

Squeak-squeak-creak!

The sound had been brief but Stella Starr had heard it as clear as a thunderclap, and she knew exactly what it had been - the loose floorboard in the hallway.

The thirty-seven year old private investigator pulled down her blanket as she tried to peek through the darkness of her bedroom. Unfortunately, she was unable to see past the tip of her nose without her glasses, but she couldn't be bothered to swing her arm around to her nightstand to get them.

A quick glance at her extra-large alarm clock proved that it was seventeen minutes past three in the morning.

As she was still looking at the clock, the bedroom door handle was slowly depressed, but nary a sound came from the doorway. She whipped her head around and caught a faint glimpse of a tall, shadowy, flannel-clad figure that suddenly slid out of the darkness and appeared next to the bed.

The next moment, a stifled yawn was heard, immediately followed by the blanket being moved aside on the other side of the bed.

Stella answered the commotion by breaking out in a shit-eating grin. Once the shadowy figure had made herself comfortable on the other side of the bed, Stella scooted over and snuggled up tightly to her best friend, business associate and now lover since four weeks, Regina Harrison.

"Oh..." the former model whispered, "I had to pee. I'm sorry if I woke you up."

"I didn't feel a thing. I woke up 'cos you were gone," Stella whispered back, pressing herself against her tall companion's firm body. Within moments, her extra-high quality pillow made her fall asleep like a baby.

The next time Stella woke up, it was just before seven, and she inched across the bed to turn off the alarm clock before it could send out its infernal siren.

After swinging her legs over the side of her bed and putting on her glasses, Stella pulled down in her oversized Bugs Bunny T-shirt and folded her legs up underneath her while she looked at her bedmate.

She shook her head slowly, still completely unable to fathom that she, the perpetually clumsy, unfavored and just plain unlucky Stella Starr, could score such a babe.

On the other side of the bed, the forty-three year old former supermodel with the perfect eyes, the perfect cheekbones, the perfect nose and the perfect hair managed to look cool, suave and in perfect control, even with her eyes closed and her lips parted in sleep.

"Sweet Chicky-Dee, Stell, you're looking at all your birthdays and Christmases rolled into one, yessir," Stella whispered to herself as she stuck her bare feet into her favorite moose-head slippers and waddled off to the bathroom so she didn't have to wait and wait and wait for her long-haired bedmate to finish showering and beautifying herself.

Before she could reach the bathroom, a pile of colorful mail by the front door caught her eye and she waddled over to it pick it up. "Junk, junk, junk, bill, junk, junk, bill, bill, bill... uh-huh. Naffnudkhar Yoga, achieve the Seventh Level of Bliss. Har, been there, done that, buddy... and I didn't need no yoga instructor to get there," she said with a grin as she glanced back at the bedroom. "Ugh, car insurance, fire insurance, credit card bill, gas card bill, library card bill... uh-huh, whut?"

Behind her, the six-foot-one, highly graceful frame of Regina Harrison went from the bedroom to the bathroom, shedding her flannel pajamas as she did so.

Once Stella had sorted the mail after relevancy, she turned around only to find herself face to face with a closed bathroom door. At first, she just stood there with a slightly puzzled expression, but when she heard the shower running and Regina humming her favorite tune, she scrunched up her face until it was only half the size it had been to begin with. "Oh isn't that just typical? Us short people get no respect... NO respect," she mumbled, fluffing her dirty-blonde mop of hair that had already grown back to haystack-like proportions after her haircut.

The words had barely left Stella's mouth before the door was opened and held ajar. A far-from-dressed Regina didn't say a word, but she didn't have to as her actions spoke louder than a whole phonebook could have: she winked and held up a sponge.

"Uh-huh!" Stella squeaked and threw the stack of mail high in the air from where it rained down like a colorful snow flurry, though she had already vacated the premises long before they hit the floor.

Much glorious scrubbing later, Stella sat down on their bed to put on her boots, but as always, the sight of Regina sweeping a shirt over her sculpted shoulders and torso, and pouring her long legs into a pair of charcoal slacks stole her attention away from tying her bootlaces.

The shit-eating grin returned with a vengeance and she had to move her glasses a bit back from her eyes to stop them from steaming up. "It cannot get any better than this," she mumbled and stood up, "it simply cannot- YEOOW!"

Hearing her friend holler, Regina knew what was coming and she hurriedly spun around and wrapped her arms around the wildly flapping Stella who had - once again - managed to tie the wrong lace onto the wrong boot.

"Are you all right, Stell?" Regina said in her trademark silky smooth timbre as she held Stella tight.

Stella had her face buried into Regina's bosom so she was in fact quite all right. "Uh-huh," she mumbled, surrounded by two of her most favorite things in the world.

"Good. Down-a-daisy... c'mon, I better help you with your boots... again," Regina continued, gently easing Stella back down on the bed.

"Thanks, Reggie," Stella said and adjusted her glasses. "You're my friend."

"And a little bit more than that, huh?" the former model said, winking saucily at her new lover.

"Maybe a little bit more than that, yeah."

Crouching down, Regina quickly undid the bootlaces and fixed them up properly. "There. You're all set," she said, putting a warm hand on Stella's jeans-clad thigh and giving it a little rub.

"Now... may I give you a little fashion tip?" she continued, wearily eyeing the brown boots, the green socks, the blue jeans and the yellow sweater.

Stella sighed and rolled her eyes. "Does it include telling me to dress differently?" she said flatly.

"No."

"Because if it does, you can tell it to the h- whut? No?"

"No," Regina said with a beaming smile. "I was going to suggest that you bought a pair of boots with Velcro bindings. Would save you a lot of grief," she continued as she reached up to caress Stella's cheek.

"Oh... huh. There's a first time for everything, I s'pose. I'll think about it," Stella said and got up, returning the favor by kissing Regina's inviting lips. "Now, c'mon... let's get over to Zeligman's Bakery before all the best donuts are snatched. I be starvin' here!"

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Treating her beloved brown AMC Pacer with kid gloves, Stella drove up the little ramp to the parking lot at an astounding seven miles an hour. "There it is again... didya hear that?" she said and pointed in under the dashboard.

"Yeah. There's a whine somewhere."

"There's definitely a whine somewhere," Stella said and nodded grimly. She drove into one of the slots and parked next to their leased Mercedes SLK.

After taking off her seat belt, Regina slapped her thigh and let out the kind of sound one uses when one perhaps isn't a hundred percent sincere. "Oh! I know what it is!"

"Wh- what? Well, spill it, Reggie!"

"It's the car!"

"Uh, yeah...?"

"The car is whining, 'why won't she drive me faster... why won't she drive me faster... why won't she drive me faster... why wo-"

"Ha. Ha. Ha flippin' HA. And another Ha! Don't you go knockin' my drivin'! I drive safely! I've never had an accident... need I remind you which of us had the accident in the SLK? Huh? Huh? So there!" Stella said and waggled her index finger at her best friend. When the tall, former model didn't appear to be ruing her quip in the least, Stella grunted and stepped out of her car.

Everything looked the same as always at the low office building that housed the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency: the asphalt in the parking lot was still cracking up, the pigeons were still cooing on the top of the flat roof, and the radio was still blaring from Billy's garage across the lot. The slight drizzle that came down from the leaden skies only added to the undeniable fact that it was late January.

On her way into the office, Stella remembered to take a giant step over the metal rail at the lower part of the door so she wouldn't stumble and fall flat on her face. She noticed another pile of colorful junk mail but left it for Regina to deal with.

At once, she moved over to the little table behind the door and put down the scrumptious feast they had bought at Zeligman's: a chocolate milk for herself and an orange pulp juice for Regina, plus four donuts - two with chocolate frosting, one with raspberry frosting and jam, and finally a special with lemon curd. "Anything in the mail?"

"Nah, just the usual stuff," Regina said, sorting through the bills and the junk mail. "Naffnudkhar Yoga, achieve the Seventh Level of Bliss," she continued, holding up a flyer held in gold and white that had a photo of a guru on the front.

"Huh, those guys sure get around. We got one just like it back at my pad," Stella said and walked over to her desk where she briefly sat down to stare at the pile of paperwork she had left there the night before. The paperwork suddenly morphed into a dangerous, fanged monster with yellow eyes and bad breath, and she hurriedly moved away from the desk and back over to the breakfast table to escape its clutches.

In the meantime, Regina took off her trench coat, her Mai Sjoblom scarf and her shoes, and walked barefoot over to her own desk where she predictably bumped down into her swivel-chair and put her endless legs up on the corner of the desk.

Stella worked with a rare smile on her lips as she thought about the nice surprise in the shower. She quickly put the donuts on a pair of plates - she took the raspberry and one of the two with chocolate frosting for herself - and poured the drinks into a pair of tumblers. "Reggie, it's funny though..."

"What is, Stell?"

"Well, that I can't stand sugar in my coffee, but I can't live without my donuts," the blonde investigator said as she carried Regina's plate and tumbler over to the other desk, "or my muffins, or my brownies, or my cookies, or my Danish, or my-"

Reaching up, Regina took the plate and the glass and paid for it with one of her trademark two-hundred watt smiles. "I get the picture."

Stella snickered and adjusted her glasses. She was about to speak up when her stomach growled out loud. "Oh... beg ya pardon," she said and clapped her gut with her free hand. "I guess it matches the monster hiding behind the pile of paperwork. I saw it, Reggie, and it was frightening."

"Well, don't bother callin' me, Stell. I don't do monsters," Regina said and went to work on her lemon curd donut.

Stella snickered again and scooted over to the couch where she put down her plate and tumbler on the coffee table. Fluffing the pillows, she sat down and took the plate with the chocolate donut. "Ah," she said with a broad grin as she studied the sugary pastry. "Beauty personified."

"Why thank you, darlin'," Regina said and flicked her perfect hair over her shoulder where it naturally fell in a perfect cascade down her back.

"No, Reggie, the donut!" - *munch, munch* - "Ain't the chocolate frosted" - *munch, munch, MUNCH* - "ones just the best thing" - *MUNCH* - "since sliced bread? Or maybe even" - *MUNCH, munch* - "since breathable air...?" - *gulp*.

"Oh... it's gone already," Stella continued, looking at the empty plate. When she realized Regina hadn't replied yet, she looked up only to be greeted by a raised eyebrow. The only logical response to that was a mischievous grin, so that was what she sent the other way.

Opening up wide, she stuffed the raspberry frosted donut into her mouth. Two seconds later, somebody knocked on the door. "OH, FFFPHARCK'M! Why do-" - *gulp* - "people-" - *gulp* - "always-" - *GULP* - "knock when I-" - *GULP!* - "eat..."

"I got it, Stell," Regina said and slipped her legs off the table. As she walked across the plush, dark gray carpet they had bought at a Chapter Eleven-sale, she made sure to stop halfway there and flash her boss and bedmate one of her trademark poses. "And just for the record, *that's* beauty personified. Ba-da-bing," she said and cocked her hips to make her rear present itself in the best possible fashion against the charcoal slacks.

"Ba-da-boom," Stella said with yet another shit-eating grin on her face.

Regina was quickly at the door and whooshed it open. Their ever-hopeful neighbor Billy the Mechanic was standing outside, holding a plastic bag and wearing a surprised look on his face.

"Hi, Billy. C'mon on in," Regina said and stepped aside to let the friendly - if slightly clueless - mechanic inside.

"Uh... thanks, Miss Harrison," Billy said and stepped into the office. As always, he was wearing safety boots, a greasy baseball cap, a canary yellow boiler suit that was zipped down to half-mast to reveal a filthy, formerly white t-shirt, and finally a pair of sturdy gloves. "Hi, Miss Starr," he continued, scratching his two-day stubble.

"Yo, Billy. What can we do for you? What's in the plastic bag?" Stella said and got up from the couch.

"Oh, it's a car CD player and a stack of discs that I wanted to ask if I could leave over here... your locks are much stronger than mine." - Through the entire sentence, Billy's eyes had never left the upper, curvaceous part of Regina's slacks.

"Sure," Stella said and put out her hand to take the plastic bag. "I'll put it in the conference room. Just come a-knockin' when you... when you... need... hey, Billy, I'm talkin' here, ya know."

"Wh- uh, whut?" Billy said, snapping his eyes away from Regina's endless legs and the tight slacks to look at Stella's slightly less-than-amused face. "Uh, thanks. Oh, and there was another thing as well. Miss Harrison, uh, I was wondering if I could tempt you to, ha ha, uh, go to Bob's Bucket of Ribs on Friday night? I promise that I'll shower and shave first."

Regina and Stella briefly locked eyes and sent each other a silent message that if Regina didn't tell him about their new relationship at once, Stella would, and that wouldn't be pretty.

Regina nodded unnoticeably and moved to put an arm on Billy's shoulder. At the very last moment, she reconsidered, thinking that her Gianna Giacomelli shirt plus grease and oil residue from the time of President Reagan didn't necessarily mix. "Ummm, Billy... there's something you need to know. Maybe you should sit down..."

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An hour later, Regina came back to the office and took off her trench coat and her scarf. "Sorry it took so long, Stell. I didn't want to leave before he had fallen asleep, the poor thing. Boy, that was awkward... grown men shouldn't cry like that."

Stella was sitting at her desk working on the mountain of paperwork armed with a notepad, a ball point pen and a large ruler that she used to whack the paper monster's fingers when it got too frisky with her. "Awkward? I wrote the book on awkward, Reggie. That wasn't awkward, that was just... just... ugh. Poor fella."

"Yeah. Of course, I can understand his shock... it would be a massive blow to anyone to be told that I, the divine La Regina is out of their reach," Regina said and kicked off her shoes on her way over to her desk. "Anyway. Did anybody call?"

"No. That's why I decided to wrestle with this thing," Stella said and gave the mountain of files on her desk a big whack with the ruler. "Gave me a paper cut, too!"

Before Regina had time to come up with a suitable quip, their phones rang. "Do you want me to take it, Stell?" she said, holding her hand above the receiver.

"Nah, I got it," Stella said and picked up her own phone. Clearing her throat, she leaned back in her seat and started toying with the cord. "You have reached the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. And before you ask, no, we don't actually have a Mr. Harrison Starr working here. I'm Stella Starr, the senior investigator. How may we help you?"

The sound level at the other end of the line was massive. At first, Stella couldn't decide if the call came from a steel rolling mill or an oil rig, but when she could hear music playing and a few kids laughing, she lost her line of thought and ended up quite confused.

'Uh... I'm sorry, it's dreadfully loud here so I didn't understand a word. My name is Meredith Campanero. May I speak to Mr. Harrison Starr, please?' a woman said in a cute English accent.

Stella let out a sound that was a cross between a sob, a grunt, a curse and a choked-up version of the Almighty's name. "We. Don't. Have. Anyone. Here. By. That. Name," she growled into the telephone.

'Great, I'll hold!'

"No, for cryin' out loud... I said we don't have anyone here by that name!" Stella barked in a voice that grew from agitated to one notch below an eardrum-popping '...ucker'-attack.

'Oh... hang on. Oh, it's too loud here... I need to find a quieter place. When do you think he'll be back?'

Stella jumped up from her chair and burned a hole in the carpet with her socks as she tore around and around and around the desk still holding the receiver to her ear. On the fourth revolution, she lost her breath and had to come to a stop.

Huffing and puffing, she bent over and put her free hand on her knee. "Listen, Miss, we don't have anyone here by that name... I'm Stella Starr, the senior investigator."

'Ohhh, now I get it. You're his daughter, right? Yes, I know all about that. I'm working for my father, too. No... no, hang on, something's come up, I have to go.' - Click.

Stella was left holding the dead receiver, and at first, it seemed like she didn't have enough life force left to do anything about it. After a little while, she sighed deeply and put the receiver back down on the phone.

"Stell, what in the world was that about?" Regina said, jumping up from her chair to help her shell-shocked friend back to the safety of her desk - paper monster be damned.

"I dunno and I don't care. I don't understand why people can't read our ads, Reggie? Why do you think people can't read our ads, Reggie? Is it because they're in black and white? Do you think that's why, Reggie?" Stella mumbled in a flat, numb monotone. "The only reason they're in black and white is because color ads cost three times as much and I didn't have much money at the time and-and-and but perhaps we should reconsider getting a col-"

RRRRRINGGG!

"Gah! The telephone! The telephone!" Stella howled and tore over to the couch to get the furthest away from the horrible plastic creature. When it sent out another shrill ring, she dove for cover under the pile of cushions that had clustered at the far corner of the couch.

Looking at her friend's frantic behavior, Regina sighed deeply and picked up the receiver. "Hello, you've reached the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. This is Regina Harrison."

'Oh, hello, Miss Harrison,' a female voice said in an English accent. This time, there was no noise and the line was crystal clear. *'I'm Meredith Campanero and I rang you a moment ago. I was speaking to the daughter of the-'*

"No, you actually spoke to Stella Starr, the senior investigator. We're just the two of us."

'Oh... oh, I'm terribly sorry, Miss Harrison. Oh, deary me... I didn't mean to be rude. Oh, dear!'

Sitting down at Stella's desk, Regina shot her blonde friend a thumbs-up that seemed to calm her down somewhat - at least enough to remove the pillows she had used as a crash helmet.

"What can we do for you, Miss Campanero?"

'Well, like I told Miss Starr, I work for my father's circus. It's just a small one, not one of the large, global circuses, you understand.'

"I see, Miss Campanero," Regina said and waved Stella over to the other phone.

At first, the blonde investigator was reluctant to get anywhere near it, but another, stronger wave convinced her it was okay to come out of hiding. That left another obstacle - Regina's swivel-chair. Gulping, Stella carefully placed her rear on the seat in the hope that it wouldn't run off with her like her own swivel-chair had done on so many occasions that she had lost count. "H-he- hello?" she croaked into the other receiver.

'Oh hello, Miss Starr. Look, I'm terribly sorry for the confusion before. You see, there were laughing children everywhere around me, and I'm sure you know how loud they can be.'

"Y- yes, I do... uh, can. Uh... am."

'My father's circus, Campanero and Daughter, has been hired by the Ocean View Shopping Mall to provide entertainment for children while their parents shop... but would you believe it... some dastardly pickpockets have begun targeting the children! And their parents, too!'

"No!" Stella said and thumped her fist onto the desktop. To do so, she had to remove the iron grip she'd had on the edge of the desk. The results weren't long in coming. "What's the world comin-" - *Wheelie!* - "OOOF!" - *crash, scrape, thump, bump.* "Owch..."

At the other desk, Regina buried her face in her free hand and shook her head slowly, making her dark locks whisk back and forth across her back. Sighing, she put down the receiver, got up and walked around the desks.

'Oh dear, Miss Starr, are you all right?'

