

Sexual situations: It's mentioned.
Violence: Nothing worse than what's on CNN.
Blessing to you and yours,

Camping Out

I Christie

Chapter 1

Claire Hanson was one happy nine-to-fiver that was about to begin her two week vacation and it was already paid for, including expenses. Her grin grew wider as she thought of her winning the office pool...that she had been pressured to contribute to. That last niggling point had her mouth drop into a frown.

Ehh. But there's the rub. Now what am I gonna use as an excuse to not waste my money in those stupid pools? Shit. That's a downer. Nope. Not gonna let them apes ruin my vacation. Alright, let's focus on something not about work.

She exited the freeway and headed for her apartment.

Okay, dump briefcase and pager, pick up camping gear. I hope the sheet I put over my stuff protected it from King George taking revenge. Damn cat always has to show me how pissed off he is about me leaving even for a few days.

Pulling alongside the red painted curb, a building away from her own, Claire muttered curses at everyone that chose to park near her apartment building thus depriving her of legal parking. Turning the hazard lights on, she checked around for anyone likely to call out parking enforcement as she opened the door. The curtains to John's apartment were parted, indicating he was home.

"Mr. Neighborhood Watch," she muttered. She had about ten minutes to grab her stuff before John's call to ticket her offending vehicle was responded to. Claire suspected with tight city budgets a push for enforcing parking violations would move up the priority list.

Hauling her briefcase off the passenger seat, she sprinted up the sidewalk, then took the stairs two at a time, and managed to fling open the door without nailing a cat. She gave each startled feline a pat with one hand, dropping her brief case in a corner with the other, and then hefting her pack onto one shoulder, and the tent on the other. As she banged down the stairs she was hoping the new neighbor was not home so the racket would not result in a bad start to neighborly good relations. The tent and pack were tossed into the trunk and back up the stairs she raced to grab the box filled with important things like food, clothes, and other small stuff.

"Bye guys! Don't do anything that will get us evicted!" she called before locking the door behind her and sprinted down the stairs, feeling lucky she did not stumble down the last few steps with the box. Her supplies were dumped unceremoniously on the front passenger seat when she thought she saw the small parking enforcement vehicle turn down the far end of the one way street. Quickly she ran around to the driver's side, slid behind the wheel and started the engine in quick succession. Gloating that she beat *the Enforcer*, her nickname for the parking officer, she watched in her rearview mirror as he

stopped alongside of an old van. The owner only moved it from one side of the street to the other to accommodate street cleaning. A ticket was placed on the windshield.

"You can't store vehicles on the street," Claire sang.

When she had a camping van of her own, it was a pain to move it every six days ten yards from the last parking space to satisfy the city ordinance. But now that she was one of the many that had to find parking on a one-way street where residence parking was a premium and rented parking spaces were expensive, she held less sympathy for the owners of second vehicles that took up space one car owners competed for. Anxiety from memories of hard feelings had her clamping down on revisiting things from the past. It was one of the things she was taking a vacation from, besides needing to get away from concrete and over crowding. It seemed these days she was always anxious, and getting jumpier each day.

The traffic lights were with her and she managed to make it to her next stop in twenty minutes. Marge was standing outside of her house staring at a paper in her hand with a long face. Apparently she just arrived home because she was wearing her working uniform, a dark blue silk business suit, with her purse slung over her shoulder.

"Hey, girl! How's it going?" Claire shouted through her window as she parked in front of Marge's house and slid out to give her a hug.

"Like shit. Hey!" Her voice went from low to high in a moment, causing Claire's eyebrows to rise. "Can you do me a favor?" she asked happily.

"If it doesn't mean I have to give up my two weeks...sure," Claire responded carefully.

Marge waved the paper towards the city construction signs posted on both sides of the street. "The city's water works is digging a trench along the street for water pipe repair, meaning no parking day or night for about a week...or so they say."

"Uh, yeah?"

She pointed at her custom built Dodge Roadtrek camping van parked in the driveway. "Would you mind taking the Mollie Bree camping? My insurance already covers Gail and you and I have the same agent... I'll have you added for a couple of weeks...just don't total it. I'm kinda of fond of her," she teased.

"Are you sure?" *If I'm dreaming don't wake me!* Claire sang to herself.

"Yeah. The newness has worn off and I can actually lend her out without getting the shakes. We'll have to park both SUVs in the driveway and with the van they won't fit...but swapping your car for the van will. Since you're taking Teddy as your body guard, he's very protective of Mollie Bree and more prone to stick near her than your car," Marge added.

"I'd love to help out." *What a break! I get to camp in luxury.* Claire tried not to do a happy dance or look too much like a puppy about to piddle in happiness.

"I wouldn't be asking you if you hadn't a van of your own or hadn't been out with us a few times in her," a relieved Marge was explaining. "If I took it over to my sister's her kids would be doing something obscene in it. No telling what I would find in it when I got it back."

Marge proceeded to tell her about the quirks of the Mollie Bree while they moved her gear from her car into the van with the exception of her tent. Teddy's box of food, dried and wet was slid next to the bed in the back.

“Can you call Rey and Sandy and change my tent space for RV?” Claire remembered to ask.

“Sure will. And don’t forget to keep in touch,” she reminded Claire of their policy for friends who traveled alone.

“Right. Ooh. It’s been a long time since I rented RV space.”

November was not a normal time for camping so she was sure there would be plenty of space where RV’s usually parked and plugged in. She was excited that she was going to have electricity, heat and be able to see some movies.

“Here’s some movie tapes I’m sure you and Teddy will love to watch before going to bed,” Marge teased. She stored the bag of CDs borrowed from their library in the back. Claire, though not a movie person, could be easily persuaded if that was all she had to do. Knowing her weakness, she promised herself that she would limit herself to one a day so as not to turn her time out in the ‘wilderness’ to ‘civilized’ escapism...which it was.

“There’s some books in the cupboard, you have clean linen and towels and there’s some food in there...but I wouldn’t be able to tell ya what,” Marge told her as she stood outside of the driver’s door.

Loaded and ready to go Teddy, a dog that really loved to travel, settled in his portable bed that was set in the center of the van’s aisle near the sink and looked up at the two women with the expectation that the trip would now begin.

“No problem. I got my own box full of goodies. Thanks again...and thank you Ladies of Fate,” Claire chuckled and gave Marge a kiss on each cheek. “Teddy, say bye-bye to mommy number one.”

“Oh, and check the propane. It’s low...the station on Gilmore and Monroe has a savvy traveler that does it in nothing flat. Bye Teddy Bear. Remember your table manners and you too Claire. Don’t feed him while you’re eating or you’re gonna have a beggar on your hands,” Marge cautioned.

The two women waved as Claire settled comfortably in the captain’s chair that felt as if it were made for her, clicking the seat belt on. While humming a song as she pulled away from the curb, her thoughts were on how to get to the corner Marge mentioned without getting stuck in traffic.

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With the unscheduled stop for propane taken care of Claire headed the RV to the nearest freeway, giddy with the run of her good luck lately.

“Well, Teddy, we are off and in luxury...well...for me, anyway.” Her grin turned into a frown as she moved onto the freeway in bumper-to-bumper traffic. After not moving very far in an hour, she decided that the traffic accident up ahead was not likely to be cleared anytime soon. With determination, she moved foot by foot to an off-ramp and started to take side roads that would by-pass the jam. At a light she used her hands-free cell to let Margie know that she was not following her usual route and would go the long way around.

Settling down with the traffic light rhythm, for the first hour she drove in silence, acquainting herself to the sounds of the vehicle. On previous trips with her friends, she was merely a passenger bringing her own tent and had no reason to be attentive. After she felt comfortable with the noises of the van, her fingers poked at the radio to see if there was anything of interest on the station that reported traffic conditions.

Chapter 2

“Damn!” she muttered as she neared a car that looked like it had a spin out. She lowered the volume on the jazzy saxophone of Pamela Williams, studying the site with an expert’s eye. The vehicle, a pale Lexus-type, had skidded for a good distance before ending up with a tire in an old construction ditch. She slowed to see if anyone was hurt, but no one appeared to be around it. No spent flares or cones left about. No dark pools to hint of spilt blood or oil, or anything to indicate it was once part of a crime scene or paramedic call. Her eyes swept the nearly private road that snaked around homes tucked in rolling hills that had not been overrun with construction. Though curious about why the vehicle had not been towed out since it did look like it had been there for more than a few days, she firmly reminded herself it was not her concern. She was about to increase her speed when she could see someone further up the road walking.

“If it’s a woman, should we pick her up?” she asked Teddy. “Shit. These days...” But she slowed to a slow roll anyway. The woman’s direction veered away from the road as the van neared.

“Hey, need a ride?” she called out of the passenger window she rolled down. The woman had a bruise over her forehead; otherwise her attire did not look as if she had been in a car accident, nor did it look like she was prepared for a hike.

The woman looked warily at the van.

“Just me and Teddy....a small dog,” she added, realizing she would not be able to see Teddy. “I’ll open up the side door so you can take a look in.”

When the woman nodded, she unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped over her backpack to unlock the door. She could have used the automatic unlock but one unlocked door to keep track of was enough. Claire unlocked the side door and pushed it open for the woman to investigate, stepping back to her seat. The woman cautiously studied the interior before climbing in. Teddy did not get out of his bed, but he lifted his nose to sniff the air she brought in with her. The woman froze, as if she were facing a ferocious dog.

“His bark is worse than his bite. Since he’s still in his bed, I would say you haven’t impressed him as dangerous,” she joked. “My name’s Claire. Do you want me to drop you off somewhere?” She thought the woman lived in one of the private homes in the area.

“Where are you headed?” she almost whispered.

Here is a mystery woman...not dressed for a hike and you are on a vacation that does not include looking for adventure. So, what are ya going to do?

“A camp site up the coast. It’s about...” she glanced at the clock on the dashboard, “by the way traffic will be on the freeway...four hours...” She paused, waiting for the woman to say something. “You’re welcome to come along. You look like you can use some water.” She handed her an unopened bottle that lay on the passenger seat across from her. *Ohhh, baby doll! I can’t believe you just offered a stranger a ride...and an open invitation to stay. Girl, do NOT try to turn this into some kind of sexual fantasy vacation! Get a grip! She is not even your type.*

“Thanks. I appreciate it,” the soft voice responded.

“Okay. Buckle in the seat back there.” She gestured to the passenger seat behind her, not wanting to move all her gear from the passenger seat across from her that was strapped in. Claire refastened her belt, and pulled back onto the roadway. *Hmm. Aside from the bruise, she looks fine. No purse. Loafers and nice slacks, sweater and shirt underneath. Nails are manicured short but with clear polish and very little make-up. Hair is neither blond or brown...verrry nondescript...and a hell of a place to be without a car. The car in the ditch didn't look like it was hers, and I don't think I saw any other car on either side of the road...but, I could have missed it.*

In the rearview mirror Claire glanced at the woman. Her eye color was impossible to tell.

After three hours Claire noted that it was getting time to pull over and fill up. She took time to get the propane tank filled but she begrudged any more delays to hit the road, so she left the three-quarter tank as it was. This was the part when she would rue that she chose the van over her cheaper compact car but she reminded herself she had two thousand dollars to peck away at. It was one of those rare times she won anything. Goody for her.

She turned on her blinker and the woman's reflection in the rearview mirror suddenly came alert. “I'm gonna fill up. Do you need something from the mini-market or to use the restroom?” She rolled the van up to a pump.

“No,” was the quiet answer.

“Okay. Come on, Teddy. This is your chance to check the local smells and leave your calling card.” She took the keys with her. Not just because it was a sensible thing to do, but because she needed the key to unlock the gas cap. While the tank filled she walked Teddy away from where someone would object if he had a BM that she did not pick up.

She let Teddy back into the van and grabbed her thermos that she had forgotten to fill. Pausing, she checked the gas progress. Still filling. She also glanced at the price that was clanking along and grimaced. With the thermos from the van tucked under her arm, she headed for the mini-market. First stop was the restroom, and then she picked up a hand basket. The camp site store usually had fresh produce so she bypassed the over-ripe fruit and looked at other goodies...like cheetos, fritos and donuts...however, she restrained herself and picked trail nuts, a variety of creamers and filled up the thermos with coffee, emptying the store's freshly filled pot.

Gassed and once more ready to go she checked on her passenger who was sitting on the floor appearing to be making friends with Teddy.

“I got some coffee for us...if you drink it. Cups are in the cupboard above the sink. Creamers are in the sack...plain and flavored. I didn't get any sugar but there's plenty in the creamers. There's also trail mix in there. Help yourself. If you don't mind, can you fix me a cup, two creamers?” *Geeze, like I don't have enough food in the box already. Get extra cash in my pocket and I spend it.*

In the twenty minutes of being off the freeway returning to it the traffic was still heavy. She switched on the headlights and checked her side mirrors before squeezing between a double trailer rig and a RV bus. Her cell phone rang and she automatically clipped in her earpiece before picking up the call.

“Yeah?...Hey, Gail. I forgot to call. Sorry...Did you just get home?...Working late are ya?...Yeah, can you believe it. I didn’t think Marge would let anyone sit in the driver’s seat at least until she permanently imprinted her fanny in the seat...Well, we both lucked out. Did Margie switch my... good. I’m about an hour and a half away.... yeah, yeah. Traffic is a real bitch....Yeah, I took the back road but I don’t see it saving time. Passed two accidents....Oh, yeah. You’ll get my daily hellos just so that you know Teddy is still alive and hasn’t been eaten by a raccoon ...okay. You guys take care...bye-bye.”

“Coffee on your right,” her passenger informed her. The woman returned to her seat and the belt clicked. Claire noticed the curtain across her window was pulled closed.

“So, do you want to share a name?” Claire asked.

“Char...Charlotte,” she offered.

“Char is your nick name?”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Do...you have a destination in mind?” Claire smiled at the strength behind the reply. She obviously did not want a nickname. Her quick glance in the mirror revealed a smile on Charlotte’s face as if she was also amused at her forceful return.

“No. Mind if I hang around a few days?”

“You’re not running from the law, are you?” she asked her lightly, though she did not think that was what this woman was about. She usually could read people quite well.

The voice gave a short laugh. “No. Nor am I running from a spouse...kids or parents.”

“Okay. Just like to get some things out in the air with someone I’m going to share space with and maybe some clothes. It gets cold and you’re not exactly dressed for camping out.”

“I understand. Any other worries?”

“Yeah, do you mind a purple toothbrush? I bought one in the mart just in case you didn’t have one,” she smiled at her night reflection in the windshield.

“Purple. Thanks for the thought.”

Claire pulled the van up in front of the rental office. She removed the keys from the ignition and hopped out to sign in and get her space number.

“Hey, Ray!” she greeted the manager.

“Evening, Claire. Marge called to change your spot. Didn’t think she would be loaning out her rig to anyone for a few years more. Not like your old Dodge, eh? I gave ya Marge and Gail’s favorite space near the stream. We’re not expecting any rain for your stay, but if ya gotta move, pick anywhere. Some of the gang has already arrived,” he chuckled, gesturing at the board where personals were placed for card games and hikes. “Let me know if you repark just in case we get some real customers.”

“Okay.” Claire could smell his dinner and knew he was eager to sit and eat so she paid the fee plus extra for a guest and then signed the contract. She was excited about her slot. It was near the stream and under a group of trees. The showers and rest rooms were up the road, though she had both in her rig.

“Ah. So, Miss. I-Like-Being-Alone has brought a guest...hm,” Rey teased.

“It isn’t what you think,” Claire returned, sounding as firm as she could.

“Okay,” he laughed holding up both hands in mock apology.

Chapter 3

Charlotte was not shy about working. Between the two women, they got the van leveled, hoses and electrical connected, the awning set up and the picnic table dragged under the awning and covered with a table cloth. Teddy's traveling water dish, heavy and deep, was placed under the table and filled. Claire also set the outside motion detector lights so that they covered blind spots. Nothing taller than Teddy could approach the van after dark without a light coming on.

Taking a breather both drank deeply from water bottles. It was then Claire thought it was time to get sleeping arrangements setup. "You have the choice of sleeping in one of the twin beds in the back or we can turn these two seats into a twin."

"I don't want to be any more trouble, so, if you don't mind...I'll sleep in back where the bed is already made."

"I don't mind. It does make it easier. I would have to read the owner's manual to figure out how the front bed works," Claire admitted chuckling. She got up and pulled out the box she still needed to unpack that had her camping food. "We can put this stuff away. If you see something you would like for dinner, leave it out."

"Hmm. Jamaican BBQ chicken sound okay? It says for two."

"Sounds yummy. There's a shower up the slope. I have some sweats and T-shirt you can change into. If I'm up here alone, I usually take Teddy and lock ourselves in the building while I shower." She wondered what Charlotte would do with her open-ended offer.

"Okay. Got an extra towel? We can buddy up. You can leave Teddy here to watch the van...unless you would rather..."

"Ehhh...no, if you're thinking of me choosing Teddy over showering with you. Wet dogs...euww," Claire laughed easily. "Alright. I think there are some extra towels in the cabinet there. I'll get you sweats and a shirt..."

Claire turned off the burner to the hot water that she had started while they set up the van. She tossed in the package of dehydrated food and then covered it. She was expecting a nice warm meal on their return.

Leading the way up the trail she breathed in deeply the evening's chilly air that was not like city air. Her red light, used so that her night vision was not impeded, shined the way on the weather rutted slope to the restrooms and showers. Both women were quiet as each listened to what was going around them. The two buildings, one for men and one for women, were newly painted, by the smell. Small lights only meant to reveal the door so as not to disturb the environment's natural atmosphere had Claire shinning her light carefully around for anything that may be menacing, like spiders.

While Charlotte stood by the entrance Claire went through the toilet stalls and then the showers, making sure there was no one in the room that should not be.

"All clear..." Claire glanced at the door where she heard the lock click into place. Claire held up her bag with a bar of soap, shampoo, conditioner, two toothbrushes and toothpaste.

“Do you go to bed early?” Charlotte asked as she made sure the curtains around the van were fastened before sitting down to their steaming dinner.

Charlotte’s shoulder length hair was mussed from the quick towel dry, and she smelled of Claire’s soap. It was distracting Claire and therefore irritating. It made no sense to her to sniff after someone that was not interested. She turned back to her clothes that she was hanging in the cabinet, pointedly ignoring the braless woman that was near her, grateful it was a black shirt and did not reveal anything personal.

“Sometimes...but tonight, well, I’m wound up from the drive so...I’ll probably watch a movie, read a bit then...do you mind about the movie? I picked a few movies from Marge and Gail’s collection. They’re avid collectors of all sorts of movies...foreign and...well...” she slowed down, realizing she was chattering.

“No. I don’t mind at all. What do you have in mind?”

Before heading to the back, Claire stopped to turn the overhead heater on. It got very cold in the evening and early morning hours and since she had the choice of waking up warm, she was going to take it. Claire’s eyes followed Charlotte’s movements as she plumped up a pillow that Claire had tossed on each of the beds.

Claire frowned wondering why she was not feeling nervous about the situation. Her usually reliable antenna was picking up absolutely nothing about this woman. That should put up a red flag but it did not.

Claire pulled out the bag of movies, but it seemed to be a lot heavier than what she remembered. She reached in and pulled out what her fingers touched, thinking the CD would be one of the Alien adventures she had packed. She blinked a few times in the low lighting at what she was holding.

“Something wrong?”

Claire looked up at her. “Well, I remember only packing the Alien series and this...I don’t recognize it.”

Charlotte reached over and plucked it from her fingers. “*Claire of the Moon*,” she read. “Shall I put it on?”

Claire’s brain had shut down and dumbly she just nodded. Charlotte slid the movie in, adjusted the television so they both could see and handed Claire the remote.

“Have you ever seen this movie?” Claire asked with studied casually.

“No. Is it R rated or something that requires a hanky?”

“Yeah,” she responded without clarifying.

Claire, true to her usual self, got involved in the story and made small noises at different parts of the movie without noticing and did not become aware of Charlotte until the end of the movie.

“You want to turn it off or do you like to watch the last of the credits?” Charlotte asked as she got up to flip the covers back and climb into her bed.

Claire blinked a few times, moving her awareness to real time. “Right.” She turned off the movie, removed it from the CD player and got ready to take Teddy out for his potty break. She slipped her warm coat on and slid her stockinged feet into her hiking boots, pausing to lace them. It was a good habit to always be prepared for the unexpected.

Teddy was quick about his business and Claire was sure it was because it was cold outside.

“Night,” Claire whispered as she settled down.

“Goodnight,” was the muffled return.

Claire’s waking thoughts were wandering on something that made no sense at all, but dreams were not connected to cognitive functions.

“You’re awake,” the soft voice announced. “Coffee is ready.”

Claire rolled over and looked toward the small doorway to see Charlotte wearing her own clothes. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know. You want to sleep some more?”

“No.” She stretched languidly and then slid out of the bed. As she made her way to the toilet she noted Charlotte’s bed had been made up neatly. *I must have been tired because I didn’t even hear her.*

When she finished her morning toilet, taking two short steps, she was standing over the small kitchenette sink to brush her teeth. Next to her elbow was fresh coffee, triggering a deep breath of the aroma. She pressed a sliced bagel between a special wire-rack and turned on the burner to crisp it. She dumped it on a plate, spread a thick layer of cream cheese on the bagel, and turned to face her guest. Charlotte was outside sitting at the picnic table sipping her coffee and watching the morning light brighten up the surrounding forest.

“Good morning. Mind if I join you?” Claire asked.

“Morning. Nope. It’s a nice sunrise,” she remarked, while with her cup she gestured to the sun that could barely be seen through the tree’s branches.

The privacy tarp had been rolled up on all three sides, letting in the chilly breeze and morning light. The sounds of creatures waking were all around them. Claire stood still, absorbing nature’s energy, filling her lungs with it in a steady inhale, and then exhaled the stress and weariness she had been feeling of late. The peacefulness of her surroundings brought a profound joy that she returned with a silent heart felt thanks.

I really need this, she thought.

Claire sat at the table and took a bite out of her bagel. She needed to ask this woman what she was planning on doing, but was not ready to hear the answer because it may mean Charlotte would leave. That struck her as odd until she talked herself into believing it was because Charlotte was a mystery and she was challenged to figure out just what that was. *You know, not all mysteries are meant to be solved.*

“What do you plan on doing today?” Claire asked, after emptying her mouth.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Not unless you have somewhere to go.” She answered too quickly for her sensible side to censor. *I don’t have any ulterior motives!* She quickly told herself as her ever present conscious was tweaked. *Geeze. Give me a break. I can’t just toss someone out in the middle of no where after...ahh, shit!* She could not believe she was having this argument with herself.

“Not at the moment. And you?” Charlotte’s dark brown eyes studied her with curiosity.

“Oh, uh.” She looked out at the stream that was just a stone’s throw from them. “I usually go climbing around here...or sometimes just do nothing but kickback with a book. Teddy’s not in for blazing any trails. Thank gawds,” she laughed. “So he hangs around the van and watches over the place while I do whatever moves me.” She looked

down at the dog that was lying under the picnic bench. His muzzle had been lifted up catching what scent was on the breeze and watching squirrels and birds hop around.

“Where are you going to climb?”

“Don’t know. I just start walking. Do you want to come along; you can borrow my tennies?”

“No. I’m more of the kickback and read type of person. If I walk, I need a destination.”

“Well, I have a few books I and my friends keep some of their favorites in the cabinet.” Claire was racking her memory as to what types of books the two would keep to reread. They both liked science fiction, mysteries and lesbian fiction. So, what would they keep in the van?

Claire decided not to worry about it. She rose to collect her backpack, and then turned to look at the woman who was not dressed for camping, which regardless of having the van, she still considered herself camping. “I have some extra jeans and socks if you want to try them on. We’re about the same size....” *Oh, you liar. She’s thinner and taller.*

“Thanks.”

Chapter 4

Not in any hurry and taking frequent breaks along her walk, Claire was about two hours along when she found a place she wanted to sit and sketch. She was following the small stream bed that could easily turn into a fast moving corridor of water and whatever else the rain runoff caught in its path. The tumultuous flooding changed areas dramatically, giving her new scenes from her last visit to draw or just look at. She leaned against her pack and began her work. Finishing one she began another; picking areas that were interesting of themselves and then drawing a larger picture.

