

Sunrise – Settling Down

JA Bard

Chapter 1

Her cell phone rattled on the nightstand. Unsurprisingly, the call came when her dream was starting to get interesting. Alex's first few attempts of locating the cell failed, annoying her enough to threaten it with physical abuse. However, she was too tired to get up so she clumsily tossed a pillow over the table hoping it would cover the buzzing instrument.

From far away another phone rang. Her mind wandered on the mystery of who would be calling Elizabeth at this time when everyone knew she worked late at night through the early morning hours and didn't want to be disturbed.

"Alex....Alex, it's your office. You're on call." Elizabeth's voice got progressively louder.

"Aren't we over this week yet?" she groaned.

"No. It's the third day...you have two more to look forward to, unless someone gets sick, and then you have four more. Did you forget to turn the ringer back on your phone? What happened to your cell?"

Alex groaned, tossing aside the pillow she was hugging, and rolled herself into an upright position, taking the portable phone from Elizabeth and her cell.

"Thanks. This is Detective Adison," she mumbled.

"Alex, a body was found in the marsh. The ME is on her way. She should be here in thirty minutes. It's Marianne so you know she's going to be here soon," Gary's voice informed her. "Sorry about bothering Elizabeth, but I tried you on your cell and it went into your voicemail and your land phone is full of messages."

"Alright, alright, Gary. I'm getting in gear," she told the night officer. She handed the phone back to Elizabeth and stumbled towards the shower. The warm spray nearly put her back to sleep until the water suddenly turned cold.

"Arghhhh! Hey!"

"Your five minutes are up." Elizabeth showed some restraint by not laughing. "This method seems a tad bit too sadistic to me; perhaps you should rethink it." She held up Alex's land phone, or what was left of it. "You really need to be nice to your belongings."

Alex sputtered and muttered into the towel Elizabeth tossed her. Yes, it was her idea to turn on the cold water if it appeared she wasn't waking up, and yes it was asking Elizabeth to monitor her when she probably would rather use her early morning time to write, and yes...there had to be another way but, she was too brain dead to think of anything right now.

"I can't remember how it got that way," she said. "Oh, yeah. I tripped on it. I had set it on the floor and forgot."

"Tripped on it?" Elizabeth said doubtfully, looking at the parts.

Alex smiled, looking embarrassed. "Okay. I dropped my weights on it when I tripped. I'll pick up a new one tomorrow."

"This is tomorrow," Elizabeth said. "What about your cell?"

"It vibrated off the nightstand. Sorry about them bothering you."

"I worry that you're not getting enough sleep. How many hours of sleep these last three days...all of six?"

"Only? Seems less," Alex mumbled. "We have new people, but they can't start until the next budget meeting. I hate budgeting and politics."

Elizabeth left her to dress. When Alex was ready to leave, the door to the study was closed, and the light leaking from below the door indicated Elizabeth was working. Not wanting to interrupt her again, Alex hurried out the door. Hopefully there wasn't anyone on the road this early in the morning because she felt irritable and would say things she should not if anyone drove too slow in front of a vehicle with blinking police lights.

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Her SUV's headlamps swept over John Maelstrom and Salvatore, waiting at the edge of the marsh for her or the morgue van to arrive. She switched off her headlamps and left her parking lights on, allowing the pitch darkness to draw closer around them. John's flashlight waved at her with Salvatore's collar light giving her an idea of where they were.

"Not much to see in the dark, detective," John drawled as he thumped his retriever mix on his side as Sal wiggled with delight at seeing Alex.

Doggie cookies, probably easy to smell to a nose dog, were always carried in her left jacket pocket. It was her protection against dogs that may be tempted to take a bite out of her. The theory being, she would leave her coat with the cookies behind, while she made a safe break away.

"You're right there, John. Whew! I can see how you found it. Let's step upwind over there."

"Sal would have found it even if it wasn't this bad." John was proud of Salvatore, Sal for short. Sal was a trained cadaver dog. He and John worked when needed as part of a disaster recovery team. "He can sniff..."

"Just the information I need for my report, John."

John chuckled. "All righty, detective. Just the facts." He was known for going into detail on the years it took to train Salvatore to be a cadaver dog. Alex suspected he liked to torture people who had sensitive stomachs.

"Sal didn't even wait for me to put his harness on. He just took off when I opened the front door. Without the reflector on his collar I wouldn't have found him so soon. I put his night collar on so I could keep track of him."

"So you didn't smell anything odd when you got home? Hold on." She changed her focus as the ME arrived. The van slid to a stop with a compact form dropping out of the van before Alex thought it was

in neutral. Alex suspected Marianne was a rodeo rider in her previous life, and treated her vehicles as if it were her horse, sliding to a stop while she tied up her steer. Alex shook her head to clear it from wandering off on quirky tangents.

"Marianne, I want to walk with you over the scene before you move anything. John," she turned back to her witness, "can you write down what you saw or heard today when you left for work and got back, and then whatever you noticed when you and Sal arrived? Drop it off at the station signed as soon as you can. I don't want you to be losing any beauty sleep."

"I heard last night you got called out three times with vandalism and alarms in some of the shops going off. Got any ideas?"

"No, but if we don't find them soon, Sal may be the only one that can find them," she said.

"I hear you. Ginger's spitting fire about what they did to her vegetable garden. I think they did that on purpose. Some people aren't nice at all."

"I heard about Ginger's garden, from everyone that can speak," she said tiredly. "Going to the coffee shop isn't any fun these days."

After inspecting the area around the body remains, she and Marianne put the body in a bag and moved it to the van. Then Marianne helped Alex as she inspected the area around where they found the body. Someone needed to hold the light and sometimes the brush as Alex took pictures and bagged whatever she found to be delivered to Dr. Mandy Sherwood's new CSI department.

The morning's office hubbub of ringing phones and voices varying in pitch and intensity had finally ceased after the three volunteers noisily hurried out together to their regular jobs, bringing a false sense of calm to the office. Since the increase of vandalism the call volume had increased to such a level that Lieutenant Harriet Sams couldn't handle the calls alone. The volunteers worked in two shifts from midnight to seven in the morning. That was when the calls started to come in from outraged or frightened citizens. Harriet hand-picked the civilian staff. She didn't want people with loose lips, as she put it.

Alex's chair squeaked as she leaned back stretching to ease the tightness in her body. She turned slightly to gaze out the second floor window at the shadowy gray outlines of buildings across the street that the fog clung to. Between the times she left the marsh, to the time she returned home -- with the hope of being able to have a word or two with Elizabeth before she went to bed -- the fog rolled in.

She shifted again in her seat and adjusted the photo of her and Elizabeth with their Tai Chi group, once more entertaining the idea of clipping out the others and just leaving her and Elizabeth. And once more, not ready to make that personal of a statement in her public life, she discarded it for another time. She was aware of how profound a statement it made of her own fear of commitment.

Reaching for the phone the moment she thought of having lunch with Elizabeth, she sighed and leaned back in her chair. It was too early to call. Elizabeth would be sleeping and the ringing of the phone and the turning on of voicemail would wake her. Once that decision was made Alex went back to the clues

on the vandalism, trying to piece together a motive behind it in their small town, Sunrise. The body found in the marsh, though not forgotten was put on the back burner, until the coroner had finished with his workup.

Okay. Let's get organized here. Let's try ruling out what it isn't about. There's nothing satanic associated with the vandalism. It's just what one would normally find in someone else's town, graffiti with expletives and insults directed at specific groups in the community. So far it's covered Lesbians, gay men, women in general, Asians, Afro-Americans, Catholics, nonChristians, immigrants, dog owners, and so on. What it all amounts to is a defacing of private and public property, which is rattling the community. And the bright colors they use for spraying property isn't a color sold in Sunrise.

She rested her chin in her palm and stared at the screen, letting her thoughts wander on whether rattling a community as a motive was worth pursuing. There were so many other wild ideas being entertained, so why not add this one?

Who would gain from a rattled community? Was it money? Land? Politics? Religion? She sighed heavily. It's not anytime near elections. I haven't heard of any laws that the committee is pondering on that pressure like this would be benefit. This town is not going to stand up to this harassment for a month more without us coming up with at least one of the criminals. By the looks of the evidence, there are more than three or four people involved with this. Are they working together? Do they know each other? And are they from Sunrise? I certainly have my suspects in that category.

She opened her reminder application and typed in a memo to herself to look up property and politics...*now politics will be easy since everyone knows where his or her neighbor stands on issues that are connected to Sunrise interests...hmmm. Okay, money...land...politics... religion...she paused...all four can be lumped together. Alex, you're getting too cynical.*

Alex moved her cursor to the top of the screen and pulled down another menu, and opened two files to view them simultaneously. She moved from the list of what was found on site to the actual photographs, and then back to her notes and Mark Scripts', her partner. She moved the cursor to a picture of a boot print found at one of the scenes Mark investigated, blowing up the toe print.

It's almost as if the person wanted the print to be seen. It's been at nine of the sites. Who would cut criss-cross patterns in the bottom of their shoes? And why would someone purposely leave a print, always the left, unless they wanted the boot to be found? I wonder who has the right boot?

Alex's eyes went back to the clock, letting out an audible sigh. Two minutes past ten. Since the increase of vandalism she had been anxious about leaving Elizabeth alone.

We've got alarms and all sorts of do-dads. You're just a worry wart.

The door to the computer room opened and the chief poked his head out. "Alex, you're the only one here?"

Alex looked up surprised. She hadn't heard him enter. "Yeah, chief. The latest hit was around where Scripts lives so he took the call. The Macs are out there with him. It's in their neighborhood too."

"Come on in here. Burns found something of interest on those vandalism cases."

She locked her notes up in her desk, and locked her PC. Securing her files when she was out of sight of her work area was something she learned when former Sunrise police officers Mike and Danny were around. They had made a habit of tampering with her files by either leaving unpleasant things pressed between her notes, or removing notes or evidence pictures from her files. Now it was because civilians were in the office and she didn't trust the new hires that took Danny and Mike's place, the McAlberts, June and Howard, otherwise known as the Macs.

Alex joined Chief Harper in the inner computer sanctum. Officer Eric Burns's short stocky frame was bent over the printer, adding more paper to the lower tray. His dark brown hair was growing out of the weird cut he had done on a dare with his high school students. Brown eyes looked up, minus the thick glasses he used to wear, as he slid the tray in with a snap. With his coat off, Alex could see the wrinkles in his black turtleneck sweater, whose arms he had pulled up nearly to his elbows, as he had the habit of doing with long sleeved shirts.

Alex and Eric nodded at each other. "Morning, Eric. How's Angie doing?"

"Ready to pop. She's not getting any sleep these days so I stay up with her and work on some stuff."

"You're looking all right for someone who's losing sleep." Alex was thinking that people younger than thirty could absorb lack of sleep better than their older counterparts. She didn't feel all that lively from three days of being on call.

"For lunch I go home and take naps with her," he admitted with a grin.

A similar expression appeared on Alex's face as she thought of how she would like to be taking her lunch breaks...if she had that much time.

"Show Alex what you found," Chief Harper broke into her distracting thoughts.

"Oh...right, chief." He grinned sheepishly at the chief then turned to Alex. "Last night, I was working on a new combination of evidence categories for the program and ran a few tests." With one hand he pulled out a thick file from three others on his desk. He flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for. He handed the file to her. "And I found an interesting combination of unrelated events...along with..." he waited for Alex to catch up to his next discovery.

At the top were a list of different crime scenes, their characteristics, and then what they had in common with other sites. She went to the next page and read the description of evidence found in the photos alone. There were pictures of the same site that didn't match. Some of the photographs had a time imprinted on the corner of the photo. In pictures with times of the same site the times were twenty minutes to an hour apart.

"Someone's not good at documenting evidence?" She looked at the names.

"Interesting, no?"

"It sure is. So we have six that could be called copycats, these are your unrelated events...and ...three others that have the same MOs. And there's this coincidence that the McAlberts, are not coming up with the same evidence as the victim's photos show from earlier shots." She read where the photos were

from. "Looks like someone got to the site before they did and messed with the evidence, or...? Do they have access to these files?"

"No. I haven't cleared them yet. Not until their background checks come back. All they do is patrol, secure a crime scene area, get the names of witnesses, and take pictures without disturbing the crime scene."

Burns looked at the message on his desktop that showed another file was changing the statistics.

"I just finished with the House evidence." She looked at one of the three. "This one here...I didn't see anything of this on the computer evidence."

The chief looked over her shoulder. "I added that from this morning's coffee shop talks. Ginger was waiting for me in the coffee shop and wanted to report it personally."

Ginger, was born Mark Anthony Grady, who had it officially changed to Ginger Grady after her sex change. She was seventy-five, and wore her age as battle scars from the hard life she had led until retiring in Sunrise. She was an elected official on the town's governing board and was too bright to be suckered into a losing argument.

"It must have been important or she wouldn't be up this early." Alex looked back down at the report in her hands. "This one here with the large boot print," she pointed with her pinkie so as not to cover the small area, "I think the size of the boot is a red herring."

"Yeah." The chief agreed. "It's this..." the chief pointed at another print that was superimposed over one of the boot prints, "that has me worried."

"A child's print. Can't be the same person who made the boot print, or there would be a lot of dragging at the toe tips. Besides, who would go through all that misdirecting then come back and leave his or her print? By the way, this child's print...it was at two other sites that were not connected to this big boot."

The chief nodded. "Eric, do you think by Wednesday you can have an abridged report for the committee ready? I think we need to start bringing the public panic down and get a collective handle on all this stuff."

"All right. I'll get on it."

Eric's cell went off causing him to jump then look around for where the noise was coming from.

He opened the cell and listened. His face went white, then he snapped it closed, dropping the paper he was holding.

"Chief, I gotta go. She's going to the hospital!"

"Go, go. We'll secure this place. Take your keys!"

He was gone.

The stack of books his coat dragged over was sent teetering off the bookcase, which was caught by Alex.

"Alex, I'm bringing down the system so I can log him off. It's going to take a while because when he normally logs off it automatically backs up the logs, so anything you need on the network drive will be closed. Secure those files, would you please?" The chief indicated the files that were sitting on Eric's desk.

Alex collected the files and anything else that looked official and took them to her desk where her own files for Harriet were still sitting in the locked file cabinet for the detectives' desks. Whenever she finished with original files that held the photos and evidence she kept them secured in the detectives file cabinet. She sent Harriet an Email letting her know that she now had a hand full of files and she would need a cart. Harriet's desk was at the PD entrance, where she typed in calls and messages that would be delivered into the electronic mail board of the intended person. Not all calls coming into the police station were police related. Citizens just knew that if the phone was busy to the city's business desk, that maybe the police desk would not be busy. Just as she hit send a message came up that the network was going down in five minutes and she needed to save all her files that were open.

Alex's phone rang and she picked it up quickly, getting a giddy feeling that spread through her as a wistful thought of who she would like it to be. "Detective Adison."

"Alex, Harriet here. Elizabeth called about two minutes ago and said she was fine. And I got your message. I'll pick the files up after lunch if that's okay with you. Is there a reason why I'm getting a message that the Network is going down?"

"This afternoon is fine for the files, and about the Network, the Chief is logging off Eric from the Master Console so it does an automatic backup of whatever was added so far into the database. It shouldn't take long. I haven't started inputting this morning's calls."

"There are a lot of calls from last shift. Gary said the calls started to come in just as he was starting his shift, but they ended up being false calls. He was running ragged. Bobbi Lyn said it was quiet on her second shift. Stender says the same thing when he works weekends. Gary may ask to transfer to second shift if this keeps up. I heard you got called out for a body by the marsh. Rumor has it it's the drifter that came into town a few weeks back."

"I couldn't tell. He had a medical alert tag in case he got lost. We haven't heard from the coroner's office, but it's early yet. I sent what we collected around the body to the CSI lab with Marianne."

"I can help later this afternoon with the logging in of the calls, but right now I'm getting a lot more calls than I normally do this morning. Is Angie having her baby?" Harriet asked. "Eric rushed out of here like a bat-outta-hell, yelling some gibberish."

"He she's going to the hospital. What kind of calls are you getting?"

"Half of them are from the same person to Council Member Lenthorpe. I guess his secretary and him are not in yet or are taking the day off and forgot to post it on the note board."

"Is he or she leaving a name?"

"Don't have to. I recognize that SOD's voice anywhere," she returned disgustedly.

"SOD?"

"Son of a dickhead."

"Ah." She refrained from mentioning that it would be more like SODH, but then, SOD did sound better. "That has a nice sound to it," she admitted. "So, who is this SOD?"

"The infamous Minister Hailburn, or is it reverend? He changes his title with the crowd."

"Is he planning on visiting?"

"Gods, but I hope not. We get more complaints when he floods the town with leaflets and turns up the speakers on his vehicles as he drives through town preaching hell fire and damnation. Right now he wants Philip Lenthorpe to call him ASAP. Each time I offer to put him in his voicemail, because the number he called is to the police department not the committee offices, he just repeats the message, have him call me ASAP. Oh, that reminds me. Can you leave a message on the L.A. desk? I was told if they don't fax their paper work by the end of today, they won't get paid. The payroll clerk was very teed off. If I thought it would do any good, I would ask her for a favor and have them return to LA."

"I wish they would. I'll leave a note for them to fax their time sheets. No other messages?"

"None. I'll call the hospital and see if Jean can give us an update about the Burn's babies."

"Max thinks it's just a big boy."

"It's twins," Harriet said knowingly. "I think that was nice of them not to get an ultra sound to keep us all waiting to see who won the pool," Harriet said.

They hung up on a laugh.

Alex drummed her fingers on the desk looking at the phone. *Elizabeth is fine. She didn't leave any other message. She's up earlier than she usually is. Why didn't she just wait for my call? I always call at the same time. Maybe she was hoping to talk to me.*

Elizabeth had been stalked for nearly two years, until the perpetrator was shot outside the courthouse as he was being taken into court. It didn't cross Alex's mind consciously, that she was adversely affected from Elizabeth's stalking experience, as significant others of victims usually are. If she attended the group meetings Genie suggested at the women's shelter, she would probably be more aware, but her police duties were consuming her time right now, or so she told herself and Genie.

She picked up the phone and dialed Elizabeth's number. She listened to the message, which was not in Elizabeth's voice but in her partner's voice, Detective Mark Script, and then waited until the audible let her know to leave a message. The wait was long and Alex wondered who the other messages were before hers.

Alex made a notation in her scheduler of this oddity then flipped back to the previous week to see if she had noted when she began to notice the long waits for the signal for her to begin her message. *About a week.* Was it jealousy or honest concern that had her noting things like this?

"Lizbeth, this is Alex. I was wondering if you would like to have lunch with me today. I'll be in my office for the morning." She waited a space, hoping Elizabeth would pick up on hearing her voice and wondering if she should say more.

"Bye." Alex was disappointed she wasn't able to say what she really wanted to say...that she missed her and....

Alex looked out the window that was finally showing a clear sky. The last of the fog's tendrils had dissipated.

She must be on the deck with her laptop. No, too early for writing. Maybe she's running the vacuum cleaner or taking a shower. Who would be leaving her messages? Alex sat up further in her chair with a guilty feeling that she was jealous. *We have to spend more time together. I want to know if my long hours bother her. I want to know if she would like to go for a walk along the beach...or have an uninterrupted dinner with me...by candlelight. I want to spend a night with no phone calls, holding her or her holding me. We sleep in the same damn house, so why can't we get our...my...well, hers too...Damn. Surely we can rearrange our schedules. We must be the strangest couple yet. Or, does she refer to herself as a couple?*

She took a deep breath. *I know I do. So, who in the hell is leaving so many messages before I even call?*

Sighing she went back to the small stack of forms the morning call takers had filled out. They needed to be scanned into the computer and the handwriting the computer could not recognize she had to try to interpret and correct. Glancing at the Network icon it showed it was coming back up.

The input would have been monotonous if she was not also reading the information that was taken. The four residences just down the road from the Scripts' house reported the same type of damage. Five of the other houses on the block had been left alone.

Alex picked up the phone and dialed the clinic.

"Sunrise Clinic," Margaret's voice answered cheerfully.

"Margaret, this is Detective Adison," she said.

"Appointment or police business?" Margaret asked.

"Business. Is Gregory or Mai available?"

"Mai's out at the hospital waiting with Doctor Ulanov for his new case to arrive from San Fran."

"San Francisco? Don't they have their own clinics and hospitals out there?"

"Mai's customer's range from the East Coast, to the West Coast and some from Canada. Gregory!"

There was a pause. "Hold on, Alex."

Alex idly flipped pages as her thoughts wandered back to her roommate.

"Good morning, Alex. You're not calling about Burn's twins are you?"

"No. I'll wait for the Sunrise telegraph to break the news. I was calling you about this morning's reports of vandalism in your area."

"We passed the houses on the way to work this morning. Frankly, it looks like kids did it."

"Did you guys hear or see anything at all strange last night on your way back from class?"

"Mark asked the same question, but when Mai and I talked about it before she left for Brisbane with Uri, we realized we had forgotten to mention to him about the trash cans."

"Go on." She quickly cradled the phone on her shoulder and expanded her word document to take notes.

"There were three trash cans outside of Connie and Jennifer's house and they only use one. They share a recycle bin with Mrs. Greenwich next door but it's parked outside of her house not Connie and Jennifer's. With two or more cans near their place it could get turned over by the neighbors backing out of their drive way."

Alex typed the additional information in quickly. "Did you notice how many cans Mrs. Greenwich had outside of her place?"

"No."

"Do you think you would be able to hear someone prowling around your place?"

"Mark installed a motion detector light outside of Mrs. Greenwich's the first day all this started and he showed me how to do ours, so that's two houses that lights would alert everyone."

Mark had mentioned some of his neighbors were asking him about protection around their houses. She would have to ask him if the five houses not hit had the lights or some sort of intruder alarm. Though, somehow she didn't think that would do much. The way things were going; one set of the vandals would take that as a challenge.

"Motion detectors..." she muttered as she typed. "Okay. Can you think of anything else?"

"No, that's it," Gregory said.

"Okay, thanks. Have a nice day, Greg. And say hi to Mai for me."

"Hold on, Alex."

Alex could hear the phone being held against fabric then what sounded like an exchange of hands.

"Hey, stranger."

Alex took a deep breath struggling to regain her composure. A nice tingling spread quickly through her body as the familiar contralto voice tickled her ear and brightened the office. She wanted to enjoy these sensations in silence but knew she needed to respond.

"Good morning."

"I'm in the neighborhood and thought maybe, if you're not too busy, you would join me for an early lunch."

"Name the place and time. I'll be there." She was already closing down her workstation and locking her desk drawer as she listened to 'Mollie's place when you can.' Even if Elizabeth had not hinted to her that 'now would be good' she would have met her at the clinic. She really missed seeing her. The realization was bringing some feelings of apprehension, but her eagerness to see Elizabeth overrode them.

You'd think you've never been in a relationship before! Alex paused before pulling down her coat from the coat rack ... *I believe I never have been. I'm in trouble if these butterflies keep bothering my stomach every time she asks me to meet her somewhere.* But the smirk on her face was hard to hide.

Mollie's was about fifteen minutes from the police station, but walking quickly and not getting sidetracked with the shop owner's or their wares could be shortened by a few minutes. Until Elizabeth got her own car, she was driving Alex's Range Rover. Alex was using a police car since she was on call twenty-four hours until the vandalism problem got under control. But driving over would be a waste of

time. Finding any available parking spot at this time of day, even in a police car, would be difficult to find near Mollee's.

Alex rapped on the Chief's open door and stuck her head in. The chief was seated behind his computer. She could see his hand pushing the phone that was cradled on his shoulder back in place as his fingers moved quickly over the keyboard.

"I'm going out for something to eat at Mollee's. Want me to pick you up anything?" she whispered.

The Chief shook his head and waved. Alex stopped off at the tattoo lounge, as she liked to refer to it as, but was the official Tourist Information Center. "Hey, guys." Mathew was drawing a new tattoo design on paper while Emily was giving verbal help.

"Adison! Hey, gal! When are you going to get yourself a tattoo? We have some new ones that would just look soooo good on you." Emily eyed Alex's neck, the only place her skin was exposed. She had her hands in her coat pockets.

Alex shook her head. "No way. I keep telling you I don't like needles. I just wanted to let you know the Chief's the only one in the office right now. Do you think you can keep an eye out on the office? Burns is out too."

"Ah, the twins are on their way!" Emily brightened up. "I thought I saw a streak go by a bit ago." She placed a large hand on her husband's broad shoulders and gave him a playful squeeze.

"Twins!" Her husband snorted, as if on cue. "Why do you women always think you're the only ones that know all about pregnancy? The woman is too small for twins. My money is on one big boy."

Alex laughed. Mathew was picking a big boy because that was what he picked on the baby pool that Harriet had going around. Emily picked twins because the women's group decided that was what Angie was expecting and the woman's group was tight when it came to some matters, like picking the gender of the unborn, deciding who was right for who...well, they did sometimes disagree on that point. Whatever the choice, Alex knew Angie was having a hard time this week.

"See you." She hurried out before she got another proposition about tattoos. Some of them looked interesting but the permanent part put her off. The idea of being reminded for the rest of her life of the drunken, the only way she would get one, moment she had for having a tattoo design that had no meaning to her sober mind, was not encouraging. Alex felt any exposed skin to Matt and Emily was like an inspiration to them and even when they were talking both studied the spaces on her body for a place to imprint a colorful metaphor of her life. She already knew what they had planned for different places on her body for they showed her on her occasional visits to their office.

So why do you keep looking at the designs if you don't want one? That's not a happy thought, Alexandra. If you have some deep-seated desire for a tattoo, get one. "No, way," she said aloud.

Downstairs she told Harriet where she would be lunching, who probably already guessed by the big grin on her face. She started out at a fast pace over to the next block and avoided the expected need of shopkeepers that wanted to pull her in to talk about the most recent news on this-that-and-the-other. She weaved in and out of the racks that were lining the walkways, not letting her eyes get distracted by the

colorful wares that might slow her down to her destination. But one did stop her. She pulled a nice rose from a bucket of them outside of Jenny's Flower Shop and asked Jenny if she could pay later.

Jenny came out and grabbed the flower back. "Alex! You need more than this, for Goddess sake." She pointed to a collection near the cash register that had a nice mixture of ferns and baby tears wrapped around a white rose with the edges tinged with red. They were Alex's favorite. "I sure hope this is for Elizabeth," she added with a wink as she pushed Alex back out the door with a wave and mention that she would add it to her monthly bill.

Alex smiled taking the small flower spray.

Chapter 2

By the time she had reached Mollee's, the noon crowd was beginning to take up the better seats both in the outdoor garden and with a view into it. The outdoor garden was a large semi round shaped area with a curved fountain wall on the far side that was outlined by vines that in spring would have a wondrous crowd of blooms. Not a place for someone with allergies. At the foot was a fanciful miniature nature scene the high school class of Mrs. Singer created that summer. A cover over the top of the rafters could be pulled back in the warmer weather to take advantage of the sun's rays. Now the heaters and cover were keeping out the day's chill. For those that could not enjoy blooms, there were booths on the other side of the glass walls that the customers could look out from. Mollee also had a salt-water fish tank for those that didn't have a view of the garden and a bookcase lined with plenty of used books for anyone who liked to sip coffee and read. The restless eye was kept satiated with plenty of scenes, if not the visiting between patrons that went on between tables and reading area until food arrived.

Elizabeth was sitting where she always liked to sit with her back facing a wall and a seat that had a view of the people coming in. She never sat near a window and always within easy reach of two exits. In The Country Kitchen, another busy coffee shop in town, the second exit was too far from the main entrance, and there was no seating that gave a good view of the front entrance, so Elizabeth was not a customer. It was not something she discussed, but it didn't take a sharp detective to notice her preferences, since even Katie, Mark Scripts five-year-old daughter, noticed.

Alex grinned. For some reason, Katie found Elizabeth fascinating. She had at first thought it was because she liked the books Elizabeth had written for children, but after watching the two interact Alex had a feeling it was more than that.

Elizabeth's eyes met hers across the crowd and stayed linked until Alex turned sideways and slid into the bench seat next to her. She pulled out the rose from behind her back and passed it to her under the table.

Genie was sitting across from Alex in the bench seat with Claire. She and Claire made the proper comments when Elizabeth pulled the rose from under the table and pressed the scented petals against her nose.

"Oh. Nice," Genie and Claire said in unison.

"Thank you, Alex. That's really sweet of you." Elizabeth sniffed at it deeply.

Alex automatically exchanged greetings with everyone, and on another level she sensed the closeness of Elizabeth's body, and the pressure of her leg against hers. The distinctive perfume Elizabeth wore mixed with the faint smell of the rose. Alex partially heard the amusement in Elizabeth's voice that answered a question from Genie about bringing the romantic side out in her partner. *Partner? That's me!*

Alex gave her order to Francine and made an attempt to focus on what the conversation was about; which she didn't do a very good job of because her senses were engaged elsewhere. A few minutes later, Claire got up to go to the restroom and Genie got up to talk to someone who came in.

"So how come you look like you've been working out?" Elizabeth teased as she took a napkin and brushed it across Alex's face and dabbed her neck gently.

Alex blinked her eyes a few times trying not to let the simple acts turn into a seduction. "I jogged over. Got held up by Emily and Matt." Her voice sounded faint to her ears.

"The tattoo couple," Elizabeth confirmed they were talking about the same people. She was also thinking about the quick stop to pick up a rose, which brought a twinkle to her blue eyes as she gazed at the distracted woman sitting close to her. She let her knuckles brush against a soft reddened cheek before she rested the napkin on the table and picked up her coffee cup for a sip.

"Yes." Alex's voice was stronger. "It's like a religious thing with them. One day they convert me and the next day they're trying to attach something to me." Alex watched Elizabeth's left eyebrow rise. "They find some really interesting tattoo patterns, that are pretty tempting, and then they try to get me to let them pin it on me." Alex sipped her flavored coffee noting that Elizabeth was wearing a white turtleneck under her thick dark blue long sleeved shirt. She remembered how the turtleneck sweater clung to her taller frame, showing ribs that were beginning to fill out and breasts whose nipples pushed against the knitted pattern, making an eye pleasing raise in the surface of the sweater pattern.

"What kind of designs?" Elizabeth's voice had a seductive quality to it that Alex willingly let herself be drawn into.

Alex touched her forehead where she thought sweat was gathering but for a different reason. "Ahh." She cleared her voice that kept threatening to sink into a sexual huskiness. "Well, let's see. There is this one design that is a woman with an owl face or something like that embedded in her hair. Then the most recent was a Celtic woman with her hand resting on the head of an Irish Wolfhound." The woman warrior had the familiar high cheekbones and raven black hair that wound around in a wild wind swept pattern encompassing two figures. The blue eyes peering out were so bright they were the first part of the design she noticed. The warrior's resemblance to Elizabeth was, she was sure, intentional.

"Sounds interesting." Elizabeth sipped her coffee.

Alex smiled up at her, entranced. "Elizabeth," she told her softly, then caught herself and continued in a normal voice, "these designs are big pictures of the entire figure of a person and the animal. It would cover my entire backside." When she had made that very comment to Matt and Emily they both had looked at her surprised.

"Of course! It's a detailed picture that is supposed to take up the entire back. Big is better for showing off the detail," was their reply.

"There is no way anyone is going to use my entire back for a pin cushion and drawing something I can't wash off the next day if I decide I want something different!"

Mark had been there that day and had literally fallen off the couch with laughter at Alex's expression.

"Sounds intriguing. A piece of artwork you purchase, and at quite a price I would imagine, and you don't even get to see it, unless you use mirrors. Only your lover can admire it." She wiggled her eyebrows playfully.

Alex studied Elizabeth's face. Her eyes were dark with the pupils opened so wide Alex could drown in them as if they were warm pools of water. "Well...I guess the lover should pick out the design then," she told her in an almost hoarse voice. Alex's eyes blinked. "What am I talking about?" She suddenly straightened up pulling her wits together. "I hate needles and that stuff hurts! Do you realize how long a tiny one takes?"

Elizabeth was laughing, the seductive spell broken.

"I can't picture you with a tattoo taking up your entire back." Elizabeth leaned back on the bench seat and regarded her roommate that she had not seen much of for more than a week. She could feel a longing ache between her legs that also was felt in her heart and left a very lonely space in her bed. The little seductive play they both partook in told her that the attraction the two had for each other was still there, as strong as ever and waiting for a chance to be expressed in physical activity. Her writing was the only thing that took her mind off the small blond woman who seemed to be avoiding her in some ways, yet she knew police work was time consuming lately.

"Well, neither can I, though for other reasons and they all began with 'p' for pain."

Claire slid into the bench seat and looked at the two women with a raised eyebrow.

"Tattoos," Elizabeth told her.

"You should see Genie's," Claire said.

Genie chose that time to return. "See what of Genie's? Oh. Food!"

Plates were slid in front of each woman as they moved their beverages out of the way to help.

Though Genie was a cook, and a very good one at that, Mollee was the chef at Mollee's Creations, and she loved to experiment on those that were willing to be guinea pigs. Genie was her favorite guinea pig because her feedback was that of one chef to another without the malicious jealousy.

"Your tattoos," Claire told her distractedly as she studied the surprise plate put in front of her. "What is this experiment called?" she asked Francine.

"Plumber's Delight." Francine turned and moved to the next booth to take an order.

Mollee's husband was a plumber, so it may have something to do with his preferring this mixture of food, but the four decided that it needed a better name that did not leave so much for the imagination.

"I think Fish Surprise is good," Claire spoke between bites.

"Hmm. There isn't that much fish. Maybe, Deep Dish Surprise," Genie suggested.

Both Elizabeth and Alex nodded as they ate and wondered about Genie's tattoo.

"So, Genie, about your tattoo," Alex finally asked as she pushed her emptied plate aside and pulled her coffee toward her. The plate was picked up quickly by Francine and replaced with a piece of Mollee's version of chocolate lover's mousse.

"I'm going to have to run back to the station the long way around to work this off," Alex said as she placed the long float glass in front of her and started in on her desert without any more guilt.

"It's a flower," Genie told them as she was still working on her deep-dish lunch.

"Tell them where it is," Claire encouraged.

Genie blushed. "Well, it's around my breasts."

"Takes up the entire boob," Claire added in a conspirator's low whisper. "Under some shirts it looks like she's wearing a lace bra."

"That must have really hurt," Alex looked at her with disbelief.

"Yeah, it took two days and I stayed drunk for those two days. It's not something I intend on doing again."

"First and last time, Dove. It's a design that uses the nipples as the flower center. Quite erotic," Claire continued in a low voice.

"What made you choose something like that? I mean, why not a tiny little one on the ankle or shoulder blade?" Alex couldn't imagine enduring to have needles poking at her much less on her breasts. It made her want to cover hers for protection.

"She wanted to seduce me," Claire said, giving Genie a smirk.

Genie put her fork down and gave her mate a frustrated look. "You don't have to spread it around, you know?"

"You regret it?" Claire asked mischievously.

"You know I don't. The dividends are too good for me to regret the investment."

