the bright white terrycloth robe, a woman escorted me to the mud room. There, laid out on tables next to each other, were all the girls. Mud covered their bodies and they had slices of fruit over their eyes.

Hawk looked so funny I wished I had a camera. Her belly was like a chocolate mountain.

"Well, well. Look what we have here?" I drawled, slipping out of my robe, putting it under the remaining table, and lying down.

"Lisa?" Hawk asked, her ears perking up. "What did you find out?"

I laughed at her eagerness. "Let me get slathered down and *then* I'll tell you."

Hawk grumbled, but let the woman get me covered in mud without any real bitching. When my eyes were covered and the woman had left, Hawk cut loose. "Okay, she's gone. What did you find out?"

I relaxed into the table and filled them all in on what I'd learned.

"It's not going to be easy to track people down by aliases," Jo said. "They could be any of the passengers."

"It can't be impossible," I said. "Someone has been figuring out who they are. At least four of them have been tracked down and murdered, according to a news report."

"And when we find out what that method is," Hawk said, "we'll be close to knowing who the killer is."

We all lapsed into silence, letting the mud do its work. If the past were any indication, things would be crazy as soon as Hawk got her teeth into this case for real. I heard the attendant come in to check on us, but she didn't interrupt our relaxation and went back out a minute later.

I relaxed so much, I slipped into a doze and awoke with a start when the attendant tugged on the towel under me.

"Time to wash you off and send you on to the masseuse, dear," she said cheerfully. Deftly, she plucked the slices of fruit off my eyes and helped me to a sitting position. I saw that two other ladies were helping the rest of the girls.

The entire flock of us quickly washed off and wrapped in our robes before being hustled down the hall to individual massage rooms. "Would you like a masseuse or masseur, dear?" the woman asked as she started closing the door behind me.

"Masseur," I said. "I need a nice, deep massage."

"One husky man coming up," she said. "Slip under the sheet face down and he'll be here in a few minutes."

I lay on the table and put my face into the special padded rest with an opening so I could breathe. The cool cloth caressed me from my feet up to my neck, and I discovered that my skin was alive with tingles. I loved a mudpack.

The door opened and a large man in a crisp white ship-suit came in. "Good morning, I'm Claude. How would you like to be massaged today?"

"Lisa," I responded. "All over and as deep as I can stand."

"You got it," he rumbled and sprayed lotion on his hand from a bottle in the belt at his waist.

An hour later, I felt like putty. Claude had taken me at my word and dug deep into the muscles of my body until they screamed. Now that he was done, I lay for a moment in a euphoric cloud. I don't think my body had ever felt this good except after great sex. It took all my willpower to climb to my feet and slip the robe on.

Outside I met the others on the trek back to the dressing room. They all looked like they'd had a good time, most especially Hawk. I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"You look like you feel better," I said as I pulled back with a smile.

"I take it all back," Hawk declared. "This girl stuff is great. My back feels almost normal. The woman massaged it and then called in an acupuncturist to relieve the pain and cramping. Even my skin feels good." She grinned at me. "Who the hell would've ever figured that rolling around in the mud had such benefits? Maybe little boys aren't as dumb as they look."

I laughed. "Somehow I bet the mud here has ingredients not found in your normal mud. I'm so glad you're feeling better."

"I could take the Right Reverend and give him the first two swings. After lunch," she amended. "I'm starving."

In the dressing room, the girls opened their lockers and started dressing, but when I

felt for my key, it was not pinned to the robe. "Crap. Be right back," I said.

I went to the massage room and looked around but didn't find it. Then I went to the mud room we'd used. I quietly opened the door and found it occupied with a new group of women. I slipped quietly inside and looked around the floor. The women didn't react to me because they couldn't see me. Then, with a silent cry, I spotted it lying on the floor beside my table. It looked like the clasp had come open and it had fallen off.

With it in hand, I triumphantly made my way back to the dressing room and hurriedly dressed. Everyone was waiting for me in the lobby as I rushed up.

"Sorry," I panted. "My stupid key fell off in the mud room. Let's go eat."

As we rode the elevator down toward the dining room, an announcement interrupted the soft music. "Shauna Hawkins, please call 1356 on any ship's phone. Shauna Hawkins, 1356. Thank you."

We all looked at Hawk in surprise. She grinned at us. "With any luck at all, it's show-time."

There was a courtesy phone outside the elevator when we arrived at our deck, and Hawk snatched it up and dialed. "Hawkins."

I could hear the angry buzzing of a male voice but not the words. It must have been good, because Hawk grinned at me.

"I'm sure you don't mean that, Lieutenant de Luca," Hawk almost purred. "There's no need to take this so hard. I'm sure that we can work together on this."

De Luca's voice got louder and individual words became understandable from the noise as Hawk put a few inches between the phone and her ear. Words like "no way in hell" and "over my dead body." All in all, not promising.

"Look," Hawk said in the same pleased tone she'd been using. "You probably need a few minutes to calm down. All that yelling is probably bad for your blood pressure. I'll eat lunch and then come by your office. Ciao." She hung up before he could respond, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"You sure know how to win friends and influence people, Hawk," I said dryly. "What did he say? What's going on?"

She shrugged eloquently and kept grinning. "Damned if I know what that was all about. All I picked out was him shouting that there was no way in hell that he'd ever let something happen. Over his dead body. The usual kind of stuff. We'll have to wait until after lunch to find out."

"Well you can bet your sweet ass that I'm not letting you meet him without someone to pull him off you if he snaps," Gretchen said. "I'm going!"

"Okay," Hawk agreed readily. Too readily.

Gretchen narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

"Me?" Hawk asked innocently. "I'm just off to have lunch. Come on, girls." She started toward the dining room at a slow waddle. Gretchen pestered her every step of the way but Hawk was adamant and refused to elaborate.

Once we seated ourselves, Hawk set the pace of the meal and that pace was dead slow. She ordered us appetizers, soup, then the various entrees, dessert and finally coffee. By the time we were done with lunch almost two hours had passed. Hawk met every attempt to speed up the process with a grin and told us to "slow down and enjoy life."

Hawk looked at her watch. "Well, I think we've made him wait long enough. Gretchen and Lisa, you're with me. Can you other girls entertain yourselves for just a bit? I don't think a crowd would work here."

They looked at each other and consulted briefly. "We'll go check out the casino," Jo said. "Then we'll check back at the room to see if you're back."

"Perfect," Hawk said. "Come on."

Gretchen and I followed her to the elevators. "Hawk, what are you doing? What will keeping him waiting this long gain you?"

"Dominance," Hawk said with a smile. "Whatever the news is, he's already royally pissed, and just running at his beck and call sends the wrong signal. If we get off on the wrong foot, then..."

"Wrong foot!" Gretchen interrupted incredulously. "I can't believe you can say that after you hung up on him and made him wait two hours. I won't even mention what I heard

you say to him last night." Hawk started a bit at that, and Gretchen gave her a wolfish smile. "Yes, I heard you, Hawk. I was hurt, not dead. Regardless, my point is how could you be on a more wrong foot after all that?"

Hawk laughed delightedly. "I'm happy to finally be able to repay you for all your 'honey attracts more bees' lessons, sweetie, and share some human nature with you, in return, dear. Once you've tossed out the honey jar and gotten into a pissing contest, you have to set the stage and show the other guy who's boss up front. Otherwise they'll undermine you every step of the way. If I let him think he can yank me around then he will. Now, unless I'm sadly mistaken, he'll be angry, but he'll end up accepting that I'll do what I can without his permission. In this case since I'm never going to be his friend, I have to settle for forcing him to let me do my job."

"If you say so," Gretchen said uncertainly.

"Hawk's right," I assured Gretchen. "Cop's are very oriented for territory and pecking order. Just asking nicely wouldn't get her anything but a loss of respect."

"Okay," Gretchen said with a shrug. "Where're we going?"

Hawk reached over and pushed a button. "I checked where his office was just in case I needed to come harass him," she said with a large smile.

Hawk presented us at the front desk of the ship's security department and the uniformed woman quirked a smile at Hawk as she pointed back to one of the offices, obviously trying to suppress a grin. Hawk didn't bother suppressing anything and grinned at her. "Ignore any and all screams as well as smashed glass. This promises to be an eventful meeting."

The woman whose nametag read "Collins" couldn't repress a laugh at that and waved us in. The several dozen people in the main room watched us go to the door labeled "Chief Investigator" with a mixture of dread and awe.

Hawk rapped on the door once but didn't wait for a response before she opened the door and bustled inside. Gretchen and I followed her in.

The office was of decent size and certainly wasn't plain. A couple of plants and some knick-knacks brightened a drab white set of walls. The wooden desk looked new, though it had more than a few things scattered across its surface.

However, Lieutenant de Luca dominated the room from his seat behind the desk. He speared Hawk with an icy glare that would have frozen a dozen jaunty troublemakers where they stood.

Hawk, however, was apparently less than impressed. She dropped into one of the chairs without invitation, and for a second I was afraid she was going to prop her feet on his desk. Thank God for her belly stopping at least that provocation because just the rest of her behavior seemed destined to make de Luca pop a blood vessel.

"Sorry we took so long," Hawk said insincerely. "You know how long it takes a woman, especially a pregnant woman, to do anything."

"Is there a purpose to this?" de Luca ground out, visibly reining in his temper.

"Absolutely," Hawk said cheerfully. "This is your first clue not to yell at me like I'm your bitch." Her eyes hardened and she leaned forward. "Treat me with respect and you'll get respect in turn. Fuck with me and I'll fuck you back. You want to try that phone call over, or should I just get used to being this way? Take your time."

I watched the vein in his temple throb and his eyes slowly bulge in his head. I hope he didn't have an aneurysm.

He clenched his fists and slowly, ever so slowly, forced himself back from the edge of violence. Deep breath followed deep breath until his towering rage was caged and only cold anger remained in his eyes.

"Since I have no choice," he said icily, "I suppose I'll take the do-over. I apologize for my intemperate words."

Rather than continue to bait him, Hawk only nodded. "Accepted. And I'm sorry that I've disrespected you on your turf."

De Luca looked surprised for a moment, took another deep breath and nodded again. "I don't know whose chain you pulled, but it looks like you're going to get your way, Detective Hawkins."

"Why don't you tell me exactly what that means," Hawk prompted him as Gretchen and I slowly sat in our own chairs, now that we were relatively certain there wouldn't be blood shed.

"You don't know?" he asked with evident disbelief. "It's everything you were demanding and more. The Captain came here in person to tell me. Imperial Lines have hired you as a 'Special Investigative Troubleshooter.' Someone at corporate pushed this down my throat, and I damned well want it on record that this is being done over my objections and against my advice." His tone grew more belligerent toward the end and he was glaring across the table again.

Hawk seemed unperturbed by his evident anger. "And just what does it mean to be a Special Investigative Troubleshooter?"

"It means," de Luca spat, "that you have the legal authority to investigate any crime aboard any Imperial Lines vessel. And, as much as it pains me, my department will assist in whatever ways we can."

"Now we're talking," Hawk purred. "The first order of business is to find out if Skip really took a swim. I assume you've started a search of the ship?"

"The crew is doing a walk-through of the common areas," he admitted grudgingly. "It should be complete in an hour. That won't do any good if he is in a private room, of course."

"What about his room?" I asked. "Has anyone checked to see if he is there?"

"Not yet." He said without elaboration.

Hawk rolled her eyes. "Come on," she rumbled. "This isn't some minor crime we're talking about. He is either dead, in a world of hurt floating in the water or this is all just an exercise and he's safe and sound somewhere on this ship. Let's eliminate the ship. Page him on the loudspeakers and let's check his room to be sure he isn't there. If he isn't found I want the ship searched fully and that includes every cabin."

"People are retiring for the evening," de Luca said with a scowl. "I will not have them disturbed at this hour."

I expected Hawk to tell him to do it anyway but she just nodded slowly. "It won't make any difference in the end, I suppose, but the search of the public areas will just have to be done again. Fine, let's at least see if Skip's cabin has been disturbed."

De Luca gave in ungracefully. With a shrug he stood up and we followed him out of the

office. The staff was still watching us with apprehension and a bit of awe. I suppose no one came in here and overruled the boss.

The trip to Skip's room only took a few minutes. I was glad now that Ted had talked me out of just going in. This way was better. It preserved the evidence if it was a crime scene.

With a swipe of his master key de Luca opened the door. When he opened it we all could see it was a disaster zone. Someone had taken drawers out of the dresser and the contents were scattered everywhere.

Chapter Ten: Catching Our Breath

Gretchen

Everyone was subdued when we closed the suite door behind us. I took charge and went straight to the bar. The clock said it was almost four PM and that meant the sun was over the yardarm.

"Drinks are on the house, people," I said, "name your poison."

Once everyone was served, I took a seat beside Trish. "I'm not going to sit here all evening thinking or talking about what happened today. There'll be time enough to do that in the morning. Hawk'll get to the bottom of this and we'll help her."

That brought nods from everyone. We sat and drank quietly for a while, rising to refresh our drinks as we needed to. After a few libations I was feeling much better, though I was worried about Hawk. She didn't need to spend so much time on her feet. I wished she'd let me stay with her.

Lisa looked over at Sandy with a smile. "I heard that you didn't let new surroundings stop you from indulging last night. You sounded like you were having a good time."

