

The Lady in Blue

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A Texas vintner meets a lady in blue at a private club. Sparks fly and tensions build as they tease each other, or as his brother would call it, doing the "Do Me" dance. Then tragedy strikes close and as they explore their relationship, they also find something new as a sexy cop becomes part of the dance. Has a real plot and three dimensional characters. It's more than just a wanker.

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Chapter One: Erotic mystery in the heart of Houston

Ted's point of view

I opened the driver's side door and stepped into the street. Glancing back to make sure the way was clear, I walked around the car to join my younger brother, Stan. Once or twice a week we made the trip into Houston to the club. It was a private club upstairs from a restaurant. The owner was particular about who he allowed in and his criterion was not always obvious. Some people became downright angry at being denied entry; but Carl ran the club for his personal pleasure, not for the profit. He wasn't terribly concerned about those who got upset. He just saw it as validation for not letting them in to begin with. Frankly, I thought the restricted clientele made it more of a draw than if it were open to every Tom, Dick and Harry. I laughingly called it my own Diogenes Club.

We went there to unwind from the rigors of managing the family business, Stansbury Vineyards. The vine covered terraces in the Texas Hill Country, the old work buildings and the presses near Houston have been in my family for almost a hundred years. My father, grandfather and great-grandfather all sweated blood over those grapes. I was no different. Stan razzed me endlessly about all the hard work. It's why I'm thirty-five and single, he said. He could be right. We shared the same square face as our father, the same strong jaw line. Looks didn't seem to stop him from dating so it must be me.

The décor was relaxing and very comfortable with overstuffed leather chairs scattered among short tables of rich mahogany. A fireplace in the side wall provided an air of intimacy with the scent of burned oak. Many of the patrons here smoked cigars or pipes with their brandy, whisky or what have you. While I don't smoke, I did like the smell of a good pipe.

Stan sometimes smoked Padron cigars while we relaxed. He told me I should enjoy one along with my beer at least once a month. No thanks. It was a very nasty habit. I would rather eat dirt. It would be healthier. I wasn't a health nut but I was in good shape and I'd like to keep it that way.

A number of people have wondered why I drank beer when I went out and not wine. To me, it seemed to be a break from work. I tasted wine often as I worked, and a few beers now and then let me feel relaxed. It made me feel less of a wine snob.

Tonight, we found our way up the stairs just after six in the evening. The club was only about half full with several regulars seated at the bar who waved at us when we walked past. Carl shook his bar rag at us as we settled into place and Dina, the waitress, brought a glass of chardonnay for Stan and a Heineken for me. She joked with me that

Carl had a nice selection of more sophisticated beers on hand, but she understood. I just liked the simple and clean taste. Dina was Carl's daughter and, if you looked, you could see her mother in her. Not Carl - thank God. He was a great guy but he fell out of the ugly tree and he hit *every single branch* on the way to the ground.

Dina patted Stan on the arm and moved off to see to the needs of the other patrons. I shot him my patented big brother look. "She likes you," I said.

Stan laughed back. "I like her, too, but think of the family, man! Carl's genes are in there somewhere!"

I slapped him on the arm. "Oh, stop it! You like Carl and Dina looks just fine."

"Ted, I like you, too, but you're still a bit homely." he retorted.

I laughed back and we settled into our comfortable routine of drinking slowly. We chatted about the people that were there. Captain Jack, Uncle Armand (no relation) and Sven the weightlifter were the first on the hit parade. They were all real characters and always worth a lot of speculation.

I was so involved in the conversation that I didn't see the woman in blue come in. It was like she had just appeared in one of the leather chairs across from us with a large, bald black man in a dark suit. It was hard to tell but I thought she was about my height. Rather tall for a woman. Long blonde hair cascaded across her shoulders, framing a face that was long, slender and pale. A soft pink lipstick was better than the red that so many fair skinned women favored. It suited her.

The blue dress fit her svelte frame like a glove and showed her willowy legs to fine advantage as she crossed them. She was well built for her frame, her cleavage showcased in a daringly low cut front that gave one the hope that gravity might pull the clinging fabric just a *little* lower. She was engrossed in an animated conversation with her well dressed companion, laughing from time to time. The occasional sip she took of her wine caused delicious ripples in her golden hair.

"Do you like her?"

I startled just a bit at the unexpected voice. I had forgotten Stan.

"She's pretty," I admitted.

"Go ask for her number."

I turned to stare incredulously and chided him. "She's with her date, Stan! Not only is that clichéd, it's just wrong!"

Stan smiled and shook his head. "Ted, that's why I date and you don't. You need to be a bit more forward," he said. "Women are *just* as needy as you are. They *want* to have men show an interest in them." Seeing that I remained unconvinced, he smirked. "I'll show you what I mean."

I looked at him warily, not really sure what he had in mind. He just smiled back at me.

"Stan, really, there's no need..." I started.

Stan stood abruptly. When I looked back, the woman's date had left the table, probably for a trip to the men's room. Stan walked right up to her and she smiled at his approach. He bent and spoke softly, pointing back my way. I could feel my face turn red. This was so embarrassing. She smiled at me...her eyes sparkling as she spoke softly with Stan. I could almost feel the heat of my embarrassment in my toes. He nodded and returned to his seat, a smug expression on his face, shrouded in a conspiratorial silence. Finally, unable to contain myself, I leaned forward. "So, what did she say?"

Stan waved his hand nonchalantly. "Nothing important. I'm sure it wouldn't interest you."

I glared at him. "Stan...", I said dangerously.

Stan laughed and held up his hands in self-defense. "Calm down, big brother! I'll tell! No need to get violent!"

Furtively, he leaned forward. "She said that the man with her is not her date, just a friend. I told her you were shy and she thought that was cute. She told me to encourage you to. Go ask for her name and phone number yourself, if you're interested that is."

When I looked back over she raised her wine glass to me and took a sip. Her friend walked up behind her and affectionately touched her shoulder as he took his seat. They went back to chatting. I could tell I was the subject of conversation from the sideways glances that kept coming my way. I flushed again and she laughed.

Stan startled me again when he rose to his feet. "Well, Ted, I think I'll call it an early night. You stay and have a good evening. Remember, chance favors the prepared mind, God helps those that help themselves and a rolling stone gathers no moss." He cocked his head and smiled. "I can't think of any more good advice so I'll get a cab and you have fun working up your courage."

With a wave, he walked out of the club, leaving me to fend for myself. A number of unusual sensations filtered through me as I settled back to take a long draught of my beer. I was shocked to find it almost empty. I didn't recall having drunk so much of it. I waved at Dina for another. She nodded back from across the room.

While I waited, I returned my gaze to the woman in blue speculatively. She was still engrossed in her conversation with her friend and seemed to have moved her attention away from me. That made it so much the better to look her over and consider what I should do. Why was I shy around women? I had never really given it much thought. Work and family took up a lot of my time. How did I go about being more 'forward', as Stan put it? Did I want to be more 'forward'?

When I stopped reflecting, I noticed that she had turned in her chair so that her skirt had ridden up. Now an expanse of creamy, pale thigh was open to my view. I'm sure that my face mirrored my surprise but I had to admit that she looked exceptional.

At last, I looked back up to her face and saw that she was looking right at me with a wry expression. She quirked an eyebrow and seemed to be inquiring if I liked what I saw. I felt my face heat once again from being caught ogling a complete stranger. She broke into laughter and made the finger gesture of 'shame, shame' at me. Her friend looked confused and looked my way with a similar expression. She leaned over, whispering something to him and he almost fell out of his chair chortling.

Her friend's laughter got my dander up. I didn't like being laughed at very much and I felt foolish. She was using me as her *and* her friend's evening amusement. I took the opportunity of Dina bringing my second beer to shift around so I wasn't looking at either of them. Inside, I seethed with indignation. After about ten minutes, Dina set down another beer beside my mostly finished one. I looked up in surprise.

"Compliments of the lady, Ted. She said to tell you they didn't mean to upset you. Her friend was not laughing at you; he was laughing at her behavior."

I looked back over and the seats were empty. That made me sit up and take notice. I

looked around but they were nowhere to be seen!

Dina continued, "She said they had to leave, but hoped you enjoyed the view. If you're interested, she plans to be back Friday night and hopes you'd like to see more of her then."

Dina started to walk away but turned back, adding, "And Ted, tell Stan that I really like him, okay?"

With a smile, she moved off, her short skirt swishing back and forth. I sank back in my seat a bit trying to get a grasp on the situation. Did I want to see more of the woman in blue? Once the outrage wore off, I found myself seriously considering coming back on Friday to see what else might be in store. I knew Stan would insist I come, the cad. Should I? Was it all just titillation and teasing? Or did she really want me to step up?

An hour passed before I finally shook myself out of my reverie. I needed to go home. I could think more about it as the week passed. Friday was still three days away. I rose with a wave to Carl, Dina and Sven and I made my way down the stairs and into the dark, muggy heat. Houston summers could be hot, but I suspected that the forecast had more than just sweltering temperatures ahead for the weekend.

Chapter Two: The night ends with a bang

Ted's point of view

Friday dawned warm and bright. After showering and dressing for a busy day, I walked out of the house into the vineyard. The trellises covered in grape vines ran in neat rows for acres. The netting we used to keep the birds at bay, fluttered slowly in the breeze. I stopped at the first row and drew in a deep breath. The smell was sweet and earthy. The vines here in the city of Spring, just north of Houston, were much younger than the main vineyard near Bend, north of Austin in the Texas Hill country. I had planted and nurtured these vines myself.

My father had turned the private vineyard his father and grandfather cultivated near Bend into a commercial enterprise but had never seen the success he dreamed of. The laws that hedged the winemaking industry in Texas had made it very hard to make a profit and had not really changed since the repeal of Prohibition. These laws restricted everything from the hours we could have wine tastings to forcing vintners to sell mostly

through distributors rather than directly to stores or via mail order. If a store sold a bottle of wine for fifteen dollars, they had bought it from the distributor for nine. That distributor paid the winemaker only five and a half dollars; it cost about four bucks to make, bottle and prepare the wine. The way to make a small fortune in winemaking in Texas was to start with a large fortune. The laws were changing, though. I wish my father and mother had lived to see it. Now we could sell via mail to anywhere in the country. The hours were better for tastings and we could advertise more openly and effectively.

The entire time we three kids grew up, my father worked hard to change the laws in Texas and draw people in to the winery. Every weekend there were concerts, events and free tastings. Stan now handled that. He just has a way with people that I could never manage. There were two classes of people for Stan: friends and friends he had not yet met.

Sue was the same as Stan - with a bubbly, outgoing personality. She is the baby of the family; five years younger than me and three younger than Stan. I could see Mom in her, vibrant and beautiful. She, her husband Leo, and their herd of kids lived in the Hill Country running Stansbury's main vineyard. It was larger, by far, and as much as I loved it, I loved this field more.

I tilted my head and looked at the dark grapes on the vine closest to me. They were almost ready - full and lush. The small, dark Spanish grapes hung in clusters of sweet promise. We would start the picking in a week or so, I decided. Then these grapes would be crushed along with grapes from Bend and some imported from California to be mixed and fermented into Stansbury wines. The rich juice would ferment for eighteen months in barrels, then we would bottle it and let it age for another year before it was ready to sell.

I walked back past the house and went to the large adobe building next to it. The eighteen inch thick walls made the dim interior into an above ground cave - cool even in the heat of summer. The interior walls were lined with barrels and casks of wine fermenting in the cool 72 degrees. The lifeblood of this vineyard sat here enshrined deep in the smell of rich oak.

The wood felt rough beneath my hand and the heady smell of the wood pulled me, as it always did. I drew some wine from one of the casks into a tasting glass and put my nose to the opening to breathe in its aroma. The fruity smell of the wine filled my senses. I moved the glass and watched the thick liquid roll. A sip into my mouth and the complex flavor of the wine reminded me of the lady in blue drinking wine in the club.

The last two days had been a mixture of growing eagerness and apprehension for me. Stan had been all for me going back, as I knew he would be. He had been a pest these last two days. Every conversation had one destination, one ultimate purpose - the mysterious lady in the blue dress and her lush, creamy thigh.

I had to admit that she preyed on my thoughts. I found myself standing and thinking about her at the oddest times. I decided that it must have been too long since I had dated if a stranger could focus my thoughts this way. What did I know about her? Nothing, except she had an exceptional way of drinking wine...

I knew I was going back even before I started my car outside the club that night. Not that I would give Stan the satisfaction of telling him my head had been turned so quickly. I'd never hear the end of it.

Pouring the wine that remained into the spitting bucket, I decided that I needed to stop thinking about this evening. I had to run back into Houston to meet with a state lawmaker and discuss the next big push - the repeal of the law that banned winemakers from owning a store that sold wine or selling direct to people that did. Others had been instrumental in prior changes that were opening new vistas to me and my fellow vintners, but I was going to bust it wide open. Texas could be as big a producer as California if the State would just open its eyes to the opportunity. The California industry was older and ten times more lucrative, but that could be narrowed. It brought 1.2 billion dollars into California's coffers and only 130 million here. We could do better.

Walking back into the house, I stepped into a kitchen that, though modern, felt as homey as one fifty years old. The makings for a breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee were soon spread out.

The scent of cooking bacon drew Stan out from his bedroom and still in his pajamas. He looked half asleep, his hair a crime against humanity.

"Morning, Ted," he yawned as he sat at the table. "Well, it's the big day. Are you going to commit?"

With a shake of my head, I laughed and forked the bacon from the pan, cracked a couple of eggs and dumped them into the skillet.

"You're implacable, Stan. You'd think this was someone you are interested in. Speaking of someone - what about Dina? Are you going back to see her tonight? I will if you will."

With a boyish grin, he nodded. "You have a deal, big brother. Are you still seeing de la Cruz today?"

I set a cup of coffee and his plate in front of him then started prepping my own. The smells made my stomach growl. Breakfast was the best meal of the day.

When I finally sat down and sipped the smooth Columbian coffee, I nodded.

"Yep. Not that I expect to get a commitment out of him. The distributor's lobby has oodles of cash to throw at him to try and keep the stranglehold going. Still, I think we can chip away at him though. The numbers are really convincing and they will have to come around, sooner or later."

We chatted over the details of the weekend plans. He had a bluegrass band on for the weekend tasting. I thought it sounded like another blast. No doubt he would draw in hundreds of people on Sunday. Not a million visitors a year, but it will do for now.

As he ambled off to get showered, I cleaned up the kitchen and then got on the road.

The drive into Houston was slow and crowded along the I45 corridor but I had talk radio programs to keep me updated on the world's events. The parking around Representative Ramon de la Cruz's office was crowded as usual. It took three trips around the block to find a place to park.

On the way into the building, I ran into Ken Price, one of the lobbyists for the distribution industry. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say he ran into me. He was that kind of fellow. I managed to not grimace as he smirked at me.

"Ted Stansbury, what a surprise seeing you here. I was just telling Ramon that I hadn't seen you in weeks." Name-dropping bastard.

"Get used to me, Price. I'll be a fly in your ointment for a long time to come. The wind of change is in the air. It's time to let the wine industry in Texas grow. Maybe you can get a job working for big tobacco."

His smirk slipped. "You need to learn your place, Stansbury," he snarled. "Be happy with the bone we gave you. We *let* you get that law to sell by mail but you won't cut us out. We are the industry, not you dirt grubbing grape farmers. You should back off before

you piss us off. Obstacles to the lobby have a way of... being removed."

Before I could respond, he pushed his way past me and out of the building lobby. God, but that man is a prick. I had dealt with plenty of decent people as distributors but some few could be real asses. I straightened my coat and took the elevator up to the third floor.

I sat in the well-appointed waiting room, chatting with the secretary about the weather for about ten minutes before she was buzzed and I was sent in.

Ramon de la Cruz was a short man but full of energy. He came around the desk and shook my hand with barely contained energy. "Ted, I'm always happy to see you. Have a seat. How's your family? Can I get you anything?"

I sat down and shook my head. "No, thanks. I'm good. I came by to talk about the future of the wine industry here in Texas. The laws that were passed this last session were a good start, but we can do better."

We spoke for several minutes about the situation as it existed and, as I expected, he was noncommittal. He sympathized but he needed to see more information. The spiel about how the system had worked well for Texas for almost a hundred years was the same one I had heard before in the offices of other representatives. The distributors' lobby greased them well. I did get a promise from him to look at the numbers though and an invitation to get back in touch with him. That was the best I expected to get from this visit.

After I was done, I went to Spec's Warehouse as my first retail stop of the day and looked over the wine selection. This place was a monster and you could get just about any kind of wine or spirit here. I talked with the manager about our product placement. I did that a lot - trying to get more shelf space for our product. Self-promoting and advertising was a lot of my work these days. When I took over for my dad, I had thought crafting wines was the biggest part of my job - how naïve.

I had lunch at the Back Street Café. As usual, the crab cake and eggs with citrus beurre blanc was wonderful. The café was bustling with people, loud with the shouts of cooks in the kitchen and the clatter of plates. I found my thoughts wandering, thinking of the lady in blue. Eating here with her - sipping wine - laughing together. I shook my head. That was way premature. I didn't even know her name. I finished lunch and in an hour later, I was back on the road home.

The afternoon passed in a blur of people and tasks. There is always more to do at the vineyard than there are hands. Somehow, I still managed to find myself thinking about her. I was reviewing an analysis on the latest batch of fermentation when Stan tapped me on the shoulder, startling me so that I jumped in my seat.

"You need to go get showered and dressed. It's almost five and we want to get to the club by seven."

I glanced at the clock on the wall and was astonished to see that the day was gone. The moment of truth was at hand. With a grin I went to shower. Standing in the room in my shorts, I stared at the closet. What to wear? Casual? More formal? I finally decided to stick with dress up. Make a good impression.

I picked a dark set of slacks and a crisp white shirt with no tie. Polished black shoes and dark socks filled out my wardrobe. I brushed my hair then put a little aftershave on. Looking closely, I decided that I looked good enough. I felt butterflies in my stomach and laughed at myself. This was like being back in high school.

When I came out, Stan was ready. "Damn! You look hot, Bro. Lets go see some ladies." Laughing and joking, we drove into the city. Traffic was heavy, heavier than that morning, and I found myself leaning forward - urging the cars ahead to move faster. It was a bit after seven when we pulled up to the club. We went inside through the restaurant and up to the club proper. The place was busy when we came in and I found myself looking around for her. She wasn't there.

I felt the crush of disappointment. Stan slapped my shoulder. "It's early, Spud. Let's sit down and give her a chance to show up."

As we sat down, Dina came up with a broad smile. "Stan, Ted. Good to see you again." She focused in on Stan and he smiled back at her.

"What time do you get off tonight, Dina? Can I interest you in a late dinner?"

Dina lit up. "I'd love to have dinner with you. I'll tell Dad I'm out of here at nine and he can just handle this place on his own." She swished off and Stan's eyes were glued to her ass. I poked him.

"What color are her eyes?"

Stan blinked at me. "What? She has eyes?"

I poked him again and we laughed. The next half an hour dragged by slowly and I found my gaze drawn back to the entrance every few minutes. When she stepped in with her friend from earlier in the week, my heart almost stopped. She was in another blue dress but this was not the same one. It was short, low cut and backless. Her eyes found me in the crowd. She smiled and waved. I waved back and closed my mouth before any flies got inside it.

The lady in blue guided her friend to the seats across from us. With a lithe grace, she sat down across from me. Up close she was even more striking than before. Her eyes were bright blue and alive with excitement. Her figure was stunning, trim and curvy in all the right places. That pale skin must burn to a crisp if she was in the sun for more than an hour. Her dress rode high up her thighs again. As she sat, the curve of her ankles in those sexy high heels drew my eyes. My gaze followed her legs upward to her face, at which she smiled and arched her eyebrow.

"I'm glad you came back," she said. Her voice was warm and had a deeper character than I would have guessed from her frame. It sounded sexy, just like she looked.

"My name is Ted and this is my brother Stan. I'm sorry I was a poor sport the other night."

She gestured to her friend. "This is Calvin and I'm Lisa. I wanted to come alone but Calvin insisted he check you out before leaving me with a strange man." She smiled at him and he laughed.

"A man has to look out for his friends," he said.

I nodded and thought it a smart thing to do.

Lisa continued. "I asked around and know more about you now. You own a vineyard? I never knew there were any around here." She leaned forward as she spoke and the opening of her dress slid lower. My eyes were drawn to her cleavage. This time I didn't have to pray for gravity. Her succulent globes were not constrained by a bra and deep cleavage filled my gaze. Her chest flushed red as I enjoyed the view. After a few seconds, I looked back up. She was blushing and smiling.

Calvin rolled his eyes, and then stood. "I'll go downstairs and round up a dinner table. That okay with you?"

It seemed safer to nod since I was not certain I could speak without drooling. He chuckled as he made his way out of the club and she sat back.

Before we could speak further, Dina ran over to us. "Stan, Dad cut me loose! He said it was about time you asked me out! It's only eight so let's go dancing and listen to music!" She drew him to his feet and pulled him toward the door. With a wave and a grin, he abandoned me to my fate.

"To be fair, I should tell you about me," Lisa said after we were alone, "I work in the District Attorney's Office in Galveston. I've been a prosecutor there for a couple of years. I don't usually get out to do things. Calvin has been telling me to get out more and Tuesday was the first time I let him drag me out of the office before dark."

As Lisa spoke, I watched her cross and uncross her legs. She had a lot of nervous energy and every time she moved, that dress rode higher. I forced my eyes back to her face. She was blushing again but I could see her nipples had hardened to the point of being obvious through the thin fabric of her dress. With a deliberate look and a smile, she parted her legs a little.

"I'm glad you decided to come back for a second look, Ted." She glanced downward.

When I looked down as well, I saw she was flashing me! The dress had ridden up high enough that I could clearly catch a glimpse of her red panties before she crossed her legs again. They had a fringe of black lace. I forced my eyes back to her face. She was flushed and breathing a bit heavier.

I cleared my throat. "You are well worth a second look," I said with as much calm as I could manage. I moved in my seat to try and relieve the uncomfortable tightness in my pants. Her eyes looked lower and widened. Then she smiled wickedly.

"I've never done anything like this before. I never realized what a turn-on it can be. If I'm embarrassing you, I'll stop," she offered.

I shook my head. "I think you have a lot to be proud of. You're beautiful and I'm enjoying the view. I've just never played the looking game so openly. As DA, aren't you worried about someone seeing you?"

Lisa shook her head. "Oh, I am just an Assistant DA. Anyway, I'm not too worried about being seen here in Houston. It's a risk, but I'll just take my chances and see what

happens. When you were looking the other day, I felt something inside that I didn't expect. I never thought of myself as an exhibitionist before. You don't mind, do you?"

Lisa once again parted her legs and her eyes urged me to look. The swell of her mons was intoxicating and it became even harder to shift around in my seat. "No, I don't mind," I managed to get out. When I looked back up, she closed her legs and smiled. Her eyes were smokey and dilated. "It excites me, too," I added.

Calvin came back in and Lisa rose gracefully to her feet at his wave. "Let's have dinner and get to know each other better. Then we can see what happens."

I had some difficulty getting to my feet and that got a grin from her. Calvin wisely kept silent. We made our way down into the restaurant and to a round table near the back. The waiter sat us and took our order.

"Any recommendation on wines," she asked with a grin.

"Stansbury Vineyards, of course," I answered. Then I steered them toward a meat dish that went well with the blanc du bois. When the wine came out, I could tell that they both loved it. That's what I liked to see.

"This is really good!" Lisa exclaimed.

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it. It's our most popular wine for a reason. I'm very proud of it."

We settled to sipping wine and I almost jumped out of my chair when I felt what could only be her bare foot rubbing my thigh! I stared at her and she sipped her wine with a cool smile as Calvin talked about the joys of Cajun cooking, completely unaware of what was going on under the table. Her foot slid up and began gently massaging my crotch.

I tried to keep up the conversational thread but I'm pretty sure that I did a lousy job. She talked about learning to cook with her mom as a girl and described some of the dishes they made together while torturing me slowly.

The waiter brought our food and Calvin dug in with relish. She ate hers with dainty bites punctuated by sips of the wine.

"This wine goes really well with the meat. It compliments the flavor to a tee." Her foot slid away and I almost groaned. "I wonder if it goes with other kinds of meat." She

cocked her head and raised an eyebrow saucily.

"Well," I managed to get out with a breath. "It's all a matter of experimentation. Sometimes you just have to take a plunge. Try it with the meat and see what happens," I said, grinning at my own daring.

Lisa laughed. "I'll remember that. I think that I will be trying this with other dishes soon."

Calvin looked up briefly. Silently, he rolled his eyes and shook his head.

The remainder of the meal went slowly. I found myself falling into a comfortable conversation with her and my mind kept playing back to her touch on my body. She just smiled and kept her feet to herself. Torturess. After the meal was finished and we had sat talking for a bit, she looked over at Calvin. "Calvin, I think I'm going to have Ted take me dancing. Can you take my car home with you and I'll get you to pick me up in the morning?"

Calvin grinned at her. "Sure. You two go out and have a good time. I'll pick you up at what? Seven-thirty?"

Lisa nodded. "Let me visit the ladies room and we can go."

We rose with her and I waved to the waiter. "Put it on my tab and give yourself twenty percent."

With a smile, he nodded.

I walked with them to the restrooms and followed Calvin into the men's room. We stood at the urinals and I sighed as I was finally able to release my pinch. He looked up at the ceiling as he urinated.

"Ted, you seem like a nice guy and it looks like she likes you but I need to say it. Don't hurt her. If she wants to have fun, I'm all for that but she's my friend and I want her back in good shape. Okay?"

"No worries," I assured him. "She's in the driver's seat. I'd never hurt her."

"See that you don't and we'll be just fine."

We had just finished washing up when he unexpectedly took my hand and firmly shook it. "It's been a great dinner and I'm glad I met you. I hope we see each other again soon."

I grinned and pumped his hand. "We'll meet again soon. Come up to Spring anytime you like and we'll give you the nickel tour."

Calvin grinned back. "I'd like that. Count on it."

We exited the room and waited for Lisa. She stepped out of the ladies room a few minutes later. Pulling her keys out of her purse, she handed them to Calvin. "Drive careful, now! No dents!"

Calvin laughed incredulously. "Look who's talking! I'm a safe driver! Who was it that rear ended the mayor last month?"

Lisa waved her hand airily, dismissing his teasing.

"Have fun and you can fill me in on all the hot, juicy details tomorrow on the way into the office." Calvin smiled at my expected blush.

As he walked away, Lisa opened her purse again. She pulled out something and put it into my hand with a sly grin. I looked down and there was a pair of neatly folded red panties with black lace - still warm to the touch.

"I hope you don't mind," she purred, gazing into my eyes, "but I decided to get a little more comfortable." I grinned and put the soft fabric into my pocket as she moved to my side. Her hand slid around my waist. I put my arm around her shoulder and we walked out of the restaurant.

When we arrived at my car, she stopped in surprise. "You drive the same car I do - same color, too! How funny!" I opened the passenger door and held it for her. She slid in but didn't buckle up. When I climbed behind the wheel, she pushed herself across the seat and pulled me closer. "I got so excited in there. I can't believe I'm doing this." She drew me into a passionate kiss and melted against me as I put my arms around her.

Lisa's tongue danced in my mouth agilely. Her lips were as sweet as the finest wine I have ever tasted. I could feel her breasts pressing against me, straining the fabric of her dress, as I let my hands wander up and down her bare back. Her skin felt soft and velvety. Her scent was driving me wild with desire. She pulled back slightly and pressed

my hand against her breast. Her hard nipple dug into my palm and the firm softness of her breast filled my hand as I squeezed her gently. She let out a soft moan...

Lisa opened her mouth to speak but before she could say anything, the night was turned into day and the interior of the car was awash in bright red light. We stared uncomprehendingly at the fireball rising from the street ahead of us. The sight of a shiny black car rising from the ground in flames was seared into my mind. The sky began raining debris and Lisa screamed.

"Calvin!"

Chapter Three: The night belongs to the Hawk

Ted's point of view

I sat next to her on the curb, my arm around her shoulders as she sobbed. The smell of fire was still strong in the air. Flashing red and blue lights lined the street. Police and firefighters surrounded the burned out hulk of her car, their radios squawking. The area was cordoned off with yellow crime scene tape the same way they had sealed the street with sawhorses. The Harris County Medical Examiner's van was parked just short of the burned out car.

Other than taking an initial statement, no one had spoken to either of us. The uniformed HPD cop standing nearby had indicated that the bomb squad had arrived and a homicide detective was on the way. All Lisa could do was nod her head and cry. I pulled the blanket that they provided closer around her and leaned her against me. She turned and threw her arms around me, burying her head against my shoulder. Her tears burned my neck, hot and wet.

"Why?" she sobbed. "Why, Ted? Why would someone do this? Oh God!"

I brushed my hand across her head. "I don't know." I didn't know what I could do but I had to say something. "We'll find out. I promise."

As Lisa cried, I heard a low throbbing noise that grew louder. Over her shoulder, I saw a big, black Harley Davidson turn the corner and glide to the curb. My eyes were drawn to the kick stand as a black boot swung it out and set the bike down, the rider shutting it off. As the other boot swung over the bike and the rider unsnapped the helmet, I looked up. Long black hair spilled out as a tall, striking woman removed her helmet and

let the rich mane settle across her leather jacket.

The Harley rider strode up to the police and words were exchanged as I watched with some confusion. The police had been shunting people away. Who was she? I saw a uniformed cop point at us and she headed over with long strides.

Another policeman interrupted the Harley rider's march toward us and I could clearly hear what he said. He gestured at the burned out car. "Hawk, the stiff is Calvin Samson. We'll have to wait for the coroner to make a firm ID, though. He's a crispy critter."

I felt Lisa jolt in my arms and then sag. Her crying became almost a wail. I wanted to get up and punch that insensitive bastard!

Hawk grabbed his collar, yanking him close. "You keep your damned mouth shut, Parker. You do that again and I'll see your sorry ass on parking meter duty. I do not need to be called in while off duty and get this kind of shit." She got further into his face. "Now get the fuck out of here before I do something you're going to regret." She shoved him off and as she turned, I could see the mouth working on his enraged face. I'm pretty good at reading lips. He mouthed, "Dyke bitch."

As Parker stalked off, I turned my attention to this Hawk. I could see her sizing us up as she came closer. Then her pace slowed down and an odd expression crossed her face. She cocked her head to one side and I noticed that she seemed to be looking at Lisa. A slow grin, not of humor, but of amusement, crept onto her face and was quickly wiped away.

I looked at Lisa and saw that her knees were spread a little. Her skirt had ridden up really high. Remembering her panties in my pocket, I suddenly realized that this Hawk was looking at Lisa's sex. Flushing, I pulled part of the blanket across Lisa's front. The woman looked at me and shook her head. Then she sped up her step and knelt in front of us.

"Lisa Davis? Ted Stansbury? I'm Detective Shauna Hawkins. I know this is hard but I need to ask you some questions."

Hawk's voice was a little husky and deeper than the average woman's. Her eyes on Lisa had a surprising compassion. She reached out and put her hand on Lisa's knee. Lisa looked up and nodded. "Go ahead."

Hawk nodded to her and then at the destroyed car. "You told the patrolman that the

man in the car was Calvin Samson and that the car was yours. What I need to know is why someone might want you or him dead. Can you think of anyone with a grudge against either of you?"

Lisa nodded. "Where should I start?" she asked with a sad laugh. "Calvin and I are - were - Assistant District Attorneys in Galveston County. We've put a lot of people in jail and we have a number of cases in progress." hung her head and I held her. "This is so unreal. I can't believe he's dead."

Hawk looked at me with the greenest eyes. "Mister Stansbury, did you see anyone odd tonight? Was someone watching you? Someone out at the cars when you came out? When Mister Samson got into Miss Davis's car?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't. We - ah, weren't looking at the car."

Hawk quirked an eyebrow and then slowly nodded. "I see. You were leaving together?"

"Yes," I said. "We were going to go dancing. Calvin was going to take her car, pick her up tomorrow morning and go to work with her."

The detective's eyebrows rose. "On a Saturday? Isn't that a bit unusual?"

Lisa shook her head and used the blanket to wipe her eyes. "Not really, no. There's always more work to be done than can be done in five days. Calvin and I have been working Saturday mornings for over a year together. We have been pulling together some pretty big cases lately, with a lot of research."

"Were you and he romantically involved? Was Saturday all work and no play?" Hawk asked Lisa.

Lisa glared at her. "No. We were just friends."

I couldn't tell what was going on behind those green eyes that were considering Lisa.

"Okay. So, you were going dancing with Mister Stansbury and then what? To his place or back home?" Hawk pressed.

"Back home. I figured we would dance and then be there by midnight or one." Lisa responded.

Hawk looked at me. "Was Ted going to be spending the night?"

Lisa stiffened. "What the hell business is that of yours!" she almost shouted. "I'm over twenty-one and I can damned well sleep with whomever I choose!"

I could tell that the detective was not put off by that response. She chuckled. "Don't get your panties in a twist," she said with a knowing look at me. I could feel the lump of fabric in my pocket. "You can sleep with him or anyone else for all I care. Hell, as good looking as you are, you should have men and women knocking down your door. Have a good time, 'cause you never know. How long have you been going out?"

"We saw each other a few days ago but we didn't even speak. Today is really the first time we've met," I said.

Hawk's eyebrows rose again. She glanced back at Lisa with mingled amusement and respect. "You guys move quick. I like that."

I felt myself heating down to my toes again and Lisa frowned at me. Under the blanket, I took her hand and put it on my pocket where her panties bulked.

Her eyes grew wide and she stared at Hawk, her face coloring. Her knees, even though out of sight, pulled together convulsively. She opened her mouth but nothing came out.

Hawk leaned forward and put a finger on Lisa's lips. "Shhhhhh. It's no skin off my nose and you don't have to worry. I get in too much trouble for my lifestyle to cause anyone grief over theirs. I won't tell." She smiled. "Besides, I think Ted and I can agree that the view was great, right Ted?"

I colored again but nodded. Then, clearing my throat, I tried to bring this conversation back into some kind of professional ballpark. "This won't help but I have something else that needs to be considered. Lisa drove the same model and color car I do."

I could see that jarred Hawk. She sat back on her heels, whistling slowly and softly. "No shit? Damn, that does make it a little more difficult. Does anyone hate you, Ted? Enough to see you dead?"

"Yesterday, I would have said no. Hell, I'm still not sure how real it is but I had words with a lobbyist for the wine distributors this morning over legislation that could put a serious dent in their - and his - pocketbooks. He was plenty pissed." I related the details of the encounter as she pulled out a pad and made notes.

"It might be nothing," Hawk agreed. "Then again, maybe not. We'll check him out but we'll play it as more likely Lisa here was the target." She looked back at Lisa. "I'll get someone in your office to get me a list of people that might have you on their hit parade but I do not, I repeat, I *do not* want you going back into that office until it is full of people. That means Monday and don't get there early. I'd also rather you didn't go home for a couple of days, just in case. I intend to have Galveston PD lend us a hand and search your place just to be sure there are no more surprises. Will you let them?"

Lisa paled and slowly nodded. "You... You think that someone may have been in my house, too?" Her voice was shaky.

Hawk put both hands on her legs, rubbing them through the blanket. "Keep it together, lady. You're tough; you have to be to be a prosecutor. I want to keep you both safe. I'll be wanting the same permission from him. Any objections if I go through your drawers?" She grinned.

Now it was my turn to goggle and Lisa elbowed me. My mouth snapped shut. "Sure, if Lisa has no objection to you being in her drawers, why should I?" I didn't realize quite how that sounded until the elbow returned twice as hard. A look confirmed Lisa was blushing furiously.

"Ted!" Lisa exclaimed.

Hawk just laughed. "You two are sweet. Well, since I have your permission to handle your - things, I'll get that rolling. Lisa, do you have somewhere to go?"

Before Lisa could answer, I spoke up. "She can use a spare bedroom in my place. We have plenty of room."

She looked at me and I could see her thinking about it.

I raised a hand. "No funny business, just a place that is quiet and has some privacy. You have my word."

Lisa blinked and nodded. "Okay, Ted. I'll try it."

I looked at Hawk. "Will you need a more detailed statement?"

Hawk nodded. "Yes, but I can come out and get it tomorrow. I have both your cell

numbers. I'll make arrangements for the Sheriff to look over your house when you get there."

Turning her attention back to Lisa, Hawk reached under the blanket and took her hands into her own and leaned forward. "Honey, I'm really sorry for your friend. I promise you, I will nail the bastard that did this. I swear it." The conviction on her face was so strong that Lisa broke into tears again and impulsively wrapped her arms around Hawk, hugging her close.

"Thank you!" she sobbed.

Hawk smoothly slid her arms around Lisa and held her for a moment, putting Lisa's blonde head against her dark tresses. Her green eyes swiveled to me to take in my reaction and she smiled. Then she let Lisa go. "Take good care of her, Ted. I can tell she's special."

I slid my arm back around Lisa, somewhat protectively. Was she hitting on Lisa? Was I jealous? If it were a man, I would be jealous. If Hawk were a lesbian, was it the same as if it were a man hitting on Lisa? I finally just let it go and nodded to her. "She'll be safe."

A man wearing heavy padding came up and interrupted us at that point. "The other car is clean, detective. We can release it."

Hawk nodded. "Thanks, Frank."

I helped Lisa to her feet and pulled her close. "Thank you, Detective Hawkins."

With a grin, she said, "Call me Hawk. Everyone does." She clapped my shoulder in an almost brotherly fashion. "That's what they pay me the big bucks for. Drive slowly and safely. Do *not* go inside the house without the sheriff's deputies. Got it?"

Hawk leaned in and whispered softly in my ear, away from Lisa. "She'll be a wreck for a while, then she'll get mad. Don't fight with her."

I nodded and she let go. Turning with Lisa, I left Hawk talking with the man from the bomb squad and made our way back to my car. After opening the passenger door, I helped Lisa in and buckled her seatbelt. Walking around the car, I looked for the best way to get out and saw a uniformed officer by the sawhorses waving at me. I waved back and climbed in. My breath caught in my throat as I started the car but nothing

untoward happened. I relaxed and saw Lisa relax as well. We had both been thinking it.

Slowly, so as not to hit anyone or anything, I pulled between the vehicles and people. The officer moved the sawhorse and I drove past it. As we left the crime scene, I could see people crowded on the sidewalk, looking to see what was going on. Just a bit further along the street, there were lights, cameras and talking heads. Vultures. I stepped on the gas a bit and left it behind.

A quick couple of turns and we were on the interstate heading north. It seemed surreal to be doing something so normal after the events of the last few hours. I found my thoughts preying on me: what had happened, what a terrible attack this had been and how it could have been Lisa or me in that car.

I looked over at her and she was huddled in her seat, not looking out. She was crying again. Reaching over, I opened the glove box and pulled out a packet of tissues. After I closed the glove box and gave them to her, I just put my hand on her leg so she could feel my presence as she grieved.

Lisa loudly blew her nose. She seemed to shrink deeper into herself and cried. I didn't try to stop her. Her hand clutched at mine as she sobbed.

The traffic grew lighter as we escaped the metro area. Soon we were away from the lights and noise of the city. When I left the interstate and began to drive the smaller roads toward Spring. Her tears had subsided and she only sniffled occasionally.

It took a little more than an hour to finally get home and when I pulled into the long drive, I could see sheriff's vehicles parked with their lights off. Several deputies perked up as we pulled to a stop and turned off the car.

Leaning back over to her, I whispered, "Stay here. I'll search the house with them and then come back. Okay?"

Lisa's makeup was a total loss; her eyes red and weepy. Still, even in her anguish, she was beautiful. She tightened her grip on my hand and then released it. "Don't be long. Please, be careful."

I nodded and climbed out. I could now see there were three cars and three deputies.

One of them came up and offered his hand. "Mister Stansbury? My name is Zoboroski.

These are Deputies Willis and Chambers. We've already looked in the outbuildings. They all look clear. Willis will stay out here with the lady and we three will go look over the inside of your place, okay?"

Zoboroski gestured and one of them followed us while the other stayed where he was beside the cars. I unlocked the door and the shrill whine of the alarm greeted us. Stan must not be home. It suddenly dawned on me that I had no idea how Stan meant to get home or when he would get here.

With a shake of my head, I put that out of my mind. He was a big boy and would find a way home. I snorted wryly. Or go home with Dina. I stepped to the side and the two deputies moved into the house, drawing their guns.

"Sheriff's Department!" Zoboroski called out as they advanced. Together we went through every room in the house. It took about fifteen minutes. No masked man leapt out on us and nothing looked disturbed.

When we came back out the front door, I looked immediately to see Lisa still in my car. She seemed to relax at the sight of us.

Deputy Zoboroski stopped at the edge of the drive. "Why don't you and the lady go on inside, Mister Stansbury. We'll wait out here 'til you're in. Turn on your alarm, you hear? I'll drive by several times tonight and make sure everything still looks good out here."

I went to the passenger side of my car. Lisa was still a bit shaky as I helped her out. Without the blanket wrapped around her, she almost glowed palely in the overhead lights. I put an arm around her and urged her toward the house. "Come on inside. I'll help get you settled in." Then to the deputies, "Thanks, boys. I really appreciate it. Come back out some Sunday and look me up." They nodded and I felt a pang in my stomach. I had said almost exactly the same thing to Calvin and he would never keep that appointment.

Once inside, I locked the door behind us and turned on the alarm. "I don't know if Stan will be back tonight." I led her through the house but she seemed too sluggish and drained to see much of it. I had already decided to put her up where she might feel a bit more comfortable so I led her to my sister's room, the one she lived in when she was down here, both before and after she married. It had her touch all over it, from the color scheme to the extra clothes in the closet. She and Lisa were close to the same size so she might find something to change into.

"This is my sister's room. She's living up near Bend now, with her husband and kids. There is a private bathroom and shower. I bet there is something in one of the drawers or closets you can change into. Why don't you take a shower and let me make us a light snack. Then you can go to bed."

Lisa nodded and went into the room, closing the door behind her. I heard the lock engage. With a deep breath, I went back into the kitchen. I started to toast some bread, and then made a few grilled ham and cheese sandwiches.

While they were frying in the pan, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the folded panties. How far the night had gone, from promising to disastrous. Almost unconsciously, I brought the garment to my nose and inhaled the subtle scent of her. A hint of her earlier arousal made my heart flutter. With a sigh, I slid it back into my pocket. That was out of the question. The very last thing she needed right now was me hitting on her. She needed support and space to get her feet back under herself.

When the sandwiches were done, I set them on plates at the table. Then, I pulled one of the bottles of merlot off the rack. That would go well with the sandwiches and we both might need something to help us sleep. Wine was better than pills.

I had just poured the wine when she stepped into the kitchen, barefooted with her hair wrapped in a towel that fell across the shoulders of the robe she wore tightly belted at her waist. She looked at the food and sat down slowly.

"I don't think I'm hungry, Ted." Lisa's voice sounded washed out.

Nodding, I put a glass of wine by her hand and the bottle in the center of the table. "Then drink a glass of wine. It will help you sleep." I sat down and sipped on my wine, watching her.

Lisa took the glass in her trembling hands and I was afraid she was going to drop it or spill it. She didn't sip the fine merlot; she drank it in gulps until the glass was empty. With a light 'thunk', she set it back on the table and exhaled shakily. "I don't usually drink much but I think tonight is an exception." She looked over her glass at me. "If I get drunk, just put me in my room, okay?"

I got the point and nodded. "Okay." Snagging the bottle, I poured her another glass and then nibbled on a sandwich as she sipped this one more slowly. She finally picked up a sandwich and tasted it. Once she did, she tore into the plate of sandwiches.

In half an hour, the wine was gone, the sandwiches eaten and Lisa was feeling considerably less pain. The towel was gone from her head and her hair looked a bit wild. Her voice was a little slurred but she had started talking again. She talked about Calvin and what a great guy he was; about Austin, where she grew up; about her job and how much she loved it. It was like a flood pouring out of her.

I filled in her pauses with stories of "growing up grape," as Stan called it. I didn't think she would remember very much tomorrow but it felt good just talking with her.

When we were done, I set the glasses in the sink and the bottle in the recycle bin. She tried to get up but sat back down heavily and laughed. "I'm drunk!" she pronounced.

I smiled. "Maybe a little." I handed her a glass of water and four aspirin. "Take this and you'll thank me in the morning."

She drank up and took them.

"Let's go get you into bed, Lisa." With my help, she was able to get to my sister's room and seated on the bed.

Lisa hesitantly patted the bed beside her. "Do you want to stay?"

I nodded but didn't sit down. "I want to stay, but I can't."

She looked nonplussed. "Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be right," I said gently. "You're hurting and you've had too much to drink. I promised someone I wouldn't hurt you and as much as I want to stay, this would be wrong. We can talk about it tomorrow."