"Oh, I'm fine, I'm fine... I just took a tumble, but I'm kinda used to that, so..." Stella said, patting down the carpet to find her glasses that had flown off her nose at the point of impact.

Without speaking a word, Regina crouched down and picked up Stella's glasses - then she put her hands under her blonde friend's armpits and lifted her back up onto the swivel-chair.

Once Stella found her glasses on the desktop, she put them on and blew Regina a kiss. "Anyway, where were we, Miss Campanero?"

'Well... uh... all right, I was wondering if you would mind swinging by later today? Today and tomorrow, we'll be at the Gold Square, that's in the eastern part of the mall. Perhaps you'll be able to see something I can't... with your expertise, I mean.'

Right on cue, Stella wiped a pair of huge dust bunnies off her lenses. Once the offending critters were safely into the wastebasket, she nodded into the receiver. "We'll be there, Miss Campanero. You can count on us, the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. We always get our man. Even when it's a woman. After all, our motto is We Never Rest Until The Crook Is Caught!"

'Uh... good, good.'

Chuckling, Regina turned around and glanced at the picture frame that protected their real motto - "If you're not satisfied with our services, you can kiss our..."

"Mmmm-yes!" Stella said with a vigorous nod. "Don't bother to look for us, though. We'll be there completely incognito! We're masters at blending into a crowd, Reggie and I."

'Oh, I'm really looking forward to meeting you, Miss Starr! I knew I should have called you sooner! Ta-ta for now!'

"Uh, ta-ta right back atcha," Stella said and hung up. With a smile on her face, she swiveled around to send a Regina a big thumbs-up - but unfortunately, she gained a little too much speed and had to grab hold of the desk with both hands to stop herself from taking another nosedive.

At the other desk, Regina buried her face in her hands all over again.

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"Who's driving?" Stella said as she locked the door to the office behind her some time later. With the door firmly secure, she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her bright yellow down vest and shuffled across the parking lot.

"I'm driving! And we're taking the Merc," Regina said and strode over to the low-slung silver metallic sports car. After unlocking it, she looked at the clouds to decide whether or not they could have the roof down. Since it seemed that more rain was imminent, she kept it closed.

Stella sighed and blinked a couple of times. She had decided to wear her contacts instead of her glasses, but it always took her a little while to adjust to the foreign objects in her eyes. "But I'm a good driver," she said in a whiny mumble that didn't get her anywhere with her tall friend. "No, really, I am!"

Regina decided to play the trump card and quickly walked back to Stella. "I know you are," she said dramatically, putting her strong hands on her shorter friend's shoulders. While Stella was looking up at her, Regina smiled and leaned down to claim the blonde investigator's lips. "But we promised we'd get there today," she husked once they separated.

"Oh, I know and... hey!" Stella said with a huffy expression on her face and her hands firmly ensconced on her hips.

Regina merely grinned and went back to the driver's side door. "Are you coming or what?"

The huffiness couldn't stay on Stella's face for too long and she broke out in a warm smile as she went over to the low sports car. "That one goes on the list, too, ya know. One of these days, Regina Harrison... one of these days, you'll... you'll... regret teasing me so mercilessly!"

Once they were sitting comfortably in the deep bucket seats, Regina turned on the powerful engine and reversed out of the slot next to the Pacer. Selecting Drive, she let the SLK glide through the parking lot until they were at the little ramp - then she entered the traffic on Carter Boulevard, driving south to get to the Ocean View Shopping Mall.

"By the way, Stell," Regina said as they came to a halt at the first traffic lights that had turned red moments earlier. "How many people have asked for Mr. Harrison-Starr now?"

Stella turned around and scrunched up her face. "I don't know... I forgot to update our list. I can't believe I didn't update it! Oh, that's your fault," she said and reached over to give the mile-long thighs a little slap.

"How so, Stell?"

"Well, you know."

"No?"

"You know!"

"No, I don't, Stell!"

In the meantime, the traffic lights turned green and the two women drove off, equally confused by the puzzling responses of the other. "You know!" Stella said again, leaning in towards her tall friend while wiggling her eyebrows incessantly.

"Careful doing that, you're gonna dislodge your contacts," Regina said drolly.

Stella turned around in the seat and added a second, even gentler, slap on Regina's thigh. "Ha, ha. Look, I'm trying to give you a compliment, actually!"

"By saying it's my fault you forgot to update the list?"

Stella groaned and threw her hands in the air. "I give up. I give up!"

"So do I..." Regina said with a slow, confused shake of the head.

Half an hour later, they arrived at the Ocean View Shopping Mall after two detours - one necessitated by roadworks, and one necessitated by Stella insisting they should stay in the inner lane when they shouldn't. As expected, the building was huge, but the parking lots in front of, on top of, and below it were more than simply huge, they were gargantuan in size. Everywhere they looked, hundreds and hundreds of cars and SUVs filled the slots, leaving very little space for Regina, Stella and their SLK.

"Huh, this isn't gonna work," Regina said while they were on the second, fruitless, tour of the parking lot on the ground level. "D'ya wanna try the roof or the garage instead, Stell?"

"Weeelll, that depends, Reggie. Is it going to rain or not? If it does, there'll be plenty of puddles on the roof, or we may get caught in a shower. I'm not the world's biggest fan of getting caught in rain showers, you know that. I'm not good with puddles either. On the other hand," Stella said and literally held up her other hand, "I remember another time at another mall where the air-conditioning had conked out in their parking garage and the exhaust fumes and stuff created such an awful atmosphere I could hardly bre-"

'Will ya get a flippin' move on!' someone shouted behind them.

When her lecture was rudely interrupted by the driver behind them running out of patience, Stella spun around in the seat and shot him an Evil Eye.

"He can't see you, Stell," Regina said flatly.

"Yeah? Well, maybe we should change that!"

"Maybe we should... but not today," Regina said and chose to drive down the ramp to get to the underground parking garage.

Fortunately for Stella's state of mind, the air-conditioning was working perfectly and it didn't take them long to find a parking space in the area reserved for female drivers. Placed right next to the sliding doors to the escalators, the area was much stronger lit than the rest of the garage, illuminated by rows of powerful lights in the ceiling that didn't create shadows along the walls for potential assailants to hide in.

"Reggie, I almost feel a little guilty for parking here," Stella said as she craned her neck to look at the sign on the wall that proclaimed the area to be reserved for women and families. "I mean, you and me can park anywhere, but others may not be comfortable out there in the semi-darkness. Huh?"

"Good point, Stell. Go ahead, I'll find another place to park," Regina said and reached over to muss Stella's haystack.

"Okay. Okay... I can do this," Stella said and scooted around in the bucket seat to get ready for the most daunting task of her day - getting out of the low sports car.

After opening the door and taking two and a half deep breaths, she bolted from the seat and shot to her feet. It was touch and go for a while, but she managed to maintain her balance and closed the door with a triumphant grin.

While Regina reversed out of the parking space and trickled off into the semi-darkness to find another place to park, Stella shuffled over to a large, colorful display showing the different stores located in the shopping mall.

"Look, Reggie," Stella said once Regina returned to her, "a hundred and sixty shops, a third of which are fashion boutiques. Should be enough even for you, eh?"

Regina went up to stand very close behind her shorter partner and put her hands on the shoulders of the bright yellow down vest. "Oooh, I can feel my credit card glowing already!"

"Ha, ha, yeah... but no. Just no, Reggie. You already have enough clothes for two lifetimes. You don't need more."

"Oh, knife me in the heart and twist it, whydontcha," Regina husked and leaned down to give Stella a brief kiss on the side of her head, earning herself a snicker.

"And besides, we're here to work," Stella continued and took Regina's hand as they walked over to the escalators. "Work, remember? Also, we need to be completely incognito, so... don't do anything that'll get us noticed. Okay?"

"You know me, Stell... I'm cool as a cucumber."

Smiling at her tall friend, Stella stepped onto the escalators. Unfortunately, she hadn't paid attention to its speed, nor to the bright blue sign that said 'Turbo Escalator', so she was taken completely by surprise when she was shot skyward at a rate of knots. Howling loud enough for the entire mall to hear, she clung to the railing like a mountain climber on the outside of Mount Everest.

Regina just groaned.

By the time they reached the first deck of the shopping mall, they didn't need to ask for directions to find the Gold Square - it was right in front of them. "Ha!" Stella said, pointing at two clowns who were entertaining a group of children supervised by a woman dressed in white pants and a dark coat who was most likely the English lady they needed to speak to.

"Brrrr," Regina replied with a shiver.

"What? You don't like clowns? You never told me that."

"Two words. Stephen King."

"Oh... yeah, okay," Stella said with a shrug. "That's what you get for watching all those horror movies, Reggie. You should stick to the good stuff, like me."

"Uh-huh?"

"Two words. One begins with a K, the other an M... and all your dreams will be gooooood," Stella said with a broad grin.

Regina rolled her eyes but eventually pulled her short friend into a sideways hug and set off towards the small enclosure where the clowns were performing.

The Ocean View Shopping Mall was laid out like a five-pointed star with the five arms each stretching out from the central square. Halfway up each arm, another, smaller, square had been put in between the shops and cafes to break the visual presentation and to give the arms recreational areas that acted like oases from the frenzied shopping.

The five arms were held in glass, smooth floors and shiny chrome like most modern malls, but the management had decided to create themes that could give their customers a sense of the good old days; the shops in the five arms of Ocean View were clustered together in clothing, electronics, sports and hunting equipment, skin care and cosmetics, and finally bakeries and delis.

Campanero's Circus had been allowed to set up a small enclosure in the Gold Square which was in the clothing arm of Ocean View - quite visible by the fact that nine out of ten customers were women who were all carrying multiple shopping bags on their arms with colorful names like Pink Princess World Fashion Outlet, Exclusive Lady Bartholdy, Original Boutique Lana é Mara and Rokkstar Street Tuff.

Stella wasn't particularly impressed with the shops, but Regina was drooling like rarely before, craning her neck this way and that to take in all the sights. "Ooh! Ooooh! OOOOOH!" she said, slamming her hand down on Stella's shoulder when she caught a glimpse of the spring collection in the windows at the Lana é Mara store.

Stella's knees were buckling under the added weight of the six-foot-one former supermodel, and she reached up to pry the strong fingers off her shoulder. "Reggie! Short person in distress here! Regg-gg-ggie! Will! Ya! Get! Ya! Hand! Offa me! For cryin' out loud! We're supposed to be here incognito, woman!" Stella whispered hoarsely, trying to keep quiet so potential criminals wouldn't pay attention to them. Looking back ahead, she could see that some of the kids had indeed turned around to stare at the weird behavior of the adults.

"What? Oh... sorry, Stell. Look, look at that! Oh, the colors... the colors! I gotta... I gotta..." Regina said and pointed excitedly at the many shops.

"Later, okay? We have a job to do... no, Reggie, no!" Stella whispered as Regina suddenly turned around and plotted a course towards the nearest shop. "Down, girl! Down!"

"Oh, but can't I-"

"Later. We're here to do a job!"

"But-"

"Later! So there!"

The pout that spread over Regina's face was world class, and only rivaled by the depth and darkness of Stella's similar pouts when things didn't go according to her plans.

Knowing she had ruffled a few superstar feathers, Stella grabbed both Regina's arms and held the tall investigator tight. "I need you to stay with me. Okay? I need you to be here, now, in the present, and observe. Can you do that? Can you do that for me, Reggie? Once we've spoken to the nice English lady, I'll unleash you so you can prowl the fashion boutiques. Okay, Reggie?"

"Yeah, okay," Regina mumbled glumly.

"Thank you. Now let's-"

Three spectators to the left of Stella, a woman let out a piercing howl that most decidedly wasn't part of the performance - "My phone! Where's my phone?! My phone's gone!" she shouted as she frantically patted down her pockets and rummaged through her purse to find her phone that had suddenly gone missing.

Stella spun around and stared at the scene with eyes as wide as saucers. "Hot diggity DANG! Those crooks are good! I didn't see a thing!" she croaked, turning around in a wide circle to find the culprits - at the next intersecting hallway, two shadows raced around the corner, but it was impossible for Stella to say whether or not they'd had anything to do with the theft.

Within moments, moms ran everywhere with their children to get away from the troubles - and in the middle of it all stood the two clowns looking like they couldn't fathom what was going on. The nicely dressed woman ran into the enclosure from a small tent and immediately let out an inventive blue streak in the Queen's Finest English.

"That's gotta be Meredith Campanero," Stella said and scratched her cheek. "Uh. Okay. Not exactly the entrance I was hopin' for. C'mon, Reggie, we better introduce ourselves."

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CHAPTER 2

"I can't stand this anymore... this is a bloody disgrace... oh... hello, ladies... I'm sorry, but you missed the show," Meredith said in a downcast voice that was matched by her unhealthy pallor. Beyond the dark circles under her eyes and the grayish haggardness of her cheeks, she was a tall blonde with steel gray eyes and a slightly hawkish nose.

Her clothes followed the classic tradition of a circus ringmaster: tight, white riding pants, a dark coat with penguin tails, and a shiny top hat - though she had left the hat on a table at the back of the small stage.

"No, I'd say we got an eyeful. Hi, I'm Stella Starr, this is my business associate Regina Harrison. We're the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency," Stella said and put out her hand.

"Oh... how do you do. I'm Meredith Campanero," Meredith said and shook the hands of both women.

Nodding, Stella hooked her thumbs inside her bright yellow vest and began to look around the small stage. "Are you all right, Miss Campanero? You look awfully tired..."

"I've hardly slept since these bloody thefts began... it's really putting a strain on my nerves. Now, I only need a child crying or laughing loudly to get all frazzled... and that happens twenty times a day here..."

"Man, that sucks," Stella said strongly before she realized that she had said it out loud. "Uh... anyway, we can certainly see that you have a problem. Can't we, Reggie? Reggie? Reggie!"

Hearing her name called out like that, Regina's eyes snapped back to Stella from where they had been - gawking at the Exclusive Lady Bartholdy store that was exactly opposite from the enclosure. "Uh... yes, we can."

Stella mumbled a few inaudible words but soon turned her attention back to Meredith. "So... these thefts happen on a regular basis, right?"

"I'm afraid so," Meredith said and picked up a prop left behind by one of the clowns. "Well, they won't for much longer. The mall management told me yesterday that if I couldn't get it under control, my contract would be annulled. But what do they expect me to do? We're only three people here, including myself, for goodness' sake! We can't be everywhere at once... if those bloody thieves don't stop preying on us soon, they'll need to find someone else's bones to pick clean."

"Mmm-hmmm."

"Oh, but it doesn't matter now, anyway. I'm sure the lady who was pickpocketed today has already called her lawyer to get him to send the management a lawsuit... oh hang on, she had her phone stolen..."

"Hmmm," Stella said again and started rubbing her chin. "Reggie, if you can tear yourself away from the temptations, would you mind taking care of Miss Campanero? I gotta think about this one."

"Sure, Stell," Regina said and screwed on her most winning two-hundred watt smile to add a bit of professionalism to the proceedings. Smiling, she moved forward and started helping Meredith clean up after the show.

Stella scrunched up her face and looked around at the location of the enclosure - or rather, at the many escape routes the crooks could use. "Hmmm. This is a challenge... but I do love a good challenge... once in a while... hmmm. If they..." - she tip-toed away from the enclosure - "or perhaps..." - she tip-toed back - "but what if... on the other hand... perhaps they..." - she tip-toed away from the enclosure and went over to one of the support pillars - "Well, I'd definitely... uh... get away quickly..." - she tip-toed back, but stopped halfway there - "but where to? Hmmm," she mumbled, gesticulating with one hand while the other was deeply buried in her vest pocket.

As Meredith observed the blonde investigator shuffling around and talking to herself, she sighed deeply and shook her head. "Oh, I don't know why I called you," she said and pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is bloody hopeless."

"Well, I've learned that Stella Starr works in mysterious ways. If we give her a little time, she has a knack for coming up with the right answers... though I will admit it looks a little funny..." Regina said, holding a plastic bag that Meredith put a few discarded pieces of paper into.

Stella absentmindedly pulled up in her winter jeans that were just a tad too large for her while she glanced at the props, the enclosure, and finally at Meredith's costume. It was the costume that sent the solution racing through her brain - "A-ha!" she cried, sending her dirty-blond mop of hair into overdrive as she jumped a foot in the air to celebrate her brainstorm.

Upon her landing, she pointed at the ringmaster's tight pants and the penguin coat. "A-ha! Reggie! I have it... we're gonna do what we do best! We're going undercover... as a pair of clowns!"

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To call Regina Harrison mortified would be an gross understatement. Back at the Harrison-Starr office, she sat at her desk and peeked through her fingers at Stella who was sitting in the middle of the floor with no less than seven piles of clothes surrounding her - two of the piles were nearly as tall as she was.

"Stell, this is nuts... we can't go undercover as clowns... what the hell do we know about being clowns?" Regina said flatly, but the easily excitable investigator on the carpet was too busy with sorting the clothes and bopping along to their indispensable Village People CD to listen to the Voice of Reason.

"... Where you can sail the seven... what? I'm sorry, did you say something?" Stella said, holding up a polka-dotted bra but quickly putting it in the pile called 'Maybe a little later.'

"No," Regina said with a long, slow sigh.

"Huh. Musta been my stomach. Hey... food... I can eat. Yeah... can you eat, Reggie? You should, you're getting a little thin... your ribs are showing."

"They are not!"

"We could call the Pizza Express... get 'em to deliver so we can concentrate on finding our costumes. I want a Meaty Mama. It's been too long since I've had a Meaty Mama. With fries. Yeah. Fries with hot chili sauce. Or mayo...? Hmmm."

"I thought they gave your nightmares?"

"Oh no, I have no problems with fries."

Regina rolled her eyes and buried her face in her hands all over again. "The Clog-My-Arteries-Meaty-Mama, Stell..." she said through her fingers.

Stella's first response was to turn around and stick out her tongue at her tall friend. Then she snickered and said: "I'll just snuggle up tighter, Reggie."

"Works for me," Regina said and took the receiver. She quickly found the number for the pizza parlor they always used and waited for one of the guys to pick up the phone.

Later, the office floor had evolved into a proper mess with two opened pizza trays - Regina had decided to go for a Vegetariano to offset the pepperonis, black olives, mushrooms, salty bacon, kebab, chicken, fried sausages and extra cheese on Stella's Meaty Mama - two smaller trays with fries drenched in various sauces, two cans of Slurppy's finest, two private investigators who were having a great time even if the taller of the two would never admit it, and finally a pile of clothes that could be used for the disguises.

"Okayffm," Stella said around a mouthful of Mama, "iffm weffm useffm thisffm pairffm offm pantsffm weffm couldffm-"

"Stell, please don't-"

"-combineffm itffm withffm thisffm-"

"-talk with your mouth-"

"-oldffm shirtffm andffm..." - *gulp* - "What?"