Her growling stomach had her fishing out her packed lunch and sipping water to wash it down. Breathing in deep her eyes looked over the area again, this time without regard to drawing it. A bank had collapsed taking a tree with it. Its bared roots created a painful picture for a tree lover, which she was. Its corpse created a bridge to the other side of the stream. A piece of fabric or trash was flapping on one of the branches taking some of the romantic isolation of the area out of it.

Chewing, and staring at the log, an indeterminate amount of time passed as she reflected on her job and the tension that was always there since the shooting. She wondered if the log was like her life...and she was now on the opposite side of the river from the rest of the department. Sighing, she tried to pinpoint just why she felt so tense. Taking another bite out of the sandwich she chewed on the feeling she got when sitting at her desk. It was as if she was being watched. Without humor she recalled her thorough search of the women’s rest room for any surveillance equipment, and though she did not find anything, she periodically reinspected it.

Her automatic crumbling of her napkin brought her back to the immediate. Finished with her lunch, she pulled out her chalk and began a more elaborate rendition of what was in her mind and not necessarily before her, though she occasionally did look around for inspiration.

"There you are," a soft voice broke in on her isolation.

Claire looked up and could see Charlotte's figure moving towards her. Her hair was mussed as if she had been working out...but then the trail was rough in some parts. Though she did not draw people, for that moment she wanted to...

"You know, there's less than an hour of light left." She glanced down at Claire's sketch pad which Claire had not closed. "Nice."

"Thanks...I lost track of time. You look like you need some water." Claire gestured to her canteen. Carefully she stored her pad so that it would rest against her back rather than bent around her box filled with drawing tools. Charlotte handed her back the water, which Claire took a drink and then started back down the trail that was fading with the day's light.

"It's a nice walk up to here," Charlotte remarked.

"Yeah. After each rain the river bed changes. With the shadows and trees I get some nice angles to..." she laughed, shaking her head. *So, I just told her that I'm not a stranger up here and she already knows I will be missed should I suddenly disappear. Wonder what else she picked up? And what does it matter? Because I don't know anything about her,* she ruefully admitted to herself.

"What? Why did you stop what you were saying?"

"I...just didn't want to go off on a tangent about drawing techniques."

"I don't mind."

I'm sure. So who the hell are you Charlotte? Maybe self-employed? A private eye? Hmm. Don't think so... Damn, she's hard to read.

The walk back down was quiet except for the thumping of their feet as both women concentrated on not twisting an ankle. The light was fading fast as the bright orange orb dipped behind the trees. Claire pulled out her small flashlight from her pack. Though it took hours to hike up the trip downhill was faster since she was intent on speed and did not pause to admire what she was seeing. By the time they had reached the van, it was dark. Teddy was happy to see them, as it was nearly past his dinner time.

"So, what would you like tonight?" Claire asked as she rummaged around in the food cabinet.

"Why don't you pick," Charlotte suggested, as she placed two dishes on the small dinette table along with napkins and forks.

"How does Fettuccine Primavera with strawberry cheesecake for desert sound? I also have a bottle of wine..."

"Sounds like the perfect meal to finish off a hike with."

"A shower and out of these clothes would be nice too. While it's steaming, shall we take a trip up to the showers?"

"So, what's tonight's movie?" Charlotte's voice asked as Claire was locking up the van for the night.

"It's your turn to choose." Claire plopped herself down on her bed and fluffed up the pillow. Charlotte reached in the brown bag and pulled out a CD.

"What's the grab bag pick?" Claire asked.

"Alien Resurrection."

“Hm.” Claire had a crush on Sigourney Weaver and in this movie she thought she was really hot. “One of my favorites.” The movie started and again Claire became involved and only when it was finished did her surroundings fade back in. While Charlotte put the movie away she put her coat and shoes on to take Teddy out for his potty break. Her coat was handed to her by Charlotte who had to move out of the way for her to exit the van.

On returning, Charlotte was already snuggled under her covers. “Goodnight,” Charlotte’s muffled voice wished when Claire slid between the sheets.

“Goodnight,” Claire returned. Claire stared up at the ceiling for a long time before falling asleep. She imagined what the sequel would be for *Alien Resurrection* if one was written. Ripley and Annalee Call could undo all the nasty secret plots the corporate politicians had against the common people... A strong yawn reminded her she was tired. *Hmm, it would put an interesting spin on the Xena and Gabriella tale.*

The next morning was pretty much like the first day. Claire took off with her pack secured on her back. Along with her drawing supplies she had water, a sandwich and trail mix. She made a mental promise to herself to pay more attention to the time since it seemed to worry Charlotte. Glancing up at the overcast sky, she determined by noon it would be hot. Wandering, with no particular place in mind, Claire found her thoughts also wandering to Charlotte. Each time she firmly changed her thoughts, her direction on the path also changed. Standing high on a trail she could see the market through the trees. She was going to head down and buy some fresh produce when she noticed that someone that looked like Charlotte was using the pay phone. The person glanced up and saw Claire. Claire waved and then started down the trail to the market. She was feeling disappointed that maybe Charlotte’s stay would be brought to an end with her phone call.

When she got to the market Charlotte was nowhere to be found.

“Hey, Sandy. How’s the day going?”

“Well. How’s your spot?”

“Love it...even better I’m not in a tent. I came for your home-grown produce. Too good to pass up.”

“Not huge but sweet and tasty,” Sandy agreed, bagging the food and ringing it up.

“Did anyone come in here a few moments ago?”

“I didn’t hear the door. Who was here?”

“My guest...I thought I had seen her at the public phone.”

“That phone hasn’t worked for ages. Telco doesn’t want to send anyone out because they don’t make money on it. I usually let people use the office phone.”

“Hm. Well, I’ll see ya around.”

Claire was not that deep in thought to miss the sound of a footstep stumbling behind her. She turned to see who was there. No one.

Okay. Let’s see if I can find out who’s following me.

She climbed back up to the cliff where she would have an aerial view of her surroundings including the path she took. Nothing; not even a disturbed bird.

It was nearly dark when she made it back to the van. When she stepped into the covered shelter she found Charlotte pacing in the small area around the picnic bench.

"I stopped at the market and got some fresh fruits and vegetables," she told her while pulling her backpack off her shoulder.

"Ah."

Claire unpacked the produce, remembering that the strawberries were not made for backpack transportation.

"These look home grown," Charlotte remarked as she looked over the strawberries and then the apples.

"They are. It's from backyard growers. Rey and Sandra can keep their prices down for a lot of their produce because it's supplied by private individuals that grow it in their backyard gardens."

"You must come up here quite often."

"As I need it...or can get away." Claire's hands were moving over the corn, pulling the husks and tossing the remains in a paper bag meant for the recycling bin at the store.

Charlotte had the water ready for the corn. A family size lasagna meal was put into another pan to boil. While they waited for their meal to cook the two sat at the small dinette table.

"How are you at cards?" A pack of cards was pulled out the back pocket of the driver's seat.

"So, so."

"What'll it be?"

"Uh...poker or something..."

Charlotte smiled, tapped the cards and expertly cut them and then quickly shuffled them.

"Hey, you're not some card shark are you...part-time Vegas dealer?"

She stopped shuffling the cards and looked at the backs of the cards. Claire had not realized they had a naked woman on the back.

"Oh. This is not my van so whatever we dig out of the supplies I don't take full responsibility for."

"Uh, huh. So, how good are you?" Charlotte asked, continuing to shuffle the cards and size up her potential mark.

"Not. I suck. Even at fish. I play solitaire on my laptop or mahjong and just recently dominos," Claire replied, picking up on the gleam of a gambler in Charlotte's eyes.

"You like the solitary life." Charlotte dealt out the cards quickly and looked over at Claire. "We'll play one game of each type and see what you're made of."

The smell of the roiling corn rescued Claire from herself. She had quickly lost the four games Charlotte dealt.

"Card games are not your best skill," Charlotte remarked as she slid the cards back into the box.

"Right," Claire agreed. "I could never get into them," she admitted as she removed the lasagna pouch from the boiling water. She placed a bottle of water for each of them on the counter which Charlotte retrieved and set on the dinette. Claire pinched out the corn and placed them in their special curved dishes, sticking the corn holders in the ends.

Both women hungrily bit into the corn, crunching their way around the cob that was soaked in butter and sprinkled salt.

"So, you can do something more than boil trail food and clean up," Charlotte observed after she tasted her first bite of corn.

"If it's the taste of the corn you're referring to...I can't take the credit. Sandra won't tell me who grows those but...it's the corn seed, dirt and whatever they fertilize it with."

Charlotte wrinkled her nose. "Hm. For a city girl, I'm only familiar with the finished product. I don't want to see the head of meat I'm eating to remind me that it was once someone's pet or hear that in third world countries they use their waste to fertilize their gardens."

"Eww. My brain is picturing sick. I am hoping these backyard gardeners only use recycled kitchen waste...gawds, I used that word again."

Charlotte chuckled. "So, are we doing the movie thing again?"

"Yeah. I..." she hesitated about going out in the dark to shower. She was sure someone had followed her part of the way and she did not want to set herself up to be a victim... she also needed to warn her camping buddy just in case it was a cause for alarm. "I'm going to try the shower here, if you don't mind."

Charlotte was watching her face as she thought about her decision. Claire could have sworn she guessed she was nervous about something.

"What's up?"

Damn, the woman has good instincts. Well, dummy you should tell her what you suspect. She's in just as much danger as you.

"I felt someone following me earlier...from the store."

Charlotte nodded looking serious. "You didn't see anyone." She affirmed Claire's unspoken explanation that she had not been able to see anyone definitely but her suspicions were that there was someone there and she took it seriously, to Claire's relief. "Is that why you took so long to get back?"

Claire let out a disgusted snort. "What do you do, read minds?"

Charlotte looked at her startled. "No. So, is there something else you need to tell me?"

"Well, when I was up on the path above the store...I thought I saw you at the payphone."

Charlotte's face did not change, but her vibes did. Then it was gone. "Not me. I was reading *Sphere* and keeping your bodyguard company. When you felt you were being followed, was it before or after you thought you saw me?"

"After. Whoever it was, was gone by the time I got down the trail. Sandy didn't see anyone, but she was in the back of the store when I came in."

"Well, I'm with you. I always tell a woman to trust her instinct; that's what it's there for."

"Well, I'm going to feel more comfortable using the shower in here...unless you want to trek up the road."

Charlotte shook her head. "I think here is a good idea until we get an idea at who is following you."

"Okay. Using the shower means it'll be cold and you'll be cut off from the other third of the van. Do you want to sit on the bed until it's your turn or wait up front?"

"I think I'll sit up front and read. Do you have a map?"

The movie she picked was *The Bourne Identity*. It confirmed her suspicion that Margie added some CDs of her own, thinking she was going to be viewing more than one a night. Margie found it difficult to believe someone actually camped for solitude from other humans, and away from the electronics of civilized life.

After the movie, Claire took Teddy out for his potty break. He sniffed here and there and did not seem to find a threat anywhere, so he did his thing and then promptly trotted back to the van.

Charlotte was already sleeping, or so it seemed when she returned. Sleep did not come to Claire and she finally got up so as not to disturb Charlotte with her moving around. Claire sat in the driver's captain chair and thought about what was bothering her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Charlotte's soft voice asked.

Claire looked up startled. Charlotte slid into the other chair, their knees nearly touching.

"Who are you?" Claire asked.

"I'll tell you what...we'll play five questions...you get five and I get five."

"Well, at least this isn't like truth or dare..."

"If you don't want to answer a question...just say so," Charlotte affirmed.

Claire thought about it because something she did learn in her forty years is that when a gift is given, it's best to check it out before accepting it. Nothing came free and when it seems there is nothing to lose, that is when to really look hard.

She sighed heavily. "Given that I have a choice..."

"There is another thing...once one of us chooses to not answer...the game ends."

Great. That means she could end it with my first question of her...ahh. Sneaky. To keep asking her questions...I not only have to keep them neutral but not get up tight when she asks me some tricky questions. Ohhhh, but she is very slick...but then again, I don't have to play.

But Claire was curious, so she nodded. "Okay."

"Alright, let's draw to see who goes first." The cards were pulled out and as funny as it can get, they both pulled sevens out and then queens and then aces. The fourth time a suspicious Claire pulled a five and a smiling Charlotte pulled a queen.

"Are these marked or something?" Claire demanded looking closely at the cards. All she saw was the same naked woman on the back of each card.

"So, my first question...what do you do for a living?"

Claire smiled, hiding how her thoughts were busy with trying to figure out how she could avoid saying who her employer is.

"Beep! Times up...no half truths, Claire," Charlotte grinned.

"I work for the city of Petima...behind a desk. Nothing exciting...more like boring."

Charlotte smiled. "Uh huh. Your turn."

"Who do you work for?"

"Myself."

"Ah." Claire gave her a suspicious look. *So, I guessed right that she is self-employed.*

“What exactly do you do behind that desk? I let you get away with a half-answer before,” Charlotte pointed out. “Now give me the details.”

“I file reports...clerk stuff, and take phone messages,” Claire insisted, not wanting to bring up anything that may lead to talking about her past. “What were you doing along the road?” she boldly asked to keep Charlotte off balance.

“Looking for a ride. What are you doing with this?” Charlotte pulled out Claire’s police semi-automatic and her ID that she had stashed in the glove compartment.

“Souvenirs,” Claire answered angrily. Grabbing the two articles she slammed them back into the glove compartment. She headed to the back of the van, feeling violated but too angry at being found out. She slid into her bed and turned her back to the door, feeling not only embarrassed but angry with this whole situation. She should be shouting at Charlotte’s for her nerve to be looking through her things...except the van was not hers and...she remembered she left the magazine in a conspicuous place. Claire almost slapped her forehead. Charlotte asked her for a map and she had told her it was in the glove compartment. Duh.

She heard Charlotte sit on the bed across from her. “Why the games?” she asked softly. “If you’re so damned touchy about being a cop or doing desk duty, just say so.”

Claire could feel her face heat up. Charlotte was right...but she too was hiding something. “Why the games?” She turned over to look at the shadowed form of Charlotte.

“Like you...I have memories I don’t want to be digging up.”

“Then why this stupid question game?” she asked frustrated.

“Because someone followed you...I needed to know if it was something you were working on.”

Claire was quiet for a while thinking if anyone would be hunting her down. “No. When I worked the streets it was just the usual shit. What about you?”

“Maybe. But I doubt it.”

“You think I might have imagined it?”

“No.” She said it with such firmness that Claire’s eyebrows rose.

“So, maybe it’s just someone curious?” Claire asked, but not believing it.

“Why don’t we take a trip down to the store tomorrow and find out who all is officially here?”

“Okay. Do you know how to use a gun?” Claire asked curious.

“Yes.”

“How about self-defense?”

“How about you?” Charlotte countered.

“I’ve spent two years in the marines,” Claire shared.

“Hm. Well, I haven’t been in the military...but I’ve taken classes in hand-to-hand. I guess, we’ll just have to see...though, I hope not.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

Chapter 5

Teddy's whining woke Claire. When she glanced towards the bed next to her she found it was empty. As usual, the bed was made. She sniffed the air and did not detect coffee being made. She let Teddy out and while the coffee sputtered, she used the toilet and brushed her teeth.

Freeze dried pancakes sounds good.

Her thoughts went back to Charlotte finding her HK P7 and badge. She forgot to leave them at her apartment but it was better to have left the pager locked in her briefcase than her weapon and badge. Though she was no longer on a beat or working on cases, she did not like leaving the two objects too far from her.

If I had thought I was going to have company, I would not have put the magazine in such an easily found place. Damn. If I was in a van with a stranger and found a magazine to a semi-automatic I would be looking for the weapon too. She had forgotten she had tucked it near the coffee pot with the intention of putting it somewhere else once she was settled.

She noticed that her warm coat and her hiking boots were missing. *Now, why am I not surprised. I sure hope they fit her because hiking around in boots that are too small or too large is asking for blisters.*

She wore tennis shoes and a sweatshirt that needed to be washed. Her backpack was stored in front of the passenger seat on the floorboards, and this she pulled up to struggle into when she stopped her motion to toss onto her shoulder. Why she felt it was necessary to check the pack she did not know but...maybe it was because she was not that trusting of her guest. She pulled out her drawing tools and case and there, wrapped in a rag she always carried she found a small box. Locked, but it would not take much to break the lock. She rewrapped it and, possibly she would regret it later, she put it back in her pack. For a moment, she wondered if she should take her P7 but she quickly put that idea to rest. That would be attracting trouble she did not want to deal with.

Yeah, right. So what are you doing picking up a strange woman on the road and not dropping her off at the nearest bus station with a ticket? Gawds! This is weird.

She made sure Teddy had his water under the awning and locked up the van. If Charlotte returned, she was going to have to wait for her to get back...though, for some reason, which she laughed to herself at, she did not think a locked van was going to keep Charlotte out.

It was still too early to visit the market so she followed the river towards the ocean, under the freeway bridge and to where she could sit and think on the beach. For a while she found sketching the cliff and parts of the beach interesting. But her curiosity at knowing who else was camping out caused her to put up her drawing tools earlier than she would normally stay out and trudge back up the path to the private park. Her eyes took in the few tents and people that were at the public camping area and as she walked up the narrow canyon, her hearing focused on what did not belong in the air. She felt watched, but it could be the male campers that were further up the beach. She noticed a lot of trash and beer cans scattered around the trash bin that did not make it into the large bin.

"Great," she muttered. Sometimes assholes became real bothersome when they thought they could get away with something. However, Claire had faith that she could handle anything short of a bullet.

The market was busy with four other people. The group appeared to be with each other. From the remarks they made, they were parked further up the road and they liked to run around naked... 'hope that does not bother you,' type of chatter. If she felt so inclined, she could join them.

No thanks. Even if you were all women...I don't do orgies. Grew out of that I did. The threat of aids, Chlamydia and STDs cured me of that fantasy.

"Hey, Rey," she nodded to him and he motioned her over to the side counter.

"Someone bothering ya?"

"Yeah, but I don't know who. I heard someone following me from here yesterday and while I was hiking from the beach to here. You know anyone that strikes you as someone I need to keep an eye on?"

Rey laughed and gestured with his head at the foursome that had just left. "I gathered you're not interested in joining them."

"Nope."

"I'll look around and let the others know. Gil's up above that quartet probably cursing me while he's got his NVGs on scoping the sights. It'll give him something to do to keep him from getting cabin fever."

"Ohh, gawds. Doris is probably fighting for her turn," Claire laughed heartily with Rey at the thought of the two ex-cops that came up here to work on a joint novel and going batty with having to sit down and organize themselves...and agree on how to write the book. They had a real RV bought in celebration of their retirement. It had hydraulics to enlarge the front room and bedroom space. It was to get away from their kids that moved back in with their families and brought unwanted chaos into the lives of their retired parents.

"Jay and Cynthia are to the south of ya. The two B's are up there too. They like living on the edge. Then there's Kenny. He has his tent up on the public beach. Maybe he's heard something. He comes over about dinner time. Breaks our boredom. Wanta join us one of these evenings...you know what time?"

She shook her head. All they did was drink, eat, reminisce and take her money in cards. "Kenny? I thought he was one of those weekend warriors and was shipped off to Iraq or Afghanistan."

"Yeap. Came back a week ago and just hangs out on the beach. Quit the PD and resigned his commission from the military, he said."

Claire sighed. Sandra knew how to help the lost souls. She knew that from her own experience. It brought back memories, but surprisingly enough, they were not as painful as she thought they would be.

"You alright?" Rey asked gently.

"Hm. I was just remembering my own episodes. Without the two of you..." she shook her head. "I'd probably be doped up on some illegal drug and selling the neighbors goods to keep up my habit."

"You have some powerful friends that would not have let you get that far, kiddo. Don't under value them." He laughed, then. "They would have hog tied you and locked you up in a tiny room until you worked out your problem. Gail is one very determined cop that is not going to let the demon take any member under."

Claire smiled, feeling the truth of that. “You’re right. I don’t know why I suddenly got in the dark cloud there. Since I got here I’ve been falling in pockets of Miss Doom and Gloom. So, are they the only ones here?”

“Aside from the guest you brought, yep. Anyone we would know?” Rey asked, wondering if it had to do with her guest.

Claire shook her head. “I’m giving her a place to stay for a while. Have you met her?”

Rey shook his head. “I did see her though. I was up at the showers early this morning and saw her at your site. Since Bear didn’t bark I kinda figured she’s your guest. I always thought Bear had good instincts about people.”

“Me too,” she sighed a little, “I don’t think there is anything to worry about from her...”

“Ranger Harland came by yesterday. Those dickheads at the public beach are giving her a headache. She asked if they were bothering anyone over here...could they have been following you?”

“Maybe. The ranger came here did she? Ha. She came here so that some of the RC gang will take the challenge and beat the crap out of them. Did you explain that RC lot is too old for those shenanigans?” Claire asked.

“Yeap.”

“Well, I gotta go. Lunch of a boiled bag of BBQ Jamaican chicken and rice with fresh strawberries are calling me,” Claire hummed.

Rey blanched at the mixture. “Keep in touch.”

Claire nodded. It was their private message that since she was alone...she needed to check in more often. Claire had filed enough missing persons reports to know it was not an unhealthy paranoia, just good old fashion caution. It was nice to know that she had friends that gave her the space she needed but still looked out for her. She smiled as she made her way back up the trail. Whoever was following her was in for a very big surprise. Once the RCGs got the message that there was something sinister going on around their campsite they would all be donning NVGs, night vision goggles, and start a game of tag. She shook her head feeling sorry for whoever it was if the Gang got a hold of him or her.

Teddy was happy to see her. No doubt he was lonely. While she prepared her lunch, she debated what to do about her missing guest. However, when Teddy turned to the door with a fully engaged tail she guessed she would not have to figure that out.

“Hey, got enough for two?” Charlotte asked as she collapsed in a chair.

“Sure do. How did your skulking about go?”

Charlotte laughed and nodded that Claire guessed right. “It went well. I found out where your stalker is from.”

“One of the tents on the beach?”

“Nope. A car parked up the road. John Regan. Ever heard of him?”

Claire shook her head. “No. No Regans in my arrest files. What about you?”

She shook her head.

“So...is he packing?”

“He’s got a camera.”

“Well...I’m not on disability, I’m not married or fooling around with anyone, nor do I plan on getting naked in public ...so...are you sure it’s me he’s interested in?”

“He shot two rolls of film on you while I was watching him. However, he did get sidetracked with another group up the road...”

“The ‘let’s get naked’ group?”

Charlotte laughed. “Yeah.”

“Well, they invited me to join them...wonder if they are working with the photographer.” Claire frowned trying to think how unrealistic that sounded. There is no reason for someone to take the time to discredit her...she had no political aspirations. She also shot any chance for her advancement to management....in a literal sense of the word. Maybe she was jumping to conclusions about the connection of the nudie group and the photographer. But, why was someone taking photos of her?

“Well, maybe he’s going to find a way to put you on the internet...you know, super impose your head on some nude woman’s body,” Charlotte teased.

“Well, he better make it a woman and one with a nice bod.”

“You don’t seem to be too worried.”

“There is nothing I can do. There is no law against taking pictures of people and as much as I appreciate you checking my stalker out...” She turned around to look at Charlotte. “Where did you say he is parked?”

“You plan on stealing some film?” Charlotte looked interested.

“Nooo. But I would like to meet him face to face. See what he has to say for himself. Though, if he’s not around...” *Except, maybe that’s the intention, for me to get caught breaking into someone’s car. Damn, woman! You are sooo paranoid!*

“Top of the cliff gives a good view of the road both ways.”

“Sounds like a plan...but he’ll be really suspicious if I change my habits...” For a few moments she was quiet. “Want to meet the people that own this place? Rey and Sandy.”

Charlotte looked interested.

“They used to be in the law-enforcement business...they inherited some money and bought this place.”

“So, no wild shootings or disappearing spouses are likely to be happening up here.”

Claire snorted. “Rey and Sandy take no misbehaving crap from anyone.”

“So, getting back to why you’re being stalked, what’s interesting about your job?” Charlotte asked.

“Nothing. It’s quiet, isolated and devoid of politics.”

Charlotte watched Claire’s face intently, looking for tension or eye movement that would show she was nervous. “Maybe one of the cases you’ve reviewed....?”

“Let’s talk about something else.”

Charlotte persisted. “We both are exposed here.”

Claire took a deep breath and let it out. “You said you work for yourself...just what do you do?”

“Bounty hunter.”

“You don’t look like a bounty hunter. You don’t have the vibes,” Claire objected, having met a few and not liking them one bit.

