

# Camping Out

J A Bard

## Chapter 1

Claire Hanson was having a run of good luck. She won five hundred bucks in an office pool and it was Friday, the start of her two week vacation, which happened to be two months earlier than her original scheduled time. Things were falling into place without any bruises.

Claire turned onto her one-way street not caring if there were any legal parking places close to her apartment. The red curb spot was hers. Hazard lights were turned on as she slid out of her vehicle. Confident, she closed her door and checked around for anyone likely to call parking enforcement. The curtains to John's apartment were parted and the left curtain panel moved.

"Mr. Neighborhood Watch," she mocked. A glance at her watch marked her time. "Twenty minutes to beat parking enforcement, and that's on his best of days."

Taking the stairs two at a time to her second floor apartment, at the top she paused for her ritual gaze to admire her view of the neighborhood through tree limbs.

"If there was room up here for more than a potted plant I'd sit out here pretending I was in a tree house." She laughed, knowing that would not happen. Jangling her keys before unlocking the door to let the cats know it was her, Claire stepped into her apartment's dim interior. Both cats were on the four tiered cat pole near the bay window. Cleopatra gave a yawn and stood up on her perch, giving the slow languid stretch that cats were known for. Ramses blinked at her from his place, as if her arrival was not a major event in his day.

What gear she could not fit in the trunk of her car she had left on the table and chair, easily lifted without bending over. There was not going to be one of those episodes of pulling a back muscle that would end her camping trip before she even got started. The box was slid under her arm and the pack was awkwardly hoisted to her shoulder. As she ran down the stairs she gave a silent prayer that she did not fall or drop anything. Her gear was tossed into the back seat, with her eyes on the end of the block. Satisfied there was no parking enforcement vehicle rounding the corner, she ran back upstairs to change into her camping clothes. The P7 pistol she wore off-duty was checked and then slid into its holster resting on her hip. A baggy T-shirt covered it, falling to her thighs.

Coming out of her room another quick glance around the apartment showed it was cat proofed, with empty boxes, bags without handles, and kitty toys spread around to keep them from being too bored.

"Now I want you two to behave nicely for the cat sitter."

Claire glanced out the window at her car. No parking enforcement cart and no ticket stuck under her windshield wiper yet.

"Bye guys."

The door was closed firmly and tested before she ran down the stairs. Her thoughts moved to setting up camp not too close to the river. By the time she arrived at the camp site, she knew in her mind's eye she

will have changed the site many times. There was an advantage for knowing the camp site well and for visiting it during the off season.

Gloating that she beat *the Enforcer*, her nickname for the parking officer, she started her car and pulled out. Next stop was a forty-five minute drive to Gail and Margie's to pick up Teddy, a Welsh Corgi mix who loved to go camping. Traffic was still light and she reached it without having to use the freeway. Turning onto Parker Avenue she could see official "No Parking" paper signs on both sides of the road. Claire parked in front of one of the signs and got out of her car.

Margie was standing on the porch, staring at a paper in her hand looking unhappy.

"Hey, Margie. How's it going?" Claire asked.

"Good," she responded distractedly then suddenly brightened up. "Can you do me a favor?" Margie asked with a wide smile that Claire returned.

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

"No way would I do that to you. You're primed and ready, girl." She waved her paper toward the posted city "No Parking" signs. "The city 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."

"Yeah?"

Margie pointed at her custom built Dodge Roadtrek camping van dubbed the Mollie Bree, parked in the driveway. "Mollie Bree and our two SUVs don't fit, but your compact car and the two SUVs would. Would you mind taking the Mollie Bree camping? I can call Kelly and get her to have you added to our van insurance coverage. Do you still have her as your agent?"

"Yes!" Claire squeaked, and then quickly cleared her throat. "Are you sure?" she asked in a lower voice.

"Yes. The newness has worn off and I can actually lend her out to people I trust without getting the shakes." She held her hand out showing how steady it was. They both laughed.

"I'd love to help out."

"You are helping us out. You agreed to take Teddy camping with you. She gets so depressed if she doesn't get out at least once a month she chews everything she can get her jaw wrapped around. When she's no longer interested in chewing on her toys and goes for our shoes we know it's time to take her out."

Marge moved her SUV then the van out of the driveway and Claire moved her car where the van had been. While Marge reparked her SUV behind Claire's car, Claire was unloading what she needed from her car, laying them out on the driveway to sort through what she would need and could be left behind.

"Our first aid emergency kit was restocked so you don't have to take yours," Marge said. "We've got books you can exchange at the camp bookstore for something you haven't read."

Claire moved her books and first aid kit into the "leave behind stack."

"Can you call Ray and Sandy and change my tent space for RV?" Claire asked.

"Sure will. Oh, hey. Why not take some DVDs? Just in case you get tired of reading and can't sleep?" She leaned in to bump Claire. "We have some nice and juicy ones."

"I'm not going out there to have a date with rosy palm and her five sisters," Claire said.

"Of course not. You can do that at home and with plug-and-play toys, but isn't this all about getting in touch with yourself? Here are the keys to the van." She tossed them to Claire.

"This is taking advantage of a windfall and an early two week vacation. It's not often that someone is willing to switch vacation days."

"What DVDs do you want?"

"Alien series. A vacation with Sigourney Weaver," she signed dramatically.

"There you go, group therapy. Rosey and her sisters, you and Sigourney."

Claire made a face at her.

Margie chuckled. "I'll go get them. I put Teddy's stuff on the porch."

Claire picked up a plastic lock-top container that had Teddy's food, and a bag with her bowls and toys, storing them with other supplies the van carried. Her box of clothes and supplies were dropped in the back of the van between the two beds to be unpacked later. Extra water bottles were stored in the sink for easy access. One more check was made of her car trunk to be sure nothing useful was left behind.

Margie came back out with the small overnight bag that DVDs were stored in for camping.

"I'll ask Ray for our usual spot by the river," Marge said. "That would be a very romantic spot to spend with Sigourney."

Marge stored the bag of DVDs in the back while Claire strapped her pack into the passenger seat, removed her holster and locked her weapon in the glove compartment.

"You have clean linen and towels and there are some staples you can use up, otherwise they'll go stale...if they already haven't," Marge added with a grin. "Oh, and in case you get your two pairs of shoes wet and need an extra pair, look in the storage space. We keep extra warm clothing there."

Loaded and ready to go Teddy settled in her portable bed and looked up at Claire with expectation.

"Teddy, say bye-bye to mommy number one," Claire said.

"Oh, and check the propane. It's low. The station on Gilmore and Monroe is where we go to refill. Ask for Bill. He's an old timer. He'll check the lines and make sure everything is in working order. He'll recognize the Mollie Bree. We tip him a twenty for the extra care. Bye Teddy. Remember your table manners and you too, Claire. Don't feed her your leftovers or you're going to have a beggar on your hands," Margie said.

"She doesn't need a bib or anything else, does she?" Claire asked.

"You behave, lady." Marge pointed a warning finger at Claire.

"And three pointing back at ch'ya," Claire said. "Bye." She pointed her finger at Marge and then spread them into a bye sign.

"I'll take my warning seriously," Marge told her, "but what about you?"

"It's not like I'm going into a strange land alone. There's always someone we know there, besides Sandy and Ray. I'll be stopping at the store daily. Is all this unnecessary worry because you aren't going along?"

"That's probably it...now that you mentioned it. I feel like Teddy when she doesn't get her camping fix, crabby and out of sorts. There's no more slippers for me to chew up. Get going before she nips you into action and I start another worry list." Marge turned and walked back into her house.

"Camp get-aways do have a way of working a bit of peaceful magic in your soul," Claire said. Marge must have heard her because without turning around, she raised her hand in acknowledgement.

While humming, Claire pulled away from the curb.

Traffic on the streets was starting to get busy with the end-of-day crowd, but the slowness gave her time to get a feel of the van and a chance to spot the gas station Marge mentioned before she passed it.

Bill asked her every time he checked a valve or tube if she knew what this or that was. She was nearly jumping up and down with impatience to get going. With the stop for propane and Bill's careful inspection complete Claire headed the van to the nearest freeway.

"Well, Teddy, finally we're on the road."

Her merge into the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the freeway was slow since only the truckers were willing to make a space for her. After twenty minutes on the freeway at forty-five miles an hour the slow down came to a virtual stop.

"What is going on?" Buttons were punched on the radio, listening for a station that was giving freeway news. "Great. An oil spill at the busiest hour of traffic."

Using the GPS she found an alternate route.

"This is real luxury. My van didn't have a lot of what this one has, Teddy. Oh, better call and let Margie know there's been a change in route." The ear bud was pressed in firmly, then she leaned over to turn her cell on.

"Call Marge. Home." The call went to voice mail. "Hey, Margie, this is Claire. I'm just letting you know that I'm leaving the freeway traffic jam and taking an alternative route you have stored in your Magellan. Talk to you all later. Oh, and Teddy Bear says, "Hi moms! Miss you." Bye." She pressed the button to turn off her cell.

After an hour of winding through hills she moved into flatland. Radio music was replaced with a CD that had a mixed collection of jazz saxophone music Marge and Gail kept in the van.

She blinked her eyes to refocus on a figure walking far ahead.

Lowering the volume, her eyes swept the empty land with not even a tree nearby to break the monotony. It was dusk and no abandoned vehicles were in sight, nor had she passed any.

"Wonder what she's doing out here alone. No purse strap. No fanny pack. Not wearing walking shoes, though they aren't high heels." Claire rolled past the woman and parked the van a yard ahead of her. Lowering her window she leaned out.

The two women studied each other warily.

*You look familiar.* "Do you need a ride?" Claire asked.

The woman's lips pressed tight and she looked at the van then back at Claire. A puzzled look wrinkled her brows as she stared at Claire.

"Haven't we met somewhere before?" The woman suddenly snapped her fingers. "Police department?"

"I work in a police department," Claire admitted.

"I'm Charlotte Smith. I remember you now. You were behind the police desk."

*I remember that. She was with a muscle guy. It was one of those days I sat at the front desk.* "My name's Claire Hanson."

"Claire. I appreciate your offer."

Claire unlocked the passenger door, and moved her pack so that it was behind her seat. "Teddy's in the back. She'll need to sniff you so she knows you."

Charlotte peered into the van's interior to see what Teddy was. "Hi, Teddy." Her hand was extended slowly toward Teddy, letting the dog sniff her.

"Where would you like to be dropped off?"

"Where there's a phone. Where're you headed?" Charlotte asked, clipping the seat belt on.

"Up north." She handed Charlotte an unopened water bottle.

"Thanks."

"I have a cell if you would like to use it." Claire reached into the sink for another bottle of water and handed it to Charlotte as she finished off the first bottle.

"Thanks. I am thirsty. I would rather call from a phone where I can have someone pick me up."

"Okay. There's a busy gas station, maybe twenty minutes from here." Claire refastened her seatbelt. "So, what are you doing in the middle of nowhere?" Claire asked.

"I was car-jacked," Charlotte said mockingly.

"Around here? Someone you knew?" Claire asked alarmed.

"I didn't know him personally."

"You want to use my cell to call it in?" As soon as she said it she noted her cell sitting on the dashboard cradle showed a poor signal.

"No. My partner should be on his tail by now. Or he better be."

"Partner?"

"We hunt down bail fugitives."

Claire stared at her disbelievingly. "You're a bounty hunter?"

"Yep. If I had my purse I'd present you with a card."

Silence passed between them as Claire regained the freeway and was able to pick up speed. Twenty minutes later they neared the off-ramp to gas up and get coffee. "This is where I usually stop. They have payphones, restrooms and food."

"Could I borrow some coins?" Charlotte's voice sounded apologetic.

"Sure."

Claire rolled the van up to a diesel pump; pulled out her change purse and dumped a dollar's worth of dimes in Charlotte's palm.

"Thanks. They don't ask for money to use the restrooms do they?"

"No. The previous owner tried that. The restrooms are on the left side of the building. Come on, Teddy. This is your chance to check the local smells and leave your calling card." When they all stepped out, Claire locked the van. Looking around the station she realized that it was not a safe place to just leave someone.

"Charlotte?"

Charlotte turned to look at her.

"Let me know what you're going to do after the phone call, okay? This isn't a place to be alone."

"I will and thanks."

Claire ran her card through the card reader and left the pump going while Teddy was walked a few feet away to do her business. When Teddy was finished, Claire deposited Teddy on the passenger seat with the window rolled down so she could stick her nose out if she wanted to. With thermos in hand she went into the mini-market looking for her traditional coffee fill-up and flavored coffee creamers. Two bags of trail mix were added.

Charlotte was standing outside the van with Teddy's nose poking out the window. They were both watching an old couple walking their miniature Doberman Pincher.

"Hi," Claire said.

"Hi. Here's your gas receipt and coins back. Your tank is full so I put up the nozzle and locked your gas cap."

"Thanks. Anyone answer your call?"

"No. Would you mind if I continued on with you? Without any funds or an ID I don't want to hang around here."

"No, I don't mind. My next stop is the campground I'll be staying at. There's a phone there," Claire said.

"Thank you."

"I was going to pour some coffee. Would you like a cup? They make decent coffee here."

"Yes, thanks. Black."

Claire prepared coffee for two then resettled in her seat. She glanced back at Teddy who was sitting up, waiting for the van to start.

Back on the highway she switched on the headlights and checked her side mirrors before squeezing between a double trailer rig and a RV bus. While she debated about changing to the second lane her cell phone rang. She automatically clipped in her earpiece before picking up the call.

"Answer. Yes?... Hey, Gail, did you just get home?... Yeah, can you believe it? I didn't think Margie would let anyone sit in the driver's seat at least until she permanently imprinted her fanny in the seat... We all lucked out. Did Margie switch my... good. I'm about a half hour away. I'll call you when I get there.... Yes, traffic is a real bear. I took the back road. Your GPS is great.... I picked up a stranded motorist, Charlotte Smith.... You know her?" Her eyebrows rose at the thought that it was a small world. "Oh. Well, her bail jumper car jacked her and left her in walking.... Okay. You want to tell her that?... You'll get my daily hellos just so that you know Teddy is still alive and hasn't been eaten by a raccoon or carried off by Big Bird...." Claire laughed at her remark. "You guys take care. Bye."

Claire glanced at Charlotte who was quietly sipping her coffee.

"Do you know Gail Quimby?"

"Quimby? She did something with helicopters in the army and now she's a cop, right? I attended a conference where she was one of the pilots that gave a presentation on flying search and rescue missions."

"That's her. She said hi and how's your jaw?" For one meeting with Gail Charlotte learned more about Gail than she had in a month. Maybe stronger bonds were formed at law enforcement conferences than bar conversations where she first met Gail.

Charlotte smiled but did not offer to enlighten Claire what the jaw comment was about.

"Have you thought of what you're going to do if you can't reach anyone tonight?" Claire asked.

"I was hoping you wouldn't mind too much if I spent the night. It's a Friday."

"I don't mind. I have extra clothes if you need them or you can check out what they have in the store."



Claire parked in front of the camp site's rental office. Removing the keys from the ignition she looked over at Charlotte, "The phone is inside. The one outside hasn't worked for ages."

A light leaked out through curtains from the residence. Her booted feet made loud thumps on the wooden stairs, sufficient to warn the occupants of her arrival. She rang a bell beneath the "CLOSED" sign.

Charlotte joined her at the door.

Ray, clad in his usual open plaid shirt, with an outrageous social comment painted across his T-shirt worn underneath, opened the door and waved them in. His once tall and slim figure was still tall but wider. He used a paper napkin to wipe his whiskered chin that captured bits of his meal. Claire could smell something over-cooked and hear the sound of a movie coming from the other side of the residence door.

"Hey, Ray."

"How're you doing, Claire? Marge called to change your spot. I didn't think she would be loaning out her rig to anyone for a few years more."

"I'm doing fine, thanks. You're starting to look like a decent wilderness man with that beard. Charlotte this is Ray, Ray this is Charlotte. Can you let her use the phone? Put any charges on my bill."

"How are you, Ray?" Charlotte asked.

"I'm fine, and you? Charlotte Smith, right?"

"You're right on about the name. I'm doing fine. Captain Hershey?"

"The Hershey part is right. I retired. Looking for someone?"

"Just a ride back home."

Claire watched the interaction, feeling more left out with another person in her life knowing more about her passenger than her.

Ray led the way to the business office. He gestured to the phone next to the corkboard that was used for residents that had information to post. Next to that was a bookcase overflowing with paperbacks. Claire's eyes scanned the easy to read titles, noting that her favorite science fiction had not been swapped back. This was where Margie was hoping Claire would find some books to swap with the ones she had in the van. Right now setting up camp and eating were her primary interests.

"Not like your old Dodge, eh?"

Claire's attention went back to Ray as he was pulling out a contract from one of the slots above the desk.

"You have Marge and Gail's favorite space near the stream. We're not expecting any rain for your stay. Quite a few of the gang is here with plenty of invitations to join them in card games and the like. Someone must have sent out a smoke signal that there was to be an official get-together here that I missed."

Claire paid the fee plus extra for a guest and then signed the contract. Both knew it was too dark for someone to drive up to the camp site to pick up Charlotte. Ray closed the gates after 8PM.

"How many years has it been since you've setup a rig?" Ray asked.

"It hasn't been that long, and I help Marge and Gail when we camp together."

"Well, at least when you back into something you can see what it is. Set for night vision, she says."

"Would Margie have less?" They both laughed. "That is a handy camera. Next van I get it's going to be loaded with all the new electronic goodies, including sensors that beep when the bumper gets too close to something, and it's going to be bio-diesel. Maybe, even have a satellite dish on top, like Setgo."

"What are you going to do with a satellite dish, watch televised outdoor adventures?"

Charlotte returned to where the two were standing.

"No. Those are boring. More than likely I'll park at all the RV parks that have a library of DVDs. Good night, Ray."

"I left my office your number. I noticed you take messages."

"That's right. Each spot has a slot. We leave messages received in the slot back here. C4 is yours. Night, you two."

"Thanks for the use of the phone. Good night."

Climbing back in the van Claire glanced at Charlotte as she settled in her seat. "We'll be setting up alongside of the river. It's nice waking up in the mornings to hear a different type of wildlife."

"Just what kind of wildlife are you anticipating?"

"Nothing bigger than Teddy. Anything bigger and Teddy would let everyone know. Gail trained her as a camp guard dog."

Teddy was standing outside of her bed, her tail sticking straight up in anticipation at having arrived at their destination. Her ears, seldom laid flat, were standing up as tall as her tail. Hearing her name she gave a few wags of her tail, then concentrated on keeping her balance as the van rolled over a rough dirt road to their site. Teddy, the experienced traveler, knew lying down would not help with her balance.

"We're far enough from the restrooms and showers to not feel like we're sharing our neighbors' private moments, but close enough not to work up a sweat to get there. Unless it's late at night or too cold, I use the public facilities, like showers and toilet. Ray keeps the facilities clean."

The rain rutted road rocked the van as the tires continued to find a solid grip on the uneven surface. Claire hoped the cupboards would not pop open.

"The bushes all look alike in the dark. Ray used to use metal reflector poles with the site number but they get flattened too often by vehicles backing up. Now he puts the site numbers on things too big or solid to knock down."

The van lights flashed on a reflector with C4 written on it affixed to a boulder.

"This is it. Can you shine the spot light on the side there? There's a way up to that flattened area."

"You know how to get this van up there?" Charlotte was hanging on the passenger seat while shining the light on the platform up a slope.

"Not a problem. I used to do it all the time when I had my own van."

She backed up the incline, silently praying that Ray did regular inspections to make sure the ground under the platforms was solid. Using the side mirror, she was able to align the van's side hookups to the camps outlets.

"Want to help?" Claire asked.

"Show me what you need done and I'll do my best."

Between the two, they got the hoses and electrical connected, the awning set up, the picnic table moved under the awning, and covered with a tablecloth. Teddy's traveling water dish, heavy and deep, was filled and placed under the table. The final preparation was setting the outside motion detector lights. Nothing taller than Teddy could approach the van without a bright light coming on. Claire could see that Charlotte was impressed.

Taking a breather, both sat at the picnic table, drinking deeply from water bottles, their breath puffs of vapor in the cold air. Claire looked in the direction of the river bed where the sound of something moving in the underbrush had Teddy staring at it, her body quivering. A low growl from her instead of fierce and threatening barks was part of her camp training. Barking came when a growl did not scare away the intruder. Claire hoped nothing would challenge Teddy that they could not handle because then it would be real trouble that normally did not come to these private camp grounds. That was why she liked to get away here. It was safe, secluded, and surrounded by friends should she need them.

The canvas awning shook with the breezes from the ocean. Claire shivered.

"Let's see what we have for dinner."

"That sounds like a good idea," Charlotte answered.

Claire stepped into the van and gestured for Teddy to get settled out of the way, which for now was the floorboard at the passenger's seat. She pulled a pan out and started the water boiling.

"Can you help me store this stuff in the cupboards? If you see something you'd like for now, leave it out."

Claire began to move her clothing from the box to the storage space below one of the beds. She glanced at Charlotte. She was neatly storing the food in the cupboards, reading the labels, and by her expression was not acquainted with freeze dried camp dinners.

"Here's something interesting, Piragis Northwoods Company's Jamaican BBQ chicken. It says for two. This stuff is digestible?" Charlotte held up the packet.

"It's an acquired taste. Not being the cooking type...aside from the microwave, I can't say I've a sensitive palate."

"You have a lot of different brands and variety. Organic Garlic Pesto Fry Bread, Organic Focaccia Bread w/Parmesan, AlpineAire Blueberry Pancakes...have you tasted them before or are these tests?" Charlotte asked.

"I'm not saying. But in the morning, we can go to the store and buy something that looks more palatable, though where's the adventure in that?"

"If it were just me, I would rather choose to be adventurous in a restaurant with medical facilities close by."

Claire glanced at the water. "Water's ready. I'll turn off the burner and dump our food in. While it's heating, we can clean up. If I'm up here alone I usually take Teddy and lock ourselves in the building."

"Okay. So, are we all heading up to the showers, or would you rather shower alone?"

"Teddy can stay and protect the rig."

Claire pulled out clothes for Charlotte and a towel. To her own shower kit she added a change of clothes.

"Alright Teddy, this is your shift. Guard the castle, but not with your life."

Hopping down, Claire waited for Charlotte to join her. Charlotte did not hop in her city shoes. The motion light came on, giving them a good view of a shortcut up the slope to the road.

Leading the way up the road, Claire shined her surefire light before them. The road was just as rutted as it was at the bottom. Minor rain damage in the off season did not warrant bringing out the heavy equipment to remake the dirt road.

Claire took a deep breath, enjoying the chill that had a heavy brine smell from the nearby ocean. She wrinkled her nose as they climbed past the platform where RV's emptied their waste tanks and dumped their gray water. Closer to the shower and restroom facilities the breeze shifted, bringing the smell of fresh paint from the shadowed buildings. On the right for men and on the left for women, the doors were dimly lit with the intention to not disturb the environment's natural atmosphere. Claire shined her light carefully around the door frame. Whoever had painted had removed all cobwebs and all traces of other bugs that lived in the shelter of the overhang.

"Doesn't look dangerous," Charlotte told her when Claire held the light longer at a dark spot on the door frame.