Regina stared at the angelic look on her friend's face - she had clearly not found a thing wrong with speaking through a Meaty Mama. "Never mind."

Stella briefly furrowed her brow but shrugged and moved the slice back up to her mouth.

"No! Please... please wait, Stell. I want to hear what you have to say. You... you always have such cool ideas and everything," Regina said and put a gentle hand on Stella's arm, hoping the fib wouldn't come back to haunt her.

"Awww," Stella said and duly put the slice back in the box. "Okay. So... we don't have everything we need so I'll need to call Costume Rentals in a little while. But anyway, here's what I got planned for my costume... this pair of electric blue harem pants, that red-and-yellow golf jacket, those pair of bright red socks... you know, pulled up extra-high and outside of the pants..."

The look on Regina's face told more than a thousand words could. "Uh-huh?" she said, looking mortified at the thought of what her own costume would bring.

"Yes, and a green sweatshirt underneath the golf jacket. Or maybe... maybe..." - Stella reached for a green t-shirt instead - "this one. Yeah, this one is probably better. Not so warm. Okay, so... your costume-"

"What do we need from Costume Rentals, Stell?" Regina interjected to put off the horror for as long as possible.

For once, Stella turned serious and put a hand on Regina's side. "Hey," she said, clawing the long torso, "don't worry, Reggie. I've found something very, very special for you. It's in the Rentals catalogue. Something that'll fit your regal stance perfectly."

With their connection flowing strong, Regina flashed one of her patented two-hundred watt smiles and leaned forward to claim Stella's lips in a loving kiss. "Thank you. Mmmm... your lips taste of Slurppy! Cherry Cola."

"And you taste of... hmmm..." - Stella smacked her lips a couple of times but couldn't find the right words. "Ehh... oh... eh... naw, we better try again," she continued and pulled Regina in for a kiss that went on for quite a bit longer than the first one.

Once they separated, Stella scrunched up her face, wondering why the world had turned foggy all of a sudden. She knew for a fact that she wasn't wearing her glasses so it couldn't be those steaming up, but something definitely wasn't right. "Uh... Reggie... can you see anything?"

"I can see just fine, Stell. Why?" Regina said and touched the tip of Stella's nose.

" 'Cos I'm kinda fogged up here... can contacts steam up?"

"Does that mean I still got it?" Regina husked, flicking her hair over her shoulder where it - naturally - cascaded perfectly down her back.

"Yessssss..."

The smirk on Regina's face was real, as was the look of love in her eyes. "Huh," she said, reaching out to caress Stella's cheek.

"This is such an odd feeling... no, I gotta get it fixed," Stella said and got on her feet. Unfortunately, since she couldn't see where she was going, the first thing she did was to step in the last slice of Regina's Vegetariano, smearing it all over the pizza tray. That in turn made it quite slippery, and while her socked foot continued forward, the rest of her went backward - right into Regina's waiting lap where she landed with a BUMPH!

"OWCH!" Regina howled, not prepared for - or indeed expecting - a five foot four-and-a-half, dirty-blonde and altogether cute little package to land across her legs.

"I can't see anything but I do know that *that* wasn't supposed to happen. I'm really sorry, Reggie... did it hurt?"

"Yes!"

"I'll kiss it and make it better... just guide me to where it hurts the most," Stella said and puckered up her lips. Before long, she moved her head back and forth while kissing blindly into the air.

"No, no, ugh... hold your horses, Stell... one thing at a time!" Regina said and reached down to take off Stella's left sock.

Feeling her toes come out in the open, Stella let out a snicker and snuggled down in Regina's lap. "Oooh, baby! In broad daylight!"

"You got pizza crud all over Tweety Bird, Stell."

"Oh... okay. Darn."

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Half an hour later, Stella hung up the phone and leaned back in her chair behind her desk. Looking down, she checked if her Tasmanian Devil replacement sock was still keeping the Tweety Bird one company - it was. "Hey, Reggie?" she said, looking at Regina who was sitting at her own desk reading a comic.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry for ruining your pizza."

"Eh, no big deal. There was only one slice left," Regina said and shrugged in her patented Can't Give A Hoot-fashion.

Stella reached over to the windowsill behind her and took the little Viking troll - complete with a long, blond beard, chain mail, a horned helmet, a broadsword and a round shield - that Regina had bought for her when she had been working for an online TV station at the Copenhagen Fashion Week the previous year. "Still. I hate it when people step on my pizzas!" she said, mussing the soft troll against her face.

"That happens a lot, does it?" Regina said and offered her blonde friend a wink.

"More often than you think," Stella said, matching the wink with one of her own plus adding a cheeky grin. "Anyway, while you were in the bathroom, I spoke to the people at Costume Rentals. They said they'd whip together the order post haste and deliver it later today with an express courier. I ordered a professional makeup kit, a red foam nose, a rainbow-colored wig, a top hat made of soft cloth so it can collapse and, uh, tilt at the top, you know, a pair of bright red clown shoes, a rose that can squirt water, a huge pair of sunglasses with little wipers attached to them and a real, old-fashioned brass bugle."

"Jeeeeebus, we gotta take a picture of you wearing that, Stell!"

"Mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... mmmm-maybe."

Regina put away the comic and went over to Stella's desk where she sat down on the corner. "But what about my costume? That's all for your disguise."

"Mmmm-yeah," Stella said with a highly secretive look on her face. "I got something very special planned for you. Something very special."

"Oh, you said that already," Regina said with a worried look on her face. "Do I need to pop a few sedatives when I wear it?"

"Abso-flippin'-lutely not, Reggie!" Stella said vehemently. Leaning back in her chair, she put her arms behind her mop of hair while a cheeky grin played on her lips.

"Uh-huh. I better find 'em right away."

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The next day.

On their way to the Ocean View Shopping Mall, the mood was cheery in the Pacer. Though the sun was low and in Stella's eyes, she had put on her mirror shade hangers and enjoyed the sensation of looking cool for a change.

The Osmonds were playing on the eight-track, and Regina and Stella occasionally sang or hummed along to the evergreen hits while they trickled along on the congested Boulevard.

Most people they drove past pressed their noses flat against their windows as they gawked at the unusual sight of two clowns driving through town.

Like Regina next to her, Stella was in full costume - red nose, rainbow wig and everything - save for her floppy top hat that wouldn't fit inside the antique car. She had spent a good portion of her day standing in front of the mirror while applying her clown makeup, a task that had oh-so-nearly sent her into an '...ucker' rage when it turned out to be far more difficult than she had expected. In fact, if Regina hadn't come to her rescue at just the right time, the mirror would have cracked from her vitriol.

She chuckled when she remembered the look on Regina's face at the sight of her very special costume when they unpacked it. Temporarily lifting her mirror hangers, she looked to her right to glance at Regina who still appeared a bit shell-shocked.

Where Stella's costume was garish and deliberately over-the-top, Regina's was cool, classy and supremely elegant. She was wearing black ballet shoes, long-legged white socks, ivory harem pants, a black belt, an ivory vest with large buttons over an ivory long-sleeved blouse, off-white

gloves with black highlights and an off-white cone-shaped hat that the former model was toying with.

Her face was covered in white makeup with a few colorful highlights that included a red dot under her left eye and a comically arched black eyebrow over her right; in short, she was the prestigious White Clown, the King - or in this case, the Queen - of the arena.

"Reggie," Stella said and patted Regina's long thigh, "didn't I tell ya that your costume was special? You look fantastic. We're gonna blow 'em away you an' me."

Smiling, Regina looked back at Stella whose face was painted white with two red, bracket-like eyebrows and a black handlebar mustache under her huge, red nose. "I'm sorry I ever doubted you, Stell."

"Oh, but that's okay. You'll have plenty of opportunity to make it up to me... later," Stella husked.

"Not tonight or tomorrow, though. I promised my aunt I'd visit her... I told you a couple of days ago."

"Oh... yeah. You did. Darnit," Stella said and tapped her fingers on the rim of the steering wheel. The news dampened her mood slightly, but it all came back when she caught a glimpse of the familiar logo of one of Uncle Greezy's Drive-Thrus off to the right of the Boulevard. "Oy, wouldya look at that... I could eat. Can you eat, Reggie? I got the jones for a Super Greezy Twin Deluxe with fries and Tex-Mex sauce. You want the regular?"

"Yeah, but... you can't go in there dressed like that!"

"It's a Drive-Thru, Reggie!" Stella said and let out a resounding *Wo-hooo!* as she drove off the boulevard and into the fast food restaurant's lot where she quickly went around the building and pulled into the yellow lane.

Stopping at the usual spot, Stella rolled down the window and put her elbow on the sill. After waiting for several seconds for someone to appear in the restaurant's window above them, she suddenly noticed a small sign that read, *'Press the button to get personal service,'* accompanied by a red arrow that pointed at a plastic button on an intercom.

"Huh, weird," Stella said and pressed the button.

'Hello and welcome to Uncle Greezy's Family Drive-Thru-'

"Hi, we'd like-"

'-where you can get healthy-'

"Whut?!"

'-and nutritious fast food for your entire family. Please state your order.'

"Uh... okay... hi, we'd like a Super Greezy Twin Deluxe, a Cheezy Greezy, a small fries with Tex-Mex sauce and extra salt, a Slurppy! Cherry Cola and a Slurppy! Carbonated Mineral Water. Thank you."

Static - static - static - static - 'Effen beffen keffen leffen?' - static - static - static - static.

"Wh- what?" Stella said and bolted upright in her seat. Reaching out, she pressed the button again. "Naw, I don't want an effen-beffen-keffen-leffen burger, thankyouverymuch! I want a Super Twin Greezy Deluxe!"

"Super Greezy Twin Deluxe," Regina said, poking Stella in the side.

"Huh? Oh yeah, make that a Super Greezy Twin Deluxe, a Cheezy Greezy, buncha fries with Tex-Mex and a couple-a sodas! How difficult can it be, for cryin' out loud!"

Static - static - static - static. 'Effen beffen leffen keffen?' - static - static - static - static.

"Whaddindahell are you tryin' to pull here? Before, you said effen-beffen-keffen-leffen, but now you're saying effen-beffen-leffen-keffen? And what the hell does that mean, anyhow?" Stella growled into the microphone on the intercom.

"Stell, perhaps we should just-"

"No, I want my Super-"

Static - static - static - static. 'Effen beffen keffen leffen?' - static - static - static - static.

"Oy! You lissen ta me and you lissen good!" Stella roared into the intercom, "I'm here with my best friend and we're hardworking women who are just trying to scrape together an existence and we want a couple-a burgers and some fries so we stopped here to get 'em. We don't want an effen, we certainly don't want a beffen, we don't know what the hell a keffen is and we sure as stink on you-know-what don't want a leffen! Can you get that into your head? Huh? So there!"

"Stell-"

"Not now, Reggie," Stella said and waved her hand dismissively.

"But, Stell..." Regina said and pointed out of the windscreen.

"Not now, Reggie!"

"Stell, you really should take a look..."

Stella sighed and threw her hands in the air - then she jerked a foot up from her seat as she took in the sight of a six-foot-something man in a cook's uniform standing right in front of the Pacer with a fierce scowl on his face, a meat cleaver in one hand and a bone saw in the other.

The cook quickly came up to the open driver's side window and stuck his meaty head inside. "What part of 'drive around the corner' don't you understand... Bozo?" he bellowed.

"Bozo?! Why, I oughtta!" Stella said, already on her way out of the Pacer.

"Stella! Drive... drive away... now!" Regina said and pointed at the clear road ahead of them.

"But I want a Super Greezy Twin Deluxe!" Stella whined nasally.

"Do you think he's gonna make you one now? We can get some food at the mall... drive! For Pete's sake, drive!"

Rolling her eyes, Stella stepped on the gas to make the Pacer zoom away from the irate cook. Once they were back on Carter Boulevard, she slammed her fist down on top of the steering wheel and let out a growl. "Effen-beffen-keffen-leffen, my furry butt... I should have given him a piece of my mind is what I should have done. I'm famished already and it's only gonna get worse. But he ain't wrecking my good mood. Nuh-uh. I'm in a good mood today. Uh-huh. I'm in a really good mood today..."

Regina didn't and indeed couldn't answer - she had positioned the cone-shaped hat so the hole for the head covered her face completely, thus reducing the risk of anyone recognizing her to a big, round zero.

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Two hundred and forty-four deep breaths later, Stella drove into one of the bays in the underground garage of the Ocean View Shopping Mall and turned off the engine. "You can take off your face-hugger now, Reggie. We're here."

Sighing, Regina moved the cone hat away from her face and shot Stella a sideways look.

Echoing the sigh, Stella clipped off the mirror shade hangers and put them on top of the steering column where she could reach them without hassle. After a few seconds, she was unable to maintain the dark look she had on her face and broke out in a cheesy grin. "I guess I do look like a Bozo, huh?" she said, running her hand up and down Regina's thigh.

"Uh-huh," the former model said as she opened the door and stepped out into the semi-darkness. Putting on her cone-shaped hat, she pulled it down just a tad over her left eye so it was on crooked.

Following her friend outside, Stella took a plastic bag with her shoes and props from behind the driver's seat and put it down on the concrete floor. "My-my-oh-me-my, you look sexy in that getup, Reggie. Mmmmm-sexy."

Regina replied to that the only way she knew - she immediately went into one of her Too Cool For Words posing routines that was surprisingly effective despite her costume. "Mmmm?" she said, finishing up by turning around and shooting Stella a smoldering gaze over her shoulder.

"Yeah," Stella said with a grin. "Oh, we better get a move on. Meredith needs us... won't look good if we let her down."

"What about the Turbo esca-"

"Have fun with that, I'm taking the stairs," Stella said and stomped over to a door labeled Stairs To Mall.

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Up in the mall itself, Regina and Stella met at the top of the escalators. Stella huffed and puffed slightly from taking the two flights at full speed, but Regina was cool as only a White Clown could be.

"Sweet chicky-dee, look at that... there's twice the number of kids today... yikes..." Stella said after surveying the scene and counting at least twenty-five children plus quite a few parents. "Oh well. The kids'll love us... or run away screaming, I dunno," she continued after putting on her floppy top hat where the crown tilted this way and that as she turned her head.

"At least you have something to do... I don't have anything at all, Stell... what do you even *want* me to do?" Regina said and tried to blend in with the background.

"Eh... we'll think of something... c'mon! Looks like the show's about to start," Stella said and quickly dug into her plastic bag to find her clown shoes and the rest of the props.

With the bright red size-fifty shoes safely on her feet, the rainbow-colored wig and the floppy top hat firmly on her head, the red foam nose stuck onto her own, the squirting rose on her lapel and the brass bugle in her left hand, she waddled towards the enclosure like a stranded manatee, waving to the kids all the way there who responded to her with happy squeals of joy.

Bouncy music started playing from the enclosure, and Meredith Campanero and her own two clowns came out to begin their act. When Meredith caught a glimpse of the additional clowns, she hid a wide smile and turned on the microphone she held in her hand. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Circus Campanero is proud to present the legendary duo, The Colorful Two, who'll be joining us today!"

To the left of the enclosure, two men dressed in identical dark clothes briefly looked at each other but soon decided to go ahead with their pre-conceived plans.

Grinning like crazy under her garish makeup, Stella was waving non-stop at the kids, making the floppy hat flip-flop back and forth and the wide sleeves of her golf jacket fly like they were caught in a breeze. Almost at once, she realized that she was able to make the kids laugh just by doing what came natural to her - goofing around.

Eyeing a little boy in a wheelchair, Stella waddled over there to give him a low-five - then she turned around to do the same to a little girl who looked like she could be his sister. After greeting the children, she put her right foot high in the air and took a giant step to move over to the other kids.

Once the others had been greeted according to the ancient traditions of low-fiving, Stella made a ninety-degree right hand turn and held the bugle high in the air. The children all squealed in joy which made Stella hold off the honk for as long as she dared. When the time was right, she squeezed the rubber ball three times to produce a HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A!

With the bugle call still fresh in everyone's mind, Stella hop-hop-hopped further into the enclosure with her knees high and her clown shoes flapping wildly, once again earning herself a loud squeal from the audience.

Regina stared gobsmacked at her easily excitable friend who was clearly having the time of her life in the clown suit. She suddenly felt like she needed to be in there to back her up, and she stepped forward and - just like Stella - did what came natural to her; she posed for all she was worth.

Stepping into the enclosure, she made a half-turn to face the parents and assumed a Bolero-like stance where she held her right hand in the air and the left at the small of her back. Her feet were positioned in a way so her left foot was flat on the floor and her right was pulled back and balancing on her toes, and the muscles in her thighs, stomach and butt were taut and firm so she'd present an athletic figure.

Regina's stance prompted a solid applause from the mothers who all knew that a female White Clown was a rare occurrence, especially one with her height and build, but the kids didn't really know how to respond to her.

Meredith watched with fascination and quickly pulled her regular clowns over to the side. "I think we should let the guests do this one," she whispered, taking a small net with several colorful balls made of soft cotton. "But keep an eye on the spectators... those bloody thieves could be here already."

With her own clowns nodding their acceptance, Meredith stepped into the enclosure and wordlessly handed Stella the net with the cotton balls.

It didn't take Stella two seconds to realize that Meredith wanted to see her juggle the balls, but juggling wasn't exactly at the top of her list of skills. *'But hey... that'll only make it funnier,'* she thought and reached into the net to grab a handful of the colorful balls.

With Regina letting out a *Hep!* to spur her partner into action, Stella threw the balls in the air and pretended to want to juggle them - unfortunately, the very first ball she threw hit the underside of the brim of her floppy hat and went south instead of north. The others promptly rained down from the great beyond and landed everywhere at such a speed that Stella couldn't have caught them all if she had tried.

Through a sheer miracle, the final ball came down right in her hand, and she held it high and let out a roar of triumph. Trying again, she picked up three balls - a red, a green and a blue one - and tried to look like she knew what she was doing.

Out of the corner of her eye, she suddenly caught a glimpse of two men who seemed badly out of place. Not only were they the only men for miles, they weren't laughing or even smiling. While she observed them, she did a much better job at juggling the balls than she had expected, but it only lasted until it dawned on her the men were identical twins - then she put out her left hand instead of her right and dropped all three balls, again much to the glee of the audience.

Regina had noticed Stella being preoccupied with something other than her act and followed the green-eyed stare until she found the twins. "Hmmm," she said under her breath, inching closer to where the two men were but hiding it through a sequence of cool poses and reactions to what Stella was doing.

Each twin was in his mid-thirties and slightly overweight - though not chubby - and had thinning hair, unshaven cheeks and chin, and a small mustache under his nose. They were both wearing dark sports clothes, no doubt to ease their escape whenever they needed one.