Sandy grinned back and raised her glass slightly. "I sure did. Keven is a very

considerate lover."

I laughed. "Was she loud? I can't believe I slept through it all." I turned to Trish. "Did you sleep through it out here on the couch?"

Trish was blushing brightly. She shook her head and smiled. "No. I, ah..."

I raised my eyebrow and waited for her to continue.

"Can we talk about it in the bedroom?" She finally asked with a shy glance at everyone else.

I nodded and rose to my feet. "We'll be back in a little bit."

Jo waved her hand nonchalantly. "No problem. We'll come up with something interesting to occupy our time. We can't let this gloomy atmosphere get us down."

Trish preceded me into the bedroom and I closed the door behind us. She sat on the edge of the bed and I sat down beside her. I waited for her to speak when she was ready.

"It was me," she said softly, her expression uncertain.

A light went on in my head. "You mean making the noise?"

She nodded.

I took her hands in mine and shook my head. "I thought you were going to give me some warning. Didn't we talk about that?"

"I know I was supposed to tell you first, but you were right. When the time came I got into the moment and stopped thinking," she admitted. "Thank God they had condoms."

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders philosophically. "Well, at least now you understand what I meant about 'being in the moment'. Did you have as good a time as Lisa thinks?"

Trish smiled. "I think I had a better time than she thinks. Once it stopped hurting, that is."

I pulled her into a hug. "Oh, Sweetheart!"

Trish held me close and trembled a little bit. "It didn't last long and I won't have to worry about it again. I was a lot more worried about it than I needed to be. They were both amazing. He was so sensitive. It really helped." She looked at me with a palpable uncertainty. "What do we do now?"

I pulled back so I could look at her. "Now we take it one step at a time. Let's start off with you telling me what happened and how you feel about it."

Trish nodded. "I was having a bad dream. You were falling off the ship and I couldn't save you." Her eyes filled with tears.

My heart melted and I pulled her back into my arms and held her while she cried softly. "It's okay," I whispered in her ear, softly patting her back. "You saved me. If you hadn't dove into the rail I'd have fallen into the ocean." I felt a bolt of fear myself and had a momentary flashback. In a second I felt like I'd just gone through that terrible ordeal all over again. My bruises seemed to throb in time with my heart and I shuddered while my subconscious reminded me of how it could've ended.

Trish must have felt me trembling. Somehow even though we didn't move, she was now the comforter. I buried my face in her hair and cried. I thought I'd cried myself out last night with Hawk. I guess not. I expected her to say something but she just held me and rocked me gently.

Her hair smelled like strawberries. I blinked at the unexpected thought. Involuntarily, I drew in a deep lung full of her scent. Her skin smelled of soap and woman. Hawk had been my only foray with a woman and I'd never been attracted to any other - until I'd met Trish. When I'd told Trish that we'd very likely be having sex during her training, I'd had to admit - at least to myself - that I was looking forward to it. I wanted her.

I pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Hawk and I talked about you last night."

Trish swallowed and gently cleared her throat in surprise. "What did she say?"

"She told me that she understood we'd be together - for training and maybe other times," I said calmly. "I expected her to have reservations and restrictions but she didn't. After you saved my life, she said they were gone. She *did* ask me to promise that if it started coming between her and me it had to stop. I can work with that, can you?"

Trish's eyes twinkled and she nodded. "I found out last night that I liked women more

than I expected, but I like men better. I'd never come between you and Hawk. Or anyone else for that matter. When I find the right man, he'll be unmarried."

"It's not easy but you need to remember not to be looking for that in the men you work for," I said quietly. "Let yourself get used to this first, and then we'll talk about it again."

I shook my head and grinned. "So, you and Sandy made love last night," I said, putting my hand on her leg. "Tell me about it. What did you like or dislike? What surprised you? Did you come?"

Trish blushed but didn't look away from me. "I was nervous. I was having a bad dream and Sandy asked me to sleep with them. I didn't want to be alone so I did. Later, I woke up to them both playing with my tits. Sandy told me they wanted to make love to me and asked me if I wanted to. Gretchen, she was so wonderful. She talked me through everything and guided Keven. I mean, being with her felt good but not like when I was with Keven. Oh, God, the man is amazing."

I laughed. "Guys can do that to you. Hawk's taught me that a woman can, too. It's not the motions, it's the *emotions*. If you don't feel like sleeping alone, my bed is always open to you. Just slip in with Hawk and me."

Trish smiled gratefully.

"Tonight," I continued, "I think you should make moves of your own after dinner. I'd like to see you take the lead - be the aggressor."

She nodded without the embarrassment I was expecting. "I can do that. I have to admit that now I've had a taste of sex, I want more. Will Hawk be with us?"

"I think so," I said. "It depends on what's going on in the investigation and how she's feeling. You've never seen her 'on the job' before today. She is so focused that eating and sleeping take second place to the mystery. I certainly want her there. Are you okay with a group scene?"

"You mean you, me, Keven and Sandy? With possibly Hawk?"

I shook my head. "No, I mean with Ted, Lisa, Jo and Earl there, too. I'm talking about all nine of us in a room-shaking orgy. This may be the *one time* where Hawk and I do this and I don't intend to miss out. If that makes you feel uncomfortable, though, don't

do anything you don't want to do."

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I'll have to think about it and take it one step at a time. Let's just start and see what happens? I know that if you're watching over me I don't have anything to worry about."

The bright trust in her eyes melted my heart. I pulled her back into a hug. "That means so much to me."

There was a knock at the door and Lisa opened it. "We've decided to split up into couples and scatter out to do whatever strikes our fancy." She smiled at our embracing on the bed. "I suspect you two can entertain yourselves for a while."

"I'd call you a perv but I was more than half-thinking something along those lines," I laughed. "Actually, I think I'll see if Trish will join me in doing a walkabout, too. Getting frisky can wait until after dinner. I'd like to see about getting to know *everyone* more closely this evening. Are you up to it?"

Lisa's eyes widened. "All of us? You mean an orgy? I've never had more than a threesome."

Trish stood up and walked over to Lisa. "I slept with Keven and Sandy last night. Sandy showed me how to be with another woman, but you were the first to touch me. I want you, Lisa. I'm nervous about all of us together, but if you and Gretchen are there..."

Lisa laughed and hugged the younger woman. "Of course I'll be there for you. Ted and I have been planning to get together with Hawk and Gretchen. What's adding four more people for fun? Why don't we ask the peanut gallery?" She turned and stuck her head back into the living room. "Hey, they want to schedule an orgy for after dinner. Is that a good time for everyone?"

Everyone burst into laughter. "I'm serious," Lisa said mock-crossly. "I'm game, if Ted is. How about the rest of you?"

Earl cut everyone else off. "Hell, yes!"

Jo laughed and swatted her husband. "Yes," she said.

"I'll be right behind you, baby," Ted told Lisa.

"I bet you will, you perv," I shouted back as I stood up. "Will you be a good boy and get behind the rest of us girls, too?"

They were just standing up when we came out of the bedroom. Ted came over, pulled me into his arms, and gave me a kiss that steamed up the inside of my eyeballs. It had been almost a year since I'd been with a man and I felt my libido revving. It took a real effort of will to pull back and not start tearing his clothes off right then and there.

"Does that seem willing enough?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said huskily. A glance at Lisa showed her smiling at us. "That reminds me, Hawk and I want to talk with the two of you about something - just a heads up; I want to get the same treatment Hawk got. I want to have a baby."

Ted smiled and didn't even seem surprised. "Hawk beat you to the punch. She talked with us before the cruise and said that you wanted to talk about it. Lisa and I hashed it out. So long as we get to be a part of the baby's life, then we're okay with helping you out. Besides," he said with a wink, "you might get jealous when Lisa starts showing."

A huge grin broke out on my face and I squealed as I grabbed Lisa up and hugged her. "You're pregnant? Ohmigod! I'm so happy for you!"

She kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you." Then she gave Ted a look that boded ill for him. "We were *going* to wait till the end of the cruise to tell you both."

I kissed her back on the lips. Her eyes locked onto mine and she parted her lips, inviting my tongue to come play. We kissed deeply for a minute and only stopped when Ted broke us up.

"That's for after dinner, girls. Why doesn't everyone that feels like kissing someone else get that out of their system now? Then we can let our imaginations run wild until later."

That sounded more than a bit like teasing but I was game. I pulled Trish into the center of the room and kissed her as deeply as I'd kissed Lisa. Once again her scent aroused me. I wanted her and was startled to feel her breasts under my hands. I didn't even remember *moving* my hands. Trish broke away with a laugh.

"That was hot! You kiss totally different than Sandy. But you're being a naughty girl! No feeling me up!" she said, her eyes twinkling. They were still twinkling when Ted and Lisa finished kissing the Bellers. Trish took a turn in Earl's arms and then Jo's.

Jo's body was sending mixed signals. She was self-conscious but still getting into the kiss. Tonight was probably going to be an eye-opening experience for her if she let her infant bisexual side hang out.

Earl picked me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist as we kissed. He was so strong! I wondered if he could fuck me like this.

Jo peeled me off her husband. "Down, girl. Save some for me."

"You want it hot?" I asked with a sly grin. Then I pulled her into the same position her husband had held me. The light oriental woman was easy to hold up and I let my mouth ravish hers while my hands roamed her tight ass. Jo groaned into my mouth and sucked on my tongue like it was a cock. She ground her pussy against my belly in need.

Ted and Earl pulled her off me before I managed to tear her blouse open, and held us apart - panting.

"That's it," Ted said firmly. "If we stay here one more minute, the orgy *will* start without Hawk, so let's get out of here now."

With an anguished groan of need, I let the laughing Trish pull me out of the suite. "Come on. Let's go find something to do until dinner."

I was starving right now and not just for food. With a sigh I gave in and all of us scattered down the hall.

With uncharacteristic assertiveness, Trish almost dragged me to the Promenade deck. "I have an idea for another outfit. Let's go see if the dress lady can put something together for me."

I smiled indulgently and let her pull me along. "What kind of outfit?"

She gave me a grin over her shoulder, almost mowing over a woman dragging her kids in the opposite direction during her momentary distraction. "I want to surprise you but I think you'll like it."

I shook my head and laughed. "That's fine. Surprise me."

The clothes store was more crowded than the last time we'd been there but someone still touched base with us quickly. Trish whispered in the woman's ear rapidly.

The woman's eyes widened and she laughed. "I know exactly what you're looking for and while we don't specifically stock that, I think I have some separates that will create the desired effect." She looked around at all the people. "It may be a bit before I can find everything. I'll need your measurements."

Trish nodded. "That's fine. I need to go get my hair and nails done anyway. You have my measurements on file already under Trish Walton."

The woman nodded. "By the time you get back I should have something for you to try on."

"Now you really have my curiosity stirred up," I said as we walked out and back towards the hair beauty parlor. "Do I at least get a hint?"

Trish grinned again and shook her head. "You'll have to wait and see."

I nodded approvingly at her standing firm. That was a welcome improvement.

The beauty shop was busy, too. Trish signed up on the waiting list for a rinse and hair styling, and then wrangled a seat at the nail tables to get a manicure and pedicure.

Trish spent the next hour getting her nails painted a deep red, and having her hair worked on. When she came out of the back the change she'd decided on was striking. She'd had her shoulder-length blonde hair braided into two lengths that swung across her back as she walked.

"What do you think?" she asked as she modeled for me.

I walked around her and looked at her hair while trying to suppress the visual of a man using her braids to ride her from behind. "It looks good, though more men like loose hair." I smiled and whispered, "I call braids like that 'fuck me' hair."

She blushed and smiled back at me. "Then it'll look good with my new outfit."

I smiled back and followed her back to the clothes shop. The crowd had thinned out some. Our saleswoman spotted us and waved Trish into the dressing rooms. While I waited for her to try on her clothes, I looked at the belts.

When Trish came skipping out of the dressing room, my jaw dropped in shock. She was wearing a tight button-up, short-sleeved white blouse and a pleated, mid-thigh length dark blue plaid skirt. Her long legs, encased in white, knee-length stockings, vanished into patent leather black buckle shoes. It took me a moment to notice that she'd added some makeup. Her cheeks were reddened slightly and eyeliner brought her bright green eyes more sharply into focus.

She skipped right up to me and assumed a bright-eyed pose. The skirt swirled around her thighs and I thought her well-endowed chest might pop a button on her blouse. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Werner! Do you like my new outfit?" she asked in a perky, innocent voice.

"Ohmigod!" I said with a smile. "A Catholic Schoolgirl? You're going to drive the men crazy. I think you look wonderful! Where did this idea come from?" I walked around her as I spoke, having to sternly tell my hands to keep off her in public. I know the schoolgirl fantasy was a male one, but she looked very hot.

"I caught part of an episode of *NCIS* where the crime lab lady dressed up like this," she admitted. "Do you really think they'll like it?"

I laughed throatily. "Honey, trust me. They'll have instant hard-ons. You're not only pushing their buttons, you're locking the switch in the 'on' position."

The saleswoman came up with Trish's other clothes in a bag. The smile she gave Trish told me she knew *exactly* what was going to happen to Trish tonight. Amused, I smiled back at her - she had no idea. She probably thought Trish was going to surprise her boyfriend. I knew she was going to have Keven, Ted, *and* Earl circling her like sharks. It remained to be seen how Hawk reacted. She was always such a wild-card. I suspected the ladies would like it, but *not* in the same - almost instinctual - way the men would.