I did lean forward and kiss her on the forehead. Her hair smelled of apples and her breath of wine. She was intoxicating and I had to pull back right then or risk not leaving.

"I... Ted? Thank you."

I nodded and turned down her sheets. Then, I stepped to the door, putting out the light. "Goodnight, Lisa. I'll see you in the morning. If you need anything, my room is right across the hall." I closed the door with my last sight of her sitting there looking at me.

Walking slowly I stepped into my room. I leaned back against the door and held my shaking hands out in front of me. I wanted her. I wanted to stay but if I did, I wouldn't respect myself.

I stripped slowly, putting the clothes in the hamper, the belt and shoes in the closet. I set the cell phone on my nightstand and went into my bathroom, leaving the room dark behind me. The bright light of the bathroom stabbed at my eyes so I turned it off and let the nightlight do its job as my eyes adjusted.

Stepping into the shower, I soaked in the heat. Slowly, I washed the smell of fire and death away. I let my mind relax, breathing in and out slowly. By the time I was done, I felt tired and drained.

I shut off the water and dried myself, the rough towel feeling good against my skin. Brushing my hair and teeth took only a few minutes. I walked back into the dark bedroom and with practiced ease, I found the bed. Pulling back the covers, I slid between the crisp sheets. Laying back on my pillow, staring up at the unseen ceiling in the dark, I focused on my breathing and closed my eyes. Strange, I still smelled apples.

The movement in the bed startled me almost as much as the warm arm that glided across my stomach. The damp hair that pressed against my shoulder was the source of the scent of apples.

"Shhhhh," Lisa said sleepily. "I don't want to be alone tonight. Go to sleep."

I could feel the soft cotton of a nightgown against me and it only emphasized my nudity. Should I get up and dress or just let things ride? As I thought about it, her breathing slowed and became more regular. Soon, she was softly snoring. Well, that took the choice out of my hands.

The heat of her body aroused me. I lay there with her sleeping form spooned against me, her soft breasts pressing against my side, and tried to think of anything but her.

I failed.

When sleep finally claimed me, I was still thinking of Lisa.

Chapter Four: The tables are turned

Lisa's point of view

I slowly came to realize that the sense of well-being and comfort came from Ted. I was too drowsy to react but I could feel hands caressing me, touching me. Firm hands gently squeezed my breasts and pinched my nipples. The heat inside me built and I moaned softly. I wanted this, I realized. I welcomed it.

Lips kissed my neck and down the curve of my ribs, pausing for a few glorious minutes where the hands had been before. I arched my back and gripped the sheets in pleasure.

Gently, the lips kissed lower, the tongue caressed my belly button at length. I groaned. With gentle fingers, my flower was spread. Hot breath blew on my nub, shooting sparks up my spine and I tried to push myself onto the lips but they pulled back.

Suddenly, a tongue dug into my sex. I almost flew off the bed, arching and crying out. With a gentle savagery, I was tortured, bringing me higher and then letting me cool only to do it again. Once, twice, three times, I was at the brink and then allowed - no, forced - to settle before the lips began tirelessly arousing me further.

When I was almost there again, I felt fingers slide into me and the lips locked onto my clit, focused on my pleasure. The fingers rubbed that special spot inside me and I came explosively. I arched my back and a scream of pleasure erupted from my lips.

As I caught my breath, I smiled and looked down. Between my thighs, green eyes, framed in long black hair, sparkled back at me as Detective Hawkins kissed my most intimate place.

I sat bolt upright, breathing hard. I was alone in bed, clutching the sheets around me, feeling the soft cotton of my nightgown soaked in sweat. It had been a dream - only a dream.

My mind slowly cleared from the dream and realized I was not in my bedroom. I remembered going to sleep with Ted and now I was on his side of the bed, his pillows by my face before waking.

The memory about the horrible events of last night and where I was came flooding back. I felt a terrible emptiness inside me but it was quickly filled with anger. Someone

had tried to kill me and had taken my friend away from me.

Throwing the covers back, I sat on the edge of the bed. I let the chilled hardwood floor ground my feet and me along with it. The clock on the nightstand told me it was after eight in the morning. I never slept that late. I felt a spike of guilt at not being up.

I recalled the conversation from last night. I didn't really know Ted, though we had talked about a lot of things - I think - but he had been more of a gentleman than most men I had dated. I remembered offering myself to him and him refusing. I didn't think any man would say no to a woman he wanted. At least, not till now.

That must be why I dreamed... No, at least not all that dream was because of Ted. The thought of making love to Ted excited me. I felt a very strong attraction toward him despite the short time we had known one another. If it had been reality instead of a dream, I would have been happy to make love to him.

On the other hand, I'd never considered myself bisexual but I had to admit a strange attraction I felt toward Hawkins. I remembered the momentary thrill when I realized she had been looking at me. That she found me attractive. I don't know that I would ever make love to a woman but I think I could fantasize about her.

With a shake of my head, I climbed out of the bed and stepped over to the dresser. I nearly shrieked when I saw my hair. I must have gone to sleep with it wet because it looked like a flock of gulls had been nesting in it. With all the wine last night, I didn't remember clearly but the evidence spoke for itself.

There was a light knock at the door. "Are you decent?" Ted asked.

"No," I squealed as I bolted for the bathroom. "Give me a few minutes!" I slammed the bathroom door and locked it. There was no way I was letting him see me with my hair like this. No way in hell.

I stripped off the nightgown and climbed into the shower. The hot water slowly brought me back to life. I saved my hair for last and gave it a good washing. Shutting off the water, I dried it as well as possible and wrapped a towel around it. When I dried my body, I found it still reactive and sensitive. I smiled wryly.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I dropped the towel and looked at myself in the mirror. I saw a woman in good shape for her thirty years. Long legs, a generous swell of hips, trimmed thatch of blonde pubic hair shaped to entice. I did that for Ted, in case I

decided to go through with the fantasy that had been plaguing me all week. The flat stomach, my larger than average breasts with the small nipples. Too large for my chest, I thought. Not as firm as they used to be. Finally, a long neck and a slender face that I think still looked good, framed by long, blonde hair.

I pulled Ted's robe off the hook by the door and slid it over my shoulders, belting it tightly. His scent lingered strongly on it. I pulled it up around my neck and face to breathe it in. I had it bad.

When I came out of his room, the fragrance of something delicious cooking enticed me toward the kitchen. I realized I was parched. I needed to get something to drink. It felt like I had run a couple of miles - or had sex. I grinned but stopped and chided myself. How could I be thinking of sex now?

I could almost feel Calvin standing behind me; his presence was strong within me. Like a ghostly voice in my mind, I knew what he would tell me: "That's just being stupid, girl!"

I snorted softly. It wouldn't be right to run out and party but it wouldn't be right to deny myself, either. I'd just have to figure out a happy medium. I was sure Ted must be uncertain of what I wanted now. We'd have to talk it out today. It wasn't fair to him to keep him in the dark. After last night and this morning, he deserved better than that. It would be a while before I knew what direction to move in the investigation of the attack. If Hawkins thought I was going to steer clear and not look for my friend's killer, she was sadly mistaken.

As for Ted, I had to admit to myself that I wanted him, too. It had been two years and a couple of months since I had taken the job down here. It had been so busy, that I had never felt like dating. Was I a virgin again after two years of celibacy? I laughed silently at myself. Horny bitch.

I walked down the hall and stepped into the kitchen. Ted was flipping a pancake on the griddle. He was dressed in jeans and a tee shirt that proclaimed the merits of Stansbury Vineyards. Scrambled eggs, bacon, grits, orange juice and coffee were set out on the table. He looked over at me and smiled. His eyes, brown, not green, sparkled and I couldn't help but feel a shiver inside me.

I took a moment to catalog him in my mind. He was about my own 5' 8", fit and handsome, in a rugged sort of way. Brown hair and a winning smile capped my

impression. Stepping close to him, I kissed him softly on the lips, and then I drew back, holding him at arms length.

"Thank you for being a gentleman, Ted. I really, really needed that last night. I appreciate you not giving in to temptation. Calvin was right when he told me you seemed like a class act. I won't forget it."

Getting a glass from the drainer, I filled it with tap water and drank deeply before putting it in the sink. Then, pulling out a chair, I flipped it around and sat straddling the back. I knew it would be very suggestive to him. When his eyes caressed my legs, I smiled wider.

"No good deed goes unpunished."

Ted laughed. It sounded so - normal. Not average, mind you. Normal. Like today were any other day, and yesterday was a bad dream. Maybe one day it would really feel that way to me. For now, I needed to think about something else.

"It was hard to tell you 'no' last night. It took a lot of willpower to be a gentleman." He blushed at the memory.

That was so sweet. I didn't think a male older than twelve could be embarrassed by being attracted to a woman. That was a rare thing these days. It was then that I saw the fresh bunch of grapes and thought they looked almost as good as Ted. Ted must have noticed because he nodded and said, "Picked fresh this morning just for you. I left the alarm off so no one would wake you up till you were ready to wake up."

"It's not your thoughts that make you gentlemanly," I said firmly, "it's what you do about them. You respected me and let me get my bearings. I would have made love to you last night, if you had come into my bed. But I would have been wondering this morning if it was the right thing to do. When you turned me down, you proved to me that this isn't just about sex or physical attraction on your part. I thought about it before I slipped into your room last night. I want to spend time with you, get to know you better. Does that scare you?"

Ted smiled and put the last of the pancakes onto a platter on the table before sitting down opposite me.

"Some," Ted admitted. "The few times I have been intimate with someone, it ended badly." He shrugged. "I'm not going to say it was their fault or mine. Everyone's,

probably. I was in college and I'm afraid we all were more self-absorbed than I like to admit. Then my parents died and I had to work the vineyard with my brother and sister. There just weren't enough hours in the day." He smiled wryly. "There still aren't. I resisted spending my time away from here even a few nights a week until Stan dragged me out by my hair six months ago and it's taken me this long to really even talk to a woman."

I stood, stared at him, flipped the chair back around and leaned over the edge of the table as I sat again. "Are you telling me that you haven't dated since college? How long ago was that? Ten years? After I left my old boyfriend, Donny, to take the job here I haven't dated either and I thought that two years was a long time!"

Ted looked up at the ceiling and I could tell he was counting. It had been so long that he couldn't remember how much time had passed. God, had it been so long that he didn't even remember what she looked like or maybe even her name? My eyes grew wider. I was teasing this poor, deprived man and he *still* kept his hands to himself with me in his bed? He wasn't a gentleman, he was a saint. Saint Ted, patron of self-control. I gulped and pulled my expression back under control before he looked back down.

"Eleven. Give or take," Ted said matter-of-factly. "After the first couple of years, it's not such a big deal anymore. Like being a monk, I suppose." He started piling pancakes and the fixings on a plate as I sat there feeling like an idiot. "Is something wrong?"

I closed my mouth with a snap. "I should apologize for teasing you like I have been. It seems cruel, now." I pulled a plate over and started filling it with a selection of food.

"It isn't cruel," he disagreed. "I've enjoyed it. Let me put this into a wine frame of reference. When a taster drinks a fine wine, he opens the bottle, and examines the cork. He pours the wine into a glass slowly and swirls it to examine the body of the wine. He'll then bring the glass to his nose and take in the bouquet of the wine. He takes a small sip, holds it on the center of his cupped tongue and breathes in through his mouth slowly to draw the taste across his tongue to get the whole flavor. Finally, he swallows and savors the aftertaste the wine leaves in his mouth. Just drinking it would leave so much out of the experience."

Ted smiled widely at me. "I think I'm about at the smelling of the wine stage with you. I'm looking forward to tasting you."

My breath froze in my body at the emotions his description evoked in me. I don't know that I had ever been made love to with as much passion as he spoke about tasting

wine. My heart beat faster within my breast and I felt myself melting inside. The connection between us seemed to be getting deeper with every second I stared into his eyes. It was like a flame moving between us. Did he feel it, too?

Before I could delve deeper into that, I heard the slam of a door somewhere in the house. It startled me. The sound of shoes on marble and a shout followed.

"Ted!"

Ted's brother, Stan, came barreling into the room, looking a bit disheveled. He caught Ted as he was rising from the chair and slapped a bear hug on him. "I heard about the explosion this morning! I thought you were dead!"

As they clutched each other, I felt my eyes mist over. I wasn't sure if it was because of the expression of love they had for each other or my own loss. I almost missed Dina coming in behind him. She came over and hugged me. "I'm so sorry."

I held her for a moment and then let go. "It still seems unreal."

Stan released his brother and came over grabbing me into the same kind of bear hug he gave Ted, surprising me. "I was so worried about you, too!" His embrace shocked me and I stared at Ted over Stan's shoulder. Ted smiled and shook his head.

"Stan doesn't have any casual acquaintances. He knows your name and he likes you so you're a friend."

I smiled and hugged Stan back. "Thank you, Stan. That means a lot."

Stan released me and stepped back to Dina, slipping his arm around her waist. "Oh, food! We haven't eaten." He sat down and wanted to know everything we knew, which wasn't much. I talked while Ted served. The heat in the room seemed to have cooled but I felt a spark every time Ted spoke.

We ate and talked for about an hour. Then Dina rose from the table. "Thank you for breakfast, but Stan and I have to run into the city for a while."

Stan looked confused. "We do?"

She nodded firmly. "Yes, we do. Come along, Stan." She pulled the confused Stan out of the room and out of the house. I just had to laugh. Ted laughed with me.

"She's the sharper of the pair, I'm afraid. I'm happy she came into his life." He looked down at the table and then back up at me. "And, even with all the pain, I'm happy you have come into mine."

I reached across the table and held his hand. "Ted, I'm happy to have you with me, too. Thank you."

After a few minutes, Ted shook himself and rose to his feet. "I'll clean up. Why don't you see if some of my sister's things fit you?"

"I'll be right back." I let him clean up and returned to my - to his sister's room. This time, I really looked it over. Tastefully done, not overly feminine but the touch was there. I didn't want to wear another woman's under-things but I could at least find some outer clothes to borrow. At that point, I spotted a folded garment on the dresser. It looked like - it was - my underwear. Beside it was a scrawled note.

"Lisa, I think all things being equal, you need these now more than I do. I really appreciate you giving them to me like you did and I look forward to trying again. Ted."

I held the note to my breast and my eyes misted over again. This was more than I expected. Taking the robe off, I slid my underwear on and after a few minutes found something that fit well enough to wear until I was able to get more clothes. I pulled my brush and make-up from my purse and sat down at the vanity to make myself presentable.

When I was done, I slipped on my shoes and went back to the kitchen. It was clean and Ted was not there. I went back toward the rear of the house and found him standing at the window staring out at what looked like a hundred rows of grapevines. I stepped behind him, sliding my arms around his stomach and putting my head on his shoulder.

"I wanted to show you all this last night," he said quietly. "For what seemed like hours, I lay there next to you and imagined what we would do today. Every step choreographed. Now, I don't know what to do."

I squeezed him gently. "I'm sure freeform will be just as good, Ted. You've made a good impression. You're not going to upset me by just doing what feels right."

Ted turned and looked into my eyes. "I still want you, but I want to see what the day

shows us first. You need some clothes and I want to show you around Spring. It's a really nice place. I think you'll like it."

I kissed him on the cheek and let go. "Then let's go do that before Detective Hawkins calls."

Ted drove us into Spring and I was amazed. The main street was lined with stores that looked like they were from the last century. People thronged up and down the street under the shade trees. The romantic atmosphere was a warm shock to me.

"Stop," I said suddenly. "I want to walk on the sidewalk."

Ted pulled over and parked the car. Together, we stepped out and began walking up the street. Every little shop called to me, begging me to come in and see what it looked like inside. Ted slipped an arm around my shoulders and I snuggled up to him, my arm around his waist. This felt so comfortable. Like we had known each other all our lives. It was both frightening and exhilarating.

Ted turned us into a clothing store called Rose Petals. With him at my side, I walked and looked at the selection. I was able to find several sets of casual clothes that I thought would be good for walking in a vineyard. I went into the changing room and came out several times to see how he thought I looked.

Ted's eyes sparkled when he looked at me. I could see his eyes dilate and I knew he liked what he saw. I felt all mushy inside again as he watched me. I picked a nice skirt/blouse set to round out the outfit and with only a moment's hesitation, I pulled my panties back off and folding them neatly slipped them into my purse. When I came out, I enjoyed his expression as he looked at my legs. I could tell he was remembering last night.

The shopkeeper was busy with a customer up front, so I stepped behind a rack of clothes. Ted watched me with a bemused expression. With a quick breath, I reached down and slid the front of my skirt up. His eyes widened as he swallowed. That sweet flush climbed his neck and colored his face. I could feel his eyes caressing my most private place and I was instantly damp.

"I don't think it's fair for Detective Hawkins to have a good look but my date miss out. Well, Ted, do you agree with her? Am I worth looking at?"

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "I like looking at you, even with clothes on. You're beautiful." With a glance up front, he stepped beside me, surprising me by reaching out and running his hand softly between my legs.

I felt weak in the knees and had to stifle a moan. The dream this morning flashed back into my mind and I sagged against him, letting him touch me. He rubbed my labia and ran a finger between them, across my nub. I forgot where we were, I wanted him now. Here.

"Good morning," A voice said, startling us both from the other side of the clothes rack. Both of our heads turned and stared at the female clerk. All we could see was her shoulders and head, thank God. "Can I help you folks find anything?"

I expected Ted to step back but he held his ground, his finger making it hard for me to even think or speak. "No, I think we're finding everything we need." He looked at me. "Lisa, do you need anything else? Is what you are finding good?"

The woman looked at me. I tried to speak and it took a moment for me to find my voice. "I... Yes, I'm finding everything here good." I looked at Ted. "I need some other things, but we'll need to go find them somewhere else." I looked back at her.

All the while, Ted tortured me in front of this total stranger. His expression remained smokey and she finally seemed to catch on.

"Oh! I'll just let you two lovebirds shop. I'll be up front if you need any help." With a smile, she returned to the cash register.

I turned and pulled him into my arms, kissing him deeply as he touched me. He stepped back before I fell down and I let my skirt drop. I was breathing heavily and debated pulling him back into the dressing room right here and now. I almost did when he brought his hand to his lips and licked his fingers.

"Now I know something that Hawk doesn't," he said with a smile. "I know that you are sweeter than the finest wine." A vision of Hawkins's eyes looking over my mons crossed my mind, then the thought of him there, too. I stepped toward him but he slid an arm around me and started leading me up front instead of letting me lead him away.

"Now, now, let's not spoil your appetite with sweets before we finish shopping!" That infuriating smile was all over his face and damned if the woman at the counter wasn't sharing it.

"Get everything you need?" she asked with a wide smile.

"It's a start," Ted answered.

She rang up my purchases and bagged them for me. As we were stepping out the door, Ted looked back and paused. "Look over at the back wall."

I turned, looking back past the smiling saleswoman at the back wall. It took me a moment to see what he was getting at. There was a security mirror in the corner so the cashier could see the entire store. She had been watching Ted play with me! Blushing from both embarrassment and excitement, I kissed him again.

"God, Ted, lets go home right now."

Ted shook his head. "No, I don't think rushing would be right."

I groaned. "Ted! I need..."

Ted put a finger to my lips. "I know. I want to so badly that I can taste it." He smiled. "Literally and figuratively. But, I'm not going to rush this right now. Let's get you some comfortable shoes and have some lunch. Then we can drive back to the vineyard."

The scent of my arousal rose from his hand and I couldn't help myself. I took his finger into my mouth and caressed it with my tongue. My flavor exploded onto my senses and I shivered against him.

With some effort, I pulled back and put an arm around his waist. A glance back as we exited told me that the shopkeeper was watching us, still smiling. "I don't need shoes," I husked.

He smiled at me. "Of course you do! We'll just go right over here and get some." The shop with the shoe on the shingle would have looked inviting on any other morning. With a sigh of resignation, I followed him in. The boy at the counter looked up and smiled at us.

"Can I help you folks?"

Ted stopped next to him. "Yes, we need some ladies tennis shoes."

The boy pointed. "Aisle 3, all the way back."

Ted smiled. "Thanks."

We made our way back and I knew now that both of us were going to be hungry when we left here for lunch. I was not going to be outdone by Ted. I found several sets of shoes in my size and then sat down on the little bench.

"Why don't you try them on me, Ted?" I asked in my most sultry voice. Then I opened my legs and let him look at me again. He rapidly discovered it was impossible to fit a shoe on me when he wasn't looking at my feet. From this angle, I had a nice view of his bulging pants and it made me breathe faster. As he fitted the shoe on my foot, I reached down and touched myself. It was not as nice as his touch but it would have to do. I rubbed myself and slowly worked a finger into my depths as he watched, the shoes forgotten.

"The shoes, Ted?" I asked archly. "I don't think they'll work. Try the next set, please."

When he leaned toward me, I put my other hand on his head and held him back. "Oh, no. No dessert until we finish eating lunch. It'll ruin your appetite." It took all my willpower to do that. I wanted him so bad. I began toying with my clit, masturbating for him. Doing it in public set me on fire and I knew I was not going to last very long at all.

After two more pairs of shoes, I sped up my fingers and started my rise to the crescendo. I never even realized my eyes were closed until Ted pulled my hand away from my sex and I opened them in surprise. I tried to use my other hand and he trapped both of them.

"No. Bad girl. No dessert until we finish lunch."

I groaned in need but he was adamant. The shoes on my feet were what I was getting, as he didn't give me a choice. He pulled me to my feet and almost dragged me up front. I must have looked a real sight as the boy was gawking at me.

"Here's the box. We'll take these on her feet," Ted said. The boy rang us up and before I could catch my breath, we were out the door. He pulled me into a café down the street.

Ted asked for directions to the restrooms but stopped me outside the ladies room. "Remember, no dessert until after we eat. Okay?"

I nodded spasmodically and he let me go with a kiss. Once inside, I looked at the stall longingly but I was not going to cheat. I washed my hands and got myself under control. Then I went back where he was waiting with a smile. In a few minutes, we were seated.

I could have cared less what they served for lunch and if I thought I could have gotten away with it, I would have ordered takeout. Ted insisted on a booth seat. We ordered drinks and some sandwiches. I just picked the first thing on the menu.

After the drinks arrived, I sipped my water and planned my next action but Ted beat me to it. With a shock, I felt his bare foot rubbing my inner thigh. I moaned softly before I caught myself. Then his foot moved in and began toying with me.

Until the food arrived, it was torture. He would rub me and leave me wanting. His revenge for last night's dinner was complete. It took all my will to not groan when the food arrived and his foot withdrew.

The meal was a blur. I'm surprised I didn't choke, I was eating so fast. I would have needed a Heimlich for sure. Ted, on the other hand, ate slowly and his eyes just kept watching me. I took a deep breath and slowed down. That lunch was the longest forty-five minutes of my life.

When we finished, Ted put an arm around my waist and carried my purchases. I'm not sure how he got his sock and shoe back on. I wanted to run to the car but he held us to a leisurely walk. After what seemed like a couple of years, we made it to his car and I flew into my seat and buckled myself in. As he slowly strapped himself in, I started laughing.

Ted started the car and looked at me. "What is it?"

I got control of myself and kissed him deeply. "I just realized I started this by wanting to make you desire me and now you've put the shoe on the other foot. You're making me want you badly."

Ted kissed me one final time, and then pulled onto the road. "It's not a good meal unless everyone leaves the table wanting more." As the car turned left at the light he winked at me. "So, shall we take the scenic route?"

I could only imagine the people on the street staring at the car as my groan of

anguished desire sailed back to them on the breeze.

Chapter Five: A fight before satisfaction

Lisa's point of view

On the drive back to the vineyard, Ted seemed to take every back road he knew. I tried to watch the scenery and act as though it didn't matter how long it took to get back to his house but I was melting in my seat. Never in my life had I been so worked up as this morning and I needed release. He wouldn't let me touch myself but he did reach over every few minutes and caress me, like he was keeping a pot simmering.

My glorious plans to drag him right into the bedroom and have my way with him hit a roadblock as soon as we pulled into the driveway. There was a black SUV sitting there. Both of us said the same thing explosively at the same time. "Shit!" It was good to know that I had him wanting me as badly as I wanted him.

Ted brought the car to a halt and climbed out. As he frowned at the vehicle, the door to the SUV opened and a man got out. Boy, did he look pissed.

The man stalked right up to Ted and got in his face as I was getting out of the car. "You son of a bitch," he shouted at Ted. "Who the hell do you think you are, trying to sic the police on me, asshole? You think I tried to blow you up and got the wrong car? Screw you!"

Ted stood his ground and didn't flip out. I can't believe Ted kept his cool. This guy frightened the hell out of me. I fumbled in my purse while Ted responded.

"Back off, Price. I didn't tell them you did it, just that we had words. This is private property so get off it before I give in to temptation and throw your sorry ass off it."

This testosterone fest was getting out of hand. I could tell from the way that Price guy was turning red and tensing up.

"Stop it," I said loudly. "Get back in your car and get moving, whoever you are."

That focused Price's attention on me. Bad call on my part. He started towards me. "Fuck you, cunt! You were just lucky that bomb was on the wrong car, killed your fag friend

and didn't kill the right guy and you with him! Oh, didn't think it would get out?" he sneered. "It's all over the news. Queer killed at club, film at 11!"

Ted grabbed him around the throat from behind as I reeled back in fear and shock. He elbowed Ted and twisted loose. Then they started circling and exchanging blows.

I pulled myself together and decided it would take too long to call the police so instead I pulled out my mace. I stepped in and aimed it right into his face as he reacted to me, swinging. The mace went flying and I stumbled back.

Ted caught him with a body blow as they grappled, fists flying. The prick's fist exploded against Ted's jaw and he went sprawling. Price stepped up and kicked him.

I started screaming and scrambled for the fallen mace. I had to stop him from hurting Ted! Mace in hand, I ran back around him and sprayed. He screamed and swung blindly at me. The world exploded in stars and the universe landed on me like a ton of bricks. I heard more screaming, so I must have been awake.

The screaming cut off after a few moments with the meaty sound of blows. I tried to get my bearings and call out for Ted or crawl to him but I couldn't seem to gather my rattled wits. With a sudden movement, everything shifted and I was looking up at Ted. He looked worried. "Lisa, are you okay?"

I shook my head and decided I was going to live but my face hurt. "Owww! That prick hit me! Let me up!" I was suddenly furious. Was testosterone contagious?

Ted helped me up. I saw our attacker huddled in a ball on the ground, moaning and writhing, his hands covering his face.

Before Ted could stop me, I planted my heel right into the prick's crotch. As he screamed, flopped and retched, Ted wrapped his arms around me, pulling me back, laughing. "He's down. Let it go. We'll call the Sheriff."

I struggled against him for a moment before I came to my senses. Reluctantly, I nodded and stepped back, trembling from the adrenaline rush of what had just happened. He pulled his cell phone from his belt and dialed. I could hear him speaking as I stalked back and forth. I was trying to get a grip on my fear and anger.

Right after Ted hung up, I saw a dust plume from a red sedan coming up the drive. It couldn't be the Sheriff. It was way too soon. Dina was driving with Stan in the

passenger seat and a woman in the back. They all piled out when it pulled to a stop and took in the scene with surprise.

"What in heaven's name is going on?" Stan asked. Briefly, Ted told him and Stan's face contorted in the first angry expression I had seen on him. He stalked off towards the back of the house, muttering under his breath.

The woman threw herself into Ted's arms and I stopped, open mouthed in surprise. Dina must have seen my expression, because she shook her head and pulled me aside. "That's his sister, Sue. We just picked her up at the airport. She flew in when Stan called her." She frowned at me. "What happened to you?"

I growled, pointing at the prick. "He hit me before Ted took him out."

Dina's eyes narrowed and glittered dangerously. Now it was my turn to hold someone back from going after him.

"No. I already kicked him in the nuts. Wait for the police," I said calmly.

"Good!" Dina exclaimed.

Stan returned with a length of rope. He flipped the prick over and tied his hands behind him. "That should hold him."

Ted came over to me with his arm around his sister. Up close, I could see some family resemblance. She was crying a little. "Lisa, this is my little sister, Sue. Sue, this is Lisa. I'm not sure but I *think* she's my girlfriend."

I snorted. "Yes, Ted, I'm your girlfriend." I held out my arms and hugged his sister.

"I heard what happened," Sue said. "I'm happy Ted and you are okay but I'm so sorry about your friend. Do they know who did it? Was it that guy?" She gestured at the prick as she let go of me.

"Damned if I know," I responded. "He doesn't like Ted very much, so maybe. The police will get it out of him."

A siren growing louder drew our attention to a sheriff's car as it turned into the drive and sped towards us, dust plume behind it. After it came to a stop, a deputy jumped out. Not one of those from last night but that made sense - they wouldn't be on duty.

The deputy looked around, his hand near his gun and then laughed. "Looks like things are under control."

Ted gave him a rundown and a second car arrived with an ambulance while they were going through the event. The two deputies took the recovering prick, cuffed him, removed the rope and handed him off to the paramedics to treat the mace.

Price started shouting that we had attacked him and that he was pressing charges. The paramedic told him to shut up.

One of the deputies, Cavanaugh, took our official statements. I showed him my DA's badge and he nodded. "Good enough for me. Sounds like his sleaze ball word against a respected property owner and an officer of the court on private property. We'll take him in and let the judge deal with him. I wouldn't worry about his assault charge sticking, though. I'd like to get some pictures of your face, Miss Davis."

I nodded and he took several pictures. When he finished, I was starting to ache and just wanted to go inside. I wondered if steak really worked for black eyes.

Sue put her arm around my shoulders and started leading me inside. "Come on, Sugar. Dina is inside fixing some tea. Let's go in and let the men-folk deal with taking out the garbage."

Not resisting, I let Sue lead me into the cool inside. Dina was bringing a pitcher of tea and some glasses with ice into the living room.

"Just sit down and I'll take a look at your face," Sue said.

The comfortable leather couch seemed to draw me in as I sat down, exhausted, the adrenaline high dropping off abruptly. Dina poured me a glass and I sipped the sweetened tea slowly as she sat next to me. The quiet washed over us.

A few minutes later, Sue was back with a damp wash cloth, an ice pack and a grin. I wasn't sure what she was smiling about. "What's so funny," I asked her as she knelt in front of me.

Sue's eyes twinkled. "I'm not sure I should say. We've only just met and it might be a bit embarrassing."

I was liking her already. "Don't worry about my sense of humor. I can take it, Sue."

"Okay, Stan told me you stayed here last night. My bed doesn't look slept in. I doubt you slept in Stan's room so..."

Dina giggled and they both stared at me.

I felt the burn of a good blush and tried to fight it off. "No," I said. "Hold up! We slept together but nothing happened." Hmmm. I'd heard that before and didn't believe it then either. They weren't buying what I was selling. "Really! He was a perfect gentleman."

"Sure, okay," said a smiling Dina. "We understand. You just slept in the same bed." She leaned forward. "That's all Stan and I did, too."

Sue started laughing. "I can see my brothers have hit the jackpot with you two. You're pistols! We're going to get along just fine!"

I gave up. I might as well just accept that they thought we were sleeping together. It would be true as soon as I could get Ted alone, anyway. I threw my hands up. "Fine, you caught us. We spent all night making passionate love. Ted is a sex god!"

Sue kept laughing and hugged me. "Oh, God! I am so happy that he found you! I was afraid he would stay locked up in this place and waste away. He's a good man and he deserves happiness. Thank you!"

Sue wrapped the ice pack with the cloth after cleaning my face and I held it over my bruised eye. I was going to have a shiner, I bet. That damned asshole. I'd have to keep the ice handy and put it on occasionally to lessen the bruising.

We all heard a catchy little jingle coming from my purse. I let her go with a smile and pulled my cell phone out. Sue sat down in a chair as I answered it.

"Davis," I said.

"Where are you," an imperious male voice asked. I couldn't help but recognize it. It was my older brother, Arthur. He sounded irked, as usual. This day just kept getting worse.

"Where I am is none of your business," I snapped back.

"Hey, I was just checking, since the news mentioned your close escape. Forgive me for doing the family thing."

As Arthur droned, the front door opened. Ted and Stan came inside. Ted sat next to me on the couch while his brother sat down on the love seat with Dina cuddling up to him. Why couldn't I have a brother like Stan? Why is it always other people's families that are worth a damn?

"You haven't given a crap about me since mother re-wrote the will, Arthur! Try again. She's in the home and doesn't even know her own name anymore. Do you come and visit? No! So don't try to weasel your way back into my life so easily. You burned that bridge when you became a 'freedom fighter,' joined the militia, told me to take my government lips and plant them in the State's ass."

I hung up the phone and dropped it into my purse. Now I was trembling again. Ted put his arm around me and held me close. I couldn't stop shaking and then the tears started. Damn it all to hell! I hated crying, but I couldn't shut the faucet off. He pulled my head onto his shoulder as I sobbed. I felt his hand stroking my hair until I was cried out.

"You know, Calvin wasn't like that," I sniffled. "The things that prick said really hurt. Calvin was my friend and I loved him!"

Ted touched my face softly. "Don't worry about it. Price is an arrogant, insensitive prick who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. It doesn't matter what a person's sexual orientation is. What's important is what kind of person they are. He was a good man and I know he loved you, too."

That started another rush of tears. When I pulled back from him, I saw the rest had withdrawn and left us alone. A box of Kleenex was now sitting in the center of the coffee table. I took a tissue and blew my nose. As I was wiping my eyes, he just held me. "Are you sure I'm a good catch as a girlfriend, Ted? I seem to cry a lot. I might be high maintenance."

Ted kissed my cheek. "I'm sure. And, no, you're not high maintenance. It's been a rough couple of days."

I smiled through the remaining tears. "Good, because they know we're sleeping together."

Ted looked at me wide-eyed. "They know what? Who knows what?"

"Dina and Sue. Sue especially. She guessed we were having sex so I told her it was true."

We started laughing and then he kissed me again. And again. Soon we were making out on the couch like teenagers. When he came up for air, he looked into my eyes from a few inches away, our noses touching. "Well, then, I better let you sample the goods so you can giggle away all the right details when Dina puts the thumbscrews to you."

I looked at him. "Now? Your sister and brother are in the house! They'll know!"

"They already know, courtesy of you. You know they're talking about us right now."

My face flushed. "They probably are."

Ted grinned at me. "So, Miss Exhibitionist, shall I make love to you right here on the couch?"

I blushed furiously and I felt my treacherous pussy start watering at the idea. Dammit! The idea excited me but I was *not* going to make love on the couch! Especially with his family hiding under every nook and cranny!

"You look unsure," Ted said with a grin. "Let's not push that showoff streak of yours too far just yet." He stood up, picking me up in his arms. "It's time to go get dessert. I'm starving, Lisa. Are you hungry?"

I snaked my arms around his neck and kissed him. "I need you. Right now. If that means you making love to me on the couch with your family sitting right here and calling out comments, I'll do it."

"That's my girl but not this time. Let's get some privacy." He started carrying me towards the bedroom.

I stopped him and pointed. "My purse, please."

He snagged it without letting me out of his arms, and then he resumed our trip back to the bedroom. "Stan, Sue, Dina, I'm going in back with Lisa for a while. Answer the phone and keep away the salesmen, okay?" he called out.

A trio of laughs came out of the kitchen. "We've got you covered, Bro," Stan called back. "Take your time."

"Oh, I intend to," Ted said softly, just to me. "I intend to make this perfect. Just like you."

I watched him as he carried me into his bedroom and kicked the door shut with one foot. Laying me gently on the still unmade bed, he untied and removed my shoes. We never bought any socks for me, I realized. Then he pulled his own shoes off and slid up next to me, kissing me deeply. The feel of his body next to mine, his arms caressing my back and the scent of his skin stoked the fire inside me.

I was about to push him back, to start doing things to him when he began kissing my neck and ears. Jolts of pleasure ran through my nerves and I sighed happily. The scent of his hair was twisting my insides into knots. The good kind. His strong hands began caressing my breasts through my clothes. My nipples were so stiff they ached with sensitivity. His gentle squeezing and rubbing made me growl with desire.

Ted chuckled at the noise I made and began unbuttoning my blouse with maddening slowness. Since I had not worn a bra last night, I didn't have one on now. Another lacking we failed to fix in town. As my breasts came into view, I could hear his intake of breath.

"Do you like them?"

Ted looked into my eyes. "Like the rest of you, they are perfect."

I smiled and started to say something pert but I lost control of my speech centers when his tongue began circling my nipple. The shocking dampness of his mouth made it tingle with need. My comment became a groan and I ran my hands through his hair. Lips and gentle nips with his teeth followed as he slowly made the journey from one breast to the other.

His hands were not still as he sampled my breasts. They finished unbuttoning my blouse and then ran up my body, returning to gently squeeze me. I didn't think I could come with just my breasts being stimulated but I was close.

When he finally began kissing his way down my stomach, I could feel my muscles rippling under his lips. I must have sounded like I was running a marathon, my

breathing was so hard. I began mauling my breasts, pinching my nipples and adding to my pleasure as he made his way lower. He didn't take off my skirt but instead lifted it. Then he began kissing, licking and gently biting my inner thigh. I moaned in response and thrust my hips at him. The bastard just smiled and started kissing his way down my leg, away from my sex.

The muscles in my leg trembled under his onslaught. That wicked tongue tortured me and after what seemed like an hour, he was at my foot. He held my foot and began licking my toes, taking them one by one into his mouth, teasing them.

"God, that feels good. Lick my toes..." I rubbed my other foot along his back as he made love to my foot, licking along the arch and across the top.

Ted stopped, stood up, and began slowly undressing for me. I watched through a haze of arousal as he did a little turn. He bumped and ground his way through a striptease. Sexy as hell, his body was tanned and fit, stomach flat. When he pulled his pants down, the bulge in his underwear spoke deeply of his desire for me.

I went from damp to soaking wet instantly. Forget foreplay. I wanted him now. I *needed* him now. "Ted, make love to me."

"I've been a good boy and I want my dessert." He pulled his underwear down. His cock stood out, straight and proud. I focused my attention on it lustily. It was bit longer than average and thick. I shivered as I imagined it splitting me wide open. I slid my hands down and started fingering myself as he watched. I expected him to stop me but he just started kissing and licking my other foot.

By the time he had made it to my knee, I was moaning and shaking, getting oh so close. He hands snaked their way up and I felt his fingers interlace with mine, stopping me again. I groaned and tried the other hand only to have it captured as well.

"That's my job, so just lie back and let me do the driving."

"You are," I said back, my voice husky with desire. "You're driving me crazy. You've tortured me all day..."

Ted laughed and kissed my inner thigh. "Like you did at dinner last night?"

I nodded jerkily. "Yes, but worse. You keep letting me getting close but won't let me come. I need to come. Please, Ted. Please. I'm begging, see? I give up. I'm yours. I'll

do whatever you want, here or anywhere else, anything, anytime. Just stop torturing me! I want you!"

"I'll remember that and hold you to it, but I promise never to make you regret it." His lips kissed up my thigh and to the shaved area beside my outer lips. I heard him breathe in deeply and knew he was sampling my scent. As wet as I was, I knew he was getting a lungful of my muskiness. Then he began a campaign of kissing and licking everywhere on my crotch except my sex. It sent so much sensation along my spine that I arched my back, ground my mons into his face and moaned like a slut in heat. He relented and *just* like in my dream, a hot tongue dug between the petals of my flower. He began eating me in earnest. I looked down at him, his brown eyes smiling and watching me. This was no dream. Fantasies about Hawkins couldn't compare.

I groaned. My hands tore free of his and grasped his head, grinding my crotch into his face. Finally! The pent up floodgates tore open and I could hear him licking me wetly. I was going to drown him in my nectar. When his lips found my clit and began sucking it at the same time he worked two fingers inside me, I thought I was going to die from the pleasure. My heart was beating wildly in my chest and my nerves were shooting off random signals. I was twitching and groaning. My sight seemed to be shrinking into tunnel vision and I could hear a scream building in the air. A part of my mind wondered who was screaming before I realized it must be me.

Suddenly, my orgasm was upon me, massive and as unstoppable as a freight train. I knew I was screaming my pleasure loud enough that the neighbors could hear me, that his family and Dina could hear me. I didn't care. My feet beat a tattoo on the bed as I trembled and my vision danced with stars. Oddly, the scent of him from the pillows was overpowering and erotic. It only made me lust for him more deeply.

Then I was pushing him weakly away, abruptly too sensitive for him to touch me there. My pussy was on fire. I pulled him up on top of me and began kissing him furiously. His face was covered in my juices. I licked him across the cheeks and lips, suddenly hungry. An odd thought went through my mind as I tasted myself. I wondered if Hawkins tasted like me, so sweet and tangy. Again, I felt a stab of heat deep in my loins. I almost laughed out loud. Part of me wanted to find out. Maybe I was bi-curious after all.

As we caught our breath, my phone went off again. I laughed. "It never fails. Well, whoever it is can damned well wait. I have more important things to do." I pulled his face to mine. He zeroed back in on my mouth and we kissed like young lovers. My phone stopped ringing, then his went off, but we were not at all interested in it.

I could feel his manhood rubbing against me as he slowly moved on top of me. I didn't want to wait one more second. "Fuck me," I said. "I want to feel you inside me now."

"I need to get a condom," Ted said as he started to get up.

I pulled him back on top of me. "I'm on the pill and neither of us has had sex in a while. We're safe. Just do it."

"What do you want inside you?" he whispered back. his voice hot with his own desire.

I groaned. "You know what I want. I want you inside me now!"

"Tell me," he commanded. "Tell me what you want inside you."

"Your cock," I almost screamed. "Fuck me with that big, hard cock of yours!"

Ted reached down and began rubbing his smaller head across me. Between my lips and across my nub. I groaned and bucked like an animal beneath him. Then I felt him pushing inside me, spreading me, and then he stopped.

The feeling of him just inside me made something snap in me. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, fighting, struggling to thrust myself up onto him. "Fuck me, fuck me, FUCK ME!" I kissed his neck and his scent drove me wild.

Ted slid forward and buried himself in my sopping sex in one slow, agonizingly pleasurable thrust. My wail of happiness was, if anything, louder than the one before. With slow and deliberate motions, he started pulling out almost all the way before filling me with that pole of his. I felt wonderfully full and stuffed.

I began moving in time with his thrusts. When he started kissing my neck as he coupled with me, I threw my head back and moaned with each penetration. The inside of my mind was a jumble of primitive emotions and sensations. I was lost in the moment, nothing else mattered but him.

Ted began thrusting harder and faster. The friction was driving me to places I never suspected might exist. I felt more alive than I could remember. We struggled to become one. He grasped my hips and stood on his knees, powering himself into my depths.

"God, Lisa..."

I looked up at him, my chest heaving.

"Do it," I egged him on. "Come inside me. I need you to. I want you to. Fuck my hot, wet pussy, Ted. Fill me up." I could feel his thrusts bringing me closer to a massive orgasm but I didn't think I was going to get there before him. I began wildly moving against him and struggled to make my own pleasure.

Ted saw my need and buried himself in me. He held still to cool himself and heat me up.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" I reached between us and began madly rubbing my clit. My cries continued and got louder as I rose on the crest of an intense orgasm.

Then he started thrusting again and with shocking suddenness, Ted arched his back, his face contorted wildly. I felt him swell inside me and begin twitching and pulsing. The incredible hot, wet sensation of Ted's come inside me overwhelmed my last resistance and I wailed as my orgasm took me away like a tidal wave.

Ted groaned in anguished pleasure as my legs and pussy clamped down on him while I writhed madly beneath him. His face a grimace of ecstasy as I couldn't stop myself from scratching his back with my nails.

As suddenly as it was upon us, the waves began to recede. He collapsed on me. His breathing was loud and fast in my ear. The sensations filled me with a warm afterglow. We kissed slowly, tenderly, sensuously.

Ted whispered softly. "I know we only just met and this is wildly too soon to say this but I think I'm falling for you."

I felt my insides melt again and my heart seemed to fill my chest. "I *know* it's too soon but I think I'm falling for you, too." I kissed him tenderly and started weeping a little with emotion. "It's been a long time." I laughed at myself. "Let's not get hung up on words." I gave him another kiss.

"We have a deal, lover."

A spike of pleasure ran through me. "Think Mister Grape has another round of juice for me?" I asked saucily.

Ted smiled back at me and kissed me deeply. "I bet so."

We made love again, slowly and passionately this time. I didn't have any more earth shattering orgasms but the two small ones I had made me feel really good when Ted finally came in me again. I was so happy. I will admit that I couldn't help myself. I screamed my pleasure and egged him on loudly as he climbed Mount Everest again. I felt no restraint as I let everyone know what a great lover Ted was and how much of a good time I was having.

We showered, caressing each other in the soapy water, not hungry for sex but for the touch of the other. I saw the long, deep scratches in his back and felt shocked. I don't think I've ever scratched up a man like I had Ted.

"Oh, Ted! I've scratched you to pieces! I'm so sorry!"