The two men split up and moved in different directions along the rear side of the spectators. Nodding at each other, one of them moved in closer to the mother of the boy in the wheelchair, but stopped with a jerk when an electronic entrance alarm from one of the shops nearby suddenly started blaring out an ear-splitting sequence of shrill tones.

Everybody looked around to see where the alarm came from, disturbing the twins so much that the first of them slowly slid back from the mother with the wheelchair. A consummate professional, he knew when to go ahead with his work and when not to, and this was a time to not do anything.

Regina and Stella quickly looked at each other and established that it didn't have anything to do with their case - it had been a shoplifter from the Rokkstar Street Tuff shop who had been held back by the sales clerks. Within moments, uniformed mall security came running from the nearest hallway to apprehend the thief.

As Stella looked back around at her own spectators, she realized the twins had used the kerfuffle to leave. Scouting near and far, she was unable to spot them anywhere.

"Hmmm," she grunted before waddling around with her huge shoes to whip up a little fun for the kids. Just as she was about to play with her water-squirting rose, Meredith Campanero came out into the enclosure and turned on her microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we're already at the end of the first part of our show. We need a little break now, but The Colorful Two shall return! If you liked their work, we would appreciate it greatly if you were to offer a small donation to our treasure chest. Thank you so much for watching Circus Campanero!"

The kids immediately started squealing - some were even crying - and most of their mothers were clapping at Stella and Regina who responded to it in time-honored fashion by taking several deep bows.

On her third bow, Stella got her right clown shoe hooked up on her left and took a forward tumble where she eventually ended up on her hands and knees. "Ugggh! Reggie! Stella in distress!" she croaked, hoping that Regina was close enough to help her get up because she was utterly unable to combat the pull of gravity on her own with the huge shoes still attached to her feet.

She needn't have worried. At the sight of their favorite clown in trouble, several of the kids rushed over to her and helped her down on her rear end while giving her all the support she needed.

"Awwwww!" she said, stretching out her arms in an invitation to a hug - an invitation that was taken by the whole group of kids who all flew into her arms, swamping her completely and knocking most of her costume askew. "OOOOO-EEEEEE!" she howled, buried under what felt like three layers of Kid plus her own clothes.

One after the other, the children went back to their mothers, leaving a beaming Stella alone on the floor. She quickly kicked off her clown shoes and got ready to jump to her feet.

"Stella Starr, you have found your true calling," Regina said and put out her hand.

"Tell me about it! That was just... wow," Stella said and pulled her costume straight after getting a pick-me-up. "Huh. I never knew I had it in me."

"Oh, you could have asked me. I knew all along you'd be the perfect clown," Regina said and pulled her blonde friend into a hug.

"Yeah, and... hey!"

After things had settled down, Regina and Stella - back in her regular sneakers - moved over to Meredith who was counting the donations the satisfied customers had left in their treasure chest.

"How much did you get, Miss Campanero?" Stella said and scratched her hairline under her rainbow wig.

"Nearly a hundred dollars, Miss Starr."

"Oh... that doesn't sound like a lot."

Closing the lid on the chest, Meredith wheeled it into a corner of the tent beyond the enclosure and sat down on it. "Oh, but it is," she said, dusting off her hands. "It's twice the amount we usually get. They loved you, actually."

"I know," Stella said with an embarrassed giggle as she performed a little shimmy on the mall's smooth floor.

Meredith reached up and briefly put a hand on Regina's costume. "Oh, and Miss Harrison, I must say you look smashing as the White Clown. You really seem to understand the character... that it needs to be equal measure suaveness and arrogance. You looked fabulous!"

"Oh, thank you, Miss Campanero. Well," - Regina unnoticeably moved her head up and to the right to let the Perfect Light shine on her jaw and cheekbone - "I have years of experience of expressing suaveness and arrogance from the catwalk. As a veteran of the fine art of modeling, I'm an expert at positioning my body to make it stand out in the best poss-"

HONK-A! HONK-A!

"Ooops... sorry, Reggie!" Stella said with a sly grin as she put away the bugle that she had accidentally squeezed twice while it was in her jacket pocket.

If looks could kill, Stella would need to call an undertaker for herself.

"Hmmm!" Regina grunted before turning back to Meredith. "Oh, perhaps you've seen me on the cover of a fashion magazine? I've been fortunate enough to be on several, like Young 2Day, Rebeccah's, Now! Fashion and-"

"No, I'm sorry, Miss Harrison. I don't have time to read the glitteries," Meredith said and got up from the treasure chest.

"Oh, but they aren't... new... they... were... never mind," Regina mumbled and wanted to shove her hands down her pockets but remembered at the very last moment that the harem pants didn't have any.

Stella leaned in and bumped shoulders with her tall friend to send her a message of support. "Reggie... I still love ya," she said once they were alone.

"Thanks, friend... you're my best friend, friend," Regina said, not realizing until she had said it that she had used one of Stella's trademark phrases.

"You better believe it. Now... let's go find someplace to eat. I'm starving here like you wouldn't believe... my intestines are so empty they've wrapped themselves around my spine and are engaged in a furious death-match with each other to have fewer mouths to feed," Stella said strongly and grabbed hold of Regina's arm to pull her away from the enclosure.

Performing a full-body shiver and a matching shimmy, Regina quickly broke free of Stella's touch like she didn't want to get the cooties. "Gawd, I did NOT need that image, Stell!"

"Well, that's what it feels like... so there! C'mon, you know how cranky I get if I don't eat!"

Regina mumbled a few inaudible words but eventually shuffled after her best friend and new lover towards one of the connecting hallways.

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CHAPTER 3

The two clowns attracted a lot of attention on their stroll through the mall. Everywhere they went, children of all ages gawked at them or wanted to touch them to feel if they were real. Stella was bursting at the seams at the attention and even Regina was enjoying it - though secretly so.

Like a blonde bloodhound, Stella was relying on her finely honed nostrils to help her find the way. Earlier, she had picked up the scent of Teresa Maddalena Pizza Sauce - she identified two equally strong strands: 'Spicy Oregano' and 'Creamy Sweet Tomatoes' - and she could barely keep up with her feet on the smooth floor. Turning a corner, they finally arrived at the restaurant from where the delightful smell wafted out the opened door.

"Gianluca's Mini Pizzas! Here! Here! Here we are! Here-here-here-here... Reggie!" Stella said and pulled at Regina's arm to get her to snap out of the model walk she had subconsciously gone into.

"Ooof, Stell! I was walkin' here!" Regina said as she was rudely shoved into the restaurant.

"Oh, you can walk anywhere. Look at this! Ohhhh!" - Stella pointed up at a large lightbox that hung over the counter displaying the menu. "I want a Four Seasons... one of each! What do you want, Reggie?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"Of course you are! G'wan, don't hold back... pizzas are good for you."

"In which parallel universe, Stell?"

Before Stella could answer, her phone went off with a loud *Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring*. "Oh, where's that damn phone?" she said, rummaging through her hefty costume.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring.

"Yeah, yeah..."

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Yeah, for cryin' out loud! You can stop tweedle-deedle-ing now, I heard ya!"

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Ooooh, I'm gonna kill that damn... ah, gotcha," she said and recovered her phone from the last place she looked, the outside coat pocket. "You've reached the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency, this is Stella Starr."

Mumble, mumble.

"Joe? Whassup there, big boy?"

Mumble, mumble.

"Uh-huh? Hang on... Reggie?" Stella said and put a finger over the microphone.

"Yeah?"

"It's Joe. Just get me something, okay? I need a can of Razzie, too. I'll be outside," Stella said and walked out of the shop to get to a bench near a couple of palm trees.

Regina shrugged and looked back up at the menu. "Hi," she said to the man who came out to greet her. "I'd like two mini pizzas, please, one with falafel and pineapple and one with... hmmm... cheese-mix and sun-dried tomatoes. Also, I need a can of Slurppy! Raspberry Fizz and a mineral water. Okay?"

Outside the pizza restaurant, Stella sat down on the bench and crossed her legs, which wasn't particularly easy wearing the electric blue harem pants. As Joe droned on in her ear about the hardships of life in the inner city and that he needed to update his demands to two gallons of cherry brandy for each successful tip he gave them, she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye.

When she squinted in that direction, she could see at once that the twins she had spotted earlier were walking away from her with determined yet unhurried steps. "Hmmm... now isn't that interesting?" she said under her breath, getting up from the bench to follow the two men. "Huh? Oh, not you, Joe... I mean... ha, ha, you're interesting too, you know, but..."

Mumble, mumble.

"Yeah. Listen, I gotta go. Call us when you have something. Bye."

Mumble, mumb-

Putting the phone into her pocket, she shuffled after the two men, trying to stay as incognito as humanly possible in her loud harem pants, her even louder golf jacket and her rainbow-colored wig that was so loud it was practically screaming from the rooftops.

Five minutes later, Regina came out of the restaurant holding a paper bag with their mini pizzas and two cans of mineral water - they didn't have raspberry fizz. "Stell? Yoohoo, Stell? Stella Starr... where'd ya go? Stell!"

The smell that rose from the paper bag was so strong and delicious that she had no choice but to move over to the bench by the palm that Stella had only just vacated. Opening the bag, she took a deep sniff - and hurriedly dug in to take her cheese-mix and tomato special before it would get cold, stale and generally uninteresting.

In another part of the mall, the sports and hunting equipment arm, Stella peeked around a corner of two connecting hallways and watched the twins standing in a niche along the opposite wall, clearly splitting their latest loot while trying to keep it out of sight of the people walking past. "Gotcha, you no-good dweebs... hot dippity DANG, I gotcha... Stella Starr on the case, with it, on it, wring it, stun it..."

Reaching into her coat pocket, she found her phone and went through the registry without looking. When she thought she had the right number for Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes at the Bay City Police Department, she pressed the button and pulled up the phone.

'Hi,' a sultry female voice purred, *'You have reached the Hot Line. All our girls are waiting just for *you*. Press one for Tatiana, press two for Mindy, press-*

"Oy! Whaddahell? I thought I had deleted that?!" Stella said hurriedly and fumbled with her phone to erase the entry. With blushing cheeks, she looked around to see if anyone had overheard the incident, but no one had been close enough. "If Reggie had heard that, she'd... she'd... she'd... holy guacamole, I'm glad she didn't hear that!"

Her second search was more fruitful, and soon, she held the phone to her ear and listened to a brief clip from the theme from Knight Rider.

'*Bay City Police Department, this is Inspector Moynes,*' a familiar voice said at the other end of the line.

"Hi, Inspector, this is Stella Starr. I'm here at the Ocean View Shopping Mall and Reggie and I could use a hand. We're investigating a spate of thefts from spectators at a small traveling circus and we're-"

'A circus? At the mall?'

"Circus Campanero, yes. It's run by a real friendly lady. Anyway, I have the perps in sight and as far as I can see, they're sharing the loot from their latest rounds. I'm hoping they'll return to the next part of the show that's beginning in a little while."

'Okay? All right, we'll swing by with a team. I can't offer you a full squad today because there's been a big stick-em-up at a diamond trader, so...'

"Shoot, what's the world coming to? Oh, by the way, it would be great if you only brought female detectives. There isn't a guy in sight here..."

Inspector Moynes laughed at the other end of the line. *'Will do, Miss Starr.'*

"Great. Thanks... talk to you soon," Stella said and closed the connection. Looking up, she just caught the tail end of the twins shaking hands and leaving in opposite directions.

By the time Stella returned to Gianluca's Mini Pizzas, Regina was leaning against one of the palm trees, slumbering peacefully from eating both her own cheese mix-and-tomato special and Stella's falafel-and-pineapple.

At first, Stella chuckled at her friend's relaxed look, but when she took the paper bag and looked down into it, her chuckle got stuck in her craw. "You didn't... aw hell, you didn't... yes you did! You ate my pizza, Reggie! Tell me you didn't eat my pizza!"

ZZZZZZZ... "Whut? Wh- whut?" Regina said, snapping away from the palm tree.

"Did. You. Eat. My. Pizza?"

"Uh... yes."

Stella's face scrunched up to such a degree that it was a miracle she was able to get it back into the proper shape. Her lips went one way, her nose the other, her eyebrows went up; then down, and her jaw just went down for good. "Reggie... why d'ya eat my pizza? You know how much I love pizza!"

"I didn't want it to get cold. Oh, and they didn't have raspberry fizz so I bought two minera-"

"I so dearly love pizza... back when I was a little girl, my biggest wish was always to get pizza on Sundays but Mom didn't want to make pizza on Sundays because she thought it was cheap and trashy but I didn't know what she meant by that so I just thought she didn't want to make it because she didn't love me and I cried myself asleep on many a Sunday evening and-and-and-and it wasn't until I could buy my own pizzas that I was able to enjoy them regularly but even

now we don't get pizzas that often because you're always on some kind of mind-numbing health trip that seems to kill all the good stuff, and-and-and-and..."

"Stell..."

In the background, they could hear the bouncy music from Circus Campanero start up, but it only made Stella more irate.

"And now we're gonna be late back to the circus and all those wonderful little kids are gonna be so disappointed and they'll think we don't love them and cry themselves asleep tonight!" - DEEP breath - "And it's all your fault for eating my pizza!"

"I bought you a falafel and pineapple, Stell."

"Gawd... pi- pineapple?" Stella said with horrified grimace. "I hate pineapple... who in their right minds puts pineapple on pizzas, anyhow? What were you thinking, woman? Waitamminute, were you trying to poison me?"

Regina just buried her face in her hands and let out a groan.

"Oh, we can't talk now... we gotta get back before Inspector Moynes gets here!" Stella said, grabbed Regina's arm and yanked her off the bench.

"Inspect-? OOF!"

._*_*_*._

Stella and Regina made it back just in time and flew into the enclosure while still adjusting the last details of their costumes, much to the relief of Meredith Campanero who had gained another few dark circles under her eyes in the meantime.

A rumor that the clowns were funnier than usual had apparently made the rounds because the crowd was even larger now - at least forty people were watching and quite a few of them were women who were there without any children.

At first, Stella froze at the sight of the large number of spectators, but she soon began to goof off to the best of her abilities, honking out loud, tripping over her large feet, squirting water from her rose, trying to juggle with the cotton balls, and every other trick she could think of.

Regina easily fell back into the role of the White Clown and assumed a cool, suave and sublimely arrogant persona as she strutted around like a white peacock, engaging in various poses and introducing Stella's tricks with shouted commands.

It didn't take long for the twins to come back into the picture. The two men who were still dressed in dark clothes slowly crept up to the rear of the group of spectators and began to size up their next victims.

This time, Regina caught them first, and she let Stella know with a sly wink that only the blonde investigator could see.

Stella promptly dropped all her balls and let them roll all over the floor so she could goof around without appearing to have noticed the twins. Each time she picked up a ball, she glanced in the direction of the twins who suddenly split up and went to either flank of the spectators.

Furrowing her brow, Stella tried to keep them both in view at once, but she couldn't do it as long as she was performing her character. The next time she glanced up, she realized she didn't have to: Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes and what appeared to be a small army of well-dressed female plain clothes detectives entered the deck from the Turbo Escalator and quickly fanned out to cover all bases behind the spectators and the twins.

As always, the strawberry-blonde Mary-Jane was smartly dressed in a navy blue pantsuit over a rust-colored blouse that matched her recently trimmed hair perfectly. Though she and her fellow detectives were of a sturdier build than most of the female spectators, they were able to blend in very well, not least because the Inspector and her entire team were wearing colorful shopping bags over their arms.

With the police there and ready to apprehend the bad guys, Stella knew their performance was coming to an end so she wanted to do something extraordinary to close it in style. Lucky for her, the embodiment of Extraordinary was standing on the other side of the enclosure in the six-foot-one shape of Regina Harrison.

Moving with surprising grace, Stella waddled over to the White Clown and kneeled down before her. Pulling a move she remembered she had seen mimes use often, she put her hands on her heart and made a pumping gesture that made all the mothers in the audience say 'Awwww' out loud; then she stretched out her arms in an invitation for a hug.

Regina couldn't stop a broad smile from gracing her features as she accepted the hug and leaned down to pull Stella up into her touch. After the hug, they briefly nudged noses, though it wasn't as easy as it looked with Stella's huge, red foam-schnozz getting in the way.

That was the last moment of serenity. Behind Regina and Stella, everything seemed to happen at once - first a mom patted down her jacket to search for her phone. When she couldn't find it, she looked around and caught a glimpse of her expensive iPhone in the hands of a stranger; then, she let out a piercing cry for help.

A split second after that, the entire battalion of female detectives reached into their colorful shopping bags and pulled out their service firearms. "Bay City P.D.!" Mary-Jane Moynes barked loudly. "Nobody move a muscle!"

Unfortunately for Inspector Moynes, most people did move a muscle - in fact, most people moved most muscles and began to scream, shout and run around like headless chicken. The scene evolved from messy to chaotic to pure pandemonium within the space of three seconds, and it only grew worse from there.

Stuck in the middle of it all, Meredith Campanero had turned on her microphone to announce the end of The Colorful Two's performance, but with sheer madness suddenly breaking out all around her, she let out a piercing cry that was amplified to such a degree through the speakers that the skylights high above them nearly came crashing down.

One of the twins exploited the situation by putting both hands on Mary-Jane's shoulders and giving her such a hard shove that she fell on her rear on the smooth, hard floor - then he was gone in a flash.

"Oy! You!" Stella howled and tried to cut him off at the right flank of the enclosure. "Nobody pushes my friends! Oy!"

In the kerfuffle, Stella completely forgot she was wearing clown shoes, so when she tried to clear the low barrier separating the enclosure from the regular floor, her right shoe didn't make it and got snagged on the upper edge.

"YEEEEEEOWW!" she howled, hop-hop-hopping forward with her right leg well behind her and both arms well ahead. "Aw hell, this..." - *hop* - "this... isn't..." - *hop, HOP* - "isn't... gonna..." - *HOP, HOP, hop* - "gonna... wo- work!" - *HOP, HO- CRASH!* - "... oh, man! Those flippin' shoes!"

"I got one twin, Stell, you get the other!" Regina shouted and took off after the other twin who had been on her side of the enclosure, closely followed by several of the female detectives.

Grumbling and cursing, Stella struggled at first to take off her clown shoes but she finally managed to send them flying. Her sneakers were behind the stage in her plastic bag, but she didn't have time to get them - her long-legged, red socks would have to suffice.

Two steps later, she was back on the floor, grumbling and cursing vociferously about the grotesque lack of friction offered by her socks. Taking a rash decision, she whipped off the socks as well and wiggled her toes in the air to make sure they were all there. With a loud grumble, she shot to her feet and set off after 'her' twin, barefoot and feeling like a hunter-gatherer from the late Stone Age.