"We don't want to spoil your surprise, so go change back into your regular clothes like a good little girl," I said with a smirk.

Trish tugged at her lower lip with one finger and twisted her feet on the floor. "If I don't wanna, will I get a spankin'?"

"You're so bad!" I said with a swat on her arm and a grin. "Spanking is only a punishment if you don't like it!"

The woman rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Too much information. If you'll sign this receipt, I'll let you get on with your *evil* plans."

"Our plans aren't evil," I insisted as I signed. "We only use our powers for *good*!"

She chuckled and walked off to help the other customers.

"Do I deserve a spanking?" Trish whispered silkily in my ear. A wave of desire made my nipples stiffen and shot a bolt of heat into my belly.

"You most certainly do!" I asserted, taking her by the arm. I walked her sternly back toward the dressing room. "And when I tell Hawk how bad a girl you've been, I feel certain she'll take you across her knees and paddle you."

A sly smile stole across her face. "Ooooooooo... Promise?"

I laughed and pushed her toward the dressing room. "You've been around Hawk too long. Get in there and change before you drive all the men crazy."

Trish giggled as she ducked into the dressing room. In a couple of minutes she came out with her new clothes in a bag. The saleswoman double-checked the contents of the bag and promptly set us loose.

We walked up the Promenade and window shopped for the next hour. Trish chattered brightly about everything we looked at. I didn't even try to suppress my smile at the happiness that poured out of her.

I was so busy looking at a necklace in the window of the jewelry store that I missed the moment she fell silent. When I did notice and turned to look at her, she was staring into the crowd behind me. No one caught my eye in the flow of people.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I think that's the man that pulled you back onto the ship," she said quietly. "Over there by the ice cream parlor."

I looked more closely at the people around the creamery. My memory of the man pulling me up was distorted by the terror and pain I'd been in. I wasn't sure if I'd know him when I saw him.

It wasn't as difficult as I'd thought. I spotted him at once. It was the man that had walked past the lounge where Trish and I had been cuddling. His eyes locked with mine as he sat at the table and I realized, abruptly, that he'd been sitting there watching us.

His lips tightened in a small smile and I almost felt him nod rather than seeing it. Then he stood up from the table he'd been sitting at and stepped out into the Promenade.

I tried to get to him before I lost sight of him but he disappeared into the flow of people. I ducked in after him, but fighting the crowd was like fighting a mindless beast. For every two steps forward, I'd be forced to take one to the side. In seconds I lost sight of him and cursed under my breath.

Trish was right behind me when I stopped. "I think he left something at the table," she said. When I looked back over at the table he'd been sitting at, I saw that a CD case was sitting on the table.

I cut off the busboy cleaning the tables and snatched it up. It was a plain CD case with an unlabeled disk inside. Also inside was a folded piece of paper. I pulled it out and read the terse note.

This might help you find out who tried to hurt you. I wish I could do more but if they find out I took this to give to you I'll be toast. The video is crappy and it's dark but it shows at least the shape of the guy that hit you. I'd try to do more but I'm already in hot water for getting involved at all.

*Signed
A Friend*

I put the note back into the case and slipped it all into my purse. Then I motioned for Trish to follow me.

"Come on," I said. "We need to get this into Hawk's hands and then it's time to get dinner ordered."

Trish frowned at me. "But this is more important than dinner and stuff. We should focus on this."

I shook my head. "I refuse to let *this* dominate my life. Dinner and *stuff* is what I want to think about tonight. I *need* to have those bright thoughts now."

Trish nodded and somehow managed to look both eager and apprehensive as we started back toward the suite.

Chapter Eleven: Dinner and Stuff

Hawk

When I finally got back to the cabin, Gretchen and Lisa were waiting for me with open arms. I was whisked into the bedroom, stripped, and all but frog-marched into the bathroom to clean up. For once, I was in no mood to argue.

Lisa drew the bath and made the water as hot as was safe before she and Gretchen helped me slip into the whirlpool tub. Then they washed my hair. It felt sinfully decadent to let someone pamper me that way. I should've told them to beat it and washed my own hair, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. My time with Gretchen had made me understand that it was okay to let someone else do things for me, and that complaining about it stole the pleasure from them as well as me. So instead of whining, I simply lay back and enjoyed the attention. When my hair was finished, they proceeded to bathe the rest of me.

Every time I started to tell them what we'd found in Skip's cabin they shushed me. It was almost spooky, since both of them were usually rabid to know what I was up to during an investigation.

"What's going on?" I asked suspiciously. "Have space aliens replaced you both with pod people?"

Gretchen laughed. "No, dear. Tonight we're having dinner and enjoying ourselves. I told the rest and now I'm telling you; I don't want one word about any of that stuff. It'll wait until tomorrow. We came on this cruise to enjoy ourselves and, for tonight at least, that's exactly what we're going to do." She kissed me softly on the lips. "And if you're a good girl, you get dessert."

I raised an eyebrow. That sounded promising. I looked at Lisa and she just grinned silently. I turned and gave Gretchen a little grin of my own. "Okay, I promise to be good. Have I mentioned how much I like whipped cream with my dessert, though?"

Lisa laughed and Gretchen smiled wickedly. "We haven't determined if you deserve

dessert yet, so talking about whipped cream is a bit premature." She held up a hand as I started to protest. "Besides, I think there's going to be a lot of cream flowing tonight. I'm not sure if it's going to be whipped, but I think you'll probably still want to lick it all up!"

Lisa laughed again. "I think she topped you, Hawk."

I bit back 'No, but I wish she would' and just shook my head. I didn't need to win all the time. Not with Gretchen, anyway. "You're right, Lisa. Gretchen, honey, I'm going to be a good girl and earn my dessert. No business talk tonight. I wouldn't want you to spank me."

Gretchen got a gleam in her eye. "You know, you're the second person to mention spanking today. I might just have to find a paddle. Though you're not in shape for anything like the time we made love in Kat's office."

I laughed. "No, I don't think I could dish it out like that right now. And if we destroyed the cabin like that office, the bill would be pretty high."

Gretchen laughed again. They helped me out of the tub and dried me slowly.

The soft caress of the towels quickly became arousing. Gretchen knelt at my feet and ran the soft towel over my legs while Lisa dried my torso. My nipples became almost painful as she dried my breast and my breathing seemed to race in my chest.

"This is so unfair," I complained without much force. "We have to get ready for dinner and you two are working me up."

Lisa glanced at Gretchen and then kissed my cheek and headed for the door. "I need to go get dressed, if I'm going to be ready on time, and I think you two need a moment alone. See you in a few minutes."

As the door closed, I pulled my wife into my arms and kissed her deeply. Her arms rubbed my back as we melted against each other. I wove my fingers through her hair and gloried in the taste of her mouth.

Only when she started down my jaw line and toward my neck did I growl and push us apart. "Everyone's going to be waiting for us. I want to toss your ass onto the bed and have my way with you, but it'll have to wait. And there's no way that I'm going to sit through dinner all hot and bothered."

Her eyes smoked at me as she smiled and turned to walk into the bedroom. The sway of her hips trapped my eyes like a bear trap held onto a rabbit. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves and followed her.

Gretchen was stripping out of her clothes, and I had to stop again and watch her. By the time she was down to her frilly red bra and panties, I was falling into that hot and bothered state I'd been trying to avoid.

The graceful movement of her body reminded me how awkward I felt next to her. I knew how badly I bumbled around the dance floor. I was only graceful in a fight. She was poetry in motion. How in hell had I gotten so lucky?

She looked over her shoulder and smiled at me as she sat down to do her makeup. That smile melted my heart all over again. "You need to pick out something to wear. I suggest something fancy tonight. We're all dressing up."

If only she knew how much of a civilizing influence she was on me. I wouldn't dress up for just anyone. "Fine," I grumbled, "but only because you asked nicely."

I dug through the closet and pulled a set of black Georgette Palazzo slacks and a silvery silk blouse with sheer sleeves. I considered wearing a thong but decided with my belly it would look ludicrous. The image of me in the thong started me giggling, and the idea that I even knew what Georgette Palazzo slacks were made me laugh all the harder.

I was just starting to calm down when Gretchen poked her head out of the closet. "What's so funny?" she asked, sending me back into paroxysms of laughter. She shook her head and went back to getting ready.

I finally caught my breath and settled on black panties and a matching bra. As I slipped a pair of nursing pads into the cups of my bra and settled it in place, I shook my head. I sure hoped these weird moods would end when the pregnancy did. I was acting like an idiot.

"If you're done giggling, sit down and let me do your makeup," Gretchen said as soon as I was into my underwear.

"I was not giggling, and I don't need any makeup," I objected. "I'm already dressing up."

Gretchen simply rolled her eyes. "Sit," she commanded.

With a sigh, I sat down. She used all the obscure implements of female torture on me. I hoped she didn't make me too girly. I hated that. This was like playing dress up and I'd never been into that. I definitely wasn't a *lipstick* lesbian. Thank God the hormones didn't seem to affect that.

When she was done, I looked in the mirror and the first thing that jumped out at me was the black eyeliner and the dark red lipstick. I would've complained about it but all I could see was the way her eyes shined at me. If it made Gretchen happy I'd just have to accept being dressed up like a Barbie doll.

"You look fabulous!" she said. "I am going to be the envy of all the other diners."

"Bullshit," I said with a smile. "Get over there and get that gorgeous ass covered before I toss you on the bed and make us late for dinner."

She laughed. "Let me help you get your pants on and then I'll get dressed." She helped me into my pants and shoes before slinking herself into the fire engine red dress I'd been drooling over since she'd bought it. She was so getting the full treatment tonight.

"You're a cruel, cruel woman," I told her as she modeled it for me. "Now I'm going to need a bib all through dinner to keep from drooling all over myself."

"It'll be worth it," she said with a wink. "Come on, the other's are probably ready."

I followed her out into the main room of the suite, once again eyeing her shapely ass.

Almost everyone was gathered in the common room waiting for us. The men were dressed in sharp three button, single breasted suits of dark tropical wool. None of them were *quite* the same cut, but there was a certain similarity of style that suggested to me that they might have picked them up on the ship. Ted and Keven managed to look suave. Earl, on the other hand, looked like a couple of mob enforcers I'd seen over the years. Big, tough, and surprisingly sexy. He didn't look anything like a redneck now.

Lisa was decked out in a low-cut sapphire blue dress that clung to all her curves. The sight of her quickened my breath. She was beautiful. Ted was one lucky bastard.

I forced my gaze off her and took in Sandy. Her gown was a pale ivory and studded with pearls. Unlike Lisa's, it buttoned up to her throat. The formal look made her look so

elegant.

Jo was dressed the most exotically in a deep green wrap-around sarong. The way the fabric clung to her slender body and hinted at her assets was most alluring.

The only one missing was Trish. I raised my eyebrow at Gretchen. "Did we lose someone?"

"Not yet," she said mysteriously. "She wanted to let us get seated before she joined us. Have a seat, everyone." She gestured at the dining table.

I took a seat. "Isn't that just like a woman to make you wait?" I asked Ted in a sotto voice.

He smiled back with a twinkle in his eyes. "Sometimes, but it's always worth it."

I settled back and it finally dawned on me that the dining table was fully laid out with plates and serving utensils. Platters of food were probably under the silver domes that dotted the table. I raised an eyebrow at Gretchen. "We're eating in and dressing up at the same time? What gives?"

"It's a surprise," she said with a smile. "Just go with it." She raised her voice. "Trish! We're all waiting for you."

The door to Keven and Sandy's bedroom opened and Trish came skipping out. My heart stopped beating for a moment. She was dressed up like a Catholic schoolgirl in a white blouse and dark skirt that swirled around her mid-thighs. Her hair fell down her back in two long braids.

"Evening everyone," she said cheerfully.

I was speechless. When I finally tore my eyes away from her I saw that all the men were just as stunned as I was. The women looked surprised, except for Gretchen. That figured. I'd never thought myself susceptible to that male fantasy, but the evidence that I was wrong was unmistakable. In a flash I was wet. My heart started beating again, and it was going a mile a minute, as if making up for lost time. Now I knew what Gretchen had in mind for after dinner entertainment.

"Dear God in heaven," I muttered in awe.

"Thank you!" Trish said and started serving us.

Gretchen laughed and hugged me. "Surprise. Now, let's dig in everyone. I'm betting we'll need the energy later."

It took a while for us to get into any kind of normal dinner conversation. We ate and talked about the interesting things we'd seen on the ship. I remembered that work was off-limits and kept myself focused on listening to their stories of shopping. Jo and Earl had visited the water park and were enthusiastic about getting in some swimming. That actually sounded like it might be fun.

The seafood that someone had picked for the meal was wonderful. I devoured my lobster like I was starving. Then I had a second helping. The butter sauce was fabulous.

Half an hour later we had demolished the meal and Gretchen served us an after dinner drink. I was shocked to see that she handed me a real drink. I took a sip of the small whiskey she allowed me and eyed her curiously.

"One won't hurt," she said. "Just relax and go with the flow."