“That’s why I’m still alive. I don’t look or feel like one. Most bounty hunting jobs involve stake-outs and research from internet and phone books. Very boring for the active minded.”

“Are you on a job right now?”

“Yes.”

“So, was that you at the phone booth I saw?”

Charlotte leaned forward interested. “No. Can you draw me who you saw?”

“I don’t do people so well...” But she leaned over to where her backpack was and pulled out her drawing pad. As she was feeling around for the box with her drawing tools she pushed aside the bottle of water and felt the rag she always carried.

“Did you put anything in my pack?” Claire asked as she pulled out the rag and then dived back in for her drawing box.

“No. Why?” a suspicious sounding Charlotte asked.

Claire laid out her box of tools and then unraveled the rag. Out dropped the small box and would have hit the ground had not Charlotte caught it.

“When did you find this?” she asked seriously, gently setting it on top of the drawing pad.

“This morning. I thought maybe you put it in there.”

Charlotte shook her head. “There isn’t anywhere on my body I could hide this. Do you ever lend your pack out?”

“I did lend my tent and backpack to some friends a month ago. I have no idea who used the backpack.” Claire picked up the box and pried open the box with a knife blade she usually used to sharpen her pencils with. The lid opened.

“Ooh, shit!” they echoed.

Claire dipped her finger in and tasted it. “Shit, shit, shit!”

“The guy with the camera...think maybe he’s tracking this?”

Claire looked over at Charlotte. “And I thought I was the most paranoid person. What the hell am I going to do with this?” She picked up her rag and started to wipe prints off the case. “Why is someone setting me up?”

“Hm. We’re still going to the store?”

“Yeah. Now I really want to find out if Rey and the gang tracked this elusive photographer down.”

“The gang?”

“Yeah. I told Rey I felt I was being followed. Don’t worry. The gang is a bunch of retired cops that like to come up here for R&R of the quiet type.”

Charlotte leaned over and whispered, her breath tickling Claire’s ear and neck. “Do you think this van is bugged?”

Claire shook her head and pulled out of her pocket a radio frequency detector. “I have issues with privacy,” she said softly.

“Alright, this is how we can work it. You head off to the store and I’ll follow a few minutes later. I’ll take this stuff and hide it somewhere...”

Claire was shaking her head. “Believe it or not, I have issues with trusting strangers with my welfare. I’ll take it and hide it somewhere...chances are, if this is a setup, they’re going to have a dog that’s going to be sniffing for this...”

“Wanta go for a swim?”

Claire smiled. “Ah...I got it. Like give the bag a salt water bath to get rid of the scent. It’s going to be interesting to see just who shows up for this bust because...then I’ll know better what the hell is going on...I hope,” she muttered in the end.

After doing what she thought was a good job of laying a false trail and hiding the box Claire headed for the beach. Finding a place to sit in isolation was easy since the beach had few people about. A rock that she hopped out to was where she decided she could get good views of the cliff face and beach to the left. Pulling out of her backpack her pad and some pencils she settled for a pleasant afternoon, finding the brisk breeze okay for now. It was about three in the afternoon, and as long as she was in the sun the breeze was not too chilly.

Her first sketch was of the person she had seen at the phone booth. Drawing nature was easier because if she did not reproduce a tree limb for limb it did not matter. Drawing a person meant it had to have some resemblance to the subject.

Geeze! Good thing you don't plan on doing this for a living.

She lifted her head to check around her. Her sun-glassed eyes scanned the beach, picking out a 'tourist' armed with a camera pointed in her direction. Suddenly he was backing up and hiding behind a vehicle. Charlotte appeared on the path from the private camp ground.

As Claire stood, her foot kicked her backpack into the water. An accommodating wave pulled it out. Charlotte had something in her hand that had Claire's rapt attention. It looked like an ice cream drumstick.

"Hey! Is that yours?" Charlotte pointed with one of the ice creams when she was near enough.

Claire reluctantly looked out where she was pointing and then looked down at her feet. "Shit!" Claire pulled off her jeans and in her underwear, waded out to grab her backpack that was sinking lower into the water. The wave that lapped up her crouch was cold and took her breath away, but she gamely wadded towards her backpack that was heading into the rocks further from her.

Wet up to her waist, Claire pulled herself up on the rock to face an amused Charlotte. Charlotte obviously had a better idea on how to innocently rinse out the backpack in salt water.

"Very good but dropping an ice cream in the bag and then rinsing it would have been my choice. I take it you would rather eat the ice cream," she laughed.

"Cold or no, I won't pass up an ice cream drumstick. I'll just have soup tonight to thaw out."

Claire removed her underwear and slipped on the jeans. Charlotte offered herself as a wall from any prying eyes. "I sure hope there is only one with a camera," Claire grunted as she tried to pull her jeans over her damp and cold legs.

"Hm. He's hiding behind a trash bin. I think he's interested in the guys dancing around by the beach," Charlotte consoled.

Charlotte carried her pad and box of pencils, and Claire followed holding the wet pack and the rag towel from each hand.

They stopped by at the store, where Sandra had some information.

"Faithful Teddy was barking his head off. Rey was up there cleaning the restrooms and caught the 'love to run around naked group' taking too much interest in your place. He ran them off. Told them he didn't want to catch them again nosing around other people's belongings."

Sandra got up to answer the phone. "It's for you," she informed Charlotte.

Whatever Charlotte had to say was brief and was spoken too softly for either of them to hear.

"So, you're being followed Rey said," Sandy mentioned, hinting for more information.

"Yeah. Charlotte tracked him and said it was a photographer. John Regan. Know anyone by that name?"

"It's a common name," Sandy told her. "But maybe Rey knows someone by that name."

Claire looked over at Charlotte who was walking back towards them. "You ready to head back? I'm tired."

Charlotte nodded and then followed Claire out, carrying a bag of strawberries. Charlotte picked a few out of the bag and offered some to Claire as they climbed the slope to their site.

Teddy was not in his usual place under the picnic table. This time he was standing on top of the table. Claire took time to coo to him her praise of being the watchdog he was intended to be. His tail waved enthusiastically and then he hopped down and waited in front of the door.

"Ya worked up an appetite, did ya?" Claire obligingly prepared his bowl which he promptly buried his nose in the mixed dry and wet food when it was set on the floor.

Tiredly she plopped in the chair opposite Charlotte. Her cell interrupted the conversation they needed to have. "Yeah?"

[Hey, miss vacation! How's Teddy and Mollee Bree?] Gail's voice asked.

Claire frowned but went along with the conversation. She left a voice mail on their service saying she was fine, so why the call? "We're all doing fine. Teddy Bear got to bark at some campers that came too close to the place and Rey came over to investigate."

[Ohhh. That must have made his day!]

"Hm. Hey, tell Marge I found the extra movies she stuffed in the bag. How come she didn't add any Xena ones?"

[I don't know. I'll ask her when she gets back. She went to the store. I got a package for you. It was sent to our address...]

"I didn't order anything. Does it say who from?"

[Nope. That's what has me worried. Are you involved in any cases?]

"No! You know I work behind the desk, answer phone, and file things... Nothing exciting."

[Well...I asked Jeff to bring his pooch over for a test sniff. In the mean time...it's sitting out in the middle of the backyard.]

"Who delivered it?"

[Janey, our regular mail carrier. It came by regular USPS.]

"Did you run an electronic bug detector over it?"

[Did all that stuff.]

"Well...I know they can't be that battery powered French tickler I ordered. I already received it..." she teased nervously.

[Can I open it?]

"If it's sent to your address...go ahead."

[Okay. Catch ya later.]

“Oh, boy,” Claire muttered.

“Why is that?”

“Tell me about your phone call first,” she bargained.

“My partner nabbed our man. He’s retrieved my vehicle and hopes to see me in a few days with a new contract.”

“Oh.”

“However, I told him I have some unfinished business here,” Charlotte lowered her voice. “I’m curious how it’s going to end.”

“So am I,” Claire agreed.

“So, what was your call about?”

“Gail, Teddy’s number two mama, said she received a package in the mail. It had my name, her address and no return address on the box. Gail is a very paranoid chick.”

“Ahh. So...do you think it ties in with the photographer?”

Claire laughed but in weariness. “I don’t know. I sure hope that’s not the supposed cash that goes with the cocaine in the box.”

“Who is Sandra?”

“She used to be my department’s shrink... Rey was captain of detectives until they inherited some money.”

“Ah. So did you tell them about the box?”

“Sort of.” Claire tried not to squirm since there was no rational reason why Charlotte’s question should make her feel guilty.

“Okay,” Charlotte replied looking bemused. “So, I would make a good guess that whoever placed the box in your bag, is keeping an eye on you, and knows you found it. What do you think will happen now?”

“True. Because they or he is not going to believe that it was dumped in the ocean,” she snorted disgustedly. “Maybe sometime tomorrow while I’m away from here...want to go for a walk? We can take Teddy with us down to the store. That way they have the whole van to themselves.”

“You don’t think that is too obvious?”

“I’m not going to leave Teddy behind. One kick and he’s dead and so will I be, to say nothing of not wanting to live with myself. And you...I don’t think it would be wise.”

“Okay. So, what’s our movie today?”

It was during their viewing of *The Banger Sisters* that the bust occurred. They were forewarned when Claire’s cell rang once, then once again. Ten minutes later, Teddy was bristling which gave them the next clue, and then he broke out into frantic barking.

Claire took a deep breath and cautiously opened the van door, only to have it ripped out of her hands, and she was dragged to the ground. She was aggressively and unnecessarily kneed into submission, where her hands were bound with nylon cord. Around her she could hear two dogs barking and the awning ripped to the ground.

Shit. They are not going to lend me the van again.

Suddenly she was yanked to her feet and put into a choke hold that had her struggling for air. When she struggled a rifle butt slammed into her stomach, knocking

her into semi-unconsciousness. When her vision returned, black clad men standing around her with rifles pointing at her head frightened her. She sagged against the picnic bench wheezing from the blood that crusted her face and over her nose. The familiar adrenalin tension from the group she knew put them on a hair trigger. Anything could set them off and someone could lose a life. She prayed the gang would be very careful what they did next.

This was supposed to be a quiet vacation. Where did I go wrong?

Claire turned her head to the side to see where Charlotte was. The small movement brought a gloved slap across her face, rocking her head back.

She could see her badge on the table, so they knew she was a cop.

“Where is it?” a deep voice asked above her.

“Where is what?” she coughed painfully. Her ribs hurt too. They must have kicked her when she was unconscious. For a moment she thought that he was going to hit her with the butt of his rifle again. She could see it in his dark eyes, glittering behind his mask.

“You know fucking well what, bitch trash!”

“Since you know I’m a cop, you know you’re in deep shit for whatever this is.”

This time she did get hit and she went down face first.

Roughly she was jerked back up and dragged into the van. Her pulse beat painfully against her jaw. It felt broken. Her captor shoved her into one of the chairs where she sagged. Charlotte was pushed into the other, her hands also bound behind her.

“I’m going to start beating on your pooch here or your girlfriend if you don’t give me some answers.”

Something was tracking down her cheeks. Claire wondered if it was blood or tears. Hopefully it was not blood that would stain the carpet.

“Where the hell is it?”

She shook her head, not being able to move her jaw without pain. A droning that increased in volume had her wondering if she was passing out.

“This is the police...drop your weapons and stand out where we can see you!”

“FUCK!” a group chorus blurted.

Claire wavered in her seat. She could feel someone supporting her weight so she did not fall out of the chair, but she was not too clear on what was happening.

For an undetermined amount of time, Claire was suspended somewhere where she felt like she was in a bubble with noises outside of her distorted and by the time they reached her everything was garbled and not understandable. Her hands were freed.

Something cold was pressed against her jaw and automatically she raised her hand to touch it. Her hand came in contact with warm ones, a sharp contrast to what was against her jaw. Her eyes tracked to blue ones that were watching her worriedly.

“Hey, you back with us?” Sandy asked gently.

Claire blinked and then nodded, which hurt.

“You don’t have a busted jaw, but it’s sure as hell going to hurt for a few days,” she smiled. “Got a shiner and a swollen face. Swollen wrists and cuts...everything is recoverable after a week more of vacation.”

“Whaaa haaaunn?” She swallowed and tried not to cry from the pain that small movement brought.

"Their badges show they are FBI. They claimed you were identified as a courier for a Mexican drug cartel they've been watching for a few years. You were supposed to have drugs and money on you. However, they didn't find the 'marked' money or drugs." Sandra sighed. "Excuse me if I state the obvious... This does not feel right."

"Hmph," she grunted. "Gaa assspin?"

"I'll give you something that will knock you out in about ten minutes. The paramedics checked you out...and since there is no emergency room or hospital around here...I'm your doctor. Rey is keeping Detective Smith outside until I make sure you're alright to be questioned."

"Hmmm. Unnn."

"Your gun?" Sandra held up her badge and HK P7, the semiautomatic that was lying on the counter. "No magazine?"

Claire pointed at the cupboard. Sandra stood up and checked. "Nothing here."

"Shii!" she got out painfully.

"Let's get the interview over quickly so you can pass out in comfort. Detective, she's ready for some questions, but with her jaw swollen up, she'll have to write her answers and you're in trouble there...her handwriting is atrocious."

Sandy switched places with an older man, someone ready to retire, Claire thought. While he got comfortable in the passenger seat across from where she was sitting, Claire's eyes sought Charlotte. It was dark outside so she saw nothing.

"ers Char..." she started painfully.

"She's alright. Which, leads me to think you're who they were after. Any reason you can think of?"

Shit! He get's right to the point.

She took the pad he handed her.

[No.]

"You're a cop...do you have any cases or contacts out on the street that would finger you with a grudge as a courier?"

[I work at a desk filing reports. No contact with any criminals.]

He nodded and wrote that down. "That's what your captain said. Any reason why he's pissed at you?"

Claire's eyebrows rose painfully in surprise. "ooo," she whispered.

"Okay. Did you recognize any of those characters?"

[No.] She did not want to point out that they were wearing masks, because if you were familiar with someone...their body language and the way they held a rifle would give them away.

"Well, you're one hell of a lucky person. If they had any more time...we would have been having this conversation in a hospital." He got up and nodded to her. "When you're able to speak...before you head home...I'd like to continue this interview. Until then, write down what happened and bring it with you."

Claire leaned back, closing her eyes and holding the ice to her aching jaw.

"Ready for your medicine?" Charlotte's voice asked.

Claire opened her eyes and could hear Teddy's excited bark. She could barely make out Charlotte's form. She was feeling sick and very tired.

"Come on. Drink this and then let's get you to bed."

How she got to bed and under the covers she would have to believe that it was with Charlotte's assistance.

Chapter 6

"We got the picture of their dog matched up..." Rey's voice came floating to her.

"Ooohh, gawds!" she groaned when her mental and physical awareness sharpened. Holding her face she swung her legs over the bed and held onto the small set of drawers that separated the two beds in the back. Taking a deep breath she focused on the figure that took a seat on the bed across from her. She did not look up. That would take too much effort at this time.

"Good afternoon, kiddo!" Sandy leaned over to touch her shoulder, handing her a glass of something. "Drink it. It will take the edge off most of your rotten feeling yet not make your thinking muddled."

"Charlotte?"

"She is out with a few of the guys, looking over the nudie's camp site. They left sometime after the helo's arrival and light show."

"Hey, Claire. Gawds but if we didn't have you...we'd be bored to death up here," Rey teased as he reached and gently touched the swollen jaw. His touch was so soft she was not aware of it.

"Teddie? What about the dog...where's Teddy?"

A small, pointed muzzle, with a shinny black nose peeked through Rey's legs at the mention of his name. Rey reached down and scratched his head. "I think he got the hell scared out of him when that German Sheppard growled back at him."

"Shit. They're not going to let me borrow their van and Teddy any more," Claire groaned.

"We got most of the mess cleaned up. Marge and Gail are more worried about you...as for the equipment, their department will pay for it," Sandy comforted.

Claire accepted the mirror Sandy handed to her. The bruise above her eye was a shiner. She looked like a battered woman. She turned her head to get a better view of an imprint of a ring on her face. "Did you get pictures of any of this?" she pointed at her face.

"Yeah. And a picture of the ring that did that damage to your face. Evidence," Rey answered. "And the condition they left the van. The Gang didn't want to come barging down and make things worse but they were filming with infrared and putting a fire under the butts of the local cops to make noise to break up the party."

Claire nodded. "So, which office are they from...local?"

"No. Texas. Sloppy work. They didn't bother to verify that you were who their snitch said you were. Their dog went over the van inside and out finding nothing...or I gathered they found nothing or they would have arrested you by now."

Claire rubbed her head that was aching. "Did you guys run a bug detector over this place?"

Rey nodded. He sat next to his wife, sliding an arm around her waist. "Found four. Even one in your toilet cabinet. Talk about sick."

"Let's see if we can get a handle on this. Can you start a story?" Sandra asked.

"You guys are going to really flip...but here it goes. A detective and his trainee went out for a routine check on a street snitch and the world changed dramatically for all of them," Claire started.

"Geeze, not that Sammie mess!" Rey let out explosively. As he was leaving the department for retirement, internal investigation was just wrapping up their investigation on Claire's partner that was shot in the head by a juvie he was questioning on the street.

"Okay, first question...what makes today's incident connect to that incident?" Sandra asked her patient, knowing that Claire still had nightmares about it and was the reason why she was satisfied with her desk job.

Claire pointed at her face. "That mark from the guys ring...it reminds me of Sammie's." Gently she touched her jaw where the bruise was in the outline of a design.

"This is a problem that keeps haunting us all," Rey remarked, sounding put out.

"There's no running from it," Sandra agreed.

"Well, I'm not running," Claire grumped at unfinished business through no fault of hers.

"Why do you have to run?" Charlotte asked as she stepped in sight. Kenny was behind her.

Claire was feeling the smallness of the van. "Hi, Charlotte, how are you?" she asked in concern of the bandages on her wrist.

"Okay." Charlotte stood back, letting Kenny move further in.

"Hey, Kenny," Claire nodded.

"Hey girl. You got quite a nasty there," he commented with a shake of his head.

"Why do you have to run?" Charlotte asked again.

"I'm not. Just some old stuff that may be, and I stress 'maybe', related to this raid."

Kenny hooted and then stopped when everyone looked at him. "Sorry. But I think they were after those jerks on the beach. They had so much shit I thought for sure they were dirty cops or idiot donkey's that stole from their dealer."

"Must have had you soiling your pants when that helo lit up the sky," Rey remarked.

"Not me. I was entertaining a babe I met at that bar...if you want to call it that. When I heard the helo overhead I just thought they were after them and glad I had an alibi."

"Were they there when you got back?"

"Gone when I got back this morning. I found the gang sifting through the sand like they knew what they were doing. Gil said he had been watching them for the park ranger."

"They buried some of their stash under the trash bin," Charlotte offered.

"We're not going to have another raid, are we?" Claire moaned.

"No, we're going to give it to the local PD," Rey told Kenny firmly.

"Why? They can't sell it or make any money on it?"

"Kenny," Rey told him warningly.

Kenny held his hands up. "Just kidding. Hell. You think I want to lose my visiting rights up here?"

"Good to hear it means a lot to you," Sandra mentioned.

“Yeah. It does. I’m going to go on up and talk to Becky and her unworthy husband,” he told them.

When he left Rey looked at Charlotte. “So, where is the stuff?”

“Under the bin waiting for the local PD to pick it up. Kenny called them when we were at the store.”

Rey nodded and smiled at Sandy. “Well, you about ready to go? We got a card game to get ready for.” He looked over at Claire. “Strip poker is out...wanna join us?”

“NO! You’ll empty my pockets!”

“I hear you have a lot in them since you won the office pot...what’s up with that? You never gamble.”

Sandy pulled his arm. “I’ll tell ya on the way down. She looks exhausted and those pills are going to knock her out...take those too.” She pointed to what was on the small table with a bottle of water. “Believe me when I say, you’ll feel so much better to sleep for one more day.”

Claire nodded. Her head, jaw and neck were aching more than her back and shoulders. She felt like she had been in a car wreck without her seat belt.

Chapter 7

Claire’s eyes fluttered open to daylight. She took a few moments to remember where she was, what had happened and feel that she was doing alright regardless of how battered she felt. Cautiously she rose. A note fluttered from the breeze that passed through the opened window slat.

Claire,

I’ve gone for a walk...I have a destination in mind. I will be back before dark. I left you a whistle. If you need anything...use it. You have friends hanging around just in case you need help.

Charlotte

Claire studied the handwriting for a few moments and the name. It was interesting that the writing was relaxed difficult to read until the name. It looked stiff and like she had to remember how to spell her name.

Maybe she was writing her name slower than she would normally so you can understand it, nutball. You already got a mystery...a deadly one if you don’t concentrate on it.

Claire got up and pulled the wall partitions out for her shower. She was not going to walk up the hill for a shower. She sat on the toilet and showered as best she could. She felt tired when she thought she should not. Turning forty made her a wimp. Surely a younger person could take a beating and carry on normally after a night of sleep...drugged sleep.

Claire laughed at herself. “Damn, woman. You should be happy this rough and tumble isn’t your bag.”

She rinsed the soap from her short hair and then finished up the rest of her washing quickly. She slid open the partition that led to their beds, picking up the towel and drying herself off. Her mind was wandering over nothing important. She turned, remembering she had forgotten to get some clean clothes.

Charlotte was standing in the passageway watching her. Claire stood very still; both women saying nothing and doing nothing for a timeless moment.

“Need some clothes?”

Claire nodded and dropped the towel on her bed. As casual as she could be, she walked towards the cabinet, giving Charlotte the choice of either brushing by her or backing up. Charlotte backed up to the cabinet and opened it for Claire. She handed Claire a pair of cleaned jeans. Glancing in the closet she could see that her stack of soiled clothing was now hung up and smelling fresh.

“I did the laundry...my one set of clothing was in need of washing.”

Claire stood close to Charlotte. “Who are you?” she asked softly.

Charlotte raised her eyebrows. She handed Claire a pair of socks, underwear and a T-shirt. “You keep asking me that.”

Claire took the clothes. “Yeah, because you don’t feel right!” she told her frustrated.

“Feel right? Oh, my. That’s a twist to an old one,” Charlotte told her dryly. “I used to hear that while someone was feeling me up.”

Claire returned to her bed and tossed the clothing on the bed. As she dressed her mind was on Charlotte’s comment. “Are you saying...that you’re a cross dresser?” she asked unbelievably.

“No. Been there, past that.”

“A transgender?”

Charlotte nodded.

Claire let out a whoosh. “I...usually...”

“Expecting the exaggerated feminine mannerisms?”

“Well...the only transgenders I know act like flaming queens,” Claire rushed out before she could censor herself. She was off balance and annoyed that this somehow got by her.

“Well...it’s like this...heterosexual women express femininity in different ways and degrees and depending on their critics, some don’t express much at all. And just like not all gay men are flaming queens, not all transgenders look like flawed effigies of effeminate women.”

Claire took a deep breath and waited a few moments not wanting to say something from a defensive position, which may be insensitive.

Charlotte sat on her bed and waited while Claire put on her shoes and socks, no doubt gathering herself. Charlotte had been through this countless times and was wondering how Claire would handle it. So far their relationship was not one based on attraction so she did not see anything more than discomfort on Claire’s part.

“Are you really a bounty hunter?” Claire asked, staring directly in her eyes.

Charlotte grinned at the unexpected question. “Yes.”

“And you really got jumped by the guy you were hunting...”

“Yes.”

“I guess your partner knows about you?”

“Third country cousin, as we say.”

“What does ...sorry...I...”

“Ask,” she told her firmly.

“What does...well I guess your family’s not happy with the surgery.”

“As a matter of fact...they helped pay for it.”

Claire blinked her eyes and backtracked on the conversation.

“When my father is now asked about his son, he feels he can honestly say ‘he’s dead,’ and not have to elaborate further. Makes his relationships at work and his church acceptable.”

“Oh...” Claire, breathed in, feeling pain for a loss she imagined Charlotte felt. Claire suspected she was either cycling or the drugs were making her too damn emotional.

Charlotte leaned forward and wiped one of the tears from Claire’s cheek. Claire leaned into the hand, feeling the warmth.

Charlotte leaned back. “So...what are you going to do about your situation?” Charlotte asked.

Claire gently cleared her throat. “I need to think about that.” She stood up and went to make coffee, needing to move. Her movements were focused on measuring two leveled spoons of Hazelnut coffee grounds into the filter, and the water that was filled exactly to the line and then poured into the well.