"Stop the thief! Stop the thief!" she shouted, tearing down the mall's arm until she reached the first connecting hallway. The bugle kept slapping back and forth in her pocket and she thought about throwing it away, but reconsidered and used it to her advantage by HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A!-ing furiously like a police siren - well, almost.

Stella was soon joined by Inspector Moynes and a few of the detectives who were much better at keeping their balance in their regulatory sensible shoes. "Hello, Stella... who are... we chasing...?"

"Hiya, Mary-Jane... a couple-a... twins... well, just... one twin... Reggie's got... the other... one."

"Okay?"

"Yeah... he's right... ahead of... us..." Stella said and pointed the bugle straight ahead.

"No... he's... not..." Mary-Jane said and shook her head.

Stella looked straight ahead and found herself gawking at an empty space in front of her. Coming to a sliding stop, she punched the air in annoyance and let out a resounding "Oh, F-"
HOOOOOOONK-A!

Regina was having better luck in chasing down her twin. Her ballet shoes had grippy soles that gave her an edge when it came to all-terrain agility. Coupled with her long legs that gave her a good advantage over the shorter thief, she was soon close enough to reach out and try to pull him to a halt.

"You might... as well... quit, Mista... there's nowhere... for you... to run!"

"Like hell there ain't, girlie," the twin barked and kept on running.

Stella furrowed her brow which looked rather ridiculous with her clown makeup and her rainbow-colored wig. "Where could he have gone... he didn't go back... he didn't go up... he didn't go left or right... he's not ahead... where in the flying fig-spread did he... waitamminute...! Wait a blip-bloppin' minute," she said and spun around to check out the shops in the arm they were in.

In the chase, they had moved from the clothing arm to the electronics arm, recognizable through a complete reversal of the gender mix of the clientele. In the clothing arm, more than ninety percent of the customers were women; in the electronics arm, more than ninety percent were men.

The group of heavily armed and well-dressed women - Stella held the bugle like a Colt .45 - attracted a lot of attention from the customers, and soon, they had to throw in the towel.

"Oh, we'll never find him here!" Stella growled and clenched her fists. "Look at all those guys... men, men, men, men everywhere... where the hell do all these men come from!"

"The same place we came from, Miss Starr," Mary-Jane said and put a calming hand on Stella's shoulder. "Come on, perhaps Miss Harrison has had more success."

Turning around, Stella mumbled and grumbled as she shuffled back to the clothing arm with the detectives. "I'll bet she has. I'll bet she just batted her eyelids at him and he swooned at her feet. That's what I do, so..."

Meanwhile back at the enclosure where it all began, Regina and the other twin had wound up running endlessly around one of the palm trees in ever-narrowing circles. The two people had amassed quite a few spectators who were cheering for Regina while booing at the criminal.

Regina thought she was finally close enough to grab hold of him, but he suddenly came to a hard stop that took her completely by surprise.

Her reflexes were slower than she thought they should have been and she was unable to stop before she barreled into the overweight man. Even though she was taller than he was, his bulk made up for the deficit and the result was that Regina found herself flat on her harem-clad rear.

Upon landing, the first thing she did was to whip her head around to cover all possible angles. "Oh Gawd," she mumbled as she scrambled away from the twin, "they all saw me... they all saw me fall on my butt... oh Gawd, I can never work in this town again..."

"Oh yeah? Well they definitely gonna see this!" the thief said and bent down to grab hold of Regina's ivory vest. He pulled her roughly to her feet, but before he had time to do anything to her - apart from clogging up her sinuses with his bad breath - the arm of the mall came alive with a ferocious HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A! that sounded like a wild animal on the charge.

The bugle's HONK-A! was soon joined by a trumpet playing The Ride Of The Valkyries, one ringmaster, two clowns, half a dozen female detectives and two dozen yelling Amazon mothers who were all hustling down the hallway towards Regina and the thief.

The thief hurriedly dropped Regina like a bad habit to stare at the oncoming avalanche with wide open eyes - the former model and current White Clown quickly scrambled away from the thief and over to safety by the palm tree.

At the vanguard of the all-conquering Amazon army came one dirty-blonde, five foot-four-and-a-half, one-hundred and twenty-five pounds, tightly coiled package of brightly burning fury who set off in a puma-like jump right into the thief's chest once she was close enough.

The impact made both people keel over and scoot along the smooth floor until they came to a stop seven feet further down the hallway, at the foot of the palm tree Regina was hiding at.

Hopping up to straddle his gut, Stella grabbed hold of the twin's sweatshirt and sent out a growl that made him twitch and close his eyes in fear. "Nobody. Touches. My. Snookums. You got that? Nobody! And with nobody, I mean no-bo-dy!"

The cluster of Amazons that boxed in the thief from all sides made him nod vigorously. "Y- y- y- yes! Yes!" he squeaked, having a look on his face that told a story of impending wetting-of-pants.

"Fine!" Stella barked and stepped off the thief. "Inspector Moynes... he's all yours."

"Oh, Stella!" -- "Oh, Reggie!" - The two investigators let out identical bawls and pulled the other into a firm embrace that made it appear they hadn't seen each other for years.

Taking a little step back, Regina held her best friend and new lover by the arms while looking deeply into her green orbs. "Thank you for rescuing me... he had such bad breath!"

"Oh, my little, tall White Clown Snookums..."

"I was worried that he might... you know... cough on me or something," Regina said, once again wrapping her arms around Stella's smaller body.

"It's all fun and games until someone coughs on you... yeah, I know that oh-so well," Stella said once they separated.

Turning around, the two investigators came to a dead stop when they realized that every single one of the female detectives and the Amazon mothers had been lapping up every single one of the mushy words they had uttered. "Psst, Reggie..." Stella said out of the corner of her mouth, "the way they're staring, you'd think they'd never seen a swell pair of clowns before..."

"Maybe they haven't, Stell," Regina said and resolutely slapped a wet kiss right on Stella's painted lips, earning herself a loud 'Awwwwwww' from the watching Amazons and detectives, and an acutely embarrassed giggle from Stella.

"Oh, get a room, you two," Inspector Moynes said and pushed the arrested twin through the massed ranks of women. "Anyway, the name of our new friend here is Lucas and I've been speaking to him about where we might find his brother... so far, he hasn't been willing to cough up the location. I was wondering if anyone here could help me with that?"

Adhering to the request, Stella and about two dozen mothers stepped forward which made Lucas step back in an almighty hurry. "N- n- n- no, get them away from me! H- h- h- he's... Richie is probably waiting for me over by a shop called MOPCO Home Electronics!"

"Then that's where we're going. C'mon, Reggie, payback time," Stella said and made a big number of walking directly towards Lucas, making him shy back in terror at the unpredictability of the dirty-blond puma.

A few minutes later, Stella, Regina, Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes, four of her detectives and a selection of the hardiest Amazon mothers all peeked around the corner of one of the connecting hallways.

"I don't see him anywhere," Stella whispered to Regina who turned around and whispered: "She doesn't see him anywhere," to Mary-Jane Moynes who in turn whispered: "No sign of the perp," to her detectives.

One of the Amazons who was even further back heard that as "She's got the burps," and promptly reached into her purse to find a pack of KillAcid Peppermint that she passed on up the line.

By the time the pack of KillAcid reached Stella, she stared at it in disbelief, not quite understanding why it was there. Shrugging, she opened it to take one anyway, but found that everyone in the chain had already nabbed a tablet, leaving only a few traces of chemical dust.

"Hmmm," she said and returned the pack. "Anybody back there got a Raspberry Fizz?"

'*What she say?*' the woman at the back said. '*She wants a handkerchief!*' another woman replied. Soon, a red, white and blue handkerchief with a sown-on patch of Wonder Woman's likeness went down the chain until it reached Stella.

"Hey... neat!" Stella said and held it up so she could get the big picture. "Reggie, I want one of these... perhaps we can find one on eBay."

"I'll make a note of it," Regina replied as the handkerchief went back through the chain.

Sighing, Stella crouched down and began to rub her painted chin. "Now... why isn't he here? Has he been told? Did Lucas lie to us? Do they share a telepathic connection? I saw a documentary once on the Science Network where two twin sisters could tell what the other was wearing even though they were a thousand miles apart... of course, they had always dressed the same, so..."

'*What she say?*' the woman at the back said. Another woman chimed in: '*Something about always dressing the same.*'

'*Ohhhh... I know I wore this outfit yesterday too, but I j- j- j- just didn't have time to change. Kevin's apartment is down by the bay and-*'

'*I thought your husband's name was Chuck?*'

"Uh... wh- it- I- uh..."

'*Ooooooooh! Dish the gossip, sister!*' a third woman said, but they were soon hushed by the detectives with a: '*Shhh! This is a stakeout!*'

'*A steak house? But I'm a vegetarian!*' -- '*Me too!*'

Sighing, Mary-Jane Moynes looked over her shoulder and shot everyone behind her an Evil Eye. "Will you people keep quiet back there?" she said, ending the sentence in a growly grunt.

Stella was oblivious to the exchange going on behind her. All she could think of was why there was no sign of the other twin. "Oh... Reggie... maybe the second twin doesn't exist at all! Maybe... maybe we've been chasing a spectral apparition brought on by a critical lack of digestible content in my stomach... or... or something..."

"No, Stella, I don't think so... quite frankly," Regina whispered into Stella's ear.

"...like that movie... what was it called? Haunted House...? Hmmm..."

'*What she say?*' a woman said from the back. '*Something about going into menopause,*' another woman whispered.

'*God, she's only, like, forty!*'

Stella definitely heard that. "I'm thirty-seven!" she hissed through clenched teeth at whomever had got it wrong.

'*Pardon... oh no, that must be so awful for you...*'

"This is ridiculous," Stella said and rubbed her brow. "And I know ridiculous. I wrote the manual, for cryin' out loud... I know for a fact it's still being used to this very day... OOOOH!"

A shadow suddenly fell over Stella while she was pondering what to do. Looking up, she found herself face to face with an astounded Richie who had seemingly come straight from the restroom further down the hallway.

"That's him! That's him! Flip-flopparoooney, Reggie, that's him!" she howled and jumped up from her hiding place, closely followed by Regina, Inspector Moynes, four detectives and six Amazon mothers who all bolted around the corner, waving their arms all over and shouting at the top of their lungs.

Faced with two clowns and a pack of screaming banshees, Richie realized he had no choice but to flee, so he spun around and stormed up the electronics arm, racing left and right between the other customers and the stacks of merchandise the shops had put in the hallway.

An orderly pile of radios proved too good to miss and he gave it a good shove as he raced past which sent pink, purple, red, blue, green and yellow radios all over the floor.

Still running on bare feet, Stella effortlessly leaped over the radios, but not all the avenging Amazons were as lucky - one slipped on a blue radio and crash-landed on the smooth floor. Once she was right-side up, her face turned the same shade of blue as the radio when she noticed the seam of her skirt had been ripped all the way from the hem to the waist. It didn't take long for the entire hallway to echo from her cry of "You gonna get suuuuuuuuuuuued!"

"Is she... talking to... us, Reggie?" Stella said over her shoulder as she raced along.

"Don't think... so, Stell," Regina said, looking back just in time to see the irate Amazon throw one of the loose radios into the shop that had put them there.

Stella's finely honed nostrils suddenly picked up a scent she knew all too well - Teresa Maddalena Pizza Sauce. "Oh no... this is... just too... cruel! Cruel I... tell you! Cruel!"

As the mad-cap chase went past another pizza parlor, Stella spotted a display stand outside the restaurant with a sign that said 'Free Salami Pizza Slice - We Dare You To Take One And Tell Us We're Not The Greatest!' "Ooooff! Pizza... pizza... pizza!"

Making a perfect three-sixty turn in mid-race, she stormed back to the small display stand and scooped up three slices of salami pizza. "Oh, Gawd thisffm isffm soffm goodffm!" she croaked as she stuffed the first slice into her face and chewed like she had rarely chewed before.

Gulping it down, she resumed the chase and soon caught up with Regina who was looking back at her with large, round eyes. "Oh Gaaaaawdffm," Stella moaned as the second slice went down as quickly as the first.

Inspector Moynes slapped her forehead at the sight, though she managed to keep up the pace at the same time. "We're in the middle of a hot pursuit, Miss Starr!"

"Iffm knowffm... Gawdffm, thisffm... isffm gooooodffm! Reggie! Youffm... wantffm someffm?"

"You're asking me... if I want... a salami pizza, Stell? Me? Who in... their right minds... puts baloney on... pizzas, anyhow? What are you... thinking, woman? Are you trying... to poison me?" Regina said around a few huffs and puffs, using Stella's own words from earlier to give her a gentle ribbing.

As a response, Stella stuck out her tongue between a chew and a gulp before she stuffed the third and final slice into her yap.

The end was nigh for the second twin though he didn't know it yet. With the pack of rabid Amazons thick on his heels, he made a sharp right-hand turn and stormed down a connecting hallway until he reached the arm of the Ocean View Shopping Mall that held the stores with sports and hunting equipment.

The only shop available to him was Sam's Hunting Gear, and he raced inside hoping to find a door to the outside - unfortunately for him, Sam's Hunting Gear wasn't connected to the outside at all, and he had no option but to come to a screeching halt at the end wall.

Behind him, the clowns, the detectives and the soccer mom Amazons spread out and formed an impenetrable line of estrogen-fueled toughness that he had no chance of matching.

"Might as well give yourself up, fella. I got a flower and I ain't afraid to use it!" Stella said and held out her water-squirting rose. Behind the rainbow-colored investigator, several of the Amazons took squash rackets that were lined up in the aisle they were in and pretended they were quarterstuffs, just like in their favorite TV show.

"And I got a badge, a gun and a pair of cuffs and I'm just itching to use 'em!" Inspector Moynes said and dangled her handcuffs from her index finger.

Faced with such formidable opposition, Richie did the only thing he could - he threw his arms in the air and hurriedly got down on his knees. "I- I- I- give up!" he stuttered, looking quite pale around the gills.

"Best decision you've taken all day," Mary-Jane Moynes said and slapped the cuffs around his thick wrists. "You have the right to remain silent..."

Hearing that, Regina and Stella turned around and offered each other a slapping high-five.

Commotion at the entrance to Sam's Hunting Gear made everyone spin around and look at the door, but it was only Meredith Campanero who came running with her tongue halfway down her chest. "So... are... we... what's... have... you... is... he... good Lord... I'm out of... shape..."

"Yes, Miss Campanero, he certainly is," Stella said and pointed her thumb at Richie. "Thank you for calling the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. We got our man, like we said we would!"

"I don't know how to thank you, Miss Starr... Miss Harrison," Meredith said and shook hands with Stella and Regina.

"Oh, we'll think of something," Regina said and wrapped her arm around Stella's shoulders.

Once everybody had been given a high-five for participating in the First Annual Grand Amazon Steeple Chase, Stella found her bugle and let out a sequence of celebratory honks that could be heard over the entire arm of the mall - HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A! HONK-A!

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A little past eight o'clock, Stella drove the Pacer into the parking lot at Rockin' Ruby's and was able to find a spot to park in fairly close to the entrance.

"That was a fun job," she said as she turned off the engine, "but it's pretty good to be back in our regular clothes, huh?"

"Definitely... though, regular, hmmm..." Regina said, eyeing the loud poncho that Stella had decided to wear for the evening's soiree.

"Well, I wear it regularly. So there!"

Regina quickly leaned over and pecked her friend's cheek. "That you do, Stell."

Stepping out of the car, the tall, former model wrapped her Mai Sjoblom scarf tighter around her neck and closed the trench coat. "You'd think it'd be warmer in late January... but no."

"No. Let's get inside," Stella said and put a gentle hand on the small of Regina's back.

Inside Rockin' Ruby's, the fifty-something bar owner Ruby Albrecht was - like always - sitting at her favorite spot at the end of the long bar. When she noticed Regina and Stella come in, she raised her hand in a salute and jumped off her bar stool. "Hi, guys. Chilly tonight, huh?"

"Yeah," Stella said and temporarily took off her glasses.

"What can I get you?"

After taking off her trench coat and putting the scarf inside the left sleeve, Regina flicked her perfect hair back where it naturally landed in a perfect cascade. "Well, I'd like an easy Bloody Mary, Ruby."

"Sure. Stella?"

"Uhhh... I'm driving, so, uhhh... I'd like a driver's Rum and Coke if you got it," Stella said with a foggy look on her face as she whipped off her poncho to reveal she had decided to wear her winter jeans and a surprisingly classy v-neck blouse.

"Well, duh!"

Once Stella had been freed of the garishly-colored garment, she put her glasses back on. At last able to see which blurry blob was which, she smiled at their host as they made their way down to their regular table, the first of the eight booths.

The evening was still too young for Rockin' Ruby's to be rockin', but a few women were sitting close here and there, sharing drinks and a few laughs. The entire row of bar stools along the counter was empty which was somewhat unusual even for eight o'clock.

Slipping into the plush, red bench seat at the booth, Stella got herself comfortable and began to toy with a napkin that was already on the table. With Regina snuggling up next to her, everything was all right in her world, and she proved it by leaning in and offering her lips in a cute, little gesture.

Regina wasn't slow on the uptake and leaned in from the other side to complete the sweet contact. "Love ya," she whispered for Stella's ears only.

"Love ya right back with whipped cream, chocolate sprinkles and strawberry jam on top, Miss Too-Gorgeous-To-Take-Anywhere-Without-A-Stick-To-Beat-Off-The-Admirers. You really had some of those soccer moms going there, Reggie. Man, they had their sights set on you..."

Cocking her head, Regina sent her new lover one of her patented, smoldering gazes. "Well... what can I say, I-"

"-still got it," Stella said with a snicker that was punctuated by another kiss.

It didn't take long for Ruby to come down to the booth with the drinks they had ordered. "So," she said as she sat down opposite her regulars. "What's up with you guys?"

"Oh, we've had quite the job today, Ruby," Regina said and reached up to muss Stella's haystack. "Stella here proved that she's one hell of a... well, I was about to say 'clown', but I don't want you to get the wrong impression."

"Huh?" Ruby said and furrowed her brow.

Stella chuckled and decided to step in before things got too confusing. "Yeah, we've been down at Ocean View all day catchin' pickpockets dressed in clown suits. I mean... I mean, we were dressed in clown suits, not the pickpockets," she continued, adjusting her glasses. "It was fun, actually. Regina was the White Clown and I was-"

"The children's clown. You should have seen them, Ruby... they loved her like only kids can love someone. And. You. Were. Great," Regina said, kissing the side of Stella's head for each word.