I wondered when someone would mention what was going to happen after dinner, but no one talked about it. I began to wonder if I'd misunderstood when Gretchen took my empty glass and set it on the bar.

"Hawk," she said, "are you okay with this? Say the word and we'll just retire to the bedroom."

I looked at everyone else and saw the excitement and uncertainty in their eyes. I'd known we would be getting together with Ted and Lisa, but this was a lot more. An honest-to-god orgy. I searched my emotions and then I nodded. "Let's see what happens."

A silent exhalation let the tension out of everyone. I wondered how one kicked off an orgy.

Gretchen helped me over to a couch and sat down next to me. "I think the way to ease into this is for everyone to start with their own partners. Trish, do you want to help me?"

Trish rose to her feet and sat down on the opposite side of me from Gretchen, looking at her expectantly. Everyone else was moving to couches and love seats, but my

attention was focused on Gretchen and Trish.

Gretchen broke the ice by kissing me deeply and rubbing her body against me. My tension flowed out of me in a rush and I wrapped my arms around her, returning her kiss with all the love I had inside me. The wine she'd drunk made her mouth taste exotic and sweet. Our tongues dueled in growing heat.

I was reminded that we weren't alone when I felt a soft pair of lips tracing the curve of my neck. A wave of extra excitement flowed through me like an electric current. I gasped in pleasure and Gretchen pulled back a few inches.

"Kiss her," she whispered huskily. "Kiss Trish, Hawk."

Almost like I was in a dream, I turned my head and my lips met Trish's. Her eyes were bright with excitement and her breath tickled my nose. Her lips were soft and inexperienced. A wave of lust rolled across me.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as we kissed for the first time. She smelled of strawberries and innocence. And desire. I felt Gretchen kissing down my neck and unbuttoning my blouse, but it was almost like it was happening to another person. Before I was really aware of it, she had my blouse fully undone and was kissing the curve of my breast as she deftly undid the clasp to my bra. My swollen breasts swung heavily as she released them from captivity.

Her lips and tongue began working on my right breast as Trish broke our kiss. The girl helped me out of my top and bra before swooping down to capture my other nipple in her mouth.

I threw my head back and moaned. Her mouth was like a furnace on my nipple. It felt like she was trying to suck every drop of milk from my breast and suck my nipple down her throat.

Then she squeaked in surprise and pulled back. I opened the eyes that I hadn't remembered closing and looked at her in sudden concern. A trickle of white from the corner of her mouth told me what had happened. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

"Sorry," I murmured. "I should have told you I was lactating. You don't have to do that."

Gretchen turned Trish's face and kissed her. A subdued wash of jealousy came over me, but I forced it back down. Gretchen loved me. This was just fun. It was surprisingly

easy to beat the feeling back as I watched Gretchen go after my milk. Trish kissed her back enthusiastically.

When they broke their kiss, Trish looked at me with her innocent eyes. "It's okay," she said softly. "I was just surprised, that's all." She lowered her lips back to my nipple and looked up at me. "Feed me, Momma Hawk."

"I told you the cream would flow tonight, honey," Gretchen whispered in my ear, "but I can tell you forgot that you have three sources to our one."

I'd only *thought* I had a furnace between my legs. With Trish's and Gretchen's words as fuel, I was suddenly on fire as Trish licked the drop of milk off my nipple and began nursing at my breast. Her eyes closed and her face became blissfully serene. I watched her throat as she swallowed the milk that was suddenly spraying into her mouth.

Gretchen chuckled throatily. "I prefer my cream from a different source," she told me, before kissing her way down my stomach. Her nimble fingers quickly undid my pants. I raised my ass to help her slide my pants and panties off. Then I turned to the side and lay down on the couch. My back was immediately grateful. She then climbed onto the couch and dipped her face between my legs.

Her hot breath was quickly followed by nimble fingers and her sweet, sweet tongue.

"Oh, god," I moaned. I couldn't even see her over my belly so I focused my attention on Trish. "Don't stop. Please."

Trish moved to kneel on the floor and resumed her after dinner drink. She nursed for a minute and then let my milk spray on her face. She was quickly speckled with drops of mother's milk until the flow subsided to a trickle. Then she kissed me. Her mouth was full of milk and we shared it in a kinky kiss, swapping it back and forth before she swallowed it.

Then she stood and let one hand play with the front of her skirt. Her head hung in mock innocence. I wasn't fooled. I could see the lust in her eyes. "Momma Hawk, I feel funny. Down there."

I laughed. I'd have figured myself to be the last person turned on by this particular kink, but I was. "Oh, you poor little girl," I said. "Let Momma Hawk see your owie."

She shook her head and scrunched her face up. "It's in my special place."

A sharp groan momentarily pulled my attention back to the rest of the room. It was Earl. He was sitting upright on the couch and Jo knelt at his feet, her head bobbing in his lap. His eyes were on us, though. Or, rather, they were on Trish. If he wasn't careful, Jo was going to get a real mouthful.

Lisa was on the dinner table, of all places. Her dress was pulled up to her waist and her legs were spread wantonly. Ted's head was between her thighs and I knew just what kind of devastation he was laying on her. She caught my gaze and squeezed her breasts. She really liked being watched. I knew exhibitionism was her game.

Keven and Sandy were naked and he was lying on top of her on the other couch, slowly fucking her. They were kissing and lost in their own world. I took a moment to admire both of them and wonder how he would feel inside me. I hoped to find out soon.

Gretchen chose that moment to lock her lips around my clit and slip two fingers deep inside me, searching for my G spot. My eyes rolled back in my head at the sudden pleasure. My wife certainly knew how to eat pussy.

"Momma!" Trish said mock-petulantly, pulling my attention back to her. "My special place is hurting!"

"Bring it here and let Momma Hawk kiss it and make it all better," I said.

She lifted the hem of her skirt and I saw her mound pushing out the plain white panties she was wearing.

I pulled her panties down and she daintily stepped out of them. Then she flexed her knees and brought her pussy to my face. I used my fingers to rub her swollen labia and then kissed her mons. The scent of her arousal filled my senses.

Using my fingers, I opened her up and gazed at the fresh, sweet womanhood before me. With a primal growl, I ran my tongue up the length of her sex. I couldn't see her face anymore, but I felt her body tremble and heard her moan. Then she was sliding onto the couch and planting her knees to either side of my head, settling her sex onto my mouth. The sudden dark under her skirt cut off my sight, but I dove in with gusto. She'd saved my wife and I was going to show her how much that meant to me right now.

She must've been on a hair trigger because she flooded my mouth with her sweet

nectar in seconds and ground her clit against my nose while she screamed. "Yes! Eat me, Hawk! Suck my clit."

I wallowed in her sex, using my lips, tongue and entire face to pleasure her. My hands held her hips as I tried to stick my tongue all the way inside her. I was still trying when Gretchen pushed me over the top and I screamed my own pleasure into Trish's slippery pussy.

Trish's fingers in my hair pulled me back to my task and ground my face into her as I felt Gretchen climb off the couch. I returned to devouring Trish and only came back to myself when several pairs of hands helped slide a pillow under my ass.

I was wondering what was going on until I felt the couch shift with the weight of someone heavier than Gretchen. My guess was confirmed when a rough chin rubbed against my inner thigh. Then an unfamiliar tongue split my sex.

Whoever it was, he was pretty good but was obviously too excited to keep at it long. All too quickly, he moved to kneel between my legs and I felt a condom-covered cock rubbing at my pussy. I was holding my breath for the moment he slid into me when I felt another pair of hands moving Trish's skirt off my chest. A pair of feminine lips quickly began sucking me. I hoped she didn't mind my milk.

Then whoever he was, he slid the head of his cock into my drenched pussy. It wasn't Ted. Whoever it was must be hung like a horse. Thank god he was going slow and easy.

I threw my head back at the sudden pressure and Trish was off the couch in a flash. She quickly knelt beside me and kissed me as my gentleman worked his full length inside me. I felt so full that I was worried he'd split me apart. When his pubic bone rubbed my clit it set me off and I came so hard that he grunted at the grip I had on him. I could feel the entire length of him as my muscles rippled down his length. He held steady until I collapsed back onto the couch.

Trish pulled back and looked down into my eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Thank you for saving Gretchen," I said with all my heart. She climbed to her feet and walked over to the table to join Ted and Lisa. No, that was Keven and Lisa. Keven was slowly fucking her on the table. Didn't she know we had to eat there? I laughed to myself.

I looked over my belly and saw Earl holding my legs and starting to pump his cock into me. Jo smiled at me from my breast, a trickle of milk running down her dainty chin. Jo stood up and kissed me. I don't know that she'd ever kissed another woman before so I gave her my best kiss. She must've liked it because she tried to shove her tongue down my throat. Then she pulled back.

"I won't smother you like Trish did, but I want to taste you soon. I'll leave you to Earl and go introduce myself to your wife. Nothing personal, but she makes me hot and I want her to be the first woman I make love to."

"Go have fun, but remember that I'm on your dance card," I murmured in her ear. "I want to taste that sweet little pussy of yours tonight."

With a laugh, she ran over to the couch where Gretchen was laying, already naked. Jo quickly shed her dress and the two of them fell on the couch in a hot embrace. Ted and Sandy were locked into a sixty-nine right next to them. This was getting hotter and hotter. Even though Gretchen said she'd never done the group scene, I was starting to see what she meant about some sex for fun. I'd have some thinking to do.

"Let me know if I'm hurting you, little lady," Earl said as he fucked me slowly. Almost any other time, his words would have raised my temper, but given where he was, I had to admit my temper wasn't what he was raising.

I was used to his size now and I needed a long, hard fuck. His cock was better than the strap-on Gretchen used on me, I had to admit. I used my heels to urge his ass closer.

"I'm fine, Earl. Fuck me. Hard."

He complied in fine style. I discovered really quickly that he liked dirty talk. I let myself go and told him in filthy detail what I wanted him to do to me. He fucked me to within an inch of my life.

His hips pistoned as he drove his thick cock into me while his eyes devoured me. I knew he couldn't last long at this rate, but that was fine. I had more men I wanted to fuck and if we took as long as we wanted, we'd be worn raw by the time we were through.

"Fuck my pregnant pussy, Earl."

Earl gripped my hips and fucked me like his life depended on it. I was ready for him and had already come once when he stiffened, and I felt his cock filling that condom with

his come. I arched my back as much as I could and squeezed him tight.

When he slid back out of me with a wet "pop" I motioned for him to come up to my face. "That's mine. I earned it. Bring it up here."

He staggered up to stand next to my head, that massive cock of his bobbing by my face. I peeled the condom off of him and grinned at him as I dumped his load into my mouth. He looked stunned. As if I hadn't just proved I liked men sometimes. His come was very salty and a bit bitter. I swallowed it and then tasked myself to licking his cock clean. I couldn't get more than a few inches into my mouth, but I enjoyed his reaction immensely.

After a minute, I slapped him on the thigh. "You fuck good, sport. Go make some other lucky lady feel like I do."

With a shit-eating grin on his face, he staggered off to kiss Lisa while Keven fucked her. Keven looked like he was getting close. Lisa was laying flat on the table and writhing in pleasure.

I looked around to see who was free. Trish was sitting on the floor, naked. She was eyeing me with lust and playing with herself. Perfect. I motioned her over and she settled between my thighs. Her tongue was gentle and soft. Just what I needed after a good, hard fuck. She would nurse me to a soft climax. I wished I could eat her at the same time, but the logistics of being pregnant prevented that.

Looking around, I took stock of who was where. The room was filled with moans and cries. It also smelled of sex. The smell of pleasure. Keven was staggering away to take a break and Earl was introducing Lisa to that monster he somehow fit inside Jo.

I looked around for Jo and found her locked in a sixty-nine with my wife. The two of them seemed totally focused on the pleasure of the other. Jo was on top and her hands pulled Gretchen to her lips. I could hear the wet sound of their tongues as they ate one another. I guess Jo liked girls just fine. I admired their bodies as they writhed together, covered in a sheen of perspiration.

Sandy was riding Ted, her head thrown back, lost in her own pleasure. She looked glorious as she fucked the father of my children. Ted was holding her up by her breasts, kneading them gently. As I watched, Sandy fell forward and clamped her lips to his and undulated to a climax.

I watched them all as Trish brought me off again and again with that soft, slick tongue of hers. When I couldn't take it anymore, I pulled her up and kissed her, tasting myself on her lips.

"You're a fabulous lover," I whispered in her ear. "Go tell Ted he owes Gretchen a good fucking and bring Sandy back over here. I want some more girl loving and I'm hungry again."

With a grin she bounced over to Ted and whispered in his ear. Ted smiled at me and kissed Sandy. They slowly uncoupled and I could see that he hadn't come inside his condom yet. That meant it wouldn't be long before Gretchen was filled with his hot, tasty come.

I watched him slip between Gretchen's legs and unroll the condom from his cock. Jo sat back, riding Gretchen's talented face and watching lustfully as Ted slid inside my wife in a smooth thrust. Gretchen groaned and wrapped her arms around Jo's waist. Jo's eyes quickly became unfocused and she lost herself in Gretchen's talented tongue.

Keven rose back to his feet and walked over to me as Sandy and Trish sat down beside me. "Does Gretchen like anal sex?"

I smiled at him. "Yeah, she does. You have enough gas left in the tank to give her a good run?"