"I sense a good story here," Elizabeth leaned forward pushing her coffee cup out of the way.

"All right. But if this ends up in a story...I want to be forewarned," Genie told her grumpily. "When I realized that I was in love with Claire I was racking my brains to figure out how to get her intrigued with me. I mean, I couldn't very well ask her to come to my room and see my etchings if I had none."

Neither Alex or Elizabeth wanted to interrupt her to know what etchings had to do with a tattoo on an intimate part of her body.

"She had just started to work as the cook, handy person and chauffeur at the House. We were still short of help and needed all sorts of skills," Claire interjected helpfully.

"Are you going to let me tell this or are you going to keep giving fillers?" Genie shifted in closer to Claire who took one of her hands under the table. "So...my best buds at the time were Emily and Matt. Both are ex-military. Emily was an ex-Marine and Matt was ex-Navy, then there was me, ex-Army, so we had something in common. Anyway, I confided in her one day. I was plastered with beer and real frustrated. Claire was ignoring my hints, jokes and..."

"I was head over heels in love with her and afraid it was one sided," Claire quickly interjected.

"What happened to your matchmaker skills?"

Claire's matchmaking skills were legendary along with Mark Scripts.

"What I can do for others doesn't mean I can do for myself."

"Quiet," Genie told her. "You'll get your turn at the next Women's Night Out. Anyway, in this drunken state, I let her and Matt do this design that Emily created and Matt insisted was very erotic looking. I don't remember much because I passed out right after I said yes. It took about a day."

Claire was having a difficult time not interjecting her comments. "I got a call from Emily, telling me that Genie just had two elaborate tattoos done and needed a lift home. I have to admit, I had to know what she had done and why she needed a ride home. When I got there, she was partially conscious, and very drunk. Not something she does very often. At the time I had only known her for about a year, the time she was there as a resident and then when I hired her when she asked to stay on. So this was a new view of her. I got her in the van, and listened to her mumble these crazy ass army songs then whimper every now and then. It really had me worried that maybe she had a tat on her butt and it was sore."

"Right. I was leaning against the door holding my breasts, gently, because I was so drunk I couldn't sit up."

"I helped her into the back room, which at the time was her room, and just had to ask her about her tattoo. That set her off in a nervous giggling jag. I should have figured it was on her boobs because she had her arms wrapped underneath them. Anyway, I talked her into showing me her flowers. I was expecting her to drop her pants. Imagine my surprise to see these colorful breasts appear right before my eyes, with tits as hard as nails, but oh the area around them was so sore."

"Yeah. She was so surprised she bit me," Genie grinned.

"She bit you?"

"You bit her?"

"Well, here is this woman I've been dreaming of for a long time, sitting there in front of me with these hard tits sticking out at me from this flower tattoo and small writing on one of the petals that looked like it was plucked and falling. It said 'she loves me'," Claire explained in her defense.

"What if 'she loves me' didn't refer to you?" Alex asked intrigued.

"If I hadn't taken a bite out of what was being offered to me, I would have hated myself."

"Offered?"

"She was just about shoving it into my face by then," Claire insisted.

"I was lucky enough to be so bold and go past the hinting stage," Genie explained. "She wasn't taking hints too well, so I told her to kiss it to make it feel better," she mumbled the last part so both women had to strain to hear it.

Genie's rapt audience was quiet for a few moments as they both tried to picture just what the tattoo would look like and...

"So, you have a flower tattooed on your breasts with the aureole as the center of the flower?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yep. A daisy on each boob."

"One of these days, if we ever have a show-n-tell at one of the girls' night out meetings, Genie's going to have to bring out her flowers," Claire said.

"Right. But only if you show yours."

"You have one too?" Alex and Elizabeth asked together.

Claire looked at the two women. "Of course! After she went and had all that done for me, I just had to get something for her. But...that's for another day. I wanted to ask you if there are any suspects on this graffiti damage."

"Chief Harper's going to make a presentation at the town meeting tomorrow," Alex said.

Claire nodded. "Good. We've been hearing mutterings among Philip's cohorts that are putting an interesting spin to the vandalism. They're doing the usual singling out one particular life style as the cause of attracting these types of vandals."

"There is no rational or intelligent substance to their accusations for anything. I think their method is to throw irrational and highly emotional statements at you and you're so busy trying to figure out how to make sense of it that you don't know what to say to defend yourself." Alex took a sip of her coffee thinking about the latest information about Philip. "Philip is busy working on the judgment that may be handed down about his misrepresentation and mishandling of cases he's been arguing in Judge Meads' courts. It's amazing those involved didn't think Judge Mead would take it personally when she found out Philip was getting away with so many delays in the other courts she oversees. There's going to be two very unhappy judges that she's going to reprimand and fine. He's also supposed to be preparing his cases for representing Mike and Danny. Jenny can't say much about the case but the rumor is the prosecutor's case against them is strong and the case is going to be heard by Judge Mead. Danny may get fined heavily and put on probation, but Mike has too many people that are coming forward and offering to witness about his misconduct...all women.

Alex tapped her finger on the table as she thought about how once a member in good standing with the local gang that called themselves the Jaded Amulet, was now being hung out to dry. Usually gangs protected their own by killing off witnesses. "Well, it's a pity we can't tie Smith and Karla to them. Then they would all be put away for a long time."

"I hear Glenda Rhodes from Antioch bought Smith's cigar shop," Genie said.

"Right. The bank is handing out small business loans for women, and she qualified so she gave up her two jobs and bought it from Mr. Smith," Claire said. "I didn't hear what she wanted to do with the space, but I don't think the few people that smoke cigars can support a tobacco shop."

"It's a nice location with the sandwich shop next door," Genie said.

Alex rubbed her forehead. All this moving around of people meant that Sunrise's PD investigation on the gang, Jaded Amulet, was getting even more complicated and with all the vandalism going on, their

investigation had come to a halt. With the exception of Mike and Danny, the others identified as members of the gang were left to go about their business unmonitored by the detectives. The sooner they found who was behind the vandalism the sooner they could get back to riding Sunrise of the gang, Alex thought.

"Say, do any of you know just how much land Hailburn owns around here?" Alex asked.

"I do," Elizabeth answered to everyone's surprise. "A dozen condos, the house on the cliff, two farm houses leasing the farm land, and three small businesses in Sunrise. One is the Golden Sunrise Real Estate Office, The Coffee Kiosk, and the new religious bookstore on South Street, Christian Lighthouse Bookstore."

"How did you find that out?" Alex asked astonished.

"A conversation I overheard in the clinic while I was lying very still with pins in me. The walls are thin. The subject was on private auctions and public auctions. The very reverend Hailburn is a fan of private auctions and he may have bitten off more than he can chew."

"I'll have to remember that," Alex remarked. "He bought all that at auction? That should be public knowledge yet I hadn't heard any gossip on that. Silent auctions?"

"It depends who holds the titles. If the silent auction doesn't get the seller what he or she wants, it goes up on the public auction block. Angela Corney, the land registrar, would know." Claire looked thoughtful. "I would think that would make good gossip material. I have to hand it to her that she's kept mum about it. There are a lot of people that would have something to say about that fake minister buying up Sunrise."

"You're a good spy on the inside," Genie teased Elizabeth.

"I was an eaves dropper and not by choice," Elizabeth told them firmly.

"Well, I've got to get back to the office and see what Mark has gathered from this morning." Alex glanced at Elizabeth.

I miss you.

As Elizabeth watched Alex her thoughts went to the small things that she would find around the house when she was cleaning that Alex would leave. Like the trail of silvery chocolate kisses that led to a white rose tipped with red, like the one she was just given, came to mind. Little gestures like this made her curious why she still felt Alex was avoiding her. And it was times like now, when she could feel their energy touching, that she had doubts about her observations. Maybe Alex's job was keeping her too busy and she wasn't avoiding her. She hated to be unsure about her observations since they were a vital part of her self-preservation.

"Would you like a lift to the station?" Elizabeth asked hoping she would just say yes to save her the time of explaining she needed to speak with her.

"Sure." Alex smiled up at her roommate. She slid off the bench and stood near as she waited for Elizabeth to slide out. *If you want to take a cruise along the beach and play kissy face and neck the afternoon away, I would go with you.* Alex shook her head at her thoughts. She really needed an undisturbed eight hours of sleep.

She waited as Elizabeth reached to get her cane and the rose. For a moment as Elizabeth stood next to her, with steady blue eyes peering into her green, Alex savored the contrast in height and the feeling of strength that emanated from her tall companion, though it was not visible in her still thin frame. She breathed her scent in and held it in her lungs for a moment.

Elizabeth nodded to the two women and gently guided the silent Alex to the front cash register. Genie and Claire were waiting for Mollee to take a break and join them. It was their weekly social meeting with Mollee.

The two paid the cashier and passed the small group of tourists that looked the two over with appreciate eyes. Neither would have been aware of the close examination until a comment reached their ears about the badge that was hanging from Alex's belt. Elizabeth didn't hide her smirk at the comments that followed and had a firm grip on her companion's elbow as she moved them out onto the sidewalk. Alex's face was red as she tried to think of something to say.

"I'm sure you've heard those comments before, Detective Adison." Elizabeth turned slightly to see a bright red ear lobe peeking out from bleached white hair that covered half an ear.

"No one that I arrested wanted to be arrested and when I cuffed them I doubt they liked it. So, why are you up so early?" Alex asked as a chirp sounded signaling the alarm was disengaged from the Range Rover's system.

Elizabeth stepped around to the driver's side and easily stepped up into the vehicles front seat. She laid the rose on the console between them smiling at Alex as she clambered up and adjusted the passenger seat for her shorter legs.

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about." Elizabeth pulled her seat belt around her and started the engine. Looking over her left shoulder she pulled slowly out from the curb, knowing that her passenger was lawfully secured with the belt crossing between her breasts, making them more prominent, and therefore distracting to Elizabeth's driving concentration, especially after their conversations of tattoos, flowers, leather, and...she let the images in her mind play themselves out.

Alex was wishing Elizabeth would just hurry up and spit it out because she was getting a nervous flutter in her stomach. The unknown source of the long phone messages on her answering machine came to mind. Was it from one person or was she getting a lot of calls? And who would be calling her so early in the mornings? Most of their friends knew she slept in late. *Or, is she getting prank calls and she's not telling me?*

"I was awakened by this racket coming from the front yard early this morning. It was a cross between enraged geese and some kind of cry," Elizabeth started in an amused voice.

Alex's eyes opened wider but she said nothing as she watched the bright blue eyes scan the street while she made a left to get to the police station.

"I found a mother cat defending one of her kittens from the geese that thought her a threat. I distracted the geese until the mother cat disappeared, and then I went looking for her. I couldn't find a trace of her. Not too long later I heard the racket again. Same thing. But this time I waited to see where mother

cat was coming and going to. Seems she had her kittens under a log across the road and decided that since they were starting to get more active our wooden deck has a safer place to let them grow. She only has three, but we now have a small family living with us, besides the flock of geese."

"Oh." Alex sat for a few moments after Elizabeth parked in front of the station. The question about the phone messages was no longer on her mind. "Okay. We have a bigger family." Alex was puzzled why Elizabeth felt she needed to make the trip to tell her that, though she didn't mind at all. It gave her a chance to see her. Then she remembered her trip to the clinic. She was hesitant to ask why she was visiting the clinic so early or before her next appointment.

"I didn't know how you felt about having any animals, besides the geese, and an occasional Angel. There's also the idea of having you think the noise they make is from a burglar."

"Eee ya. That would be rather...awkward." Alex had this image of her rushing out in the dark onto the deck that would be shadowed with lighting from the patio lights, and attacking tiny kittens with a baseball bat. She made a rule a long time ago that when she is at home, she would not grab her gun as the first method of self-defense. It's too easy to pull a trigger when you think your life is in danger in a sleep muddled mind, and then finding out too late that it's someone you care about that is the hapless recipient of your bullet.

"So, just where are they staying?" she asked as she hopped down onto the curb.

"The last I noticed, under your window near the only green patch of grass back there. But Mama cat has moved them four times already so I'm not really sure where they are at this time."

Alex rubbed her nose. She was thinking about the geese droppings and now cat poop that she would be carefully avoiding in the dark on her night inspections around the house to make sure everything was secure.

"Will I see you tonight? I get off at five. Because of the heavy call volume after hours, Mark said he'll give me a break tonight."

"Well, let's see...my yoga class is finished up at four and I can't think of any pressing appointments I have to break after that." Her smile gave Alex a giddy feeling. "I'll make dinner. How's that?"

Alex smiled back. "Nice. See you tonight then." She slammed the door shut and watched Elizabeth turn the vehicle around and headed toward the market.

In a considerably better mood, Alex waved at Harriet at the front desk, who, as usual was typing rapidly the message the caller was imparting. She ran up the stairs and poked her head in the Tourist Bureau room. "I'm back. By the way, I heard about that tattoo you did for Genie."

Matt was sitting facing his PC and turned his chair around to look at her. Behind him was a WEB page of Sunrise. "We don't talk about customers and what we did for them but seeing how you know about hers maybe you'll reconsider about something for yourself."

Alex laughed. "I doubt it. Like I said...I don't like needles poking at me."

"Well, if you see a picture of something that strikes your fancy bring it over and Matt and I will put it into a tattoo stencil and show you what it would look like." Emily smiled encouragingly from the couch where she was arranging pictures of Sunrise on the wide coffee table before her. "You never can tell until you see it on the flesh."

"We're going to change the pictures on the Sunrise WEB site." Matt explained as he followed Alex's glance. "This is the season for the seminars and art demonstrations so the Board n' Breakfasts sent us some recent photos of their places to entice a few more late registrations."

"We saw Detective Scripts with the newbees thirty minutes ago. They were excited about something," Emily added hoping this would entitle her to some tidbits of information later.

"Thanks. Mollee's got a new pot pie you might be interested in trying." Any bit of information was news. Sharing this may get her off the hook of having to give her information on their investigations, which she wouldn't do.

"Hey, that's my favorite. Thanks for the tip." Matt grinned. Matt was a big husky guy that loved to eat. Alex didn't think there was much he didn't like on Mollee's menu.

Before Alex entered the office she always scanned the room. Coats were tossed casually over chairs. Mark was not at his desk, which was next to hers, but his coat was neatly hanging on the coat rack next to their desks. She hung her coat next to his and walked over to the chief's office and peeked in, and then stepped in to look into the meeting room on the left, which adjoined his office. Here four people gathered around a new map that was stretched out on the wall in the conference room away from the prying eyes of the civilians. There was silence as the chief was changing his small post-it color makers at different sites.

Alex nodded to Mark who was sitting in one of the chairs away from the crowd that was around the chief. The two new officers, the Macs, as everyone called them, and one of the L.A. officers, Guido, were standing near the chief on the other side of the conference room table. Gary, the night shift officer was sitting stoned-face in a corner near Mark. Rajpal, who normally worked weekends on 1st shift was sitting next to Gary. Mark pulled the chair next to him out for Alex. Harriet came in after Alex and sat on the other side of Rajpal, handing him a sheet of paper. From her angle, it looked like a list of shops.

"Morning, Mark. How's the family?" she whispered as she wiggled for a comfortable seat in the old chair.

He nodded. "Family's grown. Mom and Dad are in town. We're going to have a big gathering for Thanksgiving. You and Elizabeth want to join the crowd?"

Alex's eyes sparkled and her mouth curved into a big smile. "Our family has grown too, and I'll ask her." She personally hated large gatherings for anything longer than an hour and a half.

Mark eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "Goslings? The geese hatched some eggs?" He knew winter was usually not the season geese nested. And for Elizabeth and Alex to be attached to the geese was unusual. They were still trying to get use to them.

"No, a mama cat moved in and Elizabeth adopted her and her three kits."

"Oh, boy. Are you in trouble. Angel loves cats. I wanted to ask you two to do me a favor. Mom and Pop brought two dogs that they rescued on the road, and these two don't get along with Angel. It's too hard to keep the three separated. Would you two mind taking care of Angel for me while they're visiting? Angel gets along great with Elizabeth."

Alex smiled. "I think Elizabeth misses Angel's company." Alex felt a twinge of jealousy that Angel would be spending more time with her than she would.

"Okay, listen up troops," the chief said.

He pointed to the blown up map of their small town and some of the land where two neighboring towns bordered the farms, Brisbane and Bales. Antioch was to the North, on the other side of the forest. Each color represents the MO of a vandal and the black ones represent copy-cats."

For the rest of the meeting the chief outlined what he wanted each officer to look out for and again reminded them to take pictures of the scenes on arrival. He again stressed that they were not to talk about the cases in depth with any civilian and not to take personal pictures with the department cameras.

"This town thrives on gossip. So tell them what I just told you to say and then ask them what they know. Asking them will get them off from grilling you. I don't want to hear any information leaking from this office. These little copycat things are what I want the foot patrol to concentrate on today. The shops should be all a buzz about it. They'll clam-up around the tourists; so don't press them if there are tourists around. Look for paint on people's fingers; listen to people who have their own theory of what's going on. Nothing is insignificant. Take notes, names, and times and put it all in the computer at the end of your shifts. By the way, in case you all haven't heard...the Burns family has expanded with the addition of two boys; tiny, but healthy. Eric is referring to them as Tom and Jerry."

Everyone in the room groaned.

"What happened to all those other names he and his wife were thinking about?" June asked looking appalled at the choice.

"I think he was in shock and that's all he could think of. Names for most people are hard enough to remember when not even under pressure."

"Oh, boy. Wait until the shock wears off and both realize those names will stick no matter what they do now," Mark laughed.

"June, you're teaming with Gary on 3rd shift, midnight, so be here at eleven thirty. After this meeting go get some sleep; Howard you're with Rajpal on 1st shift, nine o'clock. Rajpal will be working three additional days besides his weekend shift. Harriet, do you have anything more to add on the personnel assignments?"

"Yes. Howard, on Rajpal's days off I'll be walking patrol with you. Nine is when your shift starts and we'll start our patrol at nine thirty."

The group broke up and while the others went to take care of their work, Mark and Alex remained to go over the evidence so far gathered with the chief and what it implied.

"You asking that L.A. Dick for assistance, chief?" Alex asked.

"No," he grumbled. "He invited himself to this meeting. At least he kept his comments to himself."

"He's staying with the Macs," Mark said. "Did you notice he and June left together?"

"Must be nice to know someone that can help you cut your department costs. His LA supervisor must be happy," Alex said.

"Probably pocketing the funds," Mark said.

"Mark, you're sounding rather...off key today," Alex said.

"Lack of sleep," he said.

"All right. Let's see what we have here," the chief said. The two detectives stood behind him, looking at his computer screen. "Someone is tampering with the evidence, and only at the sites the Macs have been to, which is why I've separated them and teamed them up with Gary and Rajpal. Rajpal was kind enough to take some time off from teaching."

"Lucky he got a substitute," Mark said.

"Lucky your wife has the time to substitute," Chief Harper said.

"Gary is not going to forgive you for this, chief. He'll have to have Gus sit in the back seat," Alex said.

"I want to make sure they're following procedures. Harriet said they're sloppy when no one is watching them, so we're going to treat them like rookies. Harriet and I have already told them that they're going to have to step up their professionalism or they won't make it past probation."

Alex and Mark looked at each other. "It must be a LA thing and we're getting all their slackers."

"Another thing to worry about is that we don't know where this copycat stuff is coming from, but someone knows about some of the evidence we collected from a dozen sites. I'm not sure if it's because some of the citizens are uploading their shots to their PCs and that's where the leak is, or someone is getting to the sites before we get there to take our crime photos. I would hate to think someone has access to our computers."

"Not our computers, Chief. Eric has our PCs locked up good with the most updated security software. No one can get out to the internet without Eric knowing where and when and no one can access any file unless your name is on the list," Mark said. "It has to be citizens downloading their pictures to an unsecure site. Not everyone protects their PCs from hackers."

"What about this morning's crime scene?" Harper asked.

"Don't really know until we compare the pictures Mary, Jack, and Tommy took and then the one's the Macs and I took. When I arrived I had the Macs put up crime scene tape and secure the site. They were at the site before me. I don't know how long they were there but I can't fault them on not securing the site since they don't carry crime scene tape in their back pockets."

"I have another piece to add...though it may be a long shot...Hailburn," Alex said.

The two men groaned. "Now what is he meddling in?"

"I was thinking of a motive for all this property damage and Hailburn came to mind. He's been buying up businesses and property that were being silently auctioned off by the bank and city, from what I

heard. I think he has an inside connection, Philip the Lip or Avery the Weasel. He's been leaving messages with Philip to call him ASAP and it may be on the last auction. At our last town meeting the land auditor said something about a buyer asking for another extension on his down payment. And Philip was caught dumping some brochures from Hailburn's church on the doorsteps of the Community Hall. I remember some of the garbage that's been sprayed on the property matching a phrase or two from that newsletter."

"There's always been talk about Hailburn. Now, Philip, he's been pushy lately about some measures but they're too outlandish to be considered. I still have that newspaper bit of trash in a file. We got a complaint from a citizen about it. I'll pull it out and review it," the chief said.

"Or maybe his buddy Avery the Weasel, is quietly pushing something while he makes all that noise to get everyone's attention elsewhere," Alex suggested. "I'm still not sure how either got elected."

"They ran for their seats. Getting back to Hailburn," Mark said. "We had a brush of his asinine business. Mai told us about our house being available before the executor of the estate faulted on the loan so that it would go short sale. We dealt directly with the executor. Signed sealed and legally ours, then a week later we got a call from someone saying he was one of the inheritors and the deal was off because they got a better deal from 'you-know-who'. I gave it over to my lawyer who gave a reality check to the guy and he decided he couldn't afford our law suit. No offense to the people of the cloth, but this guy isn't in the religion business for the spirit, he's in it for the money. The minister thing is merely a means to his end, like tax write offs for all his toys, trips and whatnots."

"When did that happen?" Alex asked.

"Before your time here. It was over in a day."

"I'll have Harriet do a check on who owns what on the land around here and see if the property vandalized is something Hailburn is looking to purchase," the Chief said. "And I'll talk to Mayor Annie about your theory of Philip the Lip and his pal, the Weasel. Annie and Ringo are coming over for dinner tonight. Sounds like there may be a connection to some wrong doings in the council, but we have to have prosecutable evidence here. Philip isn't as stupid as he talks. If he's giving insider information to another who is making a profit on it, both are going to be looking at a pissed off Judge Mead. The women's group she's president of was trying to buy a strip of land for a new orphanage and they weren't invited to the silent auction, so someone else got the land and so far haven't done anything with it. It may have nothing to do with our vandalism problem but I'm not one for ruling anything out. Philip's political beliefs would fit in with some of the hate messages being sprayed on the walls. But, it's not enough. We need to find a can of spray paint in his hand, while in the act of spraying, accompanied with pictures and witnesses."

They all nodded. Philip was a lawyer and would know how to get out of a circumstantial evidence case.

"I wonder what he wants all the land for. Does he plan on evicting everyone he doesn't like?"

"Why can't he pick on another town?" Harper said.

They all looked at each other remembering they still had another case unsolved where the same refrain was uttered.

"Don't forget that cult in Oregon that was selling small parcels of land to its members so they could register to vote out the town's city council and place their own members in."

"Oh, joy." Mark and Alex said simultaneously.

"How are our secret weapons doing?" Harper asked.

Mark grinned. "Our real new hires? They're handling their additional training with Mandy's CSI group quite well. By the next budget hearing, when we get the promised funds for two more full time police positions, they'll be ready. I was thinking of having them look around at night but I don't want them picked up by Gary or any of the vigilante neighbors. I would pal them up with Bobbie Lyn but she's a loner and doing better on her own."

"Besides, nothing happens on 2nd shift according to her and Stender," Alex said.

"Good to have one quiet shift," Harper said. "Carey and Mike are smart and clean, unlike the McAlberts. I can't believe the Macs were in any police force." He sighed. "I think LA wanted to get rid of them as much as they wanted to get rid of Guidio. I'm going to have another talk with their gang task force supervisor."

Chapter 3

By four thirty, Alex was tired and ready to look for a place to curl up for a nap. She had revisited several of the sites with evidence that had changed from when the victim took pictures and when the uniformed officer arrived to take photos and interview the victims. She also had stayed with Mrs. Greenwich long enough to replant her winter garden that was trampled by the police officer that had arrived to take pictures of her neighbor's vandalized yard. Mrs. Greenwich had a lot to say about what was going on in the entire town. She especially wanted to do some spleen work on the L.A. group, whom she didn't separate the McAlberts from.

Mrs. Greenwich worked in the shop near the Baby Apparel Store three times a week and obviously felt it her duty to report on the comings and goings of the type of people that were visiting, and took copious notes, which got her glares from customers of the Baby Apparel Store. Mrs. Greenwich became only more stalwart in her documenting when some of the out-of-towners had demanded to know what business was it of hers at what they were doing in the store. The fact that she would ask had the chief giving her a lecture on risking her life if one of the visitors decided she was too nosy. It only made her more determined to oust the business that was attracting bad elements into town. She was especially ticked off at Detective Guidio who ignored the offering of her copious notes. Mrs. Greenwich, instead, chose to hand deliver them to Harriet at the front desk, where they were scanned onto a disk that the chief passed onto the FBI. Mrs. Greenwich was a good informant for Sunrise PD and the FBI. Harper made sure Bobbie Lyn and Gary passed her house on their patrols more than once.

Alex followed Mark home. A very grumpy Irish Wolfhound, a small sack of her favorite toys and a bag of food were moved to her car. After a few minutes of Mark talking to the gray bearded dog, Alex and Angel headed to a quieter household. As she turned the car onto the cliff road that led up to the house Alex was renting with Elizabeth, Angel perked up and had lifted her muzzle from the doorframe, extending her body out the car window that Alex had rolled down. Alex suspected some of the excitement was due in part to Angel's love of the wide-open spaces to run around, and remembering the path that led down to the ocean where she could romp in the waves. At five it was dusk and the chill with the tang of salty sea spray in the air was refreshing. Alex could hear the waves below the road that followed the ocean for a while then moved closer inland and away from the edge as the cliffs rose. A lazy gull moved overhead, looking for a likely spot to settle for the night. Lights peeked through tree branches showing that Elizabeth had the lights on around the house. She was hoping it was for her arrival and not from trouble.

As the gate to the yard rolled back Angel's head was moving back and forth, sniffing, and checking out any new sights since her last visit. Alex could see the tall form of Elizabeth waiting on the porch for her.

"It's just a hello," she mumbled to herself as her heartbeat quickened at the sight of someone ...no ...it was more than that...her lover was waiting for her. Alex dipped her red face behind the car as she shut

the car door to recompose herself. The thought was bringing up different feelings than what she was used to. Lately, in their distance from each other, though not necessarily in physical proximity, she found herself facing some embarrassing questions about her ability to share more than a friendship or a sexual relationship with someone she felt so vulnerable to. It was scary to think she would do anything for another...no, not just anything...but the thought that it crossed her mind about another person, was like walking in the dark with no neon, flashlight, or previous experience to give her some idea of where the cliff dropped off. She had no control here and the scary part was she walked the unseen path anyway.

"Hey, Angel," Elizabeth greeted the friendly nose that pushed into her palm. Elizabeth opened her hand and fed Angel her cookie.

Elizabeth watched with interest as Alex struggled with something that brought a flush to her face. She had feared Alex would lose interest in her once there was no more need to rescue her. A few weeks earlier, when both were vulnerable, Alex had opened up and told her about her abuse as a child but she spoke from a distance, and though for a week they talked, the closeness, as close as Alex let her in, came to a halt because of her work. She was loathed to intrude for fear of driving Alex further into her shell, but she also needed the space for her own adjusting to loving someone again. So, they were both bidding their time, letting a comfortable distance between them settle. But for how long? She found it rather amazing that she was willing to open up her own heart again, though there was a lot of hard work she was putting in with a therapist.

Two weeks of therapy didn't do much with the traumatic experience of losing people you loved to violence but it did make her aware of her habit to withdraw. Being the daughter of a missionary in Africa, she had seen many people meet with death in all forms, including vanishing one night and never finding a body or never hearing their name spoken again, as if merely mentioning a name would cause the speaker to meet with the same fate. Which in reality, did happen.

"Mark's mother and father are visiting. They found two stray dogs along the road and adopted them to protect their RV. You should see their motor home. Anyway, the new dogs aren't mixing too well with Angel and anyway, Mark said Angel loves cats so we shouldn't have a problem." Alex's chatter was from her nervousness at suddenly realizing that she should have told Elizabeth about bringing Angel home. "I'm sorry for not calling, Lizbeth."

Elizabeth nodded and stroked the dog's head as the big dog sat leaning against her as if best friends. "Linda had called. She wanted to tell me Mark packed one can of food that makes her sick. Did you bring her toys?"

"Yes." Alex felt relieved but felt uncomfortable that she again forgot something that seemed to be an important part of a relationship... calling home before bringing guests.

The two women headed back into the house with Angel hesitating a moment, then following them.

"Boy, whatever you're cooking, sure smells good." Alex sniffed appreciatively at the cooking odors that permeated the foyer.

Elizabeth smiled back at her and took the bag of toys and food from Alex's hands, letting the contact of their hands linger. "Go wash up. Has Angel eaten yet?" she asked as the dog pushed at the bag with her nose that held the dog food.

"No. Mark didn't want her to toss anything up on her drive here. A kind thought that I appreciate." Alex peered around her bedroom door jam as Elizabeth and dog started up the hallway toward the kitchen. She watched the tall woman move with a slight limp, and then added an exaggerated sway of her hips.

"Nice!" Alex commented.

Bright eyes looked back at her, giving her a wink.

Alex's daily practice of showering after coming home was her way of getting rid of the business for the day. She found she was more relaxed afterwards. It actually worked better than the antacids that she had been previously popping. As the water cascaded down her back she hummed a tune she had heard somewhere. Slowly she rinsed the soap from her short hair thinking of what she would like to do that evening and it depended on her not getting any calls.

Alex pulled out a pair of sweats from her dresser, dropping them on the bed. For a few moments she regarded them then put them back in the dresser and pulled out a long T-shirt she normally wore for sleeping in.

This is positive thinking. I will get no calls this evening, she chanted to herself, repeating it as an affirmation.

She slipped her feet into warm slippers, of which a matching pair was on Elizabeth's feet. It was to counter the cold tiles and wooden floors they both liked to leave uncovered in some of the rooms. It was also an excuse to buy something for Elizabeth when they caught her eye in a shop near Mollee's Coffee Shop.

She padded into the kitchen to sit on one of the tall chairs at the service bar where she and Elizabeth ate. In the corner of the kitchen where normally a bench and table would fit was Angel, sprawled out with her chew rag under her chin and big brown eyes watching Elizabeth as she leaned against the counter reading a printout. She looked up when Alex entered the room.

"You look nice and comfy." Elizabeth smiled as Alex climbed up on the stool and pulled her long T-shirt under her butt before sitting down. Elizabeth's eyes took in the nipples that were protruding from the white T-shirt.

"I'm thinking positive. Either the off shifts have no big problems or Mark doesn't need my help. Doesn't Angel look bigger than a few weeks ago?" Alex waited while Elizabeth settled at her place before starting in on her plate that was covered with spaghetti, vegiballs, vegisausage and some spicy turkeyballs. Elizabeth was sipping wine, which Alex decided she would also have. Long arms reached into the cupboard that held their few dishes and pulled out a drinking glass for Alex.

"I was just reading up on her breed. Irish Wolfhounds have deep chests unlike their cousins the Scottish Deerhounds. I was getting the two mixed up. By these accounts, Angel is two years old." Elizabeth pulled the papers she had been reading closer to her plate and found a page she was interested in. "It says

here the bitches get approximately 28-inches and about 88-pounds. Looks like she's almost there, though I'm not about to try to lift her to check out her weight."

Angel lifted her head off her chew rag as if knowing they were talking about her.

"Where did you get that?" Alex asked as she wrapped spaghetti around her fork, and then stabbed a piece of vegetarian burger to keep the slippery strings from dripping on her chin.

"Off the Internet while you were showering. I thought since she's going to be a guest for a while, I should know something about her. It says she should be fed three times a day, but not a lot of food. They also need plenty of exercise." At this part she looked up at Alex.

Elizabeth was looking forward to when she could start running again. Since she had risen early that morning she decided to move her appointment at the clinic up a few days and see if what she was feeling about her knee was what Gary found on examining it. He had agreed her knee was much better and suggested more strenuous exercises like walks in the soft sand along the beach that was so temptingly near. But even she knew running with Angel would be pushing the healing process back. Though, Angel probably wouldn't mind her walking while she raced up and down the beach, examining every dangerous crab, trash or driftwood that may endanger her walker.

"Mark runs her every morning and sometimes in the evenings. I'll take her out tomorrow morning. I need to get back into regular runs anyway. This 'when I get a chance' thing isn't doing my discipline any good."

The two women finished their dinners and while Alex washed the dishes, Elizabeth took Angel out to the back deck to introduce her to Mama Cat and maybe her babies. She didn't want the introduction to go unsupervised. Mama Cat didn't like Angel and had a lot to say about her presence in her area. Angel looked miffed since she was all for getting to know Mama Cat and her little family.

"Come-on, Angel. She's been living in the wild and thinks everyone is after her babies." Elizabeth coaxed the big dog back into the study. Locking the door and pulling the drapes back in place Elizabeth thought about Alex and her T-shirt.

Returning to the kitchen she watched Alex put the last dish away. Moving so she was standing behind her she put her hands on Alex's shoulders. Elizabeth could feel the warmth of the smaller woman through the white cotton fabric. Alex turned around and leaned into her.

Elizabeth sighed at the feel of Alex's body snuggled into hers. Her lips gently took possession of Alex's, and then as their passion increased the pressure became stronger with need.

After what seemed like a long time, Alex pushed Elizabeth back for air. "We need to find a place where we can get horizontal or else..."

Chapter 4

The sound of a phone ringing from far away roused a tired but satiated Elizabeth. She always heard the low ring of Alex's phone and would strain to hear the soft voice of Alex responding. She dreaded the calls that had her leaving at all hours of the evening and mornings. The foreboding fear came from her past experiences and with Alex's type of job. But, she was working on that. Now that she had decided to settle down, and no longer had to worry about being in someone's gun sights she started going to therapy to sort her fears out. The changes the sessions were supporting in the last two weeks were subtle in some things, not so subtle in others, while there were some issues she was not willing to let go of just yet. She also started to attend group sessions with other survivors and though she still found it difficult to discuss her own experiences, she was able to feel more of a participant than she had allowed herself in the past.

Alex's warm body that was wound around hers only burrowed deeper into hers as the ringing continued.

"You need to get up and answer it, detective," Elizabeth teased, kissing the top of the tangled hair.

"Not tonight! Tell Mark I'm gone," a muffled voice grumbled as mumbling lips pressed against Elizabeth's neck.

Elizabeth tried not to squirm at the tickling sensation it caused, giving her goose bumps everywhere. "It's not night anymore." She kissed the tip of the ear that her nose had nuzzled free from hair cover. Lips were turned in her direction and were offered to her, smelling of their lovemaking. They kissed lightly as the phone continued to ring.