When Stella broke down with the giggles, Ruby rolled her eyes and slid out of the booth. "Well, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see where you're headed... so I better make a hasty exit before then. Oh, by the way..."

"Yeah?" Stella said, taking a sip of her driver's rum and coke.

"Valentine's Day's coming up pretty soon and I was wondering if you'd like to stop by one day and help me fix up the marquee and the banner? I got something special in mind... a couple of wedding bands hooked together and shaped like the Women's Symbol... things like that. Gold, silver, purple, colorful balloons, roses... stuff like that, you know."

Stella and Regina briefly looked at each other and then nodded enthusiastically. "You betcha!" -- "We'll be there!" they both said as one.

A little later on, Regina pulled back her sleeve and checked the time on her wristwatch. "Oh, I'm afraid this is it for me, honey... I gotta call a cab so I can get home and get ready-"

Stella snorted loudly and chugged down the rest of her rum and coke. "Call a cab!? With Stella Starr's acclaimed taxi service right here, ready to drive you anywhere... north, south, east, west... or just plain ol' wild!"

"Well, we're gonna have to do a rain check on the driving me wild thing, honey, but... I promise that when I get back the day after tomorrow, we'll, uh... make up for my absence," Regina said and pulled Stella close for a kiss.

"Oh, you better believe we will," Stella husked, looking straight into Regina's blue orbs. "Hey..."

"Yeah?"

"Didya notice anything?"

"Like what?"

Grinning broadly, Stella reached up to tap her frame. "Like my glasses aren't steaming up."

Tick-tock-tick-tock. "Well, of course not. We haven't done anything yet," Regina whispered in a voice that was so rich and seductive that the inevitable happened-

Stella's lenses slowly fogged up until they were completely clouded over. The grin briefly faded from her face, but it wasn't long in returning. "Oh... shoot," she said with a crooked grin, shaking her head in mock despair.

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THE END of A SWELL PAIR OF CLOWNS

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II - OH, PUCK!

Written by Norsebard

DEEP sniff! - "Ohhh... can you smell that, Reggie?" Stella Starr said and pulled Regina Harrison to a halt outside an establishment on the Bay City Promenade called Victor's Amusement Arcade.

Sniff, sniff - "Yes. Popcorn," Regina said, swinging their entwined fingers back and forth.

"Mmmm-popcorn," Stella said in a voice that sounded suspiciously like Homer Simpson.
"Slurppy! Cherry Cola, too. And you know what? It smells like fun. Plenty of good old fun."

Victor's Amusement Arcade was one of a group of stores located on the promenade at the bay that gave the city its name. During the winter months, hundreds of colorful lights were turned on at eight in the evening, bathing the two-mile long curved path along the waterfront in romantic red, yellow and orange light.

As always, the promenade was awash with couples who were enjoying an evening away from their obligations, so to get some privacy, Stella pulled Regina over to the wall of the arcade where she promptly snuggled up next to her tall friend. "I was thinking that it could be a really great way to end our date if we went in there and got some popcorn and a couple of sodas and maybe tried one or two of the machines and stuff...?"

"Sounds like a plan. My treat. After all, you paid for the cab down here," Regina said and put out her arm.

Grinning from ear to ear, Stella took Regina's trench coat-clad arm and waltzed into the arcade.

She only just made it past the entrance before she stopped with a surprised look on her wide-open face - the interior of the arcade was far larger than she had expected; it was an entertainment palace with rows of slot machines and video games, and they even had several old-fashioned amusements like throwing hoops, dunk the sheriff, the wheel of fortune, and a shooting gallery with soft darts.

In the center of the arcade stood a machine that practically cried out for Stella to play with it: air hockey.

"Ooooooo!" she said, adjusting her glasses. "OooooooOOOO! OOOOO! Air... hockey!"

"G'wan, Stell... I'll get the popcorn and the sodas," Regina said with a chuckle. After spending so long with Stella, she knew there were times when it was better for all involved if the easily excitable private investigator was simply unleashed.

"Thanks, Reggie!" Stella said and flew over to the machine in a flash so no one else would get there ahead of them. When she lined up at the blue side, she noticed a small sign on the part of the rim facing her that said 'Playing equipment is rented at the change booth.' "Oh, hoot, where is that... where is... oh, there it is. Shoot... if I leave before Reggie gets back, someone else is gonna snatch it from us... Oh, Reggie, hurry back to me," she mumbled, crossing her legs like she needed to use the little girls' room.

Fortunately, Regina was soon back with a huge box of popcorn and two paper cups of soda; a regular cherry cola for Stella and a Slurppy! Athlete's Favorite for herself. "Slurppy! has a new

taste out... it's sugar free," Regina said as she put down the two cups on the rim of the playing area.

"Great! Uh, we need to get the puck and the whatchamacall'em over at the change booth..." Stella said and pointed at the small booth at the opposite wall of the arcade.

Two minutes later, Stella grabbed a handful of popcorn and stuffed it into her mouth.
"Yoummphf readymmphf?"

"You said 'you ready,' right?"

"Rightmmphf..."

"I was born ready," Regina said and screwed on her game face. Eyeing her opponent's side of the playing field, she gave the puck an easy whack with her mallet to set the game in motion.

Stella barely had time to take a long suck from her straw before the puck came flying towards her, but she maneuvered her mallet over to intercept it and sent it back to Regina. "You gotta be a little bit faster than that, Snookums. I luuuuurve air hockey and I-"

Whack!

"Goal for red!" an electronic voice said from the machine.

"Whut?!" Stella said, looking down at the puck that had slid behind her goal line without her noticing. "Hmmm. Okay. You wanna play rough, eh? I can play rough. Hell yeah, I can play rough. I can play so rough you gonna wish you was never-"

Whack!

"Goal for red!" the electronic voice said.

"Whut?!" - Stella looked up at Regina who was grinning from ear to ear. "I think there's something wrong with my mallet... okay... okay, I'm with it now."

Concentrating hard, Stella hit the puck with her mallet and watched it fly across the game area.
Whack! - *barrier* - Whack! - *barrier* - *barrier* - Whack! - *barrier* - Whack!

"Goal for red!" the electronic voice said.

Stella looked long and hard at the cheeky puck and sucked equally long and hard on her straw to get over it. Wordlessly, she gazed at Regina who was still wearing the same wide grin.

Whack! - *barrier* - *barrier* - Whack! - Whack! - *barrier* - "Ha!" - Whack! - "Ooooh!" - *barrier* - "Ehhhh..." - *barrier* - Whack! - "Ha!" - Whack! - "Ahhh..." - Whack!

"Goal for blue!" the electronic voice said.

"Har-har! Yippie!" Stella shouted and threw her hands in the air while she performed a little victory dance. "Oh-yeah, oh-yeah, oh-yeah, oh-yeah..."

Regina and Stella both reached for the popcorn at the same time and took the opportunity to tickle each other's hand down in the box.

Winking at her best friend, Regina took a modest handful and prepared to receive Stella's next shot.

Whack! - *barrier* - "Uh-huh..." - Whack! - *barrier* - "Mmmm...!" - Whack! - Whack! - *barrier* - "Yeah, baby!" - Whack! - *barrier* - "Oh, hell..." - *barrier* - Whack! - *barrier* - "I got it, I got it, I-"
" Whack!

"Goal for red!" the electronic voice said.

"- didn't get it," Stella said and pulled out the puck. "Right. Okay. Okay... right. I can see I need to get down and dirty here," she continued, rolling her shoulders.

"Uh-huh?" Regina said, once again taking a handful of popcorn.

Stella nodded and got ready to whack the puck. "Yep. All right. Here goes."

Whack! - Whack! - Whack!

"Goal for blue!" the electronic voice said.

"Aw yeah, I'm on a roll! Three whacks and it's in!"

Regina chuckled and got ready to receive the next shot from her agitated friend. "That's funny," she said and cocked her head to make her perfect hair fall down her shoulder in a perfect cascade, deliberately holding back the rest of the sentence until Stella lined up for her next shot, "that's what Steve always said," she said at the exact same moment Stella hit the puck with her mallet.

The former model had hoped the use of shock tactics would give her an advantage in the play, but what she didn't count on was Stella's reaction.

Over the course of a split second, Stella popped her eyes wide open, then slammed them shut and went into a full-body tremor that started at the soles of her sneakers and ended at the tips of her dirty-blonde mop of hair. While the tremor traveled up her body, it caused her right arm to

spasm, which sent the mallet on a collision course with the puck, which in turn gave the puck such a violent knock that it flew off the playing field altogether and sailed through the air.

By the time the tremor had reached Stella's vocal cords and sent a heartfelt, horrified "Oh, GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAG!" through her parted, twisted lips, the hockey puck had flown a good twelve feet - right into the paper cup of a six-foot-and-change man in biker boots, blue jeans and a leather vest that didn't do a good job of covering his bare, hairless torso.

The man, whose trunk-like, heavily tattooed arm was wrapped around a bubblegum-chewing twenty-something doll in a tight dress, was given a thorough soda-shower that left him dripping wet from head to toe.

Letting out a surprised grunt, the biker slowly wiped his face and eyes free of the sticky stuff as he turned around to find somebody to get even with.

"Oh... puck...!" Stella croaked, looking at the hulking man. "Reggie...!"

"Act natural," Regina whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"What good is that gonna do?" Stella whispered back in the same manner. "He can see it was the hockey puck... oh shoot, he's looking at me... he's looking at me!"

"Fake it!"

Stella's eyes rolled around in her head like they weren't attached to anything. At the last moment, a random thought entered her mind and she stepped toward the biker with her arms ahead of her. "Wow, was that rude or what? Did you see that? A cheeky little fella came in and gave me a bump and stole my hockey puck and threw it at your soda! Good thing your tats are waterproof, huh?" she said strongly, patting down her pockets to find a napkin or a handkerchief.

"A cheeky little fella?" the biker rumbled.

"Y- yeah... young fella... late teens or something... curly hair or something... loud t-shirt or something... he tore out the door once he had, you know, splashed you."

"I'm gonna grind 'im into sawdust," the biker said and stomped over to the entrance to look for the mystery teen on the promenade.

"Stell... I think we should leave... now... now!" Regina whispered and grabbed the popcorn and their paper cups. She quickly - but not too quickly - went around the edge of the air hockey table and took hold of Stella's elbow.

"But I wanted to throw a couple of hoops next!"

"Stella! He's gonna throw *us* if he finds out who really drenched him!"

"Uh-oh... he's coming back," Stella whispered and squinted out of the corner of her eye. "Yep, he's looking this way... I think we should hustle, Reggie."

Acting as coolly as she could - which wasn't very cool at all - Stella took her cherry cola and took a couple of dramatic sucks from the straw to calm her nerves. "Any luck?" she said casually as she and Regina walked past the biker on their way to freedom.

"No... you leavin'?" the large man said in a rumbling voice.

"Uh... yeah," Stella squeaked, stopping right in the middle of a step.

"If you see 'im, tell 'im he better not show his ugly face in here. Okay?"

"Will do, Sir. Wow, the kids these days, huh? Come along, Regina, we mustn't be late..."

"For our funeral," Regina mumbled under her breath. Hooking her arm inside Stella's, she nodded a brief farewell to the biker and his bubblegum-chewing girlfriend before hastily vacating the premises.

Hustling up the promenade to get to the cabs, Stella took a final suck from her straw and stuffed her face with a handful of popcorn. "So..." she said after gulping it all down, "uh... okay. You know, there's a valuable lesson in there... never mention Mr. Chiseled Jaw while I'm playing air hockey..."

"Lesson learned, Stell," Regina said, peeking over her shoulder, "lesson learned..."

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THE END of OH, PUCK!

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III - SWIMSHOOT SUIT?

Written by Norsebard

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CHAPTER 1

'Ready when you are!' Stella Starr said through the closed bathroom door.

The former - and soon returning - model Regina Harrison went over to the door and held it slightly ajar so she could look at her friend. "Thanks, Stell. I'll be a couple of minutes."

"No problemo," Stella said and fluffed her dirty-blonde mop of hair. "The weather's nice so I'll wait outside with my folding chair, my fajita wrap, my raspberry fizz, my stopwatch, my pencil and my clipboard... okay?"

"Okay, Stell," Regina said and let out a dry chuckle. When Stella had left the office of the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency and closed the front door behind her, Regina sighed and moved back to the mirror in the bathroom.

Involved in the dog-eat-dog modeling world since she was eighteen, she had never been prone to self-doubt, but now it was hitting her squarely in the gut. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she felt she was an old woman with far too many imperfections around her eyes, mouth, and on her throat and upper chest to even think about doing a photoshoot - but a photoshoot for a top-of-the-range magazine was what she was preparing for.

"Jesus, who am I kidding?" she mumbled as she tried to count the wrinkles around her eyes. "Forty-three years old... I'm old enough to be the mother of those girls... that's how they're gonna look at me, too. Old and tired. Ugh. What was I thinking?"

Over the course of the past few months, she had noticed that it was getting harder and harder to go through her a-b-c chant - 'A' for traces of cellulite on her arms and thighs, 'B' for the relentless pull of gravity on her bosom, and 'C' for the crow's feet around her eyes - without finding at least one more imperfection on her once so pristine and Goddess-like body.

Sighing deeply, she pulled her long, dark hair into a ponytail and secured it with a blue headband that matched her eyes perfectly. Once her sports bra and running undies were on comfortably, the laces of her sneakers were tied and her black Kowa Trackstar jogging suit was zipped all the way up, she posed a little in front of the mirror to see how she looked from all angles - and just to see if she still could.

Regina let wrinkles be wrinkles and turned off the bathroom light. Moving over to the filing cabinet that held their CDs and DVDs, she rummaged through it until she found the title she was looking for, the soundtrack from the original Rocky movie.

"Yep, this is gonna work just fine," she said and inserted it into their aging boombox - only then did she notice the batteries had gone dead. "Oh, Stell," she mumbled, going back to the filing cabinet to get a hundred-foot extension cord that she plugged into the nearest wall socket before taking the boombox with her.

Outside, Stella had already made herself comfortable on her folding chair. The weather was behaving itself very nicely - not always a given in late February - and she was dressed in appropriate clothes: her favorite purple flip-flops, green Popeye socks, tan shorts that revealed her winter-white legs and a purple half-sleeved T-shirt.

With her, she had a stopwatch, a clipboard and a pencil to measure Regina's progress, and a can of Slurppy! Raspberry Fizz and a freshly nuked fajita wrap for her own benefit - the Greek-seasoned fajita smelled so good she had trouble keeping her saliva on the inside.

Just as she was putting a drinking lid on the soda can, Regina came out and put the boombox down on the ground next to the folding chair.

"I wanted some music for my exercise, Stell. D'ya mind?"

"Mind? Me? Nuh-uh, Snookums," Stella said and shook her head so hard that her mop of hair whisked back and forth.

"Good. It's the Rocky soundtrack."

Grinning, Stella held up things she had prepared for the run. "Ooooh! It goes really well with my clipboard and my stopwatch!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

Regina chuckled and bent over to stretch her legs before starting her run. Standing with her feet together, she stretched down as far as she could and eventually touched the ground with the tips of her fingers. Once she got back up, she turned to look at Stella who promptly shot back to an upright position.

"It's all still there, hon," Stella said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well, that's good to know. Enjoy your fajita. I'm gonna do fifteen laps of the parking lot. You're keeping time, right?"

"You betcha," Stella said and held up the wrapped fast food. "Uh... the stopwatch, yeah," she said and held up her other hand.

"Right."

"Right!" - Unable to hold back any longer, Stella took a big bite out of the fajita even before Regina had left her side. Munching on it loudly, her eyes rolled back in her head and she let out an orgasmic sound that proved that it fully satisfied her tough standards.

"Uh-huh," Regina said and took off down the parking lot.

Stella gulped down the first bite and gawked admiringly at her best friend slash business associate slash lover jogging down towards the far end of the lot; in particular at the long legs that were doing an excellent job at propelling her forward, at her wiggling rear end, at her pumping arms and at her ponytail that shifted left and right as she put a foot down on the cracked asphalt.

"Hot diggity DANG, girl, how could I be so lucky? How in the world could I," - she took the can of raspberry fizz and held it to her lips - "...could I..." - but nothing came out of the can - "I be so luc... hey... what the flip?"

Holding it crooked, she noticed with a rising degree of annoyance that she had forgotten to crack open the can before she had put the drinking lid on it. "Aw hell... now I have to take the lid off again but where am I gonna put the fajita in the meantime...? I can't put it in my lap 'cos my brand new shorts will get grease stains and it'll look like I've wet myself... and I can't put it under my arm, can I? Fajita, can, fajita, can... can do," she said and opened her yap.

Stuffing one entire end of the fast food treat into her mouth for safe keeping, she fumbled and bumbled with opening the can, but she finally managed to do so. Then the drinking lid slipped off her lap and rolled along the asphalt. "AW PHARCK'M!" she growled around the fajita.

As she looked to her right - sitting with her head tilted back because her yap was still full of junk food - she could see that Regina was already on the return leg of the first lap. Grumbling again, she held the can of raspberry fizz in one hand and used the other to extract the treat from her mouth.

"Okay... great," Stella said, looking at the five items she was supposed to keep track of at the same time. "Soda... fajita... stopwatch... clipboard... pencil... I ain't got five hands, for cryin' out loud!"

"Hey, Stella! I can give you a hand!" a cheery male voice said right behind her ear.

"GAAAAAAAH!" Stella howled and jumped a foot in the air, not only dropping the pencil and the clipboard but the can of raspberry fizz, too. As it hit the ground at a bad angle, the precious liquid popped the can's top and burst from it in a pink tsunami that threatened to submerge the legs of her folding chair.

"Oh, you dropped your drink," Billy the Mechanic said and hurriedly reached down to take the can. "It's still half full..." he said, wiping off the dripping can on his filthy canary-yellow boiler suit.

Stella's face scrunched up so much that her eyes almost became invisible. At the same time, her fingers squeezed the life out of the fajita that responded by barfing up a slice of tomato that slid down her thumb, leaving a sticky trail of tzatziki sauce all the way down to her wrist. "Billy..." she said in a voice that didn't sound like hers at all.

"Y- yes, Miss Starr?"

"Billy..."

"Y- y- y- yes, M- Miss Starr?"

"You. Owe. Me. A. Soda."

"Of c- course, Miss Starr. I'll get it right away," Billy said and flew back to his garage, running so fast he had to clamp a hand down on his greasy baseball cap to stop it from flying off.

Behind him, Stella rolled her eyes and eventually left them pointing skyward. "Hey you, upstairs... he's a sweet fella, but couldn't you have given him a few more brain cells? Or perhaps just one more? The one he has now is kinda lonely up there..."