"Can't be too careful. Some of the neighborhood bugs get pretty aggressive about being disturbed."

"Ah. The dropping in type. I'm with you in that. I'm not fond of bugs, myself."

While Charlotte stood by the entrance, Claire went through the toilet stalls and then the showers, making sure there was no one unexpected in the building.

"All clear." Claire glanced at the door where she heard the lock click into place. "If you take this shower, I can just slide the soap, shampoo and conditioner over to you."

Both finished up at the sink, towel drying their hair and waiting for the other to be ready to head back down to the van. On the way down, Claire was more careful, remembering that a twisted ankle could end her run of luck.

Teddy was dancing around for her meal when they returned.

"I'll feed her. Dry food doesn't look too difficult," Charlotte offered.

"One scoop," Claire told her. For a few minutes she watched Charlotte with a towel wrapped around her wet hair, wearing sweat pants that did not fit her body type, in an oversized T-shirt, attempting to fend a bouncing Teddy off. It was a balancing act of sliding her feet into her shoes, holding the bowl of Teddy's dry food, and getting the door open to the outside.

Dinner was steaming from the bag, as Claire gripped it firmly in her hot mitt, least it slip from her pinch and end up fit only for Teddy's eating. By the rumbling sounds of both their stomachs, sharing with Teddy was not in their plans.

The table was set with plastic plates and silverware wrapped in paper napkins, compliments of Charlotte. A water bottle was set next to each plate.

CHARLOTTE WAS QUIET AS THEY ATE THEIR MEAL.

"ARE YOU ALRIGHT?" CLAIRE ASKED.

"I'M THINKING IT TAKES A HEARTY PERSON WITH A FIRM RESOLVE TO PASS UP EATING AT A ROADSIDE DINER TO EAT TRAIL FOOD."

CLAIRE LAUGHED NOT TAKING OFFENSE. "IT DOES TASTE BETTER WHEN YOU'RE TIRED AND JUST WANT TO FIX DINNER, CLEAN UP, AND CRAWL INTO YOUR SLEEPING BAG. YOU WANT TO WASH OR DRY?"

"WASH, SINCE YOU BOILED THE WATER AND DISHED IT OUT."

WITH A LOT OF BUMPING INTO EACH OTHER IN THE SMALL SPACE, THEY WORKED OUT A RHYTHM TO CLEAN UP.

"YOU SAID TWO PEOPLE USUALLY CAMP IN THIS THING?" CHARLOTTE ASKED, HANDING CLAIRE A FORK TO DRY.

"A FEW TIMES WHEN BAD WEATHER HIT WE'VE HAD FIVE OF US IN HERE, WITH TEDDY, AND WE DID A LOT OF BUMPING AND PINCHING FOR GIGGLES. SINCE I GOT RID OF MY VAN I'VE BEEN CAMPING IN A TENT, BUT IF IT'S RAINING OR REALLY COLD AND SOMEONE I KNOW OFFERS A VAN FOR SHELTER, I'LL TAKE IT."

"REALLY. WHAT CHANGED FOR THIS TRIP?"

"OPPORTUNITY THAT I WASN'T GOING TO TURN DOWN." CLAIRE POINTED AT THE HEATER. "SEE THAT? IT'S WHAT I DIDN'T HAVE IN MY VAN AND CERTAINLY WHAT I DON'T HAVE IN MY TENT. WOULD YOU HAVE TAKEN ME UP ON MY OFFER IF I ONLY HAD A TENT AND ONE SMALL DOG FOR HEAT?"

"ANOTHER BEND IN FATE. SINCE IT DIDN'T HAPPEN, I DON'T THINK ABOUT IT. DO YOU GO TO BED EARLY?" CHARLOTTE ASKED.

"If I was sleeping in a tent, yes. But I'm wound up from the drive and I have the luxury of a TV and some DVDs. Would you like to watch a movie?" She thought she should have selected more than the Aliens collection.

"I don't mind at all. Would you mind if I take this side?" Charlotte asked.

"I don't have a preference." Claire opened the drawer and removed her heavier socks for herself and held a pair up for Charlotte. "Need something warmer for your feet?"

Charlotte nodded.

Claire pulled out the bag of movies and reached in. Holding her choice she stared at it.

"Something wrong?" Charlotte asked.

Claire looked up at her. Her guest looked comfortable propped up with her share of pillows. Now she understood why there were so many pillows. Back support.

"I remember I told Margie I would like to borrow the *Alien* series."

Charlotte reached over and plucked the DVD from her fingers. "*Rosemary and Thyme*," she read. "Shall I put it in?"

"Have you seen the series on channel 28?" Claire asked.

"Channel 28? No. I'm not a television person."

When the show finished, Claire put the DVD away and could see Teddy waiting for her last trip out for the night. "I'm going to take Teddy out for her potty break."

Opening the door she peered out as if she could see anything moving in the dark. "What do you think, Teddy? Is it clear?" she whispered to the dog.

Teddy was in a hurry and squeezed past Claire.

"Brr. It's cold out here." Claire huddled into her coat grateful that she was not in her tent. Now that she was re-experiencing the luxury of a van she was wondering why she chose to camp out in a tent in this cold weather. Maybe she should just break down and buy a used van and get back into sensible camping. Was this a sign of aging or just deciding she had enough of the roughing it and was ready for pampering?

The wind from the ocean shook the awning, causing Teddy to growl. She was quick about her business then hopped back up the stairs to her bed. Claire hurriedly cleaned after her, dumped the bag in the trash can near the tree, then followed Teddy back into the comfort of the van. She relocked the automatic locks, made sure Teddy was safe in her bed, washed her hands, and then felt she was ready for a melt down. The overhead heater was already set.

"Night," Claire whispered after she slid between the sheets.

"G'night," was the muffled return.

## Chapter 2

Claire's waking thoughts made no sense at all, but dreams seldom did. Her eyes opened to early morning darkness. Glancing at the bed next to her there were no lumps that could pass for a body. Rising to her elbow, Claire was going to call for Charlotte when a voice from close by startled her.

"You're awake," Charlotte said. "Coffee's ready."

A dark shadow appeared in the small space that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the van. Claire took a deep breath, realizing the smell of coffee had made its way into her nonsensical dreamscape, along with the crisp clean air.

"What time is it?"

"Early morning sometime." Charlotte moved out of sight. The van shifted as she exited the van and the door closed gently.

Claire stretched languidly then flipped the covers back. There was no Teddy so she must have left with Charlotte.

"Brr. It's cold," she huffed, "but not as cold as it would be in a tent," she added. While dressing Claire wondered what she was going to do with Charlotte. At the stove she poured herself a cup of coffee and took a few sips, savoring the flavor. Pushing open the door she peered out. Charlotte was sitting at the picnic table. She was wearing Margie's coat and had her hands wrapped around a cup of coffee. The privacy tarp had been rolled up, letting in the chilly breezes. Teddy was sniffing around the edge of the tarp.

"You want a toasted bagel or something to eat?" she asked Charlotte.

"No, I'm fine with coffee."

"Not a good way to start the day off," Claire told her. She left the door open for space and fresh air. A sliced bagel was pressed between a special wire-rack and set over the burner. Crisped enough, Claire dumped it on a plate and spread a thick layer of cream cheese on each half. With coffee and the bagel she stepped outside. Claire stood for a moment, 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.

"Mind if I join you?" Claire asked.

"Not at all. You're right. Mornings are different here than in the city. So far, no wildlife bigger than Teddy has made an appearance," Charlotte said.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything other than birds and Alvin's cousins, oh, and lizards."

"Alvins? You mean chipmunks or squirrels?" Charlotte asked.

"The ones with the bushy tails," she said. "They make these really cute noises while they're running around the branches and their tails are interesting to watch. They're fast. If I had a camera, I wouldn't be able to catch them." Sighing happily, Claire took a bite out of her bagel. Swallowing it down with a sip of coffee she glanced at Charlotte. "You sure you don't want a bagel? Just half..." Before Charlotte could say no she added. "It will make me feel better. An empty stomach and coffee is not treating your system right."

Charlotte made a face, but she did take the other half of Claire's bagel.

"I usually have Bear Mush, or Maple Bulgur in the morning but I wasn't in the mood to tackle anything more complicated than a bagel over a burner," Claire said.

"Bear Mush?"

"Hot cereal. Cous cous, blueberries, raisins, and poppy seeds." Claire laughed at Charlotte's expression. "I'll pick up some fresh fruit at the small store. They have produce without the insecticides."

"You aren't doing that on my account are you?" Charlotte asked.

"I always buy my produce from them when I'm here. It's tasty. Especially their corn. Sometimes they have blue corn. Have you ever tried that?"

"No. Is blue corn healthy? Aren't you afraid the dye is bad for you?"

"It's not dyed. It's natural. Hopi Blue Corn. It's real corn that the Hopi's have been using for centuries."

"Really?" Her tone was doubtful.

"That's what Ray says."

Both returned their attention to the dawning sky, watching the colors change through the tree branches. Dark lumps barely discernable from another began to take on definition and detail.

"What do you plan on doing today?" Claire asked.

"I was thinking of walking to the store and making another phone call. And you?"

Claire looked toward the stream. "I usually go hiking or just kick back with a book. Teddy's not into blazing any trails, thank the gods. She 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 content to sniff the air.

"Where are you going to hike?"

"I don't know. Do you want to come along? I have an extra pair of shoes that's better than loafers if they fit."

Charlotte shook her head ruefully. "Thanks for the offer but I'm more of the kickback and read type of person. If I walk, I need a destination. Do you know when the store opens?"

"About 9 or 10. Just knock on the door and if anyone's there they'll answer. Until then, there's some books in the cupboard. And there's DVDs."



Claire rose to get ready for her hike. In the van she prepared a sandwich, filled up her canteen with bottled water and paused when she thought about her gun in the glove compartment. That was slipped into her pack.

Peering out door she watched Charlotte toss a toy for Teddy. "I have some extra jeans, shorts and socks if you want to try them on. We're about the same size. If they don't fit, Sandy and Ray keep emergency clothing for people that lose their rig or camping supplies for one reason or another up here. It's used clothing but cleaned and not shabby. They charge a fee."

"Thanks, but I don't think I'll be here much longer than lunch. I'll leave a note if you're not back."

"Okay. I'll be back in about two hours, maybe less." Claire looked at Charlotte apologetically. "I really don't do things by the clock."

"That's what a vacation is about. No?"

Claire hefted her pack on her back and gave a smile to Teddy and Charlotte before starting up a trail that headed into the trees.

Not in any hurry and taking frequent breaks along the trail, Claire found a place she wanted to sketch. It was near a streambed. Tumultuous flooding had changed it dramatically, giving her new scenes to draw since her last visit. She patted her pack into an acceptable cushion and then leaned against it to begin her work. Finishing one she quickly began another.

"Hey, Hudson."

Claire looked up to see Bob Black, one of the Bs, waving at her from across the river. Claire waved back. While he found a way across she took a sip of her water watching him slip and slide over slime covered rocks. He dropped next to her breathing heavy.

"How's it going, Hudson?"

"For my first day, nice. Sounds like you've been slowing down on your workouts."

"I'd like to see you cross it and not feel winded." He dug an elbow in her side.

"How's retirement?" she asked.

"Good, good. I heard you have one of the Smiths at your site."

"What about the Smiths?"

"Are you bringing her over on gaming night?" Bob asked.

"I swore off your gaming nights. If she's still around she can decide for herself."

"Why she here?"

"It's her story. If she wants it told she can do it herself."

"Let her know a couple of retirees wouldn't mind swapping stories and taking her money."

"If she's still around, I'll tell her you threw down the gauntlet."

He grunted at what she said, looking out at the river as if in thought. "Well, then I don't want to keep you from your R&R." He slid from his rock perch and after brushing off his pants started down the path.

"What was that all about? How come I've never heard about the 'Smiths?' I'm going to have to spend more time behind the visitors' desk."

It was later that her growling stomach reminded her to take a break. Laying aside her pad she dragged out the pack and pulled out some trail mix. While chewing, she looked over the area again. A piece of fabric or trash was flapping on one of the branches taking some of the romantic isolation of the area away.

Uninterested in any more trail mix she pulled out her chalk box to begin a more elaborate rendition of what was in her mind.

"There you are," Charlotte's voice broke in on her isolation.

Claire looked up. Charlotte's hair was mussed up and she was wearing a coat, blue jeans and hiking boots.

"Is something wrong?" Claire asked.

"I was worried since it was getting dark and you hadn't returned." Charlotte looked around. "I wasn't able to reach anyone at my office or home so I picked up some clothes from the store. Ray said he has a message for you."

It did look like there was not too much daylight left. "You look like you need some water." Claire handed her the canteen, then packed her equipment. Shouldering her pack, they headed back down the trail.

"It's certainly a nice hike," Charlotte remarked, handing the canteen to Claire as they walked.

"Yes, it..." A sudden noise and flashes of gray in Claire's peripheral had her jumping sideways with her foot rolling over a loose rock. As she went down she knocked Charlotte over and both crashed down a slope. Charlotte noisily bounced down the slope and out of sight.

Claire grabbed parts of a fallen tree to stop her slide. Panting, she rested for a moment, letting the sting in her hands and bruising on the rest of her body fade. It was quiet.

"Charlotte, you alright?" Claire called.

"I feel like I've been ate by a wolf and shit over a cliff." Charlotte's voice was faint.

Moving slowly, Claire tested the strength of the tree while she moved for better weight distribution. Her left foot slid from under her and she sat down abruptly, sliding down the slope head first until her pack caught on a fallen branch leaving her in an awkward position. A short struggle to get out of the straps was a battle of balance and fear of being helpless upside down. Freed, sweat beaded her forehead as she panted. Leaning heavily against the tree she pulled bits of the forest out of her hair while regaining her composure. Concerned about Charlotte, she leaned against a limb to look over the drop. With a loud snap Claire went down the embankment.

Claire wrapped her arms around her head. When her roll stopped, a few minutes passed before she attempted to get to her feet.

"Thank goodness there isn't enough light to see just what I landed in. I hope it isn't someone's poop pile," Charlotte said.

Claire wrinkled her nose at the thought. "It's not something I would willingly inspect." She looked up at the squirrels that resumed their noisy chatter.

"Bushwhacked by squirrels," Claire muttered with a glare at them.

"Is that the story you're going to tell?"

"No one likes long complicated vacation stories except the person telling them." Claire spotted the canteen and went to retrieve it.

Charlotte sat down after a dozen failed attempts to scale the slope, breathing heavy.

"It's easier to just follow the river bed to our camp site," Claire said. "Are you alright?"

"No. It worries me at what might be sharing my clothes with me."

It was dark and Claire's light was all they had as they made slow progress over dead branches and rocks, hoping wherever they placed their hands they would not be killing anything living or squishing anything dead. Claire did not want to tell Charlotte that in pitch dark, she may not be able to find where the van is.

It was Teddy's one bark to the left of them that let Claire know they were at the river edge where they could climb up.

"A friendly voice," Charlotte commented as she scrambled up the bank. Both of them walked slowly into the camp site. Charlotte leaned down to pet Teddy then entered the van.

At the picnic table Claire discretely removed her weapon from her pack, sliding it in her waistband, then dropped the pack on the table. Later she would check to see if anything broke from her fall.

Charlotte was collapsed in a chair drinking deeply from a water bottle.

"Gods, what a mess we are," Claire said.

"I feel about as sociable as a skunk at a lawn party," Charlotte said.

"A shower will do me a world of good," Claire said. "I'll feed Teddy first and grab the first aid kit. I'm sure after we clean off a lot of this stuff, we'll have something to put a band aide on."

While Claire was scrubbing her hair to rid it of all real and imaginary bugs she heard Charlotte's shower go off. That was a fast shower considering how dirty they were.

"I hear a dog barking," Charlotte said.

Claire turned off her shower and listened. "It doesn't sound like she's frantic." Claire turned the water back on and finished her rinse, then hurried through drying and dressing.

"Teddy's safe in the van," she explained to Charlotte who was also dressing quickly, "but I left my art pack on the table and someone may think it's worth something."

As they made their way down the road, Teddy gave an occasional yap, as if reminding everyone that she was on duty.

"We're here, Teddy," Claire called. Claire looked in the enclosed area where she left her art pack. It appeared untouched. She picked up the pack and brought it into the van, dropping it on the passenger seat. Not wanting to risk destroying evidence she could better examine in daylight, she limited her movement around the van to checking the hookups for tampering. Claire was hoping it was a small night animal that came by.

Along the road a truck was slowing by their site entrance.

"Claire? Everything okay?" Ray called.

Claire walked toward the truck, shining the light on the ground before her feet.

"Hey, Ray. We're okay. Charlotte and I were up the slope when Teddy started to bark."

"I heard him barking earlier too. It's not like Teddy to bark without a cause. Sent one of the gang up for a look and he didn't see anyone around."

"We were up the trail and lost our way coming back." Claire did not expect a remark from Ray this once on something so amateurish as losing the trail, but she would if it happened again. Her name would become synonymous with lost in space among the group.

"There aren't any unknown campers up here. I'll tell the others to keep an eye on each others camp sites. Are you expecting anyone?"

"No... well, there would be someone to pick up Charlotte. Did you have a message for me?"

"Sure did. He or she wanted to know if you were up here. Anything to worry about?"

"No. I'm just giving shelter to a bounty hunter until she gets a ride home."

"There's nothing wrong with her or her credit. Well, make sure you've got those security lights set right."

"I will. Thanks, Ray."

"Alrighty. G'night."

"Anything with big paw prints out there?" Charlotte asked when Claire climbed back into the van.

"If there was, I would be pulling up stakes, but by then Teddy would have been eaten." She looked down at Teddy. "Sorry Teddy. Bad joke. I'm glad you didn't drive off without us, kiddo."

Teddy yawned and stepped into her bed, circled three times and dropped into a ball. Her eyes blinked a few times and then closed as if the whole thing was nothing.

Claire prepared their meal while Charlotte napped, though Claire thought she was just listening to what was going on outside of the van with her eyes closed.

"Did you leave a message with anyone that you were here?" Claire asked.

"My office only knows a number and to leave a message, why?"

"I'm just shooting in the dark to get an idea of why someone would ask if I'm camping out here and not want to leave a name or message."

"Maybe it's a friend that wants to surprise you with a visit."

Claire frowned, taking a moment to wonder if she knew anyone that would do something like that. "Not likely."

"Think it has something to do with your job?" Charlotte asked.

Claire looked at her startled and then laughed nervously. "No. Not at all."

Charlotte smiled wryly. "In my business, when someone calls and asks about my whereabouts and doesn't want to leave a name, I would take a lot more interest in my surroundings."

"Charlotte, my job for the last year has been behind a desk. I primarily file other peoples' reports and answer phones."

"You make it sound like you would rather be elsewhere," Charlotte commented slowly.

"Actually, I'm not working all that hard to get out from working behind a desk."

"Results of a shooting?"

"What makes you say that?" Claire demanded defensively.

"Because that's what puts most cops behind a desk."

"Well, I didn't shoot anyone. My partner was stupid and got shot....dead."

Charlotte's mouth formed an O which if the subject did not bother Claire so much she would have laughed at her expression.

"He was an ass and should have gotten drummed out of the police a long time ago, but he didn't and one of his snitches he thought he cut his balls off, found some and blew him away."

"Ah. The brotherhood of the ill begotten," Charlotte said softly.

"He was a dirty cop. He got his just due. Subject is closed."

When they finished with their meal, Charlotte cleaned the dishes and Claire took Teddy out for a sniff and potty break.

"So, what's tonight's movie?" Charlotte asked.

"It's your turn to choose." Claire turned on the overhead heater.

Charlotte reached in the bag and pulled out a DVD.

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

*"Alien Resurrection."*

When it finished, both sat in silence, watching the credits run.

"Goodnight," Claire wished.

"Goodnight," Charlotte returned.

### Chapter 3

The next morning Claire woke to aches and stiffness from the previous days tumble. A groan escaped when she shifted her weight. Claire looked over to see if she woke Charlotte. Her bed was empty and by the amount of light in the van, she had slept longer than the previous day. Sniffing deeply it was easy to pick up the smell of coffee which she was sure was the cause of her waking.

"Oh, gods...oh," she moaned as she pushed her body into a sitting position. "A nice dip in a hot tub would be sooooo nice."

After dressing, she stopped in the galley for coffee and found a bowl of Blue Mountain Bear Mush still warm. Claire took the bowl and coffee out to the table where Charlotte was carrying on a conversation with someone.

"Good morning, Charlotte. Talking to yourself so soon?"

"Your bodyguard took issue with a squirrel that was interested in her territory."

"If it's one of the one's that bushwhacked us on the trail, I hope she scares it half to death."

"That's your story for a bad day."

"That was yesterday. This is a new day."

"I tasted your Bear Mush," Charlotte said flatly. "Doesn't mistreating yourself so early in the morning set you up for a bad day?"

"It takes some getting used to especially if you don't normally eat breakfast. How do you feel?"

"That rhyme, sticks and stones will break my bones, has a new meaning."

"I'm sorry about that. I was taken by surprise."

"You're dangerous to stand next to," Charlotte said. "I'm going to head to the store when they're open and see if I have any messages. I'm hoping I get a ride out of here...no offense meant but, your vacation is not what I would plan for myself."

"What do you do for vacation?" Claire asked.

"I haven't had the opportunity to take one for a while so I haven't thought about it," Charlotte said.

"How do you know Ray?" Claire asked.

"I know a lot of detectives, cops, attorneys, judges and political heads. It's part of my business. How do you know Ray?" Charlotte countered.

"He was my captain."

Charlotte looked at her quizzically. "I know the names of the detectives under him and there were no females and certainly no Claire Hudson."

Claire's face reddened. "It was a short stint, just before Ray retired from the force."

"The shooting..." Charlotte's eyes slitted as something came to her. "That was your partner -- Sam Thompson?" She sounded incredulous, and considering Sam's feeling about women it was justified. Claire nodded. "You're better off without him. Thank whoever your god is that it was for a short time."

"He was scary," Claire admitted, "and so are his friends that are still there."

Charlotte nodded with understanding. "I once was in law enforcement. I decided to take my experience and do something a lot healthier with it."

"Where was that? I don't remember you from anywhere...except that one time when I was at the front desk."

"It's a closed chapter of my life. I'm so sorry that happened to you. It puts a stigma on your name that does follow you. Brotherhoods can be positive but all it takes is one manipulative psycho in the ranks and the environment becomes abusive and intolerant. Combined with too much testosterone it's as bad as too much estrogen. Both cause irrational behavior."

"By the end of this year I have to return to duty as a detective or wash out of the department. Being a clerk in uniform is a waste of the department's resources."

"Sounds like a fair warning."

Claire snorted. "Clerking can be outsourced. Do you know Jackson?"

"Bad News Jackson with the detectives?"

"That's what he likes to be called on the streets. He's acting captain of the detectives. I was hoping with a new chief the bad apples would leave. Mr. Bad News made it clear to me things aren't going to change. Boys only and if I make a squeak one day I'll be coming home in a body bag."

"So why are you still there?"

"Because it galls me that..." She stopped realizing how naïve it would sound out loud.