He smiled roguishly. "We'll see. Right now, I think I need to at least get to know you a little first." With gentle hands, he helped me onto my knees. I pulled Sandy in front of me and buried my face into her hot pussy. Trish wormed her head under my belly and started doing the most amazing things to me while Keven slid his freshly condom-covered cock inside me.

I locked my eyes on Sandy and split her sex with my tongue. I was amazed and how sexy her freshly fucked pussy felt on my lips. She wrapped her fingers in my hair and urged me on.

"Eat me, Hawk. Taste that pussy."

My kind of girl.

Keven fucked me for a few minutes until I came. He pulled out and came around in front of me to kiss me. "Thank you, Hawk. Make my girl come like a demon."

"My pleasure," I said with a grin and attacked Sandy as he kissed her thoroughly. Then I watched over her head as he kissed Jo and pulled her off Gretchen's face.

"Hawk want's your help," I heard him tell her. She grinned at him and walked over to me.

"Gretchen eats me almost as good as Earl," she whispered in my ear.

"I'm better," I said smugly.

"Oh, god, yes she is," Sandy said as she shuddered beneath me. "I feel like she's eating me alive."

"Move over," Jo commanded. "I want some, too."

Sandy laughed and moved behind Trish. Trish had moved behind me and was lying on her back, eating me for all she was worth. She was inexperienced, but I think she had a lot of natural talent. Sandy used her fingers to pleasure my wife's protégé.

Jo lay down and scooted her sex to my face. I spent a moment examining her tiny pussy as I slid a finger inside her. "How the hell do you take Earl in here and live?" I demanded.

She laughed. "One inch at a time."

I busied myself showing her how much better I was at eating pussy and she stopped laughing. She started moaning and writhing instead.

On the couch, I saw Ted laying down and letting Gretchen slide onto him, taking him into her hot pussy. Keven was grinning like a maniac as he knelt behind her. I watched him slowly replace the used condom with a fresh one and begin working it into her ass. In a minute they had my wife sandwiched between them and were working her in tandem. Her moans climbed in tenor and she was shuddering in pleasure.

My view was partly cut off when Lisa stepped in front of me and lowered her sex onto Jo's face. Jo enthusiastically reached up to lap at my friend's wet sex.

"Hi, Hawk. Having a good time?" she asked coyly.

I laughed into Jo's sex. Pulling back, I licked my lips, tasting her sweet nectar. "Hell, yes."

Lisa returned my laugh and slowly ground herself on Jo's face. Past her shoulder, I watched Earl peel off his condom and offer his cock to Gretchen. She opened her mouth and took an improbable amount of that monster into her mouth. She grunted around it and began sucking him for all she was worth. My wife looked beautiful as she played the role of a hot slut lost in sex. The three men filled her every available opening and started working in tandem to make her die of pleasure.

"God, that looks fun," I moaned before burying my tongue in Jo.

"You want to try it?" Lisa asked. "I didn't know you liked anal sex with anything but that small dildo."

"Not now," I said regretfully. "Maybe someday."

"Let's take a break and just watch," Jo panted at me.

We broke up our all-girl love fest and took to the couch while Lisa fixed us drinks. I smiled as I got a second whiskey. Gretchen was too busy to notice. We all sipped and cuddled as we watched the three men fuck Gretchen into submission.

Keven and Earl came almost at the same time. She noisily swallowed Earl's gift to her and let him go. The two men staggered to the bar and fixed themselves something. Keven discreetly put his used condom in the trash. Then they plopped down on the love seat to watch the show.

Ted rolled her over onto her back and started fucking her like a wild man. I watched them, my eyes hungry. He was going to do it. He was going to fuck my wife silly and fill her with his seed. This might be the moment when Gretchen conceived my baby.

She wailed and came. Ted grunted in the little death and I imagined him filling her pussy. When he slid off Gretchen, she pulled her knees up to her chin and looked at me. "Oh, Hawk, I can feel his come dripping inside me. I hope I get pregnant."

We all clapped and whistled for her and I got up, with some effort, and knelt to kiss her.

"I love you," I whispered in her ear. "I hope you're carrying my baby."

Her eyes misted and we held each other, crying at the emotions.

The girls were holding their committed partners when I looked up. I heard murmurs of love even as I told Gretchen just how deeply I loved her again. Her heart was mine, just as mine was hers alone. Trish watched all of us with eyes shiny with tears and a smile.

The women finally shooed the men off to clean up. Then they took me to the master bathroom in a feminine herd and washed me again, cleaning off the smell of sex. We washed each other gently, lovingly.

Then Gretchen and Trish got me to bed and slipped under the covers on either side of me as the rest slipped out with kisses all around. I lay on my back, exhausted. They snuggled against me and I kissed them both.

"Thank you, love of my heart," I said softly to Gretchen.

"I love you, Hawk," Gretchen said.

"I love you, too," I whispered.

"Goodnight, Gretchen, Mamma Hawk," Trish said sleepily.

"Night."

As sleep took me, I marveled at how the day had turned around. This morning I'd been tracking a killer. This evening I'd had killer sex. What a day!

Chapter Twelve: Paying the Piper

Hawk

I lay on my back staring at the ceiling in the dark. The euphoric glow of the previous evening had worn off as the events settled into my mind; replaced by a lingering and unrelenting sense of unease. I couldn't get the growing feeling of wrongness to go away. I'd gone too far. *We'd* gone too far.

Glancing at the clock, I saw that it was almost 5 am. I sighed and shook Gretchen gently. She half-way woke up and I whispered to her that I needed to use the bathroom. She sleepily let me out of bed and was asleep again before I had the covers settled back over her gorgeous form.

After I'd finished my business, I made my way quietly out onto the balcony. The sky was dark and the moon was nowhere in sight, but the ship churned the sea behind us into a glowing green arrow pointing back in the direction we'd come. Leaning against the rail, I mutely watched, closed my eyes, and let the smell of the sea fill my senses.

I didn't fall asleep, but I did zone out. A gentle touch on my shoulders brought me back to the here and now. Even before I opened my eyes I knew it was Gretchen. Her scent mingled with the ocean and her hands moved in a familiar, welcome pattern on my shoulders, half caressing, half massaging me. Her breath tickled the small hairs on the back of my neck as she kissed me there.

"Trouble sleeping?" she asked quietly as I turned in her arms and leaned against the rail.

I nodded. "Yeah."

We held each other silently for a few minutes before she stepped back. I followed her to the table and we sat next to each other. She didn't prompt me any further, letting me get my thoughts together. I was grateful for that. I already knew what I was going to say, but the delivery was just as important as the message. At least, that's what she was always telling me.

"Last night was a mistake," I said at last. "It might work for some people, but it's not right for me. For us."

She nodded slowly and took my hands in hers. "I suppose my views on sex, as opposed to love, colors my opinion, but if it made you uncomfortable we'll never do it again. I love you and I only want you to be happy. "

I shook my head. "It's not that simple. Let me talk it out and see if what I'm feeling makes any sense to you." I took a deep breath and pushed on. "I like our new friends well enough, but we crossed the line when we had sex with them. I had a good time, I admit, but it was still wrong. The more I've thought about it tonight, the clearer it became. I wish I had seen it as clearly beforehand."

I watched her closely, worried about how she'd react to that. I needn't have worried.

"That does make sense," she said seriously. "I never want to hurt you. We'll talk with them at breakfast and politely put the brakes on." She smiled wryly. "I'll want to talk with Trish before that, though."

I shook my head again. "No, I told you she was fine, and I won't go back on that."

"I don't want you to feel uncomfortable..."

"No," I said again, cutting her off softly. "This is complicated. What I'm going to say may sound hypocritical but I want you to hear me out. You, or even me, having sex with Trish doesn't bother me. The idea of both of us having sex occasionally with Ted and Lisa doesn't bother me. Our having casual sex with people we like as friends bothers me."

I rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands. "Don't get me wrong. I think we'll end up being good friends with Keven, Sandy and the Bellers, if last night didn't screw things up. I'm just not comfortable with casual sex and orgies. For me, sex and love *are* tied together. I love you with *every fiber* of my being, with a totality I never thought I'd find, and that sometimes scares me. I love Ted and Lisa, too but in a different way. It's completely hypocritical, but I don't want to cut them out of our bed completely. I just can't do anything like last night again."

"I don't think you're being hypocritical," she said, pulling my hand to her lips. "I made a mistake and I'm sorry. I don't understand about Trish, though. Shouldn't I step back from her along with the others?"

"No. You asked me ahead of time, I gave you my blessing, and you gave Trish your word. I won't have either one of us go back on a promise. This isn't a matter of jealousy. Trish doesn't make me feel uncomfortable. At least not now," I amended. "Besides, I owe her big time. She saved the most important person in my world."

Her face lit up in a smile and she pulled me against her. "I love you, Hawk."

We held each other until the sun rose. Then we made our way past the still-sleeping Trish and showered together. Now *this* was how it was supposed to be.

I let Gretchen wake Trish up so they could talk privately while I went out to see who else was up for breakfast. It turned out we were the ones being slow this morning. Everyone else was already up. Ted and Lisa were sitting at the table talking quietly with

the Bellers.

BP, or before pregnancy, I'd have flipped a chair around and used it as a shield. But I'd have ended up on the floor if I did, so I sat down and quirked a smile. "I know how people hate this phrase, but we have to talk."

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "I was just about to say the same thing. You go first." The others looked at me attentively.

By the time I was done with telling them how I felt, they were nodding. Lisa grabbed my hand when I finally ran down. "Hawk, we couldn't agree more. That pretty much repeats the conversation we were having just before you came out."

"Don't get us wrong," Jo said, "last night was an amazing experience, but it was a one time thing for Earl and me."

Keven and Sandy nodded in agreement. "Sandy and I feel the same. We want to be friends, hopefully close friends," he paused and gave us a wry smile, "but maybe not that close. I'm glad we all came to our senses."

I couldn't have agreed more. We talked a little more and decided to keep the sleeping arrangements as they were. The common room, however, was off-limits for intimate relations.

Gretchen and Trish came out of the bedroom a few minutes later. I smiled broadly at Trish and held my arms up for a hug. She came to me uncertainly and I smothered her with a hug and a kiss on the lips. "It's okay. We're all okay. Park it."

She smiled shyly and sat down on Gretchen's other side. Ted and Lisa's smiles made her relax even more. "Good. I was worried. I don't want to be any trouble."

Changing the subject, I filled them in on the investigation so far. Skip's room had been tossed thoroughly. Everything had been dumped on the floor, probably while looking for something under the drawers. My bet was whoever did it was looking for the disk that Skip had waved around. I personally thought there was something more important on it than a dirty story. And judging from the disaster in Skip's room they hadn't found it. De Luca and his people were starting to look for prints and other forensic clues when I left for dinner. Hopefully the ship's search would wrap up this morning.

Once everyone had been updated, I made shooing motions. "Now you know everything.

Go get breakfast and keep your eyes open."

Everyone but Gretchen left for the dining room. She motioned for me to stay and waited for everyone to leave before speaking. "I'm proud of you."

I raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

"For telling them all how you felt and not letting it get you worked up."

I grinned. "Yeah, I guess I do get on a roll when I'm upset. Usually. It must be a drop in my hormones or something." I took her hand in mine. "I want to eat somewhere alone, just the two of us. You want to try the sixties diner upstairs?"

"That sounds perfect."

We rose and walked to the door, hand in hand. Before we got close I saw a tan postal envelope on the floor just inside the door. The envelope was large enough for a sheet of paper to fit inside without folding it. I stopped Gretchen.

"That wasn't there when everyone left or someone would've said something. Someone just slipped it under the door. Go get me a towel."

Gretchen gripped my arm. "It might be a bomb or something."

I shook my head and slowly knelt in front of it. "I doubt that after the scanning they gave us and our luggage when we boarded. It's probably a death threat."

Her eyes grew huge and I grinned. "That would actually be a good thing. It'd mean I'm making someone nervous."

"You're making me nervous. Whoever this is isn't afraid to carry out that kind of threat." Without waiting for a response, she ran and grabbed a towel from the bathroom.

I used it to gently pick up the envelope and hefted it. It was light. I handed it to Gretchen and stood up. "Put it on the table."

I grabbed a pen and used the tip to open the folding metal clasp and peer inside. A piece of paper folded around something thin. Holding the envelope with the towel, I slid the contents on the table. A jewel case with an unlabeled DVD inside fell out of the single sheet of paper. I opened the paper carefully with the pen and read the single line.

Give me what I want or I'll ruin you.

It wasn't signed.

I frowned. "That isn't quite what I expected. Let's see what's on the DVD."

Using the towel and one finger I popped the DVD out and into the player. The DVD was already playing when I turned the TV on and the room was filled with the sound of heavy breathing and moaning. My mouth dropped open. "Holy shit! That's us from last night!"

There we were in living color. All of us were easily identifiable. I sure as hell hadn't seen anyone taking video so... I spun and looked at the cabinet by the door. It was about the right place. I opened it and looked inside but didn't see anything. Behind me I could hear Gretchen swearing.

"That won't help us," I said. "Grab a chair and look on top of this thing."

She was furious. Hell, I was furious, too. When she gasped, I knew she'd found something. I handed the towel to her and followed her back to the table where she set it next to the envelope - a camera the size of a matchbox with a little antenna.