In the middle of all the mess, Regina came jogging past. She couldn't avoid seeing the puddle of raspberry fizz on the ground but chose not to make a comment. "Hi, Stell! What's my time?" she said as she jogged past in a narrow circle to start lap two.

"I'll tell you in a sec," Stella said and fumbled with retrieving the pencil and the clipboard from the ground. "Uh... uh... uh... it was... oh, crud." - Looking at the stopwatch, she could see with striking clarity - by reading the display that read 0:00:00 - that she had forgot to activate it.

Hurriedly clicking on the little button to cover for her gaffe, she opened her mouth to invent a time, but Regina was already too far into lap two to hear her.

A shrill whistle from across the parking lot made Stella look up and see Billy standing outside his garage and waving his arms like mad - no doubt to warn Stella that he was coming. Stella could see he was holding a can of soda, so she gave him a thumbs-up with her free hand. "Excellen-ty," she said and quickly took a large bite out of her fajita.

"So what's Miss Harrison doing, anyway?" Billy said as he cracked open the new can for Stella and put the drinking lid on it.

Stella took the can of Slurppy! Classic Cola - it wasn't a razzie, but it was better than nothing - and offered their friendly neighbor a hint of a smile. "She's trying to get in shape for a modeling job that's coming up, Billy. A photoshoot for a special issue of Swimsuit Illustrated."

"Wow, that's one hell of a classy magazine. I can't afford to buy it, but I always gawk at the pictures down at the supermarket," Billy said with a dreamy nod.

Stella scrunched up her face all over again at the thought of the entire world gawking at *her* Regina in a swimsuit, but she quickly overcame the sense of jealousy by realizing that the world could only gawk - but she could touch. All over. And she did. All over. "Yeah," she mumbled with a shit-eating grin on her face.

"Yeah," Billy echoed dreamily as he watched Regina jog back towards them, already on the return leg of the next lap.

"Ye-... hey! Billy!"

"Uh?"

"Less drooling in the presence of ladies, please! It's uncouth and just plain disturbing! So there!"

"Okay..."

"Okay," Stella said and stopped the stopwatch as Regina jogged past. "Two minutes thirty-nine! That's way faster than your first lap, honey!" she said loudly, scribbling the data on the clipboard.

As she flashed past, Regina sent her two interested spectators a big pair of thumbs-up. "Great! Two down, thirteen to go!"

"Yeah..." -- "Uh-huh," Billy and Stella said simultaneously as they gawked at Regina jogging away from them; in particular at her long legs, her wiggling rear end, her pumping arms and her...

"Billy! Stop drooling!" Stella barked when she noticed she wasn't alone in staring dreamily at the six-foot-one frame of Regina Harrison moving with plenty of grace, style and class.

"Okay..."

**_*_

"Which... lap... was... that...?" Regina panted as she jogged past Stella's folding chair.

Looking up from keeping track of the numbers, Stella offered her friend a supportive smile and a little wave. "Number twelve, hon! Three more laps to go!"

"Uggh..."

Stella chuckled and made a note of the time on the clipboard. "So," she said to Billy who was still standing next to her. "The whine under the dashboard... where do you think it comes from?"

"Oh, it's hard to say without looking at it, but... hmmm," the mechanic said, rubbing his two-day stubble with his greasy fingers. "It's got a column shift, so... could be the transmission."

"Ohhhhhh, when you say it like that, my wallet gets a cramp. I don't like cramps, Billy... especially not in my wallet. You hear me?"

"I hear you loud and clear, Miss Starr," Billy said with a strong nod. "It could be something easy-peasy to fix. Maybe the motor for the wipers? That wouldn't cost you forty bucks."

Stella nodded back and looked down at her clipboard. After a while, she sighed and looked back at their neighbor. "But it isn't, is it? It's the transmission, isn't it? My old girl is on her last, isn't she? If the transmission is screwed, my old girl is screwed too, isn't she?"

"I honestly can't sa-"

"Go on, you can tell me, Billy. I'm a big girl."

"I need to look at it before I can say, Miss Starr... it could be the wiper motor. Or maybe the heater...?"

The corners of Stella's mouth began to quiver and she sighed so deeply it sounded like her soul escaped through her lips. "Ah. Never mind. Thanks for the cola. I'm gonna use it to drown myself."

"Uh, okay..."

Right then, Regina came past to begin her second to last lap. When she noticed Stella's despondent expression, she turned around and jogged back to her. "Hey... Stell... what's... up...?" she said, jogging in place right in front of her friend.

"Oh, nothing..."

"Gotta... be... something...?"

Billy squinted at Stella before he leaned forward and whispered for Regina's ears only: "Car trouble."

"Oh... the... whine...?"

"Mmmm," Billy said with a telling nod.

"Okay... Stell... come on... why dontcha... go back to... the office... and get... some coffee... or something...?"

Stella nodded despondently and started collecting all her stuff; her clipboard, her stopwatch, the pencil, the boombox, the folding chair and the waste paper from the wonderful fajita that had now turned into a stone in her gut from the bad news.

Her plunge into the bottomless pit of despair was almost complete, but before she could take the last step down, their phones started ringing with reckless abandon inside the office. "I'll get it, Reggie... don't stop your program just because of me," she said in a downcast voice.

With that, she shuffled inside with the folding chair and all the other stuff under her arm.

Once Stella was out of earshot, Billy threw his arms in the air and turned around to face Regina. "I didn't do anything, Miss Harrison! I didn't even say anything! She asked me and I gave her my professional opinion!"

"It's... okay... Billy," Regina said, still jogging in place. "If you... have a... moment later on... do... you think... you could... take a look... at it... just to... calm... her nerves?"

"Sure thing, Miss Harrison," Billy said, scratching his two-day stubble.

Inside, Stella dumped all the gear by the door and shuffled across the plush, dark gray carpet to bump down on her chair. Sighing, she reached across her desk and picked up the ringing telephone with an arm that felt as heavy as lead on a rainy day. "You've reached the Harrison-Oh, hiya, Joe."

Mumble, mumble.

"You got something for us?" Stella said and found her notepad and a ball point pen through the dark fog that had saturated her mind.

Mumble, mumble.

Quickly clicking on the pen, she started writing down the details of the case as the informant spoke in her ear. "Observing a suspected two-timer. Okay."

Mumble, mumble.

"Photographic evidence, okay. Where and when?"

Mumble, mumble.

"1457 Twin Oaks Lane, North, tomorrow night at ten, I got it," she said and drew a box around the information.

Mumble, mumble.

"Yeah. Where should we deliver the evidence if we get it?"

Mumble, mumble.

"As soon as possible at the Rat's Ass, got it. Huh. You know," Stella said and leaned back in her seat while crossing her legs at the winter-white knee, "I've always wondered why bars get such colorful, vulgar names? Why couldn't it be called the Rat's Whiskers, or the Rat's Tail, or-

Mumble, mumble.

"No, of course you don't know anythin-"

Mumble, mumble.

"Never mind, never mind, Joe, I'm just trying to hold a polite and friendly conversation here!"

Mumble, mumble.

"Whaddaya mean ya busy? How can ya be too busy to listen to the woman who almost single-handedly supports your habit of drinking that awful schlat you call cherry brandy? Now me, I love cherries, but I need to have them in cherry cola or on top of-"

Mumble, mumble.

"Okay... okay," Stella said and bolted upright, "you didn't just insult cherry cola, Joe! You didn't just insult my second favorite-"

Mumble, mumble?

"We- we better end it right here, Joe, before we say something we'll regret. We'll talk at the Rat's Hiney later tomorrow night... bye, Joe."

Mumble, mum-

Putting down the receiver, Stella kept standing at the desk and stared into thin air, thinking about the unfairness of it all. She sighed deeply and shuffled over to the small table behind the door where she began to make some coffee.

Ten minutes later, Regina came into the office and immediately unzipped her windbreaker top. "Whew, that was tougher than I thought it would have been," she said, bending over to put her hands on her knees. "And hot, too. Yikes, the new Kowa set just keeps the heat inside instead of allowing the skin to... Stell? Stell? Stella, are you in the bathroom?"

"No, I'm over here," Stella said in a muffled voice. The blonde investigator was flat on her back on the couch with a damp washcloth over her forehead and eyes, and a bowl of pretzels within easy reach. "There's coffee on the pot if you want some."

Grunting, Regina turned around and closed the door behind her before shedding her entire jogging outfit to get some chilled air on her flushed body. Once she had stripped down to her black sports underwear, she took the pot and poured herself a mug of the steaming hot dark brown liquid.

"Stell, d'ya wanna trade your pretzels for a slice of gingerbread?"

"Gingerbread? We don't have any gingerbread..."

"Sure we do," Regina said and reached up onto the top shelf of the cupboard to take the paper bag from Zeligman's. She quickly took two plates and put a gingerbread lady on each - then she changed her mind and split her own in two, cutting her in half at the waist. One half stayed on her own plate, and the other bolstered Stella's part of the loot.

Smiling, she brought the two plates and her mug over to the coffee table where she placed them next to Stella's glasses. Once she was free of her delicate load, she dusted off her hands and sat down on the plush carpet facing her prone friend.

When Stella still didn't show signs of coming back to the surface, Regina reached up and gently removed the washcloth. "Hey," she whispered and ran her fingers down Stella's smooth cheek.

"Hey," Stella said, scrunching up her eyes to see better - not that it helped.

"You need your glasses?"

"Yeah... thanks." Once the spectacles were back on the blonde investigator's face, she turned her head to look at her savior. She did, but her eyes didn't make it far past the black sports underwear and the acres of tanned skin. "Oh... wow."

"Aw thanks, hon. Does that mean I still got it?" Regina said and threw her head so her ponytail swished around perfectly.

"Yessss..."

Smiling, Regina put the plate with the pastries on Stella's chest. "I'm not so sure myself these days. Anyway, here's your gingerbread lady. You can have half of mine, too. I can't have a single calorie too many these days."

"Mmmh. By the way, that was Joe calling. He's got a job for us tomorrow evening over on Twin Oaks Lane. We need to take an undercover gander at a two-timing fella."

"Okay?"

"Yeah," Stella said and took a big bite from her scrumptious pastry.

"Stell, I need to take a shower. You can have my coffee if you want..." Regina said and got up from the carpet. "No sugar, sugar," she whispered and tickled Stella's chin before leaning down to kiss the tip of her pert, little nose.

Grinning at the way Regina's rear wiggled on her way over to the bathroom, Stella felt some of her vigor returning, though she wasn't sure if it was her honey or the gingerbread lady that had pulled her back from the bog. "Ah, what am I thinking? I love gingerbread but there sure ain't much fun snuggling up to a gingerbread dame on a cold winter morn' !"

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While Regina was taking a long, hot shower, Stella finished off her gingerbread ladies and the coffee and moved over to her desk to go a few rounds against the monster that was living in the piles of paperwork that only seemed to grow larger, not smaller as she went through them.

One case file after the other was sorted, updated, signed, closed and dumped into the filing cabinet, but even after going through twelve files, she still had close to thirty to go.

"Oh, those darn new rules... sheesh... we do everything right and *then* the insurance companies come up with some cockamamie rule that forces us to go through everything all over a-flippety-floppety-gain..." she mumbled, rubbing her brow.

A knock on the door gave her an excuse to leave the desk, and she literally threw in the towel - or rather, a paper tissue - to show the monster that it might as well take five.

As she opened the door, she saw that the knockee was the postman, a fellow in his late fifties with whom she didn't have the best relationship after an unfortunate incident involving his toupee and the backdraft from the door. "Hi," she said, opening the door as softly as she could.

"Good day, Miss. I have one package for you and one for Miss Harrison," the postman said, wearily eyeing the easily agitated woman.

"Yeah?"

"Yes, and I need your signatures," he said, holding out an electronic apparatus and a stylus pen.

"Okay," Stella said and signed her name on the machine. "Reggie's in the shower. Can I sign for her too, or do you need to get an eyeful to make sure that she is who I say she is?"

The postman looked at her with a somewhat dark, yet expectant, expression on his face. "You can sign for her," he said after a little while, clearly not wanting to tempt fate too much.

"Okie-dokie," Stella said and signed once more on the machine.

The postman nodded a thank you and handed over the two packages that were both wrapped in cardboard; one square and boxy, and one flat and rectangular.

"Great! Thanks," Stella said and slammed the door shut right in the postman's face without any concern whatsoever for his toupee. "Hmmm... one's gotta be the self-defense DVD I bought from the Spyglass Magazine... but what's this?" she said and shook the square, boxy package.

The sound produced was akin to loose gravel rattling inside a tin can, but that didn't help Stella much. Checking the label, she could see it was a neutral package and that it had been sent from Mallarkey Pharmaceuticals Inc. in the Cayman Islands. "Hmmm," she said and put the strange package on Regina's desk.

By the time Regina returned from the shower wearing blue jeans and a white Layla Simonsen button-down shirt, Stella had wheeled the table with the TV and the DVD player from the conference room and into the office itself.

Presently, the blonde fury was down on her knees behind the TV set trying to figure out which cable should go into which jack. "Who was the smart-alec who thought it was a good idea to unplug all the blip-bloppin' cables from the blip-bloppin' teevee..." she grumbled, trying first one, then another cable.

"That would be you, Stell, when you wanted to get us a new flatscreen TV last month but balked at the last moment because it was too expensive," Regina said and sat down at her desk. With a grin, she put her long legs up on the corner of the desk and waved her bare feet in the air. "Just use the SCART cable to connect the TV with the DVD. Both power plugs into the extension socket, extension socket into the wall socket and we're all set. What are we watching?"

A pause. "So you're the cable guy now, Reggie?" Stella said, peeking past the TV.

"Cable *guy*? *Moi*?" Regina said and put her arms behind her head to make her chest strain against the fabric of the shirt.

"Yeah, good points... I mean, point," Stella mumbled and plugged the SCART cable into the two units.

"ANYway..." Regina said and crumbled up a piece of paper that she threw at her friend.

"ANYway," Stella replied, throwing the crumbled up ball back to the former model, hitting her on the leg. "Oh yeah, the postman was here... there's a package for you on your desk."

Turning around, Regina reached out for the square box but stopped halfway there when she realized what it was. She glanced nervously at Stella who was too preoccupied with the electronic equipment to notice anything.

Regina slowly pulled her hand back and began to tap on the edge of her desk while she pondered what to do and if Stella had figured out what was inside the cardboard box. Suddenly serious, she moved her legs down off the corner of the desk, took the package and stared at it without doing anything.

"Hey," Stella said, peeking around the TV. "I'm a damned good investigator, you know. I can tell when you're trying to hold something back from me. I don't like that one little bit, Reggie, so please don't. You and me share everything... please don't shut me out here."

Regina sighed but offered Stella a rueful smile. "I know. I'm sorry, hon. They're fast-working diet pills. I bought them online."

"Oh man, Reggie...!" Stella said and thumped her fist into the carpet. "You don't need that rat poison! You don't even know what kind of side-effects they have... what if you grow a penis or something...? Finding an earthworm in your shorts would really ruin my day... no, week... no, year... hell, it would ruin my life!"

"I'm not planning on growing earthworms, Stell."

"You never know what you get with those pills, Reggie, and you know it. Hey, I'm a happy-go-lucky soul and I've done some weird things in my past, even though you might not think it with the angelic, wholesome way I live now... but anyway, I'd never, ever experiment with online drugs like that. Never."

Regina shrugged and used a paper knife to tear open the package. Inside were three identical plastic jars with colorful labels that praised the effectiveness of Mallarkey Pharmaceutical's BurnFatBurn! Diet pills that were '*Guaranteed To Produce Weight Loss, at least sixteen lbs. a week, if not more!*' "I'll put 'em in the drawer for now."

"For good!"

"For now, Stell. If my exercise regime doesn't tighten up my body, I'll begin taking the pills. The photoshoot is next weekend and I'm not ready for it," Regina said, but she was unable to look Stella in the eye when she said it.

Not wanting to drive a wedge between herself and her best friend and lover, Stella kept quiet. Instead, she got up and turned on the TV and the DVD to check if everything was in good order. When the DVD player's No Disc screen appeared, she went over to her desk to take the other package. "Snookums, you wanna watch a self-defense class DVD with me?" she said and held up the disc that sparkled in the sunlight.

The two women looked at each other without speaking a word; then a cautious smile spread over Regina's features. "Sure. If you're not too upset with me?"

"Oh, I'm not upset with you, hon. I'm just worried on your behalf. Ah, you know where I stand," Stella said and waved her hand dismissively. "C'mon... I read on the reviews that the two instructors wear all kinds of cool, fashionable clothes."

"Well, that certainly does sound like something I would enjoy," Regina said and moved over to the couch where Stella soon joined her.

Twenty minutes into the sixty minute educational program, Regina was trying to count to a hundred-and-ten using her finger- and toenails, and Stella was leaning her head against the backrest of the couch, staring vacantly at the ceiling after being numbed into submission by the dreary video.

"Ten bucks down the drain..." Stella said in a voice that sounded funny because of the way she held her head.

"Uh-huh. Eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four..."

"Ten bucks... I could have bought a family-sized pizza for ten bucks... or two burgers... or a burger and fries..."

"Uh-huh. Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-"

"Ten bucks I'll never get back."

"Twenty minutes we'll never get back," Regina said but suddenly realized she had lost count. Shrugging, she started over with One, Two, Three...

"Yeah." - Sighing, Stella reached out for the remote and pressed Stop to turn off the mind-numbingly dull educational program where the two presenters talked ceaselessly and showed endless data sheets instead of actually going through the things they were trying to teach.

"Reggie, do you think we could make a video? I mean, we'd be better than those two."

Regina stopped counting and shot Stella a smoldering gaze. "Well, I'm game," she husked.

Stella opened her mouth to reply, but before she had time to do so, a blush had swept over her cheeks that - once it reached her brain - shut down any rational thought she'd had until then. "Not that kind of video..." she croaked after a little while.

"I know, I was just teasing you," Regina said and leaned in to kiss the tip of Stella's nose to show that she had merely been jesting. "A self-defense video? Yeah, I guess we could. All we need is an HD camera and some kind of editing software for the laptop."

"I could be the creep and you could be the damsel in distress... that could work."

"Wait... why should I be the ditzy dame?"

"'Cos you look fabulous in heels and a breezy dress, Snookums," Stella said and clawed Regina's thigh. "Oooh, you could wear, maybe, ooh, an umbrella over your arm and I could-"

"What kind of video were we talking about again?"

Snickering, Stella leaned in and bumped shoulders with her tall friend. When that wasn't enough, she grabbed hold of Regina's arm and snuggled up tight. "Oh, ha ha. I think it could work. I better make a note of it," she said and moved to get up, but Regina put a warm, heavy hand on the blonde investigator's bare thigh.