"Oh, I get it. You're figuring out how to slay the monster without getting eaten," Charlotte said. "Noble, but make sure you leave more than bread crumbs back to the evidence and don't depend on one source for anything. They start with your base of friends and undermine them in anyway they can and when you need help, it's not there."

"How do you know so much?"

Charlotte laughed. "You have a classic case of bad guys infiltrating an organization that is aimed at taking them out. How many books and movies have come out with that very plot?"

Claire frowned. "This is not a game or story to me."

"I'm not trying to diminish or attack your motives, Claire. I'm an outsider that has seen what you're facing from both within and without. I'm just commenting that you need to do more than watch your back. You said you file reports...right away I'm guessing you're collecting data...evidence against a group that's using your police department to run their illegal activities. Right?"

When Claire did not answer she continued, "Working with files gives you knowledge and therefore you're not any safer than being out on the street in uniform or as a detective...if you were thought to be a threat..." Charlotte's eyes turned dark as she stared at Claire.

"I'm not a hero or brave and I'm not one of them. I'm not one of anything."

"There is no neutral party and if you think that... The investigation into the shooting must still be going on. That's why Jackson is still acting captain. Why did Ray leave?"

"The investigation is still going on. Ray retired before Sammy's death," Claire said. How could a stranger know so much about her small city's politics?

"You said Ray was your captain...did he partner you up with Sam?"

"It was the only position open for detective. I took it with open eyes. I was qualified and no one else applied."

"And you come up here for vacations...a place that your old captain happens to manage. Is there something going down that I need to know?"

"No!"

Both women were silent as they studied each other.

"Why did you go into bounty hunter work?" Claire asked suddenly.

"I run a diversified business enterprise with one of them being chasing down bail jumpers. Through that I have connections to various law enforcement agencies. In my other businesses I know a lot of civilians, many who are not involved in criminal activity."

Claire rose and collected her dishes, "That's naïve to say. I'm going for my hike."

How could she be that transparent and blurt out things she had not spoken to with anyone outside of her tight knit friends? This was not just embarrassing but suicidal.

It did not take long to fix a tuna sandwich, add a bag of trail mix to her pack, and fill her canteen. Charlotte had come in to refill her cup and get the book she had started the previous day.

"Be careful on the trail. I heard there are dangerous critters out there," Charlotte said.



"The store won't be opening for another hour. There's some more comfortable camp chairs in the storage under the beds."

"That would be nice."

At the beginning of the trail was where her body complained the most, causing her to regret she did not bring her walking stick on this trip. By the looks of the overcast sky, noon would be a good time to start back. Overcast skies seldom meant rain in Southern California, but the chill and her sore muscles would not make a good vacation if she ended up with a sore back again. Along the trail she found a spot, comfortable and not easily seen from the path. Her drawing tools were left in her pack as she settled for some serious thinking. At work she was always second guessing, worried that someone would realize she was keeping track of shaky cases and the people involved. It was what she signed on for. It was bound to happen that Sam and or his cohorts would be shot by someone they were doing business with, but it put everything on hold. Claire had not anticipated that she would be drugged and left in their vehicle while Sam went to take care of his business. If the plan was for her to take the fall for his death, it was not pursued with evidence planted on her. In fact, it confused everyone and all investigations had come to a standstill while three groups independent of each other looked into Sam's shooting.

Something might be happening soon because Jackson had taken the time to visit her in the file room and tell her not to bother coming back to the detective position. He had not even bothered with a subtle threat. Why? What was his game at this point? Why did was she pressured to participate in an office pool she normally shunned? It was a bit suspicious that she won it, or was one of the people that won. Distrusting the money, she had exchanged it immediately and deposited the money in the bank. The vacation swap was also under suspicion; however, she felt safe where she was due to Ray and others that frequented the campsite during the off-season. It was a no brainer for anyone interested in her to investigate Ray and Sandy and the people that made it their favorite place to camp, and find that primarily active and retired law enforcement people were his customers.

"That would be a damn challenge to Jackson if he wanted to get rid of me," she said softly. "Who the heck is Charlotte that everyone but me knows her?" Was Charlotte a plant? How would anyone know she was going to take an alternative route to the camp site and what route it was going to be? If she was, Ray and Bob would have said something. Her purpose for being moved up into detective position was something only a few people were aware of, one of which was Ray. The timing of his retirement was part of the larger plan but Claire's focus was on her job and protecting herself with obsessive precautions that she was sure others were not aware of.

Restless, Claire got up and walked back to the store. Normally she did not speak to anyone about her job, preferring not to risk slipping with information, which she did with Charlotte.

"What a real idiot," she muttered to herself as she thumped down a path. At one point on the path she had a birds-eye-view of the store. A car was parked in the lot and it looked like Charlotte was walking toward it. "Looks like her ride has arrived."

Charlotte looked up and caught sight of her. Claire waved and continued down the path, losing sight of the store and parking lot.

When she got to the building Charlotte was gone and so was the vehicle. Opening the door to the store the bell sounded. Sandy came from the office to see who her customer was.

"Hi, Claire. How are you doing?"

They exchanged heartfelt hugs.

"Hi, Sandy. I'm fine. How's the day going?"

"Busy. I'm gone for three days and have a weeks worth of catch-up to do. How's your camping spot?"

"Sweet. Even better now that I'm not in a tent." She pointed at the stand with fresh produce. "I came for your home-grown."

"The corn is sweet and tasty," Sandy said. "With so much of the gang up here this month, I'm ordering more."

Sandy bagged the food Claire handed her.

"Did anyone come in here a few moments ago?" Claire asked.

"I didn't hear the door. Who are you looking for?"

"I thought Charlotte, my guest came in."

"No. Ray drove up to your camping site on his way to replenish the supplies in the public toilets. He said he would drop off a message with Charlotte Smith. Is she a new friend of yours?"

"No. She was car jacked by a bail jumper she was hunting. I found her walking along a deserted side road. It's amazing what using a GPS for alternate routes will find for you."

"Hm." She handed Claire her change. "Did Ray invite you two to the weekly dinner?"

"Yes, he did. Thanks. So how do you know Charlotte?"

"I don't. But if you came to some of the socials you would have heard about her and some of the characters she and her cousin have pulled in. We have a rule that you pay a fine for any store you retell. It's amazing what stories they come up with. It's more fun than showing them inkblots."

"Everyone seems to have heard of her but me."

"You picked up a stranger? That's nice of you but how safe was that?"

"A deserted two way road with no buildings in sight is not a safe place to have left her. She didn't have purse or jacket to hide anything like a weapon..." Claire snapped her fingers. "I didn't check her ankle."

"Alright, you. Just remember, with or without your superwoman outfit, you can't stop bullets."

"She wasn't a total stranger, Sandy and I couldn't leave her or anyone that didn't look dangerous out in the middle of nowhere."

"No. But you could have dropped her off at a bus station with bus fare back into town."

"Oh. I didn't think of that... If she didn't feel right, I would have figured out a way to safely drop her off somewhere. See you later. And thanks for worrying about me."

Stepping out of the store, Claire took time to glance around her. After shifting the pack to her back, she began her walk back up the slope to the campsite.

Claire was not that deep in thought to miss the sound of a footstep stumbling behind her. Turning to see who was there she waited. No one appeared and there was no further sound.

If she took the left path she would be able to look down at the path she was on from a turnout that hikers use to take a rest break. She broke into a jog to get quickly to the turnout. Breathing heavily, she crouched down to look over the path. Nothing. Several times she doubled back when she thought she heard something, but did not catch anyone. Crouching down she stared at her boot print overlapped by another. It was beginning to get dark and shadows were hiding more than what she felt comfortable about.

When she stepped into the covered shelter, she was startled to find Charlotte pacing.

"Hi. I thought you left," Claire said.

"No. Ray dropped off a note from my office. Bo is still tracking the bail jumper and the others are busy. Since my life is not in danger, business goes on until someone has the time. Do you mind?"

"No. Not at all. When I saw you at the store and the car in the parking lot, I thought you had left." Claire removed her pack and stepped into the van.

Unzipping the pack she reached for the container of strawberries worried she may have crushed most of them. Holding the container under her nose she breathed deep. "Ahhh. The fresh smell of real strawberries. Did anyone else come by?" Claire asked. She offered the container to Charlotte then reached in to pull out the bag of apples.

"No."

Claire looked up at Charlotte catching a change in tone.

Charlotte picked out a strawberry holding it up as if for inspection but it did not look like she was looking at it.

Claire unpacked the corn and began striping the husks, tossing the remains in a paper bag. "They didn't have any blue corn, just the traditional yellow."

Charlotte had the pan for the corn ready. The two person lasagna meal went 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?" Charlotte asked. A pack of cards was pulled out the back pocket of the driver's seat.

"So, so."

"What'll it be?"

"Uh...poker?" Claire asked.

Charlotte smiled, tapped the cards and expertly cut them and then quickly shuffled them. She was not a casual player.

"Where did you learn to play like this?" Claire asked. None of her friends performed card tricks like this. She watched fascinated as Charlotte's hands made the cards do things she had only seen in movies. Charlotte's hands were stronger than most women's but not enough to catch attention. Realizing she was staring for too long, her attention moved to the cards. She leaned closer to get a better view.

"What's on the back?"

Charlotte stopped shuffling the cards and flipped one over to look at the back. "Looks like someone's version of solitaire. Don't you think?"

"How can anyone play cards with backs like that?"

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

"With cards?" Claire looked startled at the question.

"Yes, cards. What else are we playing at?"

"I suck at cards. Even at fish."

Charlotte dealt out the cards quickly and looked over at Claire. "You're first."

"Can you do me a favor?" Claire asked.

"What?"

"Don't clutch her like that."

Charlotte said nothing for a few moments and then moved one finger over without looking at the cards.

"Doesn't it bother you that your hands are holding a woman that's doing herself? Geeze. Marge and Gail probably also have a deck with a...hmmm." Claire tightened her lips and carefully put a card down.

"Just one card? Of course it doesn't bother me. My boyfriend had cards you could only buy online." Charlotte chuckled to herself and then laid a straight down.

"Boyfriend?"

"Does boyfriend sound like I'm robbing the cradle? You cops take some things too literally," she teased.

"He was old enough to hire hookers, and old enough to know that when he played with fire he would get burned sooner or later. Lover. Is that a better word?"

"Was he in your business too?"

"In my business?"

Claire's face reddened. "You know what I mean. Was he a bounty hunter?"

"More like a booty hunter. On a few occasions I watched him run his game. It was very informational. My grandmother would have said, "Your friend boy is just big hat, no cattle." She laid down another hand that had three kings and two jacks. Claire's hand was two fives and nothing else.

"You weren't jealous?" Claire asked.

"No. As long as he didn't bring anything home, I was okay with it."

Claire rested her chin in her palm, amazed. "If I'm in a relationship, it's monogamous. Not even flirting."

"Oh, you're a strict one."

"Charlotte, it's disrespectful of the person you're with to flirt with someone else."

"How's that?"

"It's telling everyone that sees you fooling around that the person you're with isn't enough."

"One person is never enough."

Claire frowned, not knowing if Charlotte was kidding or not. "Do you fool around when you're in a relationship?"

"Sometimes. Depends."

"What kind of relationship is that?"

"Tailored to fit. Smells like the corn is ready." Charlotte collected the cards, and smiled at Claire's astonished look.

"Do you have a boyfriend now?"

"No boys, remember? I don't play with boys. Is this entrapment? Card games are not your best skill," Charlotte remarked.

"Right," Claire agreed. "I could never get into them. How do you concentrate on playing cards when the backside has a woman masturbating?"

Claire removed the lasagna pouch from the boiling water. Carefully she divided the steaming lasagna on to two plates. Claire picked out the corn and placed them in their special curved dishes, sticking the corn holders in the ends. Chips of whipped butter melted in the dishes, sending up a sweet aroma. From the cabinet she placed the container with moist towelettes on the counter.

Both women started with their corn, crunching their way around the cob, humming as they went.

"Now this is palatable," Charlotte told her after finishing her cob. She leaned over to reach the small packets of moist towelettes on the counter.

"Thanks."

"So are we doing the movie thing again?"

"Unless you want to read."

"Movie sounds good. I've read enough during the day."

"Okay, movie it is. I'm ..." She hesitated. "I'm going to shower here, if you don't mind."

"What's up?" she asked softly.

"Someone was following me earlier, from the store."

Charlotte nodded. "Is that why you asked if anyone came by?"

"Yes. I took a trail up the hill that has a view of the trail and store."

"Did you see anything?"

"When I was up on the path above the store I thought I saw you at the store heading to the car parked in the parking lot."

"I didn't visit the store today. I was reading *Sphere* and keeping your camp guard 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 office when I came in. I found a boot print over mine on the way back so I know someone was on the trail behind me. I couldn't tell much by the print."

"I always tell a woman to trust her instinct."

"Unless you want to use the camp shower facilities, I would rather stay close to the van tonight."

"I think here is a good idea until we get an idea of who is following you."

"You don't think the person you were looking for followed you here, do you?" Claire asked.

"No. He's more interested in making it to Mexico where he's safe from US seizure. It was his one time pass to Los Angeles and he won't be making one again."

"I'll be quick so I don't use all the lukewarm water. The door comes out all the way here, cutting off half the van."

"No problem. Do you have a map of this place?"

"In the glove compartment. Oh, I need to unlock it. I keep my automatic there."

"Unloaded?"

"Yes."

The movie she picked was *The Bourne Identity*. There were more than a dozen DVDs that Margie had added. Margie found it difficult to believe someone actually camped for isolation from the electronics of civilized life.

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

Charlotte was already sleeping when she returned, or so it seemed. As quiet as Claire could she slid into her bed and laid on her back staring at the ceiling. Sighing, she turned to sleep on her side, then promptly turned onto her back. Sleep was not even near. With flashlight lighting the way, she headed to the front of the van. Teddy lifted her head and watched her to be sure she was not going to be stepped on and then curled into a tighter ball.

Claire collapsed in the driver's seat and parted the curtains. Unless she had night goggles, she was not going to see anything. She smoothed the curtain back into place.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Charlotte asked.

Claire jumped from near fright. Charlotte slid into a seat.

"Talk about what?"

"Why you can't sleep."

"Too much coffee. How did you get here so quietly in the dark?"

"I have good night vision."

"Good thing. Teddy would have been unhappy if she were kicked or stepped on."

"You're avoiding the subject. Are you worried about the person following you? Think he or she is going to come storming in?"

"No. I'm just... I just can't sleep."

"Want to play a game of cards?"

"No. I don't want to stare at you holding a porno with her peeking between your fingers. It's... gross."

"Oooh. I see. Masturbation is not something to see before you go to bed. You may have disturbing dreams," Charlotte said.

"What is it about masturbation and you, anyway?"

"I have no problem with it. It's a single sport, though it can have spectators."

Claire turned the small lamp on. "Run that by me again?"

"What is it about masturbation that is bothering *you*?" Charlotte asked.

"Nothing. You brought it up."

"I brought up playing cards."

"Just what kind of game are you proposing?"

"Well, you're not good at poker and you said you don't like fish." She got up and from one of the cupboards pulled out a board game. "What's your preference?" Charlotte asked.

"You don't have to stay up because I can't sleep. Checkers."

"I can't sleep either. I keep wondering who was following you and why."

They played four games with Claire winning one and it was because Charlotte was dozing between Claire's moves.

"I'm ready to sleep," Claire announced.

"Good, then you won't wake me any more with having to make another move."

"Good night."

"Good night, Claire."

## Chapter 4

Teddy's whining woke Claire. When she glanced at the bed next to her she was not surprised to see it was made with no Charlotte present. She sniffed the air for coffee and found none. After letting Teddy out, coffee was made, and while it sputtered, she used the toilet and brushed her teeth. She thought about AlpineAire Blueberry Pancakes. Her mouth watered.

While she prepared her breakfast, her thoughts went back to Charlotte. They were still on Charlotte when she washed the dishes.

Claire slipped on her hiking boots and a sweatshirt that needed to be washed. It looked like she would be visiting the washer and dryer the store provided.

Teddy was left with her water bowl filled, sitting under the picnic table. It was still too early to visit the store so she followed the stream toward the ocean. It passed under the freeway bridge along a rough and damaged path. There was a rock in the ocean that she liked to sit on and think. As she passed by the parking lot she saw only one vehicle and tent, however, there was a group on the far side of the parking lot. They were too far away to get a good look at, but their occasional whoops gave her an idea of what they were about.

Her rock was sitting well above the waves.

Rummaging around the pack she found her pencils scattered and the plastic container she carried them in broken. "Damn, I forgot to check to see if anything broke on my fall. Ouch!" Her finger tip was bleeding. "I have to dump it out and see what's what."

Disappointed, she made her way back to the shore, keeping the partygoers in sight. Behind her dark sunglasses, she studied the men who had no tents or RVs near them. They were watching her as she walked.

"Great," she muttered, "a potential idiot mob." She lost sight of them as she moved beneath the underpass to the private camp ground.

On the other side of the freeway she turned to look behind her. She was feeling watched again. This time, she was not going to be walking all over the trails trying to catch her tail. She had a better idea.

"Hey, Ray." Claire called. He was unloading his truck of supplies.

"Good morning, Claire."

"Need some help?"



He laughed as he lifted the last box out of the bed of the truck. "Can you get my keys?"

Claire followed him inside the store. "I think someone's following me around, Ray. You know anyone that strikes you as someone I need to keep an eye on?"

"I'll look around and let the others know. You think that phone call has something to do with it?" He looked around and gestured her to follow him to the back of the store, where he could keep sight of the front door.

"Anything to do with your work?" he asked.

"Maybe. Jackson gave me a warning not to return to the detective position unless I'm interested in wearing a body bag."

"That's pretty strong. Someone's pushing their buttons."

"I think something is coming down real soon and they don't want me around...before the end of the year. Maybe this early vacation is part of it," she mused.

"What's Charlotte Smith doing here? You hire her to watch your back?"

"No. Take your pick, chance, chaos, or coincidence. I pick coincidence that she was walking down a deserted road that I happened to be driving along."

"I heard her version. What were you doing there?"

"GPS side roads to avoid an oil spill and car wreck on the freeway. No one would have guessed I would be on that road, Ray. I don't think I could find it if I had to go back."

"It's not that I don't trust her, Claire. There's nothing in your operation that would interest a bounty hunter. I don't like coincidences in the middle of an operation that could blow up in our faces. These people you're dealing with are not amateurs and they have more kids wanting to prove themselves by taking out a cop than a herd of cats has lives."

Claire watched Ray as he began to unpack the fresh produce. "Do you regret not being in the middle of this?"

Ray laughed. "Hell, no. Sandy and I like entertaining in the wilds and being consultants. It keeps me from going nutty out here and I don't lose touch with friends."

Claire watched him move to another box of produce and set the contents out. He handed her an apple. "Why don't you two come by and have dinner with us? I can drop you off at your site afterward."

"I'll think about it. I'll be going. There's A La Piragis' BBQ Jamaican chicken with rice and fresh strawberries calling me to lunch."

Ray blanched at the mixture. "I don't know how you single people live as long as you do. I tried the few days Sandy was gone and was almost a gonner myself. Keep in touch."

"Will do."

Claire smiled as she made her way back up the trail. Whoever was following her was in for a very big surprise. Once the RCs got the message that there was something sinister going on in their territory they would all be donning NVGs, night vision goggles, and start a game of tag. She almost felt sorry for whoever it was if the Gang got a hold of him or her.

Teddy was happy to see her. No doubt she was lonely after having Charlotte around most of the day. Claire dug out one of her toys and they played. Claire tossed the toy for about ten tosses, and then Teddy took her time returning the next two. Teddy's interest usually lasted under a dozen tosses. After that Claire went about preparing lunch. No sooner had she debated what to do about her missing guest then Teddy turned to the door with a fully engaged tail.

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

"Sure do. How did your skulking about go?"

Charlotte laughed. "It went well. I found out where your stalker is from."

"One of those guys on the beach?"

"No. A car parked up the road. John R.e.g.a.n. Ever heard of him?"

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

Charlotte shook her head. "But that might not be his name. I never saw anyone spell it that way."

"So...is he packing?"

"He's shooting plenty with a camera."

Claire turned from the stove to look at Charlotte. "He's watching me? I'm not on disability, I'm not married, or fooling around with anyone. What about the person I thought looked like you that was at the store?" Claire placed food in the plates and set them on the table, pausing to look at Charlotte pointedly. "I know what I saw, and after sleeping on it, it was either you or your twin. Why were you in the middle of nowhere when I picked you up?"

"He shot two rolls of film on *you* while I was watching him. 35mm with telephoto lens," Charlotte said. "That was not me you saw and I have no twin and I already told you that that's where I was dumped by the bail jumper. Whatever you're nervous about is getting me jumpy. I think you're up to something with that bunch in your department and..."

"You're jumping to conclusions," Claire told her. "I'm jumpy because there are crazy people out there and I don't like people following me."

Claire ate slowly while she went over the last two days. Something was happening with her operation. She had no partner or senior to call and ask what was going on in the peripheral. It was not that she was a special agent, just a law enforcement officer that wanted to clean out the rift raft. Sandy, a police psychologist, had asked her if it was vengeance, pointing out that if it was, her operation was flawed from the beginning.

"What are you thinking?" Charlotte asked.

"That I didn't get a chance to clean out my pack from the tumble down the hill."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"This was something she set out to do with Ray's half hearted

"It was a she and she looked like you, dressed in the clothes you were wearing the other day on the trail."

If Claire was watching Charlotte she would have seen a look of surprise, however, Claire was pulling things out of her backpack, intending on replacing the food container with fresher snacks. Her drawing pad was pulled out first and then the rest of the contents, neatly stacked.

Claire unwrapped a rag around a small square box. "What's this?"

"It looks like a small jewelry box someone would buy in Mexico," Charlotte said.

"Except it has a lock. I know this isn't mine."

"Are you going to open it?" Charlotte asked.

"Of course. Imagine that; maybe it's treasure buried in my pack." Picking up the box she pried open the lock with a knife blade.

"Uh, oh," they echoed, staring at white powder.

"Shit. This looks like trouble. There goes all that luck I've been riding this week." Claire's thoughts took off, looking for plots, likely suspects of who could have placed it in her pack, and what she was going to do with this obvious setup.

"This is going to get us smack dab into big trouble."

"The guy with the camera, think maybe he's tracking this?" Charlotte asked.

Claire stared at Charlotte. "I'm more worried about what I'm going to do with this." She picked up her rag and started to wipe prints off the wooden box. "Why is someone setting me up? And when did they put this in my pack?" She snapped her fingers. "Maybe when Teddy was barking."

"Are you sure you're not involved in an open case?"

"The only thing that's unresolved is my partner's murder, and I'm the only one that feels it's not resolved."

"His murderer is still loose?"

"I don't believe so. I heard he was killed when rival gang members were mixed in the prison yard."

"What's not resolved with you about the case then?"

"I haven't been able to find the file dealing with his death and the arrest of the snitch. It makes me suspicious that something's not up and up about this shooting."

"Why were you demoted from detective?"

"Because I was there and I don't remember a thing."

"I understand perfectly. Psch Evals."

"That's it. Now I really want to find out if Ray and the gang tracked this elusive photographer down."

"The gang?"

"The gang is a bunch of retired cops that like to come up here. They call themselves RCG, as in Retired Cops Gang. They like to drink each other under the table over a game of cards."