"Sonuvabitch!" Gretchen ground out. "First he tries to kill me and now he's blackmailing my friends?"

I shook my head and slipped the camera into the envelope. "We need to go find everyone else. Come on." I pulled the DVD out of the player and slipped it back into the case. I stuffed it and the note into my jacket pocket. Then, leaving the envelope on the table, I led the way out of the suite and into the elevator.

Gretchen started to punch the button for the dining room deck but I stopped her. "We're not going to tell them." I punched the button for the deck the security offices were on. "The killer didn't leave this. It has to be that asshole, Price. Somehow he's connected to the guy with the trick glasses. Maybe he hired the guy to spy on Ted and Lisa. You can't imagine how much he hates them."

"So we're going to tell security?"

I shook my head and smiled humorlessly. "Hell no. First I get an update from De Luca.

Then we find out where Price's room is. We'll get the original and any copies."

De Luca spotted me as soon as we walked through the door to the security section. He looked just as irked as yesterday as he motioned us into his office.

I sat down in one of the visitor chairs while Gretchen leaned against the wall. De Luca sat behind his desk and arched his fingers in a steeple in front of himself. I briefly eyed the red security passkey on his desk. That would be very nice to have but I couldn't see how I could get my hands on it. I put it out of my mind. I'd have to use what I had.

"The public areas of the ship have been searched," he said in a voice that still hinted of lemons. "The cabin search will be complete in another hour. There's still no sign of Mister Niccio."

That was about what I expected. "Anything from his room yet?"

De Luca shook his head. "We've collected a number of finger prints but the task of eliminating the staff is taking longer than I'd like. His laptop computer and computer storage material seem to have been removed." He shrugged. "It appears that someone wanted information from him. It seems you might be right. He had something that someone may have wanted badly enough to kill for."

I firmly repressed the urge to say 'I told you so.' "That just leaves a day to narrow down the killer. Do you have a list of the people who're here for the convention he was with?"

He passed over a printout of names, room numbers, and phone extensions. "This is only the people that signed up for the conference. If someone walked in they wouldn't be on this list. The convention organizer wasn't much help, I'm afraid. It seems secrecy is normal for this group. I'd imagine more than half the participants never signed up."

I spotted a few names I recognized but most meant nothing to me. With only a day to get to the answers, I wasn't feeling very confident. Luck was going to play a much larger role than I preferred.

"What about that guy Skip tore apart at the convention?" Gretchen asked. "What was his name?"

De Luca unpaused his computer and peered at his monitor. "James Carter, AKA Southland38. I've spoken with him this morning and he denies being involved."

I didn't even try to suppress the smirk from coming out. "I've never heard that one before. He certainly has the best motive. Does he have an alibi?"

"No. He claims to have been alone in his room."

I nodded. "How hard did you lean on him?"

"I didn't bring out the rubber hoses, if that's what you're asking. He can't prove he was there, but I can't prove otherwise, either."

"Then I better talk with him today. Skip met with a man in the casino before we set sail. I'd like to look at any video footage that might show us who that man was."

Gretchen set her purse down on the desk and helped me stand when De Luca stood up.

"The video is accessible from the monitors in the main surveillance room," he said. "Since the casino wasn't open when they met, the interior cameras were probably off. There are some in the bar that would've been on. And, of course, the cameras in the lobby next to the casino were on. This way, please."

He held the door open for us and we followed him to a door on the far side of the room. When he opened it, a dim room with many monitors greeted us. The man watching the bank of monitors from a Captain Kirk chair only spared us a glance.

Gretchen snapped her fingers. "I left my purse in your office. Be right back." She bolted out the door before he could respond. Good girl.

He stepped back toward the door but I put my hand on his arm to stop him.

"How long do you keep the video footage?" I asked.

He cast a second longing glance at the door and turned back to face the monitors. "The cameras are digital so there are no tapes that must be changed or removed. The footage is saved on computer hard drives and cleared after each cruise is finished, unless there's a reason to keep it. The drives are segregated from the other computers on the ship for security purposes." He tapped the man on the shoulder. "Let our watchdog sit down."

The man had the grace to grin at me briefly before he stood up. I sat down with a sigh.

The pregnancy crap was really cramping my style. The controls didn't mean anything to me.

"How do I select the casino bar from before we set sail?"

"Let me do that, ma'am," the man whose seat I was in said. He reached past me and tapped a short series of commands on the keyboard. One of the monitors went blank and then came up with a picture of what looked like either a bar or a restaurant. On this ship it could've been both. The time-stamp on the top right corner showed it was playing before boarding had started the day we left port.

"Can you fast forward it and pause when any customers come in?"

"You bet." He slid a slider up and the picture began moving quickly. It wasn't as jumpy as fast forward on a DVD. The picture was still relatively smooth. When someone came in the door, he froze the picture. It was actually two people. A larger man was walking into the room with his back to the camera, his arms raised in some type of motion as he spoke with the now infamous Skip Niccio.

"Dammit, we can't see his face." I looked back at the door as Gretchen came back in with an apologetic smile for De Luca. "Are there any other camera angles that might show them?"

"Not inside. Let's see if they sit in the camera's field of view."

They didn't though. Almost immediately they made a left turn and were out of the camera's view. Fast forwarding showed them leaving one at a time but there was no better look at the other man's face.

"Let's see if one of the other cameras in the area caught them," De Luca commanded. His man complied and put three other cameras up and playing through the time before they entered the casino and just after. One of them caught the pair but the angle was bad.

The unknown man was still gesticulating in a way that was starting to tickle a faint memory. I tried to follow it and it vanished like mist in the sunlight. I just had to let it percolate and surface on its own.

"Well, that was a dead end," I sighed. I stood up and patted the man who ran the cameras on the shoulder. "Good work. Thanks."

"Shall we go back to my office?" De Luca asked.

"Actually, Hawk hasn't had her breakfast," Gretchen inserted. "I really need to see that she keeps her strength up."

De Luca looked more relieved than irked.

I let Gretchen pull me from the security center and to the elevator. She hit the button for the deck the diner was on.

I raised an eyebrow at her and started to say something, but she just shook her head.

"Not where we might be being watched." Her eyes flicked to the mirrored area below the readout. She was right. De Luca might be watching us even now. There'd be time enough while we ate.

Gretchen made me eat before she spilled the beans. She kept blocking the conversation from leaving the bounds of normal things. Only when we were making our exit did she open her purse for me to see her prize. Nestled inside was a red security passkey.

"I can't believe you took it!" I laughed.

"He shouldn't just leave something that important laying around."

"It wasn't lying around. It was in his desk in security," I pointed out.

"And yet I have it now. Obviously it wasn't secure enough. Are you complaining?"

I shook my head. "He'll know who has it as soon as he finds it missing."

She smiled at me sweetly. "He's a man. He'll backtrack to every place he's been since he saw it last looking for it."

"I'm not a man and that's what I do."

Her knowing smile was my only answer to that comment. "Let's see if Price is in."

We walked up to his door as bold as brass. I pounded on the door. "Open up, Price."

That got no answer from inside.

Gretchen pulled out the key and I stood to help block any view of it. It was best not to take chances. The light blinked green and I pushed into the room.

It was a standard sized room with two twin beds. I expected to find it mussed, but it was as neat as a pin. There wasn't any computer or video equipment sitting out in plain sight.

"Look for any electronic equipment or computers," I said. "Keep things the way you see them. Let's not make this too obvious."

"Right." Gretchen started going through the dresser while I opened the entertainment center.

I hit the jackpot in the first cabinet. There was a laptop computer, two DVDs, and a plastic case that looked like a small suitcase. "Bingo." I handed Gretchen the computer. "See if you can get into that while I look at this case."

The case was heavier than it looked. I set it on the bed and popped the latches. Nestled inside, surrounded by foam, was a blocky piece of equipment with several computer ports on its side. There were also half a dozen smaller niches in the foam beside it. All but one of them was empty. I pulled out the identical twin of the bug in our room. There was also a coiled computer cable.

"Got you, you sonuvabitch," I murmured. I looked up and saw Gretchen had the laptop open at the desk and was looking at the screen intently. "Are you in?"

"That's my line," she said with a snort. "Yes. It wasn't even password protected. This Price must be an idiot."

I set what I suspected was the bug interface on the desk next to it and plugged it into the computer and power outlet. When I turned it on the computer sensed it and opened some kind of program. I rolled my eyes at the program name. Double O. Someone was a James Bond freak.

Gretchen looked at the drop down menus and found the history. It popped open a file list that had several files. "This is on the machine itself, not the computer." One by one we looked through them. All but one were Ted and Lisa, sometimes alone and sometimes with the rest of us, out in public. The remainder was all normal stuff. Oddly

enough, the video from the glasses wasn't there. Why remove it and leave the rest? The last one was the orgy.

"Delete that," I said grimly.

She tried, but a password prompt came up. "It's protected. This might take a while."

"Can you tell how many times this file was burned to DVD?"

"Maybe." She pursed her lips in concentration. "There's probably some kind of log here somewhere."

While she was looking, I tried the DVDs one at a time in the room's player. One of them was the orgy. The other was the rest of the surveillance. I pocketed them and returned to the desk to look over my wife's shoulder. She had some kind of text list up.

"I found the log. It shows the orgy file having been burned to DVD twice. The other files were only burned once. They were also copied to the laptop. It wasn't emailed or uploaded anywhere." She looked up at me. "I can't delete them, Hawk. What do we do?"

"I have another copy of orgy in my pocket. We'll have to take the equipment with us. He'll just make more copies if we leave it here."

Gretchen shook her head. "I have a better idea. Grab the laptop."

I unplugged the spy gear from the laptop and watched her gather it and stuff it into the plastic case without latching it. She opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the balcony. I knew immediately what she had in mind. I peered over the rail and saw a clear drop to the sea, so long as we tossed it out a little.

Without ceremony, she slung the case and it flew open as it fell toward the sea. I heaved the laptop after it and watched it all splash into the sea and sink into the depths. Well, everything but the case. I didn't think that would matter though. Price was going to be severely pissed.

I dusted off my hands and went back into the room. "We need to get going. No telling when Price might get back from breakfast."

Before she had a chance to respond, the door knob rattled. There was no time. I pulled her back onto the balcony. I yanked the drapes closed and slid the door closed as well.

Temporary safety achieved, I stared at Gretchen. "We're trapped. As soon as he looks for that equipment the jig is up. What do we do?"

Together we turned to stare silently at the rail and the cruel sea so far below us.

Chapter Thirteen: Clarity

Gretchen

I racked my brain for options. There had to be some way off this balcony without confronting Price. We didn't need to be caught breaking and entering. De Luca would completely flip out.

A glance at Hawk told me she was considering all our options, including the really stupid ones. She was seriously looking over the metal partitions that separated Price's section of balcony with his neighbors'. More worrisome was when she started pushing her foot against the railing to see how stable it was.

"You are *not* going to climb over the side of this ship," I hissed. "That's too dangerous."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "You have something in mind? I'm open to other suggestions."

"We only have one realistic way off this balcony and that's through Price's room. We need some sort of distraction to get him out of our way while we make our escape."

"Good plan," she said with a nod. "I can't wait to see how you get around the obvious obstacles, though. So, while you figure that out, I'm dumping the rest of the evidence."

She pulled the DVDs out of her jacket and flung them as far over the side as she could.

"Why didn't you do that when we tossed the other gear?"

Hawk shrugged. "I was going to give them to Lisa to destroy. You know, for her own satisfaction. Now she'll just have to settle with us telling her they're gone."

I snapped my fingers. "That's it! Lisa can help us." I dug into my purse, pulled out my cell phone and dialed.

"Hello?" Lisa answered.

"Hey, I need a favor and I need it *right now*."

"Sure."

"Call Price's room phone and tell him you'll meet him at the diner. Quick."

I could almost see her frowning. "Why would I want to meet *that slime*?"

"You don't need to meet him. I don't have time to go into the details right now. I just need you to call him and sound pissed. Refuse to talk about anything and tell him to meet you in the diner in fifteen minutes. Hurry."

I hung up before she had a chance to protest and grinned at Hawk.

"Slick," she admitted. "There's not much chance he'll pass up on that."

I held my fingers to my lips and slid the balcony door open a crack. I was sure he would hear the pounding of my heart, but we had to know when he was gone. Hopefully he wouldn't feel the need to look at his spy equipment or other DVD copies.

The phone ringing almost startled a squeak out of me. I clapped a hand over my mouth and listened. The conversation was brief and one-sided.

"Yeah?" Price answered.

"So, you found my little present. You know what I..."

"The diner. Sure. You know I have you by the... Hello? Hello? *Bitch*."

I heard him slam the phone down and laugh. It was probably meant to sound sinister but it only sounded lame. What didn't sound lame was the sound of the front door closing.

Hawk stopped me from opening the balcony door. "Wait," she whispered. "Give him a

minute to be sure he's gone."

I controlled my desire to run like hell and stood still until Hawk said we could go. After what seemed like an eternity, Hawk slid the balcony door open and peeked past the curtain.

"Looks like the coast is clear."

I followed her into the room and straight out the front door. The hall had a few passengers in it, but they didn't pay us any mind; and, most importantly, there was no sign of Price. I closed his door with a sigh of relief.