Leaning back on the toilet/shower door, she rubbed her sore jaw. “There has to be something more about that box,” she muttered more to herself than Charlotte who was watching her.

“If it was drugs, they were really after...they sure did miss hit,” Charlotte agreed. “Especially if the group on the beach were as open in displaying it as Kenny reported, or just there as a decoy.”

Claire looked over at her startled. “Yeah.” Then she let out an exasperated sigh. “Damn, but a game within a game. I just can’t believe someone put drugs in my art pack. They defiled something that’s....sacred to me.”

Charlotte’s lips twitched as she listened to her hostess, deciding teasing her about a backpack that could easily be replaced with another was not something she was ready to hear without feeling mocked. “So...it would have to be an intentional break into your residence to plant it,” she said instead.

Claire pulled out two cups and poured a nondairy creamer in hers and left Charlotte’s black. The two women took their usual seats and let the silence remain until they got settled.

“The last time I took it out was three weeks ago when I took a kayak out into the marsh in Irvine. If I am to believe that I was the intended mark...then there has to be something more in that box. I would go and retrieve it but now I’m so damn nervous about getting caught with it it’s gonna stay where it is for a while.” She sipped her coffee thinking about how it linked in with her fuzzy memory of the killing of her partner. She shook her head frustrated. The only connection was the ring.

Her eyes lifted to stare into a pale shade of green eyes that stared back at her. Time passed slowly as the two regarded each other.

Teddy’s yap announced someone he knew was approaching. Both women glanced out of the window. The two Bob’s were climbing up the river bed and approaching the van.

Claire opened the door and stepped out.

“Whooo,” Bobbie told her at the sight of her bruised face

“Ouch,” Bob empathized.

“Hey, guys. You met Charlotte?”

They nodded.

“We got some bad news girl. Sit down,” Bob told her in a mocking voice.

“Yeah? Break it to me gently,” Claire told him, holding her heart.

Bob put a voice scrambler on the picnic table. “Your little drug box had a 5 carat diamond in it.”

“How the hell did you find it?” Claire asked outraged. Then she leaned forward. “A diamond?! Five?” She leaned back trying to picture the size of it. “Isn’t that huge?”

“For the normal public crowd, yeah. One carat usually breaks a newly weds pocket at about \$17,000. Five goes for about \$300,000. This may go for more since it has good color.” Bobbie explained.

“I spotted you climbing a tree...a pretty funny sight too. You’re lucky I was there and found it,” Bob admitted with a grin.

“Because he’s so damn honest is why you’re lucky,” Bobbie pointed out. “After that damn FBI cluster fuck, no way are we going to get caught up in that and ruin our nice quiet retirement.”

His lover smiled. “Yeah. We like our retirement the way it is...boring.”

“Okay...okay. So what did you do with the damn jewel?”

“We gave it to the local PD. They nearly fainted when they saw the diamond and after their jeweler gave an appraisal...” Bob started to laugh.

“They were so damn nervous they had four-armed uniforms walk the jeweler over to his safe and had him lock it up. They’ll put an advertisement out for it and if no one claims it...they keep it.” Bobbie informed her.

“Shit,” Claire told them quietly. “I can see now all the gem dealers pulling out their receipts to prove it’s theirs...only, I have a feeling...that diamond was not part of a usual purchase.”

“Could be,” Bob agreed.

“You think those FBI agents were after it?” Charlotte asked the two men.

“If they were, that one diamond is not enough to get caught for a bad bust,” Claire informed them and they nodded in agreement.

“So...the question is where there is one will there be more?” Claire asked. “This is not making sense. For sure the box was placed in my pack for a reason...and not by me. Two scenarios can go from here. One is that the diamond was stolen by the person who was supposed to plant the box on me and he or she did not get a chance to remove the diamond. The other scenario is that the drugs and diamond were meant to be found on me...which means that diamond is recognizable by law enforcement or by someone who would sit up and take notice. So...I guess now that the diamond’s whereabouts has been posted...we wait and see. What did you tell the cops?”

“Rey knows the local chief. He did Rey a favor and put it down as a John Doe that turned it in only thinking drugs were in the box,” Bob said.

“He’ll keep Rey abreast of what’s happening. Your name did not come up at all...but I’m sure he suspects this has to do with the FBI bust,” Bobbie added.

“This is like a dream where I can’t figure out what the hell is important and what is just distraction,” Claire bemoaned.

“I know that pack of yours is only for your art, but could anyone have gotten to it?” Bob asked.

Claire shook her head. "I don't think so. I've been going over it in my head. Usually I'm vigilant about my belongings and would know if someone was lurking about them."

They were all silent for a while. The sky became overcast while they sat, but it usually did in late November. Only birds chirped with an occasional yell from fellow campers, disturbed the silence. They all focused on the one bird that was bouncing from one branch to another.

"What about the photographer?" Claire asked.

"ATF agent. Doris nearly broke his nose when she punched his camera in his face."

"ATF? FBI. What is going on?"

Both Bobs shook their heads. "He wouldn't say. We have some contacts still which we are prodding for those very questions. When we know, we'll let you know."

Claire stretched her legs out under the table. "Well...I guess I'm back to focusing on my vacation." She sighed. "Gawds... where do I begin?"

The others laughed.

"You are coming over tonight for cards?" Bobbie asked.

"Not me! Charlotte's the card shark."

"Charlotte? You're welcome to join the gang. We won't hold it against you that you're a bounty hunter. Just remember...we take no prisoners."

"Don't mind if I do. Where's the game?"

"At the store. Dinner is at five. Doris and Sandy said they would take care of it. The game commences right after. We don't use real money...don't want the local cops busting us for gambling," Bob joked.

"Uh huh," Charlotte commented, suspecting that was a lie.

When the two left Claire looked over at her. "I can loan you a twenty. That's all they bet per night."

"Thanks. I'll pay ya back."

"I'll take it out in trade," Claire said before she could stop it. "The van needs cleaning," she added hastily.

"I'm sure."

Chapter 8

Claire fell asleep with a movie running. She did not make it past the introduction. The shifting of the van woke her. Her heart beat rapidly as she struggled to wake up enough to gauge if it was danger or just Charlotte returning. Claire rose from her bed, turning on the small light so Charlotte could find her way. Unsteadily she moved over Teddy, and fell forward.

Claire stepped forward to stop her fall. Both were propelled backwards and Claire came to sit on the console that separated the two beds. Charlotte straightened herself with difficulty because Claire had her arms wrapped protectively around her. Claire could feel Charlotte's heart beat against her and for a moment was taken aback by thoughts that entailed more than a friendly embrace.

Instead, she helped right the swaying woman, so she could collapse on her bed.

“Ouch!” Charlotte mumbled as her head hit the panel.

“Did you have a good time?” Claire asked. However, soft snores came from Charlotte’s prone figure. Claire started to undress Charlotte. Her hands cupped her calf as she pulled off her loafer and then the other, carefully storing the shoes in the cupboard below the bed. She reached her hands up under the loose pant legs and pulled down her socks, noting how smooth her legs were. Her hands reached for the belt and they were stopped by two hands holding her wrists firmly.

“Thank you, but I can manage from here,” Charlotte told her sleepily.

Claire nodded, sinking back on her bed. “Good night, Charlotte,” she whispered.

“Uh huh,” a sleepy voice answered.

The next morning, Charlotte was gone. She left a note on the newly made bed. Claire knew it was newly made because the linen smelled fresh. Before reading the note Claire let Teddy out and made some coffee. She heated a bagel and covered it with sour cream. Carefully she set the bagel on a napkin on the table and her coffee. With a heavy heart, she sat at the small dinette and unfolded the note.

Claire,

Well, it looks like you have a good group of friends that will keep an eye out for you, so I’m heading back to my neck of the woods.

Thank you for the lift and for a nice place to stay while I regrouped.

C

She took a bite of her bagel and chewed it, swallowing it down with a mouthful of coffee. She slid the refolded note in her pocket and proceeded to collect her backpack. Water was added, a few snacks and she was ready. She got as far as the picnic table where she set the backpack on it and sat, watching the breeze shake a branch that hung over the stream she could not see.

Claire felt confused about her feelings for Charlotte. She did not know her long enough to consider her a friend. She was an acquaintance, she decided. So, why was she feeling depressed that she left? She liked solitude. Charlotte was not even her type...if she were not a...

Claire shifted on the bench, realizing that this unmentionable point had to do with her level of comfort in finding a place for Charlotte in her relationships.

What type of women did she go for anyway? Slim woman with dark short hair. Women that looked like young boys, she pointed out to herself cynically. However, now that she was older, she had been finding herself backing off from such liaisons, fearful not just because of STDs but because the young pickups could very well be young enough to be jail bait.

So, what the hell is it about Charlotte that I’m finding uncomfortable? Nothing. You’re just curious. Jeeze, the woman doesn’t even put out any vibes. For all you know she could be interested in men. Eh. There you go. So what the hell are you so nervous about? Nervous. Yeah. I guess that’s what this is about. Nervous? I don’t feel anything romantic for her. Gawds! I think, Claire, it’s about that time of the moon and you’re maudlin. Get out and draw something.

“Hey, Hanson! Yo! You there?”

Startled, she looked around for Gil. “Yeah,” she got out without much enthusiasm. “Yeah, I’m here, Gil,” she tried again louder.

He came from the path on the other side of the van. “Hey, gal. Ouch!” He grimaced at her face. “I saw a real nice place the other day. I bet you haven’t seen it yet,” he coaxed. “Come-on. Grab your kit... Hey, Teddy. I brought you some cookies,” he crooned to the fluffy dog that was bouncing around his legs.

The two headed up the path and then veered in a direction Claire seldom went in since it was where the gang usually collectively gathered. Their silence was punctuated with their breathing and footfalls. They made occasional stops as one or the other enjoyed something spotted on the trail.

“Well...” Gil gestured to a small, cleared area that flowers had taken root in, bursting into color amid the tangled broken branches of surrounding trees.

“Wow! How do they live surrounded by all this other stuff?” Claire promptly pulled out her sketch pad and pencils. While she sketched, Gil stretched his long legs out before him and sucked on his water.

“You wanna tell me what’s bothering ya?” he asked when Claire paused to turn the page to begin her second sketch.

“Nothing’s bothering me,” she told him preoccupied with her sketch.

“Then why were you sitting for about an hour muttering to yourself,” he objected.

She looked up at him annoyed. “Muttering to myself? What’s with the sensitive chit chat,” Claire demanded testily.

“I was worried that maybe with your history...don’t get your dander up, gal. Hear me out. Getting knocked around by masked men is not something that ordinarily happens to cops. It makes for nightmare fodder if you don’t talk about it.”

“Well, I’m not having a problem with it,” she replied tersely.

Gil nodded, but his look said he did not believe it.

“Listen, the first nightmare I have on that raid...you’ll be the first person I call to talk about it.”

“I’ve been in your shoes...fooling myself that I have other things to worry about and it was nothing to wake up in the dark with a gun pointed at me...but it did affect me. It nearly cost me my family before I got the notion to talk about it.”

“I can’t see you and Dolores carrying on a heart-to-heart chit chat without arguing.”

He nodded. “It sounds like arguing, but it’s the Italian blood in her. She doesn’t realize she’s shouting or that her excitement is so intense. What upsets her is if I back off and don’t hear her out. But it wasn’t her I went to at first...I went to my partner who was in the mist of a break up with his third wife and facing more child support payments.”

Claire laughed, appreciating the irony. “Really, Gil, I don’t have any subconscious problem with their method of dropping in on me. I just have a problem with why. It’s something my chief is going to be asking me and I don’t have an answer...and I’m not going to lie about the box...and the diamond.”

“You’re certainly in a rock and a hard place. Listen, and I’m really serious...if you need someone to talk to...use your phone or Email us. Don’t hold it in, gal.”

“Why do you feel we need this conversation? I’m curious,” she assured him, so that he would not think she was trying to change the subject...just slow it down so she could figure out what brought this concern out.

He looked down at the drawing of the one flower set in the middle of prickly bushes, then looked out at the actual patch of flowers.

“‘Cause you keep too many secrets and they’re gonna eat you alive. A cop that has no partner to talk to...that’s not a good sign for survival in the business.”

“Ah, Gil. That’s bullshit!”

“I was watching ya sit for over an hour just staring at the damn tree. I didn’t want to disturb you in case you were creating something real complicated,” he teased. “So, maybe ya got problems with your girlfriend?”

“Charlotte? She’s not my girlfriend,” she told him shocked.

“She’s not a friend?” he asked mockingly.

“Well...ya. I guess so. As long as you don’t read anything more into it. And I have no problems with her. I gave her a lift...gave her a place to stay for a while...we shared a raid...end of saga. She went back to her life. There is nothing going on with us, Gil.”

“Did she say goodbye?”

“Yeeesss,” she drew out sarcastically. “Come on, Gil. Out with it. What is this about? This can’t be a father to daughter talk because I never had any with my father. And it isn’t...”

“It’s a friend to a friend, Claire. You have one week to process what happened here and to figure out what you’re going to do with your life since you don’t want any help. One week to get whatever is bothering you about Charlotte or this raid out of your head.”

“Why?” she asked suspiciously not wanting to pursue his insistence that there was something between her and Charlotte.

“Because when you go back to work...you’re gonna be someone’s bait and I think you know that. If you quit the force...you’ll still be bait.” He gestured in the direction they had walked from. “That shit raid...someone screwed up and heads will be rolling.”

Claire pulled her knee up and rested her chin on it. “Yeah. If it’s someone in the department I guess I’ll know by who got the ax...though that could be me. The chief and I aren’t on friendly terms. As long as I’m a quiet little mouse that stays to my corner I don’t get any gripes from him.”

“Do you really want to live like that? I mean...there are a lot of people that don’t like their jobs and then there are a hell of a lot of people that do. You’re not that old. Have you tried to apply at another...okay. Well, what are you going to do when you get back then?”

“I honestly don’t know right now.” She rubbed her jaw and thought about what bothered her about the jewel the Bobs said was in the box. She looked over at Gil who was watching her. “Are you waiting for me to make a comment on that damn diamond?”

He nodded.

She shook her head. “I have no idea what it means. For all I know it could have been put in there by a courier that was stealing from his boss.” She sighed. “What bothers me the most is that damn ring that FBI agent had...it was just like Sammie’s. Sammie said he inherited his.” Claire started to laugh. “Maybe it’s like the Bush family in the skull and bones club.”

“Girl, don’t even go there,” Gil told her mockingly. “Let’s handle the lower level stuff. Now, I want you to consider this grandfather’s advice...I’ve been giving a lot of that lately...”

Claire rolled her eyes, but she knew Gil was hard core cop and retired or not...he was a man to listen to.

“Get your head on straight here. When you go back...you need to be sharp. You have good instincts and need to use them. We’ll be here for you should you get in over your head. You hear me? You’re family and we look after family.”

“Okay. Relax and don’t think about work...” she glanced at him. “Don’t dream and don’t have any more unannounced group meetings. I got it.”

Chapter 9

Claire drove her car slowly along the one way street looking for a parking space. It was three in the morning and she was hoping she would not have to park too far from her apartment.

She pulled into a space across the street from her building. She needed to remember that tomorrow was street cleaning and she had to move her car by nine. Instead of trying to take everything up she only took the box that had her laundry.

Tired felines uncurled from their sleep and yawned widely from their positions on the cat tree.

“Hey, guys. Ya miss me?” She dropped the box in the service porch and returned to boot up her PC. She was too wound up to sleep, besides she had napped at Gail and Marge’s after they pried everything from her. The contents in the mysterious box that was mailed to their address in her name, were a bunch of pencils with a local blind organization stamped on the sides. Claire insisted she did not donate any money to any organization that gave out pencils so they were all trying to figure out if it was some kind of code or message warning her about something. It got so silly she had laughed herself to sleep on their couch.

Suddenly Claire looked down at her PC’s CPU box that was against her leg. She leaned down and pressed her hand on the side. It was warm as if it had been on. When it came up, she moved to check her *I Spy* program to see what was happening while she was gone. It had been wiped clean until up to the day she left. The odd thing about that was, she had not been on the computer that day. She eagerly went into it and was about to launch the search when she thought better of it.

She jumped up and activated her bug device, taking it through the entire apartment. Nothing. She suspected someone would not be that obvious. Her phone was inspected carefully. She had a voice scrambler attached and she made sure it was on. She called a number she knew by heart.

“Hi...I’m fine. I would not have called this early if I didn’t know you get up about this time. I just got home and turned on my PC. It feels like it’s been on....Yeah. Everything is clean except for the day I left, only, that day I didn’t log on. I woke up late...I’d appreciate that. I got to be up by nine to move my car...good. See ya then. Bye and thanks.”

Assured her friend would log on to her PC and inspect it she restlessly walked around wondering what to do. Uncharacteristically she turned on the television and an old movie was on. She plopped on the couch and after a few moments fell asleep.

Her head was pounding...only it did not hurt. Claire bolted up right, disorientated for a moment.

Home!

Someone rang her bell.

Opening the door she was surprised to see Richard and then she remembered why she had called him early in the morning. Richard's parents, Gil and Doris had introduced the two because they had adopted her and felt she needed someone she could talk to. Before he became married to Kelly they went to gay bars together. Now Claire was a regular at their Bar-B-Qs and occasional holiday gatherings. Of Gil and Doris' three children, Richard was the only one that had not moved back home with his spouse. He was creative and recreated businesses when his services were no longer in demand. Right now he owned a computer business.

"Hey big sister, you look like shit," he kissed her on the cheek and pat her on the shoulder. "I logged on and put some serious filters on but I'm gonna pull out your hard drive." He had set her PC up on DSL and had security rights into her PC, mostly because she was always having problems with it and Richard remotely logged in to find out what was wrong with it. The last time was a virus that wiped out her entire hard drive.

"I'm going to make us some coffee," she told him as she started to shuffle to the kitchen.

"Better move your car first," he advised.

"Oh, that's right! Thanks. Be back in a bit," implying that it may take a while for her to find an available spot.

"Girl, you should just rent a room from us," he told her, knowing that she would want more than a room. It was a standing joke between because his spouse was very territorial.

She came back ten minutes later, breathless. "So...what did you find?"

"Don't know. I've removed your hard drive and put in a mirror of what you have. You are very lucky I kept this copy. You crash your PC more than anyone I know," he complained good naturedly.

"I bet Kelly does it more than me," she returned.

"Nope. He hates PCs. He does the housekeeping stuff, keeping the place clean and attractive and he cooks...but not the books," he added with a laugh. "Gawds. I had to shoo him out the other day...he was in one of those foppish moods of his. If I didn't know better, I would say he was on his period like you girls."

"He is a girl!" Claire laughed and then got serious. "Ah, Richard...do you know anything about transgenders?"

Richard looked at her over his glasses. "Hm. Met someone of interest in the woods?"

"I'm just curious."

"I don't know much about those sisters and brothers. Kelly would have a fit if I ever spoke to one of 'those' people. He feels threatened for some reason." Richard shrugged his shoulders in bafflement.

Claire shook her head also. "Want some coffee?"

"If you don't mind me taking it with me. I have to get to the shop and open up. I'm hiring a new gal," he grinned when Claire's eyebrows rose. "Gail recommended her. Got out of prison a few days ago. She is clean except for the drugs that she was caught with and sent away for. Nothing hard...marijuana."

"And here I thought it was because I heard Kelly complaining there was too much testosterone in the back room to be healthy."

Richard's face turned red, but he laughed. "Kelly sometimes gets in these insecure moods. So, when do you go back to work?"

"Tomorrow. Today I go and get a doctor's clearance."

"Why?"

"Because I got beat up on my vacation. He wants a licensed doctor to pass me. I guess he doesn't take Sandy as authority enough."

"All you do is sit at a desk," Richard objected.

"Hm. Well...maybe he wants to make sure when I file something, it goes in the right file." Her suspicion was that maybe he got his wish and she had been cleared to go back on the street. What a hell of a time to.

It was ten thirty and she found a parking space just vacated. She sprinted to the medical office not wanting to show her appreciation of being squeezed in by being late. However, she ended up waiting for forty five minutes. As Dr. Ellis would tell her, it took only one patient to back it up for everyone else.

Armed with Dr. Ellis's clean bill of health, including a comment to watch her cholesterol and a pamphlet on what to eat and not eat, she headed back to her apartment to take a nap.

Hardly anyone was home during the day so she was able to park right in front of her apartment. To start off her nap she took a nice warm bath, soaking in herbal oils and then curled up around her pillow.

Chapter 10

Claire jumped up staring around her disorientated. She had the weirdest dream. She looked around for her dream journal but remembered she locked it up before she went on vacation. She did not trust anyone with any of her journals. This one had Charlotte and her joining up in the forty's style of male clothing and knocking off a smugglers cartel that was looking for their lost bag of diamonds. When she looked in the bag there was only dust...no diamonds.

"King George," she whispered to the large fluffy orange tabby that was sitting at the foot of the bed ready to leap off. She suspected he was the cause of her waking. He hated the alarm and would wake her before it went off just so that she would turn it off quickly. Sure enough it started buzzing.

Off went King George into the frontroom.

Claire thumped it off and pulled off her bed covers. She changed into her running gear and managed to get out the front door without bumping into a doorway. She tried not to make too much noise as she ran down the stairs. Heading up the block, she cut to

the left to go to the high school track. There were the usual early morning runners, which she joined, setting her own pace. There were no conversations between the sunrise joggers, just a polite nod while everyone focused on their laps and pulse.

In the time she gave herself Claire was one lap short of what she did before her vacation. However, it was not something she concerned herself with. A hard lesson she learned was to not criticize herself or to humiliate herself to do better. She had thought it was part of her personality and suffered through bouts of depression when she did not meet her personal demands...very often unreasonable, as Sandy had shown her.

Smiling she tossed her sweaty clothing towards the laundry basket and started her shower. Since her laundered uniform was delivered to the office, she only had to bring her briefcase that usually carried some magazines she was catching up on, her badge and semi-automatic. She cursed silently. She left those last two items in the van. Dressing quickly in pressed jeans, starched white blouse with a brocade vest, she pulled on her black boots with a thud as her heel hit the sole. She looked at herself in the mirror deciding that if her uniform was not delivered she would be okay for the day in what she was wearing.

She dialed Marge's number as she jumped into her car. "Hey, girl. Did I wake you?...I need to get my stuff out of your glove compartment...Great. Have a nice day."

Gail and Marge would already be gone when she arrived, but Claire had a key to their house and could get the key to the van off the key holder in the kitchen. As she drove down the newly coated road she noticed the new speed bumps.

How did I miss those the other night? I must have really been tired.

She parked in their driveway and as she was letting herself into the backyard, she noticed a car driving by slowly. When she was back in her car and heading towards the freeway, she noticed the same car following her.

Just for the hell of it, she sped onto the freeway and after cutting between cars and getting off the freeway sooner than she would normally, she was pleased when she parked at the police station that the same car was idling in the parking lot. She was not imagining things.

She thumped her nose at whoever was in the car and took the stairs two at a time and then ducked into the chief's office. He was not in, so she left the doctor's clearance in his mail slot. She shoved her briefcase under her desk and went into the locker room to see if her newly pressed and cleaned uniform was hanging on her locker.

"Hey, Hudson!"

She turned to look at Monica who was dressed in civvies but wore her badge looped over her belt.

"Hi, Monica. How are ya doing?"

"Great! I got my promotion to detective finally."

"Detective?" she repeated stupidly. Sammie's boys club still occupied all the choice upper management positions, meaning they controlled who would be promoted and to where. They were not partial to women or to anyone not part of their 'old boys' network.

"Yep. You too." She looked around and then gestured for her to follow her into the women's rest room.

"Are you sure this is a good place to talk?" Claire asked suspiciously, because she had not had a chance to check it out herself.

"I checked it a few moments ago. Did you hear what happened while you were gone?"

"No."

"I thought the Chief had told you before you came back."

"I was just told to get a doctor's note saying I was healthy."

Monica looked at her curiously.

"Tell me what?" Claire prodded.

"The 'boys club' got busted...big time. All the detectives including all the brass, a few uniforms and a coroner. The chief is all that remains unscathed, so you can image all the upper positions that opened. It didn't take long before a lot of hopefuls from other precincts have been knocking on the chief's door looking to fill the brass positions. There's also word that Sammie isn't dead," she told her barely holding her excitement in.