Ted smiled at me and shook his head. "It's okay. I'll take it as a compliment."

When we shut the water off, I found something in the medicine cabinet and doctored his back. He tried not to wince and that made me feel worse. When I was done, he held me.

"You were absolutely terrific. Don't be upset, please. You are far and away the best lover I've ever had."

My heart fluttered again and I held him for a minute. When we separated, we each scrambled back into our scattered clothes. The clock said that almost an hour and a half had passed. Now I was thirsty *and* hungry. A quick check of my phone told me that Detective Hawkins had called. So did Ted's.

I grinned at him as we closed the bedroom door behind us. "I think we're going to get some ribbing when we get to the kitchen. They just might have heard us," I said.

Ted smiled back and kissed me. "They heard you. Don't let it embarrass you."

I laughed in turn. "Me? You're the one that blushes at the drop of a hat!"

We stepped into the kitchen, arm in arm, and the ongoing conversation there ceased. Sitting all around the table, they grinned at us. All four of them. Stan, Dina, Sue and - Detective Hawkins.

Chapter Six: Flying with the Hawk

Hawk's point of view

The lovers looked a bit shocked when they came into the kitchen. Judging from the volume at which Lisa had been proclaiming her pleasure, their embarrassment wasn't because there was an audience; it was because *I* was part of the audience.

With the shiner she was sporting, I would have scowled harshly at Ted if the trio had not already given me the gossip. That pissed me off. The fact that Lisa kicked him in the nuts made it a lot better.

I had spent a good amount of time getting to know Ted's brother Stan, his sister Sue and Stan's girlfriend Dina. They had all seemed pretty embarrassed about the noises coming from down the hall, even though I gathered they had been joking about it before I showed up. Stan had tried to give me the bum's rush when I arrived, telling me they were not available, but then Lisa started having a really good - and loud - time. That kind of screaming meant one thing: Ted knew what he was doing. Her exclamations made my mouth water. I grinned and told Stan I'd wait. After an uncomfortable minute in the kitchen with Stan, Sue and Dina, I was joking and talking about the absent lovers right along with them.

Now, as Ted and Lisa stared at me, I grinned back at them. "I tried calling ahead to tell you I was almost here, but you were - busy. I hope you don't mind that I waited for you."

They both blushed nicely but pulled themselves together with admirable efficiency. Ted poured Lisa a glass of water and asked, "Quesadillas everyone?"

We all nodded in agreement and Lisa sat down with us at the table while Ted started cooking.

I could have tortured her more but figured that wouldn't earn me any brownie points. "I have some good news and some bad news, Lisa," I said instead. "First the good news; your house is clear. No indication that anyone has been there."

That perked Lisa right up. "That's good! I can go back home then?"

Ted didn't look at all happy about that. Repressing a smile, I shook my head. "I'd like to give it a day or two more, which leads me to the bad news. The DA in Galveston took

off on a fishing trip somewhere and I can't get access to squat. If I can pull you away from Ted for a while, I really need to take you down there and go through your files. See if anything looks promising, you know? You up for a road trip?"

Lisa nodded. "Yes, but let me eat something first. I'm famished." At my grin she blushed again. She was really pretty. Hell, she was gorgeous, especially wearing the afterglow of great sex. I found myself wishing it had been me giving her that good time. It had been too long.

A 'ding' from the microwave announced the snack was ready. It smelled pretty good.

"Then eat up. I don't want to see you fall over from hunger," Ted said as he handed out plates with cheesy tortillas stuffed with marinated beef.

While Lisa ate, I filled her in on the details that I had been able to glean thus far. The bomb squad had recovered more fragments of the bomb than I would have thought possible. The full analysis would take some time, but Frank's quick and dirty read was that the bomb was wired to the starter and not remotely detonated. That meant someone planted it while Lisa and Calvin were inside the club.

Lisa took that better than I was afraid she would. A nod and a few tears. "I still can't believe someone wants me dead."

"Perhaps not. Calvin could have been the target. I'll have to look at that possibility, too," I said.

"Why would someone want to kill Calvin?" Lisa asked in a shocked voice.

I shrugged. "I've learned that figuring out the why before the who is a chancy business at best, Sweetie. Let me find out the who and you'll be able to tell me why. Can you access his files?"

Lisa shook her head. "No, I don't have the key to his office. You can get them on Monday when the DA gets back."

Sunday was my normal day off so the impact wouldn't be awful. "It'll work. Anyway, the parts from the bomb look homemade, not C-4 or a more sophisticated type of bomb. They are working on getting me some details to track down but that will likely take till Monday, at the earliest. It looks like a pipe bomb by the gas tank."

This line of conversation was really making her upset so I laid off any more details like that. The anger that replaced it was a lot better in the long run, anyway, I thought.

Stan and Dina excused themselves to 'go lie down for a while' and that made us all grin. Nothing like listening to someone else get laid to work up the old juices. Sue also excused herself to take a walk outside.

"That lobbyist, Price, was out here this morning," Ted said.

I nodded as I finished chewing. "I heard. I'll have his ass for breakfast. He just moved up my suspect ladder and I'll need to have words with him before he posts bail."

Lisa stiffened and I put a hand on her knee. "Don't get too worried. He would be an idiot to come back out here after posting bail. You *did* file charges, right?"

From their expressions, I could tell they were thinking Price *was* an idiot. I shook my head and laughed but I kept my hand where it was. It was almost like gentling a skittish horse to your touch. "You two! I know he's stupid, sexist and violent. That won't help him much when I've finished with him. I'll put the fear of me into him." I grinned at her. "I think it might be better if the BSB here is not in the same room, though. I want him nervous, not pissed."

Lisa cocked her head. "BSB?"

"Ball stomping bitch," I said.

Ted laughed and Lisa flushed red. He shook his head, still smiling. "I told the deputies I wanted to file charges and they took my statement but I suppose I should go down there today or tomorrow to make it official."

I nodded. "Good idea. I'll help Lisa file assault charges while we are there."

Lisa finally stood up. "Are you still on that motorcycle?"

At my nod, she started towards the bedrooms. "I'll need to change. Riding in a skirt isn't a good idea."

I looked at Ted and he looked back. We both obviously were getting the same visual. I smiled and he returned it.

"She is wonderful," Ted said at last.

"I agree. It seems like we have the same taste in women, Ted. We'll have to see about double-dating sometime."

That broke the ice and we joked back and forth until Lisa came back out, ready to ride.

Lisa and Ted kissed so deeply that even I was feeling the heat before they separated. The tight pants she wore cupped her ass and made my breath catch in my throat. God, she was hot!

When they separated at last, Lisa followed me out and we were soon on the road heading south. She didn't seem too upset about riding on the back of my Harley, her arms around my waist. I almost wish she hadn't changed out of that nice skirt and into a pair of pants, but pants were more practical, and I could still feel the heat of her against me. The helmet microphones allowed us to speak without shouting. Time to test the waters.

"So, Lisa, have you always liked showing off?"

I felt her tense a little. "What do you mean?"

I laughed. "You know what I mean. You, my dear, are an exhibitionist."

The silence dragged on long enough that I didn't think Lisa was going to answer at all. We were almost to the Harris County lock-up when the answer came. It was soft enough that I almost missed it.

"Yes..."

I chuckled. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Hun. I wondered about it after you gave me that little show Friday, but after this morning, I'm sure. You weren't being too public either time, so don't worry about it."

"There was another time, too," Lisa said hesitantly and with some embarrassment. "Ted and I were in Spring this morning doing some shopping." Her voice started strengthening. "I think a sales clerk watched him play with me."

"And that excites you?"

"I know it's not 'right'. I never thought I could be such a slut." She sounded down on herself and that just would not do.

"Look, sweetie, I'm something of an expert in things sexual, at least before the last girlfriend and I broke up a couple of years ago. What you did does not make you a slut. You've found something that you like. Now you just need to be careful that you don't go too far in public. The thrill of getting seen is not worth being arrested. Pick and choose. As for Ted, he seems nice enough, for a guy, and I can testify that he apparently makes you feel good - really good. Be happy with that as a start." I looked back at her over my shoulder and smiled before returning my attention to traffic.

We pulled into the Harris County Jail's parking lot and the big bike coasted smoothly to a stop among the rice-burning trash in the motorcycle parking area. Securing the helmets, we went inside. I signed in and passed over my weapon. The deputy gave me a glance and Lisa a lingering look. She smiled back.

After about fifteen minutes, we were allowed into the questioning area. I stopped to watch this guy, Price, through the one way glass.

Price sat there, leaned back in the chair with his feet on the table, his hands interlaced behind his head, eyes closed, dressed in county colors. Cocky bastard, acting like it was all some kind of game.

"Lisa, you do the DA thing and watch from here. I'll go in and rattle his cage and see what falls out."

I opened the door quietly and stepped up to the table before it closed or made a noise. Gripping the table, I slid it noisily toward him.

Price's eyes flew open and he flailed wildly, his chair tipping over backwards. The crash of impact was very satisfying.

"Ooooo. Sorry about that, Mister Price. Didn't mean to startle you." I pulled my chair out and sat, watching him burn as he scrambled to his feet.

"This is bullshit! That bastard jumped me and his bitch hurt me bad when I was down! I want out of here and I want them locked up right the fuck now!"

"If you're injured, I'd be happy to take some pictures of the damage for you," I said

sweetly. With a microscope, maybe.

Price fidgeted and shook his head. "What are you going to do about those menaces?"

I smiled my detective's smile and ignored everything he just said. "I'm not here about them. My name is Hawkins. I am a homicide detective with Houston PD. I have a few questions for you about an incident last night."

That rocked Price back and he sat down slowly. "I already had some jack-booted thugs grill me at home. Ask them."

I leaned back in my chair. "I'm asking you. Where were you Friday evening?"

Price puffed up like a sucker fish. "Screw you, bitch. I don't have to justify squat for you! I was at home. Alone, just like I told the storm troopers."

"Don't dick with me, boy wonder," I snarled. "You can cooperate or I can put you under the microscope. Hell, there is no telling what might fall out when I start shaking a tree. Do us both a favor and save the bluster for the judge."

Price had a hint of actual fear in his demeanor. I could smell it like a shark sensing blood in the water. He was hiding something.

"Look, just give me one name. Someone that saw you at home and we're done."

Price shook his head. "Fuck that. We're done. You think I wasn't home? Then you prove it. Until then, I want a lawyer if you have more questions." He sat back smugly, his arms crossed on his chest.

I smiled the crocodile smile for him. "Fine, but you need to know something, Pez Brain. I'm the one that set the uniforms on you, not Stansbury and I'll keep turning up like a bad penny till I get to what really happened." I leaned forward, my eyes flashing. "If you bother them again, I'll lock your ass up so fast your head will spin. Stay away from them. Oh, and keep looking over your shoulder. Soon enough, I'll be there."

Price was starting another bluster when I left the room.

Lisa was on the ball and let me out without delay. After the door was safely closed, she hugged me. "You were terrific!"

Oh, this physical contact was making my legs weak. The smell of apples in her hair was so sexy. I regretted it when she let me go.

"Nah, he didn't confess like on television. I'll have to keep working him. He's got something to hide. Now, let's go file some charges," I said.

I led Lisa back out and she soon had a sworn statement signed and in the hands of the County. Price would make bail but I hoped for at least one night in jail. I picked up my weapon and led her back to my hog.

Shortly, we were in the saddle and flying down the highway. I pondered whether to make a pass at Lisa or not. Men aren't the only ones with little heads that think for them. I decided to be straight up, since she seemed to like that way of dealing with people. A secret for a secret builds trust.

"Lisa, have you ever made love with a woman?"

That spawned another spell of silence where I wondered what she was thinking. "No. Detective Hawkins..."

"Hawk," I interrupted. "I want you to call me Hawk, okay?"

I felt Lisa nod. "Hawk, I'm not attracted to women. I... Let's just drop it, okay?"

Lisa clammed up and was quiet as we drove through Houston. More than half an hour of silence. I sighed. Looked like I screwed the pooch.

Just past Texas City, Lisa started giving directions. She sounded happy with Ted, maybe it was for the best anyways.

The drive into Galveston itself was pleasant and quiet for the next twenty minutes. We parked in front of the DA's office. It was one of those historic buildings that came with a nice plaque to prove it. The brick veneer gave it sturdy and solid appearance. A little reassurance on this island, especially during storms, would be nice. After she got off the bike, I retrieved her purse and we went inside, using her key. The big glass doors led into a surprisingly roomy lobby complete with empty guard post.

"No guards on the weekend?" I asked.

Lisa shook her head as she hit the elevator call button. "It's not open to the public over the weekends. The DA doesn't think we need someone here."

I followed her into the elevator with a certain Aerosmith tune on my mind. I firmly told myself to stop it.

Lisa's office was on the second floor, in a long hall with closed doors, little name plates and a thread-bare government grey carpet. It looked well used. Stacks of file folders and a blizzard of post-it notes covered her desk. There were law books scattered on the small wooden table, with bookmarks thick along the spine. A picture of an older woman in a conservative bathing suit waved from the wall next to Lisa's diplomas and awards. Amidst the chaos that was her desk, a computer peeked out. God only knew where the keyboard was buried.

As Lisa sat down, I looked at the stacks of paper with some dismay. "These are all your files? Holy shit, Lisa, how do you ever find anything? We'll be here all night."

Lisa smiled. "It's an art. I have everything cross-referenced in a database and a pretty good idea of where things are in the piles. The file folders have case numbers and reference numbers that I can find fairly easily." She gestured to one of the chairs beside the table. It had several heavy books piled up on it. "Have a seat and I'll look through the bigger cases. Give me twenty minutes and I'll have a short list of the cases that might be interesting for you to look through."

I moved the books onto the desk and sat down in the old wooden chair. As she typed away at the computer, I spent some time watching her and exploring my feelings. Her profile was proud and competent, here in her lair. I liked that confidence.

I needed to think about what had been said on the ride down here. She had said no but was that really 'no, I'm not interested' or was it 'no, I need to think about this, so give me some space?'

There were several times over the years that I had seduced straight women into my bed and some of them said 'no' but came back later. The only thing to do was give Lisa space, not crowd her, and see if she was tossing a coin in her head.

There was nothing sweeter than introducing a straight woman to the joys that only another woman could provide her. Still, this was different. I had never seduced a woman that was involved with a man at the time. If I convinced Lisa, what about Ted? What if she insisted Ted join us? I had never had sex with a man. I'd never really given

it any thought. I knew I was a lesbian and that was just the way it was. After my first girlfriend, I had never looked back.

I was way off on where I needed to focus right now. There was a killer to catch. Like Sergeant Nagel told me in the Academy. "Focus on the innermost question first. Too broad a line of questioning will lead you to answers that don't actually focus on what you want to know. Let the facts lead you on to new questions."

"Excuse me?" Lisa asked.

I blinked and looked up. Lisa was looking at me and I realized I must have spoken aloud. "Sorry, I was just thinking. Go back to what you were doing."

With a distracted nod, Lisa returned to her data search.

My train of thought was derailed again when Lisa slapped a stack of a dozen folders in front of me minutes later.

"There you go, Hawk," Lisa said cheerfully. "The worst of the worst, these people have plenty of reason to hate my guts. Mostly cases that have been wrapped up, though."

I thought about that and nodded. "It's a good place to start. Let's look through these and you can help translate for me."

Lisa rolled her chair over. Those tight jeans did not help my concentration. I supposed asking her to sit on my lap was right out of the question.

After a deep breath, I flipped open the top folder and we started going through them. The list of crimes varied from the usual drug lords to white slave traders bringing in women from the former Soviet block.

We talked about the people involved in each case and after four hours, there was a decent list of possible suspects written down on a yellow legal pad along with detailed notes. Lisa put away the files, shut her computer down. I tore off the pages and stuffed them in my jacket and stood up.

"I need to stop at the ladies' room on the way out. Come on, it's down the hall," Lisa said.

I followed her into the ladies' room and took a quick break myself. When I had washed

my hands, I waited for her in the hall. As I leaned against the wall, I heard a muffled voice down the hall. I frowned. We should have been alone. Lisa said she and Calvin were the only folks that worked on Saturday. Curiosity has always been a problem for me, so with soft steps, I walked down the hall and listened at the closed door where the noises were coming from.

There was one voice with pauses. I couldn't tell gender for certain. Someone talking on the phone, maybe? I looked at the name plaque. Calvin Samson. Shit! Someone was in the dead man's office! I put my ear to the door and listened. My 'spidey sense' went off when the talking abruptly stopped.

I pulled my pistol and opened the door, stepping in and starting the sweep for hostiles. The office was dark except for the light coming in through the closed blinds. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust.

A moment can sometimes be too long.

Chapter Seven: Never drink alone

Hawk's point of view

The gloved hand seemed to come from out of the darkness behind the door, slamming my head into the doorframe as it choked me. I fell to my knees, sprawling, my head ringing. My gun thudded heavily as it fell into the room and onto the carpeted floor. The glove was black leather. Odd how that came through but I couldn't seem to see the person. With a second crack of my head against the wall, I fell hard to the floor, stunned, as my attacker rushed out. I struggled to my feet and stumbled toward my fallen weapon and then out the door. I felt something trickle down my face. I wiped it away - blood. The bastard had made me bleed. I *hated* bleeding.

The hall was empty when I staggered out. Fuck me! That *had* to have been the killer! Only one way he could have gone. I ran down the hall and when the ladies room door opened, I had it covered. Lisa screamed like a B-grade 'Scream Queen' when she saw my weapon pointed at her.

"Someone was in Calvin's office. Where are the stairs?"

Lisa pointed down the hall about twenty feet. I heard her running after me as I yanked the door open and ran down the stairs. I saw no one in the lobby so I ran outside, into the street. Nothing. Shit! I kicked the mail drop box in frustration.

Lisa came out the door behind me. "Are you okay? You're bleeding!" She pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at my forehead. "You need to go to the hospital."

I holstered my weapon. "Screw that! He was right here! In Calvin's office! Why?" I waved her off and started pacing. "We need to call Galveston PD and let them know. They need to take over on this and search his office."

I pulled out my cell and dialed 911. In a few minutes I had passed the details into the hands of GPD dispatch. The first uniform was here in less than ten minutes. The next hour had them asking all the questions I wish I had answers to.

Then I heard the most God-awful redneck drawl come from behind me. Just what I *didn't* need. Last year's first runner up for Dick-of-the-year, Detective Lieutenant Dick Murphy, Galveston PD. I could tell he was not happy to see me on his turf. That's fair. I didn't particularly like him either.

Murphy leaned on the running board of the ambulance where the paramedic was treating the gash on my head. "So, Detective Hawkins, I see you still don't understand that your big city badge don't mean squat on my fair island. Why didn't you have GPD provide an escort for you? We not good enough for you? Not smart enough to keep you from getting your head bashed in?"

Murphy knew just how to torque me up. "This wasn't supposed to be anything more than a visit to look for leads on a homicide in Houston that she and I are working on. She had all the authority we needed to be there. If I had any idea that someone was here that shouldn't be, I would never have gone in. Then again, it's not *my* job to secure this building, is it?"

Murphy shook his head. "I don't care about what you thought." He stuck his face into mine. "I know you. You're a hotshot that thinks she knows better than everyone else."

"I bet you wish you had a dick as big as your ego, don't you, Dick? You don't mind if I call you dick, do you, Dick?"

Murphy put his hands on his hips. "You talk a lot of shit for a stuck up bitch that's in a lot of trouble for working out of jurisdiction. You should let some man show you what you're missing. Then, maybe, you wouldn't be such a piece of work."

I laughed sarcastically. "Is that your answer to everything? Find a man and all my problems are solved? No thanks. Women are safer."

Murphy laughed back in exactly the same tone. "Really? Then why did your last girlfriend dump you? Oh, I forgot. She left you for a *man*. That must be rough, having a lover switch to the other team. Do you think you drove her straight?"

I felt the rage rise up from deep inside me. The pain, the hurt, the anguish. Suddenly, I was trembling and felt tears burning behind my eyes. My gaze locked on Murphy's face and I felt my fist clenching. I could see him smile. He wanted me to take a swing at him. Well, it had been a year since my last suspension. It might be worth it. I came off the gurney but the paramedic held me back.

"That's enough. Back off."

The three of us looked over in surprise. Lisa stood there, her hands on her hips. "I have the authority to have her here. It was my decision to bring her with me to go through my files." She leaned in on Murphy. "She's told you what happened. Twice. I've told you what happened. We're done here. Do you understand, Detective? You're finished and we're leaving as soon as the paramedics release her. Don't make me have a conversation with Captain Gonzales about this. The department has firm rules on sexual harassment. Is that clear enough for you?"

Murphy looked like he wanted to argue but swallowed and nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's clear enough, Miss Davis. I'll go take care of the crime scene." He stalked off, pissed as hell. I knew how he felt. I've been there before. All cops hate mouthy lawyers; but, God, what a mouth she had on her.

The paramedic slapped my shoulder as I looked at Lisa in surprise. "Detective? You're done. The bandage will hold that cut for you. If it starts bleeding again or if you have any dizziness or blurry vision, go to the nearest hospital. I *mean* it." I nodded at him and hopped down.

Lisa slid an arm around my shoulders and we walked off towards the parking area. "Can you drive? Do I need to call a cab?"

I shook my head. "No, I can drive. Do I need to take you back to Ted's?"

Lisa nodded. "Yes. I called him and he's worried about us."

At the bike, I slid my helmet on with a grunt. My head still ached. That pissed me off. I really wanted a rematch. Next time I would not go down so easy. The bike started with

a roar when I kicked it off. As soon as Lisa slid behind me, we were out of there and on the road.

"You shouldn't have lied to him," I said. "That could come back to bite you."

"If I told him you were digging in without him, you would get in trouble. I'll tell a white lie to save a friend some grief." Lisa chuckled. "Besides, now I have leverage."

I smiled. "Why do you need leverage on me?" I sped up and passed around the cars a little fast for the speed limit and felt her clutch me tighter.

"I'm not going to sit back and wait for someone to tell me who killed Calvin. You're going to let me into the investigation." She sounded smug.

I shook my head and immediately regretted doing so. "Bullshit. I am not going to put you in danger. I'll cut you out if I think that is the best for you, even if that means you turn me in and I catch hell."

"He's just a case to you. To me, Calvin was my best friend. You need *willing* help down here and you are not winning any friends, if you catch my drift."

I stewed a bit at that but was forced to admit that she had a real point. Winning friends and influencing people was not one of my strong points. Reluctantly, I nodded. "If I do, it's under my rules and at my discretion."

"What rules and what discretion? I'm going to be involved whether you 'let' me or not. I'll take a leave of absence and dig in without you if I have to. You want to keep me safe? Then don't force me to work alone. I know how to investigate and I can do this with or without you. Tell me if that's what you want."

Shit. I'd catch hell for letting her in or letting her get hurt. She wasn't as tough as she wanted me to believe. She had cops to do the real legwork and dig into the scum. "Let me think about it."

Lisa was quiet as I drove into Houston. Interesting how the tables had turned. Now I had things to think about and didn't want to talk. We each had something we wanted that the other didn't want to give into, it seemed. This was making my head hurt more.

I pulled off the freeway and started into the area near the Juice Box, Minute Maid

Stadium, home of the Houston Astros. I wasn't in shape to make it to Ted's.

"Where are we going?" Lisa asked.

"My place. I think you will need to call Ted to come and get you. I'm feeling a bit wiped out and it's not safe to drive a bike when I don't feel like driving."

"Maybe we should take you to the hospital," she said. "If you feel that badly, it might be best."

"No way. I fucking hate doctors and hospitals are where people die. I'll be fine." I drove past the condos and into the small housing development that had grown up near the renovated area. A click of a button and the garage door slid up. I drove in and parked next to my car. The little blue Accord was okay but it wasn't a Harley.

After Lisa dismounted, I slid off and put my helmet on the seat. I opened the door and shut off my alarm. Sliding off my jacket, I hung it by the door on its peg. "You want something? A beer?"

Lisa had her cell phone out. "Do you think drinking is the right thing to do in your condition? It might make things worse."

"Can't make it much worse," I said with a sour laugh. "The paramedic said there was no concussion so you don't need to worry. I'm a big girl."

Lisa shrugged and I pulled a beer out of the fridge for both of us, just in case. She was talking to Ted, asking him to come and get us. She prompted me for the address and gave him a rough set of directions. It would take him an hour to get here on a good day.

When she hung up, I handed her the beer. "I'm sorry that I can't get you home... Or rather back to Ted's." Silly mistake. I really wasn't thinking straight. I already had her and Ted as an item in my head. I guess I had already surrendered that fight.

Lisa walked around my rather spartan living room and examined the shelves. "Do you mind if I look around? I find I can tell a lot about people by looking at where they live."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself. Not much to see. Does that mean there's not much to me?"

Lisa laughed. "No, that just makes what is there more important." She wandered slowly,

looking at the scattered knick-knacks. She stopped next to the television and was looking at the small-framed drawing. I had forgotten it was there. If I was prone to embarrassment, that would have made me blush. It was a hand drawn rendering of a woman's sex, open and aroused.

"You don't have any pictures but you do have this," she said, picking it up to examine more closely. "That tells me something. It means a great deal to you." She looked over to me. "Did you know that pictures tell us more about ourselves than we do? A lack of them tells me that you don't have someone you are close to right now."

I took a deep pull of my beer. "That was drawn by Sharon, my last girlfriend. She was a great artist." I laughed bitterly. "Among other things."

Lisa sat down in the chair next to me. "Tell me."

I felt myself closing in. "It's not important. She's gone. She's happily married with a little boy."

Her hand clasped mine as she leaned over. "No, it's important. She's still in your heart or you wouldn't still have the drawing. Was she the girlfriend that Murphy was talking about?"

I nodded. Amazing how empty that made me feel, even now. "Yeah. She and I were together for three years. Then one day, she wanted to have a family. A real family. One with children. A husband, not her lesbian lover. I suppose she had been hinting for months and I just didn't hear her." Did I really sound that bitter? I thought I was done with that. I shook my head angrily and again regretted it. Pulling my hand from hers, I started into the kitchen and picked up a bottle of vodka. If I was going to talk about this, I needed something more potent than beer.

Lisa gave me a look of reproach, but didn't say anything as I poured myself a double. She waited until I was sitting again to continue. "If she hurt you so badly, why keep the drawing?"

"Because it's all I have left of her." I swallowed hard and drank the double in a gulp. "She left me and it was as sudden as if she had died. I thought she loved me. She told me she did. Like an idiot, I believed her. For people like me, there is no love."

"Bullshit."

I couldn't help but chuckle at the profanity. "That's my line. Look, Lisa, it's different for you. Society doesn't frown on your very existence. As a lesbian, everyone hates me. The religious types tell me I'll burn in hell. Women avoid me like a leper and men feel threatened by me. They think I want to steal their wives. Only among other gay people do I feel like I can talk freely about anything."

Her eyes twinkled. "You seem to be talking just fine to me."

"I'm hurting and getting drunk. I'll probably offend you before Ted gets here." I poured another drink.

"Is the drawing of you?" Lisa asked.

I looked over the glass at her and nodded. "Yeah. My inner portrait. Do you want to know what she did to get me ready for it?" I asked with a challenging tone.

She blushed and shook her head. "No. What's important is that she made it with love. You still love her, don't you?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Liar."

The glass shattered against the wall before I even realized I had thrown it. "What the fuck gives you the right to come in here and call me a liar?" I shouted, standing up and stalking back and forth. "Can you read my mind, know what I think and feel? Hell, no!" The tears I held back earlier started to burn again. "God dammit." I stalked into the kitchen and got some paper towels. When I turned around, she was right behind me. Her arms wrapped around me and I stiffened.

"Shhhhh," she said softly. "I don't want you to hurt. I wish I could take away the pain."

I cried and laughed at the same time. "Nothing can take away the pain. Not even sleeping with you."

I could see tears in her eyes and she smiled. "No, not even sex can take away the pain of losing someone." She held me close and my throat closed up. I don't know how long I cried on her shoulder. I felt like Sharon had just left me that morning. All the pain tore at my insides again.

She led me back to the couch and poured herself a drink of vodka. She looked me in the eye and tossed it back. Then she just held me.

I cried again until, as suddenly as they came, the tears were gone and I felt drained. Emotionally drained. I considered kissing her and I rejected it. I didn't need a sympathy fuck, even if I could have lured her into my bed that way. I needed to be wanted for my own merits, not given into for sympathy. Even if I didn't scare her off. Pushing her back, I wiped my face.

"Why is it all the good girls are straight?" I joked. "I find one and she has a man in her life. What is it that men have that I don't, besides a package?"

"Is there a serious question buried in that humor-as-a-shield protective coating?" Lisa asked, pouring a drink for both of us.

I was already feeling a bit tipsy but I drank it anyway. "You mean there's really an answer? Yeah, I want to know. I've never understood why I couldn't give Sharon what she wanted. I mean, we could have gone to a fertility clinic or something like that. If you know an answer, I want to hear it."

Lisa downed her drink. I could see the alcohol flush on her, too. I think we were both a little over the legal limit. Maybe that explained it. I couldn't understand why I even started talking about Sharon. Or why we had veered into this deep philosophical discussion on the differences between men and women.

"I wish I did have a clear cut idea, Hawk. I'd make a mint if I did. I don't know Sharon at all and I am just getting to get to know you. I like what I have seen so far. You're strong, resourceful and loyal. That's the inside. The outside is pretty good, too."

I laughed derisively. "I have no tits or hips. I look like a man, just smaller."

"Bullshit," she retorted. "You're beautiful and I'm not the only one that says that, I'm sure."

"Did Ted say that?" I asked incredulously.

She flushed. "I'm not going to say who said that, just accept for the sake of this discussion that someone out there thinks you're beautiful." She cocked her head. "What if it was Ted? Does it make you uncomfortable to have a man find you attractive?"

I felt my face heating. "I'm a lesbian, how do you think it makes me feel?"

"I don't know, that's why I asked. What attracts you to a woman, Hawk? Not her body, what's inside her. What traits?"

I took a deep breath and forced myself to relax. "Loyalty. Someone who likes me for being me. Someone honest. Someone that can love me. And what do you look for in a man, Lisa?"

She smiled. "Just about the same things. Isn't that an interesting twist? The same things you want in a woman are the same things I see in Ted. I bet he looks for the same things, too."

"Men and women are not the same. I'll bet you've noticed the differences," I said smartly.

"Oh, I've seen the differences but in the end, people are people. Eliminate the physical. People love each other for what is inside, not on the outside," she said.

"Then why don't more women like you want women like me?" I asked. Immediately, I regretted asking it. I waved my hands. "Never mind. You didn't want to talk about that. I forgot. I'm sorry. Just drop it."

Lisa poured us one final drink and took the bottle back to the kitchen on unsteady feet. When she flopped back down, she handed me my glass with a shaky hand and we tipped them back. The liquor burned as it went down. The warmth from inside was finally beginning to make me feel human again.

"Why don't you see things like that in men? I've seen you in their world. Tough, confrontational."

"Well..." I started.

"You asked me earlier if I had ever thought about making love to a woman," Lisa continued. "Have you ever thought about what it would feel like to make love to a man?" I started to tell her what a stupid idea that was and she just waved me to silence.

"No. I want the 'why.' Think about it. I promise to think about your question and give you an honest answer but I want the same in return. Deal?"

This conversation had taken a turn for the bizarre. How the hell could she ask me that? She knew I was a lesbian. It was unnatural but I nodded slowly. "Okay. I already know the answer but I'll get a reason for you."

"No!" She shook her head emphatically. "I want you to *really* think about it. Honesty is not a knee-jerk response. It is not the same as rejecting what is not familiar."

"Are you trying to set me up with a man?" I asked, not really sure of where this conversation was going.

She colored. "No."

I leaned forward, a bit unsteadily. If I were sober, I would never have the nerve to ask this. I may never have the nerve to ask it again. "What is it like?" I asked curiously. "Making love to a man? If you believe Penthouse Forum, it's the best thing since sliced bread. What makes it any better than, say, a woman with a strap-on?"

Lisa reddened deeply. "I don't know, but I doubt there is a whole lot of physical difference, except for the tits. It's in the emotional connection. That's what makes sex with a man that I like good. I'm sure it's the same with women, too."

"But they come. Isn't that gross?" I shamelessly asked. I had been curious. "Especially blowjobs. It can't be as nice as going down on a woman." She became so red, I was sure I had pushed too hard. "Never mind. That's a bit personal."

Slowly, she shook her head. "No. Obviously, I don't know about going down on a woman, but a blowjob is almost more intimate than sex. Holding it in my hand, kissing it. It tastes like him."

"Ted, you mean," I asked?

She shook her head and giggled. "He went down on me but I still haven't gone down on him. I want to and I think I will in the morning. I'm sure it'll be great. The come can be a bit bitter but it is a part of a man's most inner self. I don't think it tastes too bad but it *is* an acquired taste." She looked at me more closely. "I've tasted myself but I'm curious. Do all women taste differently?"

I smiled, surprised. I guess she was going to be thinking about it. "Tasting it on your fingers or someone else isn't the same as tasting a woman right from her source. It is

different for each woman. Some are sweet and tangy, others a bit more musky. I know that when I go down a woman, I make her arousal my personal project. I guess like you would a blowjob."

She nodded. "It is. I can't describe it."

There was a knock at the door. Both of us started at the noise and then giggled. My God, I giggled? What the hell was wrong with me? I must have drunk more than I remembered. I staggered to the door and opened it. Ted was standing there, looking a bit worried.

"Ted! You made great time! Has it been that long? Come in! We were just having a drink! Have one with us!" I slurred.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. The damn floor was moving and I swear I felt the carpet reach out and trip me! I grabbed his other hand for balance as he was leaning through the doorway and it must have caught him off balance. We both tumbled to the floor. When we landed, I realized that he hadn't lost his balance; he was trying to cushion my head. How sweet! His hands held my upper body and kept that damn floor from hitting me. I laughed. It was so funny.

From a few inches away, he smiled at my drunken buffoonery. "I think I better help you out to the car."

I frowned. "Why? I can go to bed here."

He shook his head. "No, you're hurt and you'll feel like shit tomorrow. Lisa and I talked about it and if you don't want to go to a hospital, you get to go sleep at my house and we'll keep an eye on you for the rest of the weekend. I insist."

It was finally seeping into my awareness that he was laying on top of me, his hips between my legs. It was almost an intimate embrace. I felt an initial flush of revulsion and blinked. Then I forced myself to stop and consider this from outside my box. I had never even had a man between my legs. Did I really find it revolting or was I just prejudiced?

I knew some lesbians, a small percentage, also had some sex with men. I vaguely remembered seeing a CDC report that said it was between twenty to thirty percent though no one I knew would admit to it. I suppose that was like black men getting it on the 'down low'. They didn't think that made them gay or bi. Still, I had never considered

myself part of that minority. There were 'players' and 'lifers'. The 'players' thought they were lesbian. The 'lifers' knew it. I was a 'lifer.' Wasn't I?

The emotional turmoil must have bled through my facial expression, as he set my head down and started to get off me. I wrapped my arms and legs around him. "Wait. Don't move just yet. Please. Stay still for just a minute."

Ted raised his eyebrows and looked uncertainly over at Lisa. She looked wide-eyed but didn't say no.

"Just humor me. Lisa and I were talking and I need you to humor me for just a minute."

Ted looked at me, his eyes worried but he slowly nodded.

I closed my eyes and held him against me. His aftershave smelled nice, I decided. His body was shaped differently than a woman's and it felt - odd. I felt him moving against me, and I felt his reaction to me holding him like this. I was surprised when I felt a flutter in my stomach. Not one like Lisa caused in my belly, but a little one anyway.

I remembered what kind of person he was. That's what Lisa said I should think about. I imagined him kissing me. Was it like kissing a woman? Probably not. I opened my eyes and looked at him. Would I ever know?

"Thank you for caring enough to take me home with you." I hesitated and just decided to do it. I pulled his head down and kissed him. Not passionately, but on the lips. He stiffened and I broke the kiss. The taste of his lips was not like anything I was familiar with but...

I released him and saw Lisa watching us, flushed. He scrambled to his feet and helped me up. "It's okay. I wouldn't have it any other way. We have plenty of space." He sounded relieved.

Lisa came to my other side and they helped me gather my things, including a bag of clothes. We locked up the house and they helped me out to his car. I had an arm around each of their waists and found my emotions confused. His touch was not the repugnant thing I had expected. I don't know that I would have ever run out looking for a man but I really *was* going to have to think about this.

The ride back to his place was a blur of brief awakenings, hearing snatches of conversation. They were talking about Galveston. I wanted to listen in but I kept fading

out.

The next thing I remember, they were helping me out of the car and into Ted's house. I was still very unsteady. Hell, I was drunk. I laughed at myself. I was funny!

Together, they sat me on the couch. Ted looked at Lisa and she looked back at him.

"I'm not sure which of us should get her ready for bed," he admitted.

I started laughing at that. That was really great! He didn't know if it was worse for him to take my clothes off because he was a man and liked women or for her to because I was a lesbian and liked women! Talk about your 'catch twenty-two'!

"I can take my own clothes off. You can both watch, I don't care." I tried to take off my shoes and they both had to catch me. I just laughed harder.

After a whispered conversation, they sat me down and both of them proceeded to strip my clothes off and I found myself unable to tell whose hands were whose as they took me down to my panties. A vague sensation of arousal passed through me but I was too drunk to sort it out. I couldn't even be sure who gasped at my nipple rings. Some people were so innocent. When they stood me up and slid a cotton nightshirt over my head, I grabbed both of them and hugged them.

"You two are so sweet." I slurred out. In turn, I kissed Lisa and then Ted. They didn't recoil but they did lay me back down on the couch and put a blanket over me.

"Go to sleep," Lisa whispered in my ear.

"Goodnight," Ted whispered from beside her.

"G'night," I mumbled.

I started fading back out but remember waking up a couple of times, still hearing voices.

"She's asleep, Ted," Lisa was saying. The room was totally dark, so I couldn't see her. "I don't know if I could make love in front of someone but this is close and safe. Please."

"I don't know, Lisa," Ted protested.

"Please, Ted."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to be awake for that so it was a relief when I slid back out of consciousness.

One of the times I woke up, I could hear them. The lovers. The creak of leather as bodies moved against it. The soft sighs of a woman aroused. The scent of Lisa was strong in the air and I felt the heat in my stomach ignite. This, I understood. Then the soft sounds of bodies slapping together. Ted's groans. Her moans. They both morphed together in my head and I slid into slumber as they moaned and groaned.

My dream was chaotic, jumbled pieces of light and sound. I was making love to Sharon. We writhed together, soft cries filling my senses. Then, she changed right before my eyes, becoming Lisa in my arms. I felt my hands caressing her body and her kissing me, licking my breasts. Then her kisses rose to my neck and my lips. I felt her slide between my legs but she felt wrong.

I opened my eyes, in my dream. Ted kissed me as he lay atop me. I could feel his sex rubbing between my legs. It didn't make me hotter but the flame inside me didn't go out either. I closed my eyes and kissed him. A soft breath next to my ear told me we were not alone. Lisa's hot tongue caressed my ear and the dream faded to darkness.

Chapter Eight: Ted gets enlightened

Ted's point of view

Sunday morning dawned very brightly for me. I woke up laying flat on my back with the most wonderful sensations coursing through my body. I could feel the hot, wet caress of a mouth sucking my cock. Soft whimpers of pleasure came from my waist. Lisa's blonde head was bobbing up and down rhythmically.

She slid her mouth off of me and smiled. "Good morning, sleepy head. I woke up hungry." Lisa licked my tip before taking a deep breath and swallowing most of me.

My eyes were riveted on her as she pleasured me in such an intimate way. I ran my hands through her hair and marveled at how beautiful she was. It was so erotic, waking up to find her feasting. I would have to return the favor one morning soon. I tried to pull her body around but she wouldn't cooperate.

Kissing my little head, she tsked. "I don't think so, lover. I want to focus on you and if you slide that tongue of yours inside me, I won't be able to think. Lay back and enjoy." She licked up my length from base to crown several times before she wrapped her hand around me and took the head into her mouth once more.

There was no way I could take such intense pleasure for long. Her blue eyes stayed locked with mine as she drove me absolutely crazy. When I felt the first stirrings of my impending orgasm I gripped the sheets.

"Lisa, I'm close." I wanted to give her warning so she could do whatever she felt most comfortable with. I knew some women didn't like the taste and hated having a man come in their mouths.

Lisa didn't seem to be worried. She redoubled her efforts and was jacking me hard as she sucked. The silky smooth sensation of her tongue along my underside made me shiver and quake.

I felt the momentary pause before orgasm, that moment that seemed to slow time, and then the world shrank to one point: the head of my cock. I heard her moan as I thrust upward and arched my back. It felt like my insides were being pulled through the head of my cock, sucked out by Lisa. My strength seemed to desert me all at once.

Lisa smiled at me, licking her lips and my manhood like a cat. Then she slid up and kissed me deeply. I tasted myself on her lips but it didn't matter. "You taste so good. I didn't realize how much I had missed the taste of my lover." Her eyes took on a seductive look. "More?" she asked in an innocent little voice.

She resumed kissing me hard and passionately, then she began rubbing her sex on my belly, wet and needy, arousing me to another erection. Without touching me with her hands, she slid herself down on me and began riding me for her pleasure.

I held her upright and searched for the right level of pressure in pinching her nipples and squeezing her breasts. She was lava hot around me and oh, so tight. I knew it would be a while for me to come again, if I did, so I just enjoyed her arousal.

Lisa arched her back and ground herself against me, lost in her own world. It was wonderful to watch her make love to me. She began to lose her coordination and I knew she was ready.

Gripping her hips, I began thrusting into her from below. The heat and wetness seemed to be growing greater as she came. I could feel her internal muscles rippling around me when she cried out and collapsed across me. I kissed her softly and held her close.

"That was fantastic," she murmured. "But I need to bring you off again."

I kissed her and shook my head. "No, I'm fine. Three times in twenty-four hours can take a lot out of a man. We have plenty of time. Let's shower and see how Hawk is doing."

She stretched luxuriously but didn't rise. "Let me catch my breath and cuddle first. Hawk can wait a few more minutes. Just hold me, Ted."

I was happy to do that. I held her lithe, warm body on top of me and listened to her breathing slow down. The scent of her skin was threatening to start me back up again. I don't know that I had ever stayed inside a lover as we relaxed. The sensation was indescribable. If Lisa had been a cat, I think she would have been purring. "Lisa, you're terrific," I said.

"Why, thank you! I have to reassert my lead position after yesterday. You almost made me crazy and that, sir, is my job!" She poked me on the chest as she rolled over onto her side next to me. "I will have my revenge!"

I laughed and held her to my chest, kissing her on the forehead. "You will be my doom, lover! Mercy!"

Lisa's eyes twinkled and she shook her head. "Nope. Accept your fate! Now, come and wash my back!" She swayed into the bathroom and I watched her sexy body go before I followed her with a smile.

Thirty minutes later, I left her touching up her makeup and went out into the living room. The couch still had a lump under the blankets. The lump snored, too. I shook my head. How could that little woman snore like a lumberjack? I considered shaking her but decided that might not be the best idea since she owned a gun. Even if it was in the pile of her clothes.

"Hawk?" I asked kind of loudly. Not even a lowering of the snore volume. "Hawk!"

The lump rolled over and groaned. "Ten more minutes, Dad. Just ten more minutes,"

Hawk mumbled.

I smiled and shook my head. "Okay, ten more minutes but you better be up and ready to eat in fifteen." An incomprehensible mumble came from under the covers and then Hawk sat bolt upright, staring at me.

In the light, she didn't seem nearly as unfeminine as her street clothes made her look. I averted my eyes and gave her time to get control of her blanket but I still had a good view of her. Her breasts were small but well formed. The nipple rings added to her 'attitude.' The glimpse I had of her hips showed some curve and a flat stomach. She was slender and more girlish than womanly.

"Christ," she mumbled. "I'm sorry, Ted. You can look," she said as she wrapped the blanket around her again. "I was dreaming I was home again, and my dad was waking me up for school." She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

The question sounded rhetorical so I didn't answer it. "I'll go start breakfast, Hawk. Lisa will be out in a few minutes."

"Wait!" she said quickly. "I have a question that sounds stupid, even to me, but did - did I make a pass at you? Did anything - happen?" The shock on my face must have answered her question because she breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Thank god, it was a dream." She shook her head and winced. "I should have known you were more of a gentleman than that, Ted. I'm sorry for even asking. Go cook and add some aspirin to the tab, okay? Thank you for taking me into your home and making sure I was okay."

I don't know if I would have ever imagined her so vulnerable looking. Galveston and last night must have taken a lot out of her. "That's what friends do, Hawk. And, no, we didn't have sex. I don't think I'm your type, and I'm with Lisa," I said with a smile. That produced a haunted look that I didn't know how to interpret so I headed for the kitchen. "Lisa can let you in and get you to the shower. She also has the bag with your fresh clothes. I folded your other clothes and put them next to the couch. Your gun is in the stack."