"What now?" I asked.

"We go fill everyone else in on what we found. We need to remember jackoff has other cameras in our suite, too. Even with the equipment gone, I want them found and tossed overboard; so, we have some more searching to do."

I couldn't agree more.

It took half an hour to calm everybody down when we told them the bad news. If we'd taken a vote, they would've scrounged up some torches and pitchforks to use when they hunted down Price.

Hawk talked them back from the edge of violence with a more resolve than I'd have imagined or would've been able to personally muster. She redirected them to the real problem - Skip's murderer.

"Price has spit. Forget him," Hawk said. "We need to get a handle on the case and nab the killer before we hit landfall tomorrow or he'll be in the wind. I'm going to call Hans and see if his people have anything on the disk I sent. He assured me he'd have it in hand this morning."

I looked around the main lounge while she called Daddy. Frankly, I didn't see how we were going to find anything without some kind of break. Right now we had nothing.

Trish tapped me on the arm and pointed at the crowd. I focused on the people, unsure of what she wanted me to see.

My heart stopped beating for a second. Just coming into the room was the man that had saved my life. He was walking with a short woman in a tan pantsuit. They were deeply involved in conversation and weren't paying the slightest attention to us. A break! Thank you, God!

I stood up and started after them. There wasn't time to explain what I was doing. I had this one chance to find out who he was and why he was spying on me. Perhaps it might even lead to the killer.

I risked one glance back and saw all the girls, except Hawk, were up and following me with confused looks scrawled across their faces. Trish must've signaled them. Good. Hawk was focused on the call and the guys would keep her safe.

The pair went through the lounge and stopped at the elevators. It was obvious now that they were arguing. He was scowling while saying something and waving his arms expressively in small circles. She stood there passively. Her replies to him were short and soft-voiced.

If they got into the elevator, I'd probably lose them. I made a quick decision and approached them from behind as the doors to the elevator slid open. With the girls at my back, we followed them in.

The man noticed me first. His eyes widened and his mouth snapped shut. The woman turned at his expression and gasped at me.

I smiled. "I see you have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am, but I'm still at a loss as to who you are. And why you're spying on me. Not that I'm not grateful for you saving my life. Thank you for that."

The man smirked at the woman. "So much for *non-disclosure*, eh Susan? Are you going to tell her or am I?"

The woman had a brief internal struggle and then shrugged. "I don't have much choice, do I?" She pushed the button for deck seven. "I'm Susan Richter and this is Andy Sizemore. I'm very sorry you were attacked and I assure you that we didn't have anything to do with it."

"I don't think I believe you," Lisa said. "What kind of game are you playing?"

Before they could answer, Lisa's cell phone rang and she stepped back as much as she

could in the elevator to field the call. She mouthed Hawk's name at me before I gave the pair in the elevator my full attention.

"That sounds like a great question," I agreed. "What's going on?"

"I'm the director for a reality TV show," Susan said. "*I Spy*. We have teams of contestants on the ship competing against one another. The teams shadow select people and break into rooms we set up for them so we can critique how well they can gather information."

"Spying on people?" Trish asked incredulously. "That has to be breaking the law!"

Susan shook her head and pushed through the group as the elevator doors opened. "It's not. Not when it's in a *public* area. When we're done we'd either have to get your consent to air any footage with you in it or not use it."

"And when someone tried to kill me?" I asked angrily. "What about that?"

Susan stopped at a cabin door and fished a passkey from her purse. "I said I'm sorry, but there wasn't anything we could do. Mister Sizemore broke his cover that night and I got into a lot of trouble with the producers. They prohibited me from contacting you about that night or anything that happened."

I felt my eyes narrow. What a cold bitch. "And what about morality? Doing what's right?"

Susan shrugged and opened the door. "Andy did what he thought he had to, stealing the master disk of footage from his spy glasses and giving it to you. That just got him tossed off the show. I wouldn't have done it myself."

She stepped into the room and tried to close the door behind her, but we pushed in behind her like the tide. "I can tell. You're the milk of human kindness."

I wrapped my arms around Andy and hugged him. "Thank you for doing what's right. You won't suffer for it, I promise."

"Money isn't everything," he said philosophically. "I'd rather be able to sleep at night than have a stinking half-million dollars."

I nodded and let him go. "I couldn't agree more."

Lisa whispered in my ear. "I filled Hawk in. The video was a bust. It was too dark to tell it was anything but a man."

The sounds of outrage from Susan and the other two people in the room drew my attention away from Andy. Two men were seated at a bank of monitors on the dresser. They were dressed casually, but had headsets and microphones on. The monitors showed several scenes of people in public areas of the ships.

"More contestants?" I asked Susan.

She nodded. "You have what you wanted. You know who we are and you have the tape from the deck. I can't help you any more. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

I suppose there really wasn't any reason to harass them any further. I started to agree but Sandy gasped and started closely at one of the monitors.

"Ohmigod! It's him!" she shouted and pointed at the screen. Her tone was filled with fear and amazement.

I stared at the small picture, but the crowd was in full motion and the person filming was moving.

"Who?" I asked.

"Snake Eyes. Uh, I don't know his name. He does something for the mob, I think. He might have been a hitman. I saw him all too closely in LA, though. He was sitting alone at one of the café tables in this picture."

I pointed at the monitor. "Take this one back to the café."

Susan shook her head. "No. We've done all we can to help you already. I have a show to run."

"Let's make a deal," I said in a low growl. "Help me now or I sue your ass."

She looked indecisively at me. "If I do this you won't sue?"

"That's right."

With a sigh she pointed at the monitor. "Have Rachel go back and scan the café again."

One of the men murmured into his microphone.

The picture swung around and started back against the tide of people. I caught a momentary glimpse in a store window of a tall woman in a red dress as the spy looked to the side. Then the café came back into sight.

We all scanned the people there as our mobile eyes looked over the people.

"There he is," Sandy exclaimed. "On the left side of the picture!"

The man was obvious when she pointed him out. His eyes were cold and hard. A snake's eyes.

"He was sitting near our table when we had that first big dinner," Lisa said. "I thought he was watching the, uh, show."

I repressed a smile. Trish and Lisa had put on quite the show at dinner that night. In front of everyone. "But we weren't the only ones there, were we? I seem to recall Skip was sitting close by."

Lisa nodded. "He was and both of them were gone when I looked again. I think."

"Why would a hitman from the mob want to kill someone who writes dirty stories?" Trish asked. "Especially that weasel, Skip?"

That was a damned good question.

"Someone's sitting down with him," the man running the spy equipment said. We all leaned in to see who was arriving.

I looked at the picture and blinked. That was impossible. I'd sooner believe the President of the United States belonged to the Communist Party. Settling in at the table was the Right Reverend Billy Swaggwell.

A quick glance around the room showed all my friends in an equal state of shock. Lisa spoke first.

"We need to know what they're talking about." Lisa turned to Susan. "Can your person get close enough to play back what they're saying?"

Susan grimaced and rolled her eyes. "She could, but she won't. I've done what I have to, more than I have to, really. We're done. Andy, you're off the show. Come by my cabin in a few days and we'll finish the paperwork."

I considered arguing with her but rejected it. She didn't look likely to help any further. Arguing now would just waste valuable time.

"Let's go, girls. We have a mystery to solve," I said grimly. Susan got a short nod of my head and a mental promise to look into what mischief I might cause her later.

Andy followed us out and closed the door behind him. "I can get close to them. Is that the guy that tried to toss you over the side?"

I nodded my head. "It sure looks that way." I should've felt anger at the man, Snake Eyes. Swaggwell, too. All I felt right now was fear. I could call Hawk, but then she'd be in the middle of everything.

"Let me give you my cell number. Do you have a cell phone?"

"Not on me."

Lisa handed him hers and gave him a brief tour on how to navigate it as we all climbed into the elevator.

"This isn't a game anymore," I said in as serious a voice as I possessed. "If we're right, that man is a cold-blooded killer. If Swaggwell is involved, he's dangerous, too. I don't want you to take any chances. Get close and see what you can see or hear but don't tip them off. Skedaddle if they make you. I don't want you getting hurt."

The black man nodded. "With all this spy training that shouldn't be a problem. You need to stay away from the public areas, though. They don't know me from Adam. I suggest you visit the ladies' room."

That was an astonishingly practical suggestion from a man. I smiled at him. "Call us as soon as you have anything."

Andy split away from us and wandered down the mall with his hands in his pockets, looking to the world like any other man checking out the women clustered around shopping. My smile grew wider. He was good.

We ducked into the ladies' room and clustered by the mirror, trying to look like we were touching up our makeup. I was so nervous that I didn't dare bring makeup near my face. I might end up looking like Bozo the Clown.

"Should we call Hawk?" Trish asked.

I nodded my head. "We should, but we're not going to. Not yet."

"But we don't know what the hell we're doing." Jo objected. "She used to be a police officer, a homicide detective. We need to call her in right now."

"She's also about to pop any minute and the extra stress can only make it worse," I said in my best no-nonsense tone. "She couldn't move fast enough to catch an old man using a walker, much less Snake Eyes. I want more information before I get her all wound up. Right now we don't have proof of squat. Let's let Andy make a go at this and then we'll decide if and when we need to bring Hawk into this."

They didn't look very happy about it, but no one argued.

Time was crawling. I tried ignoring my watch, but every time I glanced at it only a minute had passed. Finally, my phone rang.

I snatched it out of my purse. "Hello?"

"Hey, pretty thing. I've been down here for ten minutes and still no you."

"Can they hear you?"

"Hell yes," he said with an unseen grin. "I could just reach right out for a touch."

The girls crowded around and I held the phone so we could all hear.

"What are they talking about?" Lisa asked.

"Just the usual, you know," Andy answered. "Old friends and business. You remember. That dude that took the long trip."

My heart went into my throat. "They're talking about Skip Niccio?"

"That's the dude," Andy agreed. "I hear he needed some cash and got it sent by

Western Union."

I frowned. What the hell did that mean?

"Are you saying that money changed hands?" Lisa asked.

"Exactly. Out with the old, in with the new."

"Swaggwell gave Snake Eyes money?" I asked.

"Well, it sure looks that way to me, sweet thing," Andy flirted. "Say, I was wondering how good you were at faces. I saw this guy that you might recognize."

"There's someone else there?"

"Naw. More like in a picture."

I looked at the girls in confusion.

Trish leaned forward. "One of them has a picture?"

"Yeah! Exactly!"

The cadence of his voice had been sounding more and more familiar as he spoke and I finally realized who he was sounding like. Samuel L. Jackson. God, I hoped that didn't mean we had snakes on the boat.

"Can you describe who's in the picture?" Lisa asked. "Who's giving it to whom?"

"Sure," Andy said. "Older to younger. The guy I'm remembering is a pretty plain dude. Average. I think he was on a ship like this one. Looked like some kind of meeting."

Trish paled. "Does he look anything like this?" She proceeded to describe a man. The description sounded familiar to me but I couldn't place him.

"Could be. Whoops, looks like the party's over."

Trish looked at me and swallowed. "That sounds like Southland38."

"They're gone," Andy said in a normal tone of voice. "Snake Eyes is off to find that dude

in the picture. I'll start following him when he gets a little further away. He was tearing up the old dude about going back to the deck and getting in trouble. I didn't see him all that clearly, but I think the old dude might have been the one you wrestled with."

"Stay as far back as you can and keep talking," I said. "Follow Snake Eyes." I left the ladies' room with all the girls at my heels. "Do you have any idea where he's going?"

"Something about a conference hall."

I handed the phone to Lisa, took Trish's, and dialed Hawk. We might only have minutes to stop a killer.

Chapter Fourteen: Crisis and Conclusion

Hawk

I snapped the phone closed and looked at the crew. Gretchen had somehow come through with a description of our guy. True, he might not be the killer, but he was the best suspect or witness that I had. The connection with the Right Reverend was more than a little confusing, but once we had all the players in hand, the motives would become clear.

Right now we had to intercept this Snake Eyes character before he did anything permanent to Southland38.

"Time to roll, boys" I said. "Gretchen thinks the killer is on his way to corner someone in the conference area."

I stopped to call security. De Luca wasn't there but I got them moving and hung up.

We piled into the nearest elevator and I leaned against the back wall. I held my stomach and wished this infernal cramping would stop. I didn't have time to deal with physical discomfort. I straightened when I saw Ted give me the eye.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Fine," I lied. "I'm just tired."

He didn't look like he believed me so I put on my most innocent smile. That just

deepened his frown.

I was saved from further inquisition when the elevator door opened. With only a slight limp, I made my way into the lobby. That's when things started going wrong.

The first problem was Tom Price. He was waiting to get into the elevator and puffed up like a blowfish when he saw Ted.

"You bastard!" he shouted. "You broke into my room and stole everything!"

Ted stood his ground. "I didn't. And even if I did, you've got no room to complain after breaking into our suite. Give it up, Price. You've lost. *Again.*"

Price turned red and bristled.

I didn't have time to deal with him. I pushed past Price just as he came at Ted. As Price shoved me aside, the stairwell door opened and the man that *had* to be Snake Eyes came out. Followed by the Right Reverend.

They were no more than three feet from me. I'd been a cop long enough to spot trouble when I saw it. The one guy's eyes gave him away. They were cold and emotionless - a killer's eyes.