Claire leaned against the sink so it could hold her up. Her voice echoed hollowly in the rest room. "Really?"

"Looks like all the rumors of you being...you know...are full of holes. Anyway, they're trying out four new detectives and you and I are trainees."

"Where's the chief? Usually he's in early." She wanted to escape the gossip and hear it from a more reliable source.

"Probably at the courthouse. He's been there everyday early in the morning talking with the judge and prosecutor. Roll call in five minutes...it's great not to have to wear that damn uniform."

"Yeah," Claire commented, switching her attention to the immediate. She was not sure if she could just show up in street clothes without the chief making it official.

However, Chief Dobbs was sitting at his desk reading her doctor's report, so Claire made a stop.

She knocked and got the wave-in.

"Hi, ya Chief. Heard you had some excitement while I was gone," she blurted this out before she could stop it. Chief Dobbs never was a casual person and she was by no means on any friendly basis with him.

"Sit down, Hudson," he gestured to a chair.

Claire closed the door and did so. She reminded herself that there was nothing he could do to make her miserable because she could always go somewhere else for a job.

"I want to know what happened on your vacation."

Claire, anticipating that pulled out a copy of what she had given to the detective up north. He accepted it and laid it on his desk.

"Tell me in your own words."

Oh, shit.

She missed roll call and felt thoroughly drained after recounting everything—from finding the box in her art pack to learning it contained more than drugs, and explaining the story given to the police.

She waited nervously wondering if he was going to fire her because she let the story Rey had given Chief Larmur go.

"I got a call from him. I'm sure he's going to be happy with the story as it is so he doesn't have to share whatever they can collect on the diamond with us." He handed

her a new badge in a leather holder. "You're promoted back to detective. You'll be teamed with our new hire, Detective Harrison Harvard. He's been around and will be able to give you a good foundation. He'll also give me an appraisal as to whether you're detective material. Find yourself a desk that's not being used. You're dismissed...and welcome back."

Automatically Claire nodded her head and thanked him and walked out, still in shock. *I'm Detective Hudson! Wow! Gotta tell the gang.*

Claire stopped before the room that had once been hers to share with others, but not feeling comfortable or welcomed. She wondered if she would feel different. Stepping over the threshold she realized the desks had been moved around. They were paired. There was only one person sitting at a desk. He was an older man that was frowning at what he was reading. By his hand were two bottled waters and an uneaten apple.

"Detective Harvard?" she held out her hand. He glanced up at her and reached over to grasp her hand, studying her carefully.

"Hudson, is it?"

"Yeah."

He pointed to the desk across from his. "Four cases for you to study." Then he pointed to his inbox. He had over a dozen. "We have a ways to go and this is just the beginning. Every drug case handled by the last bunch of detectives we've been given to make sure there aren't any discrepancies that will be challenged in court."

"Ohh, gawds," she muttered under her breath. Since she filed them, she was familiar with them but not the details.

It was lunch, by the sound of her stomach. She closed the file and looked over at Harrison Harvard, her partner. She was already liking him because he came over to see what she was taking notes on and grunted his agreement. The four files that she was given, she had already gone through and finished her seventh.

"Let's take these seven...after lunch and put our notes together and then hit the street. You got any contacts?" he asked as he held the door for her.

"No. Do you mind walking? There's a subway sandwich place two blocks up and a block from that the furniture store that was in two of these reports."

He nodded. "Good. I can do with walking."

Before they left, Claire dutifully filled her pockets with small envelopes, gloves, tweezers and a small brush that looked ratty. She slammed the file cabinet closed and followed Harrison out the building, stretching her legs to keep up with him.

As they munched on their sandwiches, Claire mentioned an odd thing she noticed. "How come we have drug dealers so close to the precinct? You think it was because the boys club was part of the gang?"

Harrison shook his head and finished his chewing. "Boys club. Everyone calls them the boys club. I've been meaning to ask why's that."

"They called themselves that. It was a joke about them being boy scouts and probably other inside jokes they didn't share with anyone on the outside."

"Must have been difficult for some of you that just wanted to be good cops."

“It’s something that happens in every law enforcement department around the world, Harrison. Someone in a uniform is an authority figure, and there are people that abuse it and some will get abused by it. And then there is the silence that is enforced within the nefarious membership. When you join the force, you learn right away what are the rules and if you don’t like them...you can quit and if you’re lucky, they haven’t red flagged your name so your application anywhere else will have a stain.”

Harrison nodded and followed her into the sandwich shop that had other cops getting their orders. Everyone nodded politely but Claire suspected from the shakeup, no one wanted to speak with anyone that they were not already buddies with, and she had always been isolated.

“Hm. The warehouse...they had four busts there that I’m not comfortable with. They have all been done based on information by a snitch by the name of ‘Booker’. I looked up Booker. He’s got an arrest record longer than most snitches. He has been getting off by reporting on ‘jail house confessions’. Some of them are outlandish, yet the judge has been letting the prosecutor use them. What if we have one of those Texas stinks where it turns out drugs were planted on these people?”

Harrison looked up at her, his grey blue eyes penetrating. However, she did not let her eyes waver.

“You are suggesting the judge and prosecutor are part of this?”

“I think everyone should be considered a suspect that touched these cases and we eliminate them if there is no evidence to support otherwise.”

“Okay,” he smiled amiably. “You take the judge.”

“Noo, problem.”

They walked to the furniture store, looking around them and putting what they saw in perspective of the detectives’ reports.

“Too bad we don’t have a drug dog,” Claire informed him, looking at the littered empty parking lot that two warehouse buildings shared.

He smiled and pulled his cell out and spoke into it for a short time, giving the address of the store. They waited for about thirty minutes, occupying themselves by poking around the area.

A SUV pulled up and a woman slid out, followed closely by a Heinz dog. His short tail was fully engaged as he sniffed at Harrison.

“Claire...my wife Ellen. Ellen - Claire, my partner.”

Claire’s face broke into a smile. “Hi, Ellen. Nice buddy you have there. Is he registered?”

“Hi, Claire. Not wearing my hubby out are you? We just moved into the area so Blueblood has a few more nose tests with the locals,” Ellen explained. “He’s registered with the FEDs though.” She leaned down to pat the happy dog’s head.

“Where did you move from?”

“Colorado. I got real lucky that this job opened. I’ve been away from the ocean for too long,” Harrison filled in.

“So, where’s the target?” Ellen asked.

“We’re not sure.”

She nodded and immediately got Blueblood into work mode. He stopped at a lot of places and each place the two marked with pieces of paper from their notebooks.

“What dya think?” Claire asked as she clicked another picture at where they marked around the spot. She leaned down and pushed whatever was on the ground into a small envelope, sealed it and wrote on it.

“I think next time we bring our car and we stock it with markers and a camera. Ellen can you give us a lift back to the office?”

When they returned twenty minutes later with more suitable equipment and their own camera, they found the entire place washed down, and not just with water. The smell of disinfectant came to their noses.

“Well, that takes care of the urine smell. So, looks like we have someone nervous. I’ll do the questioning...you just...”

“Watch the master at work...” Claire nodded.

Harrison was very good. He started by introducing himself and Claire and then after getting the response that no one spoke English he merely stated that was okay, he would take each one of them down to the PD where they had a translator. This got one person to be pushed forward that would translate for them. It was a young woman, Maria, the one man that seemed to be the leader introduced her as. She was frightened.

Harrison asked when people showed up for work and when the store opened. This took a long time since they were all not comfortable with giving that information. When they got past that, Harrison asked about who worked the floor and who worked the back. His questions were not meant to be difficult, but it was like pulling teeth with fingers.

“Hey, Harvard, let’s bring them down to the office. I’m tired of these games.”

By the looks on the men’s faces, she knew they understood English well enough to know what she was saying. But the language that came out of one of the men must have been aimed at the woman because she started to cry and would have ran except, Claire grabbed her arm. She pulled out her cell with the other.

“Hey, Amie. Can you send the big wagon?...Yep. About seven...good.” She slapped the cover closed and slid the phone in its holster.

“I should have said, my partner does not like bullshit. Don’t! On the floor and face down.” His voice went so deep that all the men froze that were about to scatter. Claire had her semi-automatic out and was pointing it to the ground, finger off the trigger, but she was ready, looking about her and keeping an eye on the woman and the men.

“I want to see a lawyer!” One of the men mumbled.

“It’s whatever INS has to offer,” Claire remarked.

Pandemonium broke out. The men rolled to their feet and regardless of what either detective yelled, disappeared between furniture and into the back. The only four they managed to keep, were the two that they managed to handcuff, the woman Claire held onto, and one of the escaping men that Harrison cold-cocked. He landed unconscious sprawled out over the top of a couch.

“Wow!” Harrison shook his hand out. “It doesn’t hurt as much when I wear gloves. Did anyone point out to you that it is against the law to yell fire in a crowded auditorium?”

“Yeah.”

He glanced up at the four uniformed police officers coming in with guns drawn.

“Hey, check out the back, will ya?” Harrison asked Cpl. Calagna.

He nodded and looked over to his partner, Officer Maenad. The two men moved into the back, guns drawn and in the classic cop stance, moved into a room that was not secured.

The other uniforms that entered the building Harrison gestured to. “We need these three taken and held for INS. We’ll take, Maria with us.”

Maria was weeping in the back of the cruiser. Harrison turned towards her and had to ask the same question three times.

“Maria, where do you live?”

“My, name is not Maria, it is Acela,” she finally got out.

“Acela, we have to move you and your family.”

“I have a daughter...she is with the babysitter, on Avenida. Where are you moving me?”

“A safe house. Who do you owe?” Harrison asked.

“Cesar. He...” she started to cry again.

“Probably has heard by now that she and the others have been picked up,” Harrison muttered. He picked up his cell phone and started making calls as they drove to a neighborhood that once had nice cottages with well cared for yards. Now the yards were as dry and dead as the lives of the people that filled every available space for rent that the landlord or original renter could collect. Children were playing in a small fenced in yard that had a faded playhouse and other toys a daycare center would have discarded for newer toys.

“Would it be bad for you if we got out of the car with you?” Claire asked.

“Just me being in this car is enough to cause trouble for me and my little one.”

“Okay. Harrison...”

“You stay behind the wheel ready to roll...I’ll go with her.”

A two year old girl with short curly blond hair and hazel eyes sat in her dark haired mother’s lap quietly as Claire followed Harrison’s directions. They stopped at four stores, one for luggage, one for adult clothes and then baby and the last was for food to eat on the train. Harrison would not tell Claire where the two were going, just that both would be safe. Harrison handed Acela a steno pad, colored pencils and crayons he had purchased. Whatever he said to her she nodded and then mother and child disappeared onto the train that was headed to Arizona.

“Is she going to be alright?” Claire asked worried.

“They both will be. There is someone on the train that will be keeping an eye out for them until they get to where they’ll be staying for a while.”

“So...you work for someone other than...”

“Let’s not go there...huh, detective,” he suggested as he rolled his window down.

They drove back to their part of town and past neighbors that were gang invested.

“Slow down,” Harrison directed her.

They were passing the site where Sammie was shot. There were a group of gang-types standing around, looking vigilant while carrying on conversations.

“I...I can’t...” Claire was starting to hyperventilate, and her hands gripped the steering wheel as she turned down a block before the corner and accelerated. However,

the street was not a through street, but there was an alley that would take them past the corner. She found that, how she did not know, but she kept on driving until hands were pulling at her tightly wound ones over the steering wheel.

“We’re fine. Let go. Come-on,” Harrison’s voice coaxed. “Come on. You don’t know if he died so you can let go of whatever you’re feeling about that.”

Claire pulled over to the side of the road and turned angrily towards Harrison. “If I want to feel like shit about something you know nothing about then I will! You and everyone else can go fuck yourselves! I hate that man! I’ve wasted five years of my life in a shitty desk job trying to survive something I can’t remember!” By then she was crying and Harrison just waited quietly.

“It must have been a lonely and hellish time,” he agreed when her sobs quieted.

“What did you want with them?” she asked pointedly of the gang members.

“I wanted to tell them there is an ordinance out that they can’t be gathering in groups larger than one,” he smiled.

“Really?”

“It was passed two days ago.”

“Well...” she thought. “I know they would be among the first to know it passed. Do you think they were just out there baiting us?” She turned the car around and headed back to the corner. Street patrols regularly passed the corner, so she was not sure why the guys were hanging out in full view.

Harrison waved his hand. “We’ll tackle your problem with that corner another day. Let’s get back to HQ.”

In the three-story parking structure next to the HQ offices, the PD shared the parking with the office clerks of the court. Claire found a slot between two PD SUVs. As the two were getting out of their car Claire remembered to bring the rifle that was locked in the trunk. She leaned back in the vehicle to press the button to release the trunk. The first shot pinged where she would have been standing outside of the driver’s side. The second shot was in the car if she hadn’t moved. Claire took off running and zig-zagging through the cars, hearing Harrison muttering that he was too old for this shit.

Her cell was ringing so she pulled it out, hoping it was Harrison.

[Call it in and start moving...see that sign across the street?]

“That’s nearly two miles away,” she whispered back. But something dropped from the sign.

[Go!]

She hung up and hit her thumb on the autodialer to HQ’s front desk’s phone. She knew by now the shots would have everyone inside the PD building hitting the ground.

[Desk!] an excited voice barked.

“We got a sniper out here! Took two shots at Harrison and me. We think he was on the girlie add sign. Something just dropped on the ground. Get us back up!”

[You got it!]

Claire climbed down the parking structure and then ran across a busy street as two black and white vehicles screeched around the street further up. She gestured to them to go down one more block which by their sudden turn in the direction of the back side of the sign’s yard she knew they got her message.

Harrison met her below the sign. Blood was everywhere but no body. They were joined by the chief and four new lieutenants.

“Did any of you shoot this sniper?”

Harrison glanced at the others then studied the fallen ladder on the side of the building. “Looks like they cut through the barbed wire blocking around access to the sign’s ladder. They probably cut themselves on the wire and that’s where the blood is from.”

“Get someone to follow the trail. It looks like they fled the scene,” the chief gestured to the others. “Hudson, get up there and check it out.”

“Hey, Hudson, watch your head!”

Great. I was just identified for whoever still may be up there. That blood doesn’t look that fresh to be the shooter.

They righted the ladder, letting her climb past the barbed wire. Blood smeared the rungs, and for a moment she had to fight back nausea. Quickly, she pulled on her gloves and drew her gun.

“Hudson, you’re not alone,” Harrison whispered up to her. “Our eyes on the roof spotted movement. They got a sniper rifle fixed on whatever is moving.”

Aww shit! She did not know when she would be attacked but she knew it would happen.

“Come on down, Hudson!” the chief called.

Momentarily she rested her forehead on her hand and looked up grateful. A barrel was pointed right at her face. Automatically she launched herself from the ladder, and a loud bang was close to her. A lot of other bangs sounded and Claire knew there would be no witness now.

She could hear the chief’s angry voice shouting at the officers to stop firing. She rolled onto her back and looked up at Harrison’s worried face.

She smiled and then shook her head. He offered her a hand.

“We have more bodies than we can handle,” he told her.

“Just as long as it’s not yours or mine...right now that is all I can handle.”

“Our three prisoners are dead...”

“What!”

“They got loose and made a run for it. One got hit by a bus, and the other two shot by the officers.”

“We need to go back to the furniture warehouse.”

He nodded.

The chief interrupted whatever else he was going to say. “I want the two of you to call it a day,” he glanced at his watch pointedly. “You’ve caused enough overtime for the forensic team. Let the other team take it from here. I want you two back at seven tomorrow. We’ll have INS and ATF and who knows who else that will want to speak to us about this fiasco so start working on those reports...and use spell check.”

They both nodded and headed once again to their office. Harrison instructed her on how he wanted ‘Maria’ handled. Since she was introduced to them as Maria that was how they would keep it. They also would say she was in a safe-house for protection.

“You know, the FEDs are going to want her, whether she can help them or not.”

“They won’t get her. She stays where she is. Their averages on this drug case have been not good enough to give me a vote of confidence that they can protect her.”

“Can you do that?”

“Well, this is where the politics between state and federal do clash. I guess we’re going to see just how far they want to push it.”

“Why would they want to threaten the life of an innocent?”

“Because they can.”

“Geeze, this is so depressing.”

“It would be if you think you’re helpless. You do what you can do at your level and let those at other levels do what they can. It’ll work out in the end,” he told her brightly.

“Right,” Claire responded sarcastically, “Good will triumph over evil.”

“It all depends on how you look at the glass of water.”

“Half full or half empty...what does that have to do with this mess?”

“How you approach this case is the type of answers you’ll get.”

“Oh, gawds,” she muttered under her breath. “I got a philosopher for a partner.” But her voice was sounding hopeful and she was surprised to feel a smile on her face.

Chapter 11

Claire stayed at work until eight that evening. She filled out her reports and then went into the basement where cases were filed. Cases she filed. That was where Harrison found her when he wanted to let her know he was leaving.

“What are you muttering?” Harrison asked, careful to make noise when he entered the room so as not to startle her.

“The files are all messed up!” she reported pissed off.

“What’s messed up?” he asked soothingly.

“I indexed and cross-referenced three names, and they all point to this file of Eric’s. I found it under another letter and the three other names are also missing.”

“Are they related to our case?”

“Yeah. One of the men killed today...his name rang a bell...” she held up an index card stained with food stuff but looking neatly typed. “I went back to my old desk and noticed that all my index cards were gone. I found them in the trash...but not in PD trash because that gets shredded...it was in the trash bin across the street the cafeteria uses.” She nodded at his perplexed look. “I knew my stuff was there this morning so it didn’t take much figuring out that if someone wanted to get rid of them, they would dump it where it wouldn’t be noticed. The shredder makes a lot of noise and curious people would notice.”

“Ah, cafeteria,” he said. “So, maybe some of the boys club is still around.”

“Yeah. They’re a pretty entrenched group, but don’t just focus on the males...there were a lot of female admirers in the civilian work force. Anyway, this one...Julio Ramirez. He was a street contact for three files...” she pointed to the desk that had a small stack of files on the desk. “I was under the impression that he was a naturalized American citizen. The report from today said he was an illegal and had no papers on him. So, how did anyone know he was Julio Romirez?”

Harrison looked at the files and then at Claire.

“I can file them someplace no one will look until tomorrow,” Claire told him.

Harrison looked around the room for cameras and found one, covered. He pointed at the camera.

"I have issues with being spied on," she explained as she gathered up the files and stored them under lost and found and locked the cabinet. She handed him the key and showed him that she had the other.

The two walked out into the parking lot together. Harrison watched as Claire checked her car out with a flash light and then got in. He borrowed Claire's flashlight and did the same to his vehicle.

"Yer gonna make me a real paranoid individual," he told her as he handed her the flashlight back.

"And your wife will love me for it because you'll live longer."

Claire parked two blocks away from her apartment and walked with all her senses in hyper mode. Elvis, the sleek black short-haired neighbor's cat that liked to spend his time outside mewling at whomever he could con a pat from, came running towards her.

"Hey Elvis. How are ya doing?" she cooed. Her own cats liked to go out only when she was home so that if they suddenly wanted in she was there to accommodate them.

Quietly she walked up the steps noting that the new neighbor downstairs had just turned off the light in the kitchen. It occurred to her that she should introduce herself to whoever it was, though the last time was disastrous. It turned out that they were two Pakistani men who were on a visa and worked for their uncle at the nearby liquor store. They mistook her friendliness to an invitation to 'she did not want to know what' and had them walking into her apartment when the door was left ajar for the cats. Not even a knock to announce themselves. She shook her head not wanting to revisit the harassment she suffered from them, knowing that all the other women around the block had been through it also. She was relieved when they moved. When they left abruptly the rental company was aghast at the filth and cockroaches left behind. It meant the four-plex needed to be fumigated. Claire shook her head again. She needed to let go of things like this. Why did she have to keep ruminating over unhappy things that are in the past?

"Hey, guys," she said to the two cats waiting at the door as she opened it. They wanted dinner, and since their babysitters, Gail and Maggie, had no reason to stop by today, Claire took care of the usual late-night routine: feed them wet food, then let them roam outside for a few hours while she unwound. And so it went.

It seemed she had just closed her eyes when her cell rang. She tried to shake her head from the remnants of a strange dream of Charlotte and register what was waking her. At first, she thought it was the alarm except she was on the couch still dressed and her cell was attached to her belt and that was beeping.

Groggily she checked the message. It was to call HQ.

"I hope this is good news," she muttered. "Hi, this is..." she smiled, "Detective Hudson. I have a call?"

[You're on call this week, Claire,] the apologetic voice of Leisa explained, [we have a fire and bodies. The chief wanted two detectives on the scene.]

"No problem, I haven't gotten to the good part of sleep yet," she answered now waking up.

[What part is that?] Leisa asked curious.

“Dreaming of a trip to Hawaii,” she answered promptly.

[I hear ya,] Leisa replied enthusiastically.

“Where do I go?”

[Largo and Kenebec.]

“Got it. Did you reach my partner?”

[Got his wife. Said she’ll roll him out in his PJs.] She giggled.

“Okay, bye.” She hung up and pursed her lips, thinking about the call. She needed a shower and fresh clothes. Feeling a lot better cleaned up, she was tucking her badge over her waist band when her cell went off.

“Yeah?”

[You up?]

“Yeah. Where are you?”

[Right below your apartment.]

“Be right down...and we got ta stop for coffee,” she whinned. Closing her cell she grabbed a leather coat and tried to close the front door without slamming it.

Below the unmarked PD SUV waited. Claire peeked in the front seat to make sure it was clear of Harrison’s gear and then checked the backseat. Ellen was in the back with Blueblood. She pulled opened the door excited.

“What’s going on?” She climbed up into the cab and quickly secured her seat belt. A cup of coffee and a bag was handed to her.

“Coffee and sugar fix. You’re gonna need all the strength you can get,” Harrison informed her.

“Hi, Ellen. Are you and Blueblood gonna make sure the SUV doesn’t get stolen?”

She laughed heartily. “That kind of neighborhood, huh? No. Big Blue and I are here officially this time. We have a drug bust where the drugs disappeared according to my handler.”

“All I got was a wake-up call and where to be,” she grumbled. Chewing on the plain cake donut, followed by a sip of coffee moved her mood to more sociable, liking the Harvard’s for their taking care of the small things.

“Hm.” Harrison pulled out his cell phone that was buzzing. “Yeah?...what’s the address?...No that’s okay. She’s with me.” He folded up his phone. “We’re all being sent to a secondary address...remember the house we picked Maria’s kid up at?”

“Ah, yeah. Multiple family dwellings, not just Hispanic but I would guess a lot of illegals.”

Where Harrison parked was in the middle of the street...it was the only place. The house was lit up with lights from squad cars and from a helicopter that was circling above. Blueblood’s nose was sniffing the air and his short tail was wagging enthusiastically.

“He loves the action,” Ellen explained.

Harrison assigned two uniforms to accompany and protect Ellen and her hound. He and Claire headed to the babysitter’s backyard where uniformed officers were questioning some locals.

It was dawn when they had found fifty thousand dollars bundled in twenties and what looked like a million-dollar stash of cocaine buried under the faded plastic playhouse.

Chapter 12

“Harrison, did you read this?” Claire tapped the first report that had been at the top of her small pile in her inbox.

He glanced up from the report he was frowning over. “Was it in that pile?”

“No. It was in my inbox. It’s on the fire at the furniture warehouse.”

“Give me a synopsis,” he told her taking a sip from his water bottle.

“A homeless person was parked in his camper in the back. His propane tank blew.”

“Interesting. We’ve identified the place as a place for drug dealing and this guy parks to spend the night. If he wasn’t involved in the sale of drugs, he would have been run off...so, did the officers get an ID on this homeless person?

“Yeah.” She studied the report, looking for why this report did not sit right with her. “Madison and Hynes were the officers that took the report. They gave the name Jesus Rodriguez.” *What is with the name that seems familiar?*

“How’s our other half doing?” he asked.

She glanced at the note left on her desk. “They went out to speak with Juan Ramirez.” She pulled another file from her stack in her inbox. She was on the last page of notes when she began to see double. She rubbed her eyes and tiredly kept them closed. While closed she tried to think how the name she was stumbling over looked a lot like some of the other names only...

“Shit!” Quickly she wrote all the names she could think of that were involved with drugs.

Harrison got up and stood over her as she wrote. She underlined each name on the first letter of their name and the last two letters of their surname. They were the same.