"So what do you propose on doing with that container of trouble?"

"Hide it somewhere, but I'm sure a nose dog will pick up the scent in this pack."

"Want to go for a swim?"

Claire looked at her blank for a moment. "Ah, a dunking."

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. The guys from the previous day were quiet, more prone than upright. She hopped out to a rock was where she could have good views of the cliff face and beach to the left. Pulling out of her pad, pencils and a thick towel to sit on, she settled in for a pleasant afternoon.

Her first sketch was of the person at the store. She shook her head at the third attempt. She did better with the scenery around the phone booth than the person. It was difficult to draw the person and not come up with a near likeness to Charlotte. Thinking about it more, some of the characteristics were different. Charlotte gave the feeling that she was relaxed, except on the trail she was a bit edgy, but she was not a camping out type of person. The person she saw at the store...was like Charlotte on the trail. It was the way she carried herself. It was just different. Claire stared at the sketch, trying to pin point the different characteristics.

*Maybe she has a relative keeping an eye on her. Claire smiled at the joke, then frowned. If that were so, how come she's still here? Does she have something to do with the drugs in the pack? How can she when she didn't have any room on her to carry anything when I picked her up? But she was gone for a long time. Was she really checking out the guy stalking me? Maybe it was this person at the store. Well, the gang will flesh it out if there's something crooked going on here.*

If nothing else, the people she befriended up here were dependable and trustworthy. Claire lifted her head. Her sun-glassed eyes scanned the beach, picking out a tourist armed with a camera pointed in her direction. The group of men were gone around the trash can were gone. The man with the camera must

have spooked them. Suddenly her camera guy was backing up. He hid behind the trash bin. Charlotte appeared on the path from the private campground.

Claire stood to attract Charlotte's attention, careful not to step on her pencils and pad. Putting her foot in a more stable stance, she nudged her backpack into the water. An accommodating wave pulled it out into the waters. Charlotte had an ice cream drumstick in her hand.

"Hi," Claire waved. Charlotte waved back. She easily made her way over the rocks to the one Claire was resting on.

"Is that yours?" Charlotte pointed with one of the drumsticks when she was near enough.

Claire looked out where she was pointing, and then looked down at her feet. "Oh, darn." Claire pulled off her shoes, socks, and jeans and hopped into the shallow water.

"Yeow! This is cold."

Cold waves took her breath away, but she gamely continued to the sinking backpack. She pulled her T-shirt up higher to avoid getting it wet and snagged the pack as it crested the next wave.

"Good thing I didn't think about this part," she said as she turned around to climb out. Wet up to her waist, Claire handed the dripping bag to Charlotte. With one hand holding her panties on she carefully climbed back onto her once roomy rock.

"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."

"Cold or no, I won't pass up an ice cream drumstick. Those are the one's with fudge in the center. The only one's they have at the store. I'll have soup tonight to thaw out, if necessary. Brr."

Claire pulled off her wet panties and slipped on the jeans. Charlotte offered herself as a wall from any prying eyes.

"I sure hope there is only one camera," Claire grunted as she tried to pull her jeans over her damp and cold legs. She nearly toppled off the rock but Charlotte's grip around her elbow held her from falling.

"He's still behind a trash bin. I think he's interested in the guys on the beach," Charlotte said. "Is there some tribe gathering there?"

"Creepy dudes. Not enough vehicles to haul the lot off and they're too old to be college students. They were using that trash bin for a bonfire. I can now see why they still use metal trash cans around here. I thought they had gone."

"Well, they're back and looks like they brought a lot to drink." Charlotte watched them for a while then followed Claire as she led the way back to their campground.

Charlotte carried the pad and box of pencils, and Claire held the wet pack and towel. They stopped at the store, where Claire introduced her to Sandy.

"Faithful Teddy was barking her head off. Ray 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. "Charlotte? It's for you." She waved her to the phone behind the counter.

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

"Ray said you're being followed," Sandy said.

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

"Both names are common enough. Maybe Ray knows someone by that name. I would call him on the radio but he's nosing about and I don't want to ruin his fun."

Claire chuckled at her image of him dressed in camo gear with grease on his face. "No. Later." Claire looked over at Charlotte who was walking toward them. "You ready to head back?"

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.

Teddy was not in her usual place under the picnic table. This time she was standing on top of the table. Claire took time to coo to her and praise her for being the watchdog she was intended to be. Her tail waved enthusiastically and then she hopped down and waited in front of the van's door.

"You worked up an appetite did you?" Claire obligingly prepared Teddy's bowl which the dog promptly buried her nose in before it touched the ground.

Tiredly Claire plopped in the chair opposite Charlotte. Her cell vibrated on her hip. "Answer. Hello?"

"Hey, Miss Vacation! How's Teddy and Mollee Bree?" Gail's voice asked.

Claire left a voicemail on their service saying she was fine, so why the call? Did she find out that she had picked up a semi-stranger?

"We're all doing fine. Teddy Bear got to bark at some campers that came too close to the van and Ray came over to investigate. That was the second time we've had some excitement."

"Trouble?"

"Nothing that we can't handle. Tell Margie 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 and certainly wouldn't use your address unless I asked. Does it say who from?"

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

"You know I'm not."

"Well, I asked Jeff to bring his pooch over for a test sniff. In the meantime, it's sitting out in the middle of the backyard."

"Who delivered it?"

"It came by regular USPS."

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

"Did all that stuff."

"I bet you didn't shake it. Sorry, bad humor. I know they can't be those battery powered French ticklers I ordered. I already received them," she teased nervously.

"Can I open it?"

"Go ahead. But, you're getting me nervous. Maybe you should get one of those robots they use for the bomb squad."

"That's an idea. Catch you later."

"Bye. Oh, boy," Claire muttered, closing her phone.

"What's the problem?"

"Tell me about your phone call first," Claire bargained.

"Our bail fugitive was caught heading toward Canada in a small Cessna, where we least expected him to go. My vehicle has been found in good shape at the private air port. It's great to have backup, it just took more people than normal."

"So..."

"So, I told my office 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, one of Teddy's mamas, 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, but not without cause, you know?"

"Ah. So, do you think it ties in with the box and our photographer?"

Claire laughed wearily. "I don't know. I sure hope that's not the supposed cash that goes with the toot in the box."

"Who is Sandy?"

"She used to be my department's shrink. Ray was captain of detectives fighting a down hill battle with the likes of a small group of rotten apples."

"Did you tell them about the box?"

Claire tried not to squirm. "I forgot."

"Okay," Charlotte replied looking bemused. "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?"

"I don't think they're going to believe it was dumped in the ocean. 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." She flinched at the thought of what might happen to the van.

"You don't think that's too obvious?"

"I'm not going to leave Teddy behind. One kick and she's dead and so will I be. And leaving you, I don't think it would be wise."

"Okay. So, what's our movie today?"

"Let's dip in and find out."

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 bristled then 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 her body dragged to the ground. She knew the process of intimidating the target with pain and mental stress. Aggressively and unnecessarily she was kneed into submission, where her hands were bound with nylon cord. Rather than focus on the pain of the cord biting in her wrists and her shoulder joints stretched more than normal, she tuned in to what was happening around her. There were two dogs barking, one deep, with the handler calling the dog's name to get ready for action. The smaller bark was Teddy, which was suddenly muffled. The tear and crash of the awning was not pleasant to hear, since it was not her property. Deep male voices shouting orders...too many to identify who was boss.

Suddenly she was yanked to her feet and put into a chokehold. She instinctively struggled for air. A rifle butt slammed into her stomach, knocking her into semi-unconsciousness. When her vision returned, she was blinded by flashlights shining in her eyes. As she tried to avoid the light, someone slapped her in the face.

A set of hands picked her up and unceremoniously dropped her on the picnic table bench, her spine hitting the table top. On the periphery of the light, she saw rifle muzzles pointed at her head. She sagged against the picnic bench, wheezing, unable to breathe through her nose. She licked her lips to catch what was dripping into her mouth.

Blood.

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

Claire turned her head to look for Charlotte. The small movement brought a bare handed slap across her face, rocking her head back.

She could see her badge and semi-automatic on the table.

"Where is it?" a deep voice asked above her.



"Where's what?" she coughed from the pain. Her ribs hurt. They must have kicked her when she was unconscious.

"Don't play games with me!" A slap followed, knocking her back. Hands roughly pulled her upright.

"Since you know I'm a cop, you know you're in deep shit," she mumbled between a split lip.

She was hit again, knocking her to the ground, followed by kicks to her sides and back. This was going to really hurt in two days, she told herself.

Again, she was jerked back up and dragged into the van. Her shins hit the edge of the stairs. Her pulse beat painfully against her jaw. It felt broken. Her captor shoved her into one of the chairs. Charlotte was sitting in the other, her hands bound behind her. A bruise was forming on her chin.

"I'm going to feed your borrowed pooch to my dog and then beat up on your girlfriend if you don't give me answers."

Teddy was barking frantically in the toilet closet.

Her cheek twitched from something that was tracking down her cheeks. Claire wondered if it was blood or tears. Hopefully it was not blood. That would stain the carpet.

Hands grabbed her and shook her making her face hurt even more.

"Where is it?"

She knew the routine. Fear and pain were a great motivator.

She shook her head, not being able to move her jaw. Off in the distance, she heard a droning noise that was getting louder.

"This is the police. Drop your weapons and stand out where we can see you!"

Claire wavered in her seat. She could feel herself suspended in a bubble with distorted noises that gradually became louder but garbled.

Were her hands free?

Something cold was pressed against her jaw and she raised her hand to touch it. She felt a warm hand.

"Hey, you back with us?" Sandy asked gently.

Claire blinked and then nodded. Pain radiated across her face.

"You don't have a busted jaw, but it's sure going to hurt for a few days like the rest of you," she smiled.

"Got a shiner and a swollen face. Swollen wrists, cuts and bruises around the ribs but recoverable after a week. I suggest you visit your doctor and arrange for X-rays."

"Whaaa haaaunn?" She swallowed and tried not to cry from the pain.

"Their credentials identify them as FBI. They claimed you're 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 anything."

"Gaa assin?"

"I'll give you something better 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. Ray is keeping Detective Smith outside until I make sure you're alright to be questioned."

"Hmmm. Unnn."

"Right here." Sandra held up her badge and semi-automatic. "No magazine?"

Claire pointed at the cupboard. Sandra stood up and checked.

"Nothing here."

At least they did not steal her registered weapon.

"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 her, Claire's eyes sought out Charlotte. It was dark outside so she saw nothing.

"Ers Char...?"

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

*He get's right to the point. Good.*

She took the pad he handed her.

"No," she scribbled.

"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?"

She wrote with a shaky hand, "No."

"I talked with your captain, any reason why he's pissed at you?"

"Nooo." *Shit. That's not how I wanted to come to his attention.*

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

"No," she wrote.

"Well, you're one very 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. Nausea and fatigue washed over her.

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

## Chapter 6

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

"Ooohh, gawds!" she groaned. Holding her face with one hand, she swung her legs over the bed and grabbed onto the small set of drawers that separated the two beds. Taking a deep breath she focused on the figure sitting across from her.

"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 that rotten feeling"

"Charlotte?"

"She's sniffing around with some of the gang, looking over that group sex camp site. They left rather hurriedly. Could have been right after the police helicopter's arrival. Maybe they're not into performing under a spotlight."

"Hey, Claire. If we didn't have you we'd be bored to death up here," Ray teased as he gently touched the swollen jaw with a new iced cloth.

"Teddy? What about Teddy?" she mumbled.

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

"They're not going to let me borrow their van or Teddy any more," Claire said.

"We got most of the mess cleaned up. Marge and Gail are more worried about you. As for the damage, we took enough pictures to embarrass the FBI for reimbursement," Sandy said.

"We have a lawyer already working on it. Wrongful bust and the way they beat up on you while your hands were tied..." Ray shook his head. "I don't care what this new Home Land Security Organization says, that's not right."

"I'm glad they didn't have a taser," she got out painfully.

"Be happy they didn't haul you off to one of those places they practice water boarding," Ray returned.

Claire accepted the mirror Sandy handed to her. The bruise above her eye was a big 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.

"Plenty," Ray answered. "One of the gang got some close-ups of the ring while the local police held him up for questioning. You missed the Mexican Standoff." Ray sighed. "We couldn't get to you sooner, Claire. We didn't want to come barging down and make things worse but they were filming with infrared and putting a fire under the local cops to make noise with their helicopter to break up the party."

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

"Texas. They made two strategic errors. They didn't notify the local bureau office that they were dropping in for a bust, and 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 and then her aching jaw. If she thought more about it, her whole body hurt. "Did you guys run a bug detector over this place?"

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

"So, what's your take on this?" 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 each one," Claire started.

"Not that Sammy mess!" Ray let out explosively.

While Ray was getting the last of his work finished before leaving the department for retirement, internal investigation was wrapping up their investigation on a shooting incident in which Claire's partner was shot in the head by a juvie he was questioning on the street. Claire had no recollection of the shooting, which was frightening to Claire since she was found unconscious in the car, drugged.

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

Claire pointed to her face. "That mark from the guy's ring. It reminds me of Sammy's ring."

"This is a problem that keeps haunting us all," Ray remarked.

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

"Well, I'm not running," Claire grumped.

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

Claire caught sight of white gauze bandages around Charlotte's wrists.

"Hi, Charlotte, how are you?"

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

"Hey, Kenny."

"Hey girl. You got quite a nasty there."

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

"I'm not. Just some old stuff that may be, and I stress 'may be', 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 were so open with their drugs I thought for sure they were dirty cops or idiot donkeys that stole from their dealer."

"Must have had you soiling your pants when that helicopter lit up the sky," Ray 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 thought it was a flashback...just kidding. I thought they were after those dudes and glad I had an alibi."

"Were they there when you got back?"

"Gone when I got back this morning. I found the RC gang sifting through the sand like they knew what they were doing. Gil said he's 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 asked worried.

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

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

"Kenny," Ray told him warningly.

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

"Good to hear it means so much to you," Sandy said.

"It does. I'm going to go on up and talk to Becky and her unworthy husband," he told them.

When he left Ray looked at Charlotte. "So, where is the stash these guys hid?"

"It's still under the bin waiting for the local PD to pick it up. Kenny called them when we were at the store."

Ray 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 so you want to join us?"

"Nope. You'll empty my pockets and get me drunk so I'll dance on top of the table wearing only a lampshade."

"I hear you have a lot of loose change since you won the office pot...what's up with that? You never participate in the office pools."

Sandy pulled his arm. "Later. 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, believing, without any preamble.

## 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. The writing was difficult to read until the name, which became stiff but carefully written.

Claire got up and used the toilet, then prepared to take a shower. Slowly she struggled out of her clothes, dropping them on the floor outside the door. She had turned up the water heater temperature, but the holding tank was not very big. As fast as she could she washed her hair, which took up all the warm water, and then moved to the rest of her body.

By the time she was finished she was tired. 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. "Woman, you should be happy this rough and tumble isn't your bag. You'd be a scary person to live with."

She opened the door and stepped over her clothes, picking up the towel she had left on the bed. She turned, hearing a sound behind her.

Charlotte was standing in the passageway watching her. Claire stood very still. After a timeless moment, Charlotte asked, "Need some clothes?"

Claire nodded and dropped the towel on her bed. As casual as she could be, she walked toward Charlotte who had an armload of clean clothes. Claire separated out a pair of cleaned jeans, underwear and shirt.

She held the T-shirt to her nose and took a deep breath. It was Sandy's soap.

"My one set of clothing was in need of washing so I thought I would help you out with yours."

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

Charlotte raised her eyebrows. "You keep asking me that."

Claire took the clothes back to the bed. "Yes, because you don't feel right."

"Don't feel right? Oh, my. That's a twist to an old one," Charlotte said. "I used to hear that while someone was feeling me up."

As she dressed she asked, "Are you saying that you're a cross-dresser?"

"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.

"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."

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 based on sexual attraction.

"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. When my father is now asked about his son, he feels he can honestly say 'he's dead,' and not have to elaborate further."

"Oh..."

Charlotte leaned forward and wiped a tear from Claire's cheek. Claire leaned into the hand, feeling the warmth.

Without lingering, Charlotte leaned back, withdrawing her hand. "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 filling the water 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."

"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. Do you think one of them planted it in your pack while we were showering the other night?"

Claire looked over at her frowning. "Yes, but why? I'm a nobody." Claire pulled out two cups and poured a nondairy creamer in hers and left Charlotte's black.

She sipped her coffee thinking about the killing of her partner, Sammy. Closing her eyes, she shook her head, wishing she could leave the incident behind. Lifting her eyes she stared into the dark brown eyes looking back at her. Time passed slowly as the two regarded each other.

Teddy's yap announced someone she knew was approaching. Both women glanced out 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 sounded in sympathy as he looked at her face.

"Ouch," Bob cringed.

"Hey, guys. Have you met Charlotte?"

They nodded.

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

"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 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, yes. One carat usually breaks a newly weds pocket. Five goes for somewhere along \$300,000. This may go for more since it has good color," Bobbie explained.



"Okay. So what did you do with the jewel?"

"We gave it to the local PD," Bob said. "They nearly fainted after their jeweler gave an appraisal."

"They were so damn nervous they had six armed uniforms walk the jeweler over to his safe to lock it up. They'll put an advertisement out for it and if no one claims it they keep it," Bobbie said.

"They? No finders fees?" Then it dawned on her the implication if she were the finder. "You're right. If it turns out to be nasty I certainly don't want to get involved. Plus, I have no idea how I ended up with it in the first place. 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. Both shrugged their shoulders.

"If they were, that one diamond is not enough to get caught for a bad bust," Claire informed them. "It's got to be part of something bigger. If these are rogue agents, I've never heard of them involving themselves in gems. Drugs yes. Easier to unload and harder to trace. So, maybe something to do with the international world."

They were all quiet.

"That 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 didn't 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 somewhere, maybe Interpol. So, I guess now that the diamond's whereabouts has been posted we wait and see. What did you tell the local cops?"

"Ray knows the police chief. He did Ray 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 Ray abreast of what's happening. Your name didn't come up at all but I'm sure he suspects this has to do with the FBI bust," Bobbie added.

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

Claire shook her head. "The only time they could have done it was when we were taking a shower the other night and Teddy was barking up a storm. I left my pack on the table to remind me to lighten it."

"What about that nudist group? Ray said he caught them around the van with Teddy barking up a storm. That was four against Teddy."

"Or the camera stalker," Charlotte pointed out. "All it would take is two people. One to keep Teddy busy while the other plant the box."

"Ray said the FBI had you under surveillance for about five years. Wasn't that about the time Sammy died?"

Claire nodded.

"Do you think it's tied to him? He was crooked," Bobbie mentioned.

"The ring mark on my face looks like the one Sammy wore," she admitted.

Both Bobs squinted at the mark that was more of a bruise now and shook their heads.

"Sometimes you have to go with the belief that it isn't over until the fat lady sings," Bob quipped.

"Well, that explains it all. I haven't heard the fat lady sing on a lot of cases I worked on," Claire returned. "Look guys, I appreciate all this brain storming but I'm getting a headache." She did not add that she was also getting a queasy stomach from thinking of Sammy. For someone dead, he was just as much trouble as when he was alive.

The sky grew overcast while they quietly sat; typical of November.

"So, what about the photographer?" Claire asked.

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

"DEA. FBI. What's going on?"

Both Bobs shook their heads. "He wouldn't say. We have some contacts still which we're prodding with 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 mockingly. "Gawds, where do I begin?"

The others laughed.

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

"Not me. I have enough going on without adding gambling. 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. Doris and Sandy will do dinner, so come hungry and the game commences right after. We don't use real money. We don't want the local cops busting us for gambling," Bob joked.

"Uh huh," Charlotte returned, catching the wink.

"I can loan you a twenty. That's all they bet per night."

"Thanks. I'll pay you back."

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

## Chapter 8

Claire was fast asleep until the shifting of the van woke her. Her heart beat rapidly as she struggled to wake up. Claire rose from her bed, turning on the small light so Charlotte could find her way. She grinned as unsteadily Charlotte's dark form moved over Teddy, and then fell forward.

Claire jumped up to stop her fall. Both were propelled backward 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 the turn in her thoughts.

"How did you manage to make it up here?"

"The guys dropped me off," Charlotte husked. "They sure do drink."

"Another reason I don't gamble with them. Here, let me help you."

"Ouch," Charlotte mumbled as her head hit the panel.

Claire's "Did you have a good time?" was met with soft snores coming from Charlotte's prone figure. Wanting to make her comfortable, Claire started to undress her. Her hands cupped her calf as she pulled off one 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. Claire's 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 had left a note on the newly made bed. Taking the note with her, Claire let Teddy out and made some coffee. She heated a bagel and smothered it with cream cheese, adding a thin slice of purple onion to the top. In exaggerated slowness, she set the bagel on the table with her coffee and took a seat at the small dinette. Unfolding the note, she read:

*Claire,*

*It looks like you have a good group of friends that will keep an eye out for you, so I'm heading back to the city.*

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

*CW*

She took a bite of her bagel and chewed it, swallowing it down with a mouthful of coffee. She folded the note carefully and slid it in her pocket. Finishing her coffee she proceeded to collect her backpack.

Water was added, and a few snacks, now 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 hanging over the stream. Sounds of water trickling over the streambed filled the air. Teddy climbed onto the bench beside her. She was happy when Claire stroked her head.

Claire glanced around the site, noting that awning roof escaped damage. The sides that gave Teddy some protection were removed. Fearful for Teddy safety now, Claire was thinking of leaving Teddy at the store.

"Hey, Hanson! Yo! You there?"

Startled she looked around for Gil. "Yeah," she got out without much enthusiasm. "Yes, 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. Come on. Grab your kit. Hey, Teddy. I brought you some cookies," he said to the excited dog that was bouncing around his legs.

After Gil made certain Teddy was in no danger from a wild animal, the two headed up the path. Claire refrained from informing him that Teddy had been on camping trips since she was a puppy, starting out with guarding tents before her owners graduated to a van. Margie and Gail taught Teddy tricks of survival, besides believing Teddy had her own natural survival smarts.

Gil and Claire's silence was punctuated with their breathing and footfalls. They made stops as one or the other enjoyed something spotted on the trail. The path widened at one point, with an area of fallen logs and branches, covered with late blooming flowers.

"Well?" Gil watched Claire as her eyes brightened.

"How do they live smothered by all this other stuff?" Claire pulled out her sketch pad and pencils. Gingerly she settled herself on the ground, making grunting sounds when her body did not bend as easily as it would have if she were not so bruised. "I'm going to have to get some kind of chair that's collapsible and light to carry."

"If you give up abusive relationships you wouldn't have to worry about being too sore to sit on the ground," he joked.

"Yeah. Like a magnet I attract bad relationships. Next day-off I'm going to a witchdoctor and have them scare whatever it is away."

Gil laughed. "I want to be there and see that. Sweat lodge, naked bodies, drugs, and your greatest fear chasing you."

Claire laughed at that. "It won't be that type of ceremony. I hate heat. I was hoping there would be a lot of dancing around, lots of drums, and mumbled casting out spells."

"I see you're not in for the casting out of evil spirits." Gil grinned at Claire's grimace.