Alex growled and reluctantly separated from her. Flipping the blankets back she climbed out of the bed and raced naked out of the room, down the hall to her own room. Elizabeth got out of bed and used the toilet. She was now wide-awake. She turned the shower on and decided she might as well get started on the new day. She felt renewed. They actually had time to talk before both fell into contented sleep. Her counselor had suggested that Alex start attending sessions with her and she got Alex to agree last night.

Sexually stimulated that woman would probably agree to a lot of things, Elizabeth thought with a smile.

As she towel dried her hair she could hear Alex's voice occasionally. She glanced at her clock that was near the phone. It was after five in the morning. That was good. A whole night without a call. Elizabeth suddenly remembered Angel.

This was the first time Angel spent the night so she was not sure what her nocturnal habits were.

"Angel?" she called down the hall. She waited. She thought she heard a whine. Returning to the bathroom she tossed the towel over the shower rod and pulling her warm robe tighter around her she walked down the hall to where she thought she heard the dog. Turning on the light in the study she found Angel lying near the door out to the deck. The curtain and rod that should be over the glass window panels

on the door, had been pulled down and was lying about her. Angel had made a bed out of it. Nose prints were all over the glass door panels.

"Are you worrying Mama Cat?"

Elizabeth looked out the window. In the predawn darkness, with the light from the study spilling out on a third of the deck, tiny balls of fir could be seen scurrying across the deck and playing in what was left of the seasonal plants that surrounded the deck in pots. Mama Cat was nowhere to be seen. The kittens looked about ready to be weaned so maybe Mama thought it was okay to leave them to hunt for her meal. When Elizabeth had gone to the market the previous day, she had picked up some cat and kitten food, determined to domesticate the family or at least let them know that they were welcomed.

Elizabeth mixed dry and wet food for Angel, smiling at the clicking of her nails on the tile floor as she danced for her meal. Once Angel was nose deep in her food Elizabeth prepared two dishes of food for the kittens and Mama. The conversation on the phone had ceased. The flushing of a toilet came from Alex's room. Back in the study Elizabeth set out the dish for water and food for Mama and babies and closed the door, resetting the alarm. She watched the curious kittens approach the dishes in a rush as the smell of something edible reached their noses.

A noise behind her had her turning. "Good morning." She smiled at the wild white head of hair that popped through a sweatshirt as arms and hands pulled cloths into order. Alex was dressed in sweats and running shoes, her face freshly scrubbed.

"Good morning. I'm going to take Angel for a run. We'll be back in an hour, or if I'm in worse shape than I think, in twenty minutes. Mark said he's on his way. Send him down to the beach. I need a warm up before he gets here." Alex grabbed a quick kiss before leaving. They shared their combined smells of soap and toothpaste.

Elizabeth watched the two leave then moved to the security monitors that covered inside and outside of the house. It was still too dark for the security system's visual cameras to come on, but the red dots moving toward the path that led down to the beach were most probably Alex and Angel. She figured the dot that was moving back and forth was Angel. Alex was not a morning person and took a little longer to show that much energy.

Elizabeth started the coffee then returned to the study to write. She was pleased she didn't have a guilty conscious about not putting any time into writing the previous evening. She was working on a self-imposed deadline; something she needed to do if she wanted to keep to one story and not have others going at the same time.

The alarm broke her concentration thirty minutes later. Annoyed, she rose to see whom it was, not believing it could be a stubborn Alex who would run past her thirty minutes even if it killed her. The light near the gate shined on Mark' truck waiting at the gate. She pressed the gate release and went out to greet Mark.

"Good morning Elizabeth!" He slid out of his truck dressed in running gear, with a pair of shoes that were like neon signs.

"Good morning, Mark. They went that-a-way." She pointed toward the path that led to the beach.

"Angel is going to have sand embedded where it's going to take days to remove."

He headed down the path.

When their run was finished, they showered and changed into work clothes and left behind a happy dog.

"Well, Angel, it's quiet time. No. You will have to babysit from this side of the door. If Mama comes back and you're there, no telling how upset she'd be." Elizabeth watched the shaggy tail move slowly as luminescent brown eyes stared into her face as she spoke.

Elizabeth pulled out her comfortable chair and resumed her writing. Angel found her spot near the door to the deck and with a loud sigh slid down with her long body spread out. Pressing her nose against the window brown eyes intently watched the kittens that had curled up in a flowerpot near the door and slept.

Hours later, Elizabeth realized she was squinting at the laptop screen, and for a moment wondered if the CRT was going out. Looking around her she took in the darkened room. Leaning over she switched on the lamp over her desk and moved her cursor to the bottom of the screen to check the time.

Lunch time.

Stretching, she glanced back at the lifted alert face of Angel. She was lying sprawled out near the door with her tail thumping a slow arrhythmic beat. Elizabeth thought maybe she was hungry. Saving her work and starting the processes of shutting the laptop down, she went into the kitchen to prepare something for Angel, who reluctantly left her post near the door. Returning she closed the laptop, pulled out the working hard drive, inserted the dummy drive and tucking her working drive under her arm, she went to the glass-paneled door and peered out on the deck. She easily spotted the two orange kittens that were playing. They were chasing each other in mock attacks and the leaves if one dared to move. Flowerpots were used for defense or for a better angle in an attack. The black one and Mama were missing. Their food dish still had some food in and the water dish was still upright and full, which she found amazing considering the antics of the two kittens she did see.

She moved into the dining room to begin her yoga stretches with the idea of later going for a walk with Angel, if she wanted to leave her small charges for another time out. Feeling safer with Angel's presence she left the sliding door open a crack so she could smell the cold sharp air that was heavy with the smell of rain, as she stretched. Between each stretch she noted the dramatically darkened clouds moving in from the ocean, which had covered all the available blue-sky space. When finished she headed for her bedroom for a nap.

A rumble shook a drowsy Elizabeth from her sleep. Though disorientated she effortlessly picked up the scent of rain in the chilly air and then became aware of the sound of the rain as it beat against the windows. Her feet dangled over the edge of the bed, searching for her warm slippers as a wide yawn

cracked her jaw. Padding through the short hall that moved past one of the kitchen doors and opened into the dining room she found the sliding door she had left open a crack was pushed open wider. There were many wet paw prints that trailed through the dining room and into the front room. She followed them into the study. Leaning against the door to the outside patio deck, was a wet and smelly dog lying with three damp looking kittens that were climbing all over her. A huge tongue tried valiantly to lick the wet fur balls dry with a few licks landing on her paws. One of the orange kittens rolled off after a swipe from the black sibling knocked it off balance. As the kitten hit the floor it bounced up and on four stiff legs. It bounded toward the big head that sent it to the floor with a lick of a tongue bigger than it was. One of the littermates ran in sideways on stiff legs and took a playful swipe at its companion, knocking both down and between the wet paws of their rescuer.

"I'll be a wet..." Elizabeth returned to the dining room to close the sliding glass door. She could hear the heater that had automatically come on when the temperature in the house dropped, working to keep the temperature around the house uniform. In her bathroom she pulled out two towels and returned to the study. After drying Angel as best she could, an appraising eye of the kittens told her they were too wild to let her near them to give them a similar drying off. For a moment Elizabeth looked out through the door's windowed panel to the deck and worried about Mama Cat. Glancing at her watch she noted it was about three.

"Want a cookie for being a good baby sitter?" Cookie seemed to be a recognized word for Angel, and she stood up with tiny wet balls scattering in different directions under furniture.

"Lucky I bought cat litter and litter box when I picked up the food, huh Angel?"

Angel ate her cookie in one gulp and was back in the study while Elizabeth tried to think of where to put the litter box. She finally put it in the guest restroom across from Alex's room, until she and Alex could decide if that was workable for her. After all, Alex would be smelling the contents before her. While the coffee dripped she checked her voice mail and found two messages. One was a long silent void then a hang-up, sent at the same time as always, eight a.m., and the other was from Alex sent at eleven a.m., the same time every day. Alex had called to remind her about the town meeting at six, telling her Genie and Claire would need a lot of visible support. Because of the hang-up calls that were too early in the morning for her schedule, she had turned her ringer off on her phone. She switched it back on and returned to the kitchen, taking the portable phone with her.

While she cleaned up Angel's tracks she again went over in her mind why she should talk to Alex about the hang-up calls, and then again went over how Alex was too busy with more serious problems. Not even her therapist knew of the calls, but...hang up calls were not a therapist issue. This was something she could handle herself, like change her phone number or just not answer the phone and let the machine pick it up. Again, the mental argument was settled by just letting the machine handle it.

She picked up the phone to call the station to let Alex know she was fine, a daily habit she found that gave them both relief, and there was no dial tone. She went into Alex's room and found hers also dead.

It makes perfect sense, if one is dead the other will be, she reasoned trying to lessen the feeling of panic. The rumble of thunder outside gave her a plausible reason for the phone failure.

She retrieved the cell phone from her purse, which Alex had insisted she keep even after the original reason for it was no longer present. It did make them both feel better about her being isolated. Right now, she was grateful she had given into Alex's concern.

"Hi, Harriet....yes, this is Elizabeth. Is Alex around?...Well, could you leave her a message?... Yes, the reception is bad. I'm using my cell phone. The land phones are out and I didn't want her to worry. She can reach me by cell phone; I'll be carrying it around with me. Yes, it's raining pretty hard here....Oh! She told you about the kittens. Well, by the tracks on the floor, Angel brought them in from the rain...No, I haven't seen Mama since last night. Yes... Really?...You're right. Well, when the phone lines come back up, I'll have to get on the Internet and check that out....Okay. Thanks, Harriet...Good afternoon to you too."

Elizabeth slid the cell phone into her pocket, fixed her coffee adding a little half-and-half, and then walked into the study where Angel and the kittens were curled up in a corner. "Well Angel, looks like just the phones up here are out. We still have heat and lights."

Isolated. Cut off.

Shaking her head at her fear, she went through each room and closet, to reassure herself that no one but she, Angel, and the kittens were in the house. She then checked the monitors in the front room and checked the alarm system as Alex had showed her. Knowing how to use them in both televising mode and infrared eased a lot of her anxieties of being isolated. Her preference was to be isolated as opposed to being crowded in with neighbors that knew everything she did that day, but her memories were still too fresh of what real isolation was like. She counted the nine red dots that indicated the nine geese. Some were huddled where she fancied was under their shelter near the feeder and two were outside in the rain. She frowned. They were not moving around. There was always at least one moving around. Was that her imagination?

Elizabeth's breathing quickened. Did it bear looking into? Alex would look into it and so would Angie, her character in *Murder in the Town Square*. She thought about the vandals. So far they hadn't killed anything or anyone. But Genie and Claire had told her the attacks were steadily getting more serious. Elizabeth slipped her shoes on and a coat, grabbing her long handled umbrella as she went. Near the door were the light switches to the exterior. She flipped them all on. The yard was dark gray both from the clouds overhead and the rainfall. She was hoping the lights would scare away whoever was around, if there was anyone. One thing she had learned was to never rely on gadgets. The use of caution and wit was more likely to keep a person alive longer. She returned to the monitors but could only see the dots in the shed and near the doorway. She was wishing it were not so dark outside that the infrared was all that was working. At times like this, she would rather have the visual cameras working.

She left the front door open a crack, just in case she needed to run back, or if she had to call Angel, who she did not want to disturb as her job as a mama right now was more important. She popped

open the umbrella and splashed her way across the lighted part of the yard, through one dark area, then into the well lit shed area. She glanced toward the pond but could see nothing but gray shadows. If she didn't already know what structures were there she would have taken pause for alarm. However, around the geese pond were statues of geese and people that marked the drains and refill pipe for the pond, which would need maintenance soon.

Mentally she put that on her things to do list, to call *The Animal Farm* to send someone up. She returned her attention to the shed, where she could see two geese lying on their sides near the doorway.

Chapter 5

"Alex...Detective Adison, I'm telling you, I don't know how that got there!" Eric's face was red with indignation that someone had entered his garage and left evidence of empty spray cans the taggers were using.

Detective Adison was acting on a tip that said evidence of who was tagging the houses would be found in Eric Kendel's garage. Eric was eccentric, too clean, and talked a lot, and was not the type to sneak out at all hours to tag his neighbor's houses. However, they had to check out all tips.

In his trashcan was a collection of spray cans underneath a few days worth of trash. Alex used her flashlight to push some of the trash aside to look at the colors without touching the cans. Bright pink was one of the distinctive colors of one of the vandals. The tip came from a woman disguising her voice, Thelma who recorded the call, said. She was one of the volunteers that took the switch board when Harriet was busy elsewhere. Alex nodded as Eric stuttered his anger and disbelief that someone was setting him up. She was more intent on studying the garage and how it was laid out.

"Is this door always locked?"

"What?" Eric stopped in mid sentence. "No. There's only one door. It's an old garage. I can only fit my BMW convertible in here."

"And that is your trash can?"

"Yes, but I always use a liner for my trash and I never store my trash can in the garage. They took the liner out and dumped my trash over their cans. That's really low, Alex. Now I have to clean the can!"

Only the evidence trashcan was in the empty garage. Everyone knew Eric used his garage only for his shiny bright red BMW convertible. He didn't want trash odors to cling to his leather upholstery, and Alex thought she wouldn't either, if she had a nice flashy car.

Alex walked back to her car and got out the fingerprint kit. Finishing the inside of the garage armed with kit and camera she took pictures of the outside of the garage, which showed a small barefoot heel at the edge of the drive way in the soft earth. She squatted down and studied it. The rain started to fall and the footprint's existence was quickly erased. Too late for a casting, but it was too shallow anyway so the photo would have to do. Alex hurried through the rest of her work. She had two more places to visit before she could return to the station.

Okay. Next stop the Anderson's.

They had seen some kids out late the other night that they didn't recognize and after thinking about it, wanted to report it. At least the Anderson's had their shop next door to Mollee's and she could grab some coffee. Her hands were cold. As she rolled up to the Andersons, she could read a CLOSED sign on the outside of the door. No lights inside.

The weather isn't great for the tourist business. Well, I'll call them from the office or talk to them tonight after the meeting. All right, next and last stop. The thought of getting home early had her foregoing stopping in the coffee shop for coffee and just moving to the Scotts'.

As she parked in front of her last call, the station hailed her. The code was for her to call in over a landline, a public phone or something of that nature. Alex pulled out her cell phone. "Harriet, this is Alex. What's up?"

"Elizabeth called. She said for you not to worry but the phone lines at your place were down. I checked with the phone company and they said they don't have any lines down over that way. The Minister Hailburn's vacation home is the only place up past the Doc's and I tested to his voice machine fine. I tried your phone but I'm getting a busy signal too. I think you should be getting over there to maybe check it out," Harriet advised. "It may be nothing at all. but no sense in taking chances with her being so far out there and all, especially in this weather. She said she would be carrying her cell phone, but in this weather, you know she shouldn't be using it. I'll give Mark a call too, just in case you may need backup."

Alex was already turning the car around and felt the tires sliding a little as she accelerated and moved over to the coast road. She was halfway up the road when Alex could hear two clicks a pause and then one click on her police radio. It was a code that Mark and her used when they did not want anyone who could be monitoring their radio frequency to know what they were doing, and that was a third of Sunrise that liked to monitor the police frequencies, which would escalate to another third that the news was shared with and the other third would learn it in the coffee shops, stores or even the town hall. There were few secrets in Sunrise. So far, their public had not been able to break this month's code.

Alex placed Mark in the warehouse district, investigating a complaint about noises in the night. If he was still there then that meant he would be taking the road that fed into the coast road south of their cliff house. The two clicks told her he was on his way.

Alex's heart was beating fast as the tires slipped and spun over the few places on the road where sand was washed onto the road surface. She kept reassuring herself that with Angel around, Elizabeth would be all right. There were also the cameras and she had made sure Elizabeth knew how to manipulate the cameras to get clear pictures of whatever was around the property. The only house that had been vandalized that had any type of security system was the House, the women's shelter. This didn't make Alex comfortable. Was there a lone wolf out there, a malcontent from a southern group that met their demise about a month back outside of Sunrise?

You're jumping to conclusions, Detective.

She was driving too recklessly over the rain-slicked road to try to dial Elizabeth on her cell. Lightening criss-crossed the sky, which was another good reason why she shouldn't be on a cell phone.

Alex waited impatiently for the gate to swing open for her to enter. The lights were on everywhere. She took that time to scan the area and look for anything out of place. She didn't want to scare Elizabeth by parking on the side of the road. If she were looking at the monitors she would wonder who was parking outside. The rain was coming down hard making visibility poor, though the lights were on.

She parked at an angle where she could see the outline of the geese shelter and the front door to the house. There was a sliver of light coming from the front door that was left open, but there was no Elizabeth or Angel. She looked toward the pond, which was not visible through the rain. The geese should be huddled under their shelter. She looked back at the front door. If she looked at the monitors she could get an idea of where Elizabeth was. Maybe she was feeding the geese, though highly unlikely since they were on an automated feeder. Something moving at the foot of the front door caught her attention. She stared hard through the rain that was sleeting off the car window.

Kittens!

Alex got out of the car continuing to look around her while resisting the strong urge to pull her gun out of her holster. Looking back at the kittens she slowly approached the front door, turning regularly to look around her. When the kittens realized she was heading for where they were, they scurried back into the depths of house. She moved into the foyer, looking around and on the floor for any footprints. She found only wet drip marks from her entrance. She moved into the front room where the monitors were, while she kept an ear out for any noise that didn't sound like a kitten would make, though she wasn't sure at just what sounds a kitten made aside from a mew.

Because it was dark outside the infrared was on rather than the visual cameras. She could see a red dot from the south approaching the geese shed. In the shed were a lot of dots with only two moving. She checked the other monitors out and stopped at the one that was pointed toward the North. The two dots that were approaching split up and moved to approach the house from the west and east. She pulled out her radio from her belt and tapped a SOS on the on/off button. She got one click back.

She was hoping that was Mark near the shed because that would be the right direction he would be coming from. She moved through the house checking each room and their closets. She found Elizabeth had moved the new bag of dog food Mark had brought over on top of the trapdoor down into the cavern below them. As she moved into the study she could hear the scampering and nails catching on fabric from the kittens. She turned on the study light to make sure that's what it was. One set of eyes peered at her from the top of her reading chair, and then disappeared with a thump behind it. She laughed to herself then grimly moved on to her own room.

Once the house was secured she returned to the screens. One dot had moved to the northeast side of the house and the other was on the northwest. She could see three dots moving in the shed, and she was hoping those were friends.

As Elizabeth crept through the rain toward the geese shed she folded the umbrella and kept it pointed in front of her in a defensive position. It was to defend herself against a mad goose just in case they were just sleeping. She remembered that if the geese were dead they would not register on the infrared, so maybe they may wake up feeling really mad. Geese laid everywhere around the feeder. A soft whine behind her had her turning quickly. Angel had followed her and was looking about her, sniffing the air. Gingerly she nuzzled one of the limp feathered forms at her feet.

"Be careful, Angel. If that goose wakes up, you are going to be facing a very pissed off bird." The long thin gray head lifted and made a small noise then stepped gingerly over a few more bodies to stand next to Elizabeth. "I hope you aren't thinking that I'm going to be your bodyguard if they should come awake all of a sudden, 'cause I'll be peeling outta here fast. It's every dog for herself," she told Angel. She looked around trying to see if there was anything that looked out of place, besides the flock being out cold. She was inspecting the third food dispenser outlet when Angel's tail started to wag as if a friend was nearby. Angel didn't run out of the shed or leave her place near Elizabeth but her eyes were fixed on the backside of the shed and moved as if whoever was back there were moving. It still startled her when Mark's face appeared at the shed door.

"Good afternoon," Mark whispered. He took the scene of geese laying all around in a glance. He motioned for Elizabeth to step out, which both dog and woman did. As he was stepping in the shed to look around his radio at his side made a clicking noise. He spun around grabbing Elizabeth by the elbow.

"Go to the house," he told her. "Angel protect and scout" he ordered his dog.

Elizabeth could have sworn the dog gave her master a big grin before she bounded off toward the house. In an awkward fashion, Elizabeth jogged alongside of Mark.

Mark checked the door, then the foyer, before letting Elizabeth follow him in. Alex was in the front room watching the monitors looking grim. Elizabeth studied the screens. Two dots on separate monitors steadily moved towards the house.

"I'll take the one near the cliff's edge. You get the other. Angel, protect Elizabeth." Mark took off through the sliding door in the dining room and Alex slipped out the front door, after giving Elizabeth's arm a squeeze.

Mark let the presence of the rain that was now coming down in a light sprinkle, the mud underfoot, and the discomfort of not being dressed for wet outdoor reconnaissance work, recede to the back of his mind. Instead he listened to the sounds around him, filtering out each sound as it was identified, and moving on to the next. He moved closer to the end of the low four-foot fence that ran along the cliff side outlining the garden and deck on the north side. There was a sucking sound from around the corner of the seven-foot fence. Then another. He moved a little further to his right slipping his gun into its holster and securing it. Spotting the top of the fence he was intending on leaping to he waited until he heard the sucking sound again to be sure he had his position right, then leaped to the top of the fence and in a smooth motion dropped alongside of a figure that was below him. He had the 'tagger' around one wrist bringing him to his knees while pulling out of his handcuffs.

The person tried to struggle but Mark had a painful grip around the thumb making the captive drop the spray can and to his knees while he pulled the other wrist into the cuffs. He pulled off the kneeling person's wet mask.

Alex's heart was beating too loud to hear what was going on around her, so she breathed a few times to quiet it and to focus on her job. Light rain drops were falling on the rock and sand surface making different sounds than the rain on the leaves of the sweet honeysuckle vine that covered the fence wall. She heard what she could identify as a ball bearing in a spray can being shaken. The thought of someone defacing the wall with a can of spray paint made her furious, and someone doing it in the rain made it a vindictive attack. She stepped out from around the house and found a pair of blue eyes peering out at her through a very wet knitted cap with a can held in mid arc. The person with the can flicked her wrist, aiming the can at her but Alex was already in action rushing at the figure. The person squirmed out of her grip and kned her in the stomach knocking the breath out of her. Alex held on and both rolled around in the mud and brush as she fought both the impulse to let go of her prisoner to concentrate on getting her breath back and to throttle this person who knew all the counter grips to hers and was successfully getting loose.

Another blow to the side of her head, and then another loosened her grip on a wet slippery wrist, then came a blow to her exposed solar plexus, disabling her effectively. As the dark dressed figure ran away Alex watched not completely helpless, noting that the movement was familiar. There were not that many owners of blue eyes, five/seven, with an athlete's build in Sunrise. As the rain beat down on her face she was aware of a tall wet shaggy figure touching her face. Angel nuzzled her then took up a position of defense next to her. The pain of feeling returning, made her whimper. She was angry that her assignment got away and her attacker had having successfully defaced a portion of their fence. It was the portion of the wall that was covered with a honeysuckle vine that delighted the nose during blooming season.

Soft hands touched her face. It wasn't Angel. "Hey," she got out hoarsely. She struggled to get up, but sank down when her stomach gave a heave. She decided then and there to work out more seriously with Mark. She felt arms wrap around her shoulders and assist her up then nearly carry her back to the house. By the time they were to the front yard she was able to walk on her own. Near to Alex's police vehicle under the carport, was a wet Howard McAlberts, hog-tied to the carport support pole. It confirmed Alex's suspicion on who got away.

"Son of a prick," she angrily growled and would have gone over to say more if Elizabeth's body was not redirecting her into the house and out of the rain. Mark was standing near his prisoner.

"His partner got away. Had her head and face covered, but there were blue eyes showing out of the eye slits. I'm sure it's June. Damn woman had all the moves," Alex told Mark softly as he nodded. He pulled out his radio. "Let's see what happens when we make the big announcement where she and everyone else hears it."

"Head hog, come in."

They waited a few minutes. "This is the Chief, go ahead Mark."

"We interrupted a pair of taggers. Got one...Howard McAlberts. The other got away. Over."

"Bring him in. I'll get in touch with the judge. Out." Was there a hint of smugness to their chief's voice?

"Okay, Chief. We'll be there in a bit. Out."

Mark looked over at his partner. "You look like you've been mud wrestling. Was it fun?"

Mud, sand and blood were on her face, and the back of her cloths looked like she had been rolling in the mud.

"Maybe I'll take it up at the next fair."

"A sell out for sure. We'll have to turn away people who want to take you on," he teased.

"I don't think so," an amused contralto voice objected. "I've seen and heard too many comments from tourists to let that happen."

"Damn. There goes our chance at getting money for the new office furniture," Mark told Elizabeth with a big smile.

Alex looked at Elizabeth and winked. Then they all looked at the tied man under the carport.

"Well, let me change into dry cloths that I keep in the car," Mark said.

Mark disappeared up the road to his own vehicle, which he reparked across the gate entrance, and came back into the house with a duffel bag. Alex was already changing to dry cloths, and Elizabeth stayed with Angel and kept a distrustful eye on their bound prisoner.

"Angel, you are the jailer," Mark told his four-legged buddy.

Angel whined and looked back into the house. Mark pulled out his pistol.

"No. No. It's okay. It's the kittens, Mark. She's adopted them," Elizabeth told him hurriedly.

He groaned. "Okay, Mama. Go take a look at your kids, then return here for duty." The dog instantly trotted into the house, leaving big wet paw prints over the wooden and tiled floors.

Mark used the guest bathroom to change.

While Alex stood in front of the mirror she made a visual check of the bruises that were beginning to show on her chest and stomach and above her eye. June hit hard and Alex was embarrassed to admit she didn't think Jean had it in her. It firmed up her resolve that it wouldn't happen again. Her one plus point was the blood was not hers; however, she was going to have a shiner.

The three met in the kitchen where Elizabeth had a pot of coffee waiting for them.

"I'll be right back. I need to get the can I left...oh."

Elizabeth pointed to the two plastic bags that had a spray can in each.

As they sipped coffee Alex explained her run in with June and how she was furious that she let her get the upper hand.

Two voices sounded, "Don't worry about it. Do better next time."

"Sure," she responded disheartened. "What were you doing in the geese shed?" Alex asked, changing the subject and turning to face Elizabeth.

"The geese weren't moving around like they normally do. I went out to see what was wrong."

"Someone must have put a sedative in the food or water, and busied out our phone connections to the house. Painting walls in the rain doesn't seem right. The stuff is all runny and looks terrible, to say nothing of the difficulty to read the message. Maybe they intended on doing more than painting walls in the rain."

"Intimidate and get you angry. But considering whom we caught, maybe they wanted to throw us off with the evidence. And maybe they know that there is an automated call out to the police station when three places on our security grid are opened without shutting off the alarm. To get to the water or feed you have to get into the yard and the geese would have given some sort of alarm. The fresh water source for the house and geese are the same. The feed is from *The Animal Farm*. Doc has it delivered and poured into the feeders every Monday, which means we need to question who delivered it and to see how much was still in the feeders when it was delivered. If they didn't doctor it up at the pet shop, it had to have been here and they would have set off the alarms or got caught on tape. We'll have to review the tapes since the last delivery. We keep them for a week," Alex said.

"I'm just disturbed with the timing. It's raining and no self-respecting tagger would be out painting anything. Tonight is the town meeting and maybe that's the whole thing. Here we've been working on this vandalism problem for about two weeks now and we haven't caught anyone. Maybe it was planned to make the chief and mayor look bad by messing up a police officer's house when one of the residents is home. I'm inclined to add that scum bag, Guido to the duo who may have been doing some of their own mischief. Hell, this is getting complicated. Don't you just love these convoluted puzzles of human depravation," Mark said.

"If we can find a tie to Guido, Philip the Lip and Weasel, then we can just bag them all in a stinking canvas bag and dump it on that damn Hailburn's stoop. I hate to say it, but my prejudice for all of them just wants to tie them all up together and dump them in some toxic waste heap," Alex said.

"Could be possible with the Lip and Weasel. They've been harping on getting rid of the chief due to the last few months of increased crime."

"We're a growing community that needs more police officers."

A bark from Angel had the three rushing to the front door. Gray figures were stumbling over themselves around the shed, with some stretching out their wings in an agitated fashion.

"We need to dump the feed before they go back for more," Alex told them.

Everyone looked at Alex including Angel.

She went back into her room for a raincoat then splashed her way out to the shed, moving carefully around the bodies that were still limply laid out. She cared for them regularly so they recognized her but she was not sure what their mood was going to be upon waking. She would be grumpy if she passed out in the rain. Her hand pulled the lever to close the feeder, and then dumped what may be contaminated feed in the feeder tray into the bottom tray that caught anything that dropped. She was going to take a sample of the feed when she caught a glimpse of a dark ball of fur near the foot of the tray. Leaning down she scooped up what she suspected was a mama kitty, relieved that the limp form was warm in her hands. She tucked her under her coat and held her in the crook of her arm as she prepared to lean back down to take a sample of the feed. A honk from the side of her had her looking at one set of very angry red eyes that were focused on her.

Oh, oh.

Grabbing a quick handful of food and whatever else was beneath the feeders Alex slid past another goose that was waking, putting the handful of whatever she had in her coat pocket. Then without much grace, but with all the speed she could muster, she came flying out of the shed with an angry goose flapping it's wings after her.

"Get outta here!" she yelled at the others. Mark grabbed their hog-tied prisoner and shoved him into the back seat of the car. He climbed over to the driver's seat and turned the engine over, as his partner was sliding in the passenger seat. As he quickly backed out of the gate, he ordered Angel to protect Elizabeth. Elizabeth was uncertain as to whether to run back into the house, or turn after Alex who had hopped into the car as it was pulling out of the driveway.

"I'll call you!" Alex shouted as more of the geese lifted their wings and started to charge whatever was in their territory.

Mark muttered to Howard how he should have left him there to suffer the consequences of what he and his partner had done. While Mark drove, Alex kept an eye on their prisoner.

"Mark, let me borrow your cell. I left mine with my stuff at the house."

Mark handed her his cell. "Don't be calling any foreign ports or to any of your girlfriends because Linda will be quizzing me on the numbers," he joked.

"Nah. I'm calling the vet. I found mama kitty unconscious beneath the feeder. Do you know their number?"

"Speed dial. #4."

Chapter 6

The Wednesday six o'clock town meeting brought the young and old into normally what would have been called a large meeting hall. Two of the smaller meeting offices were turned into a childcare center with some of the teenagers who were more interested in socializing amongst themselves, acted as sitters. Naturally all the available seats filled up quickly and standing room only was for those that arrived at what would be called early, but in this case, not early enough. Those that were not at the meeting were either watching someone else's children, or waiting at home for a friend or spouse to bring them the news.

The noise was deafening as neighbors caught up on news they may have forgotten to talk about earlier over their fences or in the coffee shops. Sunrise was a small town, provided everyone did not try to pack into the meeting room all at once. Elizabeth was sitting with Claire and Genie who were sitting near the front with their more vocal supporters. The two older women were veterans at town meetings and knew a good time to arrive for front row seats.

The chairs for the council members were vacant as they were in another room looking over the abridged report Chief Harper had distributed to them. They were also thinking about the speech he had given them about what Sunrise stood for and how some people reviled them because they had the type of atmosphere a free community should have. The council had a few that were not comfortable with the growth of their small retirement community that had transformed into a more eclectic and larger community, and where they didn't know everyone or want to. It also behooved them that there were more than two religions in what had once been an all-Christian community. Philip was the most vocal of their small group though not a long time resident in the community for as long as they had been. As uncomfortable as they were with some of his tactics, he basically spoke what they felt...too many foreigners in their town. And Philip gave them something that was responsible for the rift and sinful people taking over their town, the women's safe house. However, after Chief Harper's presentation many of them felt embarrassed at being caught in their bias and now wavered in openly backing Philip and his cohort Avery Smith.

Chief Harper was not interested in convincing Philip or Avery that standing behind the changes the town citizens had voted on was worth continued support but instead focused on those that were wavering. He was determined that anyone who used strong-arm tactics was not going to force him into doing something he didn't believe in and whoever was behind the vandalism was after more than destruction of property. His ace-in-a-hole was the fact that Philip and Avery had pushed the others into forcing the hire of the McAlberts over his objections and Howard McAlberts was got caught with his pants down, embarrassing his backers.

The mayor and judge were behind him but it was the mayor that would have to address the town at the meeting. Mayor Annie Hill was not feeling well this evening and if the Chief did not have such a suspicious mind, he would have just put it down to an illness. He had insisted before she faced the mixed

crowd that Mai take a look at her. Mai gave her some water and pressed some acupressure points on her body, giving a healthier color to her cheeks. It could have been nervousness or anger at what she had been fighting since Philip and Avery joined forces, legalizing intolerance, and christianizing it to make it justifiable. It infuriated Annie that they would use one of the most compassionate and tolerant icons as a symbol for their intolerance. Annie herself was third generation Japanese from Hawaii, and her husband, Ringo, was second generation, though his father was Caucasian. The very points Philip alluded to in his oftentimes ranting when he took the podium at town meetings. His foreign purchased bride that he didn't want to socialize with anyone seemed to have slipped his memory during his speeches about foreign influences.

As the committee walked in to take their seats, Elizabeth took note of two of the committee members that were glaring in their direction with open hostility. She took that as a challenge for it meant that there was an organized type of opposition that was taking place. She looked across from her and met with other angry glares. Some were out right hostile. It was going to get ugly. The hackles on the back of her neck rose. Alex had hurriedly told her that June McAlberts had claimed to be with Guido...talking...at the time of her husband's attack on their house. Guido supported her alibi. The cut over Alex's eye was bruising and it got darker when Alex's eyes met June's smirking face across the aisle. Alex was sitting on the bench near Elizabeth but separated by members of the Scripts family. She and Mark Scripts had come in late, as Mark had to deliver Howard to the jail at Brisbane. It was closer to where the hearing for his bail was to be set. Judge Mead was a circuit judge who moved around the four towns.

The mayor took the podium and gave a brief caption of Officer Howard McAlberts arrest for defacing private property and how the second person got away. Annie paused, giving everyone time to stare at June McAlberts with suspicion.

"All this would stop if we got rid of the weirdoes and fagots. This used to be a god fearing town and now it's like sodomy and gonorrhhea...."

Laughter and snickers broke out from both sides breaking some of the tension, whether it was intended or not.

"Lester, sit down. Speeches of hate are not what Sunrise is about. We don't abuse free speech with demonizing others that don't share our beliefs and we don't harass our neighbors. That's what all of this vandalism is about. Freedom is something we work at; it's something we all actively engage in." She held her hand up at Lester's angry retort. "We have a rule here, and that is no name calling or personal attacks. We work together on solutions. Chief Harper is here to brief us on what he has found in his investigations so far and what he suggests we do...as a community." The Mayor stood for a few moments letting her words sink in a bit. "Chief Harper, you have a briefing for us?" She stepped from the podium and found her seat.

The Chief wore his uniform with the metal picking up the sparkle from the lights overhead.