“Well...” He sat on the edge of her desk. “What does that tell us?”

“A coincidence? I mean...there are a lot of Mexican surnames that don’t end in ‘ez’ but is it a coincidence that there are so many that have their first names beginning with the letter J too?”

Claire tapped the report. “And another thing...all of these characters have been turned over to INS and none of them saw jail time except in the detention before their transportation back over the border.”

“So, someone in INS is part of this? It would mean that the arresting officers may not be involved since they put the names down, or they are part of it and...” He sighed and went back to his desk. “Gawds, Hudson! This is a big freakin’ mess.”

“For it to have gone on as long as it has...” she became silent as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She turned to face the door which her back was too. She hated this desk.

Officer Jackson was at the door. “Hey, Hudson. The chief asked if you can move your things out of the locker. Since you’re not wearing a uniform anymore he wants to make it available to one of the rookies.”

Claire nodded. “Right.” She got to her feet and headed to the locker room. She lifted the lock and let it rest in the palm of her hand, thinking of the years she had been

hating to have to change into a uniform. Spinning the lock she thought she heard a click from inside of her locker. Throwing herself down on the floor an explosion blew over her.

Chapter 13

Claire blinked a few times and felt a straw pressed to her lips. Thirstily she sucked on the straw.

“Hey, there girl.” A warm hand gripped hers and squeezed.

“Sandy?”

“Yep.”

“I feel like shit...but, I’ve been a lot worse off,” she mumbled.

“Yep. That you have.”

“How many days have I been out?”

“Four. You really got clocked this time. You’re going to have to take a week off to make sure you aren’t seeing double.”

“I hope they got the other guy.”

“Nope.”

“What’s the word out on the street?”

“There’s a contract out on you. Once you get out of here,” she leaned down close to her ear, “we’re taking you up to the camp grounds so you can recoup in safety.”

“Hmm,” was all she could get out before she fell back to sleep.

When Claire’s eyes opened, this time she was wide awake and worried for her cats. She had just gotten back from a two week vacation and already she was not home much.

“Hi. Want to try and get up?”

She turned her head. “Hey, Gil. Gawds. Did I bring you down from your mountain retreat?”

“Hell, girl. You’re giving us some fodder for our book. We gotta get ya outta here. Yer presence is stressing the hospital staff worse than a SARs patient.”

“Hm. Can I take a shower first and put something on that doesn’t air my privates out?”

“Clothes are right there. Need help?”

“No.”

“I’ll wait outside the door. Holler if ya need help,” he warned.

“I can wash and dress myself,” she replied firmly.

“Yeah, but I bet if it were a female offering, you’d be quick in taking up the offer,” he replied as he shut the door behind him.

“Damn right,” she muttered as she slid off the edge of the bed and held on while her legs stiffened up to hold her weight. Gil’s presence and rushing her spoke volumes of her peril in staying at the hospital.

The ride to El Dorado camp grounds was quiet...not even the radio played in the background. Claire slept. She woke up with a sudden concern of where was she planning on sleeping?

"Where am I going to be shacking up?"

"We got ya one of them tents," he told her.

"You have got to be kidding. You are...right?" After being in the Roadtrek with heat warming her when it was cool, the idea of sleeping in a cold tent was not as welcoming as it had been. This was winter, late November, and it rained.

"Yeah." He laughed, chuckled and then started laughing again.

"Just don't laugh us into an accident," Claire warned him. "So?"

"You're gonna be staying in that shack..."

"What shack?" *Oh, please don't say that shack that is ready to come at the first storm and has all sorts of bugs and spiders living in it.*

"We fixed up the shack near the restrooms."

"It's got a full house! Bugs, snakes, spiders and other things I don't want to get to know," she objected.

"Looks can be deceiving...and for your benefit...it does look like shit. There's one of those bomb shelters beneath it. You'll be safe and comfy."

"Will I get a nice clean bed?"

"Yep."

"With sheets, pillowcase, and clean fluffy pillows..."

"Gawds, girl but you are picky," he mocked.

"Just what am I going to do besides staring at spider webs and looking for their friends?"

"We got some books...and ya need rest, Hudson. Let the real cops do the work. In this operation, you're the bait, girl. All ya gotta do is just be there and we'll do the rest."

"Do I get to wear camouflage and dyke boots?" she asked.

"Do you wanta catch them or not?"

"I want to pull Sammie's balls off," she flexed her left hand for Gil to see.

"Ouch. Just talking about it hurts," he replied.

"What makes you think they're going to track me here when a bunch of retired cops are going to be waiting to take pot shots at them?"

"You have something they need."

Claire looked at him as if he were nuts. "Gil, they've been trying to kill me..."

"That's just recently. The FEEBs say that there are two cousins in Mexico, one wants information you have and the other doesn't want anyone to have it."

"Just what information is that?"

"I don't know for sure. In your report you never mentioned the names of the two cops that came to your assistance when your partner was shot...do you remember their faces?"

"No. I...don't even remember if I wrote a report. Damn, I don't want to even go back to that shooting." A sinking feeling hit her in the pit of her stomach, and it was the same feeling she got when she realized she left a 'must pay' bill on the kitchen table.

"Oh."

"Oh...oh, what? Girl, any partner you get is going to be a frustrated man!"

“There were two uniformed guys I didn’t recognize at Julio’s Tacos and Burritos stand. I asked Sammie what city they were from and he told me in a round about way to mind my own business.”

“And were they the ones at the scene?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember anything that happened...after the taco stand.”

“Too much stinks about Sammie’s case. You heard they think he’s still alive, huh?”

“Yeah. I heard. They identified his finger prints with someone that is wearing a different face.” She shook her head, “There is nothing about this case...then and now, that I believe.”

Claire suddenly released her seat belt and slid down to the floor, ignoring her protesting body. “Go! Go!”

Gil did as he was told, catching a glimpse of someone fixing a tire on the road not far from the entrance to the campground. He passed the entrance and kept going around the bend.

“Girl, you’re not getting paranoid now, are ya?” But his voice belied his skepticism.

“Stop, right here,” she told him from her cramped position. In her mind she pictured the curve and the open space along the beach from the movement of the vehicle.

When the car stopped, she waited for Gil’s all clear signal.

“Go, I don’t see anyone. Where ya gonna be?”

“I’ll let ya know.”

“Wait! Take this.” He quickly pulled his wallet out and stuffed what he had into her hand. “Later,” he waved her out.

She ran across the two-way highway, trusting that in the dark she would be able to tell when a car approached. For self preservation she needed to be less predictable, whether she was bait or not. Right now she did not trust anyone so she considered herself on her own.

The road was rough and uneven and the pounding waves in the near distance divided her attention. Suddenly she stopped. *This is predictable. I’m heading for the beach to hang around the camp. If I get knocked off, I’ll be another woman camping alone and killed by an unknown.*

It was early the next morning when Claire was dropped off near her apartment. Her ride was with two women, sisters, who were on their way to a friend’s wedding in a nearby city. Claire felt extremely lucky, and used that as confirmation that her decision to return to her apartment was right.

As tired as she was, she managed to notice odd things before she got to her block. There were more people at the all night store on the corner, buying coffee. Standing in the dark, she wondered what she was going to do now.

“So, what do plan on doing?” Charlotte’s voice asked.

“Jeeze!” Claire turned around her heart pumping and her stomach doing some funny things she was not familiar with. Charlotte’s shadowed figure, looking different in a cap pulled down over her face, leather coat zipped up, and jeans with western boots.

“Coffee?” Charlotte offered her a cup.

Claire shook her head. She was wired between the pills she was given to take and lack of sleep.

“What are you doing here?” Claire asked worriedly. *The woman never seems to dress like I expect her to.*

“I was nearby and heard you were injured. I stopped by at the hospital and they said you signed yourself out. I thought I would stick around since by the radio dispatches you were reported missing.”

“Yeah. Gil said it was better if I get out of there.” She frowned at the police car that pulled up at the store. The milling customers gathered around the car.

“What’s that all about?” she asked suspiciously as if Charlotte would know.

“I don’t know. I was kinda curious myself that when I went to your place a lot of people were interested.”

“How did you get my address?”

“Your driver’s license,” she admitted. “I have a car and a hotel. Want a place to crash?”

“If you don’t mind. I feel like shit.”

Movement beside her had one green eye opening reluctantly and then the other. Claire knew exactly where she was. She rolled over to see a dressed Charlotte walking into the bathroom. She closed her eyes for a moment.

“Good morning!” she heard.

“Morning? Is it the same morning I went to bed?”

“Yeah. I’m going to go out and get you something to eat. Do you have any preference?”

“No sugar and no coffee. My stomach doesn’t feel too good.”

“Okay. I’ll be back...will you still be here?”

“Unless someone’s chasing me...but I don’t think anyone knows I’m here,” she said. “Since I don’t feel that well, I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

“Okay. The only person I expect is the cleaning woman. I don’t want to put out a sign just incase someone is watching this place...”

“What’ll she do if she finds a woman sleeping in your bed?”

“Probably the same thing if she finds a man...turns around and leaves.” The door closed behind her.

Claire pulled the covers back over her and curled up into a ball feeling like she was coming down with the flu.

It only seemed like she closed her eyes when she was being shaken awake. Her head hurt and her body was achy. She felt worse.

“You don’t look too good, but we’ve got to get out of here. I want you to get out of those clothes...underwear too. Change into these.”

Claire groaned and with help moved her arms out of her shirt and into another.

“I need to take my pills...maybe I’ll feel better,” Claire muttered.

“Who gave you these?” Charlotte was rolling the bottle between her fingers reading the contents and who proscribed them.

“They were waiting for me at the nurse’s station when I signed out.”

“Never heard of that happening,” Charlotte told her worried. “Usually they have you going to the pharmacy.”

The two stumbled down the inside hall and into the next section of rooms so that they were on the other side of the large hotel. Her cousin, Bo was waiting with engine running.

He jumped out and quickly grabbed the sagging Claire. He laid her on the seat in the back and hopped into the passenger seat as his cousin was already pulling out.

“Cuz, this place is getting crowded with suits. Something is coming down. And she looks like shit. You give her something?”

“No. I think someone screwed with her pills. Do we know a doc around here?”

“Does she have anything to do with our contract?” he asked.

“Yeah. She’s the reason he’s in town.”

“Shit! Cuz, how come we keep getting the dangerous ones? What happened to the surveillance ones Ken and Jackson gets, or just watching out for over zealous fans?”

“Because...”

“Hell, partner, good thing I like this job.”

“Good thing,” she agreed with him. “Now, about the doctor. We can’t drive all over town with a sick friend.”

His eyebrows lifted as he pulled out his cell phone. “Friend. That’s right...she picked you up after you let Pritchett get one over on you,” he laughed heartily. “Hey, Connie...yeah?...Nope, we’re heading towards Hollywood...sure. The reason I’m calling, do we know a doctor we can drop in on?...No, not that guy. He gives our boss the creeps...” he laughed and gave a wink at Charlotte who scowled. Her eyes went to the rearview mirror and then back to the front. “Okay...thanks...No, she’s gonna need blood tests to see if she’s been poisoned....Yeah, that kind....thanks. I’ll see ya later,” he gave a kissing sound and hung up.

“When are you two gonna tie the knot?” Charlotte asked as she glanced at the traffic she was pulling into.

“The only thing that got tied were her tubes. She’s got this thing about over-population. Besides, did you know that this government taxes married couples? How sick is that? They should tax people on the number of kids they have...that should cut down on over population. Doc Williams.”

“Sounds like she’s got you on her election platform. Okay. I’m gonna pull in over there and get in the back with her. She’s not looking too good.”

Claire drifted in and out. She heard parts of Charlotte and her partner’s conversation but had no interest in it. Her headache was making her stomach that was empty want to heave its lining. If someone put her out of her misery right now, she would be very grateful, and promise not to haunt them.

Claire could hear someone practicing the piano from far away. She moved her legs and turned over. Cracking open an eye, and then the other, she found herself in a large four poster bed. A window was opened, letting in a breeze that smelled of rain, fluttering the curtains. There was a tree outside the window. Not close enough to use to get into the room but it gave her an idea that she was on the second floor of someone’s residence.

The faint sound of a phone ringing stopped the piano practice. Claire decided to see if she could get up and find out where she was.

Her first visit was to the toilet. By testing doors she found what she was looking for. She used the door jam to balance and nearly screamed when a strange looking womanish man was standing in the doorway.

"Well...it looks like you're up," he told her tartly. He had one hand on his hip and the other to his throat. He studied her critically. "I'll let Charlotte know. Clothes are in the closet." He pointed with a long painted nail to one of the doors she had checked behind before finding the bathroom. "They'll fit you fair enough." With that the man left, closing the door firmly behind him. His clothing was color coordinated down to the shoes. If she were type-casting, she would peg him as a queen. Claire had a distinct feeling he did not like her.

The clothes in the closet were not to her taste. A soft knock had her turning around. "Come-in," she invited.

Charlotte peeked in and saw her still wearing her T-shirt stepped in. "I don't think there is anything that will suit you in there. It's Connie's spare clothing. A bit too fem, don't you think?"

"Yeah...that was Connie that...?"

Charlotte laughed. "No, that's Connie's brother. He helps out between his other jobs. Connie is our secretary, office manager, and baby sitter."

Claire wanted to ask about the baby sitting but instead changed the subject. "So...the last I remember, you and your cousin were taking me to a doctor you knew..."

"Doc Stan Williams. Come-on. While I fill you in...I'll show you to Bo's closet. He doesn't throw away anything and once he was about your size."

"I heard that!" a voice hollered up the stairs. "Tell the damn truth! I don't want anyone thinking any of them pink or yellow shirts were mine!"

"They were mine," she laughed.

"Why do you keep them?"

"Because..."

The clothes were a little larger than her size, but they weren't frilly and they were comfortable.

"You lost weight, huh?"

"Yeah. If you're hungry...Cookie prepared tuna sandwiches. Just follow the stairs down and to the left. Holler if you get lost."

"Charlotte?"

"Huh?"

"Where am I?"

"Somewhere safe. I'll show you around when you change. You probably want to bathe too..."

"Yeah," Claire laughed catching a whiff of herself.

"I bought you some new underwear...I don't share," she smiled. "In the bureau...and Claire...don't use the phone yet, okay?"

"Alright."

An hour later, Claire slowly descended the stairs studying both sides of the staircase. There was another floor above the one she was on. The foyer was like a

waiting room with comfortable chairs and a couch between interesting statues that reminded her of Thailand's mythical creatures.

She followed the voices past a dinning table that was littered with maps, photos and...

"Hi. You're looking a whole lot better. My names Ned Blake...except to friends it's Bo." He grinned, "And since I carried you on up those stairs, you can call me Bo. I didn't get a chance to thank you for picking Charlotte up on the stretch of road of no name I can remember."

She shook hands with the tall dark-haired man. He had the same eyes as Charlotte. His grip was firm and from the muscular outline beneath his T-shirt, he lifted weights.

"Sure," she got out hesitantly. "Claire Hudson."

"Come-on in the kitchen. Nellie is going to show us how to make tuna melts the way his momma made them."

Nellie was the man who she had met earlier...or sort of did. He was camping it up for a small group of people. Charlotte was not around.

"Everyone...this is Claire...Claire that Nellie over there...and she's proud of it...is Janey when she's dressed and Mack..."

That earned Ned a glare and a grape tossed at him that he was not able to avoid. It hit him right between the eyes.

Everyone was in good humor.

"Hi, Claire, I'm Connie." A beautiful woman reached over to shake her hand. Her body was sculpted like Bo's. He leaned over and gave her a kiss, which she returned. She turned to the other two men. "That's Kenny with the blond hair, and Jackson Brown with the shaved head. He's a part-time actor so every now and then, stare at him so he thinks he's something special."

"Geish! When are you gonna drop that?" he shook his head embarrassed.

"He was supposed to be body guarding a celeb. A couple of preadolescent girls blinked at him and asked him for his autograph, and he fell for it hook, line and sinker. So, while glittery-starry eyed boy is being distracted, one of them slips by him and gets to his assignment...with spray paint," Nellie explained while cutting small cheese wedges with pickles on a cutting board and pausing to wave his knife at Jackson.

"She's hot about it because Jackson's supposed to be on a leash," Bo explained with a grin. "As in, a committed relationship."

"Well, if *my* man was here, he would defend my honor," Nellie mimicked Jackson's deeper voice.

Breakfast was filling and busy with quips - trite as well as witty. By the time the dishes were cleaned and everyone broke off to go to wherever they spent their day, Charlotte was back, dressed in a silk suit with heels and jewelry to match. Janey stopped long enough to give her a close perusal.

"Not bitch enough, but if you have to run you have to dress with the right shoes," she hummed.

"Where are we going?" Claire quickly asked, hoping the flush she felt at seeing Charlotte dressed up was not too obvious.

"The library and then the courthouse. Research first and then we'll know what to ask for," she clarified.

Research in a library was not a skill she practiced in her detective work, but she realized it would be worthwhile to practice.

"I can't remember this," Claire hissed at the absorbed Charlotte that was printing the account of the death of a local cop by a drug dealer.

Studying the old photo of the corner she avoided driving by in the photo was black and white. There were dark stains on the sidewalk. The lines underneath the photo reported it was the murdered detective's blood.

"Shot in the chest? I thought they said it was a head shot? What...it says I was unconscious in the car! What is this bullshit?"

"Maybe that was why they didn't want you to read the account...hmm. The cops that saved your life are Malone and Gavotte. Ever heard of them?"

"No. Saved my life," she muttered unbelieving. She turned back to her computer and went over the City Herald to see what they had to say. Nothing on the front page. The article of a police officer shot was in the obituaries. It did not say why he died. She went through a few days later where she saw a bigger space devoted to the investigation of the shooting but focused on why she did not come to her partner's rescue. She looked for the reporter and found there was no by-line. It was just filler for column space.

"Did you find anything?" Charlotte asked logging off her PC. She reached for the sheets in the printer and paused.

Claire logged off and rose from her chair, thinking Charlotte was ready to go. Instead Charlotte pulled on Claire's arm and dragged her around a stack of books and then around another. Charlotte gestured for Claire to remain where she was while she moved to another part of the bookcases that had a view of the computers they were just at. Claire did not recognize the face, but the way he moved was familiar. He looked around the room and then sat at the PC she had been sitting at. It was times like these that she wished she had a spy scope. However, Charlotte had one. They watched the figure as he used the PC and then wrote something down and closed the browser and moved off to another part of the library.

Charlotte gestured for her to exit the library. Claire did as she was told, not knowing what she was planning. Charlotte met her outside and quickly started walking the long way around to the parking lot.

"Were we followed?" Claire asked worried.

"No. But it makes sense that he would want to refresh his memory," she said knowingly.

"Who?"

"Your ex-partner...the one that was supposed to have been shot."

Claire stopped in her tracks, suddenly putting what was familiar about the figure into place. Features were different but...who told her that he had his face changed?

She ran to catch up with Charlotte who was running across the street to make the light.

"So, why are we going to the courthouse?"

"Public records...to see who owns the property that the drugs you and your new partner found the other day."

“How do you know so much about this case? I mean, don’t get me wrong...gawds that did come out sounding ungrateful...”

“I’m a bounty hunter and I have a contract out on a Stewart and Samuel James.”

Charlotte looked both ways and ran across the street and then up the stairs in her heels as if she were comfortable in them. Claire raced beside her.

“They were twins,” Charlotte continued as she pulled open the door to the court of records. “His mother divorced Mr. James and remarried a Kowalski and then later a Millard and then Rodriguez. However, the twins changed their names more times than their mother. Stewart James graduated from the police academy as Samuel Thompson but Samuel’s fingerprints were used to get him into the academy. Stewart’s prints were registered as an excon. His death was an execution by a pissed off partner.”

“I don’t get it. Why all that trouble to be a cop...or detective?” Claire asked in an undertone as they moved into a line.

“What better place to keep an eye on illegal drug movements and gangs that are you’re competition?”

Chapter 14

Charlotte spread out over the long table a map. Ken got small tabs and Connie walked in with water and glared at everyone that was about to ask for something else to drink.

Claire slid in the chair near the door exhausted and dozed off. Her thoughts were busy as she tried to figure out where Maria Rodriguez, the James twins mother, whose only serious job was to be married, got the money to buy four of the apartment complexes in Los Angeles and rent primarily to immigrants.

Claire sat up suddenly in the chair. *Oh shit! Emanuel Rodriguez is or was the FBI director of San Diego. Sammie called him dad in a conversation he had with... with... damn! Who was the conversation with?*

The others around the table looked up startled.

“Are you alright?” Charlotte asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I just momentarily felt like I left the water running at my place,” she sheepishly lied.

“Are you doing okay, Claire? You’re looking a bit pale.”

“Yeah, just tired. Sorry, I bothered you.” She snuggled back into the comfortable chair and went back to sleep.

It was dark outside when Charlotte prodded Claire gently. “Hey, a nice comfortable bed is waiting for you up stairs,” she coaxed. “I’m going to be going out, but Connie will be here if you need anything.”

“Huh?” Claire groggily opened her eyes, glancing around her trying to place where she was. What moments ago were vivid images, faded to remnants of desire and then even they were nothing. It left her hot and frustrated.

A tone sounded and Claire could hear footsteps in other rooms suddenly moving rapidly in different directions. Charlotte did not need to tell Claire trouble was afoot.

“Come on. Everyone knows what to do,” she explained as she went to a wall and pushed on a panel. The proverbial hidden door opened and both women disappeared into the corridor behind it, clicking shut behind them. Tiny lights lit up in the floor and these Charlotte followed as fast as Claire could go. They went downstairs and into a room that had a small elevator lift that took them into a garage. Before entering Charlotte checked to make sure it was secured and then gestured for Claire to get in the passenger side of a stretch limo. A uniform coat and cap were tossed across her lap. She gathered she was to dress in them.

When Charlotte joined her, she was dressed in a similar chauffeur’s uniform coat and cap, her hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail. The garage door opened and she pulled out, carefully maneuvering onto the road that ran behind someone’s property and then crossed onto their driveway and out the gates to the adjoining property.

Claire glanced in the mirror. She was startled to see Janey on the other side of the glassed partition, dressed in drag and talking to someone on her cell with dramatic gestures of her hand. The partition was soundproof.

Charlotte was also talking softly to someone on her hands-free cell. The ride was not for long. They dropped Janey and her suitcase off at the back of a club where she was greeted by a tuxedoed good looking man who was also the guard to the backdoor. Charlotte’s next stop was to a hamburger stand where she picked up an order for one person.

“Janey has this tradition of ordering a plain fishwich before each show,” Charlotte explained. “And here are our relief drivers.”

Two people slid into the back seat.

“Toss your coat and hat into the back. We’ll switch at the corner,” Charlotte explained as drove through busy streets with people glancing at the car. Near the bar they made the switch where there were a lot of limos waiting to let off their passengers.

“What’s going on?”

“Lorraine was staffing the front gate, and she recognized a few gang members hanging around outside. Since we usually don’t get those type of visitors we guessed it was you they are interested in. Since I don’t want my neighbors upset with us, I thought it would be better if we left.”

“How are they going to know I left...and how did they know I was there?”

“Maybe it was just a lucky guess, or they had someone following Sammie and you were spotted at the library. When we left the house, about five cars with passengers left the estate.”

“That would certainly frustrate them. I would have followed the limo.”

Twenty minutes later, they were street bums. She was grateful the clothes did not stink of urine though they did smell used. It did not help when Charlotte explained as she sprayed something on her that it was merely a manufactured scent called sweat. Claire was suspicious and walked awkwardly as she hated to feel the dirty clothing against her skin.

“That’s good. You’re walking about right. Hunch over...no that’s too much. Can’t you remember how a street person walks?”

“Oh. Right.”

“Don’t think about how unpleasant this is...you’re in a role. Be the street person.”

Charlotte was looking like a street person. Even her fingers were blackened with dirt and were reddened.

“Where are we going?” she asked softly, as Charlotte by-passed a convenient shopping cart that she thought all street people sought to own, and then remembered some cities passed laws against that.

“To a house that is being rented by one of those names on a witness list. She’s attractive enough to have a visitor from the landlord.”

“Your mark is the landlord?”

“Maybe.”

The house was not in a nice neighborhood, though it could be if people on the block would start watering their lawns and remove the debris and battered vehicles from their yards. By the light of the few street lamps, Claire could see a ragged awning that once hung above the front window, lying in dying bushes. The porch looked like someone was interested enough in its appearance to have placed a couch on it to watch whoever passed by. Charlotte joined a figure that was leaning against a building across the street. Businesses were on one side and residences were on the other. The business looked about as beat up as the residences.