"I've seen those movies where the priest comes over and all those nasty things happen to the person he's supposed to be saving. No thanks. Too much drama and my landlord would toss me out."

Gil stretched his long legs out before him and sucked on his water. "Without the drama in our lives, most of us would be bored to death."

Claire gave him a sidelong look of pity and a snort of disbelief, then went back to her sketch. She was on her third drawing when Gil asked, "You want to tell me what's bothering you?"

"Nothing's bothering me," she told him preoccupied with her sketch.

"Then why were you sitting for about an hour muttering to yourself?" he asked.

"Muttering to myself? What's with the sensitive chit chat," Claire responded testily.

"I was worried that maybe with your history..." stopping her with two hands up before she could interrupt, he replied, "Now, hear me out. Getting knocked around by masked men is not something that ordinarily happens to cops, especially when they're supposed to be on the same side of the law as you. 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 looked unconvinced.

"Listen, the first nightmare I have on that raid, you'll be the first person I call to talk to."

"I've been in your shoes, fooling myself that I have other more important 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 another support payment."

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. I'm not going to lie about what was in the box, nor could I since everyone knows."

"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 one of us. Don't hold it in, gal."

"Why do you feel we need this conversation?"

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.

"Because you keep too many secrets and they're going to eat you alive. A cop that has no partner to talk to...that's not a good sign for survival in the business."

"Gil, if I need to talk to someone it'll be Sandy. Okay?"

"I was watching you sit for over an hour just staring at that tree. I didn't want to disturb you in case you were in one of those artistic moods, creating something real complicated," he teased. "So, maybe you got problems with your girlfriend?"

"Charlotte? She's not my girlfriend," she told him shocked.

"She's not a friend?" he asked mockingly.

"Well, yes. 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, she went back to her life, end of saga. There's nothing going on with us, Gil."

"Did she say good bye?"

"Yeeesss," she drew out sarcastically. "Come on, Gil. Out with it. What is this about?"

"It's a friend to 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.

"Because when you go back to work you're going to 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 raid someone screwed up and heads will roll. Someone is going to be looking for paybacks."

Claire pulled her knee up and rested her chin on it. "If it's someone in Petima's PD I guess I'll know by who got the ax, though that could be me. The chief and I aren't on friendly terms."

"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 lot of people that do. You're not that old. Have you tried to apply at another..." seeing the shake of her head, he tried a different approach, "Okay. Well, what are you going to do when you get back then?"

"I honestly don't know right now." She rubbed her sore 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 ring that FBI agent had. It was just like Sammy's. Sammy said he inherited his." Claire started to laugh. "Maybe it's like the Bush and Kerry 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 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."

## Chapter 9

Claire drove her car slowly along the one way street looking for a parking space. Since it was three in the morning, she was hoping for a spot relatively close. She pulled into a space across the street from her building. She needed to remember that tomorrow was street sweeping and she had to move her car by nine. Keeping her load to a minimum, 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. You miss me?" Claire dropped the box in the service porch and returned to boot up her PC. She was too wound up to sleep. A nap at Gail and Marge's after they pried everything from her was just enough to take the edge off her exhaustion. 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 message warning her about something. Their brain storming possibilities got so silly she had laughed herself to sleep on their couch. The seriousness of it was that there were no fingerprints on the inside of the box, just the outside where USPS would have handled it.

While her PC booted up she turned on the washer and tossed in her cloths. They were ripe enough for her to actually want to dump perfumed softener in the rinse to make sure the smell was out.

Moving back into the front room Claire dropped into her office chair in front of the PC. Quickly she typed in her password.

*What's this?* She looked down at her PC's CPU box against her leg. She leaned down and pressed her hand on the side. It was warm.

When it finished loading her settings she launched her *I Spy* program to see what was happening while she was gone. It had been wiped clean up to the day she left. The odd thing about that was, she had not been on the computer that day. Hesitating to check her files she decided to let someone with more experience check for sabotage.

*Maybe they left bugs too.*

In the bedroom closet, she pulled out her counter surveillance sweep set. It was under her winter clothing that she only wore when she visited the snow. If anyone searched her apartment they would have come across it.

After testing it for sureness, she ran it through her bedroom first and then moved into the other rooms.

Nothing.

"Why check out my PC and not leave a memento? They had to know I was coming back today, well, last night. Another group? That means they had a lookout watching for me. But how come the cats are so calm?"

She got up and looked at the two cats that by now should be mewling for food. There was no food in the dishes but plenty of water. She poured it out and refilled it. Neither cat seemed to be especially upset.

Her phone was inspected carefully before she made her call. She had a voice scrambler attached and she made sure it was on. Claire didn't have any numbers in her autodialer. This 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.... Yes. 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 you then. Bye and thanks."

Assured her friend would remotely log on her PC and inspect it she restlessly walked around wondering what to do. Uncharacteristically, she turned on the television. Dropping on the couch it took only a few moments to fall asleep.

On one level, she heard the familiar thump as a cat jumped on the couch back and then the gentle tapping on her stomach, as a paw tested the stability of her position. The rumble of a purr vibrated through her stomach as one of the cats settled for a nap.

Claire bolted up right, disorientated for a moment.

*Home.*

Someone was ringing her doorbell. The cats were not on the cat tree and neither on any of the front room furniture. Swinging her feet to the ground she heaved herself up with effort. Opening up the door she was surprised to see Richard and then remembered she had called him early in the morning. He was Mr. Geek to the local computer club, and an equal listener when either wanted to chat an earful of the blues about their life without worrying that the other would repeat it to someone else or take it all seriously.

"Hey big sister, you look like crap." He kissed her on the cheek and patted her on the shoulder. "I logged on and put some serious filters on but I'm going to pull out your hard drive."

"I'm going to make us some coffee," she told him as she started to shuffle to the kitchen. Both cats mewed for their morning treats.

"Better move your car first," he advised. "I'll feed them."

"Oh, that's right. Thanks. Be back in a bit."

She came back ten minutes later, breathless. She finally found a place three blocks away after she circled the area a dozen times. The usual promise to herself to move to an apartment that had tenant parking was made as she jogged back to her apartment.

"So, what did you find?"



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

"You're my favorite Geek. Richard, do you know anything about transgenders?"

Richard rocked back on his heels and looked at her over his glasses. "Met someone of interest in the woods?"

"I'm just curious." She tried to look indignant.

"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.

"Want some coffee?"

"If you don't mind me taking it with me. I'm going in early this morning. When do you go back to work?" he asked.

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

"Why?"

"Because I got beat up on my vacation. The chief 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.

"Maybe he wants to make sure when I file something, it goes in the right file."

Richard shook his head and packed his bag. He pushed her tower back under the table and booted her PC back up.

"See you later," he told her. He peeked at the two felines, one on the balcony and the other on the cat pole, both cleaning themselves following a can of salmon. "Looks like I picked the right can."

"You're the only person King George will eat whatever you put before him. Why is that? You two share a life once?"

"No. Can't say I recall anything like that. I'll talk to you later. Good luck on your checkup."

Claire waited over an hour in the waiting room, going through all the last year magazines that were scattered on tables by those that went in ahead of her. Dr. Ellis would tell her it took only one patient to back it up for everyone else, but in this case, he was squeezing her in between someone and Claire was not sure which one. If he was not recommended by their police department, she would have chosen another that she would not have minded to wait for. Dr. Ellis did not spend more than three minutes with her and that was just to ask two questions and mark up a paper that was handed off to the woman behind the desk who gave Claire a neater version on a type written document with a scribbled signature she could not read. The X-ray and MRI that Sandy recommended to make sure she was okay was deemed unnecessary by Ellis, because she lasted this long without any problems.

Armed with Dr. Ellis's clean bill of health she headed back to her apartment to take a nap.

Hardly anyone was home during the day so she parked right in front of her apartment. Before her nap she took a nice warm bath, soaking in herbal oils and then curled up around her pillow with each cat finding her and his special place.

## Chapter 10

Claire sat up suddenly, looking around. She had the weirdest dream. Turing on the small lamp, she looked for her dream journal but remembered she locked it up before she went on vacation. This dream had Charlotte and her becoming partners, dressed up in the forty's style of male clothing, intent on knocking off a smuggler cartel that was looking for their lost bag of diamonds. When she looked in the bag there was only uncut smack.

Charlotte looked good in her suspenders and fedora. Mentally Claire groaned. It must be that time of the month where her thoughts would be straying on hot babes and other one-nighters.

"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. Slowly she moved to turn off the alarm. Too late. It started buzzing. Claire thumped it off.

Off went King George into the front room.

"I must have been tired," she told Cleo who was meowing near the door. "I missed your dinner? Ah, I forgot to clean your cat box?" Cleo continued to meow.

Claire tossed off her bed covers. Wet food was dispensed to each; the cat boxes were cleaned; and now it was her turn. She dressed in her running gear and managed to get out the front door without bumping into a door frame. Taking care not to make too much noise as she ran down the stairs, she headed to the high school track. There were the usual early morning runners, which she joined, settling into her pace. There were no conversations between the early runners, 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. She emptied her mind during the run, putting the nervous flutters of returning to work with some hard explaining to do to the chief on the back burner. Jogging back to her apartment she was not able to keep from thinking of it any longer. She planned her walk into the office, smiling and acting as if nothing had happened.

"I can do that," she repeated to herself as a mantra.

She tossed her sweaty clothing at the laundry basket and started her shower. Since her laundered uniform was delivered to the office, she had nothing to bring but herself to work. Her work handgun was locked in a safe in her locker.

"Crap!" She slapped her hand on the tile. "I forgot my badge and backup weapon in the van."

Finishing her shower quickly, she dressed in pressed jeans, a starched cotton 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 in what she was wearing. Grabbing her thin black leather jacket from the closet, she collected her things and was out the front door. She autodialed Marge's number as she slid into her car.

"Call, Marge."

It rang twice and was picked up.

"Hey, girl. Did I wake you?.... Good morning. I need to get my stuff out of your glove compartment.... Great. Have a nice day."

Gail and Margie 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.*

Parking behind Roadteck in their driveway, she noted a car driving by slowly. When she was back in her car and heading toward the freeway, the same car was behind her.

Just for the fun 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 that when she parked at the police station the same car was idling in the parking lot. She was not imagining things.

Claire thumped her nose at the two silhouettes and laughed when they turned to each other as if in conversation. Taking the stairs two at a time, she ducked into the chief's office. He was not in, so she left the doctor's clearance in his mail slot. Downstairs in the basement, she took a quick look of her desk, satisfied that new files were stacked in the inbox neatly and nothing else had been disturbed. Running back up stairs to the locker room to change, Claire was noticing that the usual crowd of rowdy guys was not hanging around in the hall, making rude comments at whoever passed them.

"Hey, Hanson!"

Claire turned to look at Monica who was dressed in civvies with a detective badge proudly looped over her belt.

"Hi, Monica. How are you doing?" Her eyes rested on the badge wondering why she was wearing a detective's badge and was not in uniform.

"Great! You like?" She pointed to her badge with two fingers and waggled her hips. "I got my promotion to detective finally."

"Detective?" Claire repeated stupidly. Sammy'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 in what they felt were men's jobs, nor to anyone not a member of their 'old boys' network. What was going on?

"Yep. And you too." She looked around and then gestured for her to follow her into the women's restroom.

"Are you sure this is a good place to talk?" Claire asked suspiciously, looking around the stalls.

"I checked it a few moments ago. No spy equipment. 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. The day you left for vacation, as a matter of fact. All the detectives, a few uniforms, and a coroner were handed their walking papers and served for criminal activity. Three of them for endangering a minor. The chief finally got all his ducks in a row and fired the lot, 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 top positions. There's also word that Sammy isn't dead." Monica was barely able to hold her excitement.

Claire leaned against the sink to hold herself up. Her voice echoed hollowly in the restroom. "Really?"

"Really. Anyway, there's six detectives counting you and I. Linda Chandler from N.Y.P.D, Harrison Harvard from Colorado, Dankest and Reynolds from L.A. I'm training with Linnie, then I'll be partnered with either Dankest or Reynolds. You're partnered with Harrison. It's a kick getting used to Linnie. So, New York, you know?"

"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 a uniform."

"Yes," Claire agreed distractedly. Claire ran back up the stairs, hoping the chief would be in. Chief Dobbs was sitting at his desk reading her doctor's report so Claire knocked and got the wave-in.

"Hi, Chief. Heard you had some excitement while I was gone." She wished she had not blurted that out. Chief Dobbs never was a casual person and she was by no means on any friendly basis with him.

"Close the door and sit down, Hanson," he said.

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 his request 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.*

She missed roll call and felt thoroughly drained after reciting her story to the chief and then answering questions. Nervously she waited for him to go through the paperwork on his desk.

"Your name is going to be left out of any connection with the find of the diamond and drugs. The consensus is, it will be too confusing for these Home Land Security guys to differentiate between the good guys and the bad. I spoke with Chief Lemur. He's happy with the story as it is so he doesn't have to share whatever they can collect on the diamond with us."

He tossed a badge in a leather holder in the middle of his cleared desk and gestured for her to pick it up. "You're promoted back to detective. You'll be teamed with our new hire, Detective Harrison Harvard. He's been in the business for a while 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, handed him her old badge, and thanked him. Claire glanced at the badge. It was her old one.

*Detective Hanson. Wow, I'm back. I can't wait to tell the gang.*

Claire stopped before the detective's area, gathering herself. Stepping over the threshold she realized the atmosphere was strikingly different. Desks were cleaned or newly painted, dumpy chairs were replaced or fixed and cleaned, desks were arranged differently, and the air smelled clean. Someone had not only cleaned the floor, but the walls and lights were repaired. It was amazing.

A white haired man with a buzz cut 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.

"Hanson, is it?"

"Yes."

"You're partnered with me." He gestured to the desk across from his. "Four cases for you to start with. We've got a dozen to get to before lunch. Every case handled by the previous group of detectives we've been given to verify the credibility of the witnesses, the evidence, and make sure there aren't any discrepancies that will be challenged in court. I understand you filed most of these. Did you read any of them?" Claire nodded. "Good. How are you in remembering names?"

"Good enough on some. Thai and Indian, not so good."

"I've haven't run across any of those."

Claire opened the first case on the top. She remembered this one. When she read it before filing it, she wished she made notes because this one had a lot of holes in it.

It was lunch, by the sound of her stomach. She closed file seven and looked over at Harrison. She was already liking him because he came over to see what she was taking notes on and grunted his agreement.

"I can hear your stomach from over here. Why don't we get lunch? Do you have any contacts on the street?"

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

He nodded. "Walking sounds like a good idea after eating."

Claire rummaged through the filing cabinet until she found the drawer with small envelopes, gloves, tweezers and a small ratty brush with a bottle of fingerprint dust. No camera. She trotted after Harrison, stretching her legs to keep up with him.

"You don't have a case for that stuff?" he asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. It was considered CSIs job to gather evidence and the detectives to ask questions."

"That has to change to some degree," he said.

"I never heard of drug dealers setting up shop so close to a police department. Do you think it was because the boys club was part of the gang?"

"Boys club. Everyone calls them the boys club. I've been meaning to ask why."

"*They* called themselves that. Probably an inside joke they didn't share with anyone outside of their group. Emily Tyler was real chummy with them and she didn't know." Claire smiled at him. "Just before she tells a lie, her nostrils flare."

"She's not around to ask. I asked her to resign rather than be fired when I caught her removing files. It must have been difficult for some of you that just wanted to be good cops."

"It's something that happens in every police department around the world, Harrison. Authority figures, people in uniform, and people that abuse it or get abused by it. When you join this brotherhood, you learn right away what the rules are and if you don't like them you can quit, live with it, or get killed fighting it."

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 friends with, and she had always been remote. It helped that her desk was in the basement with plenty of reading matter.

"The furniture warehouse had four busts there. All four busts were based on information by a snitch by the name of 'Booker Bee'. He's got an arrest record longer than most snitches. He's been getting off easy by reporting on 'jail house confessions'. Some of them are outlandish, yet the same judge has been letting the same deputy prosecutor use them. What if we have one of those Texas stinks where it turns out evidence was planted on these people?" Claire asked.

Harrison stared at her, his grey blue eyes penetrating hers. "You suggesting the judge and prosecutor are part of this?"

"I think everyone should be considered a suspect that touched these cases until we eliminate them."

"Okay," he smiled amiably. "You take the judge."

"No, problem." *Evelyn cleans the judges' chambers. I wonder if she'll talk to me about who visits a particular judge between court hearings.*

After finishing off their sandwiches, they walked to the furniture store.

"Too bad we don't have a drug dog," Claire said, looking at the trash littered parking lot that two warehouse buildings shared. There were few vehicles parked.

Harrison smiled and pulled his cell. He spoke into it for a short time, giving the address of the store.

"Making a date?" Claire asked.

"Yep and I have one for you too."

"She doesn't look like a dog, does she?"

"Spitin' image."

While they waited for Harrison's date, they occupied themselves by poking around the area.

A SUV pulled up and a fortyish woman slid out, followed closely by a Heinz dog. His short tail was fully engaged as he sniffed at Harrison's pocket. He reached in his pocket and gave the dog what was in it.

"Claire, my wife Ellen. Ellen - Claire, my new partner."

"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 and stroked 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. His wife nodded in agreement, preoccupied with Blueblood who was nosing Harrison's pocket.

Since it was the most she heard from Harrison on his private life, Claire suspected he was saying that to prevent his wife from supplying any information. Women were usually chatty and less likely to hide things unless there was something to hide.

"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, hoping a breeze would not blow them away.

"What do you think?" Claire asked as she clicked another picture of marked areas. Ellen supplied the camera. 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 the right tools. I'll hit a local sport mart and pick up a case then put together accessories we'll need. Right now the budget for the department is in recovery. Purchasing anything new has to go through a long list of people and then maybe we get what we need. Ellen can you give us a lift back to the office?"

Harrison sat in the back with Blueblood sticking his nose through the wire enclosure to lick the dog treat Harrison kept feeding him.

"You're spoiling him, Hon. He needs to work for those treats," Ellen told him.

"If he wants stale treats I don't see any reason to keep him from them."

When they returned twenty minutes later with more suitable equipment and their own camera, they found the entire place washed down.

"Well, that takes care of the urine stink." Claire wrinkled her nose from the strong bleach smell.

"We got someone nervous. I'll do the questioning, you just..."

"Watch the master at work." Claire nodded.

Harrison knocked on the back door to the furniture store. He introduced himself and Claire to a nervous worker that was blocking their entrance into the back of the store. The man kept repeating he did not speak English. Harrison nodded to Claire to go around to the front while he would continue to make headway through the back entrance.

Claire walked through the front and found a dozen workers from South of the border huddled around the doorway into the back, looking like they would run if a signal was given. She closed the front door and moved a chair in front of it.

"All right. Let me all have your attention!" she began. That seemed to do it. They slowly moved to where she gestured for them to stand. Harrison followed the man in the back and nodded to Claire. She was holding up her badge so they all could see she was not INS.

"If none of you can speak English, we can take you all down to the police department and arrange for a translator," Claire informed them.

"Maria," one man said and pushed a young woman forward.

"Maria, is the owner or manager of this place available?"

Maria looked at one of the men and asked him the question.

"The owner is on vacations and the manager is taking meal break," she translated."

"I want to know each man's name and what time they get here for work and when they leave. I also want to know for how long each person has been working here." Harrison kept looking at the lined up workers and around the shop as if expecting someone else to appear.



Maria's short question to the man that pushed her forward was answered in long-winded answers. After the twelve people gave the requested information, Harrison looked at the man that seemed to be the boss.

"Who gave the order to clean the back alley?"

Maria asked and everyone shook their head.

Claire walked along the line of men, sniffing. None of them smelled of bleach. "Let's bring them down to the office, Harvard. I'm tired of these games."

By the looks on the men's faces, she knew they understood what she was saying. The leader spoke harshly at Maria. She started to cry. Claire pulled out her cell.

"Hey, Amy, this is Detective Hanson. Can you send the big wagon with two patrol cars for backup?... Yep. A dozen for questioning and we'll need a translator that speaks Spanish... Good." She slapped the cover closed and slid the phone in its holster.

"Don't move! On the floor and face down." Harvard's voice went deep when the men began to move as if they were about to scatter. Claire had her Glock out and was pointing it to the ground, finger off the trigger, but she was ready, looking about her while keeping an eye on the woman and the men.

"I want lawyer," one of the men said.

"It's whatever INS has to offer," Claire remarked.

Pandemonium broke out. The men were on their feet and regardless of what either detective yelled, disappeared between furniture and into the back. Claire grabbed Maria with one hand and kicked the feet out from under the nearest man. Moving fast for a guy his age, Harrison shouldered one man into another.

"Down!" Harrison shouted. One of the men didn't obey and scrambled to his feet and started to run but Harrison cold-cocked him. He landed unconscious sprawled out over the top of a couch.

"Hands above your head and spread your legs," Claire told the two that were conscious. Both complied.

"Ouch." Harrison shook his hand out. "Did anyone point out to you that it's against the law to yell fire in a crowded auditorium?"

"My mother."

He glanced up at the four uniformed police officers coming in with guns drawn. "Check out the back, Officer Calagna," Harrison said.

Calagna 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 not secured.

The two other uniforms Harrison gestured to. "We need these three taken and held for INS. She's with us."

Huddled in the back of the cruiser, Maria was weeping. Harrison 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 Aveneida. Where are you moving me?"

"To a safe house. Who do you owe?" Harrison asked.

"Cesar. He..." she started to cry again.

"No Cesar in that group," Claire remarked. "But if she was called Maria by that one guy, what are the chances that the names they gave us are right?"

"No, Cesar was not there," Acela told them. "He lives at the apartment on Aveneida.

"He's probably heard by now that she and the others have been picked up," Harrison muttered. He picked up his cell phone and started making calls. Claire drove to a neighborhood that once had nice cottages with cared for yards. Now the yards were dirt with vehicles parked wherever they could fit. Children were playing in a small fenced in yard that had a faded playhouse and other daycare toys.

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

"Just being in this car is enough to cause trouble for me and my little one," Maria returned.

"Okay. Harrison..."

"You stay behind the wheel ready to roll. I'll go with her," Harrison told her.

He hurried Acela up the driveway and into the play yard. There were no words exchanged with any of the adults as Acela scooped up her daughter that came running over to her with arms out. Harrison had the two nearly running back to the car.

A two year old girl with short curly blond hair and hazel eyes sat in her dark haired mother's lap quietly. Claire followed Harrison's directions to a shopping mall. They stopped at four stores, one for luggage, one for adult clothes, one for baby needs. The last was for food to eat on the train. Harrison never told Claire where the two were going, just that both would be safe. Harrison handed Acela a child's backpack with a steno pad, colored pencils and crayons he had purchased stuffed in it. 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's someone on the train that will be keeping an eye out for them until they arrive, and then another team will be there for them."

"So, you work for someone other than..."

"Let's not go there, okay detective," he suggested as he rolled his window down.

They drove back to their part of town and past neighborhoods that were gang infested.

"Slow down," Harrison directed her.

They were passing the same place Sammy 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. She gripped the steering wheel as she turned down a block before the corner and accelerated. The street was not a through street, but there was an alley that would take them past the corner. She kept on driving until Harrison's voice penetrated through her fear.