She waved me on. "Go ahead. I'll sit here and wake up first. Lisa might want to come to me rather than have me barge in on her. Besides, I need to get my cop face back on."

I stopped and half-turned. "Don't. Today you aren't a cop. I want to meet the woman behind the mask. She seems like a nice person."

A look of astonishment greeted my foray into the friend zone. I guess she didn't have many friends. I left her to close her mouth and regain her composure. The kitchen was quiet and comfortable. No one else was up and that suited me just fine.

Within minutes, I had the makings for breakfast scattered about and was starting to cook.

"Good morning," Lisa said. Her voice sounded strangely distorted and a little soft but I turned to smile at the door. Oddly, she wasn't there.

Then I heard Hawk. "Good morning." That same odd tone. I finally located the voices as coming from the air vent over this end of the kitchen. I had lived here alone with Stan for so long that I had forgotten the vents sometimes carried voices. I remembered listening in on my mom and dad when I was a kid. That brought back a lot of fond memories and a smile.

As the morning pleasantries began, I wasn't worried about listening in on them, but the conversation quickly turned in a direction I hadn't anticipated.

"I heard you," Hawk said. "Last night."

There was a moment of hesitation. I could imagine Lisa coloring. "I thought you were too far gone to be awake, or to remember. I didn't even think I was loud enough to wake you up. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't awake much. Just long enough to realize what was going on. It didn't bother me nearly as much as the dreams did later. I - I dreamed about Ted having sex with me while you whispered in my ear."

I felt my face flush and yanked my attention back to the eggs before I burned them. Sliding the bread into the toaster, I tried to stop listening. This was not the kind of conversation I should hear; it was private. Physics had other ideas, though. Even with the eggs on, I could still hear them.

"Really? Does that make you uncomfortable?" Lisa asked.

Hawk was quiet for a minute. "No, more like confused. I've never thought about doing something like that, not even in a dream. Then we talk and my subconscious is thinking

about it. I don't know if men are my cup of tea, but in the dream, I reacted to Ted. Not like making love to a woman, but not like some horrible fate either. Not that I am committing to anything, mind you," Hawk cautioned, "but I'm not sure who I am anymore and I don't like that."

"Hawk, you are the same person you have always been," Lisa said. "I wasn't saying you needed to rush out and sleep with a guy. I just wanted you to think about it as hard as I was thinking about what you asked me."

I *really* shouldn't be listening to this conversation, I decided. A quick look told me that breakfast would take five more minutes, and then I could get away from that vent. Still, I had to admit that I knew I could call them into the kitchen and not have to listen in to the private conversation but, like Hawk, part of me wanted to know.

"And where has that thinking gotten you?" Hawk asked. "Look, I know you are with Ted. I can see how you and he are growing closer but I have to admit that I want you. I might even want you enough to consider..."

"Hush now," Lisa said. "I wasn't trying to seduce you into Ted's bed."

I let out my breath. I'm not sure what I would have thought if she were. I began scooping the scrambled eggs onto a plate.

"After Ted went to sleep last night, I thought about doing it with a woman." There was a pause long enough to make me hold my breath. "Specifically, I thought about doing it with you."

"To use your own words, does that make you feel uncomfortable?" Hawk asked.

"No. Confused. The same as you. I don't want to admit I want to have sex with another woman but I have to. When you look at me, I feel aroused. I dreamed about you again last night, but you were there with Ted." She paused. "You know that's how it would have to be, right? I won't sleep around on Ted. I don't know what we have yet, but I *know* running around would break his trust. That won't happen."

I felt a flood of relief. I didn't know what I thought about that, but her support of us filled me with warmth.

"Is sex with a woman really cheating on a man?" Hawk asked. "I'm not pushing for that, I just never thought about it like this and I'm curious now."

"I'm no Bill Clinton." Lisa answered. "Sex is sex and I'm not going to have sex with someone outside my relationship. It's just wrong."

"Well, I certainly don't want you to compromise your morals." I could hear the smile in her voice.

Lisa continued in a rush, as though she wanted to say something before she lost her nerve. "I need you to understand. I want to but I can't. Ted seems like he supports my fantasies, but I don't want him to think I want someone in place of him or that I'm some easy floozy. I'm happy with him and I think he is with me. I don't want to change that."

"What about if you convince him?" Hawk asked. "You could ask him to let you experiment with me."

"No, I want to be with you but if it ever did happen, it would *have* to include Ted," Lisa said at last.

My breath froze in my chest. What did she just say?

"You need to ask him if you can join *us*, if that is what you want," Lisa continued. "That's the only way it can happen. I think I'm falling for Ted but I can't deny my attraction to you, my curiosity of wanting to be with you, but I'm not a slut. If Ted doesn't agree to having all three of us together, I'll just have to regret not meeting you sooner."

"Oh, God." Hawk moaned. "I want you but I just don't know if I *can*. Lisa, what do I do?"

"You do what is right for you, Hawk. You have my answer but I've had more time to think about it. You just keep thinking and by the time you are done, I think you will know more about yourself than when I asked you. I know that I do. Come on, I'll show you to the bedroom and you can shower in the attached bathroom and dress in peace."

My mind was whirling over this unexpected revelation. I made plates of food on autopilot while my mind was working in overdrive. I don't think men should ever hear themselves being discussed by women as an object of sexual desire. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be pleased, annoyed or frightened.

This was complex. Hell, this wasn't just complex. It was convoluted; a Gordian knot. I really felt something growing with Lisa. She did with me, too. Enter the third party of this possible triangle, Hawk. She was attracted to the same woman I was. A bit of a twist on the stereotype, I admitted wryly. Lisa was attracted to her as well. I guess I needed to do some thinking about it, like they had been. In the end, it might never come to pass. Hawk didn't sound at all enamored with the idea of a man in the mix. That, I admitted, might be the best outcome. Leaving aside my male fantasy of a threesome, Hawk was a lesbian and sounded more than reluctant. That seemed to border on sex with the unwilling. I would never do that to someone.

My mind chased itself around in circles for a bit and I decided to just let things sit. I could eat myself up over all the possibilities or wait and see what developed, then talk with them both, if it did. Option two sounded better. It wasn't as if they knew I knew. Satisfied with my plan, I sat down and waited for them.

Lisa came in a few minutes later and gave me a kiss. "Good morning! This all smells wonderful. Thank you!"

"It's my pleasure. How's Hawk doing?"

Lisa gestured at the bedroom hall. "She's showering and getting dressed. Frankly, she seems a little off balance today so I think we should cut her some slack today, okay?"

I pursed my lips and nodded. "Good idea." Pouring her some coffee, I sat and sipped with her, small talking. I was curious if she would spill anything but I guess that's what comes from dating a lawyer. She gave nothing away about the simmering sexual tension in the house.

Twenty minutes later, Hawk sauntered in dressed in jeans, a Harley shirt and her boots. She looked much more together than when I saw her last. "Morning. That coffee smells good. Pour me a cup and I'll be human again. Cops live on this stuff."

I poured and wagged a finger at her. "Today, you are *not* a cop. Today, you are off and recovering. Time enough tomorrow to get back to work."

Hawk smirked. "Okay, Dad."

Lisa looked over at her with raised eyebrows. "Dad? Are you going to call Ted Dad now?"

Hawk colored. I didn't think anything could embarrass her. I just smiled, oblivious on the outside.

"I'm not really that old," I joked. "I just woke her out of a dream about her being a teen and getting woke up for school. No big deal."

Lisa smiled. "Ah, I see. We should all dig in. Food seems to bring Stan out so if we want anything left for us, we have only a few minutes."

Hawk and I both laughed and started in. I gave Hawk her aspirin to take with her food.

"This stuff is great, Ted," Hawk said as she sipped her coffee. "Beats the hell out of the swill they try to pass off as coffee back at the station. Does that bean pickin' son of a bitch, Juan Valdez, bring it here on his little donkey?"

I just smiled.

The three of us spent time taking a detailed tour of the vineyard. Both Lisa, and surprisingly Hawk, asked a lot of good questions and really seemed interested in what was here and how it all worked.

When the sun was high in the sky and the heat had become oppressive, I suggested we go in and get some lunch.

Hawk smiled and shook her head. "Actually, I've heard there are some nice stores in Spring that I'd like to see. Some have a really *historic* view, I hear. Can we check them out and then get some lunch there?"

I grinned back as Lisa colored nicely. "Sure, I know a great café with outstandingly *discreet* service."

Lisa smacked me on the arm. "Ted!"

I looked at her in mock surprise. "What's the matter, honey?"

"Ooooo, men!" We all laughed.

We drove into Spring and I pulled right up to the Rose Petals store. Lisa turned beet red but didn't hesitate getting out and walking in. Hawk and I followed right behind her. The same lady clerk was up front and smiled at us.

"Welcome back. I always like to see repeat business! Feel free to look around and don't feel awkward about touching the merchandise."

Lisa burst out laughing. "You are so bad! I'm Lisa, this is Ted and our friend Hawk."

"Alice Jenks, owner and eye in the sky." She winked at Lisa. "Don't feel bad, my husband, Andy, didn't complain later on, if you know what I mean."

"I think we'll just browse this time," I said with a grin. "We have company."

Alice grinned. "Please yourselves. I'll be right here."

As Lisa walked in, I looked back at the door and made a locking motion. Alice nodded and grinned widely.

As I caught up with the ladies, Hawk gave me a look. "Sounds like you have a fan. Is this *the* store?"

Lisa nodded, still blushing furiously.

Hawk smiled and stopped. "Then I'll check out the delicates and you two browse. Don't mind me and I'll be ready to leave when you are." She headed for the other side of the store and we both giggled.

"I don't know if I could do anything knowing someone was watching," she confided as we moved to the clothes lining the back wall. "That seems way too risky."

I thought about how turned on she got when she risked being seen. It was a part of her that we were just beginning to understand. I stopped and looked at the layout of the place, the lack of other customers. Alice was glancing back at the mirror and she smiled when she saw me. Hawk was looking at frilly underclothes and not looking this way. "Remember when I told you I would hold you to doing some things but I promised you wouldn't regret it?"

Lisa's eyes grew huge. "No! Ted, we can't!"

"Trust me. Alice knew what we were doing before. Hawk knows what you like. I am nervous, too, but there will never be a better or safer place for your first time in public."

She looked undecided for a moment, afraid even, but then she nodded.

I put my hands on her waist and pushed her against the wall, dropping to my knees in front of her. I kissed the inside of her thigh just under the edge of the skirt and then rapidly kissed my way up. Her panties were already damp when I got there and were soaked after I used my tongue on her through the thin fabric. The soft sound of her whimpering came through the skirt over my head just fine. I half expected her to hold my head but she seemed to be gripping the wall instead.

I pulled the panties to the side and dug my tongue into her flower, savoring the sweet flavor. My face was promptly made damp as she ground herself onto me. Crossing my fingers, I slid two inside her. A low moan of pleasure came out of her lungs.

"Ted, Alice is watching us. I can see her in the mirror. She can see you eating me."

I pulled back. "Does that excite you? Do you want her to watch me lick you, Lisa?"

"Oh, God. Yes... I want it." She sighed.

"Then hold up your skirt so she has a good view," I said before digging back into her with my lips.

Lisa didn't hesitate this time. She pulled the skirt up all the way to her chest. I watched her face as I kept on and could tell her eyes were locked on Alice, not through the mirror but directly over the clothes racks. Her breathing was getting ragged really quickly and her nectar was flowing. I guessed it would only be a minute before she exploded.

"I found these nice..." Hawk said from behind me. "Oh..."

I started to pull back but Lisa grabbed my head with one hand. "Finish what you started. Let them watch. I want it."

Unable to look around, I mentally shrugged and resumed fingering her and running my tongue up her wonderful sex. I wondered what Hawk was thinking now.

"I think I'll go talk to Alice and let you two have some privacy," Hawk said. She sounded

embarrassed.

"You can watch, if you want to," Lisa said huskily.

"I'm not used to this, so I'll feel better watching from up front. Please, don't be disappointed. Maybe next time, after I adjust to the idea. Okay?"

I saw Lisa nod, her eyes locked on Hawk. She was really getting into this. I was shocked when she started unbuttoning her blouse. It was twice as shocking when she pulled her bra up and began massaging herself and pinching her nipples.

"It's okay. Go ahead up front and watch," Lisa said.

I could see her watching Hawk move away. I could even hear Alice when she arrived at the counter.

"They do make a sweet couple, don't they?" Alice asked. "I locked the door so they could have a good time without interruptions."

"Lisa?" I asked in a breathless voice. "What do you see? Tell me."

"Alice and Hawk are standing there watching you eat me through the mirror. I think they like what they see."

Her body began shaking and she closed her eyes. I focused my attention on her nub and was rewarded with her explosive orgasm. She came for seconds and then slid down the wall, pulling herself away from me.

I sat next to her and held her close to me, her clothes in wild disarray and her sex on display for all to see. She seemed almost unconscious and was breathing heavily.

Lisa slowly came back to herself and slid her knees open, allowing them a better view. She turned and kissed me deeply, moaning at the taste of herself on my lips.

Lisa climbed to her feet and pulled me up with her. Slowly, she put her clothes back into place.

I dusted myself off and hugged her. "Lisa," I said quietly. "I think you should give Hawk and Alice a thank you kiss."

Her eyes flashed to me, and she searched my face, looking to see if I was serious. At my nod, we walked up front and she enfolded Hawk into her arms and kissed her.

Hawk pushed her back in surprise and looked at me. "Ted?"

"A thank you kiss from both of us, for not being upset," I said.

With a sigh, she pulled Lisa into her arms and kissed her passionately. Lisa molded her body to Hawk's and returned it with her own ardor.

Lisa broke the kiss after a minute and pulled back. "For both of us, thank you, Hawk."

Then she hugged Alice, her kiss on the woman's cheek. "Thank you so much!"

Alice hugged her back and kissed Lisa's cheek. "My pleasure, sweetie." She looked at me. "You can kiss the other cheek."

I grinned, hugged her and kissed Alice's cheek.

Hawk looked at me. "Ted, that kind of trust is really special. To let Lisa be herself and help her without being hung up on the details of what she wants." She looked at Lisa. "I'm sorry, Hon, but I think Ted needs to thank me himself."

I wondered what she was talking about until Hawk took me into her arms and tilted her head as our lips met. I stiffened, in a couple of ways, as her tongue ran across my lips.

She pulled back an inch. "Loosen up, Ted. I don't bite - much. No obligations. The rules bent, not broken, for all of us." She kissed me again, her tongue pushing its way into my mouth.

The kiss seemed awkward for a moment and then she melted against me. Her eyes were closed and I realized she was tasting Lisa. After a moment of that, I returned the favor, and she didn't object to my intrusion. We French kissed for just a minute and then she pulled back. "That wasn't so bad," she said so low that I almost missed it. Then she grinned and reached down to grasp me through my pants as she stepped back. She released me almost as soon as she touched me. "I see junior is okay with the afternoon."

Lisa was watching Hawk, well, like a hawk. When Hawk let me loose, Lisa kissed her deeply. I could see their tongues dueling and it made me like granite.

Lisa finally pulled back. "I think we need to leave before I do something we are not ready for."

"I'm starving," Hawk agreed, grinning. "Let's go eat something." She grinned even harder. "Or at least go eat something else."

Alice shook her head at us. Watching her scan the bra and panties Hawk had selected while winking slyly at her was funny.

Hawk refused to let me pay for them. "I wear my own underwear, Ted; not someone else's. At least, not unless they are my lovers. You're not looking to become my lover, are you, Ted?" She raised an eyebrow and I just shrugged my shoulders and smiled.

I did buy a gift card for \$250 dollars. Alice grinned at me and said she looked forward to us coming back to shop again as she unlocked the door and let us out into the street.

Alice stopped Lisa and spoke softly enough to her that I could only barely hear her. "When I was younger, my sister was the chaperone on my dates. With the ones she really liked, she would sit on the hood at the drive-in and give us space to play around without it getting too serious or someone catching us. It taught me the value of having someone watching out for you when you are doing something risky. I don't want to be pushy but you really need to keep that in mind for the future. We all have our secrets that would hurt us if they ever got out, me included. Come back and we'll talk more. I bet I could help you with finding boundaries." She grinned.

Lisa hugged her. "Thank you so much."

The trip to the café was one of us falling back into some sense of normalcy. By the time we were seated, it almost seemed like an erotic dream. The girls sat side by side across from me and chattered about the food options. Lisa admitted it was really the first time she had read the menu.

I grinned and made my selection. Then the expected bare foot slid between my legs and I had a hard time keeping my game face on. I wasn't going to let Lisa know how much that was getting to me. She was returning the favor in spades, chattering away with both Hawk and myself as though she was just sitting there. So cool and collected. Hawk noticed nothing, her attention focused on Lisa and what she was saying.

When the food came, Lisa's foot slithered away and left me very excited. She bit into

her steak with a moan of culinary pleasure. Hawk smiled at me and cut a bite off her own. The conversation was so normal it was almost surreal.

The lunch was very pleasant. Everyone seemed very relaxed. When at last we were finished, we all went and washed up. The girls were almost giggly when they came out.

I walked back to the car with my arm around Lisa with Hawk next to us. The drive back to the vineyard was wonderfully relaxed.

When we arrived, the weekly Sunday afternoon vineyard party Stan hosted was in full swing. The bluegrass band was already playing, and almost a hundred people were there, dancing, sitting, tasting wine and hobnobbing. Stan was moving through the crowd with practiced ease. A touch, a nod, a word. Everyone he passed felt his full attention. I still had no idea how he managed to do that.

"Hawk, if you want to get a drink, I need to take Lisa for a turn on the dance floor."

Hawk smiled. "You kids have fun. I'll get us all something to drink." She sauntered off without a backward glance.

"I think she likes you a little, Ted." Lisa whispered in my ear as we started dancing.

"Really? What makes you think that? The kiss was more for you than me."

She smiled enigmatically. "Let's just say I have some insider information that you don't."

I was about to ask what that meant when I was tapped on the shoulder. A glance back and I smiled.

"Representative de la Cruz! You finally made it!" I stopped dancing and wrapped my arm around Lisa. The energetic little man shook my hand. "I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Lisa."

"How wonderful to meet you, Lisa!" He stood beside us, his arm around a Hispanic woman about his age. "This is my wife, Mary." We were a little bubble in a very busy dance floor; the people didn't precisely bump us but they were thick around us.

I saw Hawk with three glasses of wine slowly working her way in towards us. With some difficulty, I helped open a spot for her to join us. She was smiling but she looked

worried.

"Hi! I'm Hawk. Pleasure. Lisa, I saw someone that looked just like one of your cases. That Russian, Viktor Kotov. Can we... Gun!" Her eyes were looking between Lisa and me. Dropping the wine, she was pulling her own gun and shoving Ramon aside.

I don't know what I was thinking but I shoved Lisa and dove into Hawk, Ramon and Mary. A loud bang or a small explosion went off right behind me as we all tumbled to the ground. Pain exploded on the right side of my head. The crowd went berserk and a stampede away from us made the chaos total. I could hear Hawk cursing under me.

By the time she dug herself free there was no hope of seeing anyone. No real hope of catching anyone either. Some people were watching, some were milling and many were screaming for the fastest exit. Cars were already pulling out of the parking lot in droves. Lisa was helping Ramon and Mary to their feet and I started to get to my own feet and felt the pain grow worse. I sat back heavily and touched the side of my head. It was wet and sticky. I could feel the heat of blood flowing down my face and neck. In confusion, I looked at Lisa.

Lisa's eyes widened in horror. "Oh, my God! Hawk! Ted's been shot!"

Hawk was back in a second and lay me flat on the ground. "Lay down, hero. Let's look at this." I felt light headed and watched Lisa as she shouted into her cell phone while Hawk dug painfully at my hair. I decided this was definitely more surreal than lunch as my vision faded to a point and went out.

Chapter Nine: Lisa takes charge

Lisa's point of view

Surprisingly, to me, the politician refused to leave until Ted was looked after. He pulled off his jacket and firmly took charge. "I was a combat medic in the army years ago. I haven't forgotten everything. Hmmmm." He moved Ted's hair and examined his head. Then, he wiped his hands on his shirt and opened Ted's eyes one at a time, giving each eye a quick look.

"Good news, it doesn't look bad. It looks like the bullet glanced off and didn't penetrate."

I hadn't realized I was holding my breath until it sobbed out of me. The tears that had

been threatening to take over were unleashed. Both Hawk and Mary held me, softly speaking words that didn't really register. I could see Sue crying uncontrollably while Stan held her just a few feet away.

"He might have a concussion. His pupils don't look quite the same size," Ramon continued, "but if so, I don't think it's too bad. I'm a little concerned because he passed out, but all things considered, Lisa, I think he'll be fine."

It took a few minutes for me to get my composure back. I sat there on the ground holding Ted's hand while Hawk and Mary comforted me and Ramon held a handkerchief on the wound. Ted woke up a few minutes later. Sue came over and we kept him talking to keep him awake. He seemed dazed but lucid.

The next few hours were chaotic, at best. Sue and I stayed at Ted's side as the Sheriff's deputies and paramedics swarmed the scene. When they took him to the hospital, I made a very hard choice and told him I would be there as soon as I could. Sue went with him, and Stan would have if he could've escaped.

When I caught up with Hawk, she was hip deep with the other police, questioning people that were still lingering. She was seated at a small table with a man and woman, writing as the woman spoke. "So, you saw a white man about five nine or ten run into the parking lot with what looked like a gun. Dark hair, slim build, but you never saw his face. He tore out of here in some kind of black SUV. That about sum it up, Jo? Earl?" At their nods, Hawk stood up and shook hands. "Thank you both. I hope the rest of your vacation is less dramatic."

After they left, I stepped up and Hawk smiled at me. "The Bellers have a possible lead for us. They seem to have been the only ones in the crowd to see the shooter at all. It was a man but they didn't really get enough of a look to help with an ID. It could be Price or Kotov, if that was even him I saw."

"I'm finished pussy-footing around," I growled. "We need to get this settled before one of us gets killed." Hawk nodded.

"Then, it's a damned good thing I'm here to get it all figured out for you," a deep baritone voice said from behind me. I turned and found a tall, broad, white man in his late forties. He was dressed in western clothing and had a badge hanging from his shirt pocket. His upper lip was dominated by a huge, bristling walrus-like mustache in the same salt and pepper black as his balding head. "Digger Jamison, Texas Rangers. Who's

Hawkins?"

Hawk looked pretty steamed already just at seeing him. "I'm Hawkins. This is related to an investigation I'm running. What can I do for you?"

Digger grinned but there was no humor to it. "You can thank me for takin' over this case. Since a politico was a possible target in this shooting, the Rangers are taking charge of this investigation and the one in Houston, too. You're now my contact with HPD, Hawkins. Don't you worry none, I'll make sure you look good, not that you don't already." He winked at Hawk.

"This is bullshit," Hawk snarled. "De la Cruz wasn't the target. Stansbury or Davis were."

Digger scowled at Hawk. "Let's not fight, now, y'hear? I've looked over your case file and my experience tells me that the two are connected," he said with a superior tone.

"Of course they're connected. I just told you that, you..." Hawk started hotly.

"I think," I said interrupting Hawk smoothly, "that we can agree that they are connected. Lisa Davis, Galveston County District Attorney's office." I held out a hand and Digger took it.

"Ma'am," Digger drawled. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about all this. I'll get right down to the bottom of what's goin' on and get the varmint behind bars in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

My mouth dropped open. Digger's statement was so outrageous that I didn't know what to say. I thought this kind of misogynistic behavior was a thing of the past. After all, women could be more than secretaries now. Hawk was silent and a glance showed her agape and speechless as well.

Digger filled the void himself. "There, I knew that would set both of you fillies at ease. It's already purdy obvious that feller, Price, is likely the killer."

"Oh, puh-leeze!" Hawk said, finally catching her voice. "I cannot believe I am hearing this! I'm going to call my Captain and get this fixed, Lisa." She stalked off without a word more to Digger, but I could hardly blame her. It's not every day you meet someone that pushes so many buttons all at once. She was on her cell phone before she was five feet away.

Digger shook his head. "That happens all the durned time, missy. She'll come around when she gets to know me. So, tell me what happened the night your friend blew up." He pulled out a well-chewed stub of a pencil and a cheap flip notebook.

I considered, really considered, losing it like Hawk but *barely* held myself in check. "Calvin. His name was Calvin and he didn't blow up. My car was bombed. Calvin was driving it when my car blew up." I started going over the details again and he quickly started asking questions about Ted. What I knew about him and who or what I had seen around. Who he knew. About Price. It didn't take more than a minute for me to figure out he had already focused in on Price targeting Ted, and that he was looking for information shaped to fit his preconceptions rather than keeping an open mind.

"Look, Ranger Jamison..." I started.

"Just call me Digger, ma'am," he interrupted. "And I'll call you Lisa. There. All comfortable like." He patted my hand.

I was saved from tearing his head off by Hawk exploding behind me. "Goddammit, Captain! That's not right! This is my investigation and he doesn't know squat about it or Houston. I tell you, the man is a bloomin' idiot!"

I grimaced at that. Even given the short time that I had known her, I already knew that tact wasn't very high on Hawk's list of merits when she was angry. I couldn't tell what her conversational partner was saying but it was loud enough to buzz in the air, even over here. Amazingly, Digger didn't seem upset at being called an idiot.

"I think she might not know me well enough, jest yet. Give 'er time and she'll be seein' me in a better light. She's jest upset that I outrank her," Digger said in a sotto voice.

Amazing. Simply amazing. What was with this guy?

"No, Captain, I'm *not* too close to this case. I just know I can do a better job than some..." More angry buzzing from the phone. "Captain, that's not fair! Let me finish the damned case!" She rolled her eyes at the next set of buzzing and then she paled. Her mouth opened and shut a few times without words coming out. "You can't! You won't!" I saw her eyes light up, even more furious. "Fine. If you want it that way, you're the boss." She hung up before any reply was possible.

Hawk stalked back up to us, her jaw working as I stared at her. "The bastard shit-canned me. I'm on indefinite leave of absence until this case is settled by this..." She

seemed at a loss for words.

I took her into my arms and held her. "Oh, Hawk. We'll fight this!" She hugged me back, but I could tell her heart really wasn't into it.

"Don't you let that fret you none, Miss Hawkins. Like I was tellin' Miss Davis, here, I already have a good ideer of who the killer is. I have ten bucks that says I have him in the hoosegow by Wednesday. Then you're back on the roster," Digger said with an over-confidant tone.

Hawk stiffened and shrugged out of my arms before getting right in Digger's face. "Did you ask the Captain to yank me, caveman? You don't think women can do this job?" Her finger started poking him on the chest. "I can do anything you can better for marbles, money or fun every day of the week. Your good ole boy drawl doesn't fool me for one goddamned second. You wanted this!"

Digger threw up his hands and stepped back as she kept stepping into his personal space. "Whoa, purdy thing! I was just bein' friendly-like! I know you can do any ole thing you set your purdy little head to! I didn't tell yore Captain anythin' like that!"

That just pissed her off more. "You ever hear of sexual harassment, genius? Women aren't just barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen anymore! You couldn't find your ass with both hands, even with the help of air cover, backup - code three, and directions in English!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders. "Hawk! This isn't helping anything at all!" She resisted at first, but relented when I didn't stop pulling. "Digger, this is a bad time. I'll see that she gives a statement to the deputies and so will I."

If anything, he seemed more amused than upset. "That shore does sound like a winner of an ideer. I ken git your numbers from them and call if I have any questions."

His amusement didn't help me calm Hawk down. He hadn't taken long to find all of her buttons and lean on them hard. She finally turned around and stalked ahead of me. I ran to catch up and guided her into the house and onto the couch in the living room.

"Sit," I ordered. "I need you thinking and not pissed off. This is not helping Ted, or either of us."

She sat, fuming. "Dammit, Lisa, you just don't know what it's like! I don't just have a

glass ceiling; I have homophobia to fight every day of my life, too. Captain Kruger was a great man and it was really bad for me when he was promoted and replaced. He never cared about my personal life or my gender. I made Detective Sergeant under him and then Lieutenant. Now I have had Captain Jordan, a Bible-thumping, homophobic good ole boy, in charge of homicide for three months, and he was just waiting for this. He wants me gone and, mark my words, he will find a way to make this permanent."

I slid my arms around her and she broke down, burying her head in my shoulder. Underneath her rock-hard exterior, she had an emotional side. She was just afraid to let it out. Afraid to let someone else see her pain.

When she had cried herself out, I gave her some tissues. The box was being used so hard this week, I thought I'd better see about getting some more. While she wiped her eyes, I leaned forward and put my hands on her leg.

"Here's what we are going to do. *We* are going to get out of here and drive to Galveston. We're going to get into Calvin's files and find out who might have wanted him dead. I think someone killed Calvin because that was who they were after. They must have stalked him and maybe I was just a bonus or something. I don't know why they are after us but there must be some loose ends or they would have faded out of sight. We're going to hit all the suspects until one of them cracks. What we *are not* going to do is let the good ole boy network sink this investigation."

My eyes flared with a release of anger that I hadn't realized had been building in me for days. "Someone killed my best friend and now has almost killed my boyfriend. I am not going to sit back anymore and let Digger, your boss or anyone else dick with me. I am going to find the bastard and take him down. Are you with me?"

Hawk grinned like a shark and wiped away the last of her tears. "Fuck it, if I get busted, I hated working for that prick anyway. I put myself through college working for a private investigator and had a license before I ever became a cop." Then she sobered up. "But what about you, Hon? If they find out we are giving them the finger like this, you might get canned, too."

I pursed my lips and nodded. "I might be asked to resign but I don't think they would push hard enough to disbar me. I can always get work as a lawyer or even open my own practice. But cheer up! They might never figure it out. Let's cross those bridges if we come to them."

Hawk tossed her tissues into the trash and stood up. "We need to go leave a statement

with the deputies like you promised. Then dick-cheese won't have any reason to be haunting us for a while. We need Colombo of the boondocks like I need dick."

I smiled and raised an eyebrow. "I did see you cop a feel earlier."

Hawk flushed and rolled her eyes. "That was more of a rhetorical statement. Let's not get bogged down in my sexual identity crisis. Let's get a handle on this first."

I nodded. "Let's do it. Now, where do we get a car?"

"We boost Ted's," she said as we headed back for the door, "if we can't get some keys from Stan. Stan. That's an odd name, don't you think? Stan - no, Stanley Stansbury. Did his mother hate him? Did they call him Stan-Stan when he was a kid? Jeeze, poor bugger."

I suppressed my amusement. "Do all cops have to joke when the situation sucks?"

"Yes," she said without breaking stride. "It's part of the union rules. Speaking of which, I should file a complaint with my Association Rep. I doubt it will do any good but it's better than just letting him get away with it."

"Let me know if you decide to sue him," I said. "I know some great attack lawyers," I replied as we were almost to the deputies.

"God, I hate lawyers," she muttered and then glanced at me. "With certain exceptions."

I shook my head. "You just want my body."

Hawk snorted. "No shit, Sherlock! Where'd you get your first clue?"

It took half an hour to give our statements. Actually, it took Hawk half an hour. I was done in fifteen minutes. When I was done, I looked around for Stan and I found him cleaning up some of the trash and setting chairs into some kind of order.

"Stan, any word on Ted?"

He set a chair down and slumped into it. "I talked with Sue and the doctor is sewing up the cut in his scalp now. X-rays show no fractures, thank God, and they think he even got away without a concussion. They'll probably turn him loose today sometime." He

swallowed heavily. "Lisa, he was almost killed. What is going on? Who's doing this and who's really the target? I heard that Hawk was off the case. Who'll find the bad guy now?"

I pulled a chair next to him and held his hand. "I don't know, but I promise you that I'll be all over this until I do know who did this and can take them down." I smiled a little. "Ted told me almost the exact same thing when Calvin died. Stan, he'll be safe in the hospital for now, under guard. Hopefully, Hawk and I will have some answers before he gets out. Speaking of which, I need to borrow a car. Can I take Ted's?"

Stan nodded, fishing in his pants. "I got the keys from the paramedics. Here." He handed them over. "Hawk is still working the case?" he asked belatedly.

"Yes, but keep that close to your vest. We don't want to telegraph that to anyone. Let them think we've slunk off like good little girls," I said.

Stan nodded. "No worries. I can do that. I've seen that new guy watching you and Hawk. You think he'll follow you?"

I frowned. That seemed... What? Out of character? Too intelligent? Both and more? "He sounds like a good ole boy to me. What makes you think he would want to follow us?"

Stan shrugged. "I just think he's interested in the two of you and is taking pains to not seem that way. I'm a people-watcher, and what I see doesn't add up, really. Don't mistake backwoodsy for stupid. When you two went into the house he made a circle around it and then watched the front door. He's definitely interested in you two, alright."

"Well," I admitted, "I suppose he might try to follow us then. You have a plan?"

He smiled the Stan smile. "I'll come up with something. You need a distraction, and I'm sure I can provide something worthwhile. Go wait for Hawk and make a break for it when you see my signal."

I gave him a quick hug and stood up. "Thank you, Stan, and thank you for not blaming me for this. I know how easy it would be for you to hate me."

Stan shook his head. "You are the best thing that has come into my brother's life for a decade, or more. You don't know how badly Sue and I were starting to feel about his chances at any happiness. You, Lisa, are an angel from Heaven, and I don't blame this on you. I blame the person behind it. Ted told me the night he first saw you that you

were interesting. He just never realized it was in the old Chinese curse sense, too. You know, may you live in interesting times."

I impulsively hugged him again. "Thank you for that. Except the Chinese thing. I never expected to live in interesting times either." I gave him a peck on the cheek and headed back to the pavilion.

Digger was watching me as I walked back. His expression was clearer this time, more open and with a smile of good cheer that I was starting to become suspicious of. I smiled sweetly and waved back before turning my attention to Hawk. She was just finishing giving her statement.

She smiled without humor as she walked up to me. "That doofus has been watching me. He really doesn't have a clue. How the hell did he ever make the cut to be a state trooper, much less a Ranger?" She shook her head. "It really does prove that it's who you know, or in his case, maybe it's who you blow." We both snickered at that thought.

"Maybe. Stan thinks there's more than meets the eye." I moved us to a table near the driveway and Ted's car. "He gave me Ted's keys and is going to make some kind of distraction while we skate so Digger doesn't follow us."

Hawk looked skeptical. "Him? Follow us? Humph, he doesn't have the brains to pour piss out of a boot with the instructions printed on the bottom."

I shrugged. "Take it as you will. I think we should just accept the distraction and when it comes we..."

A loud crash from the smaller metal building next to the adobe building housing all the barrels of wine startled both of us. Then, the wall closest to us bowed and ripped apart as half a dozen barrels thundered through them. It was far enough from the pavilion that there was no danger to us but it drew everyone to see what was happening. Even Digger was on his feet and running towards the building.

"That's our cue. Let's roll," I said.

We ran to the car and threw ourselves inside it. I tossed my purse in between us on the seat. With a subdued roar, it started. We turned in the drive and zoomed out onto the county road. A clean getaway.

The drive to Galveston was quiet, and when I parked outside the office, I saw a police car parked out front and got worried. "Shit. Now there's a guard. What do we do?"

Hawk motioned forward. "Drive around the block and into the alley. I saw some fire escapes last time. I bet not everyone in your office is diligent about locking the windows. They never are. The guard will have locked the outside doors and be gone down to the lobby. Legal question, counselor. Are we breaking the law here or bending it?"

I chuckled grimly. "Not that my opinion makes a lot of difference, I bet, but probably bending it. I have authority to be in the building and even in the files in Calvin's office. By law, you can't break and enter where you have authority to be. So, entering the building may get us misdemeanor property damage, if we have to break something. Calvin's office is an active crime scene, so there is the possibility of tampering with evidence, but that's weak. Real weak, since they will have already been through it. My call is we could beat it, but we'd still be smoked turkey if we get caught, so let's be real quiet."

Hawk exited Ted's car and pulled down the metal ladder with a clatter and started climbing. I locked up and climbed behind her. She stopped on the second floor and waited for me. "Let's check the windows. If not these, I bet one a little further out from the fire escape might be unlocked." She checked the windows, but they were all locked. With a sly smile, she put one leg over the rail. "Hold my arm. Don't let me go."

I stared at her, aghast. "You could fall!"

"I could get run over by a cab, too. Hang on to me, Lisa. Let's get inside and into Calvin's office." Hawk stuck her hand out and I took it with some trepidation. "Hold on tight." Hawk swung out and suddenly I was pulled against the metal rail and it dug into my hips.

I grabbed on with both hands, one grasping Hawk's and the other holding her jacket. Her weight was heavy but not beyond my capacity. "Hurry up."

Hawk reached out and pushed up on the window next to the fire escape and it slid open. "Bingo! I'm going to grab it and when I tell you to, I want you to let go," she said with some strain. Hawk grabbed the window sill. "Let go."

When I released her hand, she pulled herself into the window. With a wriggle of her she slid inside and landed with a thud. The window closed and I heaved a huge sigh of

relief.

A few minutes later, the window next to me opened and Hawk stuck her head out, grinning. "Didn't have to break anything! No sign of a guard up here. He must be in the lobby downstairs. Sloppy bastard. I bet Murphy picked him personally for this assignment."

I awkwardly slid through the window with her help. Then I closed it behind me. "What is it with you and Murphy? You and he really seem to have some major issues. Who pissed in whose Wheaties?"

Hawk paused at the closed door, with her hand on the knob. A slight frown crossed her brow. "What is it with you anyways? All this "how does that make you feel", touchy-feely stuff? Was your minor in psych? I thought all you prosecutors were more hard boiled than that."

I raised my hands defensively. "I had some therapy for a few years. I found it helps me to actually ask about things I want to know, and sometimes it helps the other person to talk about stuff, too. I know, it's personal, and if you don't want to talk about it, tell me to mind my own business. I've seen you let your hair down when we talk, though. I think it's helped you to open up."

Hawk scratched her ear and slowly nodded. "I've thought about things that either needed to be thought about or that I've never considered before. Does that make you my therapist or my confessor?"

"Nope," I said smiling, "it makes me your friend. Come on, let's get in there and get done before Murphy comes around to catch us." I led the way out of the room and to Calvin's office. The door was closed and the doorway was criss-crossed with crime scene tape. With a deep breath, I opened the door and slid under the tape. "I'm surprised they didn't lock it."

I looked around while Hawk slid in behind me and flipped on the light. Then she closed the door and started looking the room over without touching anything. She was very interested in the area behind the door.

"That fucker was right back here. I wish I had been a little more on the ball and we'd have this all done. I'm sorry, Lisa."

"It's not over yet, Hawk. We'll catch him. I'll look through his files and you do the cop

thing," I said, opening the file cabinets.

The cases were all at least passingly familiar to me, since we talked about the ones we didn't work on together. We didn't have a lot of time so I pulled each one out of his closed case files that was serious enough, in my mind, to warrant payback. I also took all his open case files. A quick trip to the copy room and the machine was zipping out copies.

Hawk was on her hands and knees looking under the desk when I came back in. She looked back at me and then resumed her search. "There is a lot of crap under here. You should speak to the custodial staff. They've been shirking."

"I'm sure I don't want to know what's under my desk," I said back. "What do you hope to find under there?"

"Damned if I know. When I see it, I'll know what it is, though. Like... What have we here?"

I watched her ass as she was wriggling back out. Then I rolled my eyes at myself. Just what a man would do. God.

Hawk sat on the floor holding a small key ring with two keys on it and a paper tag on a string. "A clue, Watson. Park it."

Sitting next to her, I examined it. "Do you think the killer dropped it here? Should you be touching it? You know, since there might be prints or DNA on it?"

"I think I know whose DNA is on it. Calvin's," she said with a grim smile. "It was on a small hook and hanging out of sight." The tag said 'Daedalus backup files'. It was dated last month and had the initials S. W. P. "The handwriting is the same as that in his case files. This was written by Calvin. The question is, what is this case?"

The name baffled me. We didn't have odd names for the cases. They were usually the State of Texas verses someone. "I have no idea. I'd certainly remember a name like that. Let me look in the files."

We climbed up and started looking through files. Nothing. There wasn't a folder with that name in this cabinet.

"Let's look in the computer system and see what pops up," I said at last, giving up the

manual search.

"The access will be logged, won't it?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes, but we all have a file of everyone's passwords in case of emergency. Not very secure, huh? I'll wake up my computer and access it under my account and they still can't be sure who did it, if they even ask later."

"God love the cock-eyed bureaucracy. They'll never know who did what. I like it."

We trooped to the copy room first. The copies were done and I put all the files back together. Fifteen minutes had the copies in a big binder and the original files back where they came from. When I closed the door to Calvin's office, it felt like I was closing a door on his life and my eyes misted.

Hawk put her arm around my shoulders. "We both seem to be weepy recently. I know you miss him but it'll get easier."

I sagged against her and just let her strength flow into me. "I'm glad we both seem to be strong when the other is feeling down. What would we do if we both got all weepy at the same time?"

"It's what friends are for, or so Ted tells me," she admitted. "I'm not so familiar with it since I haven't really had many friends. I can be a little - abrasive."

I laughed, cheered up already. "Abrasive? You? Are we talking about the same woman? We're just going through changes in our life, stress. I have Calvin's death, Ted and exhibitionism to shake up my world. You have an asshole boss and, well, I guess you could call it a sexual identity crisis."

Hawk shook her head. "You might say that. I'm a lesbian and you have me kissing guys and wondering if I'm for real or just a player. I still don't know what I want. No, that's not true. I know what I want. I'm just uncomfortable with how much more acceptable the price of doing business is getting."

I unlocked my office and sat down at my messy desk, bringing the computer to life and starting to search. "I saw you touch him after you kissed. Frankly, I never thought you'd kiss him. That surprised the hell out of me. Then groping him? You really are considering it, aren't you?"

She sighed and nodded. "I'm getting more comfortable with the idea than I like. Part of me is more curious than I would have ever believed, Doctor Freud. Do you want to hear about what I think about my mother?" Hawk asked.

"Nope. You need to have some secrets." The screen came up with the query box and I typed in the name. Nothing for that name in the system.

My cell phone rang. "Davis."

"Lisa? This is Sue. Ted's cutting himself loose and he refuses to go home with me. He's insisting you come and pick him up. The hard-headed idiot said to tell you that he won't lie down while you girls do all the work."

I smiled. That was Ted. "We'll come and get him. Look for us in an hour or so. I'll call before we get there." We said our goodbyes and disconnected. "Hawk, we have to pick up Ted. He won't go home with Sue."

Hawk shook her head. "You two can be stubborn. I'm surprised you can agree who wears the pants."

I grinned toothily. "He does. Men need zippers. It makes them feel empowered."

I locked the computer, pocketed my keys, and we closed the office behind us. We exited back down the fire escape. I was very happy to be back in the car and driving.

Hawk looked through the copies as we drove. "The information we are looking for may not be in these files. It may be in Calvin's head or house. We'll have to search it."

"I suppose we will have to start digging into his life. God, I never would have dreamed we were going that way," I said softly.

"Here's another thing you may not have thought of," she said. "We know that whoever it is, they are not shy about attacking you, even in a public place. We need to all disappear from our usual haunts for a while. Leave the bad guys wondering where we will turn up next."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked. The sky was getting dark so I switched on the lights as we were going back through Houston. Damn, it seems like I had been back and forth a lot over the last few days.

"A no-name motel: get a double, and we check Ted and you in as Mister and Missus Smith. You don't mind shacking up for a few days with Ted, do you, Lisa?"

I laughed. "No, not at all. It actually sounds like a good idea. The question is, do you?"

"Two beds makes it all safe, girl." Hawk smiled back at me.

The remainder of the drive to the hospital was without incident. I called Sue when we were about ten minutes away and she gave us directions to the place, including the entrance closest to them. We pulled into the drop off and I went in, leaving Hawk to watch the car.

Sue and Ted were inside, Ted in a wheelchair and Sue sitting beside him. He had a small bandage on the side of his head. I knelt beside the chair.

"Hey, Hero. I was going to come down to visit you, and here you are busting out. You're not mad that I went to start clearing this up without you, are you?" I swallowed a little.

Ted smiled and shook his head. "No. I'm happy you're looking into it. I could have walked out. I don't have a concussion. All I have are a few stitches. The doctor even said we can..." He looked over at Sue and blushed as she shook her head.

"Then let's get you out to the car and get moving. Hawk has a plan." I stood up and hugged Sue. "I'm so glad he's okay. We're going to duck out of sight for a while. We'll have our cell phones. We don't want to put you in any more danger."

She looked back at me, wide-eyed. "Why can't the police help us? Protective custody or something."