"Good evening, everyone." He nodded looking at both sides of the meeting hall directly. His eyes rested a moment on June and Guido, who were sitting a little too close together. He had a word or two with

her and Guido before the meeting. Neither would be reporting to duty in his station anytime soon. He had an additional background check done on Guido and the McAlberts, but not from the usual source. He still had connections in D.C. and he made it known to the two that he suspected them as being behind the harassments to some of the people in town. He also made sure they knew he had sent evidence on to the FBI at the vandalized homes he knew fit in with what the one word June had managed to spray on the wall. He even went further and called Guido's boss and asked a few pointed questions of that officer, then let him know, unofficially, that Guido was under suspicion of being behind a domestic terrorist group that was harassing specific groups of citizens in their town.

He had gone back in his records and found the vandalism started soon after Guido came up from L.A. to head a group from L.A. to investigate a L.A. gang's activity in Sunrise. It was missed because most of it was not called in until neighbors started mentioning it to each other then brought it to the official stage by filing a complaint. No evidence then had been gathered. By then, dates were lumped together and they had thought it was something Mike Learner and his group, the Jaded Amulet, was behind.

"We found that we have some juveniles that are part of the problem, so I'm asking parents to pay more attention to where and when your kids get home. Separate from the juveniles, we have three groups that are involved with the vandalism and graffiti. One group has been identified and we have one of them in custody now. We know who the other two are and we are taking measures to bring them in too. We hope to have more arrests sometime soon. I would like to point out what many of you have already figured out. Those that haven't been hit have security lights, alarms and the like. I would advise you to get some security around your place. As you leave there's information on the outside table that Detective Scripts printed out on what you can do to protect your place."

"Get a big dog!" a voice shouted out.

"Only if you can afford the grocery bill!" Linda Scripts quipped back.

That got a laugh from the crowd and lessened a lot of the tension.

The mayor stepped back up to the podium and both took questions for the next hour and a half. When Elizabeth looked over to where Alex had been she noticed she was gone. She turned to look where June McAlberts and Guido were and they were also missing. Elizabeth was hoping Alex wasn't going to punch the woman out. June had a bruise on her jaw, and was moving stiffly when she had entered the meeting hall, which gave Elizabeth some satisfaction for Alex's skills.

Elizabeth looked at Genie for a moment, not hiding the smirk. "Looks like the other guy didn't get away completely untouched. Maybe that will make Alex feel a little better."

Genie and Claire shook their heads. "Nope. She hates losing at something she thinks she should not have lost at. She's going to be working herself ragged in her workouts with Mai and Mark until they call for mercy."

"So, you think you can use the same method of getting back into your house that you used in getting out?" Genie asked.

"Well..." Elizabeth shook her head. "I think not."

Elizabeth had called Claire to come pick her up because the geese were milling around the Range Rover. There was no way Elizabeth was going to try to get to the vehicle wading through a small flock of geese that were still looking for something to take out their hostility on, so she had climbed over the wall when she had seen a vehicle approach on the monitor, hoping it was Claire or Genie. She had left a happy Angel watching over the small kittens. Mama Cat, that Alex had rescued was sick and would be in the vets care for a while. Elizabeth was grateful for the extended stay of Mama Cat with the vet, for giving medication to a wild cat was not in her collection of skills.

"If you have a ladder, I can make it."

"How about climbing on the hood of the car? We'll wait outside the gate until we see you flash us with the house lights."

"How about if I just walk out to the gate."

"What about the geese?"

"I'll release the feeder from inside the house. By the time I get home they should have a fresh batch of feed from the pet store. I told them not to feed them until I get home. As angry as those geese are, they'll be looking for anything that moves to attack. I guess it's a side effect from whatever was in the feed."

Elizabeth climbed onto the hood of their car and dropped over the fence, nearly twisting her ankle on a pot. The motion detector came on and showed the entire garden area to her. She found a whining dog on the other side of the study door. She used her key to unlock the door, rearm the alarm, and by then the kittens and Angel were out on the deck. After checking the monitors and releasing the feed for the geese, she let herself out cautiously in the front and ran stiffly out to the gate. She waved at the two women who waved back and returned home.

Elizabeth prepared dinner for two, while listening to kittens mewling from outside and big mama Angel's soft growling and whining in return. She prepared dinner for the kittens and Angel then went out onto the deck to see what they were up to. The kittens were leaping all over Angel's tail that was flopping around on the deck as she sat patiently supplied the little ones with something to wear them out with.

The alarm on the monitors signaled someone was approaching. She went back into the house and watched a vehicle with many dots in it stop outside of the gate. A honk signaled someone wanted in. They were lucky the geese were still in the shed. She remembered Alex's drill of looking at who was outside the gate before opening it. She turned the light on that would shine on the car and found Alex waving at her in the camera, accompanied by an older man and woman, with Katie and Jonathan in the back, with their parents. She released the gate and went to the front door. She didn't make enough food for two armies, with Alex being the compliment of one.

"Hi, Ms. Elizabeth! Where's Angel? Daddy said she was a mommy!" Katie's small voice called out through an open window. When the car came to a halt she was scrambling to beat her brother to the front door where Elizabeth waited.

"They're out on the deck. To the left, the center room..."

"Oh, we know how to get to the deck. We use to come here often with Dad," Jonathan told her solemnly as he paused only long enough to explain then shot after his younger sister.

"Elizabeth, this is Marta and Johan Scripts, Mark's parents." She turned as Mark and Linda approached. Mark had his arm draped around his wife's waist affectionately.

"Hi, Elizabeth. We tried to call you but your phones are still out and your cell wasn't working. We ordered pizza before we thought to invade you," Linda told her apologetically. She hated unplanned visits but she was learning from Mark's family that that did happen often so she knew how others must feel.

"The cell battery is low. When you rang it gave a rather pathetic beep. Did anyone find out about restoring the phones?"

Mark held up a hand. "That be me and Dad. We'll check the boxes and lines up the road, while we wait for the pizzas. They had to have busied the lines out somewhere where it's public access."

Alex knew better than to follow the two men when they were in a father-son bonding mode, so she joined Marta, Linda and Elizabeth on the couch, where Alex surprised herself and found she could carry an interesting conversation.

About an hour later both men came in behind the pizza delivery car with wide smiles on their faces, letting everyone know their job was completed.

Paper plates, lots of napkins and chili flakes were already out. The adults used the low coffee table in the front room, as there were more of them, and the two kids sat on the high stools to finish off two slices of pizza then quickly went back out to pester Angel and her kittens. The kittens already had names, but not given by the kids, but by Elizabeth quite hastily, not wanting 'her' kittens to be snatched from her by well meaning children. Ace Jumper, or AJ was the black kitten that was always finding high perches to leap from one place to another. Jack, the fluffy orange tabby, and Jill, a smooth haired orange and white tabby made up the family. Jack and Jill always stuck together and were rolling around together a lot. The kids liked the names and were finding the wariness of the kittens a challenge. They understood how difficult it was to befriend kittens that were from the wild, but it didn't deter their hopes at winning the little fur balls over.

The Scripts left close to ten and both women were relieved. They cleaned up, which was not much since the visitors helped, taking the leftovers with them.

"You made curried rice pilaf?" Alex groaned as she spied the glass casserole dish in the refrigerator.

"And the Alaska Wild Salmon is marinating in the other dish. Good thing I hadn't prepared the fish yet."

Alex turned to her partner and watched her as she closed the utensil drawer and moved to turn the water on under the kettle for tea. She reached out her hand and stopped Elizabeth's motion. Elizabeth turned to her and held her arms out to embrace Alex.

"Bad day at the office?" she teased gently.

"Yes."

"We seem to do a lot of starting off in the kitchen. Have you noticed that?" Elizabeth breathlessly whispered in Alex's ear, whose pulse was beating rapidly as it pressed against her body leaving no air between them.

"Yes," she murmured as she pulled Elizabeth's willing lips closer to her own. "Where to from here?"

They both moved toward Alex's room.

Chapter 7

At five in the morning Alex's alarm went off. She groaned and rolled over a partially wakened Elizabeth to shut it off.

"Going to take Angel for a run?" Elizabeth mumbled.

"This is so comfortable, I don't know if I can move," she whispered back as she continued to arrange her body so that it was comfortably sprawled over Elizabeth's.

"Well, as much as I like this position, you're putting pressure on my bladder, so unless you're into golden showers, you had better move."

Both women reluctantly got up, each going to their respective toilets. Elizabeth padded up the hall hearing tiny mews coming from the study as she passed.

This time Alex and Angel met Mark outside the gate just as he arrived. The three headed out for their morning run.

Elizabeth prepared food for the kittens, noticing that they seemed to be bigger than a few days ago. She laughed to herself. Mama Cat was going to be in shock when she gets back.

She made coffee, enough for Scripts too, and booted up her laptop. While that was coming up she booted up Alex's to pick up her Email. As she waited for the two to come up she smiled to herself as she realized she was starting a new rhythm for writing...early morning instead of late at night.

She opened her first mail, from Eric, her editor and his wife, Janey, two close friends.

Dear Wanna Be Writer,

We got some used goods that would rate #2 on a garage sale weekend. Need anything?

E and J

Elizabeth took a deep breath. Of course, the shelter had released her things to Eric, her editor, who put them in storage for her. It was...how long? She thought about things that were Noel's too that would be in the stuff. She cried silently for a few minutes before a crash behind her startled her. The mewing gave away what the problem was and wiping her tear-streaked face she studied the bag of dog toys that was shaking from a frantic kitten that got trapped inside after jumping into it.

Elizabeth rose from her chair and rescued the kitten that rushed out of the bag and hid under some furniture when Elizabeth got too close. She left the open bag on its side, knowing this was a toy for them. She sat back down and composed a reply.

Dear E and J,

Sounds like a good idea...however, I now have dark cherry wood Chinese furniture. Anything you think doesn't go with that décor, please find a home for.

Love WBW

She found some other Emails that were advertisements along with the usual unwanted porno. She deleted them and then sent an Email to Alex, asking her when she intended to be home for dinner. When Alex got to work she would have a message waiting for her. She closed her Email box then was signing off when her mail icon beeped her that she had incoming mail. She signed back on and found a return from Alex.

Be home at six, Sweet Pea.

She left the mail message and found her cell phone. She listened to the other phone ring a few times.

"Hello."

"This is Elizabeth," she identified herself and waited.

"What's going on?" the other voice asked quietly. She could hear movement in the background as if Agent Briscolle was putting distance between her and whomever she was with.

"Can you do me a favor?"

"Depends what it is. Some things I can, some things I can't."

"I want to know who is monitoring my Email."

"That I can do. Some work for the Geeks." There was a small space of silence. "I hear there's been some wolves operating in your area."

"Yes. The Chief identified three police officers from the L.A. area. They also believe they have a few copy cats in the form of teenagers being bored and two others that they haven't identified yet."

"Can you keep me informed? It may be loose ends we missed."

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment. She knew favors didn't come free. "I'll tell you whatever Alex says is not police confidential, though, she doesn't tell me much more than what the local gossip already had passed around. I think you would get a lot more information by sitting in the coffee shops."

"Right. I forgot what a small town was like. How is the town holding up?"

"Ready to jump ship. But, Mayor Annie and Chief Harper are plugging the holes up as fast as they appear."

"Okay. I'll let you know what they find."

"Thanks. Bye."

Elizabeth sat for a few moments. As a writer, she did a lot of research, and was used to using other people's talents for getting what she personally couldn't do. The section of the FBI that Amanda Briscolle worked for, owed her as much as she owed them.

She was still working on her story when she could hear the alarm go off in the front room. Reluctantly she rose from her chair, not wanting to get complacent about checking the alarms because it may be the 'one day' she wished she had checked it.

She watched as three figures arrived at the side gate that led to the trail down to the beach. One was definitely a dog.

Elizabeth grabbed a towel from linen closet, and handed it to Mark as they stepped onto the porch. He dutifully dried off as much of the sand from the squirming part horse part dog, before she rushed into the study to check on her charges. While Alex hit the shower, Mark went into the study to watch Angel and her kittens.

"Hey, who is Sweat Pea?" he teased.

"Oh, that." She forgot she had left it up to show Alex. "I don't know. I sent Alex an Email this morning, thinking she would have something waiting for her when she got into work. This came back a few moments later."

Mark signed back onto the Internet then started clicking Icons and moving around in the Internet. "Whoa. If I knew you knew so much, I would have asked you instead of Amanda to find out who is monitoring my E-mail."

"Who is monitoring your E-mail?" Alex asked as stood clothed in the doorway. She had a towel around her neck that she was using to dry her hair.

"It's not her mail that's being monitored." Mark frowned. "I think someone is monitoring yours." He turned to his partner. "You know it was bound to happen. We've been checking out too many militia sites to not have been pegged as a cop sooner or later."

"Could it be from the police station's server?"

"Maybe. Have you ever used the name Sweet Pea to anyone of those dark characters over the Internet?"

Alex frowned. "I was once referred to as Sweet Pea. But, I'm not sure just when that was. Maybe about a year ago. It seems like a long time."

"Let me grab a shower and we'll get a move on," Mark said.

When he left to take his shower, Alex sat at the desk and read the mail. "Sweat Pea? How obnoxious."

"Baiting."

"Now that you mention it, yeah. The trouble with this is...it could be from my work with SID. And that reminds me. I still have the work on the Jaded Amulet to follow up on."

"If it were my plot, I wouldn't be giving my 'hero' so many headaches that she doesn't have time to solve her main case," Elizabeth whispered this in Alex's ear as she leaned down to kiss her above her ear.

"Can you rewrite this one, please? I'll be your hero and then you can give me some days off. I can take my love up into the mountains to check my cabin out. Show her my hot tub and curl up around the fireplace...hmmm." Alex suddenly giggled when Elizabeth tickled her.

"I'll tell you what, when I'm finished with the present story I'm working on, I'll start one just for you. And, it'll need some research done...say, up in a mountain cabin, with a hot tub, and..."

"Yeow! Mark!" Alex jumped from something Mark tossed.

Mark was laughing while holding onto the side of the kitchen door sill. "Come on hot shot. We've got work to do. And you can't have three days off for that 'research' until this problem is solved, so don't ask."

Alex wrapped her arms around Elizabeth's waist and pulled her closer for a kiss, as she could hear Mark already starting up the truck. A horn interrupted the two.

"He's jealous because he's sharing his house with his patents that are sleeping in the room next door to their bedroom."

"The master bedroom is next to the guest room?"

"No, he and his father are redoing the master bedroom and two of the guest rooms. Mark and Linda are in one of the guestrooms, his parents are in Jonathan's room, and Jonathan has a tent out in the front room. He would rather camp out then sleep in his sister's room. Too much white and green frill. Besides, she wouldn't let Jonathan sleep on the top bunk."

When the house was quiet once more Elizabeth took her coffee into the study to resume her work. She opened the door to the deck and while dog and kittens settled for their moment of interest, she decided she liked the cold air.

I think I'll get the extension cord and set the laptop on the table there. The glare shouldn't be too bad.

In less than twenty minutes, Elizabeth once again was back into her story, with part of her attention on the Angel and her lively kittens.

A kitten's screech followed by a crash had Elizabeth merely lifting her head. A pot that had once been the home of a plant was now a shattered heap of dirt and pottery shards on the deck as a bored looking Angel, safely in her corner near Elizabeth, watched as first one, then the other two revisited the pot they had knocked down from the railing

Elizabeth made a mental note to move all the pots on the railing to the deck. She moved her cursor to the bottom of her screen to check the time. A little after noon.

"How about a light lunch, gang?" she asked her little family. She closed her file and followed her usual habit of backing up the story on two flash drives, and replacing the working hard drive on the laptop with the decoy. She had decided to use the study's little hidden room to store her work, though it wasn't the only place she hid things. Elizabeth knew she was paranoid, but she felt it was her right and felt no guilt at finding places to hide things that meant something to her, and away from anyone that may enter the house and pry into her things.

After lunch and making sure dog and kittens were taken care of, she settled in front of the sliding glass door in the dining room that looked out onto the ocean to start her Yoga exercises. As she held one pose she let her gaze move to the dark green ocean, finding a peaceful focal point for her to find balance. She breathed in deep the tangy ocean spray that she was finding was seeping into her soul. When finished with her stretches, she moved into some of the calisthenics that Mai had showed her to use to build up leg muscle. It was two in the afternoon by the time she finished and she felt tired.

This old body misses sleeping half the daylight away. A nice short nap should do it.

Elizabeth easily fell into a light doze and a funny dream. Movement on the bed, about an hour later, brought her to consciousness. She smiled but didn't move or open her eyes. She was picturing a half dressed Alex leaning down to kiss her when suddenly something dropped onto her stomach and scampered across the bed. She bolted up; hearing two thumps and could see two small orange furry bodies peeling out of the room. Angel was sitting with her face resting on the bed. As the room emptied of her young charges Angel sighed and followed after them with her nails making clicking sounds on the wooden then tile floor. Elizabeth started to laugh so hard she thought she was going to wet the bed. "Oh, Alex is going to love this one."

She checked the clock. Three o'clock. She got up and checked her phone for messages. The first call was Alex, telling her she got her Email and seven was more like her time home. The second was deep breathing. The third was Janey asking her what she was doing for Thanksgiving. The fourth was a hang-up. She called Janey first. She learned Eric and Janey's son was having Thanksgiving with his wife's family so Elizabeth invited them out if they didn't want to spend Thanksgiving alone. Next call was to Alex. She might as well ask her what to do about the phone calls and warn her that she had just invited company for Thanksgiving, which neither had yet talked about.

Alex was out in the field.

Elizabeth spent the rest of the day cleaning the house and planning Thanksgiving with her close friends, Janey and Eric. Her bedroom needed more furniture. The large opium bed and reading chair were not enough.

She grinned to herself when she thought of Eric and Janey loving to explore all the secret rooms the house had. Dr. Ebbens and his wife Lily had originally purchased the house from a man who loved having his own house with hidden rooms and spaces. It turned out his brother worked for NASA and was paranoid so most of the hidden spaces was for his benefit. Marriage and moving to a new house put the house up for sale. Dr. Ebbens bought the house and moved it to the edge of a cliff where he thought his wife wouldn't mind having big windows looking out over the ocean, while he traveled on business. However, she didn't feel comfortable in the home and eventually moved into town. When Dr. Ebbens quit his traveling job and took the manager position at the hospital in nearby Bales, they purchased a small house near the forest and left the cliff house vacant. When it went up for rent, for reasons no longer relevant, Elizabeth and Alex rented it.

Elizabeth went into her closet to see how bare it was. She needed warm clothing that led up to snow, and shoes for rain, snow and sandals, for walking over the rocks on the beach. It was getting colder and her tennis shoes were getting ragged. She still kept a suitcase packed with three days of cloths in it. After almost two years on the run, it was a difficult habit to break. Maybe tomorrow, Friday, she would take a trip into town and go on a buying spree.

With a shopping list in mind, she returned to the study to work. The story was nearly done and ready to be sent off to Janey. Janey was her proof reader. Eric was her publisher. She knew how she was

going to end it; she just needed one more action scene before ending it. But she needed to get into the rhythm of the story, so she started at the beginning, catching small discrepancies and changing them as she went. She referred to her notes on names; places and times to make sure the content remained consistent.

She found a place she marked for further research. She moved over to Alex's computer and booted it up. Since she had not changed the mail name it came up notifying her that she had mail. She quickly glanced through just the names and decided they were just advertisements and closed the mail impatiently then launched the Google search engine for information on compost heaps. She needed to find out how long it took a heap to ripen.

She heard the alarm go off and Angel who was in the front room with her charges let out a small bark and a growl. Elizabeth rose and checked out the camera. Two vehicles, one a beat up small truck and the other a four door mid-sized car. They stopped in front of her gate. The gander was waddling toward the gate with two others. Elizabeth could hear her honking. What had her so upset? Elizabeth opened the door a crack and could see a rock bounce across the yard.

She opened the front door and could see two boys hanging over the fence tossing rocks at the geese.

"Hey! Stop that!" Elizabeth yelled.

The boys dropped from the fence and rushed back into the cars, which took off, slidding in the sand, up toward the house further up the cliff.

Elizabeth slid her cell out of her pocket and hit her speed dial. It wasn't the boys that worried her, it was the driver's that looked older, she was worried about.

"Sunrise police department, can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Elizabeth. Is Alex there?"

"Sure is, Elizabeth. One moment, please."

She watched the dust cloud as it moved up the coast toward the one other house on the same road.

"This is Detective Adison."

It was nice to hear her voice, but she felt embarrassed. "Hi, Alex. Sorry, I just panicked. Two cars with some people stopped in front of the house. A couple of boys got out and started to throw rocks at the geese. I yelled at them and they left, but I just, I don't know, maybe panicked. Sorry."

"No, no. I'm glad you called and told me. About what age were the boys?"

"Not quite teens, unless they're short for their age. Not related. The drivers to the small Toyota truck and four-door white car were older. It's mean to stop and toss rocks at the geese."

"Would you be able to recognize them if you see them again?"

"I would. Maybe we can put a camera at the gate so we can take pictures too."

"I agree. Outside the cave entrance too. I'll bring that up with Mark and Eric. Maybe after Christmas we can look for another place to live. Where were they headed?"

"Up the cliff. The dust cloud looked like they went to the house up the road."

"It belongs to a so-called minister from the Sacramento area. I'll see if he's coming back for a visit. That guy is a real bother. I'm not sure when I'll be getting home tonight."

"So, eight or nine is more like when you'll be home, huh?"

"At this point it's hard to tell. Besides a lot of reports to write up I have interviews and a meeting with Bobbie Lyn. Second shift has been the only shift without problems. say what she's not seeing on her shift. I think the mayor is about ready to call another meeting on Friday night. The chief and Annie have been locked up in his office for over an hour now. Gotta go, Lizbeth" The increase of noise on the other side of the phone told Elizabeth that the office was busy.

Alex didn't want to say too much as there were too many people around. She didn't want to tell her that almost half the town was demanding something to be done about the increased outbreaks of vandalism.

Mark leaned over to her. "What's up?"

"A car with two people approached the house. Slowed down as they passed, but continued up the road."

Mark nodded. He pulled out his cell phone and called a number. "Carey, where are you guys?...they split up? Hmm. So it's Guido who's not around. Okay. Who is tailing him?...Lost him?...What makes him sure he's heading this way? Oh...Oh.... Right... okay. Thanks."

He folded his phone up. "Looks like June is trying to see her husband. From what Carey said, he doesn't want to see her. He's pissed. Some little birdie told his cellmate that Guido is nailing his wife while he's locked up and he is just stewing over it. There's a past here. Maybe June is up here to keep up a relationship with Guido."

"Your secret weapons are turning out to be quite the hound dogs."

"One of the lessons of tailing is that you have to know when to let go, so you don't give away your interest. Mike let Guido go so that he wouldn't think he was being followed. But he's sure he's headed here. He overheard a conversation between June and Guido that he's meeting someone." The two were quiet for a while thinking about the movement of players on their game board. "I'm real suspicious about the minister's place up the cliffs."

"Ever wonder why the minister doesn't want the police to periodically check out his place?"

"Exactly what I was inferring." He turned back to his computer and started to sign on.

"What are you looking for?"

"Halstrand Hailburn."

Alex moved her chair next to Marks to see what his results were. For the next twenty minutes after quickly looking through the names he ran across a minister of the Message of God church in Sarine Valley. They actually had a WEB page. "Can you believe all that puke garbage?"

"Claire was saying his church puts out a newsletter that Philip the Lip left in the hall next door. Gary nearly tossed him down the stairs," she laughed.

"I heard. Linda told me, only I heard he did toss him down the stairs. However, we know Gary doesn't toss people, only salad." He looked at his partner with a grin. "Let's go have a look see, shall we. We'll stop by and pick up Angel."

The two left after locking up work left unfinished on their desks, relieved to leave the unusually busy office.

Chapter 8

Elizabeth insisted she come along. She would drive the get-a-way car, she told them, while they sniffed about until something happened. There was no way she was going to be left at home worried and she already knew what they were doing was not actual police work. She had them over a barrel.

"Let us off here," Mark directed Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had been driving in the dark slowly with no lights up a winding road, but they were all wearing UV goggles, which Mark supplied Elizabeth with an extra pair. Elizabeth was surprised someone didn't come barreling down the road and run right into them as she hugged the left side of the road, thinking it was better to run off the left side into a gully, than the right, which may be a cliff. Since this was unfamiliar territory the exact location of where the cliff was, was not something she was interested in finding out in the dark.

Once parked, three silent figures got out of the car and were swallowed up quickly in the velvety darkness.

Restless, Elizabeth got out of the car and carefully inspected the area around the car testing out her UV goggles. She needed to get the car turned around and she wanted to know what the terrain around her was like. Satisfied she moved the car into an angle with the nose pointed back down the cliff.

Mark pulled his partner close to him, placing his lips near her ear. "Take Angel and check out the front. I'm going to check the cliff side out."

Alex was going to interrupt, for she was feeling guilty that she was letting her fear of heights get in the way of her job. After being tossed off a cliff into the ocean to drown, she was finding, looking down a cliff was scary.

"If I remember right, it's closer to the cliff than Doc's place."

"Oh." Alex patted him on the shoulder and curling her fingers under Angel's collar, she moved towards the front of the old Victorian house. It seemed lights were on in every room with drapes pulled across the windows, allowing only slivers of light out.

Angel didn't growl but the vibration in her throat alerted Alex that something disturbed the tall dog. She didn't remove her hand from the collar because Angle may get into mischief. Both stopped and listened.

"Shut up, Moses!" An angry voice shouted at a guard dog. "You and those damn rabbits!"

Alex wondered why so many lights on a place that was suppose to be vacant and then, when did these people move in? She glanced at the big dog next to her. Angel was keeping the fence between her and maybe the owner of the voice they had heard.

She heard a click and lights flooded the front area. She plastered herself onto the ground almost as fast as Angel.

A car rolled out. She took a peek to see Guido turning to speak to someone that was sitting in the passenger seat.

She didn't hear what he was saying but the tone of voice was angry and the voice that replied was very young and fearful. The car moved up the road instead of returning back to town. The road meandered into the forest that was a protected wilderness area, and eventually out onto a road that would take them to the main freeway.

Guido and the minister?

"Hey, Cid?"

"Yeah," a surly voice returned.

"Why is he taking Linney?"

There was a silence for a while. "She left some prints at one of those houses, and her Pa's not happy about it."

"She didn't. I know she didn't."

"Well, he carries a grudge for a long time. Hell, anyone that is still pissed off with his wife for dying in childbirth after twelve years is really something. Worse than the minister, bet c'ha."

"Ya think he's gonna beat her again?"

Another long stretch of silence. "Naw. He's taking her back to the minister and he doesn't want any bruises anyone can see cause someone may call the police."

Both were quiet as their own horrific visions of what the minister would do to the young girl filled their minds for a few moments.

"Cid. Do you think it's right to be...I mean...never mind."

"Your faith wavering, Sam?" the voice demanded harshly as if to mask his fears.

"Just for a moment, Cid. But, I'm all right now. Women are for two things, serving their man and the community. Men are to serve god and his humble servant the minister," he recited in a solemn voice.

Alex wanted to puke. Sounded like the Minister Hailburn was running a cult, which was not illegal...but child abuse was. That always seemed to run in cults, the leaders and their favorites had to dominate the children to the point of molestation and physical and psychological abuse, to say nothing of the abuse to women who had to watch their children molested. The FBI would certainly be interested...unless they already knew.

Well, to her she was satisfied with what she heard, getting a pretty good idea of who was behind the vandalism.

It was still private property and she had no official business on the premises. She would have kept telling herself that as she also make plans on sneaking up to one of the windows to see what was going on indoors, when an alarm went off. The two sentries, two dogs and Alex's heart jump started an adrenalin rush that nearly had her making like a rabbit out of the area.

"Damn, Cid!" Sam's voice rose.

A dog's howl from near by had the hairs on the back of Alex's neck and Angel's standing up.

"Let Moses go! What d'ya holding on to him like that?"

"Them sirens hurts his ears!" Sam wailed.

Damn, Mark! What are you up to, partner?

She dragged herself out of range from the lights that lit up the area. The alarm was a wailing sound that hurt her ears too, and she wanted to slap someone that set it at that pitch that was harmful to the sensitive ears of a lot of the wild life around the cliff side.

Alex readjusted her UV goggles as she trotted towards the car that had been moved. Alex looked around the car and couldn't locate Elizabeth.

"Blazes!" Her heart started to pound. "Angel, where's Elizabeth?"

The warm back that was about even with her hip shifted, bumping into her as the dark head lifted to peer around them. The head was pointed up toward the darker outline of what she remembered was an embankment. She could feel Angel's body move as if her tail was engaged in its most useful activity. She let Angel move towards the dark raise from where the car was hidden, hearing dirt movement and the intake of breath. She moved back towards the car.

"What's happening?" Elizabeth breathlessly asked as she slid into the driver's seat ready to turn on the engine.

"I think Mark set an alarm off." She slid in the passenger seat and waited. Angel paced outside the door then finally sat as if waiting. A lot of noise was coming from the minister's place, but finally the wail was shut off.

"Damn thing can be heard all the way to the station," Alex grumbled. She hated waiting for Mark, worrying about what was happening. By now she knew Mark was better than 007 in that he was good but he also did not take unnecessary chances because he had a family he dearly loved.

The roar of a car's engine then the unmistakable sliding of tire wheels as a car moved quickly out of the driveway came careening toward them. Their car was pulled into the gully enough that if someone was looking for them they would have been seen, but this car was more interested in making tracks towards Sunrise.

A few moments later a door opened and a smirking Mark slid into the back seat with a happy Angel.

"Let's get out of here," he whispered.

Elizabeth had turned the engine on the moment she saw the large dog's tail start to wave. She pulled out of their hiding place slowly not wanting the wheels to slide them back in the gully.

"Wait here, gotta get rid of the tire tracks." Mark hopped back out of the car with Alex following. "We don't need to hide the fact that we were here, only prevent someone from taking castings of the tire tracks," he whispered. "You know how some lawyers can get."

"Damn. Elizabeth was up the embankment."

"We'll worry about that later. Most of what's up there is hard rock and the wind from the ocean usually blows it clean."

Both were back in the car and without lights moving back down the road. They all kept an eye out for car lights that may be approaching them or coming from behind.

The gate slid open back at the house and the three people piled out of the car with adrenaline pumped high and feeling pretty proud of themselves. Angel was dancing in clumsy circles around Mark nearly knocking him over.

As Alex fixed the coffee and Elizabeth cut pieces of pumpkin pie for each, Mark started his story first.

"They have a dog pen in the back with a couple of hungry looking dogs in them. Looks like they aren't fed regularly. The water bowls were dark with mold so cleaning bowls isn't done much either. We can get the human society to look in there and count ribs. They have a blanket alarm system. I set it off to see what they would do. Poor dogs. If I knew it would make that sound...Hurt my ears too. Glad to see you stayed out of mischief, partner." He grinned at Alex who was frowning over her coffee.

"The minister is running some type of a cult, Mark. From the conversation of the guards, who were just boys...they're scared of the minister. I saw Guido driving away in a car. He has a young daughter that is one of the inmates. He drove out the back way, out through the forest. From what I understand, Guido beats her on a regular basis when she's with him. However, she spends most of her time with the minister..." Alex stopped paused. "I think she's being ..." she stopped.

"Sexually abused," Elizabeth said softly. "Say what you suspect Alex," she said in a stronger voice. "You think she is being sexually abused by this cult."

"I do."

Mark's cell rang. He unclipped his cell phone and flipped it open. "Yeah?... Take the coast road, past the cliffs. He's taken the back road out through the forest...No. He's also has a juvenile female with him. There may be some child abuse issues here....Be careful....Okay, thanks."

He folded the phone back up.

"Mike was waiting for him to show up at his favorite coffee shop and instead some young kids came rushing in and had an interesting story to tell Philip and Avery, who looked like they were waiting for someone. He doesn't think it was the boys. The boys knowing Philip and Avery is connecting them to Hailburn and what's going on at that house. I sent Mike after Guido. Mike may look like a wimp, but he has a black belt in jujitsu. I sure would like to see Guido try to take him on."

"So would I," Alex said. Alex's face hardened at the thought of children being abused and unable to defend themselves, especially if it was done by a caretaker.

Mark laid a hand over her wrist and squeezed it. "I bet they're the ones that are responsible for the majority of the vandalism."

Elizabeth could see on Alex's face something she thought Mark would be in a better position to help Alex deal with. Alex's past made her vulnerable to abused children. Elizabeth, followed by Angel, went into the study. She closed the door and turned some music on. Angel found her spot and circled it before collapsing with a deep sigh, rolled into a ball. The kittens, hiding in various places around the study, came out and began playing near Angel.

"Well, Angel, how did your outing go?" Leaning back in the comfortable chair she regarded the large shaggy dog that was a play toy for three lively kittens. Angel merely gave a huge yawn that ended in the snap of her jaws. "That boring or you're sworn to secrecy not to tell?"

The next morning a phone ringing brought Alex instantly awake. One good night's sleep would do her better, but she wasn't feeling like a zombie.

"Morning?"

"Detective Adison?"

"Yes?"

"This is Carey. I tried to get hold of Scripts but his cell phone is busy."

"Yes?" Alex glanced at the clock. Six.

"He told me to call you if I had something important to report and couldn't get hold of him."

"What is it, Carey?" Alex remembered how it was to work surveillance twenty four hours when she was a one person operation. She was thinking Carey must be exhausted.

"It's about June, the cop from L.A. She snuck out of her hotel room in Bales in a big hurry with her overnight bag."

"Did she skip out without paying her bill?"

"She paid cash for one night and didn't stay the one night. I checked while she was visiting Howard in the Brisbane Jail. When I scooted over to the jail, the guards were talking about Howard giving her a heated ultimatum of either she leaves Guido or he's leaving her. I caught up with her in the prison parking lot. She was talking to someone on her cell. She was laughing and smiling for someone who was just told to make a choice by her husband that's in jail. She returned to the hotel and when it was three AM she left with her overnight bag."

"Which direction was she headed?"

"North east on 34."

Alex pursed her lips trying to figure out why she would be headed north east on 34 which was a back road to Eureka... Oregon? June didn't strike her as the type to retreat or run away from unfinished business and there were a lot of loose ends hanging in Sunrise. "Howard's bail hearing is tomorrow, when

the judge sits in the Bales Court Room. Did she act like she knew someone was watching her or tailing her?"

"Alex, in Sunrise she's got the mark of Cane on her. I'm sure she noticed she's being stared at by everyone in town and at the Brisbane Jail. I'm also sure she suspects she has a tail."

"I think she'll go where she thinks we'll least expect her to be, their condo. Whoever is pulling her strings will contact her with her next set of orders. What are you doing now?"

"Having coffee inside my car with her condo back and front entrance covered."

Alex's lips curved into a smile. Apparently, Mark had a good group of trainees.

"Good. I'll update Mark. Thanks, Carey. Be safe." She hung up and followed the aroma of fresh coffee. The alarm had her changing her direction.