"We're fine. Park it. Come on," Harrison's voice coaxed. "That's it. Stop right here. Now, take a deep breath, detective. Come on. You don't know if he died so you can let go of whatever you're feeling about that."

Claire banged her palms on the steering wheel and turned angrily to Harrison. "If I want to feel like crap about something you know nothing about then I will! You and everyone else can go screw 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 silently waited.

"Sure was a lonely and hellish time," he agreed when her sobs quieted.

"What did you want with them?" she asked avoiding discussion of the incident.

"I wanted to tell them there's an ordinance out that they can't be gathering in groups larger than one," he smiled.

"Really?"

"It was passed two days ago. It's not important so we'll tackle your problem with that corner another day. Let's get back to base."

As the two were getting out of their car at the precinct, Claire leaned back in to retrieve the rifle. Harrison had the same idea and was leaning in at the same time when the first shot pinged where Claire would have been standing.

"Go!" shouted in unison was not necessary since both were taking cover.

The second shot was at the car.

Claire did not stop running and zig-zagging through the parked cars, hearing Harrison somewhere saying that he was too old for this.

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

"Hello?"

"You call it in since they'll recognize your voice better than mine. See that sign across the street?" Harrison said.

"Yes," she whispered. Something dropped from the sign.

"That's our target. Go!"

"Bye. Call Petima Police front desk."

By now the shots would have everyone inside the PD building hitting the ground.

"Petima Police Desk!" an excited voice barked.

"Hanson here. We got a sniper out here. Took two shots at Detective Harrison and me. We think he was on the girlie ad sign. Something just dropped on the ground. Get us back up."

"You got it!"

"Bye."

Claire climbed down the parking structure and then ran across a busy street as two black and whites screeched around the street further up. She gestured to them to go down one more block.

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

"Did any of you shoot this sniper?"

"Nope," Harrison answered. "Looks like the barbed wire did some damage."

"The two of you follow the trail," the chief gestured to two uniforms. "Hanson, get up there and check it out."

"Hey, Hanson, watch your head."

A fallen ladder was righted so she could climb up. There was blood smeared all over it. She fought a wave of nausea while she pulled on her gloves, and palmed her gun.

"Hanson, 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."

Continuing to slowly climb, Claire heard the chief softly call, "Come on down Hanson. We got a fix."

Awash with relief she rested her forehead on her hand. As she raised her head to start her descent, a barrel appeared above her, pointed right at her face. Immediately launching herself from the ladder, she heard a loud bang close to her. In two minutes a hail of shots were fired and Claire knew there would be no witness left.

She could hear the chief 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's 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 full of prisoners being moved to L.A. and the other two got shot by the pursuing officers when they resisted arrest."

"We need to go back to the furniture warehouse."

"I agree. I'll put it by the Chief to get a search warrant drawn up."

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, DEA 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. Claire stripped her gloves off and dumped them.

"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 local cases haven't been stellar," Harrison reminded her.

"Can you do that?"

"This is where politics between state and federal 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. You do what you can do at your level and let those at the other levels do what they can. It'll work out in the end," he told her confidently.

"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?" Claire asked, feeling tired.

"How you approach this case are the type of answers you'll get."

"I got a philosopher for a partner," she muttered under her breath. But her voice was sounding up 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.

"What are you muttering?" Harrison asked.

"The files are all messed up." She gestured angrily at the rows of boxes on shelves then a desk.

"What's messed up?" he asked.

Claire took that moment to refocus. "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 missing."

"Are they related to our case?"

"Yes. One of the men killed today. His name rang a bell." She held up an index card neatly typed but stained with something unrecognizable. "I went back to my old desk and noticed that all my index cards were gone. I kept them locked in my desk. I found them in the trash, but not in a police trash can. The trash bin across the street."

Harrison gave her a 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..."

"The cafeteria," he supplied. "So, maybe some of the boys club is still around."

"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 in three files. I was under the impression that he was born here and his parents are illegals. The report from today said he was an illegal and had no ID on him. So, how did anyone know he was Julio Ramirez?"

"Maybe there are a lot of Julio's like there are Ramirez's and then maybe not. How about giving it a rest for tonight? Do you have a safe place for those?"

"Yes."

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 chief has the master copy."

The two walked out into the parking lot. 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.

"You're going to make me a real paranoid individual," he told her as he handed her the flashlight back.

"And your wife will love me for it."

Tired but pleased with her new partner, Claire hummed to a song she played over and over on her way home. She parked two blocks away from her apartment and walked with all her senses in hyper mode. Elvis, the sleek short-haired black neighborhood cat that liked to spend his time outside meowing at whomever he could con a pat from, came running toward her.

"Hey Elvis. How are you?" 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 a nearby liquor store. They mistook her friendliness as an invitation to walk into her apartment uninvited. Though she got the message across that she was with law enforcement and they were to not come up the stairs again, she still did not leave her door ajar for the cats until a year after they moved out.

"Hey, guys," she told the two cats that were at the door when she swung it opened. They wanted to be fed. The routine for late nights was that she fed them and then let them wander around outside for a few hours while she unwound. And so it went this night.

It seemed she had just closed her eyes when her pager went off. 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 with her pager attached to her belt beeping.

Groggily she made it to her phone.

"This is," she smiled, "Detective Hanson. 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 fully awake.

"What part is that?" Leisa asked curious.

"Dreaming." she said.

"I hear you," Leisa replied.

"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 needed a shower and fresh clothes.

Feeling a lot better cleaned up, she was tucking her badge over her waistband when her cell went off.

"Yeah?"

"You up?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"Right below your apartment."

"Be right down. We have to stop for coffee," she said. Closing her cell she grabbed a leather coat and tried to close the front door without slamming it.

Below, the familiar SUV waited. Claire peeked in the front seat and then in the back when she spotted movement. Ellen was in the back with Blueblood. She pulled open the door excited.

"What's going on?" Claire climbed up into the cab and quickly secured her seatbelt. A cup of coffee and a bag with a donut was handed to her.

"Coffee and sugar fix. You're going to need all the strength you can get," Harrison informed her.

"Hi, Ellen. Are you and Blueblood going to make sure the SUV doesn't get stolen?"

Ellen 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, and sipping her coffee.

Harrison answered his cell phone. "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 Acela's kid up at?"

"Multiple family dwellings, not just Hispanic, but I would guess a lot of illegals."

"That's it."

A helicopter with its spotlight going over the block helped them locate where their stop was.

Harrison parked in the middle of the street. It was the only place available. The apartment was lit up from the lights of the squad cars and the helicopter that returned to circle 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 the locals.

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

## **Chapter 12**

"Harrison, did you read this?"



He glanced up from his report. "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 said. He took 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 victim?"

"Yes." She studied the report. "Madison and Hynes were the officers that took the report."

"How's Linda and Monica doing?" he asked. "

She glanced at the note left on her desk. "Let's see, Detectives Linda and Monica say... They went out to speak with Julian Ramirez and didn't get much from him, and his wife is scared shitless about something."

"We'll go out later and check them out. Chances are they'll be gone," Harrison said.

Claire pulled another file from her stack. She was on the last page of notes when she began to see double. Teetering back in her chair she closed her eyes thinking how the name she was stumbling over looked a lot like some of the other names only...

Quickly, Claire reached for a pen as her chair thumped down on its front legs. 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 first letter of their name and the last two letters of their surname. They were the same.

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.

"For it to have gone on as long as it has I think this is tied in with the Mexican drug cartel." She turned around to face the door. She hated where the desk was.

Officer Jackson was at the door. "Hey, Hanson. 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 closed the folder she was looking at 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 hated to have to change into a uniform. Spinning the lock, she heard a click from inside of her locker. She threw herself down on the floor as an explosion blew over her.

## Chapter 13

Claire blinked a few times and felt a straw pressed to her lips. Thirstily she sucked up the cool liquid.

"Hey, there girl." A warm hand gripped hers and squeezed.

"Sandy?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I feel like crap, but I've been a lot worse off," she mumbled.

"That you have."

"How many days?"

"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 and maybe longer if you get a second opinion on the MRI. The police MD is a real bugger."

"I wouldn't want my life to depend on him," she agreed. "I hope they got the other guy."

"No."

"What's the word?"

"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 campgrounds so you can recoup in safety."

"Hmm," was all she could get out before she drifted back to sleep.

When Claire's eyes opened, this time she woke alert 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?"

"Gal, you're giving us some fodder for our book. We have to get you out of here. Your presence is stressing the hospital staff worse than a SARs patient."

"Can I take a shower first and put something on that doesn't have me mooning the staff?"

"Clothes are right there. Need help?"

"No."

"I'll wait outside the door. Holler if you need help."

"I can wash and dress myself," she replied firmly.

"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.

"If I felt better you'd be 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 the campgrounds was quiet. Not even the radio played for background noise. Claire slept. She woke up with a sudden concern.

"Gil, where am I going to be shacking up?"

"We've got you a tent," he answered.

"You're kidding. You are, right?" It was winter, it rained, and she just got sprung from a hospital. He had to be kidding.

He laughed, chuckled and then started laughing again.

"Just don't laugh us into an accident," Claire warned him. "So?"

"You're going to be staying in a shack."

"What shack?"

"We fixed up the shack near the restrooms."

"Not that stack of wood! It's got a full house! Bugs, snakes, spiders and other things," she objected.

"Looks can be deceiving, and for your benefit, it does look unliveable. There's one of those bomb shelters beneath it. You'll be safe and comfy."

"Will I get a nice clean bed?"

"Yes."

"With clean sheets, pillow cases, and clean fluffy pillows?"

"Girl, you're picky," he mocked.

"Just what am I going to do besides staring at spider webs and looking for their friends?"

"We've got some books, and you need rest, Hanson. Let the cops on active duty do the work." He gave her a quick glance. "In this operation, all you have to do is just be there and *we'll* do the rest."

She caught his stress on the 'we', and did take comfort. "Do I get to wear camouflage and dyke boots?" she asked, relaxing against the seat with closed eyes.

"Do you want to catch them or not?"

"I want to pull Sammy's balls off."

"Ouch. Just hearing about it hurts," he replied.

"What makes you think they're going to come looking for 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 shook her head. "Gil, in case you haven't noticed, they're trying to kill me."

"That's just recently. The FEEBs say that there're 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?"

"I was unconscious when I was found. I don't even remember if I wrote a report." A sinking feeling hit her. "Oh."

"Oh? Oh, what? Gal, 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 that day Sammy was shot. I asked Sammy what city they were from and he told me it's none of my business."

"And were they the ones at the scene?"

"I don't know. I don't remember anything that happened after the taco stand."

"You heard they think he's still alive, right?"

"I heard. They identified his finger prints with someone that is wearing a different face."

Suddenly, Claire released her seat belt and slid down to the floor, ignoring her protesting body. "Keep going!"

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 drove around the bend.

"Gal, you're not getting paranoid on us now, are you?" But his voice belied his skepticism.

"Stop right here," she told him from her cramped position.

When the car stopped, she waited for Gil's all clear signal.

"Go. I don't see anyone. Where are you going to be?"

"I'll let you 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 road trusting that in the dark she would be able to tell when a car approached. For self-preservation she needed to be less predictable. Running down the rough and uneven road, she was feeling every sore muscle in her body. Waves pounded in the near distance. 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 assailant.*

## Chapter 14

Claire picked up her first ride an hour later on Pacific Coast Highway. The ride was for an hour with a chatterbox who was entertaining herself more than Claire. To give her head a rest, Claire elected to walk until she found another ride. Near midnight she found two elderly women with a flat along Pacific Coast Highway. They were waiting for AAA to arrive. Claire did not feel comfortable leaving them alone and waited with them. They recounted stories of their family. When the tow truck operator arrived, she felt justified at her remaining. The tow truck operator looked too predatory for her comfort. Claire allowed that she may well be too suspicious. The sisters left her off five blocks from her place. Normally the distance was nothing, but by the second block she was tired, her stomach was upset, her eyes hurt, and her head was pounding. Perhaps she should have stayed in the hospital a little longer.

There was a 7-Eleven on the next block where she intended to get all the medication she could get to knock her out for hours, until she remembered she was supposed to be worried about someone wanting her dead.

Two apartments from the 7-Eleven she realized it was too busy for this time in the morning. She glanced at her watch to be sure she was not mistaken about the time.

*Now what? Or, am I being paranoid?*

"So, what's your plan now?" Charlotte's voice asked.

"Jeeze!" Claire turned to find Charlotte's shadowed figure near her. She was wearing a cap pulled down over her face, a black leather coat zipped up, and black jeans with black shoes.

"Coffee?" Charlotte offered her a cup.

Claire shook her head. "I don't think my stomach can take any more acid. What are you doing here?"

"I was nearby and heard you were injured. I had stopped at the hospital and they said you signed yourself out. I thought I would look around since by police radio dispatches you were reported missing."

"Missing? I guess it would appear to be that way. 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. There were a lot of people interested in me when I went to your place."

"How did you get my address?"

Claire missed the look of amusement on Charlotte's face.

"I'm a bounty hunter. Investigating is part of my job. I have a car and a hotel. Want a place to crash?"

It was a good example, to Claire, that a good deed was being rewarded. "If you don't mind."

Charlotte slipped her arm through Claire's and took most of her weight as she guided her away from the 7-Eleven.

"How did you know I was going to be at the 7-Eleven?" Claire asked to cover her discomfort at being so close to Charlotte.

"I saw you walking along the street. You didn't look well. I was thinking, maybe you should have remained in the hospital for another day."

"My bodyguard recommended against it. I'm still on someone's hit list."

"Where is this bodyguard of yours?"

"At the camp grounds. That's where they thought it would be safe for me to hide."

"That place and your apartment are the two places you shouldn't be. At the rate of attacks against you, you should think about staying at a safe house."

"Good idea. I hope your car isn't much further."

"Right here. Do you think you can climb up there?"

Claire looked up at the Toyota Tacoma that had large tires giving it height. "If there isn't any more climbing involved I think I can manage."

Claire had a slight push from Charlotte into the cab. As Charlotte fastened her seatbelt she looked over at Claire worriedly. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible. I want to sleep this off."

Claire remembered being wakened up to walk a short distance to a room, where she gratefully passed out on the bed.

Movement beside her had her reluctantly opening her eyes. Claire knew exactly where she was. She rolled her head slowly to see a dressed Charlotte walking out of the bathroom.

Claire closed her eyes, collecting herself.

"Good morning," Charlotte greeted.

"Morning? Is it the same morning I went to bed?"

"Yes. 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. 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 in case 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, turn around and leave." The door closed behind her.

Claire pulled the covers back over her and curled up into a ball. In a few minutes she would pull herself together and then look through her clothes for her pills. Or, even better, maybe she should wait until she put something in her stomach before taking a pill.

It only seemed a minute that she closed her eyes when she was being shaken awake. Her head hurt so bad, it felt like she had a migraine. She needed to see a doctor.

"You don't look too good," Charlotte whispered, "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 spoke with difficulty.

"Who gave you these?" Charlotte was rolling the bottle between her fingers reading the label.

"They were waiting for me at the nurse's station when I signed out."

"Never heard of that happening," Charlotte told her, sounding worried. "Usually they have them waiting for you in the hospital pharmacy." Charlotte pocketed the bottle and then shifted the backpack onto one shoulder. Next she helped Claire to her feet. "You're not going to throw up are you?"

Claire grimaced. "I hope not. It wouldn't do a thing to make me feel better."

The two stumbled down the 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 the 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 Charlotte was already rolling the truck out of the parking lot.

"Cuz, this place is getting crowded with suits. Something is coming down." He glanced at their passenger in the back worried. "And she looks like crap. You give her something?"

"No. I think she's taking bad meds. Do we know a doc around here?"

"Does she have anything to do with our contract?" he asked.

"She's the reason he's in town."

"How come we keep getting the dangerous jobs? What happened to body guarding the stars from overzealous fans?"

"You said you wanted to be around the rich and famous. You didn't say what order."

"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 chuckled heartily. "I don't want to hear you talking about Burton any more. In return, I'll not talk about Pritchett."

Charlotte nodded and extended a hand to him. They slapped palms.

"Agreed and sealed. Warts and skin tags will grow on whoever breaks the agreement," the two chorused. "And green toads will forever stalk the liar's bedroom."

Bo pulled out his cell phone and hit the autodialer. "Hey, Connie... Yeah?... No. We're heading toward 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, it's the woman that took our boss on her first camping trip. She's going to need blood tests to see if she's been poisoned.... No, I don't think it's anything the boss cooked.... Yeah, that kind.... Thanks. I'll see you later." He gave a kissing sound and hung up. "Doc Williams," he informed Charlotte.

"Okay. I'm going to pull in over there and get in the back with her."

Claire could hear someone practicing the piano from far away. She moved her legs and turned over. Opening her eyes she found herself in a large four poster bed. A window was open. Curtains were fluttering, letting in a breeze that smelled of rain. 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 not on the ground floor of someone's residence. The faint sound of a phone ringing stopped the piano practice.

Claire slowly rolled out of the huge four postured bed. It was not her type of bedroom furniture but the cats would like the idea that it was too big for her to kick either of them in her sleep. She looked at her arm and pulled off the cotton wad taped over the needle mark. She did remember giving blood and then throwing up. There was nothing in her stomach but that did not stop her dry heaves.

Her headache was gone, her body was pain free, and her thinking was clear.

Her first visit was to a toilet easily found. "No looking in the mirror, Hanson. You've been scared enough." As she left the bathroom, she held onto the door jam to balance and nearly screamed with shock at the strange looking person 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 the other door. "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.

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 seeing her still wearing her T-shirt stepped in. "I don't think there's anything that will suit you in there. It's Connie's spare clothing. A bit too fem, don't you think?"

"Yes. That was Connie that...?"

"No, that's Connie's brother. He helps out between his other jobs. Connie is our secretary, office manager, babysitter, and when needs be, chases bail fugitives."

Claire wanted to ask about the babysitting but instead changed the subject. "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 some clothes less frilly. They were mine when I was in a different place."

"Why do you keep them?" Claire had very little storage space in her apartment. Any clothes she no longer fit or had not worn for a year or more, got donated to the local Aids clothing store. It was a mystery to her why people hung onto things they knew they were not going to use again.

"Because..." Charlotte opened up the closet door and gestured to a corner of the closet. If they were Charlotte's old clothes that meant that this was Charlotte's home. Yet, Claire had a difficult time believing that it was. The room they were in did not look lived in.

The clothes Charlotte showed her were not the style Charlotte wore. They were androgynous but to Claire, comfortable. Though the clothes Charlotte wore were not overly feminine, they were also not something a guy would get caught wearing, not even a transvestite. In fact, what she wore was nondescript. One would look at her and say she was a woman that dressed with good taste, but there was nothing else memorable about her.

"These look like I can fit in them. I'll get them back to you..." Claire thought about when she would get a chance to get some of her own clothes. She sighed. "I'll get them back to you when I can."

"Don't worry about that. Clean clothes will make you feel a lot better, and after a nice hot bath you'll feel even better. Are you hungry? Cookie prepared tuna melt sandwiches. When you're ready, just follow the stairs down and to the left. Holler if you get lost."

"Charlotte?"

"Yes?"

"Where am I?"

"Somewhere safe. I'll show you around after you've bathed and eaten."

"I'd like that, thanks."

"I bought you some new underwear. I don't share," she smiled. She picked up the bag on the bed and handed it to Claire. "And Claire, don't use the phone yet, okay?"

"Alright."

An hour later Claire stood on the stairs studying everything she could see. There was another floor above the one she was on. Climbing a few steps to see she found a foyer arranged as a sitting room with comfortable chairs and a couch between interesting statues that reminded her of Thailand's mythical creatures. Old reading lamps were at each end of the couch and over each reading chair. Closed doors were on both sides of the foyer with small tables outside of each. Outside of one room on the small table were dirty dishes.

"Nice," she whispered. Turning back she started down the stairs following the sound of voices past a dining table on the right that was littered with maps, photos and other things she did not get a chance to study before a voice had her turning left.

"Hi. You're looking a whole lot better. My names Ned Blake, except to friends it's Bo." He wore a wide smile that Claire found engaging. "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 that long stretch of road."

She shook hands with the tall dark haired man. He had the same eyes as Charlotte. From the muscular outline beneath his T-shirt, he lifted weights. He could have been the guy that he first saw Charlotte with some years ago. Now that she knew their business, it was probably papers to fill out on a fugitive they were delivering.

"Hi, Bo. I'm Claire Hanson."

"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 whom 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 Bo 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. If that was not a message of "We're taken" she would like to know what would be. Claire turned to the other two men that Connie gesture to when the kiss was finished.

"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."

"Hey! When are you going to drop that? Cripes almighty, but that is getting old," his deep baritone voice muttered, then he winked at Claire, surprising her. Claire smiled reflexively, then grinned from the deep laugh that he gave when Connie fluttered her eyes at him.

"He was supposed to be body guarding a celeb." Nellie drew out "supposed" and waved her knife in his direction. "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 sliced the cheese as he tattled on Jackson. Carefully he added the cheese to a plate with pickles. From there he moved to the burner where tuna was warming in a skillet. The cheese slices were placed carefully over the globs of tuna then moved to slices of bread, where tuna, cheese and slices of pickles were turned into sandwiches. Each sandwich was then cut in half and neatly placed on plates for everyone.

Bo rolled his eyes and looked at Claire. "She's hot about it because Jackson's supposed to be on a leash. As in, a *committed* relationship."

"Well, if *my* man was here, he would defend my honor," Nellie mimicked Jackson's deeper voice.

"I am my own man," Jackson informed everyone, grabbing a plate and getting out of the way of Nellie who made as if to slap his buttocks.

"I'll tell Kellie you said that. We all know he has you wrapped around his little finger." Nellie looked over at Claire. "I'm being polite in front of our guest."

Everyone laughed and picked up their plates and sat around the kitchen bar swapping stories and jibes. 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. Nellie or 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," he allowed.

"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 court house. Research first and then we'll know what to ask for," she said.

Research in a library was not a skill Claire practiced in her detective work, but she realized it would be a worthwhile to skill to cultivate. At the moment, her research covered the old fashioned practice of walking the streets, interviewing witnesses, delving into old files, or using the internet.

As they stepped on the curved driveway she turned to look at the three story mansion Charlotte called home and office. "Wow," Claire muttered. "Must be tough to clean all those rooms. I guess everyone's responsible for cleaning up after themselves."

Charlotte did not comment but led the way to a Honda Civic parked on the side of the curve. The engine was running. A nondescript vehicle in a middle class neighborhood, but not in this neck of the woods, Claire thought.

\*.\*.\*

"I can't remember this," Claire whispered frustrated. "I should remember something after all this time."

Charlotte was taking notes on the newspaper account of a local cop killed by a teenage drug dealer. "Not necessarily. The newspaper says you were drugged."

Claire stared at the black and white picture of the street corner where the murder took place. It was marked by dark stains on the sidewalk. The description underneath the photo reported it was the murdered detective's blood. It looked like a lot of blood for a head shot. What kind of bullet was in the kid's weapon?

"Shot in the chest?" Claire reread the sentence. "I thought they said it was a head shot. It says I was unconscious in the car but not who found me. Why? What happened?"