“What do you have?” Charlotte asked.

“Agent Emanuel Rodriguez is in there. Our target joined him about an hour ago.”

“Anyone else?”

He shook his head. “We got a thermal on the house...just them two. The woman that’s usually there left early this morning and hasn’t returned.”

“That’s not good. Anyone follow her?”

He smiled. “Yolanda. She called in about five minutes ago. The woman’s still in an apartment that her sister lives in.”

“We’ll take this. Go back to Yolanda and give her a break. Then take one yourself. And find out what’s going on in that apartment. Stay in touch.”

He nodded and left.

“Just how much are you getting for his capture?”

“A million and a half.”

Claire’s eyes opened wide. “Why so damn much?”

“Haven’t you wondered about the diamond and why it may be so important that an FBI team risked blowing their neutrality?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t been able to come up with anything and then I got busy with daily work.”

Charlotte laughed, “That happens. It’s diamonds...big huge D diamonds with all four cs making the grade. Four groups invested in that collection. You probably remember hearing about it...eight years ago. A cool billion dollar heist. The package arrived in New York under guard. A custom officer at the airport wanted the suitcase of the dealer opened. A rather interesting request but the case was not x-rayable. So on the surface, it was a valid request. They took the case to a secured room...everyone, including the custom agent was found dead. Case of diamonds missing.”

“I do remember that. I was a rookie. Didn’t they suspect a gas was released when the case was opened?”

“That was one of the theories. The twins were believed to have been involved. The FBI was called in and Agent Rodriguez, who just so happens to specialize in gems, was part of the team the bureau put together. Supposedly, a few of these diamonds showed up in Canada, Europe and parts of South America but they disappeared almost as soon as they appeared. Purchased by buyers that did not want to be identified. All the more suspicious to my way of thinking...but that’s not our concern.”

“So, Sammie and his brother Stewart had to disappear because someone found out they were involved?”

“They both claimed they had nothing to do with the heist. However, Stewart was executed and Samuel disappeared...so someone important didn’t believe them. The papers reported the shooting wrong. I can only guess that whoever gave them the information did it on purpose...which leads me to think the Bureau, who has that much pull. Samuel, who had a face change resurfaced, and I think it was because of that diamond you had in the box. Someone that has access to the stolen diamonds had one stolen from him and to smuggle it past guards, put it in the box with the drugs, that were meant to be planted on you. That messenger and would be thief, Jesus Juarez. You know him as John Cesar.”

There’s that j and ez. “So, why were they planting it on me?”

“I don’t know. Someone keeps trying to involve you in something you don’t seem to want to be involved with. It leads to interesting speculation.”

Claire glared at her. “I’m not interested...if I can think of how to make them go away and leave me alone...I would. So, how did you get involved?”

“My significant other was the custom agent.”

“I’m sorry.”

Charlotte shook her head looking amused. “Nothing to be sorry about. Our relationship wasn’t so hot after my operation. He was always spending money he didn’t have on drag Queen’s.”

Charlotte was quiet for a while, studying the house they had under surveillance. “He left enough information for me to figure out he was just a messenger and a foolish one at that. If his apartment had not been trashed I would have not taken his role seriously. Anyway, since everything was pointing out here and there was a nice reward for getting the brains and diamonds, I moved out here and set up house and a business.”

“You don’t own that house, do you?”

“Nope. Rent it. Got a good deal,” she smiled over at Claire.

Claire was about to say something when she heard a car door slam.

A car moved out from the back of the house they were watching. Two people were in the front seat. Charlotte looked at the heat signatures. No one was in the house but there were two in the car. Not trusting what she was seeing she moved casually along the walk and between another building. She flashed the thermal reader at the garage in the back.

“Gottcha!”

Twenty minutes later, another car, a VW bug, came rolling down the driveway with one person driving but the heat signature was two people.

“What are we going to chase them with?” Claire asked frantically.

“A motorcycle. Are you okay with that?”

She was already moving to another building where a motorcycle was leaning against a wall. There were two helmets which Claire grabbed and plopped on top of her head. It was a black cap and very loose. She hopped onto the back as Charlotte started it and pulled quickly onto the road.

“Two huh?”

“Always carry a spare!” Charlotte yelled back at her as she banked the bike and followed the VW two blocks away. Claire wrapped one arm around Charlotte and held on. Charlotte reached into her coat and handed Claire her cell phone. “Just say pick up,” she shouted back.

“Pickup!” she dutifully shouted. She handed the cell back to Charlotte. The bike banked around another corner as she raced ahead of the VW taking a turn that put them on Santa Monica Blvd.

The building Charlotte took them to was a used clothing store. They went in the back way and thankfully, Charlotte let her change into something clean.

Changed, Charlotte headed to a coffee shop where she gestured for Claire to sit while she ordered coffee and something to eat. It was late at night and either the bar crowd or after the theater crowd were gathering.

“Are we waiting for someone?”

“Yeah. Your tail. Whoever it is, is good.”

“Great. Just why am I being tailed if we have already figured out what this is all about?”

“Because your business is not my business. You know or have something that someone wants and perhaps another does not want to be known. My business just happens to overlap yours.”

“Ah. Well I’m grateful of the overlap. I’m learning more from you than had I not...wait a minute. Are you saying it was a coincidence that we met?”

“Yeah. And I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Why are we trying to find out who is tailing me?”

“Don’t you want to meet him or her and ask why?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, someone is shooting at me. This is a public place. Someone could get hurt.”

“Okay, you’re nervous. Let’s go inside then. I could use the restroom.”

“Right. Me too.”

As they moved through the crowd to the restrooms, Claire was wondering about how much money Charlotte was spending to collect her million and a half. They were separated in the crowd as a group got up to leave. Claire continued her way to the restroom and by the time Charlotte was in line, there were plenty of women between them.

When Claire finished with her business, she went to wait outside for Charlotte. She stood in front of the entrance and spotted two familiar faces scanning the customers at the same time she saw Charlotte exit the restroom. There were too many people between them. Claire panicked when one of the men reached inside his coat. She disappeared out the door and ran.

Two hours later, Claire arrived back at her apartment. She climbed the back stairs. Both cats were meowing their dismay at her long absence.

“Hello lovelies, has Maggie and Gail been good babysitters? Quickly she fed them and while glancing around for anything that she may trip over in the dark, she made her way into her bedroom. She packed her favorite backpack with clothing and food. Checked her toy box and pulled out NV goggles and a warm jacket with many pockets.

She picked up her car keys and exited out the front. She suspected everyone watching the place knew she was in. Her car had a ticket on it, which she tossed onto the car seat. At the Seven Eleven only one person was buying coffee...someone she recognized as on his way to a part time job. She pulled the GPS off her tail pipe and attached it to the other vehicle in the lot. While she waited for the other car's driver to get back in and take off, she chewed the sandwich she had purchased. As the other driver took off, she followed for a block and peeled off in another direction. Northern California was where she thought she would head. Before she went too far, she stopped at a friend whose spare key she had to her vacation vehicle. It was a beat up Datsun pickup that saw many trips up to the mountains and had a lot of engine replacements. The reason why Judy liked it was because no one wanted to steal it and it could carry camping equipment and supplies without worrying about putting dents or scratches in it. She pulled out the pickup and replaced hers in the garage.

Claire entertained hiding out in Judy's cabin, but she did not know just what she was getting any of her friends into and who was being watched and who was watching. What she needed to do was think about the story Charlotte told her. Some of it was true but she wondered how much of it was just filler and where did they think she was going to lead them?

At a rest stop she pulled over and took a nap. The sound of rain woke her. She did not feel refreshed. In her dreams everyone was chasing her with a piece of paper demanding some of the reward money.

“Well, Claire, you wanted to be a detective so figure it out,” she told herself firmly. She sipped from the water bottle as she thought about what to do. “Well, the restroom would be a good start.” She glanced out of the fogged windows wanting to locate where she was. She turned on the truck's engine to drive closer to the restrooms when she noticed a light come on behind her and then it quickly went out.

“Oh, hell! Well, if they're following me I can at least give them a merry chase with an empty bladder.” She pulled her truck close to the restrooms, as she planned it and ran through the rain. Her business was done quickly and she was hoping too quick for anyone to bug the truck.

Quickly she was on the freeway, heading for the nearest gas station. In the light she planned on looking the truck over. Someone knew her too well and was a step ahead of her. Was it Charlotte and her team? They were very organized. Were they bounty hunters and also into collecting the jewels?

“I'll bet it's the jewels. They think I know where the jewels are. If so damn many people believe that...including Sammie...Sammie would know about Judy's truck. So...but why would Sammie tail me? If he had the jewels he would know where he hid them...unless it was his brother that hid them and he thinks...oh gawds. Who all knows about me having Judy's keys. Hm. The girls, Rey and Sandy, the cat sitter, Angie...no, Sammie wouldn't know. I didn't start going up to Judy's until...Sandy suggested I needed to get away and relax because of the investigation.”

She shook her head slowly. Suspicion was now covering everyone. She pulled over to the first gas station and parked the truck in a space far from the store. Pulling out her backpack, she ran through the rain towards the underpass. Cold and wet, huddling under the freeway bridge, she pulled out her NV binoculars and watched the truck. About an hour passed, according to her watch, when someone approached it. About thirty minutes later it was dragged onto a tow truck. An official ATF vehicle pulled up and four people got out and began their investigation. It did not last long and the vehicle headed in her direction, but by then she was gone.

Claire looked over the room she was in. It was three walls standing and a partial roof. It was an abandoned equipment shack that gave her just enough shelter. Day was just beginning to break and she was somewhere in San Bernardino along the freeway that had empty stretches of land that farms and ranches covered. There were pockets where urban dwellings were trying to take over. She could see the outline of a handful of horses as they plodded towards a barn in the near distance.

She curled up in a corner after making sure she was not disturbing anything that may crawl or bite her. The truck driver that had given her a ride was an old man that listened to country western CDs and loved to sing along. He was on his way home and was barreling along when he noticed she was walking in the rain. His rig was waiting for her up the road and she was very suspicious of him. He let her inspect the truck before he got into the cab. After singing along for two CDs with him, she fell asleep. A gentle shake woke her up where he was going to be going in another direction. With some food and two cans of caffeinated soft drinks, she was back on the road.

Picking up a stick she drew in the dirt, trying to relax and let her legs and shoulders ease from tension.

Okay, you've had a few days to think about this...what have you come up with? Don't hold back...just say anything that comes to mind. She sighed heavily when nothing happened.

Let's start with the most current events. I go on vacation...get setup and knocked around...go back home...get nearly blown away...I'm rescued and taken to...

She rubbed her head irritated. "Let's go to something I do know..." *Meeting with Charlotte was not planned. That means...if she's part of this...she's new. Okay...who could have put the box in my stuff? Who has a key to my apartment? Hm. Mr. Neighborhood Watch John would know who was up there that was unusual. Gawds...holy shit! Everyone at the camp knew...they're all retired police officers so they knew there was a reward out...wait a minute. So, did they really turn over the diamond with the drugs over to the local PD?*

She needed to find a pay phone...and change. She also needed to get some sleep.

It must be the diamonds. Everyone is looking to me so I must know something about their location. But what? I gotta back track to that day. Start with the morning. Okay. He was an asshole as usual...yeah...but nervous. I told Sandy he was nervous, and...I think I told the investigators he was...who were the cops investigating? I didn't recognize them. I was not giving them a clear story...and that's when Sandy intervened... She's an MD and they would take her recommendations.

Finally, Claire slept and again her dream became frantic with people chasing around. At first she thought they were chasing her but she was also chasing...it was a piece of paper they were all chasing. It turned into a dove and flew away.

When Claire woke the wind was blowing and dark clouds were again moving in. She had changed into dry clothes and now her other clothes were fluttering in the breeze. Rolling them up, she put the damp clothes into her bag. Gazing out over the road she was going to be taking she tried to determine how far she would get before it started to rain again. In the distance she could see a black and white taking a turn into a dirt road. It was enough to send her sprinting across the road and through the barbwire. Her run was further onto the ranch land where a car would not be able to go. A muddy gully was hopped over and into the side of dripping trees she used as she made her way further inland. Why she was running she did not give any thought to. What she wanted to do was call Gail.

She reconnected with a back road further along her walk and grabbed a lift from a trucker that just unloaded bales of hay to a cattle ranch. He seemed pleased to have someone to talk to and he talked. If she dozed off during his chatter he did not stop. When she did wake she noticed that he had not stopped where she asked him. Suspicious she did not say anything but rather waited until he slowed at one of the truck check points. She jumped out before he could say anything. Since he did not stop she suspected he was nervous about whatever he had planned.

A husband-and-wife team gave her a lift to the next city where she got a hotel room and showered, washed her clothes and got a decent eight hours of sleep. Her dreams were even more frantic. When she got up, she found a pay phone and called Gail's cell.

[Girl! You have everyone going nuts! Tell me you're okay!]

"I'm not okay. Listen Gail, do you remember the diamond heist that took place at the New York airport seven or eight years ago?"

[Hm. No. Not really. You found some diamonds? Give them back and get home.]

"I wish on all counts. I think though, someone thinks I have some evidence of their whereabouts or know where they are."

[Why would you know? I thought you were in the service seven years ago?]

"I was just out and doing my PD rookie thing. You remember I told you about the bounty hunter? Well she said Sammie and his twin were involved in that heist and there is over a million dollar reward for finding Sammie and or the diamonds."

[Oh, girl. I don't like the way this is sounding. I thought you met her walking along a lonely stretch of the road?]

"I did. No one knew I was going to take that route because I didn't until I got a report of the traffic problems if I took the usual route. I think she just happened to be in the right place at the right time, and she jumped at the opportunity of a ride."

[You need to change phones or something.]

"I'll call ya later. ATF is tailing me for some reason."

She purchased a bus ticket and seat where she could sleep without worrying about being seen through a window. It was dark when the bus pulled into the Los Angeles station. She made a phone call to an ex-military girlfriend that lived in Long Beach. From there she took a tram into the city.

Emma was heavier and very happy. Her soulmate's children were young enough to love back anyone that loved them. The couple gave her the kid's room and the kids got to sleep in the front room in their sleeping bags, which was an adventure for them. Emma worked for the city as a prosecutor and her lover worked in the law office library, going to school at night to be a computer designer.

Claire was not a stranger to Emma and Tammy. She just could not understand their relationship. Tammy was bisexual and went out with men every now and then and with Emma's blessing. As long as Tammy did not spend the night and did her once a month thing, besides taking precautions, Emma considered it was part of who Tammy was and she could live with it.

"So, you look like shit, soldier. Are you being chased by someone's significant other that caught you where you shouldn't be?" Emma teased as she helped change the bedding on her borrowed bunk bed.

"Hm. I don't have that rich of a sexual life. I like the safe things. I'm more the type that gets shit faced all in love and then jumps in a relationship."

"Now that may take a long time. Do you test your batteries now and then to make sure things are working?" Tammy teased.

"Ha. Do you two still have that toy box..."

"Toy box!" a little voice piped up.

"You can't play with my toys," another small voice told her seriously. "You can play with Dora's. She's got more than me."

"Girls," warned Emma. "If I hear that again...we're going through both your toys and count out ten and whatever is left goes to children that don't have toys."

That set off two wails.

"Emma. Don't stress them like this before bedtime," Tammy groaned. "They're gonna have nightmares."

Tammy went into the front room to calm the kids and Emma sat on the made bed and patted for Claire to sit.

"What happened?"

"I'm being hunted. I know ATF is one. It's left over from Sammie's business..."

"That jerk-off partner of yours? I thought he was dead?"

"Supposedly it was his evil twin," she started, and then quickly recounted for Emma what she had been through the last few months. "So, it seems," she finished, "before he died, he parted some important information my way, which I have not the slightest idea of what that is, and everyone now thinks I'm going to lead them to whatever it is."

"ATF," she shook her head. "Now that they're part of the Fed's homeland group, no telling who's really after you. They may just happen to have the resources needed and were sent."

"Great."

"You don't have any idea what it is?"

"Nope. But there are a lot of people trying to get me to remember and some people dropping hints in my lap. Exploding ones too."

Emma shook her head. "Well, get some sleep. If you leave early..." she pulled out the envelope and some other papers Claire had given her to keep for her.

“Thanks. I hope you aren’t in my profile. So far, they’ve been one step ahead of me. Always knew what I was going to do...even using Judy’s truck.”

Emma shook her head, frowning. “I think what they may have done is just covered everything they could think of and waited. As for us,” she thought about it for a few moments. “We only met in bars and kept real cool on base. No one from the bar was from the base. We left the service at different times...had different friends and only met once after we were discharged.”

“I’ve changed clothes, watches, backpack, phones...I can’t think of anything else that tells them where I’m going.”

“GPS probably. Go to sleep. A fresh mind will figure it out.”

Chapter 15

The next morning, Claire was on the family PC doing research on the three letters in the witnesses names. A diamond advertisement popped up, among other things. EZ purchases. J. J. Muller. The seller had a store in two major shopping malls one in L. A. and the other in New York.

*Muller...that was one of the names listed that lost out with the diamond theft.
Hm. J and EZ. So, what is going on here?*

After two changes in public transportation Claire was at the L.A. mall wondering if this was a ridiculous search. She purchased coffee, bagel and newspaper and setup to watch the store that had not opened yet. The shop was on a corner so the back door was within her view also.

She was reading the want ads when her eyes glanced up to see Manuel Rodriguez and the guy whom everyone was calling Sammie walk to the closed store. The owner was opening up.

Claire’s interest was finding out from someone why she was on a hit list. She decided a soft person would be easier to find that out from, and the owner of the diamond store was that person.

An hour later the two left the diamond store through the back door. She caught two people interested in their departure. She leaned back and continued with her reading.

“You’re like that cat that keeps coming back, you know that?” Charlotte’s voice told her.

“Leave me alone,” grumbled Claire as she paged back to another part of the newspaper she had no interest in.

“You’re a distraction in our contract.”

Claire put the newspaper down and frowned at the young man dressed in a suit. For more than a few heart beats she studied the image before her.

“If you were after who you said you were after...why haven’t you picked him up?”

“It’s a complicated case.”

“I don’t know where the damn diamonds are.”

“I agree....”

“I’m not interested in your business. I’m out on workman’s comp and I’m just sipping coffee and...”

“And doing nothing to get yourself shot at?”

For some reason Charlotte was annoying her. However, when the man that opened up the store exited through the back door, Claire rose quickly to follow.

“I’ve got a car...what to borrow it?”

“Damn. Alright,” she grumped.

“Not that way. He’s parked over in the lot this way. He’s just making sure he’s not followed.”

“Well, I want to follow him,” Claire told her and was on his heels with only four teens separating them on the escalator up to the next level. He quickly entered another store. A toy store.

He was given two stuffed animals, and he headed to the hamburger place. There he was met by a woman and her two children. Each child was given the stuffed animals. The man dutifully kissed the woman on the cheek and paid for their food. Though he sat with them while they ate breakfast Claire did not feel any connection between him and the family. Even the kids and woman had no connection.

“Maybe the babysitter...” Claire mumbled as she moved to the exit, anticipating the woman’s departure.

“Hm.” Charlotte pulled out her cell. “Hey, Bo. How’s your mark?”

[They know they’re being followed.]

“Something stinks here. Break off and come on back to the mall. Let Tommy pick it up.”

[Okay.]

“At the east side behind the bookstore,” she instructed before signing off.

“I don’t think that guy you’ve pegged for Sammie is Sammie,” Claire told her.

“Have you ever thought that someone is using you to put pressure on the remaining gang to flush out the real holder of the diamonds?”

“His fingerprints match Samuel James.”

The Hummer came around the corner and picked the two up.

“Hi, Bo,” Claire greeted him.

“Hi ya, Girl. You’re back, huh? You two have something going?”

“See that woman with the two kids? We’re following her.” Charlotte told him, ignoring his comment.

An hour later they were back to Avenida where Acela’s daughter spent at a childcare. The same one they dug up drugs from under the child’s playhouse.

“Look familiar?” Charlotte asked.

“How do you know so much about this place?”

“I read the morning and evening paper. Research,” Charlotte told her looking over at Bo. He nodded at her and went around the block. As he drove around the block Charlotte pulled off her suit and had another costume in place.

She looked back at Claire and lifted a brow in askance.

“Ready whenever you are. This Hummer would be conspicuous. But, shouldn’t we be calling in someone legal?”

“Who would that be?”

Claire sighed. “I have no idea. You guys are the one’s that keep popping up...and the ATF.”

As the two women walked to the block they could see a familiar car turn the corner and pull in front of the childcare house.

The same two men from the mall stepped out of the car and with bodyguards.

"Oh, shit!" Charlotte muttered. "We have to keep walking." *Oh, joy. More cars. Okay, two white woman walking down a neighborhood that is Hispanic. We should be talking.* "You looked nice in the suit. Dress up often?"

Charlotte turned to her startled, and then smiled at the blush that crept up Claire's neck. "Whatever the job calls for."

"Uh, huh. Well..." *oh gawds Claire don't say something stupid.* "One of these evenings, if you want to go out to a play or something..." she stumbled.

"One of these evenings," Charlotte agreed. The conversation took them past the house with the four cars accompanied with bodyguards. "I just happen to have tickets to a performance...this Thursday night. Would you like to go?"

"Thursday, yeah. You driving or me?"

"I'll drive. Come this way," Charlotte turned left and crossed the street. She walked up the street passing the back of the house, not looking at Claire as she spoke. Claire could see her speaking to someone else and guessed it was via her cell-hands free. Her voice was so low Claire did not hear so her thoughts went to Thursday night.

Claire's feet thumped up the sidewalk, feeling like her heart. She was confused about her feelings about Charlotte. Thoughts of Charlotte dressed as a man excited her, and thinking about her in other apparel was also distracting. It was as if a part of her knew she was attracted to Charlotte, but... She did not want to think about why she was hesitant to think of her beyond a friend consciously...her dreams were another matter.

"We'll watch from up there," Charlotte pointed to the top of the slope. "My guess is every agency involved will be here in a few moments.

They could both hear the muffled sound of a helo. They made it to the top just as black and whites and unmarked cars burst out of various streets and converged on the house.

"A daylight raid. I've only seen them on television," Claire mentioned. "You turned them in, so what's your take?"

"I told you, we get a million and a half for turning one of the James in. ATF said we have officially turned him in and we were asked to step back and let them handle the rest."

"Only..."

"Only nothing. We get our cut. If my guess is right...inside of those stuffed animals, I bet are parts of a map to the treasure."

"The diamonds. I still don't know where I fit in this mess," she grumbled.

Police dogs were barking and people were yelling from the houses below them.

"Come-on. Let's go find our ride. What to come back with me? One of our contacts will be calling in what happened."

"No, just drop me off at my place...if you don't mind."

"Nope."

A less noticeable vehicle, than the Hum V stopped in front of them and both women got in. Claire sat in the back.

Tiredly Claire unlocked her door and looked around for the cats. Neither was around.

“Hey, guys! I’m home. Want dinner?” She kicked her shoes off and picked them up to take into the bedroom. Her reflexes prevented the door from doing any damage and her roll back to kick the person behind her would have worked except a third person hit her with a billy club in the gut and she was down.

A fist grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up. The guy’s breath stunk. His accent was too thick for her to understand. She knew he was Hispanic and by the tattoo across his forehead, she knew unless someone rescued her soon, she was going to be dead.

The question was asked again and still she could not make out what was being asked. Another voice asked. “Where’s the map, bitch.”

She shook her head and got a kick in her ribs. She dropped to the floor and was beginning to wonder if maybe she was in the wrong type of job.

The voice she could understand asked again, “We’re gonna pound on you bitch until you tell us where the fuckin’ map is.”

“I...don’t know what map.”

“Your partner gave it to you before he was shot...”

She shook her head. Her head was pulled up and one of the faces she remembered as a cop at the stand the day Sammie was shot.

“He showed it to me at the stand...he didn’t have it where he got shot. We checked the car, bitch and it wasn’t there. That means you’ve got it.”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember anything...” She was hit again and this brought tears to her eyes and stars, and then blackness.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” Charlotte’s voice asked.

Claire groaned and opened one eye when she felt the weight behind her shift and step on her hip. King George clambered over her and went to curl up against Charlotte who was sitting in the reading chair.