"Manpower," I said. "That, and I'm starting to be worried about - other aspects of the case. It'll be best for you and Stan if we don't keep you in the target zone. Go home, and I'll call you when we're set up. I'll make sure he rests and takes his medications. Any complaints about that, Ted?"

"No way. Sounds like heaven, if you're there."

Sue handed me his medicine and we pushed Ted outside. Hawk smiled as she held the back door open. "Your chariot awaits, stud." Ted didn't look weak as we got him in the

back. Sue hugged Hawk and we drove out of the parking lot after watching Sue get into her car and leave.

"What place do you have in mind," I asked as I drove.

"There's this little place I know in south Houston. We can take stock there. Get some take-out and start talking over the case files and what moves we need to make next," Hawk said as she turned in her seat.

"Ted, you mind if I ask you some personal questions? About Lisa and - relationships." Hawk sounded like a cop but not as pushy.

"If I give the wrong answers, do you have to cuff me?" He grinned at her.

"No, Doofus. I just want to know."

"Ask away," he said.

I could tell she was forming the question and wanted it just right. Interesting. As a lawyer, I knew all about asking the questions the right way. That was almost as important as asking the right question.

"In the store, why did you - you know - help Lisa's exhibitionism? Don't get me wrong, I think it was standup of you, but I've been wondering what the driver was."

Ted's eyebrows rose. "Well, I was thinking about the last time we were there. How she enjoyed it and that Alice didn't seem mind. Lisa trusts you and I figured you wouldn't get upset with her. I know I was taking a chance but I thought it would be something Lisa would like. It had been a long time since I've even had a relationship and I've *never* done anything like that. I guess I wanted to see if I could experience the thrill with her that way, too. I have to admit I did enjoy doing it in front of someone."

He sighed. "I guess I can't really explain what I was thinking when I decided to do it. Her pleasure and safety was top in my mind. If I really thought she didn't want to, I would have stopped." He looked at me and I watched him in the mirror. "Lisa, you did enjoy it, didn't you?"

"Yes, Ted." I reassured him, "I enjoyed it. I wanted it, even though I never knew that I did before this week. You did the right thing."

Ted sighed in relief. "Thank God. I don't want to screw this up."

"Ted, we're going to have to have a long talk," Hawk said. "You jumped on me to save me back at the vineyard and while that irks me a little, since that's my job, that's a huge thing to do and I appreciate it. Just don't do it again and let me do my job. I - I've never been good at relationships with men. I tend to not trust them, and then I get all abrasive with them, but I've started finding myself trusting you more than I have trusted any man in a long time, and I need to be up front with you. I can't keep hiding this."

Hawk looked over at me and then back at Ted. "There's no easy way to say this." She took a deep breath. "Ted, I like Lisa. I like her a lot. I made a pass at her." She tensed up.

Ted smiled. "I could tell that you were attracted to her. You even mentioned it to me in the kitchen. So, what did she say?"

Hawk sagged a little at his mild reaction, and I blinked in surprise. They had been talking about me?

"We talked," Hawk said. "Lisa said that she had been thinking about me, too, but that she was your woman. That she wouldn't screw around on you."

Ted nodded but said nothing.

"We talked about it," Hawk continued. "I'm still not ready to commit one way or the other but I want you to know - to tell me yes or no to something. Lisa said if I talked to you, asked to join you both, that she would be willing to have sex with me if you did, too." Hawk was speaking faster as she went on it and I could tell she was really nervous.

"I don't know what I want to do, even after kissing you. I just need you to know I will abide by whatever y'all decide," Hawk said, "and if you say no, I'll drop it." Hawk sighed and was watching Ted to see how he reacted, with the expression of a woman that thinks she just took a real chance.

Ted looked at me in the mirror and scratched his chin. "I have to admit, I've been thinking a little about you and Lisa after we talked."

"Ted," I said. "I don't want you to think I'm unhappy with you. I'm very happy. I guess

I'm just curious. If you say no, I won't be upset. I'd like us to agree on anything like this in our relationship. I won't do anything outside our relationship. It has to be both of us or neither of us. Okay?"

He leaned forward and kissed the back of my head. "No worries. I agree with you, Lisa. If either of us doesn't feel comfortable with something, we don't do it. Together, or not at all. Hawk, I appreciate your honesty and trust."

The drive was quiet as both Ted and Hawk seemed to be thinking. I asked Hawk for directions. She had me leave the freeway and start making all kinds of turns while she watched out the rear window.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for tails. We're clean. Go this way."

Hawk took us down some more side streets and then into a motor court. She ran into the office and came back out with a key.

"Last room left," Hawk said with a shrug. "I have a gay friend that works here and he said there is a damn golf tourney in town. The Valareo Texas Open. It was supposed to be in San Antonio but they had a huge fire there last month so it was moved here, to the same place they play the Shell Open. Who would have thought this many people would come to see men in ugly clothes whack balls with sticks? Room 237, in the back."

I drove back and parked. We went inside. The room was clean enough, not even really worn. The one thing that was unexpected was that it only had one king sized bed and a couch.

"There was no choice. I'll sleep on the couch," Hawk said.

Ted protested but she waved him off. "You have a banged up head and a girlfriend. One couch, one person. Don't worry about it. Let's settle in and order some pizza."

Hawk dialed while I sat on the couch and held Ted. "You're not mad, are you? Really?"

Ted kissed me. "No, sweetheart. I'm not mad."

Hawk asked what we wanted on the pizza and it was soon ordered. We took turns showering, or at least we let Hawk shower first. When we came out of the shower, she

was sitting there with the pizza on the table with some two liter bottles of soda.

Ted asked us about the day's events while we ate. He looked at the keys and we talked about some of the cases. A relaxed rhythm was developing among the three of us. Hawk was joking with Ted and me.

When the last of the pizza was gone, Ted leaned back and looked at Hawk. "I've been thinking about what you said, Hawk."

She froze and then took a drink of her soda, her cop face sliding into place. "And?"

"If you feel comfortable having sex with me and Lisa, I will say yes. I really appreciate you both taking my feelings into account. It means a lot to me. You think about what you want and let us know. Whatever you decide is fine. And, Hawk, I want you to know that you are a hottie. Does that make it easier or harder?" he asked with a grin.

She smiled wryly. "Puh-leeze. Well, I guess it's in my court. I'll let you both know what I decide. Let me sleep on it."

I stood up and stretched. "Good idea. It's been a long, scary day and I think Ted should hit the sack. Us, too."

Hawk pursed her lips and nodded. "I think you're right. Let's crash."

Hawk stripped down to a tee shirt and panties. "It's not like you haven't seen me naked." I shrugged and joined her in a tee and panties. Ted stripped to his tee and underwear.

Over the next half hour, we settled into the bed. Ted whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure I feel up to getting frisky."

I kissed him. "That's okay, I understand. If you wake up tonight and feel like it, you can surprise me while I'm asleep. After this morning, I think that would be fair."

He laughed and we snuggled down to sleep.

Sometime in the night, I woke up with the sensation of someone sliding into bed behind me, on the side away from Ted, nearest the bathroom. The room was totally dark but I knew it was Hawk.

"The couch is crunching my back. There is enough room for all of us. Do you mind?"

"No," I whispered. "I don't mind at all. Goodnight." I felt her body snuggle in behind me and had to quiet the flutter in my stomach. Sleep took a little longer to come but I finally slipped back into slumber.

I did wake up briefly as I felt Ted slip out of bed and heard the door to the bathroom close. I saw the dim glow of light as I heard him making a midnight run. I thought about how crowded the bed was. Hawk wasn't making me uncomfortable but they had both been hurt. Good sleep was important for them to recover.

With a sigh, I grabbed Ted's pillow and moved to the lumpy couch. Hawk was right. It was not as comfortable as the bed but I could take it. I tossed Hawk's pillow back onto Ted's side of the bed and laid down. I breathed in his scent, sighing happily. Sleep took me before he could come back from the bathroom.

Chapter Ten: A deal is a deal.

Hawk's point of view

I woke to the bright light of morning, and I found myself spooned behind Ted. My body was pressed closely against him, and my arm was around his stomach. Well, maybe a little lower than his stomach. The strange scent of him didn't fill me with the same arousal as Lisa did but it was - unsettling.

I was about to disengage myself when Ted rolled over and slid his arm around me, pulling me close. A smile came to his lips, but his eyes remained closed as his hands pulled me into an embrace. This was getting awkward. His body was warm and solid against me and I began to feel him harden, his cock rubbing my own sex through my tee shirt and panties. I opened my mouth to wake him up, and he kissed my throat, causing my breath to freeze.

A slow burn of arousal began in the pit of my stomach. Not as strongly as if it was a woman, but it was still an arousal I couldn't deny. A part of me wanted to let him keep going. I could feel my nipples stiffening against him and the spreading warmth in my sex. God! This was bad. I was *not* a player!

No, I told myself firmly, this was not the right time to make this kind of decision and Lisa was - somewhere else. My mother's advice came shooting back into my mind. Not

that she intended it for this circumstance, but right now it fit. 'Never go shopping when you are hungry,' she always said. I should make this decision with my mind, not my pussy. I pushed back on Ted enough to break the kiss. "Ted, wake up."

His eyes fluttered open and widened in surprise. "Ahhh..."

I fluttered my eyelashes at him. "Is that a salami in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

Ted blushed furiously and slowly disengaged our entangled bodies. "I'm sorry. I was having a dream and..."

I waved off his explanation. "I understand, don't sweat it. It was actually kind of nice in an odd way but, if I decide to ask you both if we can play, it's not because I have discovered that men are really my bag. I like women and I do *not* see that changing."

Ted nodded. "I was worried that it would be something you might regret later. In my mind, you're not a lesbian, bi-sexual or straight. You're Hawk. Whoever you decide to have sex with is just you being you."

With a wry smile, I pulled him into a kiss that lasted several seconds. I was a bit breathless when I broke away. "I'm a bit worked up so I'm going to try and not make a decision right now, but I will make it soon. I promise."

When I slid out of bed, I saw Lisa huddled on the couch and shook my head. Why did she move to the couch? Did I make her uncomfortable snuggling last night? Time to find out.

I walked over to the couch and, with the same sly smile as before, I kissed her neck and was rewarded by an arched back and a sigh.

"G'morning, Glory." When her eyes opened and she smiled, I knew everything was okay. "I kissed Ted good morning. Look what you've done to me." Then I kissed her on the lips. So sweet. It took a lot more willpower to stop than it had with Ted, but I forced myself to stand up.

Lisa groaned. "That's not playing fair."

I tweaked her nose. "Someone told you life was fair?"

The sound of the bathroom door closing got my attention as Ted took advantage of my distraction to make a break and steal the bathroom. "Don't take forever! I need to pee!" I shouted.

His voice floated back through the door. "Then come in and pee. It's not locked." The sound of the shower immediately followed.

I looked at Lisa and her eyes twinkled at the possibilities. "He's a little cocky this morning," She finally said.

"More than a little," I muttered. "He was a lot just a few minutes ago."

Lisa laughed. "So, he tempted you, did he?"

When I reluctantly nodded, she pulled me to her and hugged me. "It's okay. Let's get revenge and torture him back. Let's go join him in the shower for a good suds up."

I closed my eyes. I shouldn't be shopping... I shouldn't be shopping... I looked at her again and thought about the choice I had suspected I would make since last night.

I thought about taking a shower with Lisa and started weighing the cost versus the benefits. With a sigh I nodded. "Oh, hell. Let's do it." Crossing my arms, I pulled my shirt off over my head. Lisa's eyes were drawn to my breasts and I could see her eyes dilating. The little gold rings piercing my nipples glittered in the light. They were stiffening again.

"Doesn't that hurt?" she asked, tentatively touching one with her fingertip.

"Not as much as the other ones," I said with a lop-sided grin. "The two downstairs, and the one in my tongue, hurt more."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Oh, my God! You didn't!"

I stuck my tongue out and the small, flat-topped flesh colored stud near the tip of my tongue was revealed. "I don't wear the metal ball much anymore and this keeps people from making a big deal about it. I can put the ball-stud back in if I decide to."

She examined it closely, her hand cupping my face. "Every other tongue stud I've seen has been further back. Why is yours so close to the tip of your tongue?"

"Further back is for adding to a man's pleasure during oral sex. Near the tip of the tongue is for a woman's pleasure," I said, enjoying the touch of her.

"Ohhh!" She flushed a little. "I guess I never thought it through."

Stepping back, I hooked my thumbs through my panties. "Do you want to see the rest?" My breathing was speeding up. This was too much like foreplay.

I could see the mixture of desire and restraint warring on her face and threw caution to the wind, pulling off my panties.

Lisa's eyes were drawn to the two golden rings on the upper part of both of my labia that peeked out of the unruly hair. Not much reason to shave with no sex life. I let her eyes devour my sex for a moment and then pulled her to her feet. "If we're going to do this, let's do it before I lose my nerve." In a flash, she stripped off and pulled me along into the bathroom.

The shower was one of those tubs with a sliding door. As I sat on the can, thinking about it, she slid the door open and climbed in with Ted. The murmured conversation wasn't audible over the water. Was I really ready for this? Did I really want to have sex with Ted? Another sigh.

When I was done and slid the shower door open, Ted didn't look too surprised, so I figured Lisa must have told him I was coming. Ted had his back to the shower and Lisa was standing in front of him, a soapy washcloth in hand, washing his chest. I slipped in behind her and closed the door.

"I've decided to join you, if that's okay," I said.

At their smiles of welcome, I grabbed another cloth and soaped it up, and then I started washing Lisa's back. I hadn't been this close to a naked woman since Sharon two years ago. My mouth was watering. That was what I needed to do, focus on Lisa.

With a murmur, Ted took the washcloth from Lisa and started washing her front. She stood there and let us bathe her. God, this was so erotic. Then she slowly turned to face me. "Wash my front?" she asked.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "You are a cruel woman, Lisa Davis." Freshening the suds, I started at her shoulders and worked my way south. Her nipples were stiff and prominent as I washed her breasts. Using one hand, I lifted each breast to wash

beneath it. Her eyes closed and she relaxed into my touch. The slick feel of her woman flesh made me ache with desire, but I held it in check and washed lower, cleaning her stomach.

When I got to her legs, I looked to see what she wanted. Her eyes opened and examined mine. Then she lifted one foot and set it on the side of the tub spreading her legs. Oh, God. Breathing heavily, I ran my hand over the rag before stepping right next to her and sliding my fingers between her legs. She gasped, but her eyes never left mine as I ran my soapy fingers through her folds. When I touched her nub she groaned, her breathing hard and fast. I slid two fingers inside her and thought she was going to collapse. Her lips sought mine and we kissed passionately. I knew I was doomed now; even with the price I would pay, my body had finished making the choice for me. We were going to do this. All of us. God help me; I must have lost my mind.

Breaking the kiss, I looked at them both. "I've made my choice. I want to make love to Lisa. I don't know how I will react to you, Ted, but I'll try. Please, go slow." They both hugged me.

I dropped the cloth and ran my other hand to her breasts. Lisa's stiff nipples dug into my palm as I squeezed her. My eyes were a bit unfocused as I broke our embrace. "I need to wash you out before the soap irritates you." I looked over her shoulder at Ted, who was watching us and no doubt sporting a monster woody. "Ted, help hold her up."

Falling slowly to my knees, I picked the rag back up and cleaned her ass. Then I handed it to Ted and caught the water spray in my open hands and started rinsing her. She had a beautiful pussy. It was trimmed neatly on her mons and shaved at her labia, the silky hair the same blonde as her head. Her labia were engorged and her perky nub was peaking out at me. So, I wasn't the only one that had been worked up.

When I opened her and rinsed inside, her legs almost collapsed. "Oh, come on Lisa. This is nothing. How are you going to react when I do something like this?" Giving in to my lust, I swiped my tongue across her clit and she spasmed like a lightning bolt had struck her. Then I ran my tongue from the bottom of her sex to the top before pulling back. The taste of her made me exult. I looked up at her and grinned. "Or perhaps I should save that for the bed."

Her voice husky with need, she growled, "Now who's being cruel? Come up here." Then she pulled me up and kissed me passionately again. Our arms wrapped around one another. Then Ted's arms wrapped around both of us and he kissed Lisa's neck as his hands caressed my back. I focused on her but the touch of both of them felt good.

Lisa smiled and maneuvered herself around, leaving me between her and Ted. I turned to face her as she moved, so Ted was behind me. I could feel his erection and tried not to let it bother me. She took the wash cloth from Ted and began cleaning me. Her hands shot sparks straight down to my pussy. She smiled that sexy smile at me and kissed me as her hand went to my sex. It felt so good that I was having trouble standing up. Ted held me up and my thrusting hips were rubbing him against my ass.

The hot water cascaded off all three of us as we played. Ted's hands came between Lisa and me, cupping my breasts. His gentle pinches of my nipples excited me and I moaned into Lisa's mouth as our tongues danced. Lisa knelt and slid a soapy finger into me. I arched back and into Ted's arms, turning my head to kiss him. It started softly but heated up as Lisa plunged a second finger inside me. Again, kissing Ted wasn't like a woman, but it was good. I moaned when Lisa started rinsing me.

Then she was standing again and kissing me with Ted, their mouths dueling with each other and mine. "I think this shower can wait," Lisa said. "Let's go back to bed and do this right. It's a first for both of us and I want it to be perfect."

Ted turned off the water and we all stepped out together. We took turns drying each other. Arm in arm, we went back to the bed and lay down. I was getting nervous.

Lisa smiled at me. "Ted, I want you to watch me make love to a woman for the first time before you join us. Do you mind? I want to bring her in slowly."

He laughed. "Let me see, you want to know if I mind watching two beautiful women make love? No, you go ahead and I'll watch and join in when you two are ready."

I smiled gratefully at Ted and pulled Lisa into my arms. "Thank you. I'm a bit nervous."

"So am I," she admitted, "but I bet you can help with that."

As an answer, I kissed her. I lost myself in her sweet lips. When I couldn't wait any longer, I ran my lips down her long neck to her breasts. Her soft cries told me she liked what I was doing to her. Her nipples were rock hard as I sucked on them. She grasped my head and arched her back. I enjoyed the taste of her skin and the firmness of her body as my hands caressed her.

"Please..." she cried out, her hands pushing me lower.

With a chuckle, I began kissing down her stomach and ran my tongue through her pubic hair. That made her hips jump with desire. I thought about torturing her more, but in the end, I couldn't get past my own hunger.

"Is this what you want?" I asked, planting my next kiss right on her labia. "Tell me what you want."

She stared at me, her blue eyes wide and hungry. "Yes..." She hissed through her teeth. "I want it. Kiss my pussy, Hawk."

I gave myself over to my passion and kissed her sex again, opening my mouth. As my tongue entered her, she arched her back, moaning. Slowly, tantalizingly, I licked the full length of her and then settled in to enjoy this. She tasted wonderful, tangy and sweet all at once. I lost myself in her.

It was not long at all before I felt the first signs of her impending orgasm. The cries, the muscle twitches, the flood of nectar. I worked two fingers inside her and sucked her clit into my mouth. Small nips of my teeth and the rough side of my tongue brought it fully out from beneath its hood. Then I sucked it in earnest.

Lisa's legs wrapped around my head and her hands ground my face into her sex. With a sharp cry, she arched her back and came explosively, drenching my face. I slowly lapped her juices as she came down from her first bisexual experience.

"Oh, god! Hawk, that was wonderful." She gasped.

I purred and climbed her body, planting kisses all the way. "I'm glad you liked it." I looked deeply into her eyes. "Are you ready to make love to me?" At her nod, I lay down beside her and let her climb on top of me her damp sex rubbing against mine as she straddled me. Looking down, her long blonde hair cascaded across my face.

"I'm not nervous anymore, Hawk," she confided. Then she kissed me. The taste of her juices seemed to make her crazy. She was wild, her tongue digging deeply into my mouth. When she abruptly sat back, breathing heavily, her eyes smoked at me from under her wild hair. "You are so hot."

She slid down between my legs and began kissing my breasts. I know that they aren't much but she seemed to like them. "I love these rings. They feel nice on my tongue. I could suck your tits for hours but I can't stand it. I have to taste you right now."

As she kissed her way down my stomach, I looked over at Ted. He was lying beside us, watching. He slowly stroked his cock. I still wasn't sure, but it was time to try. With nervous hands, I pulled his mouth to mine. After a brief kiss, I pulled back. "Kiss me and suck my nipples, Ted."

Right as he began kissing me in earnest, I felt Lisa's fingers spreading my lips and a stream of warm air blowing across my clit. It felt so good. Then she licked my clit, just a taste, her first taste of another woman. I would have asked her how she liked it, but I didn't need to after she groaned and buried her face between my legs, licking and sucking. She was doing things to me that made me melt inside.

I kissed Ted with sudden passion, wanting his touch, needing to kiss him. I guided his hands to my breasts and arched under his touch. "Suck my nipples, Ted. Suck them like Lisa is sucking my clit." She clamped her lips around my clit right as Ted began sucking my nipples. I held his head, the dual sensations setting a fire inside me.

When Lisa slid her fingers inside me, I saw stars. When I came, and I had no doubt the neighbors heard me. I thrashed madly around and then collapsed in a heap in the bed. Both of them came up and kissed me.

"How was it," I asked her breathlessly. "How was your first pussy?"

She laughed and kissed me. "I loved it. I'd spend some time describing what I feel like, but I want Ted to fuck me while you sit on my face and watch him."

Lying back, she spread her legs for Ted and I watched with a mixture of fascination and apprehension as he slowly worked himself into her soaked pussy. I still wasn't sure I could do that. She sighed and wrapped her legs around his waist before looking at me. "Kiss Ted while he fucks me."

The mixture of known and new helped settle my fluttering stomach as I lowered my sex onto her face. Her arms wrapped around my hips and pulled me onto her tongue. All my apprehension fled as she worked her magic. I found myself watching a man fuck a woman up close for the first time as he gripped her waist and drove into her with long strokes. Her moans vibrated against my sex and I saw that Ted was watching me.

It was still odd, but I was getting used to the idea a little more. "You heard Lisa. Kiss me, Ted." I leaned forward to meet him and once again we were kissing deeply. I closed my eyes and lost myself in the sex without focusing on my own hang-ups.

We made love like this for a while. Lisa was raising my heat and Ted had moved down to chew on my nipples. I pushed my chest toward him and enjoyed his skill. Lisa surprised me with her aggressive approach. She worked a finger into my drenched pussy and finger fucked me for a short but wonderful time. Then, she once again replaced it with her mouth but I felt the tip of her finger rubbing my backdoor.

My moan and hip movement was my acceptance of this new intruder. She slowly worked her finger into my ass and that set me on fire. I loved having my ass played with and even had some slender toys for just that occasion at home.

I groaned in need when Lisa shook under me with her release, leaving me close. Then she pushed Ted back and slid out from underneath me. "Take my place, Ted. Make Hawk come on that wonderful tongue of yours."

As Ted was switching places with her, I found all my nervousness coming back. My stomach knotted. This was the first time a man had ever touched me that way. Lisa settled on his cock and impaled herself with a sigh. Then she started kissing me and my fears retreated back into the recesses of my mind.

Ted began eating me. I had crossed the line now and was making love with a man. Still, he knew how to eat pussy. In a very short time, I forgot all about the details and was grinding myself into his face, sucking on Lisa's breast. I didn't care anymore who was making me feel good. God, I couldn't believe I was feeling like this.

When I came, it was great but not the best of the day. Lisa took that one, hands down, but Ted had done what had never been done before. He continued to eat me slowly as I came down.

Lisa slid off of him and dropped between his legs, wrapping her hand around his cock. "I think Ted has been a good boy and deserves a treat. Help me, Hawk." She smiled and crooked a finger at me.

I felt nervous but squashed my reluctance. "You start and let me work up my nerve." Leaning forward, I lay down on Ted, like we were in a sixty-nine and watched her take him into her mouth. Ted groaned into my sex as she took him into her throat.

She bobbed her head and kept her blue eyes locked on mine as she brought him higher. The idea of sucking him both attracted and repelled me, but I found myself wanting to do more.

"Coach me," I said. "I want to try."

She pulled back a little. "Take him into your hand and feel him, rub him."

He felt hot in my hand, soft and hard all at once. I looked into her eyes and began licking the head of his cock like an ice cream cone. The taste was different but not objectionable. She whispered advice in my ear. With a deep breath I sucked his head into my mouth. It was like sucking the head of one of the more lifelike of my dildos, but the texture and taste were indescribably different. I was making love to a man. Ted groaned and pushed more into my mouth, choking me a little. I pulled back.

"Not so much!" I gasped.

"Use your hand to control how deep he goes," she whispered.

I took him back into my mouth and started bobbing my head. He was thrusting his hips, fucking my mouth with little thrusts. As he became more active, I found myself scraping him with my teeth. Lisa helped me to learn by example. I didn't want to hurt him, so I paid close attention and it got better.

When she pulled back to watch, I realized I was making love with a man by myself and that was strangely exciting. Ted and I sixty-nined with growing passion. The taste of him became more intense and I was suddenly afraid he was going to come in my mouth.

Lisa was there in a flash. "He's close?" At my nod, she pulled him out of my mouth and devoured him, bobbing furiously. Ted was going berserk with his tongue and I was surprised when I suddenly found myself totally aroused and riding his face for my pleasure. Arching my back and exploding, my reservations lost in this moment of total intimacy, I came once more.

Ted heaved beneath me even as I was coming down, his mouth coming free in an inarticulate cry. Lisa pulled my hand over and I jacked his cock while she sucked on the head. It throbbed in my hand, pulsing in time with Lisa's moans. I knew he was coming in her mouth. She never broke eye contact with me as her - our - lover spent himself.

With a smile, she released him and slid closer, opening her mouth to show me his seed. I remembered asking her what it tasted like. Now she was offering me the chance to find out for myself. If I wanted to.

Hell, in for a penny, in for a pound. I kissed her and she shared her catch with me. It was stronger than I expected, but I could handle that. Salty and a little bitter, it was somehow the essence of manhood. When she pulled back, I swallowed my share and then with a grin I swooped down to take his still twitching cock into my mouth and sucked. A few drops more coated my tongue, hot from the source.

Lisa pulled me off Ted and kissed him deeply. I sat back, catching my breath and wondering what was next. Ted pulled me into his embrace and we kissed just as deeply.

When he let me slip back a little, we all looked at each other before Ted spoke. "If you don't want to go further, I understand and it's okay."

That unleashed a welter of emotions inside me, but I firmly shook my head. "A deal is a deal. There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Lisa reached out and wiped a drop of his come off the corner of my mouth and I felt myself blushing at the connection to my most recent meal. We all giggled furiously. Lisa hugged us both. "I wouldn't force you to go all the way, Hawk, and the decision to take the next step isn't something you have to do. You satisfied the deal we made, as far as I'm concerned, but if we do more, I want you to do it because it is something you want."

We lay there, Ted on his back with Lisa and I on either side of him. I took a deep breath and shook my head. "No, I want to go all the way, at least once, but - just not yet. Besides, I need to get some condoms because I'm not on the pill. I need to absorb this and think about it. Ted, you're a great lover and I suppose some part of me must be bisexual because, there at the end, I wanted you, as a man to my woman."

My words hung in the air before he pulled me into his arms and held me. I listened to his heartbeat and drank in his scent as Lisa took up his other arm and her face lay next to mine on his chest.

"Let's not rush ahead," she agreed with me. "We have time, all the time in the world to do this. Besides," she said with a grin, "to be fair about it, you need to get a strap-on and make love to me to go all the way."

I smiled. "I have just the thing. You'll like it." I pulled myself loose from the pile of bodies and sauntered toward the bathroom. "I smell like sex so I need another shower. A private one, if we are ever going to get out of here. I'll be quick."

I made the shower as quick as I could, but my mind was awash with conflicting images

and emotions. I drank deeply from the stream of water and realized I had no toothbrush. I wondered if everyone would smell Ted on my breath all day. Cocksucker breath. I shook my head and laughed at the absurdity of the situation.

Ted and Lisa went in together as I came out, I suppose reaffirming their relationship after our threesome. No fresh clothes either. We had some shopping to do, or we need to have someone bring us some clothes, if we intended to stay away from the usual haunts.

I sat down naked on the bed and ran back over the events of the morning. I *had* rushed into making this decision, but it was not as bad as I had feared. I had some level of trust in Ted and even some emotional connection. Not love, no. I doubted I could ever feel the settle down kind of love for anyone but another woman. Still, I did care about Ted in a confused way.

"I'm going to fuck Ted," I said to the empty room. It sounded unreal, but the mixture of fear and desire told me I was not going to weasel out of it. I had been made love to with strap-ons. How different could it be?

I was fully dressed when they *finally* came out of the bathroom. I also had my equilibrium back. "You kids have fun?"

They laughed and started dressing. "There is an IHOP right up the road. Let's eat breakfast and get cracking," I said.

Ten minutes later, we were heading out. I stopped and gave Lisa one last kiss. "Thank you, Lisa," Then I gave Ted a deep kiss. "Thank you, Ted. You made my first time wonderful."

Turning to the car, I stopped dead in my tracks. The clerk, the one from last night who knew me, was standing not ten feet away with a look of pure astonishment on his face. Ohmigod! He knew my lesbian friends and he loved to gossip!

Chapter Eleven: On the case

Ted's point of view

Hawk was pretty upset when she saw the guy standing by the car looking like he had just seen a two headed goat. She rushed out and grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him against the car.

"This is not what it looks like," Hawk said.

Wide eyed, he nodded. "What do you think it looks like, Hawk? And, um, you have a hair stuck in your teeth. It's not blonde, Sugar."

Hawk let him go and slapped a hand across her mouth as though that would make it go away. Then, she slumped and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Okay, maybe it is what it looks like, but there is more to it, Javier. If I find out you blabbed my business to anyone, there will be consequences. Serious consequences. Am I coming across loud and clear?"

Javier nodded, wide eyed. "Hey, it's no business of mine if you sleep with a guy. I've been telling you that's the ticket for years." He leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. "So, you kissed the cutie. Does that mean you had a good time?"

Hawk pushed him back against the car. "That's none of your business! Drop it, and keep your damned mouth shut about it! I mean it!" She pulled him off the car, and he staggered into the parking lot as she released him. Reaching into her pocket, she tossed me the keys.

I slid behind the wheel and started the car. Lisa climbed in front and Hawk into the back seat. As I drove off, I saw Javier talking excitedly into a cell phone, jumping up and down like a schoolgirl waving his other arm wildly in the air.

"He's going to tell *everyone*," Hawk said morosely, not even looking back at Javier. "He's probably already on the phone. It's going to be all over Houston before noon."

"Is it *that* bad?" I asked, turning up the street toward the International House of Pancakes we had passed on the way in.

Hawk looked up at the mirror and into my eyes. "Well, how would it affect *your* personal life if rumors you were gay started circulating?"

"With all the shit that gays and lesbians get, I'm surprised they would care," Lisa said.

Hawk laughed without humor. "People are people. It may not be as bad, but mark my

words, it will *not* be fun. It's ironic, in a way. Straight people will give me shit for being a lesbian and the hardcore lesbian community will smack me around for not being lesbian enough. Screw it, let's eat and get working."

Lisa was half-turned in her seat and nodded. "Right. I think we should split up for now. Ted and I will search Calvin's house and look for what those keys go to. You have Kotov to check out." Lisa sounded in control and Hawk didn't even argue.

"I'll need wheels so I'll have to chance sneaking into my house," Hawk said. "I'll get you to drop me off after we eat. I can slip in the back way, change and be gone before anyone knows I'm there."

Reluctantly, Lisa agreed.

We ate quickly, with little conversation. We all had things to think about. Today had marked a changing point. Hawk had become a part of my relationship with Lisa, at least for a while. I hoped it wasn't a mistake that one, or all, of us would regret.

During breakfast, Lisa's cell phone rang and she had a brief conversation. When she hung up, she smiled wryly at Hawk. "It's you and me, kid, together in the same boat. My boss just got back into town and told me to get lost and stay that way until the police had a better handle on things. It looks like we both have been put out to pasture."

"Actually, in your case, that's a good idea," Hawk said, "and at least he may let you go back to work when you're done."

When we were finished eating, I drove through some back roads, under the guidance of Hawk. I had only a vague idea of where we were when she had me stop.

"I'm going to keep my cell on until I'm on the road. Sit here and wait. The other side of that fence there is my back yard. Come running if I yell." She tossed Lisa a set of keys and slipped over the fence with a lot more grace than I would have managed.

My cell rang. It was her. "No sign of entry in the back. I'm in, and the alarm was still on. I've locked up and rearmed it. Let me change. Hang on."

The sound of clothes changing could be heard. "Done, and I have a bag packed. I'm starting to run out of clothes. Now, I'm going to get my bike and get going." I could hear the sound of alarm buttons being pressed and a door opening. Then we heard the

rough rumble of a Harley kicking off. "I'll turn the alarm back on and let it warm up before I get going. Just a few more minutes."

That was a nerve-wracking few minutes, but nothing went wrong. "Door's open and I'm out of here. I'll call if I get a good lead. You do the same. Ted, be careful and don't let Lisa get in over her head."

"I'll try to keep up," I said dryly. "Good luck." I hung up and heard the bike accelerating away. Starting the car, I retraced my course back out of the area.

"Hit Highway 45 south and let's go to Galveston," Lisa said. "Calvin's house is next on the hit parade. These keys seem really important. Daedalus, doesn't that have something to do with flying?"

I shrugged. "You have me there. We'll have to look it up."

"Ted, thank you for this morning," Lisa said after a few minutes.

I looked over at her and smiled. "As long as it doesn't come between us, I don't mind. I can't say I didn't have a good time."

She smiled. "I did, too, but if it becomes a problem, then it stops. We are what's important and everything else is just play. Deal?"

"Deal, Sweetie. I look forward to when we can get some time out on the town, just to ourselves, when this crazy stuff is over."

I pulled onto 45 and started south. The drive was uneventful, and we talked about ourselves, getting to know each other even more. That felt really good. The connection I felt for her made me warm inside.

We pulled up in front of the two story house Lisa indicated and started looking at it from the outside. As I would have expected, there was no one around on a Monday morning because most people were at work by now. The house was older and the outside was a weathered blue. I didn't see anything that even indicated the police had been here. I stepped into the street. "Stay here and I'll go see if anyone's home."

I opened the gate and walked onto the small porch. It creaked beneath my weight. Hopefully, I wouldn't fall through. Several hard knocks on the door brought no response

from inside, so I waved Lisa up. A quick check confirmed that the door was locked.

"Locked," I told her. "What now?"

She grinned and produced her keys. "I have his spare, just like he had mine." In a second she had the door open and we were in. The house was neat and clean inside. A thin, dark carpet covered the floor and the living room had sparse, but tasteful furniture. Lisa locked the door behind us.

"We start on the bottom floor and work our way up to the second. I don't know what we are looking for, but it'll take keys. Don't disturb things too much and use these." She handed me a couple of thin rubber gloves.

"Where did you get those?" I asked curiously.

"I keep some in my purse for when I get called out to a crime scene," she replied.

I put my pair on and took a moment to wipe off the door we had already touched, both inside and out, before locking it again. I started in the living room, looking in drawers, under cushions and other places that seemed like a good place to hide something. I even looked behind paintings. In thirty minutes, we had cleared the first floor and were up to the second. There was a bedroom on the right and an office to the left; Lisa zeroed in on the office so I took the bedroom.

It was a lot less flamboyant that I would have expected from a gay man. I suppose my preconceptions were tripping me up. Tasteful curtains and a sensible bed with a dark cover. I went to the dresser and looked through the clothes in it. Nothing. The closet was more interesting, but a bit embarrassing. Over the racks of suits and other nice clothes, there was a shelf of videos with titles like 'Men Who Love Men,' and 'Manly Deep Throat.' I was about to close the door when I saw something that didn't look right. All were commercial tapes except for one that didn't have a label.

I pulled it out and looked for the VCR. If it was a porno, I could put it back. The small TV on the dresser had a built in VCR so I turned it on and popped the tape in. The picture was a bit grainy, but clear enough to make out the details. It was obviously taken from a hand held camcorder. The scene was a parking lot at what looked like a grocery store.

Two cars were parked so that the driver's doors were side by side. There was a good view of their faces, though neither one of them looked at all familiar to me. The cars

couldn't have been more different, though; the men either. A sporty red coupe with a slick man sporting dark hair in his forties and a beat up, rusty Dodge pickup with a gray old man with frizzy hair. The angle wasn't good enough to see the license plates. The man in the coupe passed a paper bag to the older man, and the older man reached in and pulled out what sure looked like a bundle of money. It was too far away to read denominations, but I didn't imagine it was a bundle of ones.

My eyebrows rose. That looked interesting. I rewound the tape and went into the office to check on Lisa. She was sitting at the desk poring over an appointment book, to my eye, somewhat unhappily. "Lisa, I found something."

She looked up. "I did, too. I found Calvin's appointment book. There's an entry marked 'wire payoff funds' and a check mark beside it."

I shook my head. "Let's not jump to conclusions just yet. We don't know what it means. If it's bad news about Calvin, we'll find out soon enough. If it's not, don't beat yourself up over it now. As for the police, maybe they are not as serious as Hawk and haven't gotten here yet. We need to get out of here soon." I took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "I found a tape that sure looked like an exchange of money."

When she was in the bedroom, I hit play. "Oh, my god! That's Zed Barclay, the Galveston District Attorney! I don't know the other man, but why the hell is someone like Barclay giving him bag full of money?" When the scene ended in snow on the screen, she popped the tape out and stuffed it in her purse.

I held the appointment book while she was doing that and the bookmark caught my attention. An admission ticket for something, date stamped last month. I pulled it out and looked at it. Admit one to Seawolf Park. I was familiar with the place though I had never been there. Two rusting World War II warships. A small surface ship and an attack submarine, were open to the public to help pay for the slow restoration. I put it back in place and watched her.

We heard the sound of the front door opening. "You take the kitchen," said an unknown male voice. "I'll take the living room. When we finish down here, we'll go the upstairs."

Lisa's eyes were huge and she quietly closed the bedroom door. "It's Murphy! He's a cop down here. He hates Hawk and he's none to fond of me after yesterday! We need to get out of here before he finds us, but how?"

I opened the window and it made a horrible noise that I was *sure* would bring the cops

down on us, but they must not have heard it. Amazing. The screen came out without too much trouble. A quick look at the roof told me that we were on the front of the house and the angle of the roof wasn't too bad. I saw what must have been an unmarked police car behind mine on the street.

"We'll climb out, but be careful. Let me close the screen back up and we'll look for a way down," I said. With a boost, I helped her out and onto the roof. I then pulled myself out and closed the window behind me. Thank god, the screen went back into place easily.

The window exited onto the roof with one of those little arches. Lisa climbed up the roof to the top of the window arch, out of sight. I followed her, holding the appointment book we had found between us. Before we could further our plan of escape, the window opened back up. We froze, staring at each other.

"What is it?" Murphy asked.

"I thought I heard something," the other man said. "I don't know what it was, but it sounded like it was upstairs."

"Nothing in the office, here or the attached bathroom. The screen is still on the window so it must have been squirrels or something," Murphy said. "Let's get back to work."

"Yeah..."

The window closed, and we both sagged with relief but kept quiet for a few minutes, just in case. When we felt safer, we slid down the roof and I found a metal pole, probably from an old TV antenna that was long gone. I handed Lisa the book and slid down safely. She dropped the book and her purse before sliding awkwardly down. I caught her and we ran for the car. I didn't feel safe until we were blocks away with no signs of pursuit.

"That was too close," I said. "I somehow don't see them being very forgiving of our taking the evidence."

"Shit," she said. "We shouldn't have taken it but what the hell were they doing waiting so long? They should have looked everything over on Saturday. There should never have been anything for us to find. Now we're really committed because we can't just turn it in. If my boss is involved, I can't be sure who to trust now. Do you think Calvin was running a covert investigation on Zed?"

I shrugged. "It's possible and might explain some things. Where next?"

"I need time to read through this and decide what we do next." She considered while I drove. "While we are down here, do you mind if I check on my mother and get some clothes?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't mind. Clothes first?" I smiled at her nod. "Good, I've been wanting to see how the other half lives."

"My place, then. Turn left." She directed me to a small two bedroom house not too far from the beach. Following her directions, I drove past it and parked a half block away.

"Let's both go in, and we can be out in a few minutes," she said as she climbed out of the car. "I'll toss a few things in a bag while you watch for trouble."

Her house was neat and orderly. There was a collection of what looked like family pictures on a small table near the door. While she gathered some things, I looked them over. Her mother was an older version of her. In the ones with Lisa, I would judge Lisa was a late teen. There was also a dark haired boy in the family shots. He had a quiet, somber air about him, almost withdrawn. That must be Arthur, her black-sheep older brother. Thin and gaunt, his eyes were like the tar pits in California, absorbing everything that touched them.

I shook my head. All teens seemed like a different species. I took a walking tour of the rest of the house. Tasteful furniture and bright colors. Very nice.

I hadn't been sure what a single woman's house would look like beforehand but this seemed to suit her busy lifestyle without being barren. The walls had a series of landscape prints in nice frames. Mountains, forests and waterfalls dominated the style, but there was one of a single oak tree in a field, standing tall and alone. In my mind, that one suited her best. It was a bit crooked on the wall, so I leveled it out.

When I looked back over the room, I noticed it was a little like the picture, the clean lines of the layout were off by just a little bit. The couch was a little forward on one side, and the love seat had one cushion out further than the other. It looked like someone had searched the room and had not been very careful in putting things back in order.

"Lisa! I think the living room was searched. We need to get out of here," I called up the stairs.

"Same here," she shouted back. "I'm ready." The stairs clattered as she ran back down with a small overnight bag over one shoulder. "Let's go and keep an eye out for people watching us."

I felt like I had a target on my back when we bolted from the house. Was that a curtain falling into place across the street? That woman walking the little dog; was she watching us a bit too closely? The dry cleaning van up the street was it... I shook my head. I was being paranoid. Taking a deep breath, I slowed my pace. Lisa slowed down with me and we walked calmly to my car.

Once we were moving and I could look into my rearview mirror I started feeling better. I breathed a sigh of relief. "It looks like no one is following us. I'll make some more odd turns just to be sure, though."

When we were both moderately certain we were safe, she gave me directions to the nursing home where her mother was staying.

In the parking lot, I put my arm around her. "Your mom seemed pretty young in the pictures at your house. What happened?"

She shook her head. "A stupid car accident about a year and a half ago. The doctors say she has recovered from the injuries but she's in coma and won't wake up. I tell people that she doesn't know her own name but that's not really true. She's just asleep. All they can tell me is that she may wake up any day just as normal as she was before, or she may never wake up at all. They really don't know. The brain is a huge mystery to the doctors. I come and talk to her every day, if I can. This weekend is the longest time without me stopping in, and I feel bad about it." She looked at me. "I really think she can hear me."

I nodded. "I've heard something like that before. It surely can't hurt. I hope she wakes up soon." I held the door open for her.

The lobby was filled with older people, sitting in chairs or wheelchairs and watching TV or talking to friends or family, and some staff people manning the desk or moving among the residents. Two bird cages, a fish tank and a single cat were scattered around the room with them.

"You mentioned that your mother changed her will and that your brother stopped hanging around. Do you mind if I ask what that's all about?"

Lisa shook her head. "I don't mind. Arthur has always been a bit of an odd duck. Loner in school and at home, too. He got involved in one of those right wing groups that thinks the government is illegal and should be overthrown. One of the militias, I forget the name. He got arrested several times for damaging city or county property with his nut case friends. Mom always bailed him out of jail. Then I got my first job as an ADA in Dallas, where we lived, and he freaked out. We had this huge knock down, drag out fight and he was pretty wild. He scared both of us but my mother stuck to her guns and threw him out. Then she re-wrote her will so that I was the primary beneficiary of her estate. Daddy left her pretty well off so it can pay for the expensive care she gets. It would be hard on my own. When Arthur found out he had a screaming cow. For the life of me, I can't imagine why he followed us down here. He keeps claiming it's because he's family, but I think he hopes that if he waits around, Mom will wake up and change her mind."

I scratched my chin. "If we weren't already pretty sure Calvin was the first target, he'd make a pretty good suspect."

Lisa laughed. "Puh-leeze! Arthur plan and execute a plot this complicated? The sun will go out first!" She waved to the nurses, leading me down a hall and into one of the rooms on the right side. There were two women in the room, both in bed. I knew the younger one was Lisa's mother from the pictures but she looked so different now. Lying as though asleep, her face was slack. The older woman was watching a soap opera on the television with the sound coming out of her remote control. The older woman smiled and they exchanged greetings.

Lisa pulled up a rolling chair and sat down beside the bed, taking her mother's hand into her own. "I'm sorry I didn't come by this weekend, Mother. It's been a real bear of a week." She looked up at me. "I want you to meet someone. This is Ted Stansbury. He and I have started dating." She smiled at me and then looked back at her mother's face. "I only just met him, but he's special. I can tell. I think you'll like him."