Mark. Time for their morning run.

Angel's wiggling body was at the front door with three little bouncing balls of fur. She pushed the button for the gate to open, opened the door a crack, not wide enough for the kittens to fit through, and hurried into her room to change.

"Good morning, Angel. No. You're too small to take on the geese, little ones. Get back in the house." Mark could be heard saying at the front door.

"I smell coffee! Where is everyone?" Mark called out.

"Good morning, Mark," Elizabeth's pleasant voice greeted him.

"Hi, Mark." Alex entered the kitchen tucking her sweatshirt in her sweat pants and taking a quick glance at a sweat suit clad Elizabeth. She wondered if Elizabeth was coming with them. Then she looked at her feet, still in slippers. That would be a no.

"Carey called. She said your cell was busy. She reported June left the hotel without settling her bill. Headed North east on the back road. Her visit with Howard ended in an ultimatum that she leave Guido. Casey said she spotted her in the prison parking lot on her cell laughing it up afterward."

"There's no sexual heat between Guido and her, but there isn't any between Howard and her. Eric is looking deeper into their background. I personally think they're co-conspirators in something illegal. Heading north east on the back roads," he said thoughtfully. "It sounds like she might be trying to throw her tail off. Hopefully Carey knows not to follow her. She's the type to set a nasty trap, like a hit and run on the road where there's no witnesses."

"Carey's waiting for June outside of the Macs' condo."

"Good. I've been on the phone with the Chief. The chief spoke with most of the council members throughout the night, with the exception of Philip and Avery, Hailburn's cohorts. The council okayed the firing of the Macs and the immediate hiring of Mike and Carey with two more positions that Chief Harper will fill. No more meddling by the council as Chief Harper's contract on hiring stipulated. The council actually apologized to Harper."

"Excuse me, wake me *up*!" Alex's mouth fell open. "The council dropped their attitude about micromanaging all the departments they fund?"

"Annie, being a very smart mayor, gave them a reality check. Whatever she said, it got them off
"I've met Annie. Anyone that wants to take her on has my sympathy," Elizabeth said. "I've also had lunch with her and I would never challenge her cheesecake baking."

Mark laughed. "Genie and Mollee try every year at the Summer Solstice Fair. Come on, partner, let's get this run over with. I think Angel is going to piddle all over the floor if we don't get a move on."

The kittens were shooed back into the house as they tried to follow Angel. In the foyer they ran in two different directions. Jack and Jill into the front room and AJ into the study.

Elizabeth studied the monitors, identifying the three as they moved out of the security systems range. She returned back to the study to write then went into the study to start writing. She could hear occasional noises from AJ who apparently found something to play with behind the door to the study. She finally got up and opened the door out to the deck thinking that would entice the others to go outside. The smell of the chilly air outside was refreshing and rather than having to worry about being disturbed later with closing the door, she put a warm sweater on and went back to ending her story.

Chapter 9

It didn't seem much time had passed when a crash of something in the front room had Elizabeth leaping up and rushing into the kitchen, expecting kitten mischief. Jack and Jill were sitting on the counter looking at something with rapt attention in the front room. Looking over the counter she saw two geese waddling around, testing surfaces with their inquisitive pecking. The kittens weren't as bothered by Elizabeth's nearness as the geese below them.

"Listen guys. I appreciate your situation, but you two aren't allowed on eating surfaces. Get down." She shooed them onto the kitchen floor so they had a solid wall between them and the two very big geese. As she stepped back to get a broom from the kitchen closet she looked down at her slipped feet.

Sand.

Elizabeth pulled a broom from its hook and checked the front door then the sliding door in the front room. Neither door was opened.

Elizabeth opened the front door hoping the geese would wander back out. Armed with a broom, for defense in case the geese should become unhappy with her, she went to the trapdoor in the kitchen pantry, the only entrance to the house with direct access to the beach. Sand and water were around the trapdoor. The 50lb bag of kitty litter and large bag of dry dog food had been moved off the trap door leading down into the tunnel that led to the ocean. She remembered she moved the bags and had forgotten to move them back. Cursing silently, she retrieved her cell phone and called Alex's cell phone. It went into her voice mail. She was probably on another call. Since she didn't hear it ringing in her room she knew Alex had it on her while she was running with Mark. She sent a text message to her cell.

Clutching the broom as a weapon, she started to search through each room, beginning with her bedroom. She found a trail of water and sand near her bedroom door that led into the dining room. The sliding door was still closed. The trail of sand told her that someone had been there while she was moving through each room. Elizabeth looked around her, worried that whoever it was might be behind her. The geese were making too much noise for her to hear anything else.

She unlocked the sliding door and slid it open. She had no intention of cornering anyone. She wanted to give whoever was in the house, and the geese, ample avenues of escape. Normally, when she opened the dining room door she only left it open wide enough for air to get through but not for one of their curious feathered guards to walk in.

Everyone in Sunrise knew that what was once a wine cellar entrance on the new foundation was the doorway to stairs that led down to the ocean, via an old smuggler's tunnel. It also meant that the alarm system had been disabled.

"Great," she muttered darkly. More geese had entered through the front door checking out where their buddies were. She brought the broom up and glared at the lead goose that scarred the hell out of her. That gander was nasty. It had a dark spot over its eye, which was how Elizabeth identified her but usually she was always ticked off so it was easy to pick her out.

"Okay, big girl. Take your friends and waddle yourselves back outside. You're making a mess of the floors." She could see already with dismay that her morning was going to be busy with an unplanned event. She had to laugh at herself when she thought of telling this story to Janey and Eric.

Big Bad Bird, or the 3 Bs, as she referred to the lead gander, angrily pecked at the broom that she had extended in front of her. The pecks were aggressive and the 3 Bs nearly pulled the broom from her grip.

"Listen, this is my place. You have a very big yard to be wandering that has plenty of greens and food for your meals. There isn't anything in here...." *I hope.*

Elizabeth could hear a sound in the kitchen, like someone trying not to laugh out loud. *So, I'm someone's show. Well...they don't sound dangerous.*

Elizabeth didn't have time to worry any more about her audience as the big goose was joined by two others and they attacked the broom and worked their way up the handle, due to there wasn't enough room for all of them to reach the bristles.

"Angel, I sure could use you now, buddy!" She yelped as the broom was again, nearly pulled from her hands. These birds were not weaklings by any means.

She took a quick glance behind her, toward the front door and spotted Angel rushing into the yard, nipping a slow to move goose from the entrance. Elizabeth bit off the happy greeting when a painful poke on her leg reminded her she was vulnerable. The large gray bird was not flapping its wings at her, merely giving her a hard poke, as if to get her attention.

Angel started barking at the geese, causing them to flap their wings. Some hastily left and a few rushed her. A horrible noise from the front had the geese extending their long necks and replying. One by one they started to waddle out the door, honking and squawking as they went... and leaving unpleasant reminders of their visit on the hardwood floor and carpets.

"Elizabeth, are you alright?" Alex yelled from the front door.

"Yes, now I am. They scarred the hell out of...."

A screech from the other side of the kitchen counter had Elizabeth remembering her audience. She carefully circled around the geese to look over the counter to see who it was, guessing it was caused by Angel's appearance. Meanwhile, Alex rushed through the hall and into the kitchen.

Elizabeth could see small bare feet sticking out from under one of the bar chairs. Angel was sitting at the hall entrance to the kitchen with her tongue hanging out, as if she had just come from a run. She turned her shaggy head toward Alex as she joined her at the doorway. Alex rested her hand on the dog's head as she studied the shivering child, using the chair to shield her from Angel.

Elizabeth entered the kitchen from the entrance near the refrigerator.

"Angel is the big dog's name," Elizabeth said softly to the child. "She doesn't hurt anyone unless someone tries to hurt her or someone she's protecting. My name's Elizabeth. That's Alex. What's your name?"

Angel's tail started to wag and her head turned toward the pantry.

"I forgot Mark." Alex moved into the pantry and lifted the panel.

"Everyone okay?" Mark asked as he climbed out of trapdoor.

"Elizabeth was being invaded by angry geese and we found the owner of those prints."

Mark held up the abandoned wet shoes that were too large for the small form on the kitchen floor.

"They were left at the bottom of the stairs."

Alex gestured for him into the kitchen where Elizabeth was sitting cross-legged about five feet away from the small pale faced child that looked up at the two adults fearfully.

Mark left the kitchen, thinking too many adults were not what the child needed at that moment.

"Why don't you get information from the kid and I'll get Gillian over here."

Alex nodded.

Gillian was the court appointed child advocate for Sunrise, Brisbane, Bales and Antioch.

Two hours later, Gillian had the child wrapped in a warm jacket and slippers, hugging a medium sized stuffed dog in her car. The child's bruises that they could see from the edges of the ill-fitting and worn shirt and the fact that the child would speak to no one, would be recorded in as safe an environment as could be provided for the child. The Child Services tried to make their investigative approach as noninvasive as they could; though, gathering evidence when it was on a child's body, hidden underneath clothing, was invasive.

Antioch handled abused children's cases for the four surrounding towns, and a home had been established to take care of those that had no home to return to in neighboring Brisbane.

The silent figure sat very still in the seat letting Gillian strap the seat belt across her or his lap, hugging the stuffed dog tightly, and staring out the window frightened when the door closed. Gillian talked to the child explaining what she was doing and where they were going.

As Elizabeth returned back into the house she found Alex and Mark engaged in a low voiced argument in the front room. Both had changed into their work cloths. She went into the study where Angel was playfully pawing at AJ's dark figure that would bounce toward her on stiff legs with his tiny tail and hair sticking straight up, then scuttle away and hide behind the chair's legs. AJ didn't stay hidden long as he would rush his big play toy again, approaching this time slower, with hair standing on end and moving towards Angel in crab-like fashion.

AJ's littermates were not without their own agenda. They had clambered onto the reading chair and were scrambling across the arm, dropping together onto Angel and rolling down her body as they failed to get a good grab onto her coarse hair. Angel was making little sounds and moved her paw laying it across two of the squirming bodies. Their little voices made so much noise it sounded like Angel was killing them.

Elizabeth let the playful scene seep into her, to replace what she guessed the child was running from, careful not to let her imagination provide images.

"What's going on?" Alex's concerned voice sounded behind her.

"A siege gone bad," Elizabeth commented dryly, as she moved over to allow Alex and Mark a view.

Jill's furry orange body broke loose and tried to swat the hairy face that leaned toward her. Angel lifted her head quickly and barked. AJ and Jill disappeared and Jack's orange and white body was released as Angel rose to acknowledge Mark.

"Hey, Mama Angel. How's the babysitting going?" Mark asked.

She pushed her nose into his palm and was rewarded by fingers that scratched across her coarse haired back. She wiggled in delight.

"So, do you think the child was from the house up the cliffs?" Elizabeth asked the two as they watched one then another kitten peel across one side of the room, over the chair and drop behind it, where the three gathered.

"Yes," Alex said.

"We don't know," Mark said at the same time.

"So, unless the child talks or you find that other officer's child alive and willing to point fingers at the house, you have no reason to check it out?" Elizabeth guessed.

"That child is from there," Alex said. "When we were up there we could see there were a lot of under age and unrelated kids," Alex insisted, staring hard at Mark.

"We don't know what's going on at that ding-bat's place," Mark returned firmly. "Maybe he's moving his orphanage here, though he would have to get a license and he hasn't or it would be all over town."

"What about the footprints? They came from the rabbit path that goes up to the ding-bat's place," Alex pointed out.

"What prints? And how did she get in here without me knowing?" Elizabeth asked.

"The footsteps are bigger than the shoes I found and bigger than her footstep," Mark said. "You're talking about a very dangerous man who may have something more going on up there. We can't just jump in there without investigating it or we may miss an opportunity to catch Hailburn and whoever else is involved in something illegal."

"Angel found footprints past our cave entrance," Alex explained to Elizabeth. "We started to follow them and found they led right into the cave. The wire to the camera and alarm had been pulled out. Mark stayed to fix the wires and I had been taking pictures with my cell phone when I got your text message."

"By the looks of the sand tracks in the house, she came up the cave stair, into the kitchen and either went to the dining room door or the front door the first time and ran into the geese and fled back into the house and tried other ways to get out, then just hid."

"Normally only 3 Bs is crabby." She was surprised the geese would be so aggressive towards a child.

"I noticed you have a broom in the front room. They hate the broom. The last feeder, Sally, used it to make her way to the feeder to pour in their feed. Sally was scared to death of them but needed the job so she didn't say anything to anyone for a while."

"They've been conditioned to hate the broom. I'll remember that."

"Well, let's get into work. Chief will want a report. Are you going to be okay?" Alex asked.

"Yes. I was going to mention to you that my editor and his wife will be by for Thanksgiving. They'll be bringing my things that they don't get rid of so...I was thinking of getting some stuff, like maybe..."

"I hope you aren't going to say dining room furniture." Alex looked at her apprehensively.

"No. Alex, I like all that space just like you. I was thinking more along the lines of a dresser for my room."

"Hey, why don't you bring them over to our place for Thanksgiving?" Mark invited her. "We're going to have Mom, Elsie, my two sisters, and I think Linda, working in the kitchen. It's a tradition to gather family and friends around holidays."

Elizabeth hesitated. It was not just because she wanted to return a favor to two people that meant a lot to her, it was because it was going to be a difficult time for her and being surrounded by few people as possible was her preference. Elizabeth felt a heaviness descend on her and a rebellious streak at being forced to do something she didn't want to do.

"Elizabeth, you don't have to. I won't take it as an insult," Mark quickly added.

Alex shifted uneasily as she felt the change of mood from Elizabeth. She waited for Elizabeth to make the plans for their Thanksgiving.

"I would rather a small celebration, if you don't mind. If...Alex wants to go...I..."

"Oh, no you don't," Mark chuckled. "I know better about splitting a couple. Alex hates big parties anyway. I just don't like her to be alone on holidays so in the past I would twist her arm to come to family celebrations."

Elizabeth looked at the quiet, and embarrassed Alex.

"I can talk for myself, you know. Who's cooking?" Alex asked Elizabeth.

"Me. I'm a fairly good cook, not like Genie or Mollee, but...I can read a receipt and not over boil the rice."

"Great. I do coffee and sometimes instant oatmeal, but that's about it in the cooking end," Alex confessed. "But I can cut things up, and miss my fingers."

"She does boil trail rations too," Mark offered.

Elizabeth laughed. "Is that the one where you add boiling water to the pouch?"

"That's the one. All right, Mark. Let's get to work. I sure hope by Thanksgiving all this excitement will be over."

It wasn't that Alex couldn't cook. She refused to. The step-father she had been abused by made a lasting impression on her and one of them translated into hating to cook, something he insisted she do at

seven. She never had the meal perfect and he was ingenious in creating punishments, knowing that bruises were labeled as child abuse, but there were other things that left no physical bruises.

The phone on the counter that was Elizabeth's started to ring. Elizabeth didn't move to pick it up.

"You expecting someone?"

Elizabeth sighed. "It's just a hang up call. Every day, the same time. When I don't answer it, they just let the message run out."

"Damn." Alex looked at her aggravated. "Elizabeth, why didn't you tell me?"

"Sounds just like the one's you've been getting in the evenings," Mark commented.

"You've been getting them too?" Elizabeth looked at Alex accusatory.

"Well, that's different."

"No, it isn't!"

"All right ladies. Let's take a break. We need to get to work. We can all have lunch at Mollees. So make kissy face and we'll get going. It's eight o'clock and already we're starting the day off with reports to fill out," Mark said.

Alex stuck her tongue out at Elizabeth and quickly left as she could feel the towel Elizabeth was holding flick against her hip.

"Eleven o'clock! Mollees!" Alex yelled back at her as the two got into their own vehicles and headed into town.

Elizabeth stepped into the yard to study the outside. The geese were scattered. Some in their pool, which the Animal Farm had told her they would send someone over at noon tomorrow to clean. That was good. She had enough excitement for the day. She also wanted to take notes and ask some questions. She would go on the Internet and get some information too, so she would not be asking questions she could get access to. Her gaze went around the house noting anything out of place and letting the weather, smell of the ocean, buzzing of ...*buzzing?*

Curious Elizabeth headed back into the house and found where the buzzing was coming from. The buzzing was the alarm in the tunnel below the house that Mark had reactivated.

Two dark figures were outside of the cave with dogs on leashes.

Without thinking further on it, she grabbed her cane with the sword. She had no doubt Angel would handle herself well with the dogs.

She went into the closet and checked the stairs that were still down. The motor to retract them was being repaired. It took Mark a week to figure out how to remove the motor.

The way the figures walked, they reminded her of teen-agers. She started down the stairs with a growling Angel impatient to go down before her and see who was trespassing on her territory. There were no lights in the cave so Elizabeth decided to use that to her advantage. She kept her hand on Angel's collar letting her guide her and to keep her from spoiling the effect she was hoping to have on her would-be trespassers.

She stopped before rounding the bend where the sunlight reached. The sounds of boys shouting and dogs barking and panting, were amplified in the tunnel.

Finally one voice got the others boys to stop shouting.

Angel was leaning against her leg and she could feel the shaggy body vibrate with a deep throated growl. The dogs began barking again and yowling.

"Hell and damnation, and all the saints be they praised," a frightened voice yelled over the dogs.

"Mosses, sit! Get your dogs in hand," a deeper voice shouted.

The tunnel echoed with commands as the three boys yelled at their dogs. The echoes served to confuse the dogs for the boys became more vehement in their commands, which only made it worse and various commands echoed loudly around them. Angel had enough and howled.

Nice touch, Angel.

The quiet was for a short time, then panic struck, and the voices of the boys and dogs created a frightening din in the cavern. Elizabeth couldn't tell if the boys were encouraging the canines to go further into the cave or to high tail it out. She could feel Angel move forward a step, increasing her growls that added to the commotion.

Finally there was silence. Angel shifted her weight pulling Elizabeth forward as she moved around the corner and into the gray shadows of the tunnel. Elizabeth held the dog back. She was remembering about messing up the tracks...then remembering by the time the detectives got here the tide would wash the tracks out.

"Come on Angel. Let's see if Alex has a camera somewhere," she said softly. She tugged on the collar gently. Both of them moved back into the darkness with Angel guiding Elizabeth. She found the stairs by pure instinct, as a hand went out before her, painfully hitting the tip of a finger on the stair's railing. Angel obviously had no guide dog training for she had not stopped to warn Elizabeth the stairs were in front of them, instead she merely stepped aside to let Elizabeth go up first.

"Now you're being polite?"

Elizabeth lifted the floor cover cautiously, as she had closed it after them to not let any light down into the cavern to give her presence away and to prevent curious kittens to try to follow.

"Now I know why you let me go first."

Three kittens were curiously peering at her emerging form from beneath the floor, as they roosted comfortably in the rag box in one of the corners.

Elizabeth laughed. "Good thing I closed the floor cover. With all that sand down there, you guys would have thought you were in one huge litter box."

After settling Angel and the kittens on the deck where Angel was in an active play session with her young kits, she went to her phone to call the station. She didn't want to just go into Alex's room and start looking for something. Her message light was blinking, so she pushed it.

"Elizabeth, I have some news for you," Agent Briscolle's voice informed her. "Give me a call at the office, when you get in."

That was two messages. One was to logon to her Email and the other to call her.
First things first. Evidence does not last long...as one of her character's would say.

"Sunrise Police Station, Lieutenant Sams here."

"Hi, Harriet. This is Elizabeth. Is Alex in?"

"She sure is. Hold on Elizabeth."

"Detective Adison," a harried voice greeted her.

"You sound like you can use a warm bath with lots of bubbles and someone to massage those knots of tension out," Elizabeth said. By the silence on the other side, Elizabeth was wondering what Alex was in the middle of that gave her pause. She smirked to herself as she thought about Alex's predicament of what she wanted to say, what she could safely say, and what she could say to appease her lover who just gave her a very tempting offer.

A throat cleared over the phone. "Well, thank you, I'll take you up on that offer...later." A deep breath and then another clearing of her throat. "Can I call you back...or is there something you need right this minute."

"I need camera with flash if you have one." She would tell her later about why.

"In the computer drawer on the left. There's two digitals." Was the quick reply in a soft voice.

Elizabeth could see the little gray and white cells in Alex's head working overtime to try to figure out why she wanted the camera, but not able to ask it.

"Thanks. Is lunch still on?"

"It sure is. Where is the question now," there was a heavy sigh. "As planned, at the restaurant or I'll not want to return to the office today."

"Thank you, bye," Elizabeth said. Conversation at lunch was going to be real interesting she mused. She laid her phone down on Alex's computer table and pulled out the top drawer. It was full of 'things' and after reaching the back of the drawer; she found a digital camera in a black zippered case and one that was loose. The stuff she had pulled out she tried to put back into some sort of compact mess, which was how she found it. Zipping open the case she found three SmartMedia cards at 8GBs. Elizabeth was impressed. She pulled the camera out. Kodak.

The camera appeared to have never been used. She pulled a small card out.

Sweetheart,

It's loaded and ready to shoot. Yes, I know you said no gifts, butt...

Don't you just love butts...?

Paddles and bites,

SMSusan@dol.net

Thoughtfully, Elizabeth laid the note near the computer, and went to the next small booklet that explained the operation of the camera in short hand.

She decided Susan's instructions were easier to follow and made her way back to the closet after one last check of the screen that showed the entrance of the cavern.

"No, Angel. You stay and watch the fort. Give me a bark if the phone rings." She pushed the big dog back, patting her side with affection. "You watch the kittens. Don't let them down here. I won't be long." She left the trap door up this time.

Grabbing a flashlight on the shelf near the exit she looped the Kodak around her neck, and started down the stairs. When she was finished she gave a quick call to the SID agent, Amanda Briscole, but only got her voice mail. She only had a few minutes to get dressed to meet Alex and Mark for lunch. She dragged Angel's heavy dry dog food over the floor cover then the fifty pound bag of cat litter Mark had brought over. She would have used the padlock but Alex lost the key. Since Angel was remaining behind, she figured she would scare anyone that attempted to move the weight off the panel.

She left for her lunch date after making sure Angel and the kittens had something to munch on. However, the kittens seemed to like to play with the big chunks of dry food in Angel's dish better. They were chasing the large pieces of dry food around the kitchen floor while Angel tried to get in a few munches of her own before another thief crept over to make off with another chunk of her food.

"You little mischief makers...you're lucky Angel likes you or you would be part of her meal."

Elizabeth looked for the 3Bs and could see she was contently squatted down on the patio, apparently sleeping in the sun's weak warmth. The day was gray as if to remind her it was winter. Elizabeth remembered she was going to go shopping after lunch.

As she drove down the winding road into town, Elizabeth mentally went over what Janey and Eric would be bringing of hers. The thought of her things, personal pictures and mementos, being back with her gave her a nice feeling that something in her past could be brought to closure. It was amazing how attachment to things worked. When she had to let go of her belongings that were a part of her everyday life there was only a brief moment of anguish. Of course, she was not in a very mentally alert state at the time, but she let go of them and concentrated on staying one foot ahead of her stalker. Now, when she had the chance of getting her things back that she had not had for over a year...the attachment to material items was reasserting itself. Her own dishes were going to be an important addition. Alex brought hers into the household but she only had five settings for two, which was fine if no one minded the mismatching dishes. Alex also didn't have large serving dishes or anything to bake in, since she was Ms. Take Out or Mircowave Queen. She also thought about her clothes. She didn't have many clothes that were in style. Her desktop PC was outdated but CRT monitor would be a relief for her eyes. She had a television, stereo...

She avoided thinking of all the things that were Noel's that would be intermixed with her stuff, but Janey and Eric would remove those. But she knew there would be things they would miss. Janey and Eric had taken care of the loose ends that were so important while she was busy with other things...like survival

Elizabeth took in a shaky breath, her hands gripping the steering wheel tighter and her speed on the coastline road slowing down. Emotions were difficult for Elizabeth to share, aside from the usual responses lovers give to each other, and it frightened her at what was going to happen when she was

looking at her things that would open up a closed part of her. She had been preparing for this with her counselor. It was something she was not going to be in control of and she had prepared Janey and Eric, but she had not talked to Alex about it yet.

Elizabeth wanted to say so much to Janey and Eric who played an important part in keeping her alive, and she thought giving them a Thanksgiving dinner on a day that had a lot of meaning to them would be nice. She felt bad for their son for he must have really been torn with feeling responsible to his pregnant wife's wishes and knowing how much the day meant to his parents. Knowing Janey and Eric, they probably told him to worry about his wife and not them.

A smile creased her face as she thought of the many Thanksgivings she spent with them. The one memory that stood out was where the turkey was served with chestnut stuffing. It was a time when they were all happy. It was before Noel came into her life and before Helen's death. She had finished her first mystery book, which was as accurate as it was because of Helen's insistence that she be accurate, and since she was volunteering to advise her, there should be no discrepancies. Elizabeth had taken her seriously, and the result was that she wrote a book that she found hard to believe she wrote. *Murder in the House of Henbane*. It was meant as tongue in cheek but...like most stories...they take on a life of their own once started.

She would have to search the Internet for a receipt on chestnut stuffing, though it would be easier to just call Janey for the recipe, but she wanted to surprise her.

As she neared the town crossing she could see a vehicle behind her traveling too fast for safety. Instead of fighting for her right on the road, she turned up Bluff's View road, which would take her up toward Genie's and Claire's the back way. The blue Toyota pickup truck bounced past her with only one passenger. It was one of the young boys whose face was being stored on film from the surveillance camera. She had pulled the tape out, labeled it and put in a fresh one. It was now at her side with Alex's digital camera and the note. She wondered if Alex would say anything about it or just...let it go.

Paddles and spansks, huh? Alex, you're keeping a secret from me. Well, I'll just have to find a way to get you to open up...maybe tie you up, blindfold you and attack you with a big feather, ice, candle wax and, nibbles. Elizabeth chuckled to herself as she looked for available parking.

Chapter 10

The parking around Mollee's was taken and as Elizabeth was getting ready to drive around the block she spotted two familiar figures standing in front of a shop talking to the owner. She pulled up.

"Detectives, I have a complaint to report," she called out the window.

Mark looked up at her grinning. Alex, looking in a better mood than what she had sounded like earlier, started over to the Land Rover.

"Hi. No parking huh?" She opened the door that Elizabeth unlocked. "Mark, we'll meet you at Mollee's!"

She slid in and turned back around to look at Elizabeth. "There's a space on the next block in front of Aaron's Furniture."

"Good place. Just where I wanted to go later." She pulled back into traffic. "You're looking good."

"So do you. What's all this?"

"The surveillance tape is of a visit by three teenagers accompanied with dogs that wanted to explore the tunnel. Angel scared them away. The digital camera has pictures of the scene. No vandalism to report, detective."

Alex gave her a quick smile. "Schools in session so it's not from any teenagers from Sunrise. The few that are unemployed and out of school are at the warehouse getting a lecture on car repair from old Tom. That leaves the minister's place. Dogs and young boys." She was quiet for a while. "Max said he fixed the motor to the stairs, its just finding the time to get over and put it back in. I think I'll ask Mark if he can help."

Elizabeth parked and the two slid out. Their walk back toward Mollee's was slowed down with both women looking at the merchandise that was displayed on hangers, tables and shelves outside of stores. Both women made mental notes on what to come back for later to buy as a surprise for the other.

"By the way, one of those teenagers passed me on my way here. Drove a dirty blue Toyota pickup. Pretty beat up. He was in a big hurry." She smirked as she remembered Angel's growls rolling though the tunnel.

"Some citizen will take his license number down and report him if he hits the town's streets going too fast."

Mark was seated in the booth that Elizabeth usually picked. Genie and Claire were talking to him as they waited for something, for they were not sitting down.

"Damn. More trouble," Alex growled.

"I don't think so. Neither looks troubled." Elizabeth smiled at the group as she put a hand on Alex's elbow so she could change places with her.

"So, now we know that it's official, no teenager from Sunrise participated in the vandalism. That leaves us with those kids in Hailburn's place," Mark informed his partner looking pleased. "What's all that?" Mark pointed to the tape and small camera case Elizabeth moved to the tabletop.

"Visitors from Hailburn's place. They brought dogs, Elizabeth said." Alex sipped her coffee preoccupied as she thought about how she was going to word the favor she was about to ask Mark. Since his parents were in town she was reluctant to interrupt a family gathering, but Mark was talking about not having anything to do around the house because his father was doing it all during the week to keep from being bored. Since he had removed it, he should be able to put it in under a half an hour. She could invite the whole family over for dinner. She wondered if Elizabeth would mind.

"We can give the smart cards from the camera to Burns. He has equipment at home he can put this stuff on until the firewall's back up."

Mark leaned toward Elizabeth. "Did Agent Briscole get a hold of you?" he asked in a soft tone.

"She left a message on my machine and I left a message on hers. Her message told me about some Email information but I haven't looked at it yet."

"While she was checking out your information on the Email with her Geeks, they found the Sunrise police firewall had been breached. Burns brought everything down. He and the chief are trying to figure out just how far back to dump. Amanda's Geeks have volunteered to help. Seems they've been twiddling their thumbs because of this problem they have with a few Senators that are questioning the methods of using nonsecurity cleared persons to gather information.."

"I don't know how they have the nerve to complain; they have more security breeches than a sieve has holes." Elizabeth was watching Alex out of the corner of her eye. She was nervous about something. Maybe she remembered the note in the camera case.

"Whoever returned that mail to you showed his hand. Maybe he was a little too full of himself or he didn't think anyone would notice so quickly. Burns had started an auto trace then let the BOT run, just waiting for anyone that should not be logging in to put in an appearance. The secure ID will not let people into ongoing case files from outside but Mike's and Danny's background personnel files had been tampered with. Email files had been scanned and changed. Burns undid that mess by going back to last week's backup files, but I can see we may end up having to go further back to make sure nothing was tampered with. It was while he was home with the twins that the rest of the stuff started to hit. He thought he plugged up the back door but they came knocking again and just about got in. That's when Burns' sniffer went to work. By tomorrow or Sunday we'll see what everyone comes up with."

"I was wondering, Mark ..." Alex hesitated, hoping he wasn't too busy.

"If it's about putting in the motor for the stairs...you got a deal." He grinned at Alex then winked at Elizabeth.

"Dad is driving Linda and Mom crazy with trying to find things to fix." Mark held up his hand and ticked off his fingers at each point, "The kids miss Angel and are driving everyone nuts with wanting the three dogs to be best friends. They also want to play with the kittens. They've bought toys for them." He

sighed. "And I don't want to hear the phone ring with another request to help set up security lights and they're adding Christmas lights too. Dad is now volunteering just to have something to do. I'm going to compete with my own Dad."

"Christmas lights?" Elizabeth asked.

"Mark took number one for the best Christmas decorations and lighting for about three years now. No over doing it with lights and gaudiness, just a unique scene each year. He gets a lot of people asking for suggestions."

"Between the intruder lights and the holiday lights, we're going to need to put up our own windmills...get off the city grid," Mark muttered.

"Would you be able to add a camera so we can see outside of the cave entrance and whoever is at the gate?" Elizabeth asked.

Mark looked surprised and then nodded. "It would be a lot safer. We can stop at the electronic store and pick up some stuff. How long do you two plan on staying at Doc's place?"

"After Christmas, we'll look for another place or before then if we keep getting intruders," Alex said.

After lunch the two detectives walked Elizabeth to the furniture store, then eagerly headed to the office to convince Burn's to go home and download the evidence Elizabeth provided them.

After purchasing her bureau with glass enclosed shelves she stopped at various stores, meeting Genie in one of the stores getting a surprise gift for Claire's birthday. Claire hated to celebrate her birthday so Genie made sure she got her an un-birthday gift, accompanied with dinner, and a surprise desert.

"Why not come over to our place? I can test out some stuff I'm going to use for a Thanksgiving dinner."

"Oh yeah? What are you fixing?" Genie asked as she picked up a small statue of two people in a very intriguing pose. Not something found outside where kids could see it. "Do you think people actually can get in this pose?"

Elizabeth glanced up from the T-shirt she was looking at. "If you're into yoga." She turned back to the T-shirt and chuckled at the suggestive slogan on the extra-large shirt. "This suits Alex. She needs a new sleeping shirt."

Genie looked at Elizabeth and then at the shirt and held up another. "I guess the more lean and agile can."

"Take up yoga and you'll be able to."

"So what do you plan on preparing for us guinea pigs?"

"I'm thinking of an old fashioned chestnut stuffing with pumpkin apple soup, garlic mashed potatoes, fresh baked bread, pumpkin pie...."

"Not for your Thanksgiving dinner," she was laughing, "I mean for Claire."

"That's it. It's practice. I want to try pumpkin apple soup. I've never made it before and my friend Janey loves it."

"Pumpkin puree, clove, apple sauce, butter, nutmeg, chicken stock, ginger, brown sugar and to finish it, cream," Genie listed the ingredients.

"That's the one."

"I haven't made that for her before. It will be a good surprise. We can have a potluck."

"Potluck? Genie, we're the only two cooking."

"Well, don't short change Alex. In the House kitchen she's done more than help mix and pour cake mix into cupcake tins. She once dumped chopped ingredients for an omelet into the pan, without the eggs."

"I'll have to remember she has potential to make special breakfasts. For now, I'll just let her do the coffee and oatmeal. How about coming over between ten and eleven? That's about when the Animal Farm is sending over someone to clean up the pond. Claire said she wanted to see how it's done. Is she still interested in getting a few geese?"

"Yep. Fresh eggs, cute pets, nice guardians. Can you see a tagger getting chased by an irritated goose? Oh boy will they find out firsthand what it feels like to be goosed!"

"What about Bruno, your dog? It's one thing to pick up after him and another to clean up after these geese. Let me tell you, wait until she steps in their mess. Alex taught me some new words after she slipped on the side of the house."

"The geese will take the front of the house at night. We're putting in a small pond. Claire doesn't like cutting the lawn. She only likes the gardening part, so the pond will get rid of a lot of the lawn."

"Oh. Wait until you have to clean the pond," Elizabeth laughed.

"I won't say anything to her about it. She loves those damn geese for some reason."

"Have you tried buying a few rubber ducks for her bath?"

Both women laughed then parted. Elizabeth sat in the car along with her groceries and gifts, and thought about a conversation she still had not had with Alex.

She glanced at her watch and decided to swing by the police station. Her cell phone buzzed as she pulled into a space in front of the building.

"Hello?" She remembered Alex telling her to never give her name.

"Hi."

A smile curled up her lips.

"Image you calling. I was just thinking of you."

"Oh, yeah?"

Alex laughed. "I was hoping you were around town still."

"If you're in your office, peek out your window." Elizabeth could hear movement and the sound of blinds moving.

"I have a nice aerial view of a green Range Rover," Alex told her. "Anyone's I know?"

"Come out and see."

"You have good timing." There was a pause, "Max has the engine so we were going to put it in the back of the Rover."

"Okay."

"We'll be down."