"The cops that found you were Malone and Gavotte. Ever heard of them?" Charlotte glanced up at her.

"No," she murmured, looking for the names of the two officers in her newspaper. Nothing on the two officers. She loaded the tape for the City Herald to see what they had to say. Nothing on the front page. The small section on the shooting did not mention even her name, nor say why or how Sammy died. She advanced the reel to a few days later where she saw a bigger space devoted to the investigation of the shooting. Lots of questions and speculative answers were in this article.

Claire looked for the reporter and found there was no by-line. It was just filler for column space. If she wrote something that asked a lot of questions, she would want her name on the column...unless the writer thought he or she would be targeted. After all, the boys club was still active.

"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 one 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 better view of the computers they were just at.

Claire caught a reflection off glass but did not recognize the face; however, the way he moved was familiar. It was the way he dragged out the chair and flopped into it, like an adolescent instead of the adult he was. It was just how Sammy did it. It was times like these that she wished she had a spy scope. Ever prepared, Charlotte had one in her purse. After fifteen minutes of reading and taking no notes, he closed the browser and moved off to another part of the library.

Charlotte gestured for her to exit the library. Charlotte met her outside and quickly led the long way around to the parking lot.

"He wasn't following us was he?" 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. *No. He's dead. There were pictures of the crime scene. Coroner said it was him, dead.* But it was hard to discount the way that person moved.

She ran to catch up with Charlotte who was running across the street to make the light.

"So, why are we going to the court house?" Claire asked.

"Public records. To see who owns the property where the drugs you and your partner found the other day."

"What has it to do with Sammy? How do you know so much about this case? I mean, don't get me wrong. I really appreciate your timely appearances, but..."

"I'm a bounty hunter and I have a contract for a Stewart and Samuel James."

Charlotte ran up the stairs in her heels as if she were comfortable in them. Claire raced beside her.

"They were identical twins," Charlotte continued as she pulled open the door to the hall of records. "His mother divorced Mr. James and remarried a Kowalski and then later a Millard and then Rodriguez. The twins changed their names more times than their mother. Stewart graduated from the police academy as Samuel. Stewart's prints were registered as an excon. His death was the result of a business partner not feeling he could be trusted."

"Why all that trouble to be a cop or detective?" Claire asked in an undertone as they moved into a line.

"You have to be kidding. What better place to keep an eye on illegal drug movements and gangs that are your competition?"

"They were in a gang?" Memory of the ring came back to her.

## Chapter 15

In the dining room, Charlotte spread a new map out over the long table. Ken retrieved small tabs from one of the pockets of supplies on the side of the table legs, and Connie supplied water. Anyone who asked for anything more was given a glare to get it themselves.

Claire dropped gratefully in the comfortable reading chair in the corner exhausted and dozed off. Her thoughts however, 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 apartment complexes in Los Angeles and rent primarily to immigrants. Why was INS not raiding the apartments? Then she remembered their rules were to only monitor the border towns. It was Federal jurisdiction and only Federal agents could do anything about illegal immigrants.

Claire sat up suddenly in the chair. *Emanuel Rodriguez is or was the FBI director of San Diego. Sammy called him dad in a conversation he had with... with. Who was the conversation with? He was really cynical when he said 'Dad' so I didn't really think much about it.*

The others around the table looked at her.

"Are you alright?" Charlotte asked.

"Yeah," she lied.

"Are you doing okay, Claire? You're looking a bit pale."

"Just tired. Sorry, I bothered you." She snuggled back into the comfortable chair and fell asleep.

It was dark outside when Charlotte prodded Claire gently. "Hey, a nice comfortable bed is waiting for you upstairs. 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. Charlotte had changed into clothes similar to what she was wearing the other night. Whatever business she was going to be about, she did not want to be seen.

A tone sounded. Footsteps and movement in other rooms started suddenly. Charlotte didn't need to tell Claire trouble was afoot.

"Come on. Everyone knows what to do," Charlotte said. In the room they were in, Charlotte went to the south wall and pushed on a panel. The proverbial hidden door opened and Charlotte stepped into it. She turned to an open mouthed Claire. "Come on."

Unlike what Claire was expecting, a dark corridor with lots of spider webs, it smelled of wood and perfume, and the floor had tiny lights running its length, that guided them around a corner. Charlotte led Claire at a fast pace to a set of stairs. They went down, along another corridor 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 front seat 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 pony tail. The garage door opened and she pulled out, carefully maneuvering onto the road that ran behind the property, onto their driveway and out the gates.

Claire glanced in the mirror that ran across the front windshield. 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.

Charlotte was also talking softly to someone on her hands-free cell. They dropped Janey and her suitcase off at the back of a club where a tuxedoed good looking man who was guarding the backdoor greeted her. 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 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 parking lot," Charlotte directed. At the bar they made the switch where there was a line of limos waiting to deliver their passengers.

"What's going on?"

"Lorraine was staffing the front gate and she recognized a few Mexican gang members hanging around outside. Since we usually don't get those type of visitors we guessed it was you they're interested in. I don't want my neighbors upset with us."

"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 Sammy 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 if they only have one vehicle."

Twenty minutes later, they were street bums.

"That's good. You're walking about right. Hunch over, no that's too much. Can't you remember how a street person walks?"

"How's this?"

Charlotte laughed at her exaggerated walk as if her underwear were soiled. "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?" Claire 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 a name on a protected witness list. She's attractive enough to have a visit from the landlord."

"Your mark is the landlord?"

"Maybe."

The house was not in a nice neighborhood. By the light of the few street lamps, Claire could see a ragged awning that once hung above the front window lying in dead bushes. The porch had a couch on it for three people to comfortably watch people who passed by. Businesses were on one side and residences were on the other. The businesses looked about as beat up as the residences. At this time they were all closed. Charlotte joined a figure between one of the businesses, leaning against the wall to blend in.

"What do you have?" Charlotte asked the shadowed figure.

"Agent Emanuel Rodriguez is in the target residence. Our mark joined him about an hour ago."

"Anyone else?"

He shook his head. "We got a thermal on the house. Just those two. The woman that's usually there left early this morning and hasn't returned."

"Anyone follow her?"

"Yolanda. She checked in five minutes ago. The woman's still in an apartment that her sister lives in. I gave Carl a break. He should be back in a few. He's set three buildings down."

"We'll take this point. Go back up Yolanda and give her a break. And find out what's going on in that apartment. When she's back take one yourself."

He nodded and left, leaving through the alley where a few minutes later a muted putter from a Vespa could be heard.

"Just how much are you getting for all this work?"

"If we find one or both of the twins *and* the suitcase -- two million and a half."

Claire's eyes opened wide. "Wow!" When she got over the amount and thought about all the people-hours involved she decided that may not be enough to make a sizeable profit to pay rent for her mansion.

Charlotte's gaze was fastened on the house across the street. She grinned at Claire's expression.

"Haven't you wondered about the diamond and why it may be so important that an FBI team risked blowing their neutrality?"

"There is no such thing as neutrality. With a Federal agency it gets more complicated because there's more groups invested," Claire dryly informed her. "And no, I haven't had time to wonder about anything but case files in my inbox. Since my promotion to detective trainee, I've been looking through old case files. Another team gets the newer stuff."

"That bothers you?" Charlotte asked when Claire became quiet.

"I was at first resentful, then I got too busy and...I really like working with my partner. He's a new hire but a veteran detective. Really sharp and we're making some interesting finds in the old cases."

"Why are you going through the old cases?"

"The previous group of detectives were crooked, just like Sammy. The prosecutor is worried that there will be a backlog of cases demanding a retrial because of the previous detectives."

"Sounds like some house cleaning was done."

"Yeah. While I was on my two week vacation. I had good timing. When I got back, from top to bottom people were fired. All the detectives were gone. Some police officers that had been wanting to be detectives but couldn't because they weren't part of the 'in crowd' were promoted and paired with experienced detectives the city hired."



"That sounds like a good thing, for you anyway." Charlotte gave her a quick look grinning wider. "So. What this Sammy thing is all about is a suitcase full of diamonds. Big, huge D diamonds with all four Cs making the grade. The rumor goes that they were flawless nine carats, already cut. They were being flown to a lab to be certified as AGS Ideal Cuts. Four groups invested in that collection. You probably remember hearing about it. Eight years ago. Some say what was in that suitcase was valued at a billion dollars." She shook her head in disbelief.

"The suitcase arrived in New York under heavy guard. A custom officer at the airport wanted the suitcase opened. A rather interesting request but the case was not x-rayable and the guard stated it seemed too heavy to be just jewels. 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 and the diamonds went missing."

Claire leaned against the wall in surprise. "I do remember hearing about it. I was a rookie. Didn't they suspect a gas was released when the case was opened?"

"That was one of the theories."

"You sound like you have one of your own," Claire observed dryly.

"Hm," was Charlotte's comment. "The twins were believed to have been involved in the planning of the theft. 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. It's believed a handful of these uncertified D 9 carat diamonds showed up but they disappeared almost as soon as they appeared. Purchased by anonymous buyers."

*How would you know if they were from the same stash?* Claire puzzled and then asked, "So Sam and his brother Stewart were interviewed by the FBI?"

Charlotte nodded. "They both claimed they had nothing to do with the heist and had proof they were in the Caribbean on a business trip. One of the original owners of the diamonds didn't believe them. Stewart was publicly executed and Sam disappeared."

She kept her eyes on the building across the street. "It's odd the local papers reported the shooting scene of your partner all wrong."

"Do you think he wasn't killed?" Claire asked alarmed. Having two Sammy look-a-likes was a frightening prospect since she was haunted some nights just thinking about Sammy getting shot in the head and she didn't even witness it.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. "The coroner died in a car accident, so I can't question him and the FBI accepted the report. His mother had his remains cremated."

"Too many coincidences and conveniences," Claire murmured.

"I'm not sure why one diamond appearing would bring Sammy out or why now the diamond and drugs appeared."

"A billion dollars in diamonds. How many diamonds were there?" Claire asked.

Charlotte laughed shortly, "The amount varies from one extreme to another. Since there is a bet on the amount, some have gone so far as do the math."

"Around 600 had to have been in the case to amount to a billion dollars. That's a heavy suitcase without wheels."

"To tell you the truth, I don't think it was just diamonds that were in the case," Charlotte said. "You were setup, that's obvious. Do you know Jesus Juarez?"

*There's that j and ez.* "No. So, why were they planting it on me?"

"I don't know. A lot of this case has me puzzled. Bo likes to stay focused on what it takes to get our reward, just like everyone else that's hunting the twins and trying to figure out where the suitcase is, hopefully still filled with diamonds."

"For all that money, why isn't this place swarming with bounty hunters?"

"Well, it's like reaching for a snake in a bag of snakes..."

Claire gave her a pained expression. "Something doesn't add up in this story."

"Right. Like why does someone keep involving you? It leads to interesting speculation."

Claire glared at her. "I'm not interested. If I could think of how to make them go away and leave me alone, I would." For a moment, the two stared at each other. Claire looking irritated and Charlotte looking amused.

"So, how did you get involved, besides the money?" Claire demanded.

"My significant other, Andres, was the custom agent that died at the airport."

Claire blinked a few times to digest what all that meant and then got out an "I'm sorry."

Charlotte shook her head not looking bothered. "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 Queens."

Charlotte was quiet for a while, studying the house with binoculars. "Andres left enough information for me to figure out he was just a messenger and a foolish one at that. If our 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?"

"No. 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. 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. 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 read two people.

"What are we going to chase them in?" Claire asked frantically.

"A motorcycle. Are you okay with that?"

Charlotte ran to another building where a motorcycle was parked near a car. She stashed her equipment in the car trunk, slammed it closed and pulled the motorcycle away from the fence.

There were two helmets. Claire grabbed one and plopped it on top of her head. She hopped onto the back as Charlotte started it and pulled quickly onto the road.

"Two huh?"

"Always prepared!" 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 *pickup*," she shouted back.

"Pickup!" she dutifully shouted. She slid the cell in Charlotte's pocket, and wrapped her arms around Charlotte firmly. The bike banked around another corner as she raced ahead of the VW taking a turn onto Santa Monica Blvd.

Charlotte pulled up to a used clothing store. They went in the back and thankfully, Charlotte let her change into something less wretched looking, and clean-smelling.

Changed, Charlotte led them to a coffee shop where she gestured for Claire to sit while she ordered coffee and something to eat. It was late and the bar crowd and after-theater crowd were gathering.

"Are we waiting for someone?"

"Yeah. Your tail. Whoever it is is good."

"Just why am I being tailed if we have figured out what this is all about?"

"Don't you want to ask your tail who sent him or her?"

"In case you've forgotten, someone is shooting at me. This is a public place. Someone could get hurt."

"You're nervous. Let's go inside then. I could use the restroom."

"Me too."

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 she went to wait near the front entrance for Charlotte. She spotted two familiar faces outside scanning the customers. Turning to the women's restroom Charlotte was just exiting. There were too many people between them. Claire panicked when one of the men reached inside his coat. She ducked out the door and ran.

Two hours later, Claire was back at her apartment. She entered via the back stairs. Both cats were meowing their dismay at her long absence. Quickly she fed them and then made her way into the bedroom. She pulled out her backpack she used for camping, and added clothing. The pockets were

already filled with survival tools and food. From her toy box she added NV goggles and a warm all weather 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 7-Eleven only one person was buying coffee. Someone she recognized on his way to a part time job. She pulled the easily located 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 her sandwich. As the other driver took off, she followed for a block then peeled off in another direction. Northern California was her direction. She stopped at a friend's garage 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. She pulled out the pickup and replaced hers in the garage.

Claire entertained hiding out in Judy's cabin but thought better of involving her friends. She needed to 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.

"Well, Claire, you wanted to be a detective," she told herself firmly. She sipped from the water bottle. "A visit to 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.

"If they're following me I can at least give them a merry chase with an empty bladder." She parked close to the restrooms and ran through the rain.

With her business done, quickly she was on the freeway, heading for the nearest gas station. In the light, she planned to look the truck over. Someone knew her too well and was a step ahead of her. Was it Charlotte and her team? They were organized. Were they just bounty hunters?

"Someone must think I know something about the diamonds. I know only what Charlotte told me and I can't believe that. Too much going on for a suitcase full of diamonds. Why would Sammy tail me? If he had the diamonds, he would know where he hid them, unless it was his brother that hid them and he thinks... So, does that mean his brother is dead? Who knows about me having Judy's keys? The girls, Ray and Sandy, the cat sitter, and Angie. But Sammy 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 behind Sammy's death. Unless he's been watching me since his brother was shot."

She pulled over to the first gas station and parked the truck in a space far from the store. Pulling out her backpack, she glanced around to see if anyone pulled in. Ducking behind the building, she made a round about run through the rain to the underpass. Cold and wet, huddling under the freeway bridge, she pulled out her NV binoculars and watched the truck. After thirty minutes it was hauled onto a tow truck. An official DEA 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 structure she was in. It was three walls standing and a partial roof. It was an abandoned equipment shack. The day was just beginning to break and she was somewhere in San Bernardino along I15 freeway. She could see the outline of a handful of horses as they plodded toward a barn in the near distance. She would have rather headed on the I5 to Oregon, but suspected someone would be looking for her. Maybe she should head to Sedona instead.

She curled up in a corner. 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. 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.

*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 came.

*Let's start with the most current events. I go on vacation, get setup and knocked around, go back home, and nearly get 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 on the scene. Who could have put the box in my stuff? Who has a key to my apartment? Mr. Neighborhood Watch John would know who was up there that was unusual.*

*Wait a minute, everyone at the camp knew. They're all retired police officers so they knew there was a reward out. Hold on. Did they really turn over the diamond with the drugs to the local PD?*

She needed to get some change and find a payphone. She also needed to get some sleep.

*It has to be the clutch of diamonds. Everyone is looking to me so I must know something about their location. I need to backtrack to that day Sammy died. Start with the morning.*

*He was an asshole as usual, but nervous. I told Sandy he was nervous, and I think I told the investigators he was. Who were the investigating cops? I didn't recognize them. I was not giving them a clear story and that's when Sandy intervened... As the department shrinks they took her recommendations.*

Finally, Claire slept. 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 tried to determine how far she would get before it started to rain again. In the distance she could see a black and white turning onto a dirt road. It was enough to send her sprinting across the road and squeeze through the barbwire. She ran further onto the ranch land where a car could not travel. She hopped over a muddy gully and used drooping trees to hide her as she made her way further inland.

She connected with a back road 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. She dozed off during his chatter and awoke to find he had not stopped where she asked him. Not saying anything, Claire waited until he slowed at one of the truck checkpoints. She jumped out before he could say or do anything.

A husband and wife team gave her a lift to the next city where she got a motel room, showered, washed her clothes, and got a decent eight hours of sleep. When she got up, she found a pay phone and called Gail's cell.

"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?"

"No. Not really. You found some diamonds? Give them back and get home."

"I wish on all counts. I think though, someone thinks I know their whereabouts."

"Why would you know? I thought you were in the Army seven years ago?"

"I was just out and doing my rookie thing. You remember I told you about the bounty hunter I picked up, Charlotte? Charlotte said Sammy had a twin and they were involved in that heist. There's over a million dollar reward for finding Sammy and or the diamonds."

"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."

"You need to change phones or something."

"I'll call you later. DEA is tailing me for some reason."

She purchased a bus ticket and sat away from the window. It was dark when the bus pulled into the Los Angeles station. She made a phone call to an ex-military ex-girlfriend living in Long Beach. From there she took a tram into the city.

Emma was heavier than she remembered her 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.

"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.

"I don't have that rich of a sexual life. I'm more the type that falls in love and then jumps into 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 going to 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 DEA is one. It's left over from Sammy'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 in 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, and everyone now thinks I'm going to lead them to whatever it is."

"DEA," 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."

"That sounds more like they don't want you to remember." She sighed. "You still get into the darndest situations."

"Hey, it was my job to find smugglers and thieves in the military. It wasn't my fault that they forgot to tell me that the brass was exempt."

"You were lucky they gave you the choice of getting out or get reassigned to guard duty in a dudgeon. 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, "don't forget these."

"Thanks. I hope you aren't in my profile. So far, they've been one step ahead of me, even my using a friend'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. We've both been too busy to socialize. Think it's a bug on you?"

"I've changed clothes, watches, backpack, and phones. I can't think of anything else that tells them where I'm going."

"Feds? The eye in the sky probably. Go to sleep. A fresh mind will figure it out."

## Chapter 16

The next morning, Claire was on the family PC doing research on J and EZ from the witnesses' names when a diamond advertisement popped up. EZ Loans for your dream diamond ring. J. J. Muller. The seller had a store in two major shopping malls one in L. A. and the other in New York.

*Muller. I remember that was one of the names listed that lost out with the diamond theft. J and EZ.*

After two changes on public transportation, Claire was at the L.A. mall. She purchased coffee, a bagel, and newspaper and waited for the store to open.

She was reading the want ads when she glanced up to see Manuel Rodriguez and the guy whom everyone was calling Sammy arrive at the store. The owner was just opening up.

An hour later Sammy and Rodriguez left the diamond store through the back door. She caught two people interested in their departure so she leaned back and continued with her reading.

"You're like that cat that keeps coming back, you know that?" Charlotte's voice informed her.

"Leave me alone," grumbled Claire as she paged back to another part of the newspaper. Claire put the newspaper down and frowned only to find a young man dressed in a suit standing before her. For more than a few heartbeats she studied the image very aware she was attracted to this woman.

"If you were after who you said you were, why haven't you picked him up?"

"It's a complicated case."

"I don't know where those damn diamonds are."

"I agree."



"I'm not interested in your business. I'm out on worker's comp. I'm just sipping coffee and..."

"And doing nothing to get yourself shot at," Charlotte finished sarcastically

When the man that opened the store exited through the back door, Claire rose quickly to follow.

"I've got a car. Do you want a ride?" Charlotte asked.

"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 a toy store.

He was given two stuffed animals and he headed to a fast food hamburger joint. There he was met by a woman and her two children. Each child was given a stuffed animal. The man dutifully kissed the woman on the cheek and paid for their food. Though he sat with them while they ate breakfast, Claire noticed the lack of a family bond. Even the children seemed to have no connection with the woman.

"Maybe she's a new babysitter," Claire mumbled to Charlotte as she moved to the exit, anticipating the woman's departure.

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 Sammy is Sammy," 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."

"Maybe someone planted the wrong prints in the FBI's registry."

A Hummer came around the corner.

"Hi, Bo," Claire greeted him as she slid onto the seat.

"You're back, huh? You two have something going?" he asked with a grin.

"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 had been in childcare.

"Look familiar?" Charlotte asked.

"How do you know so much about this place?"

"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," Claire told her. "This Hummer is conspicuous. 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 besides the feds."

As the two women walked 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 with bodyguards.

"Keep walking," Charlotte said.

*More cars. Okay, two white woman walking down a Hispanic neighborhood. 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 now four cars parked in front. "I just happen to have tickets to a performance this Thursday night. Would you like to go?"

"Thursday's fine by me. 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. Claire could see her speaking to someone else and guessed it was via her cell-hands free.

Claire's feet thumped up the sidewalk. Her heart was pounding. What has she gotten herself into? She was confused about her feelings for Charlotte. Thoughts of Charlotte dressed as a man excited her, and thinking about her in other apparel simply distracted her. It was as if a part of her knew she was attracted to Charlotte, but...

"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 both heard the distant sound of a helicopter. As they reached the top black and whites and unmarked cars converged on the house.

"A day time 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 twins in. DEA 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, are parts of a map to the treasure."

"The diamonds. I still don't know where I fit."

Police dogs were barking and people were yelling from the houses below them.

"Come on. Let's go find our ride. Want 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."

"Okay."

A non-distinct vehicle stopped in front of them and both women got in. Claire opted for the back seat, wanting to watch Charlotte unobserved.

Tiredly Claire unlocked her door and looked around for the cats.

"Hey, guys! I'm home. Want dinner?" She kicked off her shoes and leaned down to pick them up to toss in the closet when three men with clubs beat her to the ground.

A fist grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up. The guy's breath stunk. He had a thick Hispanic accent 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.

Another voice demanded, "Where's the map?"

When she shook her head she got a wack in the ribs with a bat. Dropping to the floor she was beginning to wonder if maybe she was in the wrong line of work.

"We're going to pound on you until you tell us where the map is."

"I don't know what map," she wheezed.

"Your partner gave it to you before he was shot."

She shook her head. Her head was pulled up. The face staring at her was the cop at the stand the day Sammy was shot.

"He showed it to me at the stand...he didn't have it when he got shot. We checked the car, and it wasn't there. That means you've got it."

She shook her head. "I don't remember anything." She was hit again. She saw stars followed quickly by total 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."

"Great," she muttered.

"There's always a bright side."

"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."

"I found out what everyone wants."

"What's that?"

"They think I have a treasure map. Why would he give it to me?" she asked tiredly.

"The person that was given the job to hide the diamonds knew she was marked for death and disappeared with her payment after mailing off parts of the map."

"Ah."

Two golden eyes blinked at her from the cat perch in the tube. Cleo seldom came out of her favorite hiding place when there were visitors.

"Your cats must have fled when your visitors came in. One was crying on the balcony and the other was crying in the yard."

"Cleo 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, I may have to look for another job."