I stepped over to the other side of the bed and put my hand on her mothers other hand. "Mrs. Davis, it's a pleasure to meet you. Your daughter is really special to me, too, and I'm glad she likes me. I hope you get better soon."

Lisa smiled brightly at me. "Can you give us a few minutes alone, Ted? I'd like to have some girl talk."

Smiling, I nodded and went back into the hall. Closing the door behind me, I walked back up the hall toward the lobby. There was a fish tank with some tropical fish in the corner so I spent some time watching them swim around.

"They are like us humans," a male voice said behind me. I turned and looked at the elderly man in the wheelchair beside me. He looked to be in his eighties or nineties but his eyes were sharp and clear. "They swim around in circles but never seem to notice. We do the same, walking in the same rut and never seeing that we are in a glass tank."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Is that such a bad thing? The fish seem pretty satisfied with their lives."

The man nodded. "And well they should be, but what if someone fails to feed them? Their world changes and they are out of control over what happens. Same thing for us humans. If our world does something we don't expect, many of us just roll over and float to the surface. It's the rare man or woman who can look at the world and see beyond the face presented to us. Even more rare to see someone do something about it."

"That's an interesting theory, sir. What do you see that is going on unnoticed around us?" I asked with a little curiosity.

"I saw you come in with that young woman a few minutes ago. She comes in four or five times a week to visit her mother. Poor woman. I pray for her every day. This is the first time I've seen you around, and that strikes me as odd, considering that you are the second new visitor that poor woman has had today. Is it her birthday?"

That got my attention. "No, I don't think it's her birthday. I've just started dating her daughter and she wanted to introduce us. Who else was here earlier?"

The man shrugged. "I don't know his name, but he was about your age, slim and dark haired. Really dark eyes. They were kind of cold. He had a snotty voice and was trying to boss the nurse around. He wanted something and he should have known better than to harass Nurse Cratchet. The woman is *formidable*. She set him back on his heels, I tell you!"

I frowned. That sounded like Arthur. Lisa said he didn't give a crap so why would he hang around now? "Did you hear what he wanted, sir?"

"Call me Doc. Everyone does. I was a general practitioner before the time of HMOs. I tell you, boy, those things are the ruination of our society. Costs go up and service goes down, all the while touting how they save money. For who, I ask you? Themselves. The government should do something about them."

Smiling at his feisty monologue, I asked again. "Did you hear what he wanted, Doc? And call me Ted."

He held out an aged hand and gave me a handshake that was more vigorous than I expected. "I sure enough did, Ted. It didn't make much sense to me but I guess I just don't know the whole story. He was looking to get into that poor woman's personal belongings to get her keys. Said he had left some things in her house, and his sister was being a bitch about letting him have what belonged to him. Cratchet wasn't hearing any of that and sent him packing. He made a real stink about it. I'd hoped they'd call the cops. Nothing livens up the day like having the cops show up and arrest someone."

"Does that happen a lot?" I asked with a chuckle.

"No," he replied grumpily. "Not nearly often enough."

I felt my eyebrows rising. "I'll make sure and tell her, Doc. She'll see that he gets put in his place. I don't think she will be too friendly toward him either."

The old man laughed. "Good! That boy reminded me of someone I hated when I was your age. I got over on him though. He stole my girlfriend and left me high and dry. He got what was coming when she got pregnant and he had to marry her. Both of them are still alive and on each other's nerves every day. Thank god I didn't marry that shrew! I'd have been in a mental hospital, or prison, by forty." He winked slyly at me. "I pray for them to have a nice long life together, too. Every day."

I shook my head. "You're something, Doc. Remind me never to get on your bad side. I'll leave you to keep an eye on the place and go see if my girl is ready to go."

He shook my hand and let me leave. As I walked back up the hall, I wondered what Arthur had really been doing here and what he wanted from Lisa's mother's house. The guy seemed a bit slimy. When I knocked at the door, Lisa opened it. "Honey, we need to go."

"Okay," she said. "Let me say goodbye." Lisa bent over her mother and kissed her cheek. "Mom, I'll be back soon. I love you. Goodbye, Ellen." The older woman hugged

Lisa and patted her back. When Lisa came back, her eyes had tears in them but she wasn't crying.

I put an arm around her waist and walked out slowly with her. When we got to the lobby, I waved at Doc. He grinned and gave me a thumbs up. In the parking lot, I was looking at the various cars and people more closely. "Someone else came to visit your mom today." I quickly passed on the details as she became more alarmed.

When I was done, she shook her head. "What in the world does he have to gain? All the valuables from her house are in storage, and I have the keys. Hell, I have her keys, too. The nursing home doesn't have any of that. What the hell is Arthur playing at?"

I kept looking around as she talked so I had a lead on the trouble when it popped up. "You can ask him yourself. That is him over there, isn't it?"

She turned to look with me at the ratty looking brown Ford Pinto with a man that fit the description. He was glaring at us from behind the steering wheel, his lank dark hair looking unwashed and dirty. "Shit! It *is* him! What in the..."

The car started, not with a roar but more with a wheeze. With a clunk, it started out of the parking spot it was backed into and limped toward us. Not the fastest in the world but faster than we could run and he gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles as his eyes glittered with what seemed like an almost mad appearance.

I started running with her to the side of the lot and thought we would make it until the car suddenly roared and shot ahead right at us, accelerating hard. He was going to hit us before we could get to safety!

Chapter Twelve: Anchors aweigh

Ted's point of view

I grabbed Lisa and ran toward the parked cars even though I didn't think we would make it. The Pinto accelerated hard, the eyes of her brother slitted above a snarl. I felt an instinctive need to close my eyes when he slammed on the brakes and screeched to a halt just a few feet from us. The rough idle of the car didn't last long as it sputtered into silence.

We stopped running and panted as we stared at the little bastard. Arthur sneered at us as the car door opened with a sharp metallic groan. He was wearing what his car suggested he could afford; ratty jeans, a torn western shirt and sneakers I would have thrown away years ago. A day's growth of stubble finished off his lean face. I didn't really think he looked much like Lisa or her mother.

"Sorry about that," Arthur said in a completely insincere tone. "The accelerator stuck when I tried to pull up and talk with you, Sissy."

He might as well have just waved a red flag in front of Lisa. If steam had started pouring out of her ears while her head started spinning, I wouldn't have been a bit surprised.

"Goddammit, Arthur!" she shouted as she started toward him, her hands balling tightly into fists. She struggled with me when I wrapped my arms around her to hold her back. It was like a rerun of the confrontation that she had gone through with Price at my house. I made a mental note to myself that she did have a sharp temper when riled.

"Let go of me, Ted," Lisa finally said in a low voice. Her tone brooked no argument, so I let her go. She stood her ground and glared at her brother. "I'm done with this childish bullshit, Arthur. Is it time for me to get a restraining order to keep you from being an ass to me and bothering the staff up here? You should know better than to think they have mother's stuff here. They certainly have no keys for you!"

Arthur laughed mockingly back at Lisa. "Like some piece of paper from an illegitimate government will keep me from going where I want? Please, save it for the poor saps who have been duped by this so-called democracy. I'll go where I want, talk with whom I please, and I *will* have what is mine!"

Lisa rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Don't roll out that damned separatist crap for me again. If you want to believe it, that's fine. Just leave it at home in whatever fleabag rat trap you're sleeping in this week. What are you being denied this time?" she asked, her foot tapping impatiently.

Arthur leaned forward, the sneer never slipping from his face. "I want my share of mother's estate."

Lisa laughed in Arthur's face. "Fat chance of that!" Arthur turned red but Lisa rolled right over whatever he was going to say. "Let me lay out the facts for you, genius. Mother isn't dead! I know that comes as a shock to you, but she's right in there. That

building you were in a while back. Remember it?"

"Save your lawyer crap, Sissy. She is never going to wake up. Mother is as dead as if she were in the ground. All she is now is a machine that turns food into shit. You should have some mercy on her poor body and let it die."

There was no way in hell I could have caught her this time. Lisa snarled and climbed him like a squirrel. She was all over him like white on rice, beating on him with her fists.

The cretin flinched and then tried to shove her off, but she just popped him in the face.

"Owww!" he cried as he backpedaled.

That gave me the space I needed to grab her again. She struggled hard and snarled at him.

Arthur held out his hand and looked at the blood on it from his nose. "Bitch, I should call the fucking cops on you and your gigolo! This is assault!"

Lisa stopped struggling and laughed at him. "What? The big, bold separatist needs to call on the authorities he says are illegitimate and illegal? Does anyone else see the irony in that? I thought you lived off the land and solved your own problems?"

That struck the mark. Arthur snarled and took a step forward but stopped when I pushed Lisa behind me. "Stay out of this, dickhead. This is between me and my bitch sister!"

I shook my head. "Not anymore. I'm making this my business. Hit the road before I help you hit it my way." I out-weighed the scrawny bastard by thirty pounds or so and none of it was fat. I raised an eyebrow in invitation. "Like your sister, I solve my own problems. You should take a page from her: solve this one yourself and leave."

"Fuck you," he snarled even as he backed away from me. "That bitch of a sister has been living off Mother's money, so why shouldn't I get my fair share? I will get it, one way or another!"

"You idiot!" Lisa shouted back at him. "I live off my own money and all Mother's does is pay for her care."

With the first real menace I had heard yet, he laughed. "You'd like me to believe that,

wouldn't you? Well, I have news for you, bitch. I do solve my own problems and you better reconsider before I solve you."

As Arthur got back in the Pinto, the door slammed with a creak, and I pulled Lisa behind some of the parked cars. At first, I didn't think his car would start at all, but it finally caught and he stomped on the gas, only to have it die again. I shook my head and smiled. Arthur slammed his hands against the steering wheel and cranked it laboriously back to life. Then, at long last, he wheezed out of the parking lot and down the road in a cloud of smoke.

"Call this a subtle premonition, but I don't think we're on the invite list to his next clam bake," I said in a sotto voice.

"God!" she shouted and slapped the tailgate of the truck next to us with a solid thump, setting off its alarm. "That asshole has really done it this time! I *will* swear out a restraining order and toss his skinny ass in jail if he fucks with me again!"

"I don't think he is all there," I pointed out. "He's not going to lay off. He's going to keep pushing your buttons trying to get what he wants. You need to just do it."

"I know," she growled. "It's just hard. He's still my brother."

Sliding my arm around her shoulders, I started walking back toward my car, away from the wailing alarm. She slid her arm around me and sighed.

"Why can't I have Stan for a brother? He's such a nice guy," she grouched.

I laughed. "Because, then you'd be my sister, and that just wouldn't do!"

She smiled and shook her head. "You know what I mean. Someone like him. Never mind, I'm stuck with Arthur. I only pray he never breeds." She shuddered under my arm.

When we got to my car and I unlocked it, Lisa noticed something was wrong right away. "Shit! The tape and appointment book are gone!"

We looked all around the inside of the car, just to be sure, but they were gone. The ticket stub from Seawolf Park was between her door and her seat. I looked at the passenger side door and could see a tear in the weather-stripping. I'd been slim jimmied.

I raised an eyebrow. "Should we call the police?"

She laughed without humor. "And tell them what? That someone broke into your car and stole some evidence that we stole from a crime scene? That ought to go over well. Or tell them someone jimmied your car and took nothing before locking it up behind them?"

Shrugging, I nodded. "That does make a certain kind of sense. Well, do you think it was your brother?"

She shook her head. "I doubt it. Why would he want them? Also, he's not that neat. He'd just bash in the window, I think. My bet is that someone else was watching Calvin's house and followed us, somehow."

I shrugged. "If nothing else, it tells us that the information was important. At least they don't have the keys you have. If, of course, we ever figure out where to look for the locks they open."

We climbed in my car, and I pulled out of the parking lot. Lisa sat there looking at the only remaining thing from Calvin's house, the ticket stub, frowning.

"Where now? Back to Houston?" I asked.

"No," she said slowly. "Head to Broadway and then over to fifty-first street. This ticket may be more important than it looks. The keys are labeled S.W.P. and it's possible that means Seawolf Park. I don't know why I didn't make that connection before."

I made the turn onto Broadway. "Because you didn't have time to really look at it with all the other information?"

Lisa nodded. "That's as good a reason as any." She turned in her seat and looked out the back window. "Now I'm paranoid. Let's go past fifty-first and go through the McDonald's drive through. A Big Mac and fries are called for, and maybe we can tell if we are being shadowed." She pulled her cell phone out of her purse. "I promised we would call Hawk if we found anything. It's a little late but I need to clue her in."

As I drove south, I listened in on her half of the conversation.

"Hawk, Lisa. We have some new information."

She nodded.

"I'll make it quick and you can call me back when you are free to talk. We found a tape at Calvin's and his appointment book. Murphy showed up, but we got out without him seeing us. The tape showed the Galveston DA passing cash to someone I don't know."

Lisa looked over at me and took a deep breath.

"Then I got stupid and left them in the car when we stopped to check on my mother. Someone jimmied the car and took them."

She pulled the phone away from her ear and I could hear the elevated buzzing coming from it.

"I know! I was stupid! You can join me in tearing myself up for making such an amateur mistake. My idiot brother was there but I don't think..." She listened to an interruption. "No, he's not that smart. He'd just smash the window. Listen, before you go, we have a ticket stub that was in the appointment book. S.W.P. on the keys could be Seawolf Park."

More buzzing and Lisa shook her head.

"No, I'll be careful and look for tails but we need to get there before someone has a chance to figure out to look there, if they can, from the other evidence. I won't wait, but you can come down when you can, or we'll call after we look around."

She pulled the phone away from her ear again and winced at the volume. Covering the mouthpiece, she smiled wryly at me. "She's not happy that we are not waiting but she only has a minute to talk."

Putting the phone back to her ear, she interrupted Hawk. "Look, you need to go. We'll call if we find anything. Good luck, and be careful." Without waiting for a response, she disconnected and sighed. "She is going to chew me out when she catches up with me."

"Can I watch?" I asked with a grin.

She laughed and slugged my arm. "Silly! That's not what I meant! Men!" Then she leaned over and kissed my neck in a way that sent shivers down my spine.

"If I didn't need to look for people following us, I'd let you watch me chew you out

while we drive down the street," she whispered in a sultry voice as she nibbled my ear. "Have you ever had a blowjob while driving?"

I felt myself stiffening. Little Ted sure was all in favor of that idea but she was right. Now was not the time. "No, but you're right. That needs to wait."

Lisa reached down and massaged me through my pants, but nodded. "I promise to make it up to you as soon as a good opportunity presents itself." Reluctantly, she released me and returned her attention to the rear of the car.

I saw the McDonalds up ahead and tried thinking of food to relax my hardness. Deep breaths. By the time we were in the line at the drive through, it was at least a little more comfortable. We both ordered a Big Mac meal. She went for the diet drink to my Dr. Pepper. I parked the car so we could watch traffic as we ate.

She sat turned in her seat and split her attention between me and traffic outside as she ate. Big bites, no dainty nibbles, for this woman. "God, I love their fries! I don't care what is in the grease, they taste like heaven!"

I laughed and nodded my agreement. "That they do. It's a good thing I cook in a lot, or I would weigh a ton just from them."

Lisa waved a finger at me. "Don't you get on my case for eating them, Ted Stansbury! This has been a *stressful* day! Cut me a little slack, will you?"

Holding up my hands in surrender, I smiled. "I would never criticize. I love your curves."

Then I looked out and around. Still nothing or no one that looked like they were following us.

"Lisa, did you enjoy this morning?" I asked her while sipping my drink.

She nodded. "I did. I hadn't ever been attracted to a woman like I have been to Hawk. Not love, just physical attraction and curiosity. I used to think most women were bi-curious at some point in their lives. Now, I don't know if that's true or just me."

She looked at me and licked the salty fry taste off her lips. That made me hard again in an instant.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but as great as you are at oral sex, she was... She ate

me better than I have ever imagined. She knew *right* where to go and what to do."

I shook my head and smiled. "That's only to be expected, I guess. She knows what feels good. I'll talk with her and let her give me some pointers the next time we are both between your legs."

Lisa shivered in reaction and I could see her nipples poking out clearly. "God, that sounds like heaven. I enjoyed going down on her, but it was nothing like sucking your cock, swallowing you into my throat, feeling your come coating my tongue. That's the kind of oral sex I love."

Then she smiled wickedly. "But enough about me. Did you enjoy Hawk's first blowjob? Sliding your tongue into her wet pussy? Going where no man has ever gone before?"

I laughed and did my best William Shatner imitation. "You're making me feel like Captain Kirk. My... God... Spock... This woman is so... Sexy! We'll see if I go where no man has gone before next time, if she's decided to take the plunge. Actually, I enjoyed it but I don't have the same emotional connection with her as I do with you. Our connection makes sex with you deeper, tremendous. With Hawk, it's just having fun. I wouldn't do it without you there because you make it the experience I want."

Lisa set her food down and pulled me into a hug, kissing me. "That is so sweet! I..." She clamped her mouth shut and clapped a hand over it. "I almost said it!" she said through her fingers.

I raised my eyebrows. "Almost said what? Go ahead, I won't get upset."

She lowered her hand. "I almost said I love you. I don't really know if it's true, yet, but I feel like it's going that way."

Kissing her softly, I nodded. "I feel the same way. I don't want to jinx it by saying that too early, but I feel the same way. I won't get upset if you do or don't say it. Deal?"

Lisa kissed me again. "Deal."

When she pulled back to continue eating, I decided we'd better start driving, or I'd take her right here in the parking lot. I ate as I drove, turning on fifty-first and driving until I crossed the bridge to Pelican Island.

The rusting, partly restored, WW II warships came into view as I drove up to the park. The surface ship looked in worse shape than the attack submarine. They still had a ways to go on her. I paid the attendant and received a ticket much like the one that brought us here in the first place. Parking the car, we tossed our refuse in the trash can. We would sip on our drinks as we took the tour at our own pace.

The lot had about half a dozen cars and one RV in it, with a few people fishing at the tip of the island. A light crowd in the middle of a workday, I imagined. "What first, the sub or the surface ship?"

"The sub looks like it has been restored more than the ship. There are more areas that people shouldn't be on the ship, so let's start there."

I walked up beside the gangplank and looked at the plaque. "Destroyer Escort USS Stewart DE-238. Why do Destroyers require escorts?"

"They don't," a male voice said from behind us. When we turned, we found an older man in casual clothes on the walk below the gangplank. "This class of ship was a Destroyer, made specifically for escorting the larger ships and screening them from danger. I'm Hal Spencer, part of the staff here. Walk through and look her over, and I'll be happy to answer your questions when you're done. Just stay clear of the areas marked no access. The ship is still under restoration, and those areas can be unsafe." At our nods, he walked off the sidewalk and around the side of the ship with a smile and a whistle.

"One question answered," I said as I looked back up at the superstructure of the warship. "Shall we go in and work our way up?"

Lisa was looking up with me at the antennas and upper platform. She had a speculative expression on her face. "No, let's start up there and work our way back down. I bet the view from up there is great. It's called a crow's nest, isn't it?"

I gestured at the gangplank. "We can ask our friendly staff guy when we finish. He would be the expert on all things nautical."

The trip up the ladders and between the rusted fittings of unknown purpose told me a couple of things. One, this ship smelled of oil and other things manmade. Second, it needed some serious applications of paint. It was still interesting. I looked for any place that might house something that would take a key.

When we reached the short ladder leading up to the highest watch platform on the ship, Lisa gestured for me to lead the way. I clanged up the metal ladder and rested my hands on the rail. The standing area was a circle about five feet in diameter and the sides were sheet metal covering the area up to waist high. I looked around the park from the high perch as Lisa climbed up to join me.

The park was situated on a small island, right at the tip. A ferry transporting cars from one side of Galveston Bay to the other was just passing in the water that was only the length of the ship away to the front of the Destroyer. I could see several people looking at parts of the ship and going into the sub via a small ramp leading to its deck, off to our left. Both vessels were buried in the ground to what would be the water line. To the far left was a building with the parking lot behind the ships. On the other side of the parking lot was the gulf waters on the far side of the island. It wasn't very wide here at this end.

"The view is really pretty good from up here, isn't it Lisa?" I asked.

"I like the view a lot," she replied. Her voice sounded like she was only part way up the ladder. When I looked back down, she was actually in the crow's nest but was on her knees. Lisa reached up and caressed my legs through my pants.

Looking back around, I could see people going about their business dozens of feet away, oblivious to the erotic scene unfolding just above their heads. A woman with a couple of kids smiled and waved at me even as Lisa was unzipping my pants. Lisa's hand around my stiffening cock felt wonderful. The woman below was snapping a picture of me waving at her like an idiot when Lisa swallowed me whole.

Well, the shoe was certainly on the other foot now. I was the exhibitionist today and Lisa was in control. My adrenaline was pumping in time with my quickening heartbeat. I couldn't keep my eyes off of her, but I couldn't stop looking for people seeing us either.

Seeing her smiling at me with her lips wrapped around the length of my cock was the most erotic sight I had ever seen. She pumped my length with her fist as she sucked and licked me. Then she pulled me out of her mouth and began licking my head.

"I did promise you I would make it up to you for teasing you. This way, I get to have sex with you right out here in the open, and no one can tell I have that wonderful cock of yours down my throat." With a saucy smile, she kissed my head and slowly opened her lips and impaled her face onto me. Slowly, inch by inch, her lips pulled around me as she swallowed.

I could feel her throat muscles squeezing me as her lips finally kissed the root of my cock. Her eyes smiled at me as her tongue worked under the entire length of me in an indescribable sensation.

That was more than I could take. I gripped the rail tightly and looked down at the deck below as I felt the universe contract around me. My last coherent thought was astonishment as I saw a Japanese couple by the bridge taking my picture while my cock exploded, and I could feel and hear Lisa swallowing my seed as I blasted off like a rocket ship. My knees weakened, but I managed to keep from collapsing as she squeezed her lips tightly around me and slowly withdrew, forcing the last few drops out and onto her tongue.

With a satisfied smile, she tucked me away and zipped my pants. With a soft pat on my groin, she stood up and slid an arm around my waist and waved at the Japanese couple. That sparked a few more photographs.

"That, my love, is better than Hawk." She stuck her tongue out and I saw the thin coating of my own seed on that sweet, pink tongue. An offering.

I kissed her deeply, tasting myself. After a moment, I drew back, still in her embrace, with my arms holding her tightly. "You taste much better but thank you for sharing."

Lisa giggled and together we waved at the friendly tourists' last picture before we climbed back down. "So, how did *you* like your day in the spotlight?"

"I like being anywhere with you. Together." I replied. "Thank you." I kissed her deeply and then we made our way up the walk to the bridge, nodding politely at the confused looking tourists.

Lisa smiled and bowed to them. "Ted, why don't you go look over the bridge for a minute."

As they bowed back to Lisa, I smiled with my own confusion and went into the bridge. Unlike the exterior, the instruments here gleamed. I started looking around for any place that could hide something.

I was mostly finished looking when Lisa came in and smiled brightly at me. "Find anything?" At my shaking head, she nodded. "I wouldn't think it would be in plain sight or in a common area. We need to head below decks and get out of the tourist area if

we are going to find anything."

"Are you going to tell me what that was all about?" I asked bemusedly.

"Nope," she saucily replied. "Maybe one day. Come on, champ. Let's go find the goods and get the bastard, whoever he is, nailed."

The gangway into the interior of the ship smelled even worse than the exterior. I could hardly imagine how the sailors could stand it on those long cruises. The smell of machines and men long gone commingled into a thin soup that colored the inside of the ship in my senses. The gangway went lower than this next deck but was closed off by a steel mesh door. A door with a lock.

Lisa slipped in front of me and tried the bigger of the keys and the lock clicked open. "Bingo! I win the big jackpot! Woo Hoo!" She opened the door and we slid inside. Lisa pushed it shut behind us. "Better safe than sorry. Come on."

The passage below was dark but work lights were strung along the length of the corridor. I found the switch and flipped the lights on. The close fitting corridor ran from the front of the ship to the back. Pipes of unknown purpose were above our heads. Walking required being careful if I didn't want to bang my head on the pipes.

Lisa struck out to follow the pipes to the back of the ship. "Let's start in back and work our way forward." Closed hatches led to rooms on the left and right, but she ignored them. The hall ended in another closed hatch. We both looked at it for a moment before we figured out which way to turn the wheel to unlock it.

The door opened with a metallic groan that seemed to echo through what must have been the entire ship. It sounded loud enough to wake the dead. Lisa stared at me with wide eyes as I held my breath. No other noise seemed to indicate anyone had heard it, though.

When our hearts slowed down, we slipped through the door and into the room beyond. The ceiling soared above our heads and huge engines filled the room.

"Wow, the engine room. There must be a million places in here to hide something," I said. "Let's split up and look. I'll take the right side and you take the left." At her nod, I slid into the shadow of the area to the right and we began searching.

After fifteen minutes, I was grimy and greasy. I was also empty-handed. The only spot left on this side was a crawlspace at the very back, in a pool of darkness. My skin crawled at the thought of sticking my hands or body in there, but I sucked it up and reached into the inky blackness. There was something in there, something wooden. I felt a handle and pulled it out. A flat wooden box with a shiny, brass padlock.

"Lisa! I found it! I'm coming out!" I shouted.

The box was not easy to move. It had some real weight to it. With having to crawl and pull it at the same time, it took a few minutes for me to get it out and into the open. I stretched my aching back and turned to the interior of the room. I frowned. Lisa was nowhere to be seen.

"Lisa?" I called out again.

"Right here," an unknown male voice said as he thrust Lisa out in front of him, a pistol pushed into her back. "Don't be stupid," he said with what sounded like an educated voice. The man was not unknown to me. Lisa and I had seen him taking money from the DA in the tape earlier today. "Open it."

"I don't have the key," I said. "How did you get in here?"

"Not that it matters," he said with a chuckle that chilled me, "but I picked the lock. Give him the key, Miss Davis." He emphasized the order with a sharp jab of the pistol to her back.

Reluctantly, she pulled the keys from her pocket and tossed them onto the deck in front of me. They jingled loudly in the deep silence that surrounded us.

My eyes flitted to the left and right, looking for a weapon of any kind. Nothing. With a sigh, picked up the keys and unlocked the padlock.

"Why all this? You have us now, at least tell us why before you do whatever you're going to do," I said.

"How melodramatic. You don't know me so I don't have to kill you. I'll be taking the evidence with me so it would just be your unsupported word. I have the tape you were so kind as to leave in your car for me. I'll take that, lock you in and we all walk away from this," the old man said. "Open it."

"Is that why you killed Calvin?" Lisa asked with a choked voice. "Why you would have killed me? Why you almost killed Ted?"

The man laughed a menacing, sinister laugh. "Do you think this is some kind of mystery story where the villain will tell you all his secrets in some final confrontation? Spare me. Accept that your friend needed to die because he knew too much and wouldn't back off. I advise you to not make the same mistakes as he did. You are much too pretty to die so young. Open the case before I change my mind, Mister Stansbury."

Lacking options, I pulled the lock off and opened the wooden lid. Inside were several items. Three videocassettes, what looked like a bank ledger and a computer CD in a case. I looked back at him. "Send her over and I give you the stuff."

That earned another laugh. "You think you are calling the shots, Mister Stansbury? Think again. Slide the contents over here and I will leave you a live woman. Do you understand me?"

I sighed and pulled out one of the videotapes and casually tossed it into the wall behind him. It clattered loudly and made him curse.

"Do you want me to shoot your girlfriend? Don't try that again!" He slid back and away from Lisa. "Walk forward, Miss Davis. Go to your friend."

Lisa locked eyes with me and started forward. The man slid back and to the wall. He watched us and I waited. His eyes flicked down and he bent to get the tape.

While he was reaching, I slid the computer CD out and onto the floor beside the box. A risk but worth it, I thought. When he had the tape and was again looking, my hands were on the box and Lisa had stepped between him and the secreted evidence. I didn't want to, but I gave up the rest of the evidence. He slid them into a small bag over his shoulder. I must have missed it in the dark, against his dark clothes.

"Show me the inside of the box," he commanded. I tilted it up for him.

He picked up the things I had slid out to him and backed toward the door. "I'm glad you saw reason. This could have been much more difficult." He opened the hatch and backed out. From outside the door, he reached down and picked up what looked like a wine bottle filled with some fluid.

"Too bad for you that I am not a very honorable fellow, eh?" He smashed it to the floor

in front of the hatch and I rushed forward a few steps.

The pistol came back up and I threw myself to the side. The gunshot was incredibly loud in the closed off, metal room. I covered my head as the round bounced through the room. Thank god we weren't hit.

He pulled something out of his pocket even as I scrambled to my feet. I heard Lisa running to the side behind me. It was a lighter. With a flick that seemed to take an hour, he brought the flame to life and it fell in a slow tumble. The smell of gasoline was growing very strong. Then the floor ignited in a flash and half the room was on fire.

Laughing almost maniacally, the man slammed the hatch and it locked. The sound of something metal against the door could be heard, probably jamming the hatch.

I turned and Lisa scrambled back with me, snatching up the CD. "What do we do?" she screamed. "We're going to burn alive!"

Desperately, I looked for an alternate exit but there seemed to be none. There was another hatch, but it was padlocked from the inside. There was also a set of metal steps that should lead to the deck above, but it was disassembled and laying on the floor. A lot of the smoke was being drawn to vents in the roof, but the flames and their heat kept advancing.

We were trapped.

Chapter Thirteen: Soaring free.

Note: Takes place at the same time as chapter eleven.

Hawk's point of view

I slipped my cell into my jacket and revved my hog. With a roar, I shot out of my garage and onto the street in front of my house. Ted and Lisa could find their own way out of the neighborhood, I decided, and I took to the street fast.

There was no sign of anyone following me, so I traveled the main streets into downtown. Police headquarters was busy, as usual. That might actually work in my favor today. I really didn't want to run into Captain Jordan. I was already on his shit list and he would have no qualms about giving me the third degree.

I waved to various people I knew as I threaded my way to my desk. My old wooden chair creaked as I sat and the metal spring squealed in protest at my weight. I smiled at the difference between Lisa's desk and mine. No clutter here. All the papers were in neat stacks or the in/out boxes. There were no photos, either. I preferred being in the field. I logged in to the system and ran a query on Kotov. I was surprised to see more than one Kotov in the system.

A few keystrokes and I had all three in summary format. There was Viktor and his two sons, Alexi and Uri. I clicked print on all three and shut down my system. Time to scram before trouble found me.

The place was too cheap to have anything but a shared printer so I had to hope someone wasn't printing a novel. When I saw my pages printing right out, I smiled. The gods were favoring me. I snatched them up, folded them, and slid them in my pocket. A glance at the Captain's door showed it was still closed. Perfect.

My sense of euphoria lasted all the way to the edge of Detective's row. I walked around the corner and almost ran into Jordan. The short, balding, pudgy man did things to a suit that likely made more women into lesbians than the rest of humanity all rolled together. His already unfriendly face frowned even more than his norm.

"Hawkins, I thought I told you that you were on leave until further notice. Was I less than clear? What are you doing here?" He asked in a voice that reminded me of a bad English butler without the accent. His arrogance just bled right through.

"Sorry, Chief, I was getting some personal effects from my desk. I'm going home right now. It's been a long day and I need to rest up, anyway," I said in as neutral a voice as I could manage.

"I've told you before not to call me Chief. Really, Hawkins, are simple instructions beyond you? I imagine that you'll be needing that sleep," he said with an unconscious sneer.

I've met a number of deeply religious men, most of whom were not fond of my sexual orientation. They, unlike Robert Jordan, could be polite and hate the sin without hating the sinner.

Putting my hands on my hips, I nodded. "I certainly will, Captain. A night of drunken debauchery and making love to more women than you can count takes dedication.

There is a special orgy scheduled in my honor at the local lesbian 69 union hall."

"Your attitude reeks, Hawkins. I don't think you are bright enough to know when you've been beaten. That little tirade you had on the phone sealed your career. You're done. With all the other disciplinary actions in your jacket, I've already spoken to the Chief of Detectives," he sneered, "and he is letting me fire you. You have brought enough disrepute on this department and I will, frankly, be more than glad to see you gone. Come to my office and turn in your badge and weapon."

I grinned and stepped into his personal space, quietly addressing him. "You talk a lot of shit, Captain Jordan, but since it's just me and you, let's cut the crap. You hate my kind. You know, the homosexuals, don't you? It's not my attitude you hate. It's the fact I get more pussy than you ever will, isn't it?"

He reached up and pushed me back. I stumbled in surprise. "Stay away from me, you freak!" he hissed. "Don't you dare get in my face." I don't know why that enraged him like that, but he was out of control. I could hear the room quiet behind me. He was still around the corner and seemed not to notice. A low voice that would be lost in the normal rumble of multiple conversations now could be heard by the closest of the desks.

"All you should be run out of the police department. Your kind will burn in hell. Homosexuality is a sin against God and you'll burn. I've been looking for a way to be rid of you since the day I took charge of this division. Kruger was a weak-minded fool to allow you to pollute this place and I will earn credit in Heaven by correcting his mistake. Not even counting your unnatural cravings, a woman has no place in homicide anyway." He held out his hand. "Your badge and gun. You're fired. Come on, give them over."

Slowly, burning with anger, I pulled out my badge and pistol. Slowly, I unloaded the pistol, but rather than handing them over, I stepped back and held them out, making him come to me. He was like a fish, seeing only the bait. With a hungry smile, he stepped out of the hall and took them.

I looked over the room and most of the detectives were staring at us with expressions ranging from shock, anger and satisfaction. I made mental note of the various people here. Some of them would talk about it later, I hoped. Then I smiled sweetly at my former boss.

"Jordan, I'm actually glad you fired me. This place has been a cesspool under you and I know Assistant Chief Kruger will be interested in what you think about him, even if he is only working with the DA now. Oh, and I'm sure everyone out there has found your

views on homosexuality and women in general to be fascinating, too."

Jordan looked like he was waking up from a dream state. He turned and stared at the room in surprise, as though he hadn't even known they were there.

"I'll get someone to escort me out, since I'm a lowly civilian lesbian now. Detective Saunders, will you escort me out of here?" I heard the mix of bitterness and triumph in my tone. I was both devastated at the loss of my badge and exhilarated at the public exposure of my tormentor. I would hurt later. For now, I still had work to do. This case was not going to be wrapped up by someone else. I *would* finish it.

The petite brunette stood up and walked past the open mouthed Jordan with a withering glance. "Sure, Hawk. I need to get out of here and get some fresh air anyway." We left Jordan standing there, his mouth working like a beached fish. Once we were inside the elevator, she turned to me, angry. We had never been friends but I had never been her enemy either. "What the fuck was he thinking? He's nuts! Are you gonna fight this?"

I pressed the second floor button. "I don't know what I'm going to do, yet. I'm going to torpedo that jerk, at the very least. Come on." On the second floor, I led her to Internal Affairs. The detective at the front desk frowned sourly as I came in. It was the same bozo that had handled my last suspension. What was his name? Oh, yeah, Lazlo.

"Morning, Lazlo," I said brightly.

"Detective Hawkins, what now? Did you punch out the Mayor?" he asked tiredly.

I pulled out the chair and sat down. Saunders sat down next to me. "No," I said. "I was fired and I'm here to file a harassment complaint against Jordan before Saunders throws me out of the building."

His face lit up in surprise and he pulled out a report pad. In all my years of trouble, I had never filed a complaint against anyone. That must have made him reevaluate the situation.

"Tell me what happened," he said in a newly professional voice.

I related the encounter in as much detail as I could recall. With his questions, I added details.

"Can anyone corroborate your story?" he finally asked.

I looked at Saunders to see how she jumped.

Saunders looked at me and then at Lazlo. Slowly she nodded. "Yeah, me and everyone else in homicide. Jordan wasn't very discreet." She rounded on me. "I don't like you, Hawk," she said almost defiantly, "but I can't let that pass." She returned her attention to Lazlo. "I saw him shove her, too. At least, I saw someone shove her and then Jordan stepped into sight."

I let my breath out slowly. I hadn't been sure she would back me up. Then I named off a dozen other detectives that had seen it happen.

"I'll head up there and get statements as soon as we're done here, Hawkins. Your rep won't let this stand. I can't believe he was so stupid as to say that in front of so many witnesses," Lazlo said while I signed my statement. He tore off a copy and handed it to me.

"Jordan was in the hall at first and didn't realize everyone could hear him," I said tiredly. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I guess I'll let the rep start screaming and let you investigate someone other than me to start with. That should be a real change of pace for you, eh?" I forced myself to grin at him.

He held out a hand. "I can't say I've ever been a fan of yours, but I'm sorry to see you go like this. You've always been a bit rough around the edges, but you got results. I'll handle this and be in contact with you. I suggest you call a good lawyer and your rep."

I shook it and stood up. "Time for you to toss me out on my ear, Saunders." She walked out with me and I stopped in the parking lot.

Saunders fought with herself for a moment and then stuck her hand out. "If you need something, call me. We remember our own."

That surprised me. I smiled warmly and shook her hand. "Thank you and say goodbye to everyone else for me. Don't let that bastard beat you down."

She watched me as I started my bike and drove out of the police parking lot for what may be the last time. I didn't look back.

I was filled with a mixture of anger and satisfaction; despair and exhilaration. Jordan had hung himself and I could get my job back, if I wanted it. I guess I shouldn't be so fast to decide to turn my back but that was my immediate impulse. I needed to think and make some calls. One to Kruger, for certain. I also needed something to perk me up. Starbucks coffee.

Pulling into the parking lot like a one woman motorcycle gang, I powered into the motorcycle parking area and stomped into the shop. "Give me a massive espresso, Dave. I need a major hit."

"Coming right up, Hawk," he called from behind the counter as I took a seat. Business first, I pulled my cell and dialed the rep. "Wally, Hawk. I have a little problem."

"Who did you hit," he asked tiredly.

"Wally, Wally, Wally, you disappoint me. I didn't hit anyone. I was sexually harassed." I heard his chair as it thumped back onto the floor on all four legs.

"What?!?" he barked. "You're shitting me! Who had the balls to harass you and what hospital are they in?"

"Nope, no kidding. Jordan did it in front of a dozen witnesses and then fired me. I didn't even break anything." When I calmed him down, I gave him all the details and told him I would fax him a copy of the Internal Affairs complaint. By the time I had hung up, my coffee was ready.

Kruger wasn't in his office, so I left a detailed message for him. I hoped he went down there and tied that little creep into a pretzel.

Sipping the hot brew, I pondered this moment. I had seen something like it coming for months. Jordan had a reputation and friends in high places. Even with witnesses, it would be tough going. Then I shrugged. Screw it. I'd have to head back home before I did anything else and get my concealed carry permit and backup pistol. That and get my Private Investigator's license. Thank God I had kept it current. No way I was going around unarmed right now.

First, time to read through the police reports on the family Kotov. I pulled the folded papers and read through them slowly. Daddy Kotov spent a less than impressive five years in prison for human trafficking. Charges dropped on various other counts with no reason listed. Why the hell couldn't someone behind bars actually get the time they

deserved? No indication of recent criminal activity. Yeah, right.

The sons were more interesting, in a way. Suspected of being involved with drug trafficking and other crimes on a lower level. Not enough to charge them but persons of interest. Well, I wasn't really interested in them right now, anyway. Daddy Kotov was listed as still running an import/export business so I now had a place to start in on him.

With a wave to Dave, I threw away my empty cup and slid the papers back into my jacket. On the way out the door, I spotted a car across the street with a man in it, slumped down. I didn't look at it directly, but it might be a tail. I kicked the hog over and turned right on the street. My eyes took in the car as I passed it and my suspicions were confirmed. That moron, Digger, had picked me up somehow.

Well, that was good, in a way. It meant I didn't need to worry about other tails on the way to my place. I'd have a police escort. Till I lost him, anyways. I saw the car turn out and around to follow me. Amateur.

I drove slow and easy so he wouldn't lose me on the way home. Hitting the garage door opener, I drove in and closed it behind me. After shutting the bike down, I went in and turned off the alarm. A quick jog to the bedroom and I had my spare nine into a shoulder holster and my jacket back on. I pocketed the carry permit and my license.

He would be waiting for me outside. I suppose he must have picked me up here at my house. At least if he was following me and not Ted and Lisa. I could give him a real twist in the streets and lose him pretty quick.

I reset the alarm and started up my bike. Revving it hard, I opened the garage door I shot out and turned left. Another press of the button started the door close but I wasn't waiting for it to finish.

In my rearview mirror, I could see Digger starting to give chase, but he was late off the mark and a few blocks behind before he could get up to speed. Too bad I knew this neighborhood better than he did and my bike could beat the hell out of his car. I lost him in less than a minute, laughing in my helmet.

I hit an alternate route back into downtown, so that Digger wouldn't pick me up by accident. The older buildings in their grey stone gave way to the newer steel and glass buildings that dominated the skyline.

Cutting off an office drone, I slid into a newly vacated parking space. We saluted each

other with one finger as he drove off. It was oddly an almost friendly gesture. Sometimes this city could be strange, indeed.

After consulting the building directory, I took the elevator to the twenty-second floor and found the offices of Kotov Imports and Exports. I should probably be more discreet, but time was not in good supply. I wanted to get this wrapped up before Lisa or Ted joined Calvin.

The outer office was plush and bright. The receptionist was the same; a bottle blonde with more breasts than brains. She smiled rapidly at me. "Do you have an appointment?" the woman asked with a thick accent. Russian, maybe?

"I'm here to talk with Viktor. Is he in? Tell him it's about a police matter." It certainly was, even if I wasn't a cop.

The secretary's smile didn't fade, but her brow crinkled. "Do you have an appointment?"

I cocked my head to the side and leaned over the desk to get closer to her. "You don't have the least idea what I'm saying, do you?" I asked.

She nodded brightly. "Do you have..."

I cut her off and nodded. "Yes, I have an appointment."

She stood up and swished her way to the inner door and knocked. A muffled voice queried her just before she opened the door.

Viktor Kotov's arrest photos didn't do him justice. He was much smoother looking in person. His thin frame looked like there might be some muscle under that shirt. The touch of grey along his dark hair added an air of distinction to him. He spoke with the woman briefly in what sounded like Russian, and then he waved me in.

"Come in. Sit, sit," he said with almost no accent. "You have an appointment, you say? Vodka? I have Stolichnaya. Better than this American crap. I don't remember an appointment and I am sure I would remember a woman like you." He poured two shot glasses with vodka while he smiled and talked. I took it and raised it to him.

"No, but I couldn't get my point past your well developed countrywoman, Viktor."

Viktor laughed. "She takes calls from Russia and has only been here a few months. We don't get many visitors here." He raised his glass to me. "To long life," he said and tossed it back. I followed suit. It was smooth. He sat down on the edge of his desk. "You have more soul than most Americans. Tell me who you are and what I can do for you."

I set the empty glass down and smiled at Viktor. "The name's Hawk. I'm investigating a murder and your name came up."

Most people would be bothered some by being connected with a murder, but he seemed amused. "I killed no one. I have no need to kill people." He grinned. "Besides, you police have already been here to question me. Don't you talk to each other?"

The flash of anger inside me wasn't really directed at him but I growled anyway. "No, we just come around and ask you again. Why should I believe you had nothing to do with the murder?"

Viktor slid into his seat and propped his feet on the desk, lighting up a cigarette. The smoke was pungent and he blew it right at me.

"I was at home, alone. Not very helpful, eh?"

"Not really," I grunted. "Going from human smuggling to murder doesn't seem like too big a jump for me."

He laughed. "You don't back down. I like that. I tell you what, Hawk; I will tell you something I didn't tell your rude, ignorant friend." The smile vanished from his face and his eyes sparkled. "I want you to find who killed Samson as much as you do."

That wasn't what I had expected but I kept it off my face. "Why is that, Viktor? He put you away for years. I'd think you'd want to see him go down."

"Because he helped me testify for the Federals. I was able to still be with my children while they were young. Without him, I would still be looking at many years in prison."

I leaned back in the chair. "That wasn't in his file on you. Why?"

He shrugged. "We can ask him when we meet him again. All I can tell you is that I owe him. The other man didn't seem to care. He wanted to berate and harass, but you have fire in you. He wouldn't drink with me, so I told him nothing. You have soul, Hawk. I

think I would like some sparring with you."

I shook my head. "I'm not a cop anymore."

"I know," he said agreeably.

My head snapped up. "You what?"

"I heard about it. I saw your picture after I read about the bombing, so I found your name and asked questions." He smiled at my surprise. "I have been using people to get information, Detective Hawkins. They told me what happened to you. That's unfortunate, but I'm glad to see you are still looking. I hear that your explosives people have reached some conclusions." He grinned at me. "I don't think that *buffoon* will have the intelligence to use it."