As the men struggled to put the engine in the back of Alex's Range Rover, Elizabeth decided to bring up a few things with Alex before Saturday. She never knew when she and Alex would get enough time to talk. The last few nights they were lucky that she hadn't gone out but they didn't spend that much time talking on subjects each of them liked to avoid.

"Alex...I wanted to talk to you about Monday night."

"You still want me to come to that group session?"

Elizabeth felt relieved that she was still intending to come. She was hoping she wouldn't chicken out. "It's actually just you and me so Jeff can get some history on you and so you can get to know him. I just wanted to tell you..." she paused as she watched Alex's face become tense. "I'll be probably dealing with memories of Noel."

Alex looked surprised. "Noel?"

Elizabeth concentrated on keeping her eyes on Alex and not running away. "I..." her voice tightened a little and she was wondering if in this short time she was going to be able to get it out, but it was better than just sitting down with nowhere to go and having to drag it out. "I'm getting some stuff back that might have some...it might be pretty emotional when I open some of the boxes that Janey and Eric are bringing and, it's..." Elizabeth found she couldn't say the most important thing...it was the anniversary date of his death.

Alex looked at her for a long moment. "Would you rather I not be there?"

Elizabeth looked surprised..

A moment of panic set in with both women as they tried to take internal readings of their own issues and the needs of the other.

"I'd like to be there," Alex got out quickly in a breathless rush. "I just don't know if or how I'll be. But...I'll be there if you want me to be there," she finished in a soft voice, fearful that she may have failed somewhere by not saying the right thing the first time. She was also frightened that something Elizabeth faced may trigger something she didn't want to face in her own buried past. The other night she let Elizabeth's kisses and closeness lower her resistance to see a therapist, thinking a group survivor meeting would not be too threatening to her own stuffed memories, after all it was about other people.... but now the influence wore off and her courage was wavering. What if they asked her some questions about her own past? She knew how powerful group sessions were on each member whether she or he wanted to be effected or not. There was no way she was going to be one of those wailing women that broke down in front of strangers and spill out her pathetic past.

Elizabeth let the internal feelings of confusion, self-recriminations, and doubt settle as the blur of the figure before became clearer and she was able to focus on Alex's tension that was showing in her body position and eyes. Elizabeth studied the green malachite eyes whose pupils were but a pinpoint. Her face was drawn up as thoughts crossed her mind and Elizabeth realized that Alex was afraid for herself.

That makes two of us, my Love.

"I would like you to be there. But if you need to talk about it first, maybe tonight we can. It's going to be busy tomorrow with Mark and his family and Genie and Claire coming over. We also have the pond cleaning person coming over and the furniture will be delivered around that time too."

Alex tried not to give in to the desire to lower her eyes. She cleared her throat and started slowly, "It probably would be a good idea to talk a bit, just so we know what to expect. I don't know much about Noel and I don't know what I should do if...what do I do when you..."

"Cry?" Elizabeth smiled sadly.

"Well, that I know what to do. I'll hug you. It's if you get mad or something really crazy. I wouldn't know if you would want me to hold your hand or just sit back." Alex shrugged. "I'm not skilled at this 'open up and show the world my feelings' thing." She took a deep breath. "Mark and I are on call tomorrow but he said he would cover tomorrow night."

Elizabeth smiled then looked towards the SUV where the two men were lifting the motor.

"I still can't believe they managed to get it out of the closet. It must weigh a lot," Alex said.

"The same weight as a single outboard motor," Elizabeth told her.

Alex looked at her in surprise. "Really? For me, it might as well be two."

Mark came sauntering over wiping his hands on a rag. "Good thing Max believes in cleaning engines. Okay. Leave it in the car for the night. Don't either of you two think about moving it out," Mark told them both. "Dad and I will lift it out. How does ten o'clock sound?"

"It's a man's thing, right? No problem with me. Elizabeth said Claire and Genie are coming over for a pond cleaning ritual," Alex told him.

"Is it that kid from Brisbane?" Mark's brow was furrowed.

"I don't know. John Butler is his name," Elizabeth replied.

"I'll want to be there too." Mark didn't say why as he played with the rag. He looked at Alex and Elizabeth. "It's about five, why go home now, Alex?"

Alex looked surprised. Her desk was locked up and any report she had to work on now would be done with a lot of distractions. It sounded like a good idea to her.

"I'll be right back Elizabeth. Let me get my coat."

"Go, while you have the chance," Mark told her softly. "You go back in there and you'll get nabbed for some phone call." Mark had overheard some of the conversation between the two and decided to lend a hand. Since most of the town was now looking for any suspicious person around their property and their neighbors, calls had actually slowed down for two nights. He was hoping this was a trend, to say nothing of the fact that they had stopped one group by jailing one of their members, and they had an idea of where the teenagers that were tagging the homes and public buildings were coming from.

The drive back to the house had both women nervous. Neither knew what the other was going to bring up, so as not to embarrass herself as well as her mate in a therapy session. The concern was bringing up a lot of questions and uncertainties...but not in their own feelings for the other.

Paws draped over the fence on the side of Alex's bedroom, with a hairy face and brown luminescent eyes peered at them as Elizabeth pulled under the carport.

"I didn't realize just how tall she is," Alex commented as she helped Elizabeth with her packages. Elizabeth waited as Alex did her safety check.

"Well, I count nine geese a moving, three kittens pouncing, and one dog a bouncing," Alex said. A dog with three kittens came rushing into the kitchen with Elizabeth moving slower behind them.

"I have mixed feelings about this kitchen entrance,"

"Me too. The other night I had a dream about it. It was something about me going down and meeting up with this big woman who was dressed in beads and leather. She told me I didn't belong there and she would smuggle me back topside."

"Now that's an interesting dream," Elizabeth said, as she mixed some wet food with the dry. "Hey, don't play with her food AJ," she scolded the black kitten as he tried to carry a large dry chunk of dog food as she laid the bowl down. "I should have fixed the kittens dish first."

Alex watched as Elizabeth moved between dog and cats, quickly preparing their food. Alex thought about the dog Elizabeth had lost and of the child whose death was also going to be something they needed to talk about.

"So, who is Susan?" Elizabeth asked not turning around.

"Susan?" Alex blinked at the tall back that she was facing as Elizabeth put a kettle of water on and pulled out some tea.

"The one who wrote the note in your camera case." Elizabeth pulled out some food to prepare their dinner.

"Oh, that Susan." Alex thought for a moment. "It was someone I met via a chat room. We also met a few times at a leather bar in San Francisco but, it didn't go further. She was a bit too rich for my blood."

"As in money?"

"As in everything. She took too many chances."

"Nice camera."

"I forgot I had it until you asked." Alex moved over to stand next to Elizabeth.

"My turn," Alex told her quietly, watching the lidded eyes that lifted momentarily to look into hers.

Elizabeth laid the knife aside and dumped the chopped ingredients into a mixing bowl Genie had loaned her so she did not have to buy anything she already had stored away.

"Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Have you ever been in a relationship longer than two years?"

Elizabeth paused in her motion to pour steaming water into two cups. "Yes. Two." She handed a cup to Alex then moved the bowl with smaller ones to the counter they usually ate at. They still had not bought a table bench table to put in a corner of the kitchen.

Alex said nothing, expecting her to fill in more information.

"One was Noel's mother. We were together since High School. One day she decided she wanted to marry a man and start a family society wouldn't hassle her about."

"She must have thought a lot of you to ask that her son be adopted by you."

"She had no one else," Elizabeth told her dryly then sighed. "You're right. We...wrote now and again. She was happy when Helen and I got together." She smiled and picked at her salad.

After a length of silence passed without Alex breaking it, Elizabeth went on.

"Two years after Judy left I met Helen. Helen was an Agent with the FBI. We met while I was researching guns. I was just learning the fine art of research and after we got together she made me stick to it. She felt it was important to be honest even about off-hand remarks on something that the reader would think was factual."

"What did she say when you adopted Noel?" Somehow Alex felt Helen had left her when she adopted Noel.

"Helen was killed before I adopted Noel. She never saw him...for that matter neither had I until he was about a year and a half. His mother was in the hospital after a hit and run driver crashed into their car. Mike, her husband and Noel's father, died instantly. Crushed. She somehow knew she wasn't going to make it and wanted to have me adopt him legally. That had her doctor really upset. He thought she was giving up. Noel's only living relative was a grandmother too old to care for him, though she found us five years later. She got a court order to have us move near her. Unfortunately, we settled in the wrong town."

"Bobby Miles' home town."

"Yes."

"What did Judy die of?"

"A brain aneurysm. Surprised everyone."

"So, you had Noel for how long?"

"Five years. He couldn't remember his mom or dad. It was the three of us, Rusty our dog, he and I. My turn. Have you been in any relationship for more than two years?"

Alex laughed, blushing. "No. A year would be pushing it." Her eyes watered for a moment as she struggled to not close down. This game was worse than truth or dare.

"I've had some difficulty with..." she closed her eyes to gather the courage she needed to be honest with herself as well as with Elizabeth. Elizabeth was a person she wanted to share her life with and it meant a lot of other things about herself would be shared too. She sighed. "I'm not really sure what it has been that I've found difficult to handle in a committed relationship. I think the first thing was...I never met anyone until you that I wanted to live with." She smiled into Elizabeth's eyes. She paused as she struggled to maintain her equilibrium that tipped dangerously as she wanted to only stare into the face that was regarding her with ...understanding. "For any relationship I had been in I always insisted we keep separate apartments because I needed my space." Alex started to laugh while shaking her head. "I think I just wanted a nice comfortable sexual relationship with one partner and with no serious emotional ties."

"So, these different women agreed to a one year 'when I need it' relationship?" Elizabeth asked curiously.

"All? There were three." She didn't mention that before she realized she liked women exclusively there had been a guy in her life. "No. All of the relationships ended because I found out they were out and about. Then I got involved with doing undercover work for SID and just did the usual casual dating stuff. It was conveniently difficult to have a serious relationship since my work required a lot of travel and being away for months at a time."

Alex picked at her salad as she thought of what she wanted to ask Elizabeth. If she asked her, it meant Elizabeth could ask her the same question.

"I...really want this relationship to work, Elizabeth. You're the first person that I really want to be with." *Great, Alexandra, just get to the point!* "Only...I'm afraid that I'm going to mess up big time..."

"Whoa, whoa!" Elizabeth waved her fork. "Hold on, Hon...that's part of what a relationship is about."

"Messing up?" Alex asked unbelievably.

"Yes and more. We already have marked on the calendar important times, like your cycles so moodiness has a reason, stomach aches aren't from whoever cooked that night... we'll survive. I somehow don't think we're that fragile." She reached out and pulled Alex towards her. Her lips brushed against Alex's tasting the oil and vinegar from the salad then kissed her lightly, releasing her when the pulse under her fingertips quickened. "Your little gifts around the house are really appreciated. I love the chocolate kisses leading up to a beautiful rose, a book of love poems with a stuffed kitty keeping it warm...and when you stop leaving them around...I'll try not to take it personally," she told her in a low voice that sent shivers up Alex's spine. "But you're going to have to not take it personal if I donate some of the stuffed animals to the children's hospital because I ran out of kennel space."

Alex let the close presence of Elizabeth seep into her, laughing into her arm. It was amazing how quickly the body she wanted to always snuggle up against had changed in a few weeks. It was downright distracting. During Elizabeth's flight from her stalker she had grown extremely thin and sick, until she arrived at Claire's shelter and under Claire's team, had begun to get some of her good health back.

"Elizabeth?" she asked in a voice that was so soft it was difficult to hear unless listened for. "I love you."

"I love you too," a stronger voice answered. Lips met once again and spent more time exploring familiar territory with enthusiasm.

Noise from behind the intertwined women caused Elizabeth to crack open one eye and check out the sounds she suspected were from a mischievous fur ball that had clambered on the counter. AJ was in the cupboard she had left ajar with his two siblings and a worried Angel watching. Reluctantly, she parted from Alex's lips and turned to the kitten that disappeared inside the tempting dark unexplored territory.

"AJ, get out of there," Elizabeth coaxed as she opened the door wider. "Come on."

"Why not just reach in and grab him?" Alex had mixed emotions about the interruption.

"The kittens still are wild. Come on, get out of there, AJ." Elizabeth had no intention of getting her hand shredded with the needle sharp claws of a frightened kitten. While Elizabeth tried to get an angle to scare him out and give him room to jump out, Alex was moving her own body to compensate for Elizabeth's movements, deciding she was not going to move away from the tantalizing body she had been warming up to.

"Alex..." Elizabeth struggled not to laugh as the tickling sensation from Alex's wandering hands ran up her ribs. "This calls for a joint decision here. Is the physical energy expended to end the stress the cat in the cupboard is causing more important than the physical energy expended in...hmmmm. There's something about this kitchen."

Both ignored the crash of things falling out of a cupboard as other more urgent needs were being attended to.

Chapter 11

Sometime during the night when Alex had risen to use the toilet Elizabeth thought it would be a good time to check the kitchen out. She didn't bother using Alex's robe that was too small for her. The temperature in the house was about 69 degrees, enough to give her goose bumps as she moved to her bedroom, looking for her own robe. She turned the lights on as the night's moon gave enough light. She learned to move comfortably in the dark rather than turning on a light and becoming a target for her stalker. Now she found she liked moving around in the natural darkness and could easily make out the distinct forms of objects that other people may have more trouble seeing. Surprisingly enough, nothing was dislodged from the cupboards. She closed the cupboard doors and went back to her room.

Standing in front of the window that overlooked the ocean, she absentmindedly reached down and stroked Angel's head. She seldom closed the drape as she liked waking up and looking out at the sea. It gave her a sense that she was not trapped in a corner. Her gaze became fixed on the reflection of a light moving on the ocean then disappear. The light again appeared and this time it stayed on.

The reflection of a robed Alex appeared behind her. "It's chilly." Alex moved next to her to see what Angel and Elizabeth were looking at. Both slid arms around the others waist.

"Damn. They're going to try and explore our tunnel with the tide in."

"Probably using the tide to take a boat in. There's a ship out there, just near the cove under that house the teenagers are at."

Alex squinted to see what Elizabeth was pointing at. "Where? Hold on. Let me get my night vision goggles."

She came back and was about to step towards the window when she paused. "I don't know why, but I keep getting the feeling there used to be a door right here."

Elizabeth nodded. "And over there...to get onto the deck. Also, in the bathroom. I looked the other day along the walls. It looks like someone put windows in where there were doors, and a hot tub. Someone didn't feel comfortable with so many entrances to the master suite."

Both women walked through the short hall that passed the kitchen and into the dining room. Alex pushed opened the sliding door to the outside and stood on the porch with her goggles on. The cold night air from the ocean whipped Elizabeth's hair back and ruffled Alex's short hair as the two studied the ocean.

"There's a boat out there. Probably about...Elizabeth, Hailburn has a small 20 foot 8-passenger cruiser. He docks it at Bodega Bay. He has to know that the child we gave to child services hid in the cave."

"When I spoke with Genie, she said no one claimed the child and the child is still not talking. When she plays, it's by herself and it's just with the stuffed dog she was given. They named her Nepa."

Alex decided skulking about in a robe near a cliff's edge, in the dark, was not wise. "I'm going to dress in something dark. Do you want to go down the tunnel with me and make sure we don't have unwelcomed visitors?"

"We'll meet in the kitchen," Elizabeth said promptly.

Alex checked the surveillance camera for the cave and the entrance to see if it was still active. She met Elizabeth in the kitchen, wearing black jeans, a dark shirt, sandals made for serious walking, and a navy skull cap. Alex had forgotten Elizabeth had experience in dressing to not be seen.

"I think we need to do something about this tunnel entrance before it gets any more popular, like post a big sign in the front, no trespassing."

"That will surely temp the kind of people we don't want in our basement," Elizabeth said.

"They haven't found the entrance yet, so they aren't familiar with the beach"

"They had dogs with them the first time and some tracks to follow." Alex pulled up the trap door. She paused for a moment, tempted to get her gun. She would have no legal reason to have it. As she bent to listen to what sounds were coming up the stairs, she was joined by Angel and three curious kittens.

Elizabeth who was watching the group would have laughed out loud if she didn't worry about sound traveling down the stairs.

"I'll be right back," Alex whispered. For a moment Alex thought maybe she should let Mark know, and then decided he needed a break for the night. Instead she quickly pulled out her deep waders that she had decided to invest in after two bodies within two years were found dumped in the marsh.

Elizabeth looked up at the strange sound that was approaching the kitchen. Alex appeared dressed in boots and waders, looking every bit a fisherwoman even without her hat and reel.

"Looks like you're prepared for hip deep stuff," Elizabeth whispered.

Alex grinned. "People who are tall probably don't have the same concerns about wading in what they perceive of as a bit of water," she whispered back. Carefully, she started down the stairs, listening after each step.

"Angel, you stay here and guard the house and kitties," Elizabeth whispered in the dog's flickering ears. She somehow thought Angel would prefer that for they could hear the water lapping against the sides of the walls below them.

Elizabeth followed closely behind Alex.

Alex felt the warm hand resting on her shoulder, giving her more courage than what she could muster on her own. *Maybe this type of work is starting to get old.* Alex shrugged the thought away. *Maybe I have more to lose now,* was the more practical thought.

Elizabeth's hand gripped her shoulder when they were a foot from the bottom of the last step. Alex had the night goggles on and was identifying walls and water that was rising at each gentle wave that lapped against its restrictions. But she already knew how high it would rise by the old watermarks on the

wall. Slowly she let herself into the water that came up to her knees and stood near the stairs peering around the small cavern that the outer tunnel opened up to.

Now they both could hear voices, but they faded in and out. Alex moved towards the curve of the tunnel that would take them to the ocean. The coldness of the water that was lapping at her legs was starting to seep through the waders. Elizabeth, seemingly undaunted by the cold water moved quietly behind Alex, still attached to her shoulder. Both women were careful how they moved in the water for the lapping water was echoing in the small area and they did not want to add their own noise, giving away their presence.

Elizabeth's pressure on her shoulder increased and Alex could feel her warm breath on her ear. "This is where the tunnel takes a turn. We can wait here."

Alex nodded. There was splashing and soft curses that bounced off the walls.

"He's coming!" a young voice whispered dramatically and sounding frightened. Louder splashes and a deep angry voice growled directions as the two could hear the bottom of a boat being dragged over a rocky bottom.

With the echoes it was deceiving how close their intruders were but both women guessed the boat was being dragged into the cave with someone important directing the laborers.

"Those boats, loosen them and take them to my cruiser. Looks like they're salvageable."

No one dared to tell the minister that he was telling them to steal."

"Minister, they're chained and..."

"Do you dare to question ME?" The voice had not risen. It deepened and by the silence that followed, it was not a comfortable pause in conversation.

"Abe, take him back to the cruiser in one of those boats."

"Minister...please...please...I wasn't...." A slap and a splash of water told the two women the conversation was over.

"Thank you John. Now, let's investigate this place. If Mary is in here...I want her located....alive or dead. Is that clear?"

"Alright you lazy sinners...get the rope and pull!" an older voice ordered. "Jeb and Mike, you two stay here and get those boats loose. And pick up that disgusting sinner. Take him back to the boat as the reverend commanded."

The voices may have been uttered in a conversational tone but they carried well in the tunnel. Lights lit up the other side of the corner of their hiding place, though they were weak. Elizabeth pulled at Alex's arm. Alex nearly jumped when she turned her goggled sight on the tall form at her side.

"See that knob of a rock up there?" The whispered breath tickled her ear and she was tempted to brush at it. Instead she readjusted her night vision goggles. She could see an unnatural line of a thick cable running down the side of the far wall. How had Mark and her missed it?

Elizabeth ran her hands lightly along the rough wall. The wall was not crumbling or felt like it was made up from the same material as the rest of the cavern's walls. She pushed in several places with Alex

keeping an eye on the light's reflection that were getting stronger against the tunnel's walls and could hear the unnatural swishing of water as legs moved in the hip deep water.

Alex grabbed the wall she was leaning against cutting off an audible curse as part of the wall moved. She glanced up and could see a rail the gate was suspended on. Water swished and what she thought was a natural wall moved across the opening. When opening closed, Alex could see on their side the surface was smooth. Someone had spent a lot of money creating a fake gate in the shape of a rock cliff. Who owned the property before Doc?

Both waited breathlessly. Elizabeth moved to stand next to Alex.

"Reverend, it ends here," a young voice piped back.

"It can't end here! I was told it goes up under the house. This isn't far enough under!" the deep voice growled.

They could hear more splashing as bodies moved about looking for an opening in the wall. They could hear a rapping on the stones as if someone was tapping them.

"Minister seems there's a door here. It's blocking us from going any further."

"Let me see. Pull the boat closer! You ungrateful sinners! Get the hell out of the way! John!"

Then there was silence with only an occasional sob echoing in the tunnel. "Shut him up. You coward! The Lord suffered on the cross for your sorry sinful soul. You can't even take a few moments of discomfort. Well, you'll be toughened up. Give me that other light. John, look for a lever or something," the deep voice ordered.

Alex didn't know if the intruders were trespassing or not so she was wondering what she could do to challenge the further encroachment of a person who had the intention of finding a way into the house that was above them. Why did he want to trespasses? Hailburn didn't strike her as someone who would be open about his unlawful activities.

"Warning. Intruder Alert. You are on private property. An alarm has been sent to the local police department. If you continue to engage in this unlawful behavior, you shall be charged with knowledgeable trespassing."

The recorded message was in a voice that echoed up and down the tunnel, scarring the wits out of everyone that heard it.

"Damnation! He didn't say anything about this. Damn lowlife. John! Get me out of here!"

"Owww owww. I'm pulling as hard as I can!" The women heard a young voice cry out.

Alex let out a soft breath of air. "Come on. I want to call the station and see if they did get an alarm."

Alex peeled off the boots and waders as Elizabeth pulled her soaked tennis shoes and pants off, and a worried Angel sniffed at both of them. The kittens were sitting on the overturned bag of dog food that had been opened and dry chunks of dog food were all over the kitchen floor.

"Jeez!" Alex breathed as she looked for a safe place to plant her feet. Elizabeth pulled the broom out and cleared a path for both of them. While Alex darted into her room to get to her phone Elizabeth cleaned up the mess. "I can't wait until you all would rather spend your time outside," she told the kittens that suddenly found the broom something fascinating to attack. Little bodies were rolling as Elizabeth continued to slowly sweep up dog dry food with kittens trying to cling to the bushy broom for a ride.

Alex came back into the kitchen with her phone cradled on her shoulder and pulling on a warm pullover.

"Yeah. I'm going to check the tape now, chief. Do you think we can get the coast guard to visit that cruiser soon? It sounded like the boy was frightened of being on the boat with that guy that calls himself a minister....Yeah.....Okay.....Yep. Thanks, chief."

She hung up the phone and watched the comical scene before her. Angel was lapping up an occasional bit of food when it rolled her way, which was not because Elizabeth was directing it that way, but because Jill, the smoothed haired orange tabby was in a full charge after the chunk of dry food she had sent moving across the tile floor. AJ was attacking the broom with a vengeance, accompanied with hisses and snarls, and Jack, the fluffy orange and white was waiting for a good shot at his sibling who had stolen one of his chunks of dry food toys. His little butt was wiggling back and forth in the anticipation of his attack. Off he went, bouncing sideways as he arched his back, hair sticking straight out and right for his sister who ignored him. Both collided and rolled in the pile of food Elizabeth was sweeping up.

"Hey, Angel, take your pack out of here, will you?" Elizabeth looked up at Alex who was laughing in the doorway. "So, what's going to happen?"

"Chief has been looking for a reason to inspect something of Hailburn's. We need the tape of this excursion of his. According to the chief, the owner of this house, Doc, owns the rights to the tunnel up to right where that gate is. Because it's not posted as Private Property on the outside, which had been at one time, Hailburn can give the excuse he didn't know. He would just be in an awkward position of answering the question of what was he doing in a tunnel, at night that looked like it went under the house of his neighbors. It would be real difficult for him to get a sympathetic jury with all the problems Sunrise has been having lately with taggers."

"And his cruiser off shore?" Elizabeth swept the dog food into the dustbin and watched her lover dump it back into the righted bag of dog food.

"Well, there is a buoy not far from him that warns anyone from being too close. He is inside the markers. Also, there have been complaints from the local fish market that someone has been illegally fishing their traps. That might be those kids, if they're fed as seldom as the dogs. So there is cause to board his cruiser. That reminds me. Yesterday the Human Society took a look at the dogs. There was no adult on premises and from her report; the kids she did see were not looking good. She saw one of the older boys punch a young kid in the face for looking out the door while she was there. Chief just said Brisbane is getting a group together to raid the house ...but ...because they have to move without any of Hailburn's ears from learning about it they've been pulling all sorts of strings which is why it's taking time. They want

to give him a false sense of security; however, from what we overheard, he must be here because of the missing kid. Wonder why he's worried?"

"The bruises on the girl's body. Explaining it away may be awkward."

"He can say whoever was overseeing her was responsible. Mark found his church on the Internet. It runs an orphanage, a soup kitchen, several bible retreats, and has pilgrimages to the holy land once a year. Mark said he talked to someone in the real estate business off the record. Hailburn wanted to turn the cliff house into a nonprofit orphanage run by his church but he hasn't been able to get the clearance to put an orphanage there because another non-profit organization has already gotten permission to build one in Sunset."

"Let's see if we can get in a little nap before you and Angel go out of your morning run."

Alex groaned, "I thought if I moved way out here, Mark would lose interest in waking me to run early in the morning. That crazy cop is feeling too smug about these morning runs."

Propped up and snuggling close in Elizabeth's bed, they watched the moon shine a path over the bed, and talked over Saturday's busy day. Finally, tired and feeling talked out, they slid under the covers to sleep. Alex's hand rested on Elizabeth's hip.

"You're gaining weight. That's good," Alex murmured. Then she fell asleep.

Angel was better than a clock, in that she was quiet, but doggie breath was not pleasant.

"Oh, that's awful," Alex groaned as she got the full effects. Her head was nearest the edge of the bed.

"Mouth wash," Elizabeth mumbled. "Gotta get her some mouth wash."

The alarm from the monitors went off.

"It's probably your running buddy. You get to let him in," Elizabeth said.

Alex got up and ran up the hall to open the gate, then the front door, which kittens and dog bounded out, and then back to her own bathroom to dress for the morning run.

Mark was making the coffee when Elizabeth came into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Elizabeth. Sleep okay? The chief told me about your visitors last night," Mark leaned back on the counter.

"She didn't want to disturb your one night off." Elizabeth could see his feelings were hurt.

"Besides, she wanted to surprise you with the moving wall we found. Quite impressive."

"Morning, Mark!" Alex had her sweatshirt on backwards and by the expressions of the two guessed it. "I can't stand this shirt. They put the design on the back instead of the front!" She pulled the top off, and readjusted it.

"How about if we jog down the tunnel?" Alex suggested.

"Nope. As tempting as it sounds. You're just trying to get out of running," Mark grinned at her.

"Elizabeth should be getting into the running spirit soon. You plan on joining us?"

"I certainly don't want to interfere with this partner bonding you two have, especially if it means I have to get up so early in the morning."

After their run, Mark waved at the two women as he rushed off to have breakfast with his family. Angel's tongue was lolling out and just about buried her muzzle in her water dish, splashing more on the floor than what she probably inhaled, as Alex dragged Elizabeth into the shower with her.

By ten, Elizabeth had her soup nearly finished. Alex lent a willing hand at chopping, pulling out food from the refrigerator for their pot luck, and then keeping the kittens and dog from entering the kitchen where they seemed to find more interesting to be than the deck.

"How's everything over there?" Elizabeth asked as Alex glared at AJ who decided to scuttle under the legs of Angel to escape with a stolen piece of dry food from Angel's bowl that had been moved into the pantry.

"I feel like a herd dog."

Elizabeth leaned over and kissed her lips as they conveniently tilted up for her.

"Nope. You don't kiss like a dog...though I have had only a limited amount of experience in that field."

"Care to go into that bit of..."

The sound of the alarm went off.

"Saved by the bell," Elizabeth smiled.

"You are not getting out of explaining to me just what the limited amount is that you were referring to," Alex told her as kittens following an enthusiastic Angel bounded toward the front door.

Alex first checked the screens. Five vehicles. "A caravan! Oh, what fun."

"It was just a lick on my arm or hand. I'm not going to even ask you what you had in mind."

"Nothing. Just want to make sure my lover isn't into too kinky of stuff... or else..."

"Else what?"

Both women were walking out the door to greet, the Scripts clan, Genie and Claire, the delivery truck with furniture and an unfamiliar dirty brown old chevy truck pulling the dirtiest position, the back where the dust converged.

"Else...I would have to get a tape on the karma sutra to keep up," Alex whispered.

Elizabeth used her hip to knock Alex off balance. Alex retaliated with a thrust of her own while their guests were entertained with the two women jostling each other.

"Ms. Elizabeth!" Katie's small voice called from the car as Linda pulled up under the carport. "We got Mama Cat!"

"And toys!" Jonathan piped up, not to be outdone by his sister.

"Mama Cat?" Elizabeth for a moment, found her thoughts trying to figure out where to put Mama Cat with everyone around. She and Alex agreed to try and domesticate her but...

"We can lock her in your room with litter box until everyone leaves."

Greetings were exchanged and then the women from the shelter, led by Genie, started to move the food, chairs, extra table, and other supplies into the house from the cars. The furniture men were directed into Elizabeth's room with her supervising where she wanted the dresser placed. The young man from the Animal Farm was escorted back to the pond with Mark, his father and Claire who wanted to watch him work. Alex felt sorry for him because she didn't see how any of the three could not offer suggestions on how to do his work better, but their presence would probably unnerve him.

When the men from the furniture store left, Elizabeth set Mama Cat in corner where it was dark and where she had access to food and water.

"Where can she go potty?" Katie asked as she closed the door carefully behind Elizabeth.

"I'll let her out just before we settle for lunch. I want her to get use to the room's smell first."

"Dr. Sandy said she's too wild to want to stay home with her babies."

"Maybe. But right now she looks a little groggy."

"It's her medicine," Jonathan informed her with a note of authority. "Dr. Sandy gave her one shot before she left. You should have heard her cry. She made more noise than Katie when she has to get a shot." Jonathan poked his sister who had settled on Elizabeth's leather chair in the study where they waited for the kittens to appear from their hiding places.

Little eyes peered out at them from under the skirts of the reading chair. Angel was in her glory as both her adoring fans had hands buried in her coarse coat scratching her. Elizabeth left the two kids to figure out how they were going to get the kittens to come out and play. Kitty toys were laid out neatly in a row to tempt them.

Lunch was noisy and exhausting for Elizabeth and by Alex's tired smile when everyone was saying good-by, Elizabeth guessed Alex was ready for silence. The nice thing about having friends for dinner was that they helped clean up so there was nothing left for the two to do except think how nice it was going to be to soak in the hot tub either on the patio or in the master bedroom. She decided the patio. Alex would be pleasantly surprised that she had filled it and warmed it up the last few days. While Alex was locking up the house, Elizabeth removed the cover to the hot tub and checked the temperature.

"Hey, here you are." Alex stepped onto the patio where the light was on. Elizabeth was sitting on the bench leaning over the tub's rim, with steam rising into the chilly night air.

"Is it turned on?" Alex asked surprised.

"Yes. I thought it would be nice to sit in a nice hot tub in the cold night air with the stars above us."

"That sounds perfect! With or without a suit?"

"A robe for when we get out is all I think we'll need."

* * * *

"So," Elizabeth said as Alex slid down next to her, linking their legs. "Did you guys have a good time testing the stairs?"

"Boys will be boys, they didn't let me do anything but watch. They wanted to do it all. I was there to take notes." Alex giggled. "If it weren't so entertaining, I would have left. Mark impressed his father and me with his tenacity or was it just old fashioned determination, to climb over an unstable cliff face to install cameras on the outside of the cave entrance."

"That was entertaining?"

"Well, it was their comments. Johan and Mark are very witty to cover the tension of working together as equals." Alex said, sounding dreamy. She linked her hand around Elizabeth's and brought it up to kiss her knuckles. "Let's not do so many people next time."

"Not for a while," agreed Elizabeth. "It was a bit much, but I missed my friends at the shelter."

Alex yawned. "I'm ready for bed."

"I'll let Mama Cat out to roam in my bedroom. We'll sack out in your room. Sound okay?"

"Yes. That way I don't have far to run if my phone rings." Alex stretched her jaw in a yawn.

"Let's hope everything will be quite at least until Tuesday." Elizabeth got out of the tub and slipped on her robe.

Alex followed her out, and helped her put the cover back on the tub.

"Until Tuesday?"

"Monday is our meeting with Jeff."

Alex smiled. "Even if a murder happened, I wouldn't miss our meeting for the world," Alex mocked.

"All right," Elizabeth said.

"I am serious, joking aside," Alex said. "I know how important this is to you."

Chapter 12

"Hi, Millie, can you tell Jeff we're here?" Elizabeth said.

Alex ignored Millie and sat on the couch, picking up a tattered magazine from the scattered pile on a coffee table.

"He had an emergency and left a few minutes ago. Since it's just an intake, I'll do it and leave it on his desk. Come into my office."

Elizabeth missed seeing Alex's expression. She was focused on Millie, taken off guard at hearing of Jeff's emergency. Her feelings were conflicted between concern for what the emergency was and disappointment in his not being available. It took a lot of work to get Alex to come in and *talk* about joining the survivors group.

"Intake?" Elizabeth asked as she followed Millie into her office.

"We do intakes on everyone that comes into our office for counseling. It's standard practice."

Elizabeth was startled by her tone of voice which didn't sound friendly, but didn't have much time to think about it when she heard the door open and close behind her. Glancing back in the waiting room she realized Alex was gone.

"We haven't agreed to any counseling so an intake isn't necessary. Excuse me," Elizabeth said and left the waiting room, hurrying after Alex. The SUV gave a chirp and then she heard the solid slamming of the vehicle's door. There wouldn't be any further discussion with Alex tonight on the survivors group. Jeff's emergency came at an awkward time.

Elizabeth opened the passenger side and stared at Alex. "Why did you leave?"

"Is she one of the counselors?"

"Not for any of Jeff's groups. She has her own groups and co-therapists. They share a waiting room."

"I agreed to listen to what Jeff had to say. I'm not interested in what Millie has to say and I'm not filling out an intake that she can look at," Alex said.

"What kind of history do you have with her?" Elizabeth asked as she climbed up into the SUV.

Millie was a counselor that worked with a few women in the safe house that Sunrise sponsored for victims of spousal abuse in other states. Elizabeth was aware that some of the women didn't like her while a few thought she was a jewel and life saver. That wasn't something that bothered her one way or the other. During her stay at the safe house, she was focused on surviving physically and not joining counseling groups.

"She's a pain in my butt. She told the Chief, Mark, and everyone else that will listen, that I made an unwelcomed pass at her. She's one of those straight and narrow minded people that takes issue with *me* being a lesbian."

"Isn't she a lesbian?" Elizabeth asked.

"That's not something she'll admit to. But even someone without a psychology 101 course can hear the refrain Thou doth protest too much with her."