"Are we still on for Thursday evening?"

"Yes. 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. At least she was smart enough to wear a bullet proof vest.

## Chapter 17

Charlotte picked her up at five thirty, with dinner their first stop. She wore a dress and low heels. Her raincoat was in the back seat.

"You know, I didn't see anything with Sally playing." Claire moved slowly onto the seat.

"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 and raise money for a charity."

"Nice to 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.

"I'll tell them you're with me and you're my bodyguard," Charlotte told her with a smile. "But with all that limping they may not believe it. You could have canceled until you felt better."

"No, no. I may never get another chance to see just how I'll act in front of Hollywood celebrities. In my mind I'm real cool but I'm also playing another scenario that I'm making a complete fool of myself. How do you know these people?"

"They've hired me for various jobs."

"Is there anything I should know so I don't make a fool of myself?"

"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 a Hollywood home close to Charlotte's residence. The attendees included well-known celebrities. Claire 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 relinquished her sidearm but kept her clip. Each sidearm was wrapped in a sack with a name on it and carefully locked in a safe. There were a lot of sacks besides hers.

Sally spoke with everyone including Claire before the show. At the pause in the performance Claire stepped out onto the balcony for a break from the star power.

"Too much?"

Claire 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 any."

"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 many of these people as friends and employers," she explained as she sipped her drink. "You like Charlotte?" she asked casually.

Claire looked at her startled. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"Just curious." She lifted her glass to someone that was on the other side of Claire.

"What do you mean by like?" Claire ventured.

"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 came from behind her.

When Charlotte stopped in front of her apartment to leave her off, Claire paused, wondering if she should ask Charlotte.

"Thanks for the evening Charlotte. It was nice if not..."

"You felt uncomfortable with the celebs."

"Yes. 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 Sally 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 18

Claire and Gail were packing her books in boxes. Both cats stressed out at the dismantling of their home had been put in cages and deposited in their new home to sleep off the change.

"Did King George finally go to sleep?"

"Curled up in his carrying cage," Gail told her as she pulled the box to the middle of the room and went for another. "Introduce yourself to Lynn across the street in the green and orange house. Only, don't say to her that's it's green and orange. It's terra cotta and hush green, or something like that. Connie's on the left of you. Both are home all day. Lynn has a business at home and Connie's between jobs. It's handy to make nice with them. 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 from a packet of her old notebooks she rediscovered. "Sure," she agreed and then went through the books wondering if she should destroy them. They were from when she first started patrol work and then into her detective work. Her fingers paused at one book.

Gail looked over at her. "What's wrong?"

"This isn't mine."

"What isn't?"

"This notebook..." Her voice trailed off as she flipped through it. A piece of paper fell out.

"You got gloves?" Gail asked quickly.

"The box in the kitchen."

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?"

"I don't know. I don't even know how I ended up with it. Where's my cell?" Pointing it at the map she took photos and sent the image to Harrison along with a text message.

Both women jumped at the sound of a knock on the door and then opening.

Marge and Charlotte holding boxes of pizza and drinks looked surprised.

"What's with you two? Necking while we were gone?"

"No! Of course not," Claire retorted. "You scared me is all." She flipped the phone closed and tucked it in her pocket.

The food was set out on the table and while the women ate, Claire quietly informed them of their find.

"When is this going to end?" Marge asked exasperated, wiping her fingers on a napkin, and then taking a deep drink from her beer.

"Don't know. Tomorrow I'll tag it as evidence and see who's interested. I let Harrison know. I took a picture of it with my cell phone camera."

"When's he coming by with the truck?"

Gail looked at her watch. "About an hour. He had a late golf game. The loading will go fast. Bookcases are cleared, drawers removed from bureaus, 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 recognized the voice and he was wearing a thick ring under his gloves. She pointed at the box near his feet. The notebook with the loose map were sitting on top of the box of books. After glancing at the map and the book, he departed with his friends.

"Well, who do we call?" Gail asked, nonchalantly.

Claire pulled out her cell phone. "Hi, Harrison....no, no. That's not what I'm calling about. You got the map image I sent?... Good. We had a visit from five men dressed in black. They now have it.... Right. No more visits." She snapped the cell closed and secured it on her hip.

"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 noted.

"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. It was close to where they lived. It was a nice small cottage with two bedrooms and a backyard for the cats to play in. It had been their starter house.

"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. What a life."

"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.

Gail wagged a finger at her. "Problem is, you keep on riding and call a day later to ask someone to feed your kids. When you appear two days later you're wearing a big smirk on your face you won't tell us why."

"Ah," Claire and Charlotte said together. "You think there is a story behind the smirk," Claire said, 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 recounted.

"And that we were close behind," Marge added.

"I haven't gone on any of those rides since. Not out of fear," Claire added quickly, "just haven't had the urge."

"If 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 embarrassed.

"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 the Los Angeles River. Sammy, or his brother, made stops along the river on several occasions. Claire now suspected her partner figured out his part of the map showed the exact location.

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?... I've been thinking about this diamond business.... Yes.... I can't let it go because it's stuck in my mind.... Are you going to listen?... There's a place along the LA river that Sammy... Okay, his brother, Mr. Whatever... anyway, he used to stop at this place. He claimed it was to meet a street contact.... Yeah, okay. I'll be right there."

She hung up and headed to Harrison's place. He was right that she should not be going there alone. Glancing in her rearview mirror, she wondered which of the lights behind her was her tail.

"Why tail me when I don't have the map any more," she muttered frustrated.

As soon as she stepped out of her car, Harrison was stepping out of his condo.

"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, sliding into the passenger seat of his SUV.

"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?"

"A tit for tat. I remember. 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 the suitcase, or what we're all hoping is a suitcase with the missing diamonds."

"How do they know where to go?"

"We've been watching two gangs, one from each side of the river. They didn't know the exact location and we didn't either until you figured it out."

"With all the firepower you have showing up unless they're suicidal they'll keep a low profile." She raised her eyebrows at him.

"Won't know until the key player shows up."

They drove a few blocks in silence.

"I guess once this is finished, you'll be leaving," Claire mentioned.

Harrison glanced over at her. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, by your connections outside of the department, I figure you're working for another agency."

"I see. Preparing yourself for another partner?"

"I like the one I have now."

"Good answer."

Claire glanced over at him and then back to the road. Under the passing night lamps, she thought she saw a grin. No further conversation passed.

It was easy to find the site. A helicopter was moving overhead, its beam lighting boarded up houses under it. There were a lot of official cars around and not just black and whites. Gang members were being patted down and questioned. Rival members, separated by the river were also being detained. Dogs with their handlers walked along the river, serving as a further barrier between the two hostile groups. There were no curious onlookers.

Claire slid out of the car and looked around her. The neighborhood was poorer looking than she remembered it.

"He would stop here, and look around." She pointed in the dark where a tree sagged and a dilapidated garage stood. "If a woman hid it as your informants say, it would be around there, where she could get to it easily in the dark. She probably hid it in the early morning when people are sleeping. Since this has always been a gang area, that's taking a risk if she's not a gang member," Claire explained.

"Mack? This is Claire, Claire-Mack."

Claire shook hands with a tall thin young man. Even in the poor lighting she thought he looked like he was missing sleep.

"What's the history of this place?" Harrison asked him.

"They had heavy rains during the time. River would have been high. Taking in consideration at the time Claire just said, I would dig around the tree. There's enough rubble and trash to use as cover."

"Let's get it done then," Harrison told him.

Mack gestured to a woman who nodded to him and brought a dozen uniformed and plain clothes people to begin searching the area around the tree.

A lot of things were found before the silver suitcase. Whatever was in the suitcase by the small devices pulled out and scanned over the case, something else was expected. The case was not opened but rather stored in a box with two locks.

"So, will they tell us if that's what they were looking for?" Claire asked Harrison.

"Probably not," Mack answered.

"Do you feel better about this case closing?" Harrison asked as he led her back to his vehicle.

"Yes. Will I see you in the morning?"

"Not my day off and no vacation days yet, so I guess you will. We've got a lot of cases to catch up on."

"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?"

"Yes. That one."

He glanced off in the distance. "Can't say one way or another."

If Claire thought throwing a temper tantrum would do any good she would have, but his knowing her last name told her something.

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. 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?

## Chapter 19

Claire tossed her coat on the back of her desk chair, expecting to go out for coffee when Harrison arrived.

"This pile is not shrinking," she pointed at her inbox of paper.

The week had been busy with new cases and added to the old cases they were reviewing, it was exhausting.

"Ah, a favor for a favor," she hummed happily at the large envelope nearly buried under new paperwork. "Let's see if this is worth looking up parents of a missing parolee."

She had given a call to the NYPD and used the buddy system to see if someone could dig up information on the people involved in the diamond heist. In return, she was asked to look up the parents of Doug Green, a New York parolee who disappeared. His parents still lived in Southern California.

She looked at the envelope carefully, wondering if anyone opened it.

"Hanson, you get coffee yet?" Harrison's voice asked. A whiff of fresh coffee reached her.

She hummed in appreciation, taking a deep breath of the aroma. "Not yet. You're a jewel." She waved the envelope at him. "I asked NYPD if they had any information on that diamond heist in New York, since they started the investigation."

He handed her a coffee and sat at his desk. "Well, open it and stop teasing me with it," he said.

She pulled out the photos and spread them on her desk.

"Which one survived?" she asked, picking up the photos and looking at the back that had a name.

Harrison tapped one of the photos. "This one."

She put that one aside and studied the photo of one of a guard, wondering if it was Charlotte's boyfriend. She turned over the picture to read what the clerk had added. "It says he was found dead a week later from a drug overdose. That's suspicious," she added in a lower voice as she read the clerk's notation.

"Since he had old tracks on his arm what's suspicious?" Harrison asked her.

*Now how did he know? I knew he was here for more than training me.*

"His girlfriend says that he was clean for three years and attended AA meetings on a weekly basis. What's suspicious is that the detective that started to work on the case was removed and her replacement didn't pursue that line of questioning."

"FBI took over the investigation and if they pursued it any further, you'll need to ask them," Harrison pointed out.

"You know I can't be doing that. I'm already a suspect with them." She smiled sweetly at him. "How about your connections?"

"I can tell you right now, because it's an on-going investigation they won't allow any locals messing up their case." He held up a hand to forestall any more questions. "Let's work on our own cases and let the FBI muddle through that mess," he suggested.

"I would if I wasn't being followed *still*, and if I knew just what they were looking for...still." She flipped over to another page. "Charlotte told me one of the guards was her boyfriend."

"Uh huh," Harrison agreed.

"You didn't get your big fish," Claire pointed out.

"Big fish left town."

She stared at him perturbed. "So, what am I missing?" she asked him softly.

"I don't know what you're missing, Hanson."

She sighed. "Geeze," she muttered. "Okay, let me spell it out. The missing suitcase was found, but I didn't get a chance to see what was in it so I don't know if everything in the case was there." She ticked off one finger. "Most of the players are dead or gone." She ticked off another. "And I'm being watched. That means something else was in that case..." her voice trailed off. She frowned at Harrison until she got his undivided attention. "Those two cops that my partner met at the taco stand, one of them keeps showing up." She snorted disgustedly. "It took me long enough, but I recognized one and he wasn't wearing a uniform during any of those brief glimpses I had of him." She was quiet waiting for a comment from Harrison.

"I'm making a wild guess," she continued since he remained quiet, sipping his coffee, "that maybe it's not the diamonds or whatever was in the case, that's important now. Because I'm still being watched. I think it's because I may remember the other police officer. 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."

"Quite a leap there, Hanson," Harrison chuckled. "Careful you don't pull anything."

"Doggone, Harrison! I'm going 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 new cases to work on. Shall we get to them before noon? Better put that envelope somewhere no one can get to."

"Yeah, right. In my purse," she said.

"Have you ever thought about getting a massage?" he asked.

Claire's eyes moved from the file she opened to him. He was taking notes from the file he was reviewing, and to all intents and purposes, looked preoccupied.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're too tense. You're going to get a headache, among other things. There are legitimate masseuses," he said without looking up.

"I know. I just was wondering what you were driving at."

He laid his pen down and looked at her. "It means you might want to try relaxing. You look so tense I'm hurting for you. That, or get a girlfriend," he added returning to his note taking.

Friday came and none too soon. Claire had the weekend off and was ready for it. She had plans for working in the garden with her cats joining her. They enjoyed basking in the sun or chasing bugs while she weeded. They also used the fresh turned dirt to do their part and fertilize, though it was not what she preferred, but she could hardly chastise them for their version of participation.

As soon as she opened the front door, her eyes fell on the tux that was hanging on a coat tree. She glanced at her watch and realized she had three hours. She dumped her briefcase on a chair, and began to remove her weapon. Tonight she was going to go on a date with Charlotte. Her eyes went back to the tux.

*A nap. Sounds like a good way to take care of these nerves. Darn! Why am I so damn nervous?*

Removing her shoes, she fell onto the bed, expecting the cats to join her. She fell asleep before noticing their arrival. The doorbell woke her.

"Who's that?" she asked King George who hopped off the bed and disappeared in the hallway. Claire followed him at a slower pace. She glanced at the clock as she passed the kitchen. Peering through the peep hole before opening it she was surprised to see Charlotte.

Claire quickly pulled the door open and Charlotte walked in at Claire's sweep of the hand. Charlotte had a dress bag and overnight bag.

"Hey, you're early, or am I late?"

"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.

"It's a surprise." Charlotte caught sight of Claire's tux still on the coat tree. "Not into the frilly dress with heels, hey?"

"No. Too many disadvantages, like a twisted ankle, sore feet, or backache."

"Maybe if you considered the advantages they would null the disadvantages."

Claire hesitated before replying. Something was different about Charlotte. "I really don't see why people get excited about women wearing high heels," she said slowly.

"For the same reason that some women find them attractive."

"Right. So...would you like to take your shower first?"

"No. I'll let you go first."

"It's still kind of early..."

"We'll be unfashionably early."

Claire shrugged her shoulders, feeling off balance. "Well, make yourself comfortable. Drinks are in the frig and something to nibble on I'm sure. Or you can make coffee."

Claire went into the bedroom and collected her robe and underwear. Pausing for a moment she listened to Charlotte moving around the kitchen. Her extra gun was slipped in her robe's pocket, if only to help settle her nerves. The jittery feeling was not making sense. It was the same feeling she had that day Sammy or his brother was shot. It was not the same nervousness she had when thinking about her relationship with Charlotte, that she was sure about.

*I'm really confused. Next vacation I take, I won't be picking up any unscheduled passengers.*

She tossed her things onto the counter in the bathroom and went into the den to let the cats out. From the sliding glass window, she could see three men jumping over the fence into her backyard. A bag was tossed over the fence and caught by one of them.

"Get the picture yet?" a voice asked.

Claire turned to look at her. It was not quite Charlotte's voice. That's what was off. A figure stood before her dressed from head to foot in a lab suit, with even her hands and feet covered.

"Not exactly." Claire glanced quickly to the men that cautiously crossed the backyard not seeing her or the dressed figure. She remembered the alarms had not been disengaged. Should she ask if this person was Charlotte or someone else? Suddenly she remembered the woman at the camp site that she had thought was Charlotte.

"We've howdied but we ain't shook yet," she mocked.

Suddenly the figure in the white suit made a sudden move toward her and Claire moved too. Gail and Marge had drilled her and their other students at their Saturday night classes on self-defensive moves enough for her to react automatically. Something snagged in her hair as she dogged a blur and then kicked her attacker, knocking the figure to the wooden floor. Claire pulled the dart that entangled in her hair and plunged it into the woman's leg. Someone was trying to open the sliding door and

simultaneously the back door. She grabbed her keys from the hook near the door and flung open the front door glancing up and down the street. She was sure the front was monitored. A pop hit the door near her hand while she was throwing herself forward and then was knocked sideways from another pop that hit her.

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 panic 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 near her.

Soon she heard the blades of the helicopter and sirens. The house alarm was working, she thought relieved. 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.

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.

"It's not that bad at all. According to your partner, they got everyone they were aiming to get plus one more."

"Can someone tell me what is going on?"

"Well, that's my job."

"Am I in trouble?"

"Depends who you talk to."

"Okay, tell me what is going on before I die of curiosity."

"You met Charlotte's little sister. They look alike, but that's Mary Jo's intention. Their mother died and the father farmed the kids out to relatives. Charlotte calls her the bad seed. Mary Jo had gathered information on the heist from Charlotte's apartment. Charlotte thought it was someone else, that is until her manager mentioned he wanted the extra key he had given her back. Knowing her little sister and her dislike for her Charlotte followed her out to California hoping to stop her from causing trouble with her face and look for the diamonds, twins, and collect on the reward while she was at it. It wasn't easy to find the twins, her sister, or the diamonds, so she moved her business headquarters to California, biding her time. You can imagine how overjoyed she was when you appeared and under the circumstances, probably thought you were a gift from heaven.

"Clarkson was the one that took the contract out on you. He thought you were blackmailing him, when actually, Charlotte's sister, Mary Jo was working the information she had, trying to smoke out the right people to collect whatever she could. She lost out on the diamonds and finding one of the twins, but there was a bounty on you and that she intended to collect."



"Me?" she squeaked hoarsely. Her eyes narrowed as she made a connection to the name. "Isn't that guy running for office?"

"The same."

Claire slapped her forehead weakly. "He was the other police officer," she whispered. "I knew it was more than finding the suitcase. It had to be more than one game going on."

"He didn't care about the diamonds as much as he needed to get rid of the twins, who could finger him as a participant in a diamond heist while working as a police officer on the west coast. It would ruin his plans for political office."

"What about Charlotte's look alike?"

"Arrested."

"Charlotte?"

"She sends you her regards. She had a job out of state so she couldn't be here to visit. She advised you to not lose your health insurance. Now for some bad news. Are you ready for it?"

Sandy grinned when Claire scrunched up her face dramatically and asked in a whisper, "I'm fired?"

"Now that would have made Gail and Margie happy, but no. Your boss wants you to take a psych eval before you return to work. He thinks you attract too much trouble. I believe he called it a distraction from regular detective work. I personally think he would prefer one of those casting out the evil spirits type of ceremonies. Your partner went to bat for you and thinks you make a good detective."

"Harrison. How is he?"

"Worried about you." Sandy pulled out a shamrock painted a bright green. "He said you need this."

Claire took the shamrock key ring grinning. "This means I still have a job and my partner."

"I guess that means I shouldn't waste my breath talking you out of your job?"

Claire snorted. "I like my job. And it's not my job that's been going sour, it's the company I once had to keep. So, when do I get out of here?"

"A few more days. Besides the shot you took, you hit your head on the brick wall. Your face is still bruised and if you haven't noticed, you have a hole in your leg. By then Gail and Margie will have calmed down, realizing this is something you like doing, dodging bullets and other flying things and not always being fast enough."

"It's not my work," Claire insisted.

"You hold that thought. I think your nurse has arrived to bathe you." She waved her fingers at Claire as a large person replaced her at the side of Claire's bed. Claire had to look up into the face of a huge puffy faced...person. Gender was undetermined.

*Oh gods.*

"Miz Hudson, I'm here to take your vitals."

"Just vitals?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes. Did you need something else?"

"Sandy!" Claire hollered.

"You need to calm down or your readings will be off."

Claire could hear voices in the hall, one of them Sandy's laughing heartily.

"I'm going to get that woman," she fumed.

"Think of something less exciting," the nurse suggested. "Otherwise, your stay will be longer."

Claire suddenly grinned. She still had her job, her partner and Charlotte's cell phone number.

Days later Claire was taxied home by Harrison.

"You sure you're going to be alright alone?" Harrison looked around her house as though there was still something that could be troublesome for her.

"I've changed battle dressings, I can grab a cab to the doctor's office, and I have lots of phone numbers to call should I need my dinner cooked, house cleaned, and DVDs delivered. I'm fine Harrison. Thanks for caring." She held her cane up. "I can also bonk someone good if they get near enough to threaten me."

"Alright then. You have messages."

"Do you want to stay awhile? There's water, coffee and tea." Since he seemed reluctant about leaving, she thought she would give him a chance to say what he wanted over a drink. Hopefully it would not take long because all the preparation in letting her out of the hospital tired her.

She pressed the button on her messages while watching Harrison walk into her kitchen like he was familiar with the layout. Then he would since he and a lot of other investigators tramped through the house terrifying the cats. It was Harrison that helped Margie cage the cats and put them in the bathroom until everyone left.

Both cats made an appearance and giving her one meow hurried into the kitchen after Harrison.

The first message was from Margie and Gail, welcoming her home. She deleted. The next was from Richard, wishing her well and certifying her PC's health. Delete.

Harrison came back in with two bottles of water, not from the refrigerator. He did not believe it was healthy to drink cold water. He dropped on her couch and looked around him. Cleo promptly crawled onto his lap.

"I see you made friends," she started and then stopped abruptly, from the expression on Harrison's face and the voice coming over the recorder.

"Claire I'm so sorry this was a bad experience for you," Charlotte's voice said, "and I'm sorry I couldn't tell you everything. I would like to have coffee with you and see if we can start a friendship over again."

I'll be out of town for a while. I don't want to give an exact time just in case it turns out longer and then... Well, you know. I'll call you or just call my cell to keep in touch. Okay? Bye."

She turned off the messages and walked over to the chair facing the couch, which King George took to sitting on. Gently she lifted him to her lap.

"Who is Charlotte to you?" she asked him.

"An ex-partner. I had no idea you two connected."

"Partner where?"

"FBI. We belonged to a child predator squad. When small police communities recognized they had something serious going on in their neighborhood and they didn't have the resources, they would call us in. All they had to do was show that it involved someone from across state lines. Charley looked like a teenager so he was our bait. The others in our squad had little respect for Charley risking his life because they thought he was too feminine. One day he quit. No reason given. About a year later I was in the neighborhood, so I stopped by to see how he was doing. I found out from his boyfriend that he was in the hospital. Someone beat him up pretty bad, only his boyfriend said Charlie was now Charlotte. He thought it was an FBI agent. He gave me a name."

"Was it?"

He nodded. "He admitted it with pride in front of everyone. I put him in the hospital. I also wrote him up. I then quit when the department wasn't going to pay for Charlie's hospital bill or get that jerk to pay for it. I now go around as a free agent tightening up different cities detective squads. Only now, I think I found a comfortable spot to put out my name plate."

Claire smiled. "Didn't anyone complain about you putting him in the hospital?"

"We were playing ice hockey. You know how bruising that can get."

"She looks okay."

"It's not the same face. She had to have plastic surgery so she had her face changed. That's what made it so difficult to make a connection to her sister. Her sister had plastic surgery done to look like Charlotte. She's a bad seed. I hope they don't let her out for the rest of her life."

"So, Charlotte turned bounty hunter and bodyguard."

"She had a business on the East Coast, protecting drag queens from roving gangs that like to prey on individuals. It's what got her the money for her operations and seed money to open up something bigger in California. The rest you'll have to ask her yourself."

"I will. Thanks Harrison."

He lifted Cleo from his lap and set her on the arm of the couch, just where she would prefer. He knew a lot about her cats.

"You should go lie down and take a nap. You're looking pale."

"Thanks again for picking me up."

"That's what partners do."

Claire's face broke out into a big smile.

The End