"Did he tell you his name was Digger?" I asked, though I was already certain what the answer would be. I nodded in response to his affirmative answer. His opinion was the same as mine.

I'd have to eliminate Kotov the hard way or find another lead. I stood up and walked toward the door. "I better not find out you lied to me or we are going to have a real problem, Viktor. If you hear anything, call me. My cell is in the book under Shauna Hawkins."

He smiled a shark-like smile. "I will. If you need help from some sturdy people without too many questions, call me. I have many friends who owe me favors." He raised his empty glass. "Good hunting."

The woman smiled at me as I left. "Dos Vedanya," she called out cheerfully.

"Don't take any wooden nickels," I called back.

The elevator ride let me get my thoughts back into order and make a plan of action. I stopped in the lobby, looked up a number on my cell and dialed. When it picked up, I smiled.

"I figured it wouldn't be too long before you called me," Frank said with a chuckle. "You only call when you want something or you want to get rid of something that goes boom."

"That's right, Frank. I'm a needy bitch. You hear about Jordan yet?"

"Who hasn't?" he spat. "That jackass. You are the top homicide cop in the city and he wants to dump you. With a crowd, too. Word is everywhere. Kruger has been in his office for an hour, I hear. Lots of shouting and arm waving. Internal Affairs is sniffing around, too. Man, you like to stir up a hornets nest, don't you? I haven't had this much fun since the hogs ate Uncle George."

"What did you get out of the bomb?" I asked, my heart beating faster at the mention of Kruger. I wasn't going to talk about it, though. If he reversed my firing, I would get a call. Hell, I'd get a call from him soon either way.

"It's against department policy to give information on an investigation to civilians," he said piously.

I shook my head and sighed. "What'll it cost me?"

"Bribery, too?" he asked, shocked. "It's good I'm not in my office where other law-abiding cops hang out."

"Come on, you damned thief. What will pry it loose?" I asked with a smile. "You have your price. A bottle of scotch?"

"Dinner. Dinner and you tell me all the juicy details."

"Done," I agreed. "Give."

"The bomb was made out of common components but the trigger was special made," Frank said. "The circuit board had a part number on it that linked it to a commercial remote detonator used in construction and demolition. One that isn't available to the general public." The sound of satisfaction filtered into his voice. "One that is tracked by the State. Every company that uses them has to account for every single one and there are not many of them. It's a new model. I can text message the companies and numbers to you."

"How about the results of the canvas? You must have called them already." I asked, a bit annoyed. Why the raw information when he could give me the details?

"The Ranger insisted that we send him the information and he would follow up. We were told to hand it over and step back." Frank sounded disgusted.

I was flabbergasted. "Is he crazy or stupid?" I demanded.

"Yes," Frank said bluntly.

Shaking my head, I just accepted that Digger was really as stupid as I thought. Why not use the local resources? That was just plain stupid. "Text me and we'll do dinner as soon as this is done. Frank?"

"Yeah, Killer?"

My voice softened. "Thanks."

"It's us versus them, Kid. Chin up and call me if you need anything."

My step was bouncy as I exited the building. I'd get through this. This was a huge break. I slid on the bike and brought it to life. While I warmed it up, I slid my helmet on and considered calling Lisa. I decided to wait until I had more information.

When I got on the street, I automatically scanned for tails and damned if I didn't spot Digger back there. That was simply not possible. I had lost him and there was no way he picked me up so damned easy! He didn't even *know* about Kotov. My eyes narrowed. That *bastard*!

I took the corner at a roar and began weaving through traffic to blasts of horn and shouts of outrage. I grinned and enjoyed it. Let the asshole follow me through that. I needed a few minutes without him and I would know one way or the other if I was right.

Turning onto Main Street, I cut under the Interstate and into the McDonald's parking lot. I climbed off and yanked off my helmet angrily. "If that chicken-shit bastard did what I think he did, I will get so even!" I muttered to myself as I started looking closely at my bike.

It took less than a minute and I had it in my hand. A tracer with adhesive on it stuck under my seat. That had to have been planted at my house before I picked it up. The fucker had broken into my garage and planted an illegal tracker! There was no way he had a warrant for this! What a cheese-eating bastard.

I started cussing and kicked a rock into the side of the building. The two older bikers

with the Hell's Angels jackets in the drive-through just grinned at each other. I opened my mouth to tell them where to stuff it when it came to me that I had an opportunity.

Jogging over to them, I grinned. "Hey, boys. You got a cig for a girl?"

The one closer to me nodded and started digging his pack out. "Sure. Nice bike. We don't see many chicks with a big hog like that. You taken? If not, I'll marry you."

I leaned over and planted the tracer on the license plate and let him have a nice look at my tits, laughing. "Yeah, I have this mean bastard that keeps me on a leash. You from around here?"

He passed over a cigarette and lit me up. Damned things. I puffed it and smiled through the smoke. I had to learn how for undercover work.

"Naw. We're from Hempstead. We just came in to drop off a pal at the bus station." He gestured to the Greyhound station right across the street. "You wanna ride back out with us?"

I shook my head. "I'd love to but my old man would freak. You boys have fun, but keep an eye out. I hear the cops are following bikers this week, looking for drugs."

"Thanks, Sister," the other man said. "We'll keep an eye out and ditch any that try. If your old man gets too tough, you come look us up."

I slid between them and gave each a kiss on the cheek. "I'll do that. Ride safe."

They pulled up and ordered while I jogged back to my bike, laughing to myself. With any luck, Digger would be a while figuring out what I just did to him. Life was sometimes cool.

In a few minutes, I was gliding through the back streets, just so I didn't run into Digger. I felt my phone buzz and pulled over to take a look. It was the list. Less than a dozen companies and their numbers right there. Frank was going to get a big ol' steak.

I pulled off my helmet and sat on the side of the street to start calling them. I knew the talk and one of them would have an unaccounted detonator, probably already reported to the police. At least, if I was lucky.

Chapter Fourteen: A big break.

Note: Takes place at the same time as chapter twelve.

Hawk's point of view

I caught a lucky break on the fourth call. The secretary at Conrad's Construction and Demolition wasn't as discreet as she should have been to nosy people asking questions about missing explosives and detonators. She let slip that they had already reported the theft to the police. I told her someone would be following up on that right away and to have an eye out. Her directions were clear and concise. I figured it would take an hour to get there.

Being paranoid, I kept an eye out for Ranger Dickhead, but he seemed to be lost for the moment. That was good, but it cost me an extra fifteen minutes to be sure.

The city gave way to empty rural area with surprising suddenness as I crossed the Beltway. When I came to the company, the tall chain link fence with barbed wire along the top looked suitably tough; it would be hard for someone to simply sneak in. A lot of beat up trucks, and other vehicles with less obvious purposes, were scattered around a metal building. A smaller building was separated by almost half the property. Men in hardhats walked around. They looked pretty buff. Some of the lady detectives I knew would be drooling. More than one construction worker stopped to watch me as I pulled the hog into the parking area.

I slid off and shook my hair out of the helmet, leaving it on the bike. A large man in a red flannel shirt and a battered orange safety helmet came over. "Hey, can I help you?" He held out a beefy hand and smiled at me. "I'm Big Mike."

Turning on the charm, I smiled back and took it firmly. "Yes, you sure are. I'm Hawk. You might be able to help me. I'm looking into the disappearance of some explosive detonators. Your company called the police." Not one lie in that, but the line I wanted his thoughts walking was laid out.

Mike pulled his hat off and ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah, we did have some turn up missing last week. Conrad was out on all the sites looking around for it and asking questions. That kind of stuff can get the State, the ATF and the Department of Homeland Security pretty interested in a company."

"I take it that it never turned up. Will I get the straight deal inside? I'm not here to

cause trouble for the company, but you know how people will try to put what happens in the best light. I need to know the real deal if I'm going to get to the bottom of this." I added another hundred watts to my smile. "Can you give me an off the record take from the boys in the yard, Mike? It would really help me out."

Big Mike grinned and nodded. "We can trade for it, Hawk. You let me take you out to dinner and I'll give you the word around the yard."

I held my hand back out. "Deal."

After a pleased shake from Mike, I looked back toward the main building. "Conrad is a good guy, both to work for and with. I don't think he would shade it too much to the cops. He'd just tell it like it was and take his lumps, but there is no real proof that he can be sure of. The boys have an idea but it's just suspicion, you know?"

I nodded. "Suspicion is fine for now. Tell me what happened and what you boys think."

He put his hands on his hips. "Well, last week the Friday inventory came up short some explosive compound and one wireless detonator. One of the new ones that has the increased range. The shift boss, Tony, freaked out. You see, we have to sign out explosives and detonators. Only the shift boss is supposed to do that and it's inventoried at the start and end of each day so Tony was responsible for it. He called Conrad and they tore the place up looking for it. No dice."

"Can anyone get into where you keep that stuff?"

Mike pointed off at the small building off by itself. "It's locked up out there in the explosives shed. The door is locked all the time and only the shift boss, Mavis in the office, and Conrad have keys."

"So, someone had to come out here during the day and get into that locked building in broad daylight?"

He nodded. "That's not as off as it might sound. During the day, most of these guys are out on various job sites. The only reason this crew is here is because we are going out to a new site. In an hour there will only be the office staff. That won't get anyone through the doors but it cuts way down on witnesses."

I nodded and pulled a pen out of my jacket. Grabbing his hand, I wrote my number on his hand. "You've been a lot of help, Mike. Call me this weekend and I'll pay up my end."

He went back to the other men and they started hooting. Men. I just smiled and shook my head before walking into the main building. The office was clearly marked. A harassed looking woman in her forties was manning the phone. "No, I can't send a crew out this afternoon, Marty. I can send Carl and some of his boys to take a look at it tomorrow morning, so just go have a beer and stop yelling at me. I work slower when I get yelled at. Tomorrow." She hung up and smiled sourly at me. "Everyone thinks they have priority. What can I do for you?"

I scratched my nose and tried not to smile. "We spoke on the phone. I'm here to follow up on the explosives theft."

"I called Conrad and he said he would help you with it," she said. "Hang on." She dialed a number and spoke briefly into the phone. "He'll be right out."

True to her word, a balding man in well-worn work coveralls came out from the back in less than a minute. He looked to be in his middle fifties. "I'm Conrad. Come on back."

I followed him into a neat office and took the chair he indicated. "Call me Hawk, Conrad. I'm following up on the report of the missing detonator and explosives. What can you tell me about it?"

His rendition matched pretty well with Big Mike's, so I was pretty sure it was the straight shot. When he was done, I asked, "So, who has keys to that shed, or do you think it was broken into another way?"

Conrad shook his head. "The office key is missing. Someone came in and took it. I have my suspicions and they were in the report."

I nodded. "I know," I lied, "but I want to hear it all fresh."

"We had a new hire no show today. Allen Carson. He was only with us for a couple of days last week, and then he vanished. He hasn't answered his pager, and that's the only number I have for him. I went by his place and it's a meat market. Makes me real suspicious. Mavis said he was in about lunch on Friday and asked for a copy of his W4 form. She went and made him a copy. When all the ruckus happened, she couldn't find the key. She's been with me twenty years so it must have been him. "

"Can I see his employment application and papers?" I asked.

He nodded and stood up. "Let me go get them for you."

While he was out, my phone rang.

"Hawk," I said when I answered it.

It was Lisa. "Hawk, Lisa. We have some new information."

"I'm in the middle of something, Lisa. Can you call me back?" I asked.

"I'll make it quick," Lisa said, "and you can call me back when you are free to talk. We found a tape at Calvin's and his appointment book. Murphy showed up, but we got out without him seeing us. The tape showed the Galveston DA passing cash to someone I don't know."

I heard a deep breath. That couldn't be good.

"Then I got stupid and left them in the car when we stopped to check on my mother. Someone jimmied the car and took them."

"Dammit, Lisa! How could you leave it in your car?" I half shouted.

"I know!" she said. "I was stupid! You can join me in tearing me up for making such an amateur mistake. My idiot brother was there but I don't think..."

"Did your brother take it, do you think?" I asked.

"No, he's not that smart," Lisa responded. "He'd just smash the window. Listen, before you go, we have a ticket stub that was in the appointment book. S.W.P. on the keys could be Seawolf Park."

"Wait for me. We'll all go there together," I said.

"No," Lisa said. "I'll be careful and look for tails, but we need to get there before someone has a chance to figure out to look there, if they can, from the other evidence. I won't wait, but you can come down when you can, or we'll call after we look around."

"Argh! Lisa! Don't be stupid! Wait for me and I'll be right down! Going in by yourselves is about the most..."

She interrupted me quickly. "Look, you need to go. We'll call if we find anything. Good luck, and be careful."

The call disconnected before I could tell her no way. I started to call her back and then decided it was a waste of breath. She was stubborn. I would just have to trust she would be careful and that Ted would keep an eye on her.

Conrad came back in with a folder. "Trouble?" he asked, setting it down on his desk in front of me.

I opened it and shook my head. "No, my partner is just off doing things that get on my nerves. Newbies drive me nuts."

The folder had a standardized job application and copies of his ID. I looked at the black and white copy of a drivers license. Thin guy in his thirties. Black hair and eyes that seemed to shout at me his guilt. It all looked in order.

"I'll need copies of these and a look at the shed, Conrad," I said, closing the folder.

In twenty minutes I had them and had been given the grand tour. Conrad was right; there was no sign of forced entry. The explosives were stacked neatly in shelves and bins and the detonators were in a separate room. I was satisfied that the new guy was the thief, and there was a good chance he was also our bomber. Conrad and I parted ways with my promise to get to the bottom of this.

The best lead I had now was Conrad's list of references. Mavis had to have talked with someone who knew this guy. First, though, I should run his ID. I pulled out the phone and started dialing dispatch before I remembered that I had been fired. I cursed and then called anyway.

"Get me Steve Lombardi," I said with authority. "Hawkins calling."

In a minute, I had him on the line. "Hawk, what can I do for you?" Sounded like he hadn't heard the news. No need to ask him to break the rules. Then I thought about it and cursed my own honesty. I couldn't lie to a friend, even by omission.

"I need a run on an ID, but I have a problem, Steve. Jordan canned me this morning. Will you help me out?"

"What?" he asked, shocked. I told him the story and he cussed at Jordan for a minute.

Then, he came through for me. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him, so give it to me."

"Thanks, Steve. Allen Carson, license follows." I gave him the information.

"Got it, hang on while I bring it up. Hmmm, the number is valid, but it's not connected to Allen Carson. It's to a James Waldeck, age eighty-seven. You have a social?" I read it to him. "That's for a Janice Silvers, deceased. Hawk, it sounds like your man is using cribbed numbers."

I knew it had been too easy. I'd have to go the references. I thanked Steve and hung up. The first one was a man named Vern Worthy. The phone was answered by a male voice.

"I'm calling to get a reference for Allen Carson," I said.

"Sure," he answered. "I know Allen. Good man. Be happy to give you a good reference for him."

I let him tell me how great the non-existent Allen was and then let him go with my thanks. Then, I called the operator and asked for a reverse lookup on the number. Bob's Bar and Grill. I got the address and headed off that way. Time to let Vern tell me that again in person. It was on the way to Galveston, and I was a bit nervous about leaving Ted and Lisa on their own for too long. Lisa was too cocky.

The parking lot was filled with cars that had seen better decades. Any expectations I had for this place were obviously too high. It was a dive. No self-respecting hooker would be caught here if she had more than two teeth. The neon sign outside either wasn't on, or most likely, didn't work. I think the exterior was gray, under all that crap, but I wasn't checking too closely.

I opened the door and was almost bowled over by the stench. Stale beer, unwashed bodies, cigarette smoke and weed. That, and other less savory smells. I made a mental note to burn my clothes later. When my eyes adjusted to the dim interior, I was able to make out a scattering of people drinking at tables, a couple playing pool and one trying to coax something from the jukebox. There was only one guy behind the bar and my money was on him being Vern.

Eying the stain on the bar stool, I decided to stand. The bartender was about thirty. Dirty brown hair hung past his shoulders in stringy clumps. His face didn't speak razor.

When he smiled, I considered paying him to stop.

"What can I get for you?" he asked while undressing me with his eyes.

"Lysol, straight up."

He blinked, and then he smiled a bit more. "Funny."

"You Vern Worthy?" I asked.

"Maybe," he answered with narrowed eyes. "Who want's to know?"

"I do," I said with a smirk. "I'm here to ask you about a reference you gave for Allen Carson."

His eyes widened and he bolted toward the back of the bar. I guess he was shy.

I took off after him. This was more like it. Hunter and hunted. Predator and prey. A waitress that I would have given a tip to wear a sack over her head stepped right out in front of me and went flying as I elbowed her aside. The patrons started scrambling and shouting. I snatched one of the pool cues off the wall and tossed it at his feet as Vern was approaching the back wall.

The stick tangled his legs, dropping him in an untidy heap with a screech. He tried to scramble to his feet but I dropped onto him like a hawk on a cute little bunny rabbit.

Driving his face into the floor, I levered his arm behind him. "Hi, Vern. What's the rush? Hot date?" His response was muffled by the cheap-assed carpet he was eating so I let him back up a bit. I would have talked, myself. No telling what was on that carpet. "Tell me about Allen Carson. Make it good, or we'll see how well you breathe when I tie you up like a pretzel."

"Shit, Bitch, let him loose!" shouted one of the men that had been playing pool.

"Back off," I snarled back. "You don't want to get into my business with Junior. Go back to your game. Talk, Vern."

"I don't know," he groaned. "I don't know no Allen! I swear!"

"Wrong answer." I ground his face into the carpet, burying my knee into his back.

The guy behind me had more balls than common sense. He shoved my shoulder hard. "Let him up, Bitch." The bad thing about big balls was they made a great target.

I snapped my right elbow back into his conveniently placed crotch. He went down hard and I could hear him adding his own share of gross stuff to the carpet.

"You gave a reference for him. Talk, Vern." I whispered loudly into his ear.

His legs started beating against the floor. "I don't know him! I swear! Some dude just paid me to give him a good reference. Two hundred bucks!"

My right side lit up with pain and I fell over. The other pool player was standing there with his cue. Thank god for thick jackets.

"You think you're tough, Bitch? Come get some of this." He spun his pool cue around like some ninja fighter.

I rubbed my side as I climbed back up. "You think that stick makes you tough? Let's see." With a quick step forward, I started grabbing pool balls and bouncing them off him. The cue clattered to the floor as he tried to duck and cover. His sudden screams of pain and flight from the fight cheered me up a lot. Only an idiot used a cue when the balls made much better weapons.

Looking at the rest of the bar patrons, who were all staring at me, I smiled wolfishly. "Nothing to look at. Vern just didn't pay for the transvestite hooker he used last week." I can't imagine why no one tried to stop me from leaving.

Back out in the parking lot, I took a deep breath, trying to clear the stench from my lungs. Still no closer than when I arrived, I took my bike and headed south. The pieces were starting to fall into place. I just had to get them into the right order.

In half an hour, I was pulling into the parking lot at Seawolf Park. Ted's car was there, next to an RV and a beat up old pickup. I paid my ticket and was pulling into the lot when the ship started belching smoke from one of the stacks at the rear of the hull.

Not bothering to curse, I leapt off the bike and ran toward the ship. As I was climbing on the deck, a ratty looking man came out of the bridge and screeched to a halt at the sight of me. People don't stop running from fires unless they are afraid of something

else more. I was already reaching for my pistol when he pulled his and ducked back behind some metal thing whose purpose I didn't have time to fathom.

"This certainly isn't to your advantage, Detective. Shall we shoot it out while your friends burn?" He shouted, his voice more cultured than his appearance.

"Drop the weapon," I called back.

"Oh, I don't think so," he chuckled. "Once again, I am one step ahead of you. You're more troublesome than I expected, though. I should have taken care of you at Samson's office. You do your Master's bidding better than most minions." I glimpsed him off to the side and ducked when he fired at me.

"Was that you? I didn't think a dried up stick like you had that kind of strength in him." I slid forward, toward the bridge, watching for him. When I saw him slinking toward the back rail of the ship, I fired at him twice, making him duck.

"I left your friends in a burning room and every second counts. Take your time thinking about what you really want to do," he suggested with a laugh.

Bastard. He was right. "We'll meet again. Soon. Keep looking over that shoulder."

I backed into the door he came out of with his laugh chasing me. The smoke was pouring up from a stair leading down into the bowels of the ship. I spotted a fire extinguisher on the wall and snagged it, pulling my shirt over my face and plunging into the smoke.

Settling closer to the floor where the smoke was less punishing, I crawled toward the rear of the ship. The hall ended in a hatch with a wheel on it. A metal bar was jammed into it. I grabbed it and let go with a yelp. It was hot! Duh, Hawk. There was a fire on the other side of the door. Smoke poured into the hall from a vent above the door.

Whipping off my jacket, I dropped the extinguisher. Then, I wrapped the jacket around the metal bar and yanked hard. It didn't move. I pulled harder. With a screech, it pulled loose. I used the jacket to force the wheel around and kicked the hatch open.

The smoke made me gag and cough. "Lisa! Ted!"

"Hawk!" Lisa screamed from inside. They were on the other side of a sheet of flame.

"Hang on!" I shouted. Grabbing the extinguisher, I yanked the pin and started spraying the floor. The flames didn't die easily, but I forced my way toward my friends one step at a time.

I started worrying about how much the extinguisher had left. The flames were stubborn. With a chug, it started to give out and there were still a few feet of flame between us. "Shit!"

Ted grabbed Lisa and tossed her across the flames and into my arms. I almost went over but staggered back and kept her on her feet. My prized leather jacket fell into the flames, along with the spent extinguisher, as I fought to keep us clear. I backed us out into the hall.

"Come on, Ted! Jump!" Lisa screamed, clutching her purse to her side.

Ted jumped through the flames and rolled into the hall. His pants were on fire and I used my shoe to put him out. Then I helped him up.

"We need to blow this joint. Now."

Together we escaped the fire, coughing and wheezing. The fresh air was like a drug. We sucked it in even as we tumbled down the ramp. Staff was running to the ship and a man helped us down the ramp and off onto the grass.

"Is everyone okay," he asked worriedly.

I looked at Ted and Lisa, alive and well. "We're just fine," I said softly.

Ted held onto Lisa, letting her start to cry. I felt the same urge but focused on the parking lot instead. The old pickup was gone, but now I had a real lead. I knew who had jumped me in Calvin's office and knew he was connected to the DA here in Galveston. That explained the easy access. No way had that man come in through the window. He had a key.

The level of smoke pouring from the ship was coming down. The staff was getting it under control. Off in the distance, I heard sirens getting closer. I wasn't looking forward to explaining this one.

Sitting back down by the lovers, I touched them both. "I told you to be careful," I said gruffly. "I don't want to have to..."

Lisa threw herself onto me and tried to squeeze the life out of me, crying again. "Oh, Hawk! I thought we were going to die!" The side that had been hit with the pool cue ached, but I ignored it.

I held onto her, but looked at Ted. "Not on my watch. Nobody messes with my friends. I saw the man. I wish I had been thinking, because I could have gotten his tag numbers."

Ted nodded. "They might have a camera that caught that. Parking lot security. His coming here might just be his first big mistake. He got all of Calvin's stash except for a data CD that Lisa has."

"I have good news, too. I got a line on the bomber. I had his info in my jacket, but it's toast now." I shook my head in disgust as I thought about my mental note in the bar. I hadn't meant it literally. I made another mental note to be more careful about my mental notes, and then shook my head again. This nonsense wasn't getting me anywhere. "Anyway, he was a young guy, not a geezer man. Fake ID, but there is a picture on file at the place where he stole the explosives."

I looked at the fire engine pulling into the lot. "We know some of the players but not the game. We need to keep the police out, for now. Digger tagged my bike with an illegal tracker, and that makes me suspicious. I don't know if he's a part of this or not, but I'm smelling a rat somewhere. The police investigation has been derailed and that sure looks like someone inside, as much as I hate to admit it."

Ted stood up, pulling Lisa back to him. "We should get moving before someone official comes over."

I nodded and stood up, but before we could take more and two steps, I saw trouble. Murphy driving through the gate.

"Shit. Here we go," I muttered.

Murphy climbed out of his car with a grunt and headed right for us. I opened my mouth to say something, but he cut me off.

"You folks okay?" he asked loudly. "You need paramedics?" Then he dropped his voice. "I don't know what's going on here, and I don't want to know. The DA and some prick from the Texas Rangers have a hard-on for all three of you and it smells really bad. The

DA opened warrants for all of you, linking you to the bombing. It's total crap, but any cop that sees you won't have a choice but to arrest you." He paused a beat. "Good thing for you I never saw you." Murphy poked me in the chest. "You owe me, Hawk. You owe me big time. Now, beat it. All three of you."

He walked off, leaving me totally flabbergasted, to direct the scene.

"We need to go. Now," Ted said.

"Yeah," I muttered, "before Jordan shows up to give me a backrub."

We took our vehicles and cleared the area before the majority of the uniforms arrived. Lisa directed us onto some back streets and then onto the highway. She pulled us over into Texas City and to a small house.

I climbed off the bike and looked at her, confused.

"My mother's house," Lisa said. "We need to clean up, eat and plan our next move. Things are coming to a head. Let's park in the back."

Ted stepped back to the car. "You girls start without me. I'll hit a Stop and Rob for some fresh food and supplies we might need, and then come back. Save me some hot water."

Lisa opened the back door while I stashed my bike. The house was small, but neat. She was waiting for me inside the door, already half-naked.

"Strip. We need to wash the clothes," Lisa said.

We were both a mess, covered in soot. I stripped and she stuffed our clothes into the washer.

Lisa took my hand and pulled me against her, wrapping her arms around me. She kissed me deeply, stirring a heat inside me. "Go shower," she said softly. "And thank you. I'll wait for Ted, so I don't tempt myself."

With a sigh, I nodded. I found the shower and let the hot water beat on me. God, what a day this had been.

Chapter Fifteen: Where no man has gone before.

Lisa's point of view

After Hawk went into the bathroom, I sat down on the couch and ran my hands over my face. The last few days were taking a toll on me. My world was turned upside down and now my boss was somehow involved. There wasn't enough to go for a warrant without *him* pushing it, but he was part of it. I felt like pulling my hair out by the roots. I was angry, upset and wanted to break down, but that would gain us nothing.

Hawk had a lead on the bomber, we had the old man and his link to the DA. If we could get something from the disk, we might be able to find out who they were. I thought about my boss, that rat bastard, he had to be in it up to his neck. He killed Calvin and then had all those sweet words of support for me. The schmuck was going to pay.

Calvin had worked so hard, collected all that evidence and we just let them take it away from us. It made me so mad. With a growl, I got up and began pacing the living room. I had been going about this in the wrong way, like I was just a victim, not a prosecutor. I needed to be building a case against these people. They had been ahead of us every step of the way because they knew us and we didn't know them. That was gonna change.

The back door opened and I heard Ted call out. He came into the living room and stopped with a grin. "Do you always stalk around your living room naked? You look like a Valkyrie with your face all stormy like that." He set down the grocery bags and took me into his arms.

I buried my face in his neck, kissing his skin. He smelled like smoke. "You stink about as much as I think I do. Hawk is in the shower. Get these nasty clothes off so I can wash them."

With a kiss, he held me close for a moment before he started stripping. I stepped back and watched him. Sooty, smelly and grungy, I still wanted him, and just watching him take off his clothes made me wet.

I took his clothes and stuffed them into the washer, after emptying the pockets. Then I started them all over again. A second wash couldn't hurt. Ted was in the kitchen, putting up some sandwich materials and drinks when I wandered in. I stood in the doorway, watching the way his trim ass moved. When he bent over to put the lettuce in the crisper, I thought my heart would stop. He was so damn sexy. I was eying the

table, trying to judge its load bearing capacity when he turned around and caught me gawking.

"Well, well. See something you like, little girl?" he asked with a grin. "Hawk *is* still in the shower..."

I took him into my arms, rubbing my body against him. "Yeah, I do." I captured his face in my hands and crushed his mouth with mine, taking him.

The first inkling I had that Hawk was done with her shower was when her hands slid around me and twisted my nipples, shooting lightning bolts through me, while she kissed my neck and rubbed her breasts against my back.

"You two go shower," she whispered in my ear. "There will be time to prove we're alive when you smell like you weren't in a fire." She pulled back and swatted our asses. "Go. Shower now." She gently started pushing us toward the bathroom and we, giggling like school kids busted making out, obliged.

I climbed into the tub and set the water temperature to something just below roasting. Ted climbed in behind me and we lathered each other up. I looked into his eyes as he kissed me, and melted inside. "I love you," I said softly.

He held me, the hot water sluicing down us. "I love you, Lisa."

We bathed each other, cleaning the grime and soot away, leaving us smelling fresh. The scent of his hair made me squishy inside. My hands began caressing him and he squeezed my breasts gently.

Suddenly, his hunger took him and he pushed me against the wall of the shower. His hands lifted me and in one sharp thrust, that took away my ability to speak, he was inside me. He felt molten hot as I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper inside me. His eyes were wild as he rocked his hips against me.

The feel of his slick skin under my hands made me groan with desire. My breath caught in my throat as he filled me again and again. Each thrust was as if it were the first, fueling my lust and love.

The rush of sensation and emotion, made me unable to think. I suddenly felt my hunger rise and take over my mind. With a growl, I bit his shoulder. Not hard, but I had to taste him. He bucked like an animal beneath me.

"Faster," I moaned in Ted's ear. "Fuck me faster. Make me come. Fill me with your come. Oh, god!" A small orgasm exploded between my legs and I writhed around him, rooting my sex onto him, lost in the moment.

He impaled me and held me close until I could see again. Then he started fucking me slowly. Pulling out almost all the way before filling me. The feel of the ridge on his cock brushing the entrance to my sex made me moan with every thrust. The slap of our bodies mixed with the rush of the water.

I watched Ted's face as he made love to me. His eyes unfocused, his mouth open and panting. Then he leaned forward and began devouring my neck. I flashed hot all over my skin and screamed as he made me his.

I knew he was close by the slow groans that came from him. "I love you," I whispered in his ear. "Your cock feels so good inside me. So big, so thick, so hot. You make my head spin when you make love to me. Take me. Make me yours."

His hands, slippery on my skin, gripped my hips as he powered into me. I used my legs around his waist to thrust back down onto him and groaned into his ear to urge him on. It didn't take much urging. Ted buried himself inside me and his face in my breast. The groan that ripped from him coincided with the swelling of his cock and the pulsing as he filled me with his seed.

I cradled his head to me and squeezed him gently, sighing in pleasure. His footing seemed a bit unsteady, so I slid one foot down to help keep us standing. Together, we stood holding each other, him still deep inside me. "Thank you," I whispered in his ear.

"You never have to thank me," he said back with a smile. "I'm happy to be here for you."

I smacked him on the arm playfully. "Oh, you!"

He turned the water off and opened the shower curtain as we pulled apart. I should clean up again but I might have some more sweating to do before we were done, *if* I was lucky. We dried off and he snagged me up, carrying me in his arms back into the master bedroom.

On the bed, lying on her side, her hair tumbling down across her chest was Hawk. She grinned at us. "You two sure know how to have a good time." Her smile faltered a little.

"Do you mind a little company or should I scram?"

Ted looked at me. I smiled at her. "You can join us. Same as last time, you tell us where your limits are." Ted set me on the edge of the bed and I could see her looking at his still erect cock with an interesting mix of lust and dread.

I took her hand in mine, drawing her eyes to my face. "You don't have to go any further than you want to."

She nodded and a slow grin crept across her lips. "But, I'd hate to see Ted waste good money."

I raised an eyebrow and looked at Ted. "What would he waste money on?" I asked.

She reached behind her and dropped an unopened box of condoms on the bed in front of her. "Look what I found in the grocery bag. Unlubricated condoms!"

Ted turned a bit red. "Just in case. No pressure. I just had the chance to get them and took it."

Hawk laughed. "Were you a boy scout? Always prepared? I'm fine, Ted. I want to. Maybe only once, but I want to make love to you." She fell back on the bed and opened her arms. "Take me," she cried theatrically.

Ted grinned. "I think I can do better than rushing in. This is going to be slow and as perfect as Lisa and I can make it. We have some time until our clothes are finished, so there's no rush. Let's take our time."

"Go get some wine out of the kitchen, Ted. Hawk and I will get things started while you get us some drinks. Then, you can watch us make love while you recover from the shower." I grinned at him. "You don't mind if I get her warmed up for you, do you Ted?"

Ted shook his head. "I don't mind at all. You girls have fun and I'll be right back." He wandered out, with my eyes drilling holes in his butt. I sighed. Sex with Hawk was fun, but he was gorgeous.

"If you think that I'm coming in between you, tell me and it won't hurt my feelings," Hawk said quietly. "I can see how much you love each other and I don't want to hurt that. You two are important to me."

"Hawk," I said gently, "if I think that it's an issue, I'll talk with you about it. Ted doesn't feel threatened with this for now, and neither do I. Just like no means no, yes means yes. We both want to make love to you, but Ted won't push. Don't worry about it. Just have a good time. And, let's take it slowly. I want some more of Ted, too," I said with a toothy grin.

To emphasize my point, I touched her breast with my fingers, rubbing along her nipple with my nail gently. The deep inhalation told me that she liked my touch. Using only my fingertips, I traced the curve of her breast, the flat skin of her abdomen.

Her fingers began tracing the same path along my body. With a sigh, Hawk leaned across and our lips touched. Soft, sensual, she kissed me. The taste of her exploding as she slipped her tongue inside my mouth. Our tongues dueled, our kisses becoming more heated and our hands pulling each of us to the other. Her stiff nipples set off an ache of need in my belly, and I felt my own nipples harden in response.

Hawk rolled on top of me and broke our kiss. "Let me show you something new, lover. I think you'll like it. A lot." She slid her leg between my thighs and slowly rubbed it along my damp sex. I sighed and let her settle down on my leg. Her sex was drenched. When she groaned, I realized we were fucking each other. She was masturbating herself on my leg as I was getting off on hers.

With hungry hands, I pulled her down to me and kissed her passionately. We writhed together, kissing, as I grabbed her ass and held her as we thrust together. I heard the 'pop' of a wine cork but ignored it. The sound of wine being poured into glasses sent a shiver up my spine.

Rolling Hawk over onto her back, I stared down at her, my hair a wild halo around my face. An innocent frame to a devilish arousal. "I want to taste you again, Hawk. I want to slip my tongue deep inside your hot, sweet pussy. Since you're feeling so adventurous, I want to feel you suck Ted's come out of me, one drop at a time."

Hawk groaned underneath me and nodded, her eyes wide with lust. "Yes," she moaned. "Do it. Make me suck Ted's come from your hot pussy. Oh, god!"

I swooped down, locking my lips around her nipple and she bucked beneath me, a scream of pleasure bursting from her lips. The metallic feel of the nipple ring made me shiver with excitement.

"Ohhhhhhhh! Yes!" Hawk screamed.

Nipping lightly with my teeth, I searched for the ragged edge of Hawk's line between pleasure and pain, not being afraid to use my teeth to twist the rings just a little. My hands squeezed her breasts as I feasted on them, sucking, biting, licking. I could feel the heat of Ted's eyes all over me but I wasn't going to look. Just knowing we were being watched made my pussy flood.

I slowly kissed my way down to Hawk's belly button, running my tongue along and inside it. Hawk's hands tangled in my hair, trying to push me lower. I resisted, digging in. This was going to be at my pace. I was going to make her beg for me to make love to her.

When I finally kissed lower, she moaned and called out for me. "Yes! Oh, yes. Make love to me, Lisa."

I grinned and decided to do the same evil that Ted had done to me. I skipped her slippery sex and started kissing down her leg. She screamed with desire and pulled my hair, almost painfully, trying to bring my tongue to her needy sex. I wasn't playing that game. I untangled her hands from my hair and kissed her inner thigh.

"I'm running this show, Hawk. Last time you were calling the shots. Now, I will do this *my way* and you *will* like it!" I whispered, my voice husky with desire, at Hawk.

Hawk gripped the sheets and groaned. "Ted, come here and help me!"

"No!" I called out, flashing a stern look at Ted, who was sitting in the chair by the vanity. "You don't get help. You're mine, for now. I'll make you scream my name when I am ready." I looked back up at her face. I was crouched, like a hunting tigress. I was almost shocked by how aggressive I was being and how passive Hawk was. I almost expected her to flip me over and ride me but she submitted to me. She was stronger than me and could push the issue but she just writhed under me. The scent of her arousal sent sparks through me.

Getting back to my seduction, I returned to kissing her leg, tasting her skin. I took my time, running my tongue along her flesh. I kept my eyes on her face, watching the waves of pleasure wash over her. I waited for her next move, I expected it. When she reached for her own sex, I snaked my hands up and captured them shy of their goal. "Bad girl! No touching yourself unless I *tell* you to. Keep your hands above your waist. You may touch your breasts."

Her groan of need flushed me with heat. I wondered if Ted would play along with this kind of thing later. I smiled and kissed my way lower, running my lips along her ankle. I spent a good five minutes torturing her foot, sucking her toes like Ted had done mine.

When I started back up, her breathing sped up. She was twisting her nipples so hard I was afraid that she might hurt herself. The musky scent of her womanhood was intense and overpowering. It took a lot of willpower not to taste her and still get within an inch of her mound before switching legs and starting back down.

Her screams of anguished desire filled me with lust. By the time I came back up, she could have worn a hole in the mattress from all the writhing. So, this was how it was for Ted, holding me on the razor's edge, tortured with need and pleasure. Waiting, knowing that when I finally touched her, she would explode. I shared a long, hot look with my boyfriend as I teased Hawk. I was surprised he wasn't touching himself, yet. Though he was as hard as a rock, he was keeping his hands away, sipping on some wine. He raised the glass in toast to me.

Returning my focus to Hawk, I repeated the slow descent to her foot and took my time. Even when she started pleading with me. "Please, I give up, Lisa." She called out to me. "Don't leave me like this!"

I laughed and shook my head. "An extra minute for begging. Wait for it!" I purred back. Another lusty groan met my delay.

By the time I was back above her knee, she was twitching with need. I made my way to her dripping pussy. I had heard the phrase before but always thought it was hype. Hawk proved to me that it could be true. The lips of her sex were dotted with nectar and she quivered like a plucked guitar string.

She arched her back and wailed softly when I blew a warm stream of air across her flower. My god, I don't know that I had *ever* seen someone so aroused. I was going to have to ask Ted if I was so far gone when he did this to me.

"Now, you may touch below your waist," I husked to Hawk. Her hands were like striking vipers, grabbing my head and burying my face into her sex. The taste of her exploded into my mouth and I heard her scream before her thighs clamped to my head. It took all my strength, but I forced her legs apart so I could breathe. Using my fingers, I spread her lips and dug my tongue as deeply inside her as I could. The ridges of her sex trembled as I licked her deeply, feeling her lower piercings rub along my face.

I licked her clit and she crushed my lips to her. When I locked my lips around her clit and sucked hard, she arched as taunt as a bowstring. Then she wailed her pleasure. I sucked her pussy until she bucked me partway off her. Then, I got the shock of my life. She clamped her legs around my head and I saw a squirt of nectar shoot out of her. I know it was pussy juice because it squirted right into my mouth. The next one just sprayed droplets of her sexy juice all over my face. That's something else I had heard of but never imagined seeing. Female ejaculation. I must have made her come like a dragon. I slowly lapped her sex as she came down from her high, toying with the rings in her labia. Finally, she collapsed in a loose heap, spent.

With a silly grin all over my face, I began kissing up her heaving body. When I got to her face, her eyes were unfocused. Hawk did react to my kisses, though. She moaned as she licked my face, tasting herself.

"You shot come all over my face and into my mouth," I whispered to her. "I guess that means I did a good job, huh?"

"Oh, god," Hawk moaned. "That was an A+ if I ever felt one."

"Caught your breath?" I asked her. At her nod, I climbed up and straddled her face. "Suck my pussy," I told her, planting my sex on her lips. "Suck Ted's come out of my pussy," I commanded.

Hawk didn't play around like I had; she dug right in and started eating me. When she tasted Ted's come, she groaned. I squeezed my muscles and forced some into her mouth. Hawk went nuts, sucking, licking and biting me gently. She was a great pussy eater. Better than Ted, I had to admit. I'd have to give him more time to practice or get Hawk to give him some pointers.

Hawk began sliding her fingers inside me and licking them when she pulled them out. I locked eyes with Ted and motioned him over. He set the glass down and climbed onto the bed. I kissed him and about sucked his tongue down my throat. His hands pinched my nipples and he began kissing my neck. My eyes unfocused and I ground my sex into Hawk's face.

I forced him back and leaned forward to capture his cock in my mouth. The salty taste of him revved me right up. I bobbed my head and moaned, which only set off Hawk. From the motion of her arm, I could tell she was playing with herself, so I wasn't too surprised when she came again.

Pulling my mouth back, I rode her as she writhed. I looked deeply into Ted's eyes as I came with a shiver. He held me close while I came back down, listening to Hawk coo and moan into my sex. I rolled off of her and onto my side, trying to catch my breath.

"Ready to take the plunge, Hawk?" I asked when we could both breathe. "Are you ready for Ted to fuck you? Do you still want it?"

Hawk's hair was in wild disarray. She looked like a goddess of sex. I wrapped my hand around Ted's cock and he was like iron. Hawk looked at my hand, swallowed and nodded.

"I'm ready, but I need you to guide him and be here with me," Hawk said. Her breathing was a bit fast but she looked like she was ready.

"I'll be right here. If you need me, call me and I'll be here. If you want to stop, tell Ted and he'll back off." I assured Hawk.

I found the box and pulled out a foil package. With a grin, I tore it open with my teeth and fit the condom on the tip of Ted's cock. Then I used my lips to push it up and unroll it, taking him all the way in and settling the condom around the base of his cock. I could see Ted's eyes cross when I massaged him with my throat. Pulling back, I used my hand to jack him a few times.

"Assume the position, mister." I whispered to him. Ted was funny, caught between eagerness and not wanting to be seen as *too* eager. I kept my hand on him as he knelt between Hawk's spread thighs.

I looked into her eyes, wanting to be sure. At her hesitant nod, I ran the head of Ted's rubber sheathed cock along her sex. She jumped a bit so I stopped.

"No," Hawk said. "Just go ahead. I'm only nervous."

With a nod, I positioned Ted right at her entrance and pulled him forward a bit. Slowly, an inch at a time, Ted sank his length into Hawk. She closed her eyes and sighed as he settled on top of her.

"It feels weird, emotionally, but not bad," Hawk told Ted. "Kiss me. Kiss me while you fuck me." And with that, she wrapped her hand in his hair and pulled him into a kiss.

I sat back and then slid off the bed entirely. I wanted a glass of wine and I wanted

Hawk to have her first time with a man alone. Well, not really alone, but not where sex with a woman would cloud the issue. I picked up a glass and poured my wine while they made love on the bed.

Sitting down in the chair, I crossed my legs and watched Ted move, resisting the urge to touch myself. He was slow and gentle. Letting Hawk have the benefit of his experience. I could see that Hawk was undulating under him, holding him, kissing him. They made love this way for fifteen or twenty minutes. I could tell that Ted was really having to focus on not coming first.

Hawk finally arched her body into his and groaned into his mouth. Her legs wrapped around him and he pistoned into her with short, sharp thrusts. She pushed Ted back, breaking their kiss to urge him on.

"Do it," she hissed. "Fuck me. You know you've wanted to fuck me since you first met me. You want to make me come on your cock, don't you? Do it!"

Ted lost control. He grabbed Hawk's hips and started powering his cock into her. She writhed and thrust back onto him as he impaled her. "Does my cock feel good, Hawk? I'm going to make you come. I'm going to make you come and then let you feel a man shoot his load inside you for the first time."

They both writhed and seemed to be trying to fuck the other to orgasm first. From my point of view, it was a tie. I sipped my wine and watched Ted arch and bury himself in Hawk. She screamed his name and rubbed her sex onto him and then went wild, writhing and moaning. The two of them came down slowly, holding each other, kissing each other. I decided that was my signal to rejoin them.

I set the wine glass down and slid into bed with them, holding them both. I kissed Ted and then Hawk. "So," I whispered to them, "you guys have a good time?" Ted smiled that just-fucked-silly-man-smile at me and nodded. Hawk kissed me.

"Mmmmm, yeah," Hawk said. "That was fun." She looked at Ted. "I don't know if it will ever replace making love to a woman, but you're damn good, Ted. I came harder than I thought I would. I could feel you pulsing inside me. God what a feeling. Thank you."

I pushed Ted back and unrolled the condom from his cock. "My turn," I said with a smile. Turning the condom inside out, I sucked the flavor of both of them into my mouth and sighed.

Hawk slid out from beneath Ted and settled him onto his back. Then, she grinned at me and settled onto his face. "Go ahead, Ted. Give me head while Lisa fucks you."