Alex turned the engine on and Elizabeth put her seatbelt on.

"So you were interested in her?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not in any way." She said it so firmly it made Elizabeth smile. "Millie considered my saying hello to her as flirting. Before she found out I was a lesbian, if I didn't say hello when we were within hailing distance, I was being rude. She has no problem with Genie and Claire, or Ginger, for that matter, just me."

Nothing more was said on the ride home. The gate swung open with the lights in the yard turning on. The geese were sleeping and didn't take very well the bright lights that woke them. By now the flock was familiar with the SUV and them. If it was a stranger, their honking would become deafening as well as the intruder would be chased with a flock of long beaks reaching to bite them.

Alex pulled the vehicle under the carport and out of habit, studied their surroundings for anything that looked off.

"I'll feed the cats and dog while you do your inspection," Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth slid out of the passenger side and with a slight limp walked to the front door and unlocked it, leaving the door open for Alex. She let Angel and the kittens in from the patio, mixed their food and set the bowls on the kitchen floor. She then prepared Mama Cat's special food with her medicine mixed in.

"I cleaned the two litter boxes," Alex said. "You have a message on your phone."

"It might be Jeff. How about, we meet in the hot tub?"

"Outside or inside?" Alex asked.

"Outside. The weatherman said it's going to rain tonight. If we're lucky, it'll start raining when we're in the tub."

Alex reached up and kissed her. "Sounds like a deal. First one to the hot tub gets to remove the cover."

Alex was sliding into the hot tub when Elizabeth arrived.

"Jeff will be out for a few weeks on a family emergency on the East Coast." Elizabeth chuckled at Alex's attempt to not smile. "That lets you off the hook for two weeks more," Elizabeth said.

Alex sighed at the bubbling heat. "I feel guilty that Mark is on call this week and he doesn't have his hot tub working yet, so he can't decompress."

Elizabeth laughed. "No, you're not. And, according to Linda, it's not a hot tub but a crosstrainer. It's going in the guest room downstairs. They're putting locks on the doors so the kids can't get in without an adult present."

"Jonathan will figure out where they keep the key or the combination. Mark will have to put in an iris scan," Alex joked.

Elizabeth sighed. "I don't miss having to out think and out maneuver a child who is too smart for his own good. It was exhausting to always be vigilant and not just for me but for him and others. "

Alex looked over at Elizabeth. She moved over to her side and took her into her arms. Quietly, Elizabeth grieved for Noel.

"Thank you, Alex. When I think of Noel, I feel I failed keeping him safe, yet, I know the point is mute. He would have been just as crazy and dangerous to himself and others as his father's side of the family. When I was around his grandmother I recognized that madness in Noel. It had been there since he was an infant. I tried not to think of what was going to happen when he hit puberty and his hormones would destabilize whatever meds he was on. I still love him."

"It must have been a heavy burden to know that no matter how you raise him, his genetics were going to be the determining factor on who he was going to be when he grew up."

"It was. Many times at night I wondered if Judy was punishing me for something to have given me the responsibility to raise her flawed son. Then I would feel guilty, after all Noel was a tiny baby when Judy and Mike died. I know Judy wouldn't have married Mike if he was crazy like the rest of his family. But, love is blind, as the saying goes."

"So what you're saying is that you feel guilty because you're relieved that you don't have to worry about Noel becoming a teen."

"No. I'm over that guilt. I remind myself that Noel could have become a Bobby Miles. They were second cousins. But he was still a boy, with more good days than difficult ones, and the way he died is what hurts the most."

* * *

An alarm stabbed through Alex's dreamscape ending a clear understanding of something that was important. She slapped the alarm off and glared at the time. Tuesday. 5AM.

Angel's breath and low whine gave her an idea she had better hurry and let her out. She opened the patio door in her room let Angel out and the kittens suddenly appeared and ran out to join her. After brushing her teeth and changing into her running clothes, Alex started the coffee so when her run was finished she would have a fresh cup of coffee waiting for her. Angel was eagerly waiting for Alex to let her back in, knowing a run awaited her. They waited outside the front gate for Mark.

A light from a vehicle traveling fast up the road had Alex stepping out to catch the license as it passed by. Ford truck, black, three passengers in front. Truck bed covered with a tarp.

Five minutes later Mark's truck came by at a safer speed. He parked on the side of the road and got out. His neon shoes were eye catching in the early morning light.

"Good morning. Did you see a truck speed by?" Mark asked.

"Sure did. They're awfully busy this early in the morning," Alex said.

"Children's Protective services will be making a raid on Hailburn's various properties today. His lawyer got him out on bond Monday. Chief asked the two of us to be there and the FBI may send over someone. A couple of the kids are believed to be from out-of-state."

Mark then started his run in earnest, out distancing Alex. It didn't matter since she was content to run at her own pace. On their way back up the slope Mark fell in alongside of her.

"I'll pick you up when the teams are ready," Mark told her. "They want to do it around seven or eight, but who knows with so many different groups involved."

Alex nodded. It gave her time to see if Elizabeth was up and maybe have breakfast with her.

The house was quiet. She took her shower and returned to clean up the sand tracks Angel had left. As she was stepping out the door with her cup of coffee to wait for her ride up to Hailburn's cliff house, she thought maybe she should leave Elizabeth a note of where she had gone off to. Tacking it to the refrigerator door she made sure Angel and the kittens were out on the deck before leaving.

A cloud of dust announced the arrival of her ride. It was a long caravan of cars and as they approached the house some of them peeled off and spread people out to prevent anyone from escaping their net. A coastguard cutter was watching from the ocean, another group was at the road where it peeled into the forest and a helicopter was lazily buzzing the tops of the forest keeping distance until the siege got underway.

The Children's Services had cameras, legal documents to search the premises and plenty of back up in case the children had weapons they were foolish enough to use.

When they all moved in, everyone armed with cameras, the shrill cry of young voices was jarring to hear. They were there to save them, yet by the cries, maybe they had previous experience that one group or another didn't matter.

Pictures of children chained to beds, in the basement and the scars on some of the older children who were in charge gave testimony that no one was immune from the beatings. In one room stolen goods from Brisbane, Antioch and Bales were mixed with items from Sunrise. Someone had been trying to fix some of the electronics that were pulled out of vehicles and from apartments.

Alex had no time to call Elizabeth as they passed by the house to take the evidence in and write up reports.

The lights around the house were off when Mark dropped her off. It was pitch dark until Alex's moving body set the security light on. A whine from the fence with the familiar muzzle and dark nose greeted her. For a moment Alex hesitated. The light had come on the deck when Angel moved but she didn't hear any other sounds. Unlocking the door to the house she waited silently trying to hear movement within but only a faint mewling broke the stillness.

Alex moved into the front room and opened the cabinets to see what the cameras showed. The usual nine geese, nothing that moved like a person or dog was around the house. The mewing persisted from the other side of Elizabeth's door. The study door was open and the lights were off.

Alex let Angel and the kittens in which had them all running into the kitchen expecting to be fed. Alex quickly filled dishes and mixed in the dry and wet as she had seen Elizabeth do. With the extra dish for the Mama Kitty Alex hesitantly approached Elizabeth's room. Knocking softly, then a little louder, only the mewing on the other side told her someone was in side. Worried Alex opened the door.

"Elizabeth?"

No answer, only the continued mewing from behind the bathroom door. Alex closed the bedroom door and turned the lights on before opening the bathroom door. Mama Kitty, who was not used to close places, darted out and hid behind the bed. Alex put the food down next to the water dish in the bathing room after satisfying herself that Elizabeth wasn't around. Curious, she looked into the closet, which had more cloths than what she had moved in with. Wistfully Alex touched the dress she had bought her...on a silly whim. Elizabeth's suitcase was sitting within easy reach. Alex unzipped it and found cloths neatly packed, with the usual toothbrush, toothpaste, other feminine needs and cash.

When will she stop being afraid?

Alex zipped the case closed and looked around the closet. Leaning over she picked up one lone boot. Turning it over her heart nearly stopped. The crazy criss-cross patterns from a left shoe, found at some of the crime scenes and in her hand was it's mate.

Did someone steal the boot? Why had she not said anything to me? Of course she doesn't know about the evidence but...why keep one when the other is missing?

Alex dropped the boot back on the floor. The most obvious pieces of clothing missing were a warm coat and a pair of scuffed tennis shoes she like to wear. Backing out of the closet Alex carefully looked around the room noting with some surprise, that Elizabeth had nothing of her own about the room. The small personal items that were around, were things Alex had bought her.

She told you she had plenty of stuff in storage and wanted to see just what she had before she added anything. You don't have anything personal yourself. It's like we both are afraid to put something out that shows we're here to stay.

Alex let herself out of the room, careful to not let the Mama Kitty out. She forgot to add medication to her food. Mentally she admonished herself. Once off the medication, Elizabeth was going to let her outside where she thought the older cat would be much happier. She was also spayed so she would not be having another litter. As much as Elizabeth hated doing that to a wild creature, Alex had told her there was more than enough cats in Sunrise to make certain the population would not die out.

"Hey Angel, find Elizabeth."

Angel's mouth opened and what Alex took to be a smile turned toward the door and sat next to it.

"Let me change shoes. I gather this is not going to be the usual stroll through town."

With a heavier jacket, hiking boots and a flashlight Alex followed Angel's bouncing form down to the beach.

Elizabeth woke with a headache and to the sounds of an unhappy cat. She didn't need a calendar to tell her this was the day she and Noel were run down by a hit-and-run car. It was something she had been preparing with Jeff to face, hopefully not alone; however, as fate would have it she was alone. There was no pressure to focus on survival, or the pain from her injuries and moving to a new safe house that had put off for a while dealing with the suspicion that the man that had been making Noel's and her life a living hell had tired of toying with them and sought to end their lives. Now it was here to face: the fear she barely allowed herself to feel, and most hurtful of all, the void in her life that Noel's death had left. With that came memories of Helen's death and other people that she had been close to. It all crowded around for a chance to be recognized and reexperienced. With skill she pushed them back down and under the shower let the tears that did escape wash down the spout with the shower water.

As she entered the kitchen she noticed on the refrigerator door was a brief note.

I'll try to call in later to see how you are doing.

Sorry it didn't work out like you wanted it to.

A

Elizabeth glanced at the clock on the microwave. It was eleven. She turned to fix everyone something to eat. Though she wasn't hungry, she decided a peanut butter and jelly sandwich would be easy enough with a cup of coffee.

Her phone rang at noon and Elizabeth picked it up, expecting it to be Alex and lamenting the loss of connection she usually got when it was Alex ringing her.

"Elizabeth, this is Jeff."

Elizabeth was quiet as the thought about not returning to any more sessions crossed her mind for the umpteenth time that morning. The need to change was no longer there. There was only darkness and loneliness.

"How are you doing?" his voice coaxed.

"Just great." Elizabeth heard an audible sigh on the other end.

"Look, I want to apologize for last night. I had an emergency call and had asked the clinic to find someone to fill in for me. I didn't expect them to assign Millie."

Elizabeth remained quiet.

"You probably gathered her and Alex don't get along. Millie should have pulled herself out of the setup when she heard it was you and Alex, but she didn't. Counselors have the same frailties and make bad judgment calls like everyone else and this was a big one. How are you two doing...about last night?"

"We left. When Millie said she was going to do the intake, Alex left."

"I'll discuss that with Millie when I get back. What about today, the anniversary day. Have you spoken to Alex about what today is?"

"We have discussed Noel and my mixed feelings about him. But not about what today is."

"Do you have what we discussed ready?"

A large lump formed in her chest and hurt like a knot of trapped gas in her gut.

"Elizabeth...talk to me."

"Yes."

"Do you think you can ask Alex to go with you?"

"She's at work. I'm fine doing it myself, Jeff. I'm a big girl, perfectly able to take care of myself."

Jeff was silent as he let her get her voice steady.

"Yes. You can. Do you think Alex will..."

"I gotta go, Jeff. I'll call when I'm ready for another session." Elizabeth hung up the phone and turned off the ringer. Restlessly she paced the house not able to focus on anything and not wanting to think about what day this was.

The sun was nearly down when Elizabeth found herself in her room pulling out the shoebox she had stored precious things she had been preparing for today. Without opening it she laid it on her bed and pulled out a warm coat, tennis shoes and mittens.

"No, Angel. Not this time. You're going to have to wait out on the deck with the kittens." For a moment she let her thoughts drift to a smaller dog that kept her and Noel company on their campouts, until that came to an end when Bobby and his crowd would take to appearing in a campsite nearby. They kept her and Noel frightened and awake all night with their loud and boisterous parting all night. A shudder shook her as a sob tried to work its way out.

Elizabeth had a flashlight in her pocket but didn't use it as she made her way down the path to the beach. Elizabeth stared at the sun's reflection on the wet sand as the water receded. Without any destination in mind, she just walked, taking in the pounding of the waves, not realizing she was crying. Unconsciously, Elizabeth wiped away the tears that were trickling down her face. She came to an abrupt stop and sank to her knees. Now her sobs came out, and a keening cry that wind that she grabbed and carried along the craggy cliff and dashed them back down onto the rocks below.

Elizabeth wasn't aware of the passage of time or where she was. It was a dark place where shadows were menacing and were as sharp as knives. Vital life force bled from injuries, and the energy that was necessary to go on with life was seeping out. Elizabeth pulled herself into a small ball and waited for the darkness to let her go. When it did, she would attend to the shoebox.

Warm, loving arms scooped her up and a voice whispered to her but she couldn't hear. Was it Helen? What did they forget to say that day she went to her death? Nothing. It was like any other ordinary day. No forewarning. No regrettable words spoken or any special loving words unspoken. They were in love and planning a future together. What went wrong?

There were no regrets about Judy's leaving. They were comfortable with each other. More friends than lovers. It was more a surprise that Judy wanted to lead a straight life. But Judy seemed to be happy with Mike. Both were happy. What happened that they should also find an end to a life that was so ordinary?

Oboe came to mind. That dark black ten year olds face shinning in the darkness, as he implored her to not go with him. It was dangerous. He was her black brother, though her father objected to her use of the biblical term to describe her friendship with one of the heathens on the hot African continent. To her parents, they were sinners that needed to be reminded that they were unworthy of the Lord's love but needed to keep trying to lead God-fearing Christian lives anyway. That night Oboe disappeared, along with a lot of others that her father spent days preaching to in his never ending tirades of sin and punishment for dancing their heathen dances and other practices that did not sit well with his Christian beliefs.

Elizabeth couldn't find anything in the bible that spoke against dancing but rather saw it as divine as one of the men danced naked in the streets for his god. Her father had been livid when she pointed this out to him and had taken the whip to her. They were sinners that were not worthy to dance for the Lord, he shouted.

Elizabeth was often confused when he referred to the Lord. She couldn't figure out if it was god or Jesus he spoke of. Oboe said everyone was from the one source and therefore everyone was a child of the one. Oboe never told her what religion he followed. He never came back to tell her why she couldn't go with him that night.

The soft words continued and Elizabeth thought maybe she fell asleep in the arms of her protector whoever that was.

A chill that clawed it's way up her calves in the form of a cramp was what brought Elizabeth into a stiff sitting position. Arms that were around her loosened but didn't fall away.

"Hey, are you all right?" Alex's voice croaked.

A dark shape that was lying nearby rose and pushed wet whiskers into Elizabeth's gloved hand. Elizabeth bit her lip as she leaned forward to try and work the cramp out.

"Here, let me try. Lean back and try to relax." Alex's strong hands found the calf muscle that was rigid and cold.

"Okay. That feels better. Thanks, Alex." Elizabeth's face felt stiff from the cold.

"What are you doing out here alone, Elizabeth? I was worried about you." Frantic with worry was a better description.

Suddenly Elizabeth realized the shoebox wasn't near her. "Where's my shoebox?" Trying to rise on a stiffened calf muscle had her leaning heavily on Alex's offered arm.

"Right here. Right where you dropped it. Sit here and let me get it for you."

Elizabeth took the box and looked up at the sky where occasional clouds would pass by blocking out the night stars that provided a canopy of sparkling lights above them.

Alex sat next to her. "What's in the box?"

"Mementos of...the dead."

Alex nodded not wanting to disappoint Elizabeth again.

"Jeff called this afternoon. He apologized about not being there and about Millie." Elizabeth looked out onto the ocean and was grateful she had no more energy to cry.

"So what about the shoebox of mementos? What are you going to do with them?"

"This is the anniversary date of Noel's death and that I was going to give him a burial. I wanted you to be here for it." A sob in her throat had her crying again.

Alex knelt beside her and pulled her cold face into the warmth of her jacket rocking her until the sobs quieted.

"So the mementos are things of his?" Alex finally asked.

"Yes. I had Eric and Janey mail them to me."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Build a pyre and burn them. He was like a soldier through all that stuff with Bobby. Noel liked hearing the stories where the dead hero was set on a pyre before his comrades, and his remains went up in smoke to the heavens. He thought they became stars."

"Just how big do you want this pyre?" Alex stood up and turned her flashlight on looking for driftwood that was above the tidewater and dry enough to burn. Alex needed action to drain the nervous flutters and pain that were in her gut.

"Not big. It's a Teddy Bear and a pair of his jammies that he out grew."

Alex decided to build a big enough fire to keep them warm as well. Elizabeth dropped the bear and clothing in flames with a few words to Noel. Alex tossed an occasional stick in to keep the heat up. Angel was contently curled up near their feet as Elizabeth, leaning against a stone they found conveniently near their bonfire, held Alex.

"Noel came into my life shortly after I had lost Helen. He was a little over a year old, and in the same hospital where he was recovering from his own injuries that his mother was in. I thought it was a mixed blessing because I was tired of hurting over Helen's death.

"My writing came to a complete standstill. Writing was my therapy. But Noel at one and a half years old was a charmer when he was not going off on tantrums. Then I didn't know it was a genetic flaw and thought it was something to do with my mothering.

"At three, Noel developed a practice of not stepping on lines or cracks in the sidewalk. He was obsessive about it. That's when I took him to a child therapist. Noel sometimes was nice and sometimes would go ballistic with the therapist. I couldn't figure out why. There was nothing in his life with me that could warrant that. The doctor suggested meds but he would be so lethargic, he was a zombie. So, we hardly medicated him and he kept his once a week visits to a child psychologist.

"Then we ran into Bobby. He showed us that hell is right here on earth. Bobby's eyes were just like Noel's when he got mean. Noel called him Darth Vader at first. On one of our visits to his grandmother, he said to her, I'm just like you and that policeman that is scaring us. He leaned close to her

and said, but I'm not going to be that mean and scary to people I love. I would go away where I can't hurt them. Then I knew, Noel saw something of himself in Bobby. His grandmother told him, Bobby was his cousin, and he wouldn't hurt Noel unless she told him to. It was two days later we were run over."

Alex pulled Elizabeth close, holding her tightly. Memories of the children she had seen earlier, chained to beds and one of them chained in the basement dirtied in his own excrement with no water or food had her crying with Elizabeth.

When their bonfire burned down to embers without any more fuel added, the two tiredly rose to bank it, spreading the damp sand over it. The walk back up the steep path was done in quiet, led by an equally subdued Angel. Cold hands intertwined as both women thought of a warm home they would be returning to.

Neither felt like going to bed so Alex brought two blankets from her bedroom and pulled out her game case. By candlelight they played checkers until Alex crawled up on the couch next to Elizabeth and fell asleep.

Chapter 13

"Detective Adison." Alex answered the phone and glanced at her watch to see what time it was. "...No, Mrs. Wrinkley, the detective's desk does not keep statistics on the crime rate.....No, Mrs. Wrinkley. I can put you through to the Chief's desk...yes." Alex dialed the Chief Harper's extension, explained the City Council member's request and transferred the call.

"I'm taking off for lunch, Mark. Want to come along?"

"No. The kids want me to join them for a picnic. It's a school thing."

"Enjoy. No sun, but no rain either," Alex said.

Alex stretched her legs into a fast walk to Mollee's hoping she wasn't too late. The week had flown by with getting the new hires settled in, documenting as much evidence gathered dealing with Hailburn's business and having a real breather with the vandalism and graffiti coming to a halt. She was planning on reviewing the coroner's report on the body in the marsh after lunch.

Philip Lenthorpe and Avery Smith were keeping a low profile but a rumor was making its way around the coffee shops that they were thinking of moving, much to both men's consternation and vehement denial.

Alex stopped at the flower shop and purchased a rose with a small spray of baby's breath, then continued her hurried pace toward the coffee shop. The shop's foyer was standing room only and as Alex pushed her way through some reluctant visitors to pass through, thoughts of being short and the lack of respect in crowds peppered with what could be done about that flickered through her mind.

Genie's robust figure rescued her when one particularly impatient potential customer was about to reach down and pull Alex back to wait behind him.

"She's the law. I wouldn't be thinking of doing that if I were you or your lunch will not be served with a menu first," Genie admonished his reddening face.

Both women made their way to the table that was beginning to be labeled as Alex and Elizabeth's, weaving through moving customers who were socializing at other tables and the waitstaff that were carefully delivering trays of food.

"What's the crowd all about? I don't remember it being this crazy last year?"

"You didn't visit this place last year. You were in the habit of stopping at the House." Genie smirked as she waved to Elizabeth who was sitting with her hands folded in front of her and a serious expression on her face. "I'll leave you in Elizabeth's safe hands. We're eating in the kitchen."

Alex looked at Elizabeth with concern. Her eyes were red rimmed and from what Alex could tell, it wasn't from happiness. Alex's eyes turned to the couple that was sharing the booth facing Elizabeth.

"Alex, this is Janey and Eric Stringer. Janey and Eric, this is Alex." Elizabeth's voice was hoarse as if she had been crying hard.

Alex slid in beside her lover studying the couple across from her concerned. Eric was not a tall man, but rather short and husky, not fat. His hands were large reminding Alex of a weight lifter or power

lifter. He wore his hair pulled back into a ponytail. The white shirt he wore was open at the neck revealing body hairs that curled over his shirt collar. His gray eyes returned Alex's study. Janey was the opposite of her husband. Like Elizabeth, she was tall and had a muscular physique, which was not hidden under the turtleneck top she had on, and her hands were also large. Like her husband, her eyes were gray matching the gray streaks in her otherwise pale orange hair.

"It's nice to meet you, Alex." Eric's large hand reached over to shake Alex's and for a moment she wondered if he would crush her hand. The warm hand buried hers in a gentle squeeze and his serious face was transformed to an engaging smile.

"Nice to meet you too. Your drive was okay?"

Janey laughed and flicked her shoulder length hair back, a gesture she recognized as Elizabeth's. "We had a lot of interesting adventures, but we still made it on time." Janey affectionately lifted a hand and stroked the clean shaven face of Eric's. "My hero managed to save the day in all of them."

Elizabeth wasn't smiling as she sipped her coffee quietly. Alex slid her hand under the table and handed her the rose. For a moment both their hands clasped around it.

"How has your day been?" Elizabeth raised the rose to her nose and let the fragrance settle pleasantly around her, changing the strained atmosphere around the table.

"Busy, but a nice busy." Alex hesitated to ask her about hers because she really wanted to know, but maybe Elizabeth would feel awkward with her friends here. "You don't look too happy."

Elizabeth turned her eyes toward Alex and studied her for a few moments. She squeezed Alex's hand. "Janey and Eric were commenting on the Town's Square garden that Ringo and Max fixed up for the holiday season." A smile creased her face at the change of subject. "They have just about every known and unknown holiday depicted and the Leprechauns hidden under the brush is a great addition."

"It nearly scared the bejebees out of me when one of them moved. An animated little village." Eric moved his large arms out of the way as Sally, their waitress, delivered food.

"I hope you didn't mind that I ordered for you," Elizabeth said, as the steam from the food rose to Alex's nose.

Her stomach growled appreciatively. "Not at all. I'm glad you did."

Conversation was halted as everyone had something more important to take care of.

Eric was the first finished and he took that time out to gaze around him. "Nice little town from what we've seen. Very interesting place you two are staying at. Elizabeth's been teasing us with information on a hidden cavern under a floor board, hidden rooms that go nowhere or seem to serve no purpose."

Alex nodded as she positioned the mashed potato and gravy on her fork, held in place with a piece of roasted chicken.

"Do you think we can get a chance to talk to the owner of the place?"

Janey laughed at her husband's request. "Eric is a frustrated mystery writer. He's too technical and too detailed to carry the story on quickly like many of the publishers believe their readers to be interested. He does love puzzles."

Alex thought it must be an inside joke, because to her there wasn't anything funny about it, yet the three were laughing as if Janey had told a joke.

"You'll be able to meet them at the celebrations tonight."

Their lunch was hurried as the waiting line was spilling out onto the street, much to the delight of the surrounding stores that had their wares on display on the sidewalk with helpful clerks that rang up their purchases without them having to get out of line.

Alex squeezed Elizabeth's hand as they parted outside. "We'll talk later," Alex said. "I love you." Elizabeth brightened up and hugged her. "Thank you, Alex. I love you too. See you later."

When Alex arrived home at nightfall it was Eric who let her in.

"No trailer or U-hall Truck?" Alex asked.

"No. No belongings to find places for," Eric said pleasantly.

"Where's Elizabeth?" Alex thought that may be the reason why Elizabeth had been crying.

"Walking along the beach with Janey and Elizabeth's four legged bodyguard. Woman talk, I was told. I got the job of reassuring you that all is well and to tell you to say nothing of what you may find in the kitchen."

"I'll go change then." Alex found a rose on her bed with candy kisses circling the rose.

Freshly showered and changed, Alex found Eric in the front room reading what looked like Elizabeth's finished book. Alex sat on the couch and Eric looked up from his reading.

"So, what were some of the adventures you had on your way here?" Alex asked.

"Well, aside from speed traps, all of which we managed to escape from, on route 43 at Abel's Motel we had a run in with the local police. The U-hall truck we had rented to bring what was left of Elizabeth's stuff was broken into and emptied. The officer seemed to take issue with Janey's suggestion he wasn't taking much interest in our report. The talk at the local bar was that a local gang operated along that route, preying on the small moving vans and trailers. It was local alright, with the police helping, was our suspicion. Since nothing was going to be done, we thought we had better leave town sooner than later. Small towns don't like strangers messing with their economy, and we do know a few Federal Agents that we called, just in case they would be interested. As soon as we could we turned the rental truck in and grabbed the earliest plane out of there."

"Did she have a lot of things?"

"No. Bobby Miles and his cohorts had broken into her storage and vandalized her things. We packed what was salvageable, to let Elizabeth decide what she wanted done with them. If the theft was done in daylight, the thieves would have noticed it wasn't even worth putting out for a garage sale."

"I guess she didn't take the loss of her things too well."

"I personally thought she was relieved she didn't have to deal with the memories."

Three red dots appeared on the monitor while simultaneously the alarm sounded.

"Would you like some tea or coffee?" Alex asked as she rose from her seat.

"Since you offered, coffee, if you don't mind. We brought some Hawaiian Hazelnut. Elizabeth said you liked that."

"I do. Thank you."

Alex nearly ran into the kitchen table with the wrap around bench seat. "You've been shopping." She looked underneath the table and noted it had enough room for Angel to still curl up under.

"Like it? Janey and Elizabeth insisted we get it rather than sit down for our first meal at the coffee table, here. It might be okay for you or me, but tough on those tall gals."

While the coffee was dripping Alex opened the refrigerator door.

"Whooo! This is a treasure chest!"

"They wouldn't let me look, is it going to be a good surprise?" Eric asked from the couch.

Alex spotted the birthday cake that had Eric's name on it. "I do believe so. But I've never seen so much food at one time in here."

The front door opened and a prancing dog's nails made Alex grin some more as she opened the cabinet to pull out four mugs. Coffee mugs were one possession that Alex had a lot of.

Instead of the near bare cupboard Alex found herself staring at shelves that had plates of different sizes, serving platters and what would be appropriate to call 'pretty' coffee cups.

"You like?"

Alex turned around to face Elizabeth. Alex held her arms out and Elizabeth willingly stepped into the embrace. "I loved the chocolate kisses and rose. Thank you."

A whining Angel reminded them they were not alone.

"I was going to ask you about the pattern but Karen gave me a good deal on it." She picked up one of the cups and looked at the Chinese designs. "One of the nice things about a small town is everyone knows your taste so you don't have to spend hours looking for anything if you're not into that."

"Nice table too."

"Glad you liked it. Could you grab the food dishes? We might as well set the table while the meal is finishing up."

Elizabeth looked in the oven at what she was baking. "I give it another twenty minutes."

They returned to the front room with a pot of coffee and cups.

"So, how was the walk along the beach? I'm sure Elizabeth showed you the infamous cavern," Alex asked as she sipped her coffee.

"Yep. Only Eric insisted we take the smuggler's stairs from the house down. I love the moving wall. Eric likes the cameras that look at the inside and outside of the cavern. I know Elizabeth is going to be writing about that in one of her books." Janey draped one leg over Eric's. "How's your reading going?" she asked her husband as he draped an arm over her leg and patted it.

"Good, good. A bit melodramatic in one part. Just about had me pulling out my hanky. Clever way you rescued that kid," he said to Elizabeth.

"Yes." Elizabeth rose from her seat. "Let me go see what's happening with the roast."

"Excuse me." Alex rose from the couch and followed her into the kitchen. Both silently worked together setting out the prepared food as the roast finished its last moments in the oven.

"Dinners ready," Elizabeth announced.

"Oh no you don't Angel. There isn't enough room for you and us," Alex coaxed the dog and the kittens out onto the deck.

The supper conversation was on safe subjects like who was going to prepare the next day's meal and the most important dinner, Thanksgiving dinner, which Janey insisted she do it because she always did. Then the cake came out and they sung happy birthday to Eric. Elizabeth purchased a book for him, specially ordered from Books From Around the World, a local bookstore that Alex liked too. Mollee and the owner of the bookstore had an agreement where their used books section was rotated with the books in Mollee's restaurant's shelves.

They made it to the city dedication after the speeches were made and when the socialization began. Eric and Janey were introduced to the Dr. Ebbens and his wife Lily who had little to enlighten Eric on the mysteries of the house. Since Lily hated it they hadn't spent much time exploring it. Elizabeth also introduced the various people that had become important to her in her new life, to Janey and Eric.

As Elizabeth settled next to Alex in her bed Alex let her hand rest for a moment on her shoulder.

"Tough day, huh?"

A nod was her answer.

"Your shoulders are tight. You want a back rub?"

"Can you just hold me, Alex?" Alex rolled on her back pulling Elizabeth so her head rested on her shoulder. Alex could feel tears drop on her skin.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Alex ventured after a lengthy time passed with the quiet sobs subsiding.

"Not really. I'm talked out. There's nothing to do but go forward," Elizabeth whispered in her shoulder. She shifted so she was peering up into the shadowed face of Alex. "It's better that I didn't see any of the stuff. I would always be reminded that he touched this or that, or that he marked it up or it was replaced by a well-meaning Janey and Eric."

"I guess then, that means we can go pay a visit to The Knick Knack Corner and buy some of those dust catchers to decorate the house. Make our home look more cluttered and lived in."

"Not unless you plan on dusting them, Alex. I'm quite content with the few things to dust and clean to say nothing of what the kittens manage to dump."

At six, both Elizabeth and Angel were encouraging Alex into a wake state, though in different ways. Then the alarm from the security cameras broke up Alex and Elizabeth's wrestling match on who was going to get up and let Angel out. By then they both were aware of the smell of coffee.

Elizabeth went to join whoever was in the kitchen while Alex dressed for her run.

Eric dressed in jeans and T-shirt was sipping coffee and talking with Janey who was dressed for a run.

"Good morning you two. Sleep well? I forgot you're on East Coast time."

"Good morning."

"It's about time sleepy head. Sleep well, Hon?" Janey asked brushing a strand of hair from Elizabeth's face. She rested the backs of her fingers on the pale skin, noting the lack of tenseness that had once been deeply etched in her face.

"Yes. Did you two like the bed?" Elizabeth raised her hand and curled her fingers around Janey's, giving them a comforting squeeze before letting them go.

"Different. Love the carvings on the posts. I can see why you like the furniture. The detail is great. I don't think they make those beds in cherry wood unless special ordered."

"It's on loan, but I would like to talk Mai into parting with it. She and her husband have a rambunctious child that is hard on furniture so they've changed their furniture style. What happened to you?" Elizabeth asked Alex who came into the room sucking on her hand.

"AJ. Those kittens are getting bolder. He tried to take possession of my sweat shirt," she grumbled as she took an offered coffee cup from Eric, who was sitting closest to the coffee machine.

"Good morning!" Marks voice came through the front door as he rapped on opening it.

"Good morning, Mark. We're in the kitchen."

Mark, dressed in his running cloths entered the kitchen with a prancing Angel who had gone to greet him.

After good mornings were exchanged Alex noted the time.

"Well, let's get this over with. I have a feeling I'm going to be eating everyone's dirt." Alex regarded her two longer legged companions.

"Don't worry, Angel will make sure you don't get lost in our dust," Mark teased.

When the door closed after the four, Elizabeth slid into the seat next to Eric. "Well, what do you think of the book Eric?"

"No lies between us, huh Elizabeth?" Eric studied the tall woman who was looking a lot healthier than he had last seen her, though still not at her best.

"Morbid, right?" Elizabeth guessed.

"Yes. No surprise though, considering what your life has been like." For a few moments he was quiet. "That scene in the forest....did it really happen?" Eric quickly slid a large hand around Elizabeth's, as she was about to get up. "You don't have to tell me....please, don't run from me."

Elizabeth relaxed her hands under his larger warm ones. "Do I have to tell you now?"

"No. So do I think it will sell? Yes. It reads like one of those serial thrillers. I would publish under a different name, though. Not your usual style. It would shock your following. Normally you have humor between the horror or not so nice parts and in this story...there is no humor."

"No humor."

"Do you want to have it published?"

"I don't know."

Eric nodded. "I understand. Has Alex read it?"

Elizabeth shook her head. This time she slid her hands out from Eric's and busied herself at the counter preparing cat and dog dishes for a morning snack. By the sudden appearance of three loud kittens both of them guessed they were not going to wait for Angel's return.

"That cat in your bathroom is not very happy."

"No, she isn't. But today I'll be letting her out. Her medication is finished and she's looking a lot more alert. The vet used dissolvable thread on her stitches so we don't have to bring her back to get them removed."

"Are you okay here?"

Elizabeth leaned over to put the cat dishes on the floor. "Yes, I am. How are Keith and his family?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Great. They're expecting their first boy and Carol's family is making a big deal of it. So, Keith decided to keep peace and visit her family for Thanksgiving and then for Christmas have everyone over to their place. By then Carol won't want to travel. Maybe it'll be a solstice baby like you, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth smiled and sat back in the stool chair. "I never could figure out why people wanted to know what they were having...I mean...the baby is too young to care if the cloths are blue or pink."

"It was her family's insistence to know what to buy them. I'm hoping the kids can resist Carol's family's influence over the important things. She moved to Plymouth to get away from them and now...I don't know. Something they'll both have to handle themselves. Janey and I decided it would be better to not jump in unless asked and then...well...we'll wait to see just what happens. So, this place is quite a house. Not what I would expect you to turn into a home."