I saw a flash of recognition as he locked eyes with me. God, they *were* a snake's eyes. I'd been made. His hand slipped inside his jacket and came out with a silenced pistol. No one else seemed to catch on to the danger right next to us.

Everything dropped into slow motion. I swung my fist at his arm and only barely deflected his aim before the sharp "pop" of the silenced shot swept over me. It wasn't completely quiet, but it didn't sound like a gunshot either. With hardly a sound, Price fell backwards.

The pistol went spinning out of Snake Eye's hand. I tried to follow up the disarmament with a strike to his throat, but he moved like a greased pig. He punched me in the stomach and I staggered back in gripping pain.

He spun away and rushed into the confused crowd with the guys finally twigging to the danger and taking off after him in a pack. They weren't alone. Several other men in the lobby also took off in pursuit. Other's shrieked and ran around in circles, panicked. Thankfully, several people were trying to help Price.

I started after the shooter, but my legs suddenly felt like lead. I staggered and almost fell from the cramp that tied my belly into a knot. I felt someone catch me before I fell.

"Are you okay?" a woman's voice asked. A blonde woman my age was holding me up.

I started to tell her I was fine, but another wave of pain washed over me. "No," I admitted through gritted teeth. "I..."

A sudden warmth of wetness flowed down my legs. Christ, I'd wet myself. The woman stared down at my legs. This was more than embarrassing.

The woman stared at me in surprise. "Your water just broke, didn't it?"

A wave of cold washed over me. Oh God, not now. I nodded wordlessly at her.

"We need to get you sitting down," she said. Her voice sounded a lot calmer than I felt. She turned her head to the man next to us. "She's going into labor. Help me get her to a chair."

"I don't think so," a familiar voice said. I forced myself to concentrate and looked more closely at the man. It was the Right Reverend Swaggwell.

I started to say something tart when the woman holding me gasped. A glance down revealed why. The Right Reverend had picked up the fallen pistol. He had it digging into the woman's side.

"Take her into the elevator. Now." His voice was calm and conversational. His eyes, however, were completely mad.

I didn't resist as we were herded into the elevator. The woman held me upright and she turned so that her body was between me and the gun. Brave, but ultimately a futile gesture.

"She needs to see a doctor," the woman said with almost no tremor to her voice. "Which deck is the infirmary?"

I told her and she pushed it. Swaggwell just smiled at us.

"This is stupid," I told him. "There's no way you can get away. We're on a ship and God

only knows how many people saw you with the gun. Give it up already."

"You have woman's work to do, Shauna. Focus on that. You're about to witness God's miracle." He sounded just as calm and gentle as he would when talking to his flock, I'm sure. His use of my name like that made me grit my teeth.

The elevator door opened and we just had time to step out before what looked like a full EMT team with a stretcher bolted into the elevator. That left the nurse at the station alone with us.

Swaggwell had the pistol dug into my helper's back as she helped me forward. Her hands barely trembled as she helped me to the desk. "Her water broke. She's in labor."

The nurse took the news more calmly than I would've in her place. "Let's get her into this first room on the right."

I was going to warn her about the gun but a contraction took my breath away. It was all I could do to stay on my feet.

The nurse and my helper got me onto the examination table. "You'll have to wait outside," the nurse told Swaggwell.

He smiled and shook his head. He also showed her the pistol. "No, I don't think so." The nurse froze. "I don't understand."

Swaggwell shook his head. "Just get her into a gown."

It's not like they had much of a choice. He sat down in a chair, leveled the gun at us, and watched them undress me with those mad eyes. When they had me in a gown and settled on the table, he gestured at the door. "You may leave and get the doctor."

The nurse bolted out the door, but the woman that had been helping me shook her head. "This is crazy. I'm not leaving her in here alone with you. Just let her go."

His smile was filled with compassion all at odds with the gun he held. "Then, by all means stay. Birthing is a woman's work, after all. In fact, that's a much better idea than a doctor coming in here. He might try something stupid."

The woman visibly swallowed. "Look, I don't know what your problem is, but she needs a doctor."

Swaggwell pointed at the phone. "When someone calls, you can find out what you need to do. This is actually a much better idea. If God chooses to allow the children to survive then it must be His will."

The woman paled. "Children?" Her eyes slid to mine. "You're carrying more than one child? How early are you?"

"Twins," I said, my mouth dry. "I'm more than a month early." I looked at Swaggwell. "This is because I'm a lesbian, isn't it? What do you hope to gain out of this? You can't scare me straight, you know."

The phone rang, startling all of us. The woman picked it up, looking at Swaggwell as she spoke quietly. I went through another contraction while they spoke. Now I knew they weren't cramps.

"The doctor wants to speak with you," she said, setting the phone on the counter. Swaggwell motioned for her to walk over to me and picked up the phone.

The woman took my hand. "He's not going to let anyone else in here, is he?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. He's crazy. I'm afraid that he wants to kill me after I give birth."

Her eyes widened even further. "We've got to stop him. I've got to stop him."

I shook my head. My eyes bored into hers. "You need to focus on the children. Listen very carefully to me. My babies are more important than I am. Focus. Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

She visibly calmed herself. "I started pre-med in the eighties. I don't know if I can do this."

"What's your name?"

"Regan."

"I'm Hawk. Just focus on what we're doing. You can do this. I can do this."

Swaggwell set the phone down and resumed his seat, interrupting us. "Good news,

Shauna. The doctor has a surprise for you. It seems your father-in-law made sure that a specialist in premature babies took a vacation with you. And he brought all his equipment. Those children might just live after all."

Regan went to speak on the phone. I stared at Swaggwell. "What will killing me gain you?"

"Your mind is warped by your deviancy," he assured me. "This is all for the best. Focus on the children, now."

The door swung open, surprising all of us. Swaggwell tracked the gun to point at the door. Gretchen stood there and my heart sank. "No. No. No! Turn around and get out of here," I said.

Gretchen closed the door behind her and smiled at me, ignoring Swaggwell. "Never."

"I'll take this as a sign from God," Swaggwell said. "Lock the door. I don't want any more unannounced visitors."

Gretchen locked the door and came to my side. I started to speak when another contraction rolled over me. I took her hand and held on.

Regan started washing her hands. "Miss, if you're helping me you need to wash your hands."

Gretchen left me to wash up and get into a gown, cap, and gloves. "It's Missus. I'm Gretchen Werner; Hawk's wife."

"An abomination," Swaggwell announced. "You'll join her in explaining your failures to God after the children are born. Hellfire will lick at your heels for all eternity."

They both ignored him, rolling their eyes. "Regan Thomas," she said to Gretchen. Regan looked at me. "The doctor gave me instructions. I can do this." It seemed more like she was trying to convince herself than me.

Gretchen held my hand and started the Lamaze mantra about breathing while Regan disinfected and shaved me. Regan measured me and announced I was dilated five centimeters. "You're getting there, Hawk. You must've been having contractions for hours." Gretchen glared at me. "I can't give you anything for the pain," Regan continued. "I'm sorry."

The next few hours were a blur of pain and panting. When Regan finally allowed me to push I was long past ready. Three hard pushes and the first baby was out. Counting to ten through each excruciating push seemed to last an eternity. Regan tied off the umbilical cord and snipped it.

"Unlock the door," she snapped at Swaggwell. Her hands were bloody and I couldn't focus on the baby. My eyes were full of tears.

"My baby," I moaned.

"The doctor is right outside, waiting," Gretchen assured me. "She's early and needs to be in his hands right now."

She. I blinked to focus my eyes on Gretchen. "It's a girl?"

"She's beautiful," Gretchen told me.

Regan had handed her out and kicked the door closed before Swaggwell locked it again.

The next contraction was already on me. I cried out again with pain and pushed when Regan told me to. Gretchen was there helping me breathe and focus.

It only took two pushes to get the second baby out. Once again Regan tied off the cord and rushed the baby to the door. The process of getting the baby out of danger was repeated.

Gretchen wiped my face and kissed on the forehead. "Another beautiful baby girl for us," she said, ignoring our impending doom. "You're doing great."

"We have to..." I started when another contraction surprised me.

Regan was back in position. "One more push and the afterbirth will come out. You're doing great. One more push."

Across the room, Swaggwell was watching us in some sort of religious ecstasy. The pistol was aimed at me. I knew he was praying for me. I was too exhausted to give more than half a damn.

When the last of the afterbirth came out, Regan took the pan with it over to the

counter. She stopped and turned to Swaggwell.

"Let them go," she said.

"Unlock the door and leave," Swaggwell said.

Regan took a deep breath and heaved the afterbirth in his face. She dove to the side as he brought the pistol around and fired blindly in her direction.

I tried to heave myself up on the table, but I was too weak to move. It would only take him a minute to clear his eyes and he'd start killing us.

Gretchen bent down. I thought she was pulling off her shoe, but she had a small revolver in her hands. Methodically she emptied the revolver into him from ten feet away. The shots were like thunder in the closed room. He staggered back and slumped against the wall as the door was kicked in. De Luca was in the lead, his Kevlar vest emblazoned with the word POLICE and his gun tracking on Swaggwell.

Swaggwell's nerveless fingers dropped the pistol as he slid down the wall in a trail of gore.

Gretchen dropped the pistol she must have hidden in an ankle holster and held me as the medical team that had been waiting just outside rushed in and carried me out in a rush.

Four days later I was sitting in a wheelchair in the ship's chapel. It was a thin spire at the very top of the ship. Through the wide windows and over the rails there was nothing but ocean visible in any direction. It felt like being in the arms of God.

I felt almost human again, but I looked like a deflated beach ball. The babies were down in the infirmary, getting the best care that money could buy. The girls were early, but the specialists Hans had snuck onboard with us assured us that the chances were very good they'd grow up perfectly fine without any lasting harmful effects.

After talking about it, Gretchen and I decided to change our original choices in names. We'd settled on names for all occasions. We chose possible names for two boys, a boy and a girl, or two girls. The eldest girl was still being named Janice, after Gretchen's mother. The youngest, however, we named Regan.

Her namesake was horribly embarrassed when we told her, but pleased. Those little girls were going to have a whole gaggle of godparents. Originally, it was only going to be Ted and Lisa, but now Regan and her fiancé, Tony, were included as well. I know that Ted and Lisa would be more parents than godparents, but still.

The last few days had been chaotic, but had at least settled the mystery of what happened to Skip. Snake Eyes, AKA Louis Pirelli, was black and blue, but alive. The guys had caught him and beat the snot out of him. De Luca disapproved, but I was more than happy with them about that.

Swaggwell's diary finally explained to us why Skip was attacked. Swaggwell wrote down everything. He'd gotten tired of his lack of success in stopping what he saw as the tide of evil in pornography on the web. He contacted Pirelli through a few fervently converted former mobsters. Money did the rest and Pirelli was off and tracking down erotic authors. This cruise probably seemed like a buffet to them.

Pirelli was being held on murder one. Price had taken that one round right in the heart. He'd been dead before he hit the floor. I felt guilty about how I felt about it. I regretted his death, but only in a very general way.

The one death I didn't regret was Swaggwell's. He died on the scene and I was happy to wish him a nice time in Hell. Gretchen had brought De Luca's backup piece in with her when she came into the birthing room. He didn't want to let her in, but he was real short on ideas that might get us out alive. The fact that Gretchen also ran all over him to get in there must have counted in some way.

I found out later that De Luca had told Regan to distract Swaggwell after I gave birth. She'd done so much more spectacularly than he'd anticipated. The ship's doctor was still hardly speaking to me after we trashed his infirmary.

The thought of Regan brought my attention back to the present. She and Tony were standing in front of the ship's Captain. She'd been grazed by one of Swaggwell's shots but you couldn't even see it under her beautiful gown.

I'd found out that they were on this cruise to be married. They'd eloped, actually. Once I found out and Gretchen told me how she saw Tony buying the wedding rings on the first day of the cruise, I'd been insistent that I attend the wedding

I held Gretchen's hand and watched them repeat their vows to each other in front of the Captain. Their eyes were naked with emotion. They obviously loved each other as

deeply as Gretchen and I loved one another.

They promised to love one another and the Captain pronounced them man and wife.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to present to you Antonio and Regan Di Ricco," the Captain intoned. "Husband and wife."

We all clapped and tossed rosebuds in the air. I hugged the newly wedded couple from my chair. "Where are you two off for your honeymoon?" I asked.

Regan smiled at Tony. "We have a place we both love in Vermont. We're going to hide there until someone forces us out."

"I hope you'll be available for the babies christening," Gretchen said from behind me. "We'd really like both sets of godparents to be there."

"Count on it," Tony said."

"We wouldn't miss it for the world," Regan agreed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sandy and Keven talking to the Captain. Judging from the way they were dragging him back to the altar, there was going to be another wedding on our plate today.

De Luca walked out from the concealed elevator and smiled at everyone. Then he leaned over my shoulder and whispered in my ear.

"I have good news and some bad news. Some Cuban fishermen pulled Skip Niccio out of the water alive."

"What's the good news," I quipped.

He laughed glibly. "He apparently insulted Fidel in absentia. They've thrown him in jail."

"That *is* good news," I agreed with a laugh.

This trip was ending on many positive notes. I held Gretchen's hand as Sandy and Keven were married and let myself once more get lost in the words of love.