Dropping the used condom, I straddled my lover and sank onto him. I didn't think he would come again so soon, but I knew I would. I pulled Hawk to me and kissed her deeply while Ted pleased both of us at the same time. Her eyes betrayed how aroused that made her.

"Did you enjoy watching?" Hawk asked me. "Enjoy watching your lover fuck me? Take my virginity? Be my first?"

I giggled and held her. "Yes. Did you enjoy me taking charge? Telling you what to do?"

Hawk moaned and nodded. "I learned something about myself I didn't know, Lisa. I kinda liked that." Hawk started rubbing her sex on Ted's face faster and faster. I slipped lower and sucked on her nipples until she exploded.

When she fell back, I leaned forward and kissed Ted, loving the feeling as his arms enfolded me. "You sexy man," I murmured to him. "I'm going to fuck you silly. Can you come again for me?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. You just have a good time, Baby."

I closed my eyes and sank onto him in time with his thrusts into me. I sighed and moaned as he made me feel fabulous. The sensation of our sex slicked bodies moving together made my heart soar. Actually, it had to have been the fact it was him. He made it extraordinary.

The gentle touch of hair along my lower back startled me. I looked back and Hawk was behind me. She grinned. "Don't worry," she said softly. "I think I can help you out some more." Hawk urged us to slide to the edge of the bed.

I didn't know what she had in mind, but at this point, I would give just about anything a try. Hawk began by kissing my lower back, sending shivers up my spine. Her hands caressed my body as she gentled me to her touch. When she bent low and began licking where Ted and I joined, I groaned. Her tongue split attention between my labia and Ted's cock and balls. She was pushing both of us and I might get another load from Ted, after all.

When she left there to lick a little higher, I lost it. Hawk kissed my ass and I went nuts.

I remembered her talking about that little strap-on she wanted to fuck me in the ass with and just went berserk on Ted.

"God, Ted. She's kissing my ass, licking my ass," I whispered. Her hands held me where she wanted while that long tongue of hers pleased me. "Ohmigod, Ted. She..." I shuddered and my vision went double for a moment. When I could see again, I continued. "She told me she had this little dildo that she could show me what anal sex felt like. Should I let her, or do you want to be my first?"

Ted was going berserk underneath me. I thought I would be getting that last orgasm out of him, after all. Then, I felt it. Hawk slid a finger slowly into my ass and I exploded. I arched my back, wailed to high heaven and came right there. As I collapsed on top of him, I felt Ted slip out of me.

Hawk didn't miss the chance. She grabbed Ted and sucked him into her mouth, sucking and bobbing her head. I slid off Ted, watching dazed as Hawk showed me how well she remembered her lessons. Ted grabbed her head and I could tell from her expression when he came. Hawk swallowed and then began licking him all over his cock while he came down from cloud nine.

I held onto him and let Hawk snuggle from the other side. She kissed me softly. "I still like women more, but I wouldn't kick you out of bed, Ted. Thank you for making my first time fabulous. Both of you."

"Does that mean you liked it enough to try again?" Ted asked with a grin.

Hawk blushed. "Maybe. I wouldn't rule it out," she muttered. "Don't let it go to your head, Hero," she added with a slap to his chest. "Lisa with a strap-on will still be just fine."

I laughed and held them both. "I think we need more wine, and I need to put the clothes into the dryer."

"Already done," Ted said. "I slipped them into the dryer a bit ago. Let's get some wine and shower up again. We smell like sex." We all laughed.

An hour later, we were all showered and sitting, dressed, at the kitchen table eating sandwiches and drinking wine. I drank what seemed like a gallon of water, too. Wild sex really took it out of me.

Hawk laid a hand on each of ours. "I was afraid that if I waited, I might never get the chance to make love to both of you and I really wanted to. You're both real friends. Thank you."

I smiled. "Friends with benefits? I seem to have read a sexy story by that name."

She shook her head and smiled. "Sort of. But now it's time to get all our information on the table, see what's on that disk and get these bastards. Ready?"

I nodded. "Ready."

Chapter Sixteen: Fighting back.

Lisa's point of view

After we finished eating and putting the house back in order, we stepped out the back door. Hawk took one of my mom's light jackets to cover her shoulder holster.

"I think we need to stick together," Hawk said. "They know who we are and have shown no hesitation at trying to kill us - publicly. Now we have your boss after us, too, Lisa. We have two threads to pull on. Him and the mysterious bomber. Since we know him, I think we should start there. The guy that stole the bomb equipment will fall if we can flip the rest."

"But, Hawk, he's at work," I protested. "We'll never get to him right now and what about the disk?"

"I didn't see a computer around here, so we'll have to look at it when we can find one we can use. Is your boss married?" Hawk asked.

I shook my head. "He was, but his wife passed away a few years back. No kids. He's a fairly young guy for that position. He's in his forties."

"Then let's go make ourselves useful and dig up some dirt on him. He's not afraid to break the law to get us, so we'll have to break it to get him. We need to get into his house," Hawk said firmly.

I shook my head. "He lives in a secure community. So, we'd have to get past the front

desk. Anything we find will be inadmissible in court, so how can that help us?"

"We'll figure out a way to do that later," Hawk said confidently. "First, we need a distraction. Let me look the place over and see what I can come up with. He's the only member of the conspiracy that we've identified, so let's take the fight to him." Then she grinned. "Yah know, information turned over to the authorities by an anonymous source is admissible, so we'll get it and turn it over to someone we can trust with no lead back to us."

I nodded reluctantly. "Okay, I suppose you're right. It's still so hard to believe. Like a bad dream, you know. In any case, since they're looking for you, we need to leave the bike here. The police may pick you out by it. We shouldn't take Ted's car either for the same reason. Mom's car is in the garage, so we'll switch Ted's for it."

"I thought you said she wrecked it," Ted said.

I nodded. "She did. I guess I should have said it's Dad's old car. It's a sweet ride. I give it a spin every once in a while just to make sure it keeps working. Come on."

Hawk scowled, but nodded. "Fine. I don't have my jacket anyway."

When I opened the garage, Ted whistled at the bright cherry red, vintage '68 Mustang. "Yeah, we'll be inconspicuous in that. It doesn't have dual-exhaust glass-packs does it?" he asked, almost drooling.

I smiled. "No, silly! Dad wanted it pristine and didn't go for the noise factor in his muscle car," I chided. "He always said this was his walk on the wild side. He told me to watch out for Mom, because all the guys would come sniffing around his baby and seduce Mom to get close to it. He was such a card."

Hawk laughed and nodded. "If I can't ride my hog, this will do."

After swapping the cars, and putting Hawk's bike into the garage, we drove back into Galveston and ducked off the main lanes as quickly as we could. Best to take as few chances as possible when avoiding the police. I drove to the building - a high-rise of secure condos. No external fire escapes here and no access to the first floor except through the main entrance.

"He lives on the fifth floor, condo 502," I said. "That means getting past the front desk."

The doorman will see us as soon as we come in and he's not in the habit of letting people in without the go ahead of the residents."

Hawk climbed out of the car, giving the building a good look. Then she smiled. "There's our ticket in. Come on."

Hawk jogged across the parking lot to a car that had just pulled up. A little old lady climbed out stiffly and was digging at the grocery bags in the back seat. "Ma'am, let us help you carry those in," Hawk said.

The woman peered suspiciously at Hawk. "I really shouldn't let strangers help me into my apartment."

I pulled out my District Attorney's ID and badge. "I'm an officer of the court, ma'am. Does that help?"

The old woman nodded and smiled. "Yes, it does. Ya'll are so sweet. You know, you have to be so careful these days, especially as you get on in years. It's good to see nice young people again."

"We're happy to help you, ma'am," Ted assured her. "Let us carry these up for you and then we can go visit our friends."

As a group, we carried the woman's groceries in. The uniformed guard at the desk chatted with her as she walked past. Her name was Mrs. Lanier. He didn't give us a second look.

Her condo was on the third floor. It was nice and neat. Very orderly, with pictures and flowers everywhere. We set her bags on the table and politely declined her offer of tea with thanks.

Hawk grinned smugly on the elevator ride up. "It's about time we had some luck swing our way. Remind me to send her some flowers."

The fifth floor looked exactly like the third, pale walls and light blue carpet. Hawk stopped at Zed's door and knocked. I about came out of my skin.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. "There could be someone in there!"

Hawk nodded. "Wouldn't you rather know if someone's home *before* you broke in?"

It's hard to argue with that logic. When no one answered, Hawk slid what looked like a small kit of screwdrivers from a hidden pouch on her shoulder holster. She opened the kit and I saw an assortment of oddly shaped hooks and picks. She knelt and inserted two into the lock.

"Lock picks? Where did you learn to pick locks?" Ted whispered. "Isn't that kind of an odd skill for a cop?"

"Oh," Hawk said airily, "someone owed me a favor and gave me some lessons. You never know when you might need to go through a locked door."

"Uh, huh," I muttered. "What if there's an alarm inside?"

Hawk looked up from where she was working. "Then we have four minutes to search before we scam. I doubt there will be, though. This is a *secure* community."

Thirty seconds of work and the lock clicked. "*Who's* your Daddy?" Hawk exclaimed. She opened the door and there was no alarm. "Told you! Now, don't touch anything and leave things where they are. We *don't* want him knowing we were here."

"Wipe the doorknob down," I said, digging the last three pairs of gloves out from my purse, "and put these on."

"Ooooo!" Hawk squealed. "Now we're talking! We could have another career ahead of us!"

We all put on gloves and split up. Ted took the front room, I took the bedroom, and Hawk took the office.

This condo was decorated much more lavishly than Mrs. Lanier's. Zed had to have sunk some serious money into this place for such cushy digs. The living room furniture was a light cream leather over a deep-pile white carpet. Tasteful art decorated the walls and nooks. He was doing pretty well for himself.

The bedroom was done in dark blue. A neatly made king sized bed anchored the room. The closet was filled with expensive suits - a lot of them. Also, a fair amount of hunting gear and camouflage outfits.

The dresser had more clothes and no major revelations. The bookcase was a treasure

trove, though. On top was a group picture of about a dozen men and one woman, all in camouflage gear with rifles. Automatic rifles. I looked closely and spotted Zed. I also spotted the man that had tried to kill us.

The bookshelf was stuffed with books. Catchy titles like *Defrauding America*, *Lost Rights: The Destruction of American Liberty*, *Liberty Under Siege*, *The Waco Whitewash*, *It Did Happen Here: Recollections of Political Repression in America*, *Microwave Harassment & Mind-Control Experimentation*, *Votescam: the Stealing of America*, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction to the Order of Skull & Bones*, *Conspirators' Hierarchy: The Committee of Three Hundred*, *Secret Team : The CIA and Its Allies in Control of the United States and the World*, *Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country*, *The Militia in 20th Century America: A Symposium*, *Safeguarding Liberty: The Constitution and Citizens Militias*, *A Call for Revolution and The Citizen's Guide to Fighting Government*. There were plenty more in that theme.

My stomach did a slow roll. Jesus, Zed was a separatist. How could I have missed it? Did he know Arthur? My blood ran cold. Was my brother part of this? Oh, shit!

I took the picture and went into the office. Hawk was sitting at the desk, rifling through the drawers, looking at papers.

"I found the link," I said. "They're members of a militia."

Hawk took the picture, pulled it close and stared at it. "Shit! I don't believe this! That's Jordan!" She looked up at my face, paling. "Just how fucking deep does this go? Why him? Hell, this guy is a county judge and this woman on the left is the Harris County Auditor. Shit! How the fuck do we unravel this? It's like a takeover from within!"

I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but I had to ask. "Hawk, is the bomber in this picture?"

Hawk looked closely and shook her head. "No. No one that young. These folks are all forty or over. Why?"

I sat on the edge of the desk with a sigh. "Because my idiot brother is into the same crap and I'm praying it wasn't him. I should have shown you his picture at Mom's house, but I didn't think about it."

Her eyes narrowed. "So, killing Calvin was the primary objective and you were just a bonus? That seems a little - I don't know - convenient."

"He'd be the perfect recruit for this," I muttered. "The bastard doesn't give a rat's ass for anyone but himself and his *cause*. Killing me would also give him the money he thinks my mother has. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she was next on his kill list. That could have been him with the gun at the vineyard, too."

"We need to find out who the old man is," Hawk said. "He's the leader. We don't have any proof of anything illegal with these people, yet, but we have some leads to go on. Help me look through the desk and let's get some dirt on them."

Ted came in after about ten more minutes. "Nothing out there that makes me suspicious. How're we doing in here?"

"The papers are just normal business crap. No computer, though there's a cable for one here. I'd bet there's a laptop around somewhere," Hawk said. "He may've cleaned up because we're close and he's worried. We can't get to the DA, but I bet we can turn up your brother, if he's part of this."

"Arthur? You think he's part of this?" Ted asked. "He called your cell phone, so that gives us a number for him," Ted said. "Why don't we make him come to us? We've been dancing to their tune. Let's get one of them to do a jig for us."

Hawk thought about that and slowly nodded. "That's not bad, but what's to keep him from bringing friends? Or just not coming?"

I rubbed my temples with my fingertips. "It would have to appeal to his greed," I said. "He won't want to share. I'll tell him that I'm tired of fighting and want to pay him off. I don't think he'd bring someone who might take money from him."

"Where would be a good place to catch him *and* what'll we do when we have him?" Ted asked.

Hawk shrugged. "Sweat the truth out of him. Get names and what they're doing, that kind of stuff. If he won't talk, or doesn't know, I'll just have to improvise, but I bet I can squeeze the juicy details he has from him. As for a place, why not your mother's, Lisa? It's a place he'll be familiar with and won't feel scared to come to."

I nodded. "That's fine, but we really should check out the disk first. It may save us all the headache."

Hawk stood up. "I know a place that's out of the way. The owner has a computer we

can use." She sighed. "That, and I'd rather take my lumps now rather than later."

"What does that mean?" Ted asked.

"The Cat's Paw is a lesbian bar in the Montrose area," Hawk said. "I know the owner and she'll let me use her computer. The trick will be getting in and out without me getting into a fist fight with one of the regular's, if they've already heard the rumors. I don't think some of them will appreciate my diversity, if you know what I mean."

"You know what? Fuck them," I said, hugging her. "If they're so narrow-minded, I'll kick their ass. Let's get out of here. Take the picture or leave it?"

Hawk frowned. "I'd rather not let him know we were here, but we should take it. He may not notice it's missing for quite a bit."

We made one last walkthrough to be sure we left nothing out of place and left with Hawk locking the door behind us. The guard didn't even look up as we walked out.

Having made a clean getaway, we drove back into Houston to the Montrose area. It's the haven of the artistic types and the gay and lesbian community. A good number of buildings had murals and wall art. Very trendy, I'm sure. There was one wall in particular that caught my eye. The classic gay men's bar scene with all the fixings. Even a few woodies in the pants and one 'gentleman' in a leather vest and chaps clutching his.

The Cat's Paw looked like any other club on the outside. We parked and walked in. The sun was still over the yardarm, but there were already some regulars there. The place looked normal enough with small tables scattered all around the floor and bar almost in the middle. The jukebox was back by the restrooms. The music playing had a fast beat and I recognized it from the radio but did not know its name or the artist.

The bartender's blonde hair was cut short and spiky. A nice ear stud and some kind of tattoo on her left arm running under the sleeve of her tee shirt with the bar's logo completed her look. I expected only women, but there was one gay male couple, two hetero couples, and what I suspected were a scattering of cross-dressers.

The barkeep waved and smiled. "Hawk! A bit early for you, isn't it?"

Hawk walked up to the bar and smiled. "Charlie! I'm here on business. Mind if I use the

computer for a few minutes? It's important."

She nodded and pointed back towards the bathrooms. "You know the way. Who're your friends?"

Hawk pulled Ted and me forward. "This is Ted and Lisa. Good people. Guys, this is Charlie."

Charlie smiled at us. "Pleasure. Welcome to the Kitty."

The office in back was cluttered and the desk was messy. I felt right at home. Charlie's wasn't quite as messy as mine, but it was close. The framed pictures on the wall were all of patrons having a good time.

Hawk parked herself in the chair and leaned forward with a creak of wood. The computer wasn't new, but it served its purpose. No need to have a high-end computer for basic accounting, I suppose. Hawk slid the disk in and began accessing the contents.

"Looks like bank records," Hawk muttered. "Monthly statements for some offshore accounts. Balances run to the millions. Big deposits, all in the last year. The accounts are numbered, so that's no help in getting names, but a forensic accountant can probably trace them back to the owners. This is really damning evidence. Enough to kill for." Hawk smiled. "It won't be quick, but this will probably unravel the plot and those involved. This is more important than the tape they took. You two really brought home the bacon."

Ted leaned over the desk. "Who can we trust giving it to?"

"Kruger," Hawk said without hesitation. "They don't come straighter than him. With the implication that asshole Jordan is involved, he'll make sure this gets done right. All we need to do is get the information into his hands. We'll make copies, of course, and then drop the other into the mail drop at his house. He'll have it in his hands when he gets in tonight."

Hawk typed up a brief note and printed it. Straight and to the point. Samson bombing. She then snagged a blank CD from the spindle and burned a copy, wiping it clean before putting it into a case. She made a color copy of the photo and slid it and the CD into a manila envelope. The originals, she put in the back of one of the drawers of the filing cabinet in another manila envelope she marked with her name.

"Let's go drop this off before we give Junior a call," Hawk said.

Ted held up his hand. "Why are we doing that, if your man can crack this?"

"Because," I said, "you never count on one line of investigation."

"And," Hawk added, "that *scum* is still after us. They won't take a vacation just because we have the bank statements under investigation. We'll see if we can roll your brother in front of witnesses. Every piece of the pie we can get our hands on will make the case stronger. Arthur may or may not have done the deed, either way I want the bastards behind it. That, and I can't just sit back and let someone else do my job."

"I'm not sure..." Ted started, before a woman in a faded leather jacket burst in. She had short black hair and her dark eyes were flashing with anger.

"You did not! Tell me that it's bullshit, Hawk!" she shouted.

Hawk closed her eyes and sighed. "Why does life have to be so hard?"

"Oh, my god! You did! What the fuck got into your head? You were happy, satisfied." The woman's eyes narrowed. "Is this him?"

"Kate, let it be," Hawk said wearily. "I'm still me, and it's not his fault I just wanted to see what all the screaming was about."

Kate rounded back to Hawk. "You're not the same. Before, you were real, now you're just a player. How could you betray us and take something disgusting like him into bed?" She gestured at Ted.

That riled me up. "Hold on, sister. That's *my* man and you better back off before this gets ugly."

"I can say whatever the fuck I want. You must not be much of a woman if you can't make up your mind between this pig and a breeder like Hawk," she sneered.

Hawk's eyes flashed. "You bitch," she said, shoving Kate back. "I don't give a rat's ass what your narrow mind thinks, but if you insult my friends I'll kick your fat ass. You better get going before I bust up your face so bad not even your dildo can stand you."

"Ladies," Charlie yelled as she rushed in and grabbed Kate by the collar before the

snarling woman could charge Hawk. "I will *not* have this in my bar. If you want to fight, take it outside."

Kate fumed, but backed off. "This ain't over," she growled and pushed her way past Charlie.

Charlie shook her head and looked at Hawk. "What in the blue blazes was that all about? She came in, talked to Jean for a second and came right back here to fight. Did you hit on her woman?"

Hawk laughed a bit hollowly. "I might be forgiven for that. No, I can't believe you haven't heard yet. I had sex with a man and liked it."

Charlie gave Ted a calculating glance. "Really? Well, if you had a good time, I'm happy for you."

Hawk opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Charlie shook her head and laughed. "You're such an innocent about some things. Look, Hawk, most people don't really care who you sleep with. Ever since you started coming here, you've been with the hardcore lesbians like Kate. As far as she and her little clique are concerned, you're a traitor."

Hawk nodded. "Most of the people I know will feel that way."

"Bullshit," Charlie said. "That's total bullshit. Most of us would be happy with anything that made you happy." She put a hand on Hawk's shoulder. "When Sharon left, we all felt your pain. But, Sweetie, the signs were there that you were growing apart."

Hawk yanked her shoulder back. "What the hell does that have to do with this," she growled, her voice a mixture of pain and confusion.

"Because, Dear, I see her sometimes. She's still my friend. Most of us don't reject her for wanting a man. I saw it coming. The hints, the drawing back from you. Being with a man doesn't make you a pariah any more than it did her."

"Dammit, Charlie, if you saw it happening why didn't you tell me?" Now there was fury in Hawk's voice.

"You were like Kate, Hawk, living in a black and white world. Us versus Them. Our

community is filled with shades of gray, just like your friends' hetero world. Humans are complex. Leaving you hurt Sharon, too, but she had to do what was right for her. She still regrets that she hurt you; wishes she hadn't lost you as a friend. I think you should call her and go out for coffee someday. The bottom line is that probably three in ten of us have occasionally crossed over. I have. It doesn't mean I'm not a lesbian."

"You?" Hawk asked, her voice choked. "I had *no* idea. Aren't you afraid of that getting out?"

"No. Some people know, but Kate and her friends don't, yet. Sooner or later they'll find out. So what? The people whose opinions matter already know and accept me regardless, and they will for you, too. Don't let Kate be *our* spokeswoman. Welcome to the real world." Charlie hugged Hawk.

"This is all happening so fast, Charlie. This isn't what I expected and things are looking a little tilted right now," Hawk said. "We have some stuff we need to do. I left an envelope in the file cabinet with my name on it. If something happens to me, take it to the press. Don't mention it to people otherwise. Someone's already been killed for it."

Charlie let Hawk go. "I'll take care of it. Ya'll be careful. I'm sorry that I didn't have time to meet your new friends properly. Bring them back soon, Hawk."

I pulled Ted along and we smiled at Charlie in passing. "We'll be back soon. I promise."

Charlie escorted us back out into the main bar area. It looked like Kate had stomped off. At least, she wasn't there to make another scene. As we made it back to the parking lot, I thought about the Cat's Paw. It wasn't at all what I'd expected. Then again, I'd had no idea what I expected before we got there.

Ted drove and Hawk directed him. Kruger's place looked normal enough. Hawk climbed out and ran to the front door, dropping the envelope through the slot. When she was back, we started toward Galveston again. It felt like we had been making this trip over and over.

"Won't his wife find it first?" I asked Hawk.

"He's divorced," Hawk replied. "Years ago. She took the kids and moved to Michigan. She's a good person, I suppose, but cop work is hard on a family. Shit happens."

I nodded my understanding. Being a prosecutor had some of the same problems. I wondered if that had anything to do with the trouble Hawk had with Sharon, but I didn't say anything.

"Now, how will we do this? Just call him and tell him to come over?" I asked.

"We're taking a chance here," Hawk said. "If he comes with backup, we could end up in a world of hurt. I think it might be best if I stay there and wait for him alone." She held up a hand to quell my objection. "Let me finish. You're not armed, have no weapons training and no tactical training. I don't want your blood on my hands if something goes wrong. I'm trained for this. Let me take him down alone and if he comes with company, I'll bail out the back door."

"No," I said stubbornly. "They might spot us on the street. If we have to bail, we all bail together. With me there, I might be able to talk Arthur into giving up the names easier. Get used to it, boys and girls, I'm part of this and I'm going."

With a sigh, Hawk relented. Ted didn't say anything.

It was after dark when we parked in the alley behind my mom's. The house was dark and empty looking. Hawk checked every room just to be sure it was empty.

"We'll want to pull the shades down," Hawk directed. "Ted, I want you looking out the back in case we have company. Lisa, I want you with me. Call him."

I pulled my out cell phone and used the call log to call him back.

"Yeah? What?" Arthur asked after a few rings.

"Arthur, I've been thinking and Mom wouldn't want us fighting like this," I said tiredly.

"Really?" He sounded surprised. "After this morning, that's a very surprising change of heart. Why?" He also sounded suspicious.

"Fine, you're right," I countered, changing tactics. "I'm just tired of fighting with you and having you threaten me and Mom. I want to pay you to go away. Leave the area and never come back." Yeah, like that ever had a chance of happening.

The oily guile in his voice almost made me laugh. "I think we can do business, Sissy. How much are we talking about?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," I said firmly. "Non-negotiable. Take it or leave it."

"Done," he exulted. "Where do I meet you?"

"Mother's house. In one hour."

"Keep that punk of your's away. I won't deal with him there threatening me."

"Fine. Don't be late." I hung up the phone and sighed. "Please, tell me that I'm not that gullible."

We sat in the house, looking out the blinds and waiting. I saw his ratty car pull up in front of the house, just short of an hour after I had called. He made good time in that rat trap. He climbed out, alone, and strutted to the door, ignoring the buzzer and banging on the door with his fist.

I opened the door and he stalked past me into the living room. "I'm glad you finally came to see this my way, Sissy. This never had to be so hard."

"Arthur, you don't know the meaning of the word," Hawk said, stepping out of the kitchen with her pistol out. "Against the wall. Assume the position."

Arthur stiffened. "Crap." He looked to have some familiarity with the position. Hawk cuffed him and then patted him down, pulling a pistol from his belt, under his shirt.

"What have we here? I wonder if this could be the weapon that someone tried to kill Ted with at the vineyard? Or was it Lisa you were after?" She purred in his ear before propelling him into the easy chair. "We've never been introduced. I'm Hawk. I've heard so much about you, Arthur, that I feel like I already know you."

"Fuck you, dyke cop bitch," he said and spit in her face.

Hawk wiped her face with her sleeve. "I see my reputation precedes me. Let me help you get this into the proper perspective." She planted her knee in his crotch and leaned in hard. His groan of anguish twisted me inside. I hated him, but he *was* my brother.

"Look here, Sport. I'm a bad-assed dyke cop bitch and you're mine, all mine. Don't fucking tease the Doberman when it's got you by the balls." Hawk ground her knee in harder. "I already know most of the story, but if you want to ever have kids, you'll tell

me what I want to know without all this macho crap. Understand?"

She pulled back away from him, sliding her pistol back into her holster. "Ted, go watch the back. Lisa, the front. I don't want any surprises while Junior and I chat."

I peeked out. Still clear. Ted disappeared into the kitchen.

"Fuck you," he shouted, clearly frightened. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Let me remind you," Hawk said conversationally. "You got work at a construction company under a false name and stole the explosives used to blow up your sister's car and her friend. The police lab is onto that and you left a copy of your fake ID with your picture, Doofus."

Arthur paled. "Ahhh..."

"So," Hawk interrupted, "the question now is, how hard do you want to fall? The others will leave you for the sharks just to save their own skin. We already know the identities of some of your friends and where they're getting the cash. We're just nailing down some details now. Cooperate and *maybe* you won't get murder one. I can talk to them and see about something less *if* you give up the names and details I don't know."

"I can't!" he said, sweating. "They can get inside and kill me."

"Then you go down hard and they'll kill you anyway, or you can tell me what I want and we talk about witness protection. You're going in either way, so just give me the name of the old dude and we'll call that the start of negotiations. He's your leader, right?"

Arthur slumped and gave up. "Yeah. Shit. Bill Tanner." He half-turned and glared at me. "Why didn't you have the grace to just get into your car and die with Samson, you slut. I could have killed you and him and got everything," he snarled.

Hawk grabbed his shirt and lifted him to his feet. "Focus, Arthur." She propelled him into the kitchen and I followed. "We go out the back and get into the car. Me in back with Junior, since we've gotten so *close*."

Ted opened the door and Hawk man-handled Arthur outside. Looking around, Ted and I followed. We were almost halfway to the car when a man stood up behind it. I recognized him from the picture we had taken from Zed's apartment. Jordan, Hawk's ex-boss.

"Hold it right there," Jordan said. "You're all under arrest. Put the weapon down and step away from that man."

Hawk laughed. "I don't think so, Jordan. We already know you're in this mess up to your eyeballs. I never thought to wonder why you called me for the bombing so late. You should have been gone but you waited for it. You wanted me to pull it so if I got close, you could burn me. Too bad I'm going to burn you first."

"Oh, I don't think so," Jordan sneered. He raised his pistol and fired even as Hawk threw herself back and into us. Ted and I went down under her sudden impact. Several shots rang out and Arthur jerked before falling like a puppet with its strings cut. "Oops. No witness." He ducked back behind the car.

"Arthur," I cried out as he fell. Ted grabbed me, keeping me from rushing to him.

"Crawl to the front of the house and make a break for it," Hawk shouted, firing her pistol from the ground while I stared at my dead brother. "Lisa, go!"

I stared at her, dumbfounded that I had just watched my brother murdered. Ted grabbed me and I scampered toward the front of the house on my hands and knees with Ted right beside me. We stopped at the side of the house and I had to look back. I was so worried about Hawk.

Hawk was still lying on the ground aiming carefully. I didn't see Jordan, so I had no idea what she'd shoot at. I startled when Hawk fired. A scream from the other side of the car told me she hit the bozo. He fell into the alley holding one hand on his foot.

"Give it up, Jordan! Throw down your weapon!" she called out triumphantly.

"Fuck you," he snarled, bringing the pistol up.

Hawk fired first. Jordan crumpled, the gun falling from his fingers.

I leapt to my feet and grabbed Ted, starting back toward Hawk. A hand clamped over my mouth roughly and someone held me with an iron grip around my waist as I struggled. Two other shadows grabbed Ted.

"Now, aren't we resourceful?" Tanner whispered in my ear. He started dragging me back from the house and one man remained and started firing into the backyard at

Hawk. I struggled, but I couldn't get free. I had a whirling view of a dark van before Ted and I were thrown into the back and the door slammed. Ted wasn't moving. I tried to find a door handle but there wasn't one on the inside. The front was screened off and I saw Tanner get into the passenger side.

"Drive." He commanded the man beside him. As the van pulled away, my heart sank. My brother was dead, we had been kidnapped, Ted was hurt again and Hawk was in deadly danger!

Chapter Seventeen: The takedown.

Hawk's point of view

Jordan had just gone down when I heard a shot behind me and a slug exploded into the ground beside my head. I rolled madly to my left as more shots rang out. Arthur didn't seem smart enough to have fooled us, so the bad guys must have tailed him. Too bad they weren't as stupid as Arthur.

When the firing paused, I stopped rolling and fired once toward the corner of the house. It had no noticeable effect. So I waited, keeping an eye on both sides of the house in case the shooter tried to sneak around. Inside, I was worried about Ted and Lisa. Did they get away? Was someone holding them at gunpoint now, or worse?

I gathered myself to charge the corner when I heard a shout on the other side of the house. "Police! Drop your weapon! Drop it! Do it! Now!" Then I heard a shot. It sounded like a different gun than the one that had been firing at me. Then there was the sound of someone running. I aimed and waited.

"I'm coming around the house. Don't shoot," the voice that had identified itself as police said. After Jordan, I wasn't sure I was buying.

"Slow and easy," I shouted back. "Keep that weapon pointed away."

When the man came around the house, I couldn't help myself. "Shit. Why did it have to be you, Digger?"

Sure enough, there he was. Funky mustache, hat, and all. His pistol was pointed straight up. "So, are you gonna shoot me or listen to what I've got to say?" Digger

asked. "And you'd better hurry up and decide, because *they* have your friends."

I jumped up and ran over to him. "Let's go." When I rounded the house, I saw another crumpled form, a man, lying near the bushes. This was going to be tough to explain. In the distance, I could hear a siren wailing, getting closer.

Digger led the way to his car and jumped in. I slid into the passenger seat and we took off even while I was belting in. He consulted a handheld device and drove. "You okay, Hawk? Not shot are you?"

"Where did that hokey accent go? Why shouldn't I just pop you one right in the mouth?" I asked with some heat.

"Well, I kin a get 'er back iff'n that's what you want," he said with a grin. "Or I can just cut the crap and fill you in. Your call."

"I bet you think you're clever, Asshole. Give me the details," I said with resignation.

"There's good news and bad news. The good news is that you've been cleared in my investigation. Not the shooting, but the real investigation."

"Real investigation? What *real* investigation? Do you think my investigation isn't real?" I managed through clenched teeth. "Let's not even discuss that someone's been trying to kill my friends and me, too. Or did you miss that part?"

"Now, now..." Digger started.

"Don't placate me, Dick Cheese! Why are you *really* here?" I demanded.

"Police have been suspected of 'losing' drug money in vice and homicide," he said, "both in Houston and Galveston. Not just from the cities, either, but from both counties as well. I suspected someone in the DA's office was involved in both places, too. When the shooting took place at the vineyard, I didn't know if you were part of it or not, so I had to keep you in the dark."

Digger swerved out onto the main street and upped the acceleration. He slapped a bubble light on the roof and we took off.

"Why the hokey accent and being an asshole?" I asked.

"The accent was to make everyone disregard me as inbred defective that wasn't a threat. The asshole is natural," he added with a grin. "Ask anyone that works with the Rangers. I called in the shooting back there and told them officers were in pursuit of kidnapping suspects. I was watching when it all went to shit and came in as fast as I could."

"You were watching? Shit. Well, maybe that might help me some. Captain Jordan was one of *them*. He's dead back there," I added. "The Galveston DA is part of it, and some guy named Bill Tanner. Older white guy."

He nodded. "I'll run the name and see if any likely bolt holes pop out. I tagged the van with a tracer before I knew what they were going to do. Looks like they are fifteen miles or so up road."

"What the fuck is with that, anyway. You broke into my house and planted one on my bike," I said with a suspicious look.

"Look in the glove box."

I opened it and looked inside. Under the Twinkies there were several folded pieces of paper. I pulled them out and gave them the once-over. A warrant for my house and vehicles, and the same for Ted and Lisa. All signed by a judge out of Dallas. It included wire taps and vehicle traces.

"What the hell? What probable cause could you possibly have on us! This is bullshit!" I shouted, waving the warrants around.

He glanced over at me. "You really need to see someone about those anger management issues. Police corruption, prosecuting attorneys on the make, county funds disappearing in both Harris and Galveston Counties. You all made yourselves valid subjects for a warrant. You'd have done the same, so don't bullshit me. You do what you have to do to bring down the bad guys."

He picked up the microphone for his radio and called dispatch. "Dispatch, 2431. I need a records check on a Tanner Tom-Adam-Nora-Nora-Edward-Robert, first of Bill or William, license unknown, DOB unknown. I want connections to any separatist or militia outfits. Also, run plates on a van, gray, tag number Boy-24-John-3-Tom. I also need any addresses in this area."

"2431, standby," the woman on the other end said.

"Now," Digger commented as he sped onto the interstate, "that tracer on the van isn't quite legal, but we'll just keep that to ourselves, okay?"

"What's the plan, then? They have Ted and Lisa. They have more than a few members and are anxious to use violence. If you can't admit to tracing them, you can't call for backup."

"Easy as pie," he said. "We track them and scope the place out. If it's on the property list, we go from there. If not, I'll improvise. I'm real good at improvisation, Little Lady."

"Don't call me that or I'll pound you."

He grinned as he swerved around a semi. "After you sent me tracking the Hells Angels, I think you deserved a little payback. I thought they were going to chase me all the way back to Houston. That wasn't very nice."

"Fuck you," I said genially.

"Not with a stolen dick," he sneered conversationally.

The drive led us north of the metro area and toward a northern rural zone. While we drove, I filled him in on what we had learned. Dispatch called Digger back with a listing of properties connected to Tanner, William, associated with a splinter group of an organization called the Republic of Texas - a militia group seeking the independence of Texas from the United States. One of the properties was just ahead of us in the direction we were traveling.

Digger cut the siren and lights and went quiet. "They might spot us in the rear view mirror, so we go silent. I'd rather we take them before they get into their hole. They probably have weapons and all kinds of crap in there. If they beat us, we can wait for backup and smoke them out or go right in."

I felt a chill run down my spine. "If we let them hole up, they'll keep the hostages and likely kill them. If they make it in, we go in fast with backup on the way."

He nodded. "I'd do the same. You should reload. I have a spare piece under the seat and some shotguns in the trunk. I have a vest but only one. You take it."

I laughed at him. "I'd fit inside it like a supermodel in a barrel. Keep it." I took the spare

piece and slid it into my belt. Then, I swapped out the partially used magazine for a fully loaded one.

We took an exit that led off into the boonies towards Tanner's property. There was no sign of the van, but that didn't mean squat with all the twists and turns the road was taking. Five miles or so, I thought. "Punch it. We need to be right on their ass when they get there. With any luck, we won't have any more - company. Let's not let them get a lever on us."

He nodded and kicked it. We flew around curves like an Indianapolis 500 driver. "The turn off to get to the place should be less than half a mile in front of us."

We popped over the last hill and saw the van make the turn onto a dirt road. "Do it! Run up their ass and I'll call for backup."

I grabbed his microphone and started calling in the location and details. I used his call number to keep the questions to a minimum. They told us to hold for backup and I just shook my head. Right. Like that was gonna happen.

When we slammed into the dirt road, I thought the axle was going to rip off. The trees and shrubs were seriously overgrown and a pall of dust obscured the uneven ground. That didn't seem to bother Digger. He just powered into it and bounced along the road.

The bright flash of brake lights in front of us gave a bit of warning just as Digger screeched to a halt and rolled out. Through the haze of dirt, I could see two men yank open the back doors of the van. One of them pulled Lisa out and started dragging her back towards a cinderblock building that reminded me of a fortress. No way he was going in there with her.

"Take the other one! I'm on Lisa," I shouted to Digger and ran across the road. The shouts and then gunshots behind me were his problem now. I had at least one hostile to take out and a friend to save.

When he was about ten feet from the door with the struggling Lisa, I shot the door. "Freeze! Let her go!"

The old man whirled around and slapped a large military-style knife to Lisa's throat. "Well, Lieutenant Hawkins, once more we meet with your friends between you and me. Put the weapon down or I slit her throat."

I didn't budge one inch, my pistol sight framing his face just beside Lisa's terrified eyes. I forced the fear in my gut back down. Lisa's terrified face ate at me. "Give it up, Tanner. We have you, and your associates, dead bang guilty. There are other police enroute here, and you won't get away. We know all about the money. Drop the knife and make it easier on yourself. Zed is already in custody," I lied.

Tanner smiled nastily. "Unlikely. You seem to be under the mistaken impression that you're in control here. One flip of my wrist and your little friend bleeds out. Drop the gun," he said, his eyes hard and just a little crazy.

"If you kill her, you die here and now. If I let you take her in there, she's as good as dead, too," I said firmly, trying to quell the sick rolling my stomach was doing. "You have two ways out if this. Giving up or in a body bag. Your choice."

"I don't recognize your authority," he sneered. "This is my state and I'm the duly elected President of the Republic of Texas. You are committing treason and the penalty for that is death. Put down that pistol and I'll commute that sentence to life in prison."

Yeah. A whack job.

"Is that your final answer?" I asked, sounding a bit like Regis.

"Do you think you can take me out without me killing this pretty young woman? Those are your options. Kill me and her, or let me go with her. Decide," he said.

"Okay. You win. I'm putting down my..." My weapon bucked in my hand as I fired. His throat exploded in red. He dropped like a puppet with his strings cut as Lisa screamed and ran to me, her face and body splattered with his blood. I held her and watched him blink, listening to the choking noises he made. His spine was blown out and he was dying without being able to move. Lisa clutched me, weeping in shock. I held her close and whispered in her ear that it was over. She was okay. My own eyes misted. I had been sick with worry that she would be hurt or killed. I felt almost like throwing up with all the worry that had been bottled up inside me. I felt so much relief that they were both safe that it made me feel weak.

I turned when I heard a noise behind us and saw Digger looking on. "The other bad guy is down. I've called for an ambulance for Stansbury, just as a precaution. He's awake and asking for Lisa."

"It's over, Lisa," I said quietly, holding her close. I let Digger take the crying Lisa into

his arms and approached Tanner. I kicked the knife away from his nerveless fingers more out of habit than concern. His eyes glazed over and death took Calvin's murderer. I looked at the house and could see the door was locked with a padlock on the outside. No one inside.

"Let's go back to Ted and wait for the medics," I said. "This one's done." We walked back to van, leaving Tanner in a pool of his own blood. Lisa sat there, stroking Ted's face, crying until the EMTs arrived just after our backup. Digger recovered his tracker and I looked the other way. He had come through, and I wasn't going to quibble. Lisa went with Ted to the hospital, hovering over him. I went with a sheriff after my statement was taken and joined them for a little while before they took me off for questioning.

The next five days were long and a bit confusing. The records inside the camp house served up quite a number of people in various governmental posts and police agencies. There was also a large cache of weapons that the government frowned on people, outside of the military, having in their possession. That didn't even begin to cover the grilling they gave me. Even with a witness, shooting a cop, your own former boss no less, can really get the police all spun up. They had me in interrogation for twelve plus hours a day, chewing on me. It was a painful change to be grilled instead of grilling. In the end, they accepted what Digger and I had told them.

When the dust settled, some of the birds flew the coop, but most of them were taken down without incident. Lisa's boss, Zed, was one of the latter. I hear he looked mighty shocked when Murphy took him into custody. Good.

Ted was admitted to the hospital for observation and released the next day. Lisa and I stayed with him overnight. The doctors assured us that he would be fine and just needed some rest. He had a nice bump on his head. Lisa and I talked into the night about everything under the sun. Ted was one lucky son-of-a-bitch.

The next morning, I went in to see Vice Chief Kruger at his request. I wondered why I was meeting him in homicide rather than in his office. I knew I'd be able to tell what was going to happen by the way the detective's bull pen reacted to me as the uniform escorted me through and into Jordan's old office. When they looked away from me and pretended I wasn't even there, it chilled me to the bone. It couldn't be good.

Kruger was in the chair behind the desk and motioned me in when the officer knocked on the door. "Come in, Hawk. You can go, officer. Thank you. Close the door behind

you."

I stepped in nervously. From the blank look in his eyes, I was in a lot of trouble. He motioned to the chair and I sat down stiffly.

"I've been going over the complaints filed by everyone from some guy in a bar outside of town to the Texas City Police Department. The guy in the bar complained about your ladylike manners and Texas City is mighty pissed at you for leaving dead bodies all over the place. We won't even talk about the folks at Seawolf Park." He closed a folder and laid his hand on top of it.

He let me stew for a few moments. "I can't believe you let things get so out of hand, Hawk," he finally said with a shake of his head.

My mouth was as dry as cotton. "I... I accept full responsibility for it, Chief. It was a goat fuck and I blew it."

"I called in a boat load of favors to smooth the waters over this," he said after another long stare. "A lot of favors. I'm going to expect better from you in the future or I'll fire you myself."

My heart leapt into my throat. Did he just say....

Kruger opened the desk drawer and pulled out my shield and weapon and slid them across the desk, smiling. "Your department rep went to the mat for you with the review board. They overturned your firing based on so many reasons that I couldn't begin to go into. I want a full report of all this crap on my desk by eighteen hundred hours, Lieutenant Hawkins, and then you are on paid leave for a minimum of three weeks while the investigation wraps up. Get out of town. I'll call you when you can come back."

"Yes, sir! Your desk?" I asked with a bit of confusion. "Shouldn't that be to Jordan's replacement?"

"The mayor has decided that I will do him more good back in charge of homicide." Then he fixed me with a glare. "If you ever let things get so out of whack and don't tell me, I'll kick your lesbian ass all the way uptown. Do you hear me, Hawk?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Get out of my sight!" he growled with a smile.

I didn't ask twice. The detectives in the bull pen hooted and hollered when I came back out and I was mobbed by detectives all the way back to my desk. I think I was in shock, really.

Between everyone stopping in to wish me well, I managed to get it all written up and shot a copy off to Kruger. Then beat feet and got out of there. Part of me wanted to stay, but I knew Kruger wasn't kidding about the vacation. I'd go out to the vineyard and see what they were going to do in the interim.

Ted and Lisa were sitting outside on the porch, sipping on some tea when I arrived.

"Hawk!" Lisa cried as she ran out to hug me. "We just heard you got your job back! I'm so happy for you!"

I held her and smiled. "Yeah. I'm still all jelly inside thinking about it. How's Studly doing and what about your job?"

She grinned at me. "Grouchy and I'm still employed. I figure that I'm going to give him a few days to recover and then drag him off to get some relaxation away from all the media." She frowned a little. "And get away from the process servers that damned bastard Price is trying to sic on us. He's suing *us*!"

I gave Ted a kiss and sat down at the table. "Screw him. You'll hand him his ass. I'll have to come up with something to do, too. Kruger told me to take two weeks off before I could come back in. Maybe I'll go down to Mexico."

She looked at Ted and quirked an eyebrow. "We're making a trip to Las Vegas in three days. Can we invite her, Ted?"

He smiled. "Sure. I think it'd be fun."

"Are you sure? You two should have some time alone," I said, torn.

"We don't have to hang out all the time. Let's take a week and go see Vegas," Ted said.

I nodded my head and smiled. That sounded like just what I needed. A vacation away from all the stress of Houston to get to know my two new friends as closely as they'd let me.

“Let’s do it.”

With those three words, my life was about to change forever.

The End