Elizabeth chuckled at the change of subject. "Yes, well...Alex and I are thinking of looking for a place with less entrances and exits after Christmas. The view is nice, but...I'm having nightmares of people coming through the floors and the walls and just walking around as if it were a tourist attraction."

Eric wrapped his large hands around the mug that appeared to be like a child's teacup in his possession. "You always had a thing about privacy. A hell of a two years this was."

Elizabeth nodded without thinking about it. Her focus was on her future. "You remember that friend of yours that was designing those bamboo houses?"

Eric's eyebrows rose. "Now that would be...Elizabeth, his houses don't have much defense against bullets or..."

"Eric, most homes don't have a defense against bullets. That part of my life is over. We don't have nuts running around with guns here. The worst was the nuts with spray cans and they were teenagers."

"Does that have to do with the piece of forest land you took us by?"

"Yes. I wanted to talk to Alex but we've been busy with other things. I'm in no hurry. Besides, I'm still waiting to hear from the environmental agency that holds trust over the land. They do a background check, and I sign a pad of papers not to ruin the natural environment, not to divvy up the land into smaller plots, not to build more than one residence on the land, etc. Alex was talking about missing her visits to her cabin so I don't think she would mind the forest environment. And on foggy days it takes her nearly forty-five minutes to wind down this road into town. It will only be a thirty minute drive from there to town."

"I hope your nerves hold out. I have to hand it to you, that stairway to the beach is interesting, though it does have one wondering if some tourist may decide to come on up just to see where it leads. Some people have no sense of courtesy."

Both jumped at the alarm that went off.

"JesusMaryandJoseph! How can you put up with that?"

"It's another thing we want to get away from. Maybe we'll get an old fashioned alarm, like a dog or just learn to use our intuition or knowledge of the environment. A bird stops chirping, crickets stop chatting, a sniff of the breeze..."

"Right out of a book. I hope you don't put too much into that stuff. With all this surveillance stuff, no wonder your work is so morbid."

"So, what have you guys got planned for the day?" Alex asked as she pulled her boots on. The towel from her shower and damp running cloths were draped over the laundry basket edge as if they had not quite made it into where it was tossed.

"More shopping. Janey saw something she wanted to buy for her grandchild. It's one of those toys that when he kicks it makes a musical sound, and another place kicked it has a birdie that pops out."

"Oh. Well, if you're up to lunch..."

"We're having a picnic at the park across from the House. Genie is preparing it. Are you coming? It's at noon."

"I will. Can I bring Mark?"

"You know, I expect the town to appear. It's to get some of the women to venture out of the House."

"Hey," Alex said softly, "How are you holding up with all these memories?"

"I'm very lucky that I have people here, who care for me."

Saturday morning had the foursome taking off on their early run with Eric and Elizabeth left to start the morning fixings for the mid-afternoon Thanksgiving meal.

Elizabeth and Alex later left Janey and Eric on the phone with their son and daughter-in-law who sounded unhappy surrounded by Carol's family. Carol was not happy with the expectations her family placed on her and her expected role in their circle...as if Carol and Keith's plans were of no relevance.

Janey perked up with the special preparations Elizabeth had gone through to make this Thanksgiving a special one. What made this particular day for Janey and Eric special was that they had gotten married on Thanksgiving, just before Eric had been shipped out to Vietnam and three Thanksgivings later, he had returned wounded, but home to stay.

"So, you're saying Elizabeth had called up this race car driver and asked him to teach her to drive...."

"Her, asked her. We knew her personally so it's not like she didn't have an introduction." Janey waved her glass of wine towards Elizabeth who was trying not to cringe at this particular tale.

They were sitting at the coffee table rather than the more comfortable kitchen table, with the fire snapping happily at the logs that were laid carefully out for its consumption. Elizabeth and Janey sat on the couch while Eric and Alex sat on throw pillows around the table moving their players around the game board, careful not to upset mugs of various beverages that sat next to the game board.

The kittens had curled up around Angel to sleep and Mama Kitty, whom Elizabeth thought would not want to come back in, had found her own place to sleep in, keeping a wary eye on everyone.

"She had the hots for Elizabeth," Eric whispered conspiratorially.

"She did not. She was just joking around." Elizabeth's face was slightly red.

"She had the hots for her," Janey agreed. "She called me and asked a lot of personal things about her, and none of the questions were: is she available or is she gay."

"You never told me that."

"We didn't want Helen to go after her," Eric grinned.

"Helen and Elizabeth were just getting settled in...so to speak."

"So they get in Julie's race car...long legged Elizabeth and Julie was half her size..."

"We borrowed another car and we did spins and roll-overs. It was nothing that was that funny."

Elizabeth ended the long tale with a shorter version.

"They borrowed the showroom car without telling anyone. Can you image the shock of everyone to see what was once a shiny unblemished vehicle sitting in the showroom the night before, the next day looking like it had gone through a derby race?"

"I didn't know it was the showroom car."

"Julie was so drunk she couldn't see anything in singles. How the two of you lived through that lesson is anybody's guess," Eric said.

"She wasn't driving. You think I would let someone that drunk drive? I do know how to drive race cars, you know? It was rolling a car that I hadn't done before."

"Who got her drunk anyway? By all the questions she was asking about you, I thought for sure she wanted to be in condition to put the press on you," Janey asked curious.

"Helen. A few months later she admitted to taking Julie out and getting her too smashed to think about a romantic night. I think my driving got her sick."

"Well, what happened about the showroom car?" Alex asked.

"Nothing. The guys are always playing pranks on the circuit. They just put it down to another one of those 'boys will be boys' kinda things."

"Oh, oh."

They were playing Pachisi, and Elizabeth's roll gave one of her players a shot at the same place Alex's player was sitting. Smirking at Alex, Elizabeth tapped her player.

"Hey. You wait...I'll get you," Alex gave Elizabeth what she thought was a fierce stare.

"All right Hon, but what more can you possibly do to me than send me home." Elizabeth leaned close to her, blinking her pale blue eyes.

"Well, we can talk about my arrest approach."

"Ohhhh. Elizabeth. I think she's getting tough now," Janey laughed as she slid her player next to her husband's one player that was on the board. His strategy was always moving one player as far forward as possible before moving out his next. "Home again, home again, jiggity-jig," she sang as she moved his player for him.

In response, he leaned over and gave her a brief kiss. "A kiss makes it feel much better."

He patted her leg that was next to his.

"So, what are you two going to do for the next holiday?" Janey asked.

Alex looked up from her roll. "Christmas. Usually I take one of the others place that has a family then when everyone is back I ride up to the mountains and spend three days getting in touch with nature." She looked at Elizabeth. "You have anything you want to do?"

"That sounds nice. Do you mind company on your touchy feely escapes to nature?" Elizabeth asked.

Alex grinned and looked back at the dice, trying not to turn red at the images that her fertile imagination conjured up. Clearing her throat she moved her player next to Elizabeth's, the same one that had earlier sent another of her players' home.

"Are you okay with boiled trail food?" she asked Elizabeth.

Janey looked at Eric. "Don't you dare tell that story."

"Okay. I will say though...don't invite Janey on one of those trips that entails boiling trail food."

"You can't do that to us!" Elizabeth moved toward Janey and started to tickle her. "Take it back! Tell him he can tell us!"

"Hey, why aren't you tickling him?" Janey was wiggling from Elizabeth's long fingers.

"Because he is old tried and true blue. Even if I drove him to pee in his pants, he still will not tell if you tell him not to. So...give....give!"

Janey continued to squirm but her efforts were not getting her away from Elizabeth's grip or tickling fingers.

"Oookaaay! Eric tell them!"

The two long limbed women were sprawled on the couch with Elizabeth pinning the more muscular Janey under her. Their long hairs, dark brown and red streaked with white mingled and for a moment both paused, puffing from the exertion.

"Are we too old for this?" Elizabeth asked smiling down at her captive.

"No. Never."

Eric chuckled. "I wish you two would do it in mud sometime. Do I get a birthday wish still?"

"NO!" Both women told him.

Janey sat up and kissed his forehead. "Maybe next birthday I can arrange something for you. Hmmm. That does give me ideas."

"Well. I'm marking it down on my palmtop and on my desk calendar just in case one loses memory."

"Okay, out with the story I worked hard for." Elizabeth settled back on her side of the couch.

"In one of our few roughing it excursions...all of which were appalling to the civilized senses...we took up some food stuffs Keith bought for us."

"Is this one of those Keith makes the arrangements for his parents' vacation things?" Elizabeth asked.

"He was twenty and we thought he would have us in mind when he made the arrangements...now, be quiet and let me finish this...okay, where was I...oh yeah. So we get up to the cabin that had a fire place and a sink with only cold running water."

"No kitchen, no bathroom, no heater?" Alex asked.

"It was that type of place men like to bond with nature for one brief day, and then escape to a nice motel nearby," Janey said.

"Quiet!" Eric said. "So...we found a beat up pot in the box of supplies and after I got the fire going and the pot was put on the fire with the food packets of 'surprise entries' we went outside to find out if there was an outhouse or somewhere we could relive ourselves when that time came."

"We heard this pop noise or something like that, coming from the cabin so we sprinted back to see what was going on..." Janey added.

"Culinary delight everywhere," Eric told the audience of two solemnly.

"Oh. You didn't poke a hole in the bags?" Alex nodded wisely.

"Yes, I did. That's basic 101 cooking and there's hubby here who was making sure I knew what I was doing. Whatever was in those pouches must have plugged up the holes."

"Which has me relieved we didn't eat it."

"We spent the night cleaning up and the next day we found a nice hotel with a hot tub in the room, maid service and a very nice cooking staff that didn't overcook the omelets."

"Well, I think we can plan our meals with no clogging bags of bits."

"You plan on taking your dog pal?" Janey asked.

"No. There's wildlife up there. A dog tends to mark territory and I don't want to disturb the normal boundaries the wildlife has set up there."

"You don't worry that you're being up there will disturb them?" Janey teased.

"Naw. I use the flush toilet in the cabin."

They all laughed and continued the game until midnight.

"Hey..." Alex was on her side watching Elizabeth prepare for bed.

"Hmm?" Elizabeth pulled the long T-shirt Alex had bought her over her long frame then turned to face Alex.

"You and Janey are good friends, huh?"

Elizabeth sat on the edge of the bed looking at Alex. "Yes. So...did you enjoy the dinner?"

"Yes. They're nice people." Alex was wondering if her change of subject had anything to do with what she had thought she picked up from the two women when they were wrestling on the couch or if it was just her insecurities.

Elizabeth slid under the covers. "So, what have we scheduled for Sunday?"

"Just chores. I have to clean the duck pond..." Elizabeth could hear her jaw crack as she yawned, "then touch bases with the new guys..."

Elizabeth snuggled into the warm body that welcomed her into an embrace. "Hmm. Wouldn't they call you if they needed help?"

"Well, yes. Or, they would call Harriet first. She's their supervisor. I see your point already. How about we take a picnic out to the beach."

"It's supposed to rain."

"I love the beach in the rain..."

"Right. The wind driven sand that bites whatever skin is exposed. You're nuts."

Alex laughed.

"What do you normally do on your days off?"

"I...ah...work or go up to the cabin."

"What do you do up there in the cabin..." Elizabeth turned in her arms..."all alone, or did you have a guest to keep you occupied."

Alex blushed. "Sometimes. Or I took walks in the surrounding woods or played survivalist games with Sam. He lives up there and keeps an eye on things for the property owners."

"Even in the bad weather?"

"Elizabeth..."

"I'm just wondering what to do to keep you from being bored. I don't think playing board games will be enough."

"Oh!" Alex thought for a few moments of what she would like to do, but decided it would be rude with company.

"Do you like something with physical activity?" Elizabeth moved her hand slowly up the smaller woman's body.

"Ohh...uhmmm...hmmmm." *Be damned the guests.*

When Alex awoke the next morning she was alone. Sighing, she got up and took a quick shower. Dressed in running clothes she went to check the kitchen for anyone awake. The coffee pot had old coffee in it. She rinsed out the pot then remade another pot. From what she could tell she was alone and the only one up. Frowning, she peered into the study and found Elizabeth asleep in the easy chair with a book opened over her lap. A whine from outside told her Angel was on the deck and wanted in.

The whine brought a slumbering Elizabeth awake.

"Good morning," Alex said.

"Good morning," she mumbled. "I must have fallen asleep while waiting for Angel."

"How long has she been out there?" Alex opened the door and Angel followed by the kittens, made for her corner in the study, circled it a few times and laid down. The kittens found their toys and played with them, each other, and Angel's tail.

Alex looked for any sign of Mama Kitty. It was still dark outside so she wasn't able to very far. The security screen would help if she wanted to separate geese dots with one Mama Kitty. Elizabeth had released her but kept a bowl of food near the cage that she left on the deck. The food dish was empty, but the kittens or Angel could have emptied it.

Alex sniffed and could smell rain in the air.

Elizabeth looked at the page she was on. "Two pages and..." she glanced at her watch..."five minutes."

There was silence for a few moments as Alex closed and locked the door.

"I was sketching out a new story and lost interest."

"I guess all this unusual activity is putting you off your normal rhythm," Alex said.

"I don't think I have a rhythm anymore." Elizabeth rose from the chair and touched Alex. "By the clock, we've slept four hours. Mark should be here soon. I'll take a shower, dress in *my* running outfit, and we can wait for Mark together."

"Are you up to running?"

"Not quite. Short spurts of trotting. My walks in the sand have been helpful but I keep tweaking my knee."

"Well, I was going to gather Angel and Janey for a run. Mark is probably not going to make it. Their holiday dinners go way into the next morning."

"Like ours?"

Alex leaned over and kissed the willing lips that took possession of hers, causing her to forget her run until a voice clearing behind them reminded her they were not alone.

"Is this a warm up?" Janey's voice asked lightly.

"Oh, yeah," Elizabeth gave Alex a push. "Now she should run like lightening. I'm going to follow at a slower pace."

"You were limping yesterday. I think you need to give it two days rest then get back to it," Janey suggested. "Don't push past injuries."

"Sound advice," Alex said.

While dog and two humans left for their morning run, Elizabeth hit the shower and prepared mentally for what to keep four adults occupied with.

"Good morning, Eric." Elizabeth walked into the kitchen to the smell of cooking food and hungry meows. "Here let me get the kittens, you can watch the...hmmm...what are you stuffing those omelets with?"

"Surprises. You know, you have a great view of the moon out there on the ocean."

"Yes."

"How did you sleep last night?"

"I didn't. You know I write at night."

"Tired?"

"No. Probably at about noon I'll run out of gas. I was thinking...maybe we could take a ride out to the woods later. Would you guys be interested?"

"The place you are thinking of buying?"

"Yes."

"When are you planning on sleeping?"

"Eric, you're..."

"Worried about you. When you're stressed out you push yourself till you collapse. I know your work habits well. Besides, by the look of the weather, it'll be raining soon. I would rather curl up with Janey by the fireplace there and whisper sweet somethings in her ear. We didn't sleep much last night. Had a lot to talk about."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and waited.

Eric grinned. "We worry about the kids."

"I bet that warrants a lot of talking." Elizabeth smiled not believing it was all talk.

Eric merely smiled and went back to moving the pan off the fire.

Elizabeth set out the plates and went out onto the deck to look for Mama Kitty. She found the cat dish she had left out earlier that was out of reach for Angel, empty. Elizabeth looked up at the sky when a wayward drop hit her cheek. Sighing to herself she sat on the built in wrap around bench leaning with her back against the planter box that also acted as a fence that surrounded the deck. Tiredly she closed her eyes and thought about how hard it was to be present in a relationship when she wanted to lock herself in her room and write. Was she trying to escape or was it her creative juices? She knew enough of the right things to say, being in previous relationships that were successful enough for her to feel confident that she could recognize when communication and personal needs were not being met.

Another splat of rain hit her face but it was not enough to drive her inside. She could hear the thump of what could be Mama Kitty so she remained still. Patiently she waited, imagining that the cat was checking her out. For the few days of her being locked up in her room she felt she bonded with the cat as much as the cat was ready to. She had actually gotten her to take some wet food from her extended hand without losing it to a paw with extended nails. It was a good while and a few more scattered drops of rain later that she could feel pressure against her side as the cat cautiously curled up against her for warmth and protection from the elements. Elizabeth's lips curled into a smile.

"Looks like you have a new friend. Would you like me to get you an umbrella?" Alex's soft voice asked from the doorway.

Elizabeth carefully turned her head her way, keeping her smile. "Well, we do need to get some quality bonding time here."

Alex disappeared then reappeared with a large umbrella. She opened it before slowly approaching Elizabeth, so as not to scare away the cat.

Alex sat next to Elizabeth and leaned against her. She was still wearing her jogging sweats that were damp from her run. Elizabeth wrapped an arm around her and closed her eyes. The sound of the pattering of rain on the umbrella didn't disturb Elizabeth as she fell into a light sleep, but Mama Kitty had enough of the rain and let her warm comforter go for a dry hidey place.

Contently, Alex snuggled closer to Elizabeth resting the handle of the umbrella on the bench seat and balancing it between their bodies. When the sprinkles became more serious Alex prodded Elizabeth to her feet.

"Come-on. Let's get inside. Mama Kitty took to the cat carrier that you have under the bench."

"Do you think it's going to be dry enough?"

"No. But she would claw us to death if we try to help. There's an opening to the bottom of the house that she can fit through on the side of the house. If she's a wild cat, I'm sure she knows about it. We can't leave this umbrella out here. If the wind catches it, it will scare her more."

Both women dripped through the study and past the kitchen where their breakfast was being kept warm in the oven.

After a hot shower and some playful noise as they teased each other while thawing out from the cold rain they decided to say a quick hello to their guests and retire for a nap. While Alex was drying off Elizabeth peered into the front room and decided to not disturb her guests.

Alex curled around Elizabeth's form as she slept and as she dozed her mind drifted to her growing need for Elizabeth's presence. Sighing softly she pulled her closer unconsciously, feeling the body against her tighten. She ran a hand along the long arm that she could reach, soothing it and coaxing it's owner to relax. When she could feel some of the tightness give way she lessened her contact and let her mind wander again.

The thunder started to rumble overhead and the rain against the windows increased in intensity. Alex carefully slid out of bed, pulling on a pair of pants, with socks and shoes. Angel was whining from the study. Alex tried to see through the darkness the cat carrier. She couldn't see clearly.

"Angel, why do you have to relieve yourself now?" Alex opened the door for Angel to pass through, and then left it opened a crack for her to return. By the smell of what was coming from the cat litter box in the guest bathroom, it needed to be emptied. Alex took care of that, then was about to reenter the hallway when she saw a wet Mama Kitty peering out of the study for a place to hide. Pulling down the two towels on the rack, she tossed them into a corner and then left the bathroom. Waiting in the doorway of her room she could see the dark wet cat slink into the bathroom. Alex guessed it was the smell of the litter box the cat probably figured was cat territory.

For the remainder of the morning Alex was on the Internet, monitoring what she and Mark called the hate sites, making sure their small town was not mentioned. Since she no longer worked in covert operations for any organization, she had no reason to bait or communicate with any of the participants, so she was surprised when she got a ding from her inbox that a mail delivery had been made. Not really wanting to work, or look at what might be something irritating, she ignored it for a while. Another ding told her she had another delivery.

Damn. Doesn't anyone take a day off?

Reluctantly she pressed the mail button on her keyboard and it launched her mail service.

Twenty four messages! Jeez. It's only been a day since I cleared it. As they came in she scanned the subjects. *What is going on?* Most of the advertisements were for porno sites. Her thoughts went to Mike and what he was doing in prison during his spare time.

Scrolling down she found a few legitimate Emails. *Oh, shit!* "Just great."

"Fan mail?" a sleepy voice asked her.

Alex turned around to see Janey leaning through the doorway.

"Not the kind I would encourage." Alex's face turned red. *Susan, you have the worst timing as usual!* "My work used to entail me monitoring hate groups on the Internet and other sordid stuff that I'm still getting mail from."

Janey sat in the chair next to her. Alex could not stop her eyes from traveling appreciatively along the long muscular legs that the shorts laid bare.

"Porno?"

Alex started to laugh not embarrassed. "Yeah, just like everyone with an E-mail address. These are new from another type of site we would not recommend to our mothers..."

"They seem to know your preference."

Alex stared at her for a moment. Then opened one of the sites up and then moved down the list. "Well. You're right. How did you know?"

"I recognized three of those addresses and took a guess. Hi, sweet cakes." Janey looked up at her husband who came into the room with a tray holding three steaming mugs of Hawaiian Hazelnut coffee. "We received a whole slew of the stuff right after we ordered something over the Internet. Remember that, Love?"

"You must be talking about the House of Pleasure's mail catalog over the net. That's the only one place we have ordered anything and then got so much advertising Email I thought we were going to have to change mail addresses."

"That's the one." Janey leaned back in the reading chair laying her head for a moment against her husband's muscular chest. Both sipped their coffee in silence as if remembering just what they had ordered.

"You have to admit it was funny," Eric grinned at Janey.

Janey turned back around to Alex. "I found the WEB site in the history while I was looking for a site I had visited the day before but forgot the address. Here was this House of Pleasure so I went into it. My, my, my. Toys, toys, toys. Naturally I knew it wasn't Keith or Carol. They hadn't visited for a while. So...I thought...'My Lover here was ordering a surprise for us, was he?'" She patted the large hairy thigh next to her, affectionately.

Alex was thinking that for both their ages, they had very nice physiques that showed well through their T-shirts and shorts.

"So, I decided I was going to surprise him and do some ordering of my own. I think I got carried away," she giggled.

"Ha! You admit it! My sweet vixen."

Janey leaned over to give him a quick kiss. "It wasn't a wasted visit."

"No. But I'm glad you ordered that book that gave us a hint at what some of the stuff was for."

Alex laughed. She was surprised at her comfort in listening to their banter or revelations into a private part of their lives.

"So...well that explains why I'm getting this stuff then," Alex smiled broadly. "I ordered this night gown they called Naughty Nighty."

Janey's eyebrows rose.

"And a few other...things," Alex admitted with a hint of a blush on her cheeks.

"Sounds like fun." Eric looked at his watch. "Let's give her a few more hours of sleep time. You don't have a weight room or anything like that around this town, do you?"

"Yes. But it's not open on Sundays. But, the police gym has some okay equipment. You two want to go as my guests? No one would be there in this weather and on a Sunday after Thanksgiving, so we'll pretty much have the place to ourselves."

"Love to. You leave Elizabeth the note and we'll get our gear. Come on, Love. Let's see who can get themselves together the fastest."

While they were getting ready Alex signed off the computer and placed a call to Mark to let him know she was headed to the police gym with guests and if he wanted a break to join them. She was imagining that at this point Mark would want a break and also she wanted to get Eric and Janey to know Mark better for his mother's sake. Marta was really serious about gathering receipts for her book but she didn't know how to get a publisher and Alex was hoping to broach that subject during the workout.

Elizabeth woke to the same rumbling of thunder that she had fallen asleep to. Waking in Alex's bed, alone, had her taking note of what was going around her before stretching into full wakefulness. The presence of something larger than a kitten and smaller than a dog was pressed against the back of her bent legs. As she blinked her eyes open Angel, accompanied with bouncing kittens, probably sensing her waking, came ambling into the bedroom. The pressure against the back of her legs was gone quickly.

"Hey, Angel. Oh, your breath, Angel. Mouth wash for doggies is my next purchase." She rolled over to glance at the clock. It was three in the afternoon... or morning? It was dark. Sliding out of bed she hit the toilet first then moved to the kitchen, wondering where everyone was. A note on the refrigerator told her the jocks went to work out at the police gym. For a moment she paused remembering she used to be one of the jocks. Sighing, she decided it was time to seriously get back into training. Janey's shape reminded her of what attacked her and Janey to each other and...if Janey was not true blue to Eric and she didn't have scruples about breaking up marriages, their relationship would have or could have been a lot more intimate. The three had discussed it. It was an open matter between them but they valued their friendship more than the sexual tension that both women brought out in each other when they were in the same space. Eric had told them it was a turn-on for him but he appreciated they didn't act on it. The two women were also glad for the sexual intimacy would have been too much of a strain on their friendship. Elizabeth realized Alex had picked up on it and like Eric she had been aroused. Elizabeth grinned as she fixed herself some tea. Alex had left her usual trail of hickey's across her abdomen and one at the base of her neck, as if she were marking her as her own. Elizabeth decided she liked that.

Last night's love making was more intense than usual and Alex had shown some interesting moves that gave Elizabeth an idea that things were moving along in their comfort level with each other in sexual matters. It was the other things, like personal space or work rhythms that they still needed to work out. Sipping her tea she moved to the dining room where she could do her yoga stretches and if they still were not back, start her Tai Chi.

The kittens and Angel followed her into the dining room. While she watched the rain bounce off the sliding glass door to the dining room in between stretches, the four pets found things to occupy themselves with. Angel had discovered that when she brought her ball out, the kittens would push it around, though it was almost as big as them, then she could get up and retrieve it and the process would begin again. It was not as much fun to watch as when the kittens stole kernels of her food and chased them and each other across the kitchen floor, but it was amusing to watch.

Elizabeth was on her back with her knees bent and the soles of her feet flat above her and her palms pulling her knees closer to her sides when Angel scrambled to her feet and rushed to the front door. The alarm went off a few seconds later. Elizabeth calmly continued to stretch only relaxing when the front door opened. By the sounds there was more people entering the house than what left. Katie's small voice was struggling to be heard over her brothers as she squealed with delight as the kittens appeared at the door along with Angel.

"Lucky I'm dressed," Elizabeth mentioned from her supine position on the floor as a familiar figure leaned over her.

"Hey, that's a nice vision." Alex leaned down and kissed her on the lips. "We didn't know if you would still be asleep."

Alex gave her hand and helped her to her feet. "We stopped at Mollee's and picked up some take out. Are you tired of turkey?"

"Why, did you get turkey sandwiches?"

Alex swatted her playfully on her bottom.

Alex was exhausted and grateful when the Scripts left with Genie and Claire who also stopped by. They had played pantomime games till the kids got too wild with their examples which Linda translated into meaning it was bed time.

Tomorrow was a work day for her and it was when Janey and Eric were leaving. Eric recommended to Marta and Mark what she needed to do to get her book submitted and who to contact. It was not the subject Eric dealt with but he knew who to direct her too. Alex was appreciative that he didn't mind them asking and wanted a copy when it was published. Eric liked to cook fancy or different foods while Janey did the everyday type of stuff, with the exception of Thanksgiving dinners. Eric did Christmas dinners.

Alex sighed in contentment.

"Had a nice day?" Elizabeth was holding her and her breath against her ear gave her a nice shudder. "Let me give you a massage. I'm sure your muscles are very stiff from all that exercise you did today."

"Those two macho brutes were trying to out lift each other. I think Mark is going to be so sorry he took Eric on. Janey was happy with doing reps, and I was just happy I lasted as long as I did. They have

these routines they do. I just work upper body one day and lower another. They do it all. I got tired just watching."

"Hmmm." Elizabeth's lips were against Alex's neck. "Who were you watching?" Elizabeth could feel Alex's body shift. "I'll bet you were watching Janey," she whispered. "Nice moves...nice arms...abs...and very nice legs."

Alex swallowed and could feel her body heating up. She was not quite sure if it was from the husky voice that was breathing in her ear or remembering how she found her eyes returning back to Janey's body as she worked out.

"Lizbeth," Alex whispered hoarsely.

"I need a work out myself," Elizabeth whispered.

Alex was awake moments after the alarm went off. She dressed quickly for the last run she would be taking with Janey. She was surprised Elizabeth got up and dressed for running too.

"I think while you two run I'll try a bit of a jog. It's time for me to start back to getting in shape," Elizabeth explained as she tied her shoes.

"And your knee?"

"I'll tape it."

Alex kissed her on the lips quickly then moved into the front room to let Mark in who should be arriving soon.

Elizabeth found Eric in the kitchen. "Good morning Eric. Get your walking shoes on. While they run, you and I can take it at a slower pace. Your vacation is over."

"Do I gotta? Darn. Well, Janey had been teasing me that I'll be totally out of shape by the time we get back. Now is as good a time as tomorrow. Did you stay up and work or...oh, well, that's nice to see." Eric smirked then left the kitchen, passing Janey as he went to get ready.

"Going somewhere? What about the knee?" Janey kissed Elizabeth on the cheek.

"Bandaged. Your physique has me so jealous I'm just itching to get back on the program. You are just one hell of a commercial for vitamins, Janey."

Janey slapped Elizabeth playfully on her bottom.

"Ahha. That's my territory," Alex's voice chimed behind them. Mark was moving behind her though not with his usual form.

"Hey, what happened to you, Mark?" Elizabeth asked peering around Janey.

"Testosterone," Janey told her solemnly.

"Is this going to be one of those female bashings?" Eric asked his wife as he pulled on his coat to his sweat suit.

"No. It's a testosterone bashing. Both sexes have that," she smirked.

"Looks like you and Elizabeth will be having company," Alex smiled as she followed a stiffly moving Mark out the front door.

"Go ahead, make fun of me, partner. Wait until you have to go chasing down a perp by yourself."

"I'm sure you'll be quite okay cutting them off in the patrol car," she returned.

Chapter 14

Elizabeth was sitting with her legs extended and covered with a warm blanket on the couch, reading a novel that she had found in their practically bare bookcase with the fire ablaze near her. Angel and kittens were napping, Mama Kitty was sleeping in one of the chairs close to the fire and the guests were safely on their way home.

The alarm on the monitor gave a bleep and Elizabeth lifted her head to see if it was the expected vehicle. Smiling she rose to prepare the rest of the table. By the time Alex was inside the door to a happy dog, scampering kittens, and a warm embrace, the candles were lit and the lights in the rest of the house were off or on low.

"Hmm. You smell very nice," Alex told her as she buried her face in her chest in a big hug.

"Thanks. Go take your shower and get comfy. Dinners waiting for you and so am I," Elizabeth told her lowering her voice for the last part.

"I will be right."

"Candle light dinner, beautiful lover, it's a very nice eye full," Alex told her as she pushed her finished plate aside and watched Elizabeth reach over for the bottle of wine. Both had one glass already.

"So, what's the plan for tonight?"

"How about we just play it by ear?"

"Okay. Anything special that we're celebrating?" Alex asked, trying to figure out if there was something more to the set atmosphere than just a romantic evening.

"Nope. Unless you want some meaning attached to it. How about the fact that we're alone again."

"Well, how about us taking our wine over to the fireplace and throwing a few logs on for effect and fulfill some fantasies."

"Just what I had in mind. Shall we?"

Alex's cell and land line went off simultaneously.

"Damn! It just could not last. I can't wait until tomorrow!" Alex mumbled as she rolled out of Elizabeth's bed and tried to run down the hall in a half awake state.

Elizabeth rolled over and glimpsed at the clock. Four in the morning.

"What is with criminals around these parts," she muttered. "Don't they know crimes are committed late at night and later in the morning?"

She went to let Angel out. Alex was asking questions to whoever was on the line. It was still raining. She may as well get up and start researching for her next story.

"Hey, hon," Alex slid next to Elizabeth in the shower and helped her rinse off.

"Don't you have to run off somewhere?"

"Nope. That was a call from the East Coast. Agent Briscole. She had some information she wanted to pass on. Remember we were trying to find out who the boss was of the Jaded Amulet gang?"

"Yeah. Your long list of suspects."

"Hmm. She did a background on Margaret at the clinic. I sent her fingerprints from a bottle of pills I got at the clinic. She says they don't belong to Margaret but to a Margi Litman. She has a police record. She's sending me an Email with a photo and information. But that can wait. My two days off are tomorrow. How about heading up to my cabin for a couple of days. We can get Mark and Linda to stay and take care of the kitties. They can use a break. Mark's parents can watch the kids. Wanna go if he says okay?"

"Oh, your secret hide away. I sure do. Would you be offended if I bring my laptop?"

"Nope. I do have electricity, hot water and a hot tub. No phone service, though. No nearby stores. Cell phone reception is iffy. There's snow up there. It means we're going to be isolated. Are you alright with that?"

"I think I can manage. When do we leave?"

"I usually leave right after I get off work but if that's too..."

"Tell me what you don't have up there and I'll pick you up packed and ready," Elizabeth gave her a tweak on her bare bottom.

"Hey, I'm the cop here. If there's going to be any pinching...that's my job," Alex muttered as she tried to move out of the way of Elizabeth's tickling fingers.

Alex rapped on Chief Harper's office door and entered. Mark was in the conference room that was adjacent to the chief's office, with the only entrance being through the chief's office. Chief Harper felt more comfortable with the 'war room' sandwiched between the secured server room and his office. Less chance of their discussions being overheard if the doors were closed, and any charts left up showing crime scenes should the civilians show up for volunteer work.

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked as she looked from Mark's serious face and the chief's.

"No. Now that we have a breather from the vandalism, we can get back to our local gang. I was hoping they would move out after the bust."

Alex nodded and would have mentioned to Harper about the information Briscole, once her SID partner, had given her but her previous covert job was still not for public knowledge and openly discussing the information would lead to questions from Mark.

"My contact in DC gave me some information on fingerprints that were sent to them to study," he informed her.

Alex nodded and smiled. So, SID was still sharing with the chief. Chief Harper closed his office door and the two joined Mark who was spreading names and mug shots around the table.

"Hey, glad to see you made it," Mark told her as he handed her a photo. It looked like Margaret except for hair color. "Looks like Margaret at the clinic, but it's not. Fingerprints don't match hers."

"Shit!" Alex shook her head surprised. "Elizabeth is right."

"About what?"

"She told me that she thought there was something odd about Margaret. Like a scar on her hand that one day it's there and another day it's not. Or one day she's real warm and friendly and the next day, she may say the words but there's no warmth. Elizabeth thought she would make a good boss suspect."

"Well, Burns is running a search on finding out where she was born...and the hospital records to see if she has a twin. This Margi Litman is listed as adopted."

"Wow. Gary is adopted, Margaret is adopted, Rita Monroe is adopted and now this Margi Litman. Can we get a DNA work up on them or am I jumping to conclusions here?"

"It's being worked on. By the time you get back from your days off, we'll have something," Harper said.

"Okay," Alex thought about mentioning the connection of Margaret's pit bull to a hair in a folded list of names she found when working for SID. However, she couldn't remember if she had already told the chief that or not.

"Our next departmental meeting we'll get back on the list. Margaret being Gary's girlfriend puts an interesting twist on things."

"Jeeze, this thing is still full of convoluted twists," Alex groaned.

"And you love it! Nothing but a good mystery with many dead ends to get your juices going." Mark's grin told Alex he meant a lot more in that remark. "So, when are the two of you leaving for the mountains?"

"As soon as I get off work."

"Good. You need a vacation from people," Mark smiled.

"As do you and Linda."

To be continued in: III Sunrise: Cabin Fever