“I’m doing better. I’m starting to wake up in my own apartment.”

“Not for long. I’m afraid your landlord is evicting you. Too much noise.”

“Shit.”

“There’s always a bright side to seemingly bad news.”

“Yeah? So, what happened to the guys that were beating me up?”

“There was only one of me...so they got away. No police report unless you want to call it in.”

“Umm. Well, at least I found out what everyone finds me so interesting about.”

“What’s that?”

“They think I have a treasure map,” Claire started to laugh. “Why would he give it to me?”

“Hm. Well, the meeting was everyone that had a part of a treasure map. The diamonds being the treasure. The person that was given the job to hide them was a spouse of one of the partners. No one told her she would be shot once she had hidden the treasure and made up the maps, but I’m sure she guessed and did her job, mailed the parts of the map out and disappeared with her payment.”

“Ah.” Two golden eyes blinked at her from the cat perch in the tube. Charlie seldom came out of her favorite hiding place when there were visitors.

“Your cats must have fled when your visitors came in. One was on the balcony crying and the other was in the yard crying.”

“Charlie must have been on the balcony. She likes watching the birds. So, how did you know to come back?”

“Besides the cats? There were three cars with suspicious people guarding them at the end of your block.”

“At this rate, I’m not only out of an apartment, but I may also have to look for another job.”

“Are we still on for Thursday evening?”

“Yeah. I just hope nothing happens that night. When is Thursday?”

“Tomorrow. Well, I guess I’ll leave you. I need to clean up our business. You have some friends that should be by soon. I called them.”

“Great,” she mumbled and fell asleep. She was going to have to report this to Harrison, as embarrassing as it was.

Chapter 16

Charlotte picked her up at five thirty, with dinner as their first stop. She wore a dress and low heels. Her rain coat was in the back seat.

“You know, I didn’t see anything with Lily playing.”

“She’s in town but she’s doing a private one-night appearance. It’s done at a friend’s place to test out her material.”

“Oooh. You have connections, huh?” she grinned at her as she laid her own coat across her lap.

“They aren’t going to like you with that gun on your hip,” she mentioned as she pulled away from the curb and headed for the freeway.

“I’m my own bodyguard,” she told her, now worried that the night was not going to go well.

“I’ll tell them you’re with me and you’re my bodyguard,” Charlotte told her.

“Really?”

“Yeah. They’ll think it’s funny.”

“Great. How do you know these people?”

“They’ve hired me for various jobs.”

“Hm. Is there anything I should know before I make a fool of myself?”

“Just don’t ask for autographs. Don’t take pictures or get in the way if a bodyguard should get nervous.”

“Okay. Any of your people going to be there?”

“Some.”

The showing was in one of the Hollywood homes near to where Charlotte had her residence and business. The people that attended were known celebrities and people Claire did not know. She was happy that Charlotte did not leave her alone except to go to the restroom. Her sidearm was checked in at the door, where Bo was acting as the

doorman. Claire removed her sidearm but kept her clip. Since it was her backup weapon and not official sidearm she did not feel as averse to checking it in. Each sidearm was wrapped in a sack with a name on it and carefully locked into a safe that looked like it was here for that reason. There were a lot of sacks besides hers.

Lily spoke with everyone that was there, including Claire, who had no idea what was being said, but it did not matter. The small show was for a cause which Claire missed hearing. She was too busy trying to be casual with all the stars that were around her. At the break she stepped out onto the balcony for a break from the star power around her.

“Too much?” She turned to look at Connie who had two drinks in her hand. She held one out to Claire. “It’s non alcoholic. I noticed you weren’t drinking anything with alcohol.”

“No. I’m not much of a drinker. Thanks. Do you come to many of these?”

“These?”

“Private shows.”

“We work a lot of them, so we know a lot of these people as friends and employers,” she explained as she sipped her drink. “Do you like Charlotte?” she asked casually.

Claire looked at her startled. “Ah. Yeah. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“Hm. Just curious,” she lifted her glass to someone that was behind Claire.

“What do you mean by like?” Claire was beginning to feel pressure.

“I’m just curious why you two keep bumping into each other.”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Claire saw no point in pointing out that she had been minding her own business and it was Charlotte that kept popping up in her life.

“Hi. The second part is ready to begin,” Charlotte’s voice from behind her had Claire turning around. She looked curious at what had Connie frowning but did not ask.

The second part was Lily interacting with a flower and her concerns with it’s health as an avid gardener that spoke to all her plants. It became funny when the flowers started to make social commentaries.

To Claire there was nothing romantic in her relationship with Charlotte, it was more of a friendship and occasionally an odd sexual twinge but nothing that would go beyond friendship and she wondered if Charlotte felt that way.

So, when Charlotte stopped in front of her apartment to leave her off, Claire paused, wondering if she should ask Charlotte if she thought she was leading her on to thinking her going out with her was anything more than friendship.

“Thanks for the evening Charlotte. It was nice if not...”

“You felt uncomfortable with the celebs.”

“Yeah. I’m not used to being around people like that. I don’t even know what to talk about.”

Charlotte smiled. “Well, you didn’t say anything that ruffled any feathers and you even managed to get out ‘hello, how are you’ without getting tongue-tied when Lily shook your hand.”

“It was easy. I didn’t say anything else. Charlotte, how do you see us?” she asked suddenly.

“As friends.”

Claire nodded relieved. "I...didn't want to mislead you."
"You're not putting out any vibes otherwise."
"Well, good night. And thanks again. Next one is on me."

Chapter 17

Claire and Gail were packing her books in boxes with both cats stressed out at the littered frontroom.

"Did you get my electricity turned on at the house?"

"Yeah," Gail told her as she pulled the box to the middle of the room and went for another.

"Good. I don't want to have to use a flash light and get the police called on me."

"That could happen. Introduce yourself to the woman, Lynn, across the street and Connie on the left of you. They are home all day and keep an eye on the neighborhood. Lynn has a business at home and Connie's between jobs. When we're alone, I'll show you the alarm system...I'd appreciate it if you don't mention it to anyone."

Claire looked up at her, holding a packet of her old notebooks. "Sure," she agreed and then went through the books wondering if she should destroy them. They were over five years old. Her fingers paused at one book that did not match the others.

Gail looked over at her. "What's wrong?"

"I...this isn't mine."

"What?"

"This notebook..." her voice trailed off as she flipped through it. A piece of paper fell out.

"You got gloves?" Gail asked quickly.

"Under the sink."

Gail came back with the bulky yellow scrub gloves. She slipped them on and took the book from Claire's hands. She paged through entries that were filled with scribbles neither could understand. Gail then opened up the slip of paper.

"The missing map," Claire whispered.

Gail nodded. "Now what?"

"Hell, I don't know. I don't even know how I ended up with it. Where's my notes?"

The knock on the door and then it opening had both women jumping into a defensive position.

Marge and Charlotte holding boxes of pizza and drinks looked surprised at the reaction of the two women.

"What's with you two? Necking while we were gone?"

"No! Of course not!" Claire retorted. "You scared the hell out of me is all."

The food was set on the table and while the women ate, Claire quietly informed them of her recent find.

"When is this going to end?" Marge asked exasperated, wiping her fingers on a napkin, then taking a deep drink from her beer.

Claire looked surprised at her outburst then realized that Marge and Gail were like family and sharing her bumps and bruises with plenty of support, especially caring for

her cats when she didn't return nightly. "Don't know. Tomorrow I'll tag it as evidence and see who's interested. I let Harvard know."

"When's he coming by with the truck?"

Gail looked at her watch. "Bout an hour. He had a late golf game. The loading will go fast...bookcases are cleared, drawers removed from bureau, and all sorts of boxes. Shouldn't take long to move things from here to there."

"I'll take that map," a deep voice from behind them demanded.

Four startled women looked toward the door to find five men dressed in dark clothing and holding semiautomatics pointed at them. Claire thought they looked familiar but could not place them.

Claire pointed at the box near his feet. The notebook with the loose map were sitting on top of the box of books. Claire reproached herself silently for being so cynical and expecting this. After glancing at the map and the book, he departed with his friends.

"Well...who do we call?" Gail asked, her tone reflecting she also was not surprised.

Claire pulled out her cell phone from under a pillow. "Hi, Harrison...no, no. That's not what I'm calling about. The missing part of the map...I found it with Sammie's notebook in some of my stuff...I don't know and I don't care...cause five men dressed in black showed up and they now have it...Right." She snapped the cell closed and tossed it into a box.

"What did he say?"

"I have bad luck and I may have to find a new partner if I keep losing essential things," she picked up a slice of pizza from the box.

"You don't seem to be that upset," Marge mentioned, looking perplexed.

"It means I won't be bothered anymore. That should make my new landlord happy."

Gail smiled. "It will make our insurance agent happy. Just don't get any of those dogs on that list I gave you and we'll all be happy."

"Just cats," Claire agreed, taking another bite out of the cheesy pizza.

The house Claire was renting was owned by Gail and Marge and not too far from where they lived. It was a nice small cottage with two bedrooms and a fenced in backyard for the cats to play in.

"Ever thought of getting another type of job," Marge asked as she peeled off the cheese from the pizza lid.

"I'm just getting into this detective thing. Why do you want to see me out of it?"

"I just thought you were ready for a job change," Marge told her.

"This is a job change. From clerk to detective in two months. I'm just getting the sleep rhythm down. Catnaps wherever possible, don't forget to bless the nights where I can sleep eight hours, and don't forget to water the lawn. What a life."

"Hm. Well when you start looking for a motorcycle we'll know you've reached that crazy point," Gail remarked.

"There's nothing wrong with that," Claire objected.

Marge and Gail groaned and waggled fingers at her. "Problem is, you keep on riding and call a day later to ask someone to feed the cats and then you appear two days later with a big smirk on your face and not telling anyone why."

“Ah,” Claire and Charlotte said together. “You think there is a story behind the smirk,” Claire asked giving them the smirk they were alluding to.

“Is there?” Charlotte asked Claire. Three women waited for an answer.

“It’s a natural high,” Claire told them.

“Do you still ride?” Charlotte asked.

Three voices, two louder than one chorused, “NO!”

“Her last bike was squashed beneath a rig that swerved to avoid a pedestrian that jay-walked to get to the beach. She was lucky she wasn’t driving fast and slid past the wreck,” Gail tattled.

“And that we were close behind,” Marge added.

“I haven’t gotten on a bike since. Not out of fear,” Claire added quickly, “just haven’t had the urge.”

“You need a rush...just let us know and we’ll figure out something that does not involve speed and death.”

“They’re my big sisters,” Claire told Charlotte with an embarrassed smile.

“If we were, you would be nagged to get out of police business,” Gail told her.

Four days later Claire was studying a map of the Los Angeles River in her new residence. The map she had turned over to the masked men reminded her of a stop Sammie made on several occasions. Claire now suspected Sammie figured out his part of the map showed the exact location. Why did he not remove it and leave? Claire did not think it had to do with honor among partners but more like he was afraid someone was watching him.

Claire tapped the map and wondered what she was going to do about her guess. She got up and dressed for a night out. In her car, she pulled out a voice scrambler and Harrison’s number.

“Hi. Am I disturbing you?...Well, I’ve been thinking about this diamond thing...yeah...I can’t let it go because it’s stuck in my mind....are you going to listen?.. Okay. There is a place along the LA river that Sammie...okay, his brother, Mr. Whatever...anyway, he used to stop at this place. He claimed it was to meet a street contact that if he had anything for him, he would be there...yeah...okay.”

She hung up and headed to Harrison’s place. He was right that she should not be going there alone. Already she could feel like she was being followed. It was stupid because they had the map...unless it was someone else. *Shit!* she cursed to herself.

Alright, so I’ve been going about this with tunnel vision. Too many players are turning up and I haven’t been making a list and assigning them to a team list. Hell. Why can’t I just leave it alone? Impatiently she tapped her steering wheel as she waited for the light to change. She was miffed at why she was feeling so much reluctance to just sit down and figure out what was going on. This was a nagging question since her partner was shot. Maybe she intuitively knew this was going to be a big pain in the ass to untangle.

As soon as she stepped out of her car Harrison was stepping out of his apartment.

“I hope this is the last of this,” he told her.

“Me too. I want to close up the case and move on with my life,” she told him seriously, following him quickly to his SUV.

“So where are we headed?”

Claire checked to be sure her voice scrambler was on. "Remember where those two gang members were found tied to the fence?"

"Okay."

They drove on in silence. "I guess once this is finished...you'll be leaving," Claire mentioned.

Harrison glanced over at her. "What makes you think that?"

"Everyone is looking for those diamonds...why not you?"

"Getting a bit down in the dumps, huh?"

"Even in my dreams people are chasing me and I'm running in confused circles!"

"Well, those diamonds will bring in a lot of money if no one claims them."

"Why not J. J. Muller or his insurance company?"

"They came over illegally and were not insured."

"Was there something else in the suitcase?"

"Won't know until we take a look," he glanced at her. "Want to turn that thing off for a moment?" He pulled out his cell. "Bobcat treed. Follow up." Then he hung up. "Should have enough people along that stretch of the river to prevent anyone from illegally making off with it."

"How do they know where to go?"

"In the day time there is are two gangs that have their homies posted on each side of their river and at night they send their boys down there looking around."

"Don't you think they would know you're watching and would fake you out?"

"The key player hasn't showed up yet. Since I know who that is...I'm sure the game is still on."

"Don't they have dogs that smell things even in the water?"

"Cadavers. Bodies."

"Hm."

There were a lot of official cars around and a helo moving overhead. There were gang members that were being questioned and dogs being walked along the river. She slid out of her car and looked around the neighborhood. It was even poorer looking than she remembered it.

"Well, he would drive over here and look off that way." She pointed in the dark at where a tree sagged and a dilapidated garage stood. The house was boarded up like the others along this stretch of the river as if they were getting ready to be torn down.

"Okay. Where to now?"

"Well, it was a woman that hid it, I would think she probably would hide it where she could get to and not on private property. Most probably in the early morning when people are sleeping. It happened in January if I remember right."

"Mack? This is Claire, Claire-Mack. What's the history of this place?"

"They had heavy rains during that time. River would have been high. Taking what Claire just said...I would dig over there. There's enough rubble and trash to use as cover." Mack glanced at his notepad.

The whole area was dug up with a lot of things found. Finally, they found the silver suitcase. Not only the majority of the missing diamonds but two black books with different handwritings in them. There were also passports and a semiautomatic.

“So, looks like someone had more to trade than diamonds,” Claire mentioned to Mack and Harrison.

“Yeah. Now it’ll be another year before anyone works on figuring out what’s in the books.”

“A year?”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t sound any different than what it was like before they were all put under one head office,” Claire told them.

“So, do you feel better about this case closing?” Harrison asked as he led her back to his vehicle.

“Yeah. Will I see you in the morning?”

“Yeap.”

“Harrison, can I ask you a question that’s going to sound odd?”

“You can ask,” he told her giving her his complete attention.

“Have you done a profile on Charlotte?”

“Whitman? That gal you’re seeing?”

“Yeah. That one.” She wanted to add that it was just a friendship but she actually did not know what she was feeling about Charlotte.

He glanced off in the distance, as if thinking about sharing with her his information. Claire was wondering why she always felt like she was someone’s bait. She thought for sure this job was finished...but maybe not.

“Can’t say. Not mine to tell. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

If Claire thought throwing a temper tantrum would do any good, she would have. She was still someone’s bait. But what had Charlotte to do with it? What she needed to do was buy a motorcycle and start taking evening drives.

At home there was a message on her answering service.

[Hi, Claire. It’s Charlotte. I have tickets for a piano and guitar recital on Friday. Do you want to go? You either wear a tux or formal. It will give you a chance to dress in drag either way.]

Claire laughed. Picking up her mail, Claire sat on her couch and looked out the back sliding glass door that gave her a view of the garden she had partially planted, but she did not see this. Instead, the image of Charlotte dressed as a man came back to her. She rubbed her forehead wearily.

Why did that image come up? If she dresses wouldn’t she dress in something more feminine? So, what do I dress in? She didn’t give me a hint how she wants me to dress.

Claire leaned her head against the couch’s back and groaned. Weren’t they just friends?

Oh, gawds. I’m gonna play head trips on myself. What would Charlotte dress in? Well, she is a transgender so probably in heels and dress. She sighed. She had no idea where this relationship with Charlotte was taking her but she was sure it was headed into something she was not willing to explore at the moment. Then she became uncomfortable with Harrison’s not telling her what he knew of Charlotte Whitman.

Getting up she trudged into her bedroom thinking that all this wondering about the future could wait for another day.

The week was busy with new cases and they were still reviewing the old cases to see if there were any discrepancies. Claire spent time going through the mug shots of the witnesses, noting that many of them were missing from the files. She also spent time at the newspaper archives looking up information on the diamond heist eight years ago. It hardly made front page news in California.

She gave a call to the PD in New York and used the buddy system to see if someone could dig up information for her on the people involved in the diamond heist. In return, she was asked to look up information on a Doug Green of Richmond.

Friday morning an envelope was on her desk and a note from the mailroom that it came right after she had left the day before. She looked at the envelope carefully, wondering if anyone opened it. It did not appear to have been tampered with.

"Hey, Hudson. You get coffee yet?" Harrison's voice asked her as she caught the smell of fresh coffee.

"Hm." She waved the envelope at him. "I asked for some information on that diamond heist from New York."

He handed her a coffee and sat at his desk. "Well, open it and stop teasing me with it," he encouraged.

For a few moments she stared at the photos of the dead and then handed them to Harrison. She read the report.

"Says one person survived."

"Yeah, but the note on the photo says he was found dead a week later from a drug overdose. What's smelly about that?" Claire asked.

"Hm. Since he had old tracks on his arm...nothing," Harrison told her.

Claire did not answer him as she read the note the clerk wrote to her. "It says here...that the boyfriend of his swore he was off drugs. However, the detective that noted that in his notes was moved to another case and the detective that took over the case felt with the witnessing of all the killing, he had gone back to drugs." She flipped over to another page. "You know...Charlotte told me the guard was her boyfriend."

"Yeah," Harrison agreed, as if he already knew of this.

Why hadn't he told her he knew of this? Maybe she had told him and forgotten.

"This case is not finished...is it?" Clair asked.

"I don't know."

"You didn't get your big fish," Claire pointed out.

"Big fish left town."

"So...what am I missing...and don't get weird on me. I check this room out for bugs every day and in between," she warned.

"I don't know what you're missing, Hudson."

She sighed. "Shit," she muttered. "Okay...the missing diamonds are found...most of the players are dead or gone... but, I'm still being watched. That means..." her voice trailed off. She looked up at Harrison. "It's the two cops the night of Sammie or his brother's hit. One or both of them. One of them keeps showing up in these encounters over the diamonds masked. I recognized one." She was quiet as she thought more on it.

“Now, I am making a guess, that he’s not why I’m still being watched. I think it’s the other one. Maybe he’s going to be someone important in politics or in the public eye and they don’t want anyone to be pointing fingers at him.”

Harrison gave no indication of whether she was right or wrong or if she was even talking sense.

“Damn, Harrison! I’m going to go nuts here,” she told him in an intense and low voice.

“I don’t have any answers for you.” He held up a file. “We have two cases to work on. Shall we get to them before noon? And...better put that somewhere no one can get to.” He nodded to the envelope from New York.

“Yeah, right. My purse,” she told him sarcastically. Since she did not carry a purse, he knew how sarcastic she was feeling.

Friday came and Claire was looking at her tux hanging on a coat tree. She glanced at her watch and realized she had three hours.

A nap. Sounds like a good way to take care of these nerves. Blasted! Why am I so damn nervous?

She had just fallen asleep when she heard the doorbell ring. She stumbled into the front room and pulled open the small peep door.

“Hey! You’re early! Or am I late?” Claire quickly pulled the door open and Charlotte walked in at Claire’s sweep of the hand. Charlotte had a dress bag and overnight case.

“Sorry to barge in like this. But do you mind if I use your place to get ready?”

“No, of course not. So, what are you going to wear?” she asked curious.

“Since you don’t know, I’ll keep you guessing.”

Claire laughed. “Alright. So, would you like to take your shower first?”

“No. I’ll let you go first. Just to keep the surprise going.”

Claire glanced at the clock. “It’s still kinda early...”

“We’ll be unfashionably early.”

Claire shrugged her shoulders and wondered why something did not feel right. “Well, get comfortable. There’s drinks in the frig and something to nibble on I’m sure. Help yourself.”

She went into the bedroom and grabbed up her robe and underwear. Pausing for a moment she thought she heard Charlotte moving around in the kitchen. Her extra gun was slipped in her waist band, if only to help settle her nerves. Since she was feeling too jittery, she could not figure out if it was the date or something else. It was not that time of the moon so maybe it was just too much coffee. She tossed her things onto the counter in the bathroom and went into the front room to let the cats in. From the sliding glass window, she could see three of Charlotte’s colleges jumping over the fence into her back yard. A clothing bag was tossed over the fence and caught by one of them.

“Get the picture yet?” Charlotte’s voice asked.

Claire turned to look at her. She was dressed from head to foot in a lab suit, with even her hands and feet covered.

“No,” Claire glanced quickly to the men that cautiously crossed the backyard. She had not disengaged the alarms. She wondered if Charlotte had. Claire could hear Charlotte move and she moved too. Her defense moves that Gail and Marge drilled with

her at their Saturday night classes gave her enough speed to get out of the way of a dart that sped her way. She kicked out at a surprised Charlotte who landed on her back, made awkward in her strange apparel. Claire pulled the dart that entangled in her hair and plunged it into Charlotte's leg. She grabbed the gun from her nerveless hands and could hear someone trying to open the sliding door and simultaneously the back door. She grabbed up her keys from the hook near the door and flung open the front door glancing up and down the street. She was sure Charlotte's group would have the front monitored. A pop and she fell forward and then was knocked sideways from another pop.

Claire crashed sideways into the hedges and rolled over them and behind the old brick border that the hedges overgrew. Panting she tried to figure out how not to scream from the pain and not worry about bleeding to death. She could hear the silencer's muffled pops and the hits the bricks and house were taking. Fortunately, whoever was shooting thought that she was scooting or dragging herself along because they were not shooting around her.

Soon she heard the blades of the helo and could hear sirens over her house alarm. Gail did not believe a silent alarm would do what is expedient, get rid of the intruder, making the resident safe, so she made sure it made just enough noise to alert the neighbors to call the police and scare off the intruder.

Claire felt the ground tremble as booted feet ran up the walkway and into the house. She was too weak to call out and fainted into darkness. Just before she let the darkness overtake her, she was thinking that she was a big woose.

Chapter 18

Claire became aware of hospital sounds, beeping and calls for doctors over a loudspeaker. She groaned her objection at being awakened and was promptly encouraged to drink something.

Claire opened one eye and found Sandy looking at her with a sad look. "I'm not doing so well here, am I? I think the bad guys have more points than me," she croaked.

"Nope. According to your partner, they got everyone they were aiming to get."

"Can someone tell me what the hell was going on?" she whined.

"Well, that's my job."

"Oh, gawds. Sandy when they pick you...it means I'm in trouble."

"No, no. Not necessarily. It's just the finish up with that diamond heist in New York stuff."

"Okay, tell me before I die of curiosity."

"You know that Sammie and his brother were involved in a heist about eight years ago. You know that Charlotte's boyfriend was a messenger and was killed in the heist. Charlotte figured out who pulled it off and decided to head to California and see what she could do with that information. She found a gold mine. With a legitimate business as a front she did jobs for the ring leader of the heist, biding her time. You can imagine how overjoyed she was when one of the people she was blackmailing asked her to get rid of you. He thought you were blackmailing him, that would be Clarkson."

"Isn't that the guy that's running for office?"

"The same."

Claire slapped her forehead weakly. “He was the other police officer,” she whispered.

“Yep. He needed to get rid of the James twins, who could finger him for a lot of money when he was in office. You were supposed to take the fall, but some witnesses changed all that. It was a sloppy hit. On top of that, his map was missing.”

“What about Charlotte?”

“She’s not talking, nor are her cohorts. They have a good lawyer so it’s going to be interesting what story they come up with. By the way, the person that shot you, got away but since Clarkson was arrested you may not have to worry about any more people taking pot shots at you.”

“I think I’m gonna move.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know yet. But far, far away...and somewhere where it’s normal to carry a rifle or gun and where I can shoot back.”

END

Note: No sequels planned.