"Or we could sit here and make out...?"

"Or we could sit here and make out," Stella parroted and spun around on the couch so she had the best possible access to her fabulous friend who seemed to get all the bright ideas.

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The evening of the following day, two minutes to ten.

The sleek, silver metallic sports car pulled over to park at the curb on the left side of the peaceful, secluded Twin Oaks Lane that was dominated by tall trees and low hedges.

Each side of the street saw an endless row of neat two-story bungalows that all had neat porches, neat lawns and neat driveways. Most of the garage were closed, but here and there, sensible family sedans were on display to show that the families living there were respectable - and neat.

"This is kinda neat," Stella said, clicking on her penlight - quite literally a flashlight scotch-taped onto her pen - to record the time of arrival on her clipboard.

Regina nodded and put the shifter in Park. "And conservative," she said as she turned off the engine.

"That too. Oh... why aren't you wearing your commando cap?"

"It's scratchy and my hair is dark enough without it, Stell."

"Reggie..."

"Stell?"

"Reggie!"

"Stell!"

Stella scrunched up her face and mumbled a few inaudible words at her cheeky friend. "Stop doing that, Miss It's-Okay-To-Talk-Back-To-Anyone-'Cos-I'm-So-Tall-They-Can't-See-My-Face! This is an undercover operation, so I specifically asked you to wear your undercover outfit... black boots, black jeans, black commando-style sweater, black stripes on your face, black commando cap... look at me, I'm fully dressed!"

"Yeah? Well, so am I," Regina said and briefly clicked on the interior light so Stella could see the two fat, black stripes the former model had painted on her cheeks. "And! And I'm wearing black silk panties. Hmmm?"

"Okay, that's... okay," Stella said with a shifty leer. "But I still think you should wear your cap. I mean, what are traditions for if no one follows them? Oh, I remember back when I started taking the evening classes to become a private investigator... the men and women who were there with me were true characters, Reggie... strong, proud and staunch followers of the age-old traditions.

Why, one of them even had a Colt 1911 in a shoulderholster... he was a true gumshoe. All right, it was a lighter, but I digress-

"There he is, Stell, our main attraction," Regina said, pointing over her shoulder and behind her at a man who was walking up the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Briefly turning the ignition key, she pressed the little button that rolled down the window in Stella's door.

Cut off mid-stream, Stella hurriedly adjusted her glasses so she could follow Regina's finger. "Uh-buh, whut? Wh- uh... uh, okay... subject number one arrived at... at..."

"Three minutes past."

"Ten oh three, okay," Stella said and updated the clipboard before taking her camera and preparing it. "Well, he's certainly sticking to his plan. So far, the info that Joe got from the aggrieved wife has been spot-on... let's see if he goes up to one-four-five-seven."

The dark-haired man - in his late thirties and wearing a pale brown camelhair parka coat over a dark blue business suit - slowed down and began to look over his shoulder. Once he had established no one was near him, he made a ninety-degree right hand turn and walked up the driveway of the house Regina and Stella had under surveillance.

"Uh-huh," Stella said and took a quick potshot to see how much she needed to zoom. Once she had adjusted the telephoto lens, she held the camera ready on the windowsill in case anything interesting happened at the house.

The front door was soon opened and the man was greeted by a well-endowed twenty-something brunette in a salmon-colored negligee and fluffy slippers. Judging by the kiss they shared, they appeared to know each other quite well.

"Uh-huh," Stella said again and took a whole sequence of compromising pictures before scribbling a few thoughts on the clipboard.

"Fakes," Regina said dryly.

"No doubt about it. They're kinda balloony."

"Yep."

"But that doesn't necessarily have to mean she isn't a great gal."

"Of course not. But they were too big for her frame."

"Uh-huh..."

The businessman and the brunette closed the front door behind them and went into the living room to the right of the door. By looking through her binoculars, Stella could see the woman

serving the man a colorful drink with a little umbrella, but she didn't want to pry so she put them away almost at once.

"Ten oh six," she mumbled, adding to her information sheet, "act one starts."

"Ten nineteen, subjects move from living room to bedroom. Ceiling lights briefly on, but soon off," Stella said as she scribbled. "You wanna have a little bet on how long it'll be before he leaves? The prize is a kiss."

"Sure," Regina said and sat up straight in the bucket seat. "Uh... how about... hmmm... thirty-five minutes?"

"Thirty-five minutes, noted, that's five to eleven. I'll say twenty minutes, that's ten forty. People in business suits just don't understand the concept of foreplay."

Snickering, Regina whipped her head around to stare wide-eyed at her shorter friend. She let her eyes roam the black-clad body for a few seconds, wondering what kind of experience Stella had on the matter in order to give such a sweeping statement. "Is there something you're trying to tell me, my precious little dove?" she chirped and took Stella's free hand.

"Ah, that would be a 'no,' my precious little, uh... albatross," Stella said and patted her tall lover's hand before making another entry on the clipboard.

Regina snickered again and moved her hand down to claw at Stella's thigh just to feel her surprisingly strong thigh through the jeans.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Oh, that damn phone!" Stella said and opened the flap on the sleeve-pocket to get the ringing telephone. "You've reached the Harrison-"

Mumble, mumble.

"Whut? No, I'm not interested in getting a subscription for the Shining Light magazine."

Mumble, mumble.

"No, a free gift won't sway me. I've never heard of the Shining Light... what is it, anyhow?"

Mumble, mumble.

"A magazine celebrating family values with a spotlight on the blessed nuclear family? Oh, I'm a big fan of the nuclear family. That's the one where there's plenty of loving for all involved, right?"

Mumble, mumble.

"Ohhhh, I see. The blessed nuclear family is a man and a woman? Right. Tell you what, you've persuaded me. Of course, I'll have to ask my wife first, but... hello? Hello? And a very nice evening to you too, buster. So there!" Stella said and shoved the phone back into the pocket on her sleeve.

"Stella, you eeeeeevil," Regina said and ran her hand up and down Stella's thigh.

"I can only take so much B.S. you know?"

"Oh, I know. And thanks for the promotion, by the way. Stella Starr and wife. Of course, I think it should be Regina Harrison and wife, but..."

"Reggie!"

"Stella!" Regina replied and broke down with the giggles that soon claimed Stella as well.

Fifteen minutes later, a faint crash somewhere in the distance made Stella furrow her brow and look out of the window. Another faint crash was soon heard that seemed to come from the house they were watching. "Reggie, roll down my window... something's up over there," she said and held the camera ready.

"Here ya go," Regina said and briefly turned on the ignition key to activate the power window.

Stella zoomed in on the facade of the house and took a potshot of the closed front door.

"Thanks... yeah, something's definitely up."

Even as Stella was speaking, the front door of the house was flung open and the well-endowed brunette - who was wrapped in a satin sheet - pushed a very, very naked businessman out of her home.

"Ooooooh! Loser! Fifteen-minute-man! You're SO busted!" Stella howled, taking picture after picture of the starkly naked man who was trying to cover himself up while dancing about outside the house - and vice versa.

"Holy cow, that's gotta be embarrassing," Regina said and let out a long, mock wolf call. Chuckling, she started the Mercedes and turned on the lights to let the unfortunate man know he had an appreciative audience.

Seeing the car - not to mention the camera - the man let out a most un-manly squeal and tried to dive for cover behind one of the hedges, but it appeared to be a thorny one as he came out even faster than he had gone in.

"Oh, that was a nice shot," Stella said while clicking furiously. "And he's turning around!" - *click, click, click* - "Is he turning?" - *click, click, click* - "He's turning around! He's turning around..." - *click, click, click* - "he's turn- helloooooo, Willie!"

"I think we have more than enough now, Stell," Regina said and put the shifter into Drive. When Stella didn't reply beyond an inarticulate 'Oooooooo!'-sound, Regina let out a throaty laugh and drove away from the curb.

As the SLK trickled past the unfortunate man, Stella was practically hanging out of the open window to get every last detail. "All right, that should do it," she said and waved cheerily at the businessman who responded in time-honored fashion by flipping them the bird. "The wife... soon-to-be ex-wife... told Joe she wanted them in print, so... uh... who do you think we can get to print, uh... forty pictures of a naked dude this time of night?"

Driving slowly down Twin Oaks Lane, Regina looked across at Stella who was already sorting the images on the display at the back of the camera.

Stella felt Regina's eyes on her and looked up - "Downtown," they both said as one, adding identical cheesy grins.

"And!" Stella added with an even cheesier grin, "I won the bet. You owe me a kiss, Snookums!"

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CHAPTER 2

Saturday afternoon.

The drive to the luxurious uptown mansion where the photoshoot was to take place had been held in uncharacteristic silence. Regina wasn't in any mood to chit-chat so Stella had kept her lips glued firmly shut all the way there.

It wasn't until they drove off one of the major boulevards to enter the gated, upper class community that Stella couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Snookums, you look a little pale today. You didn't sleep well?"

"No."

"I told you we should have spent the night together, hon," Stella said and reached over to put a comforting hand on Regina's slacks-clad thigh. "We didn't even have to do any hanky-panky, we could just have talked all night."

Regina just shrugged.

"Reggie, I haven't looked... but I feel I have a right to ask. Did you take any of those pills?"

Sighing, Regina conveniently ignored the question as she pulled to a halt at a gate where a uniformed security guard came out to greet them. "Hi, we're Regina Harrison and Stella Starr. We're here for the Swimsuit Illustrated shoot," she said and handed the guard the accreditations Steve had mailed them.

The burly guard checked the paperwork thoroughly - even though it was broad daylight outside, he shone a flashlight in Stella's eyes which earned himself an annoyed "Oy!" - before stepping aside and opening the gate.

"Go around the back of the house... you can't miss it, there are trucks and stuff there already," the guard said and waved them through.

Grumbling, Stella rubbed her eyes and let her glasses fall back down on the bridge of her nose. "Trucks and stuff," she mocked, snarling at the man as they drove up a gravelly driveway.

The two-story Roderick Mansion had been built in the late 1930s for Charles Roderick, a much-admired movie star of the silent era. Held fully in white, it was designed to appear like a cross between a Greek temple and an Art Deco palace, though the interior was up to modern standards.

Situated on a hilltop, the mansion had a perfect view of greater Bay City with all its skyscrapers and the ever-present, suffocating cloud of filthy smog that hovered over downtown.

The driveway ended in a courtyard at the back of the mansion where a valet immediately offered to park the SLK among the dozen vehicles that were already present - Italian sports cars, German luxury sedans, American limousines, Japanese vans and pocket-sized family cars of assorted heritage that looked out of place among the splendor - but Regina waved him off and parked it herself.

A bit further into the courtyard, cables of all sizes and colors ran from one of three semi-trailers that were lined up side by side; the diesel-powered generator for the stage lights needed for the photoshoot was already chugging along, sending out the occasional cough of black smoke from the tall stack at the far end of the trailer.

Turning off the SLK's engine, Regina knew exactly where Stella's eyes were. Not on the glamorous mansion or the exotic cars, but locked onto her profile, asking silently why she hadn't yet responded to the last question. Sighing, she turned her head to the right to look at her best friend and lover. "Yes," she said quietly. "I've been taking them. Four at bedtime for most of the week."

To show that it wouldn't ruin what they had, Stella reached over and placed a loving kiss on Regina's lips. "It's okay," she said and caressed the former model's smooth cheek. "I'm not angry or upset or anything. I'm just a little disappointed because you can't see that you don't need them. Is that why you didn't want to come over all week?"

"Yes. I didn't want to lie to you about it. And what you didn't know, you couldn't ask about... well, you know."

"But I did ask."

"Yeah."

"Did you at least lose any weight?"

"Yes, but they are diuretic, so..."

"Mmmm. Let me make one thing perfectly clear, Reggie... I love you, which translates to every last inch of you and your body, curves and all," Stella said and ran her hand down said curves and all. "I didn't fall for a coat hanger back then and I don't want to see you turn into one now, so you gotta promise me to dump those pills once we're done here."

"Oh, I promise... and I love you, too," Regina said and gave Stella's hands a squeeze.

A smile slowly spread over Stella's face and she leaned in to give her Snookums another kiss. "C'mon. Let's check out the competition. Uh... would you mind comin' over here to give me a hand up from this roller skate...? I'm not planning on being the clown today."

"I'll be there in a flash, Stell."

The interior of the Roderick Mansion was even more impressive than the exterior, and it was easy to see that no expense had been spared when Charles Roderick had commissioned it from one of the finest architects of the period.

The first room of the mansion, the lobby, was a study in Art Deco and square angles, though it was marred slightly by the two dozen cables that ran along the Italian marble floor and out the front door clustered together in a thick wad of insulation and electricity.

Photographers, photo technicians, crane operators, models, minders, make-up artists, hair care specialists, wardrobe consultants and money men were loitering about or running to and fro in the next room, the grand hall, that had been transformed into a command center for the assembled army of people that seemed to be large enough to invade a medium-sized South American country without breaking a sweat.

"Ho... ly... sh-it..." Stella croaked as she took in the chaotic sight. Her decision to wear blue sneakers, maroon twill Capris and a yellow-and-white Hello Kitty t-shirt suddenly seemed to be the wrong one, at least judging by the fashionable clothes that everyone present seemed to wear.

Regina chuckled and wrapped an arm around Stella's shoulders. She had chosen a neutral charcoal gray pantsuit over a white blouse for the occasion, and she fit in far better.

Off to the right, Regina caught a glimpse of Steve Darrian who was busy fixing the bikini top of a young, nubile model. Mr. Chiseled Jaw, as Stella always called him, was dressed in black shoes, high-waisted steel gray pants with a black leather belt, and a white shirt where the top two buttons were undone to flaunt his manly throat.

Stella felt her Potential Trouble radar buzz in her ear and turned to look at what it was Regina was gawking at. When she realized it was Steve, she hooked an arm inside her tall friend's to show that she was still very much there.

Fortunately for Stella's well-being, Regina pulled her into a sideways hug and reached up to muss her dirty-blonde mop of hair. "You don't have to worry 'bout a thing, Stell. That's all in the past. I kinda like the present. And I wanna make it the future."

Adjusting her glasses, Stella let out an "Awwww," and returned the hug. "You're my best friend, friend. Hey... you're trembling! It's a hundred-and-ten in here, you can't be cold...?"

"I'm stomach-churningly, gut-achingly, heart-stoppingly nervous, Stell."

"Oh if ya need to barf, there's a trash can right over there," Stella said and pointed to the right of them. "Or maybe not? Okay, let's go outside and get some fresh air. I guess they'll call when they need us."

Outside the mansion, a rectangular swimming pool of near-Olympic proportions had been built into the forecourt. The rim of white tiles framing the deep blue, enticing water was punctuated by orange and red parasols creating shadows at several round benches along the sides of the pool.

The air seemed to hum, not only from the fact that scantily clad women were everywhere at the shoot, but from the countless pieces of electrical equipment that were in constant use: lights, cameras, floor fans of every shape and size, and even hair care gear like curling tongs and straighteners.

At the near end of the pool, a photographer had set up a shooting site with a large, white canvas on wheels that reflected the light, a neutral sunbed, and a short-haired, long-legged, dark-skinned model who was lounging on the sunbed in a bright white one-piece swimsuit.

Above her, the photographer was busy working her best angles - not that she had any bad angles - and giving her directions with a French accent, asking her, among other things, to put on a wide-brimmed, bright white sunhat that had been lying on the tiles outside of his camera's view.

"Oh, my... mo... ma... ah... buh... bah... cah..." Stella croaked as she took in the sights of the gorgeous model, especially her sculpted thighs and torso. "N- n- n- now I know why it's called a swimshoot suit... uh... a shimswoot- uh... sw- swimsuit-"

"Don't you recognize her, Stell?" Regina said, rubbing Stella's arms.

"Nuh-uh... I've never met her. I'm quite sure of that. Uh-huh. Quite sure..."

"Actually, you have. That's Lele da Silva."

"No way!"

"Big way."

Stella stared wide-eyed at the model she had met briefly while working on the case of the Invisible Man at one of wealthy socialite Lulu LaFontaine's legendary parties. "That's Lele? Wow... she looks great in, uh... uniform. Or out of uniform, I dunno."

"She's the undisputed number one at the Williamson, Crewe and Rosenthal agency now. A first tier star who moonlights in magazines for kicks. I guess Steve has rented her services for the shoot."

"And you called that, didn't you! Yes you did, Reggie, you big ol' genius, you!" Stella said and nudged herself repeatedly against her friend's arm.

Regina buffed her fingernails against her pantsuit jacket and assumed the opening stance of her Too Cool For Words posing routine. "Well, I do know what I'm talking about."

"Uh-huh-yeah!"

"She certainly does," a male voice said behind them.

Stella didn't even have to turn around to know who it was - Mr. Chiseled Jaw himself, Steve Darrian.

"Hello, Regina. You look fantastic," the gray-eyed, broad-shouldered, square-jawed, crew-cut Steve said and reached out to pull Regina into a hug, but Stella quickly stepped between the two tall, divine creatures to mark her territory.

"Hi, Steve," Stella said as she pumped his hand up and down like the handle on an old brass well. "You look a little haggard. Not eatin' well? Naw, that can't be it, not with that gut."

Though Steve smiled at Stella, it seemed slightly fake and didn't quite reach his eyes. "Hello, Miss Starr. So you're here too?"

"Oh, I'm not only here, Stevie-boy, I'm Reggie's manager. Yessiree, they call me Miss Twenty-Five Percent, the terminator, the intimidator, the enforcer, the closer, the pitbull, the mastiff, the bulldog, the-

Grinning, Regina stepped behind Stella and put a pair of calming hands on the blonde's shoulders. "What Stella is trying to say is that she's my wingman so you won't take advantage of me."

"Fair enough," Steve said with a grin that matched Regina's perfectly. "So, uh... I'm a little busy running the show as you can imagine, but I promise I'll swing by when it's your turn."

I bet you will... so you can gawk at her in a swimsuit, you... you... you... something-or-other, Stella thought but - unusually - kept it to herself.

"Okay," Regina said, reaching down to entwine her fingers with Stella's.

Steve nodded and began to move away, but suddenly remembered something and turned back toward the two women. "Oh, by the way, the entire show has moved on a bit from the old days, Regina. It's faster now and the triggermen have less patience. It needs to be in the can P-D-Q or else they'll move on to the next girl."

"I'll cope. Thanks for the warning."

"Him and his 'girls'," Stella grumbled as the well-dressed man moved back into the mansion.

"Huh?"

"I don't see no girls anywhere, Reggie, only women. 'Girls' is such a derogatory term. He should call us what we are, and that's women."

"Stel-ll?"

"Yeah?"

"You hate his guts, don't you?"

Stella put on her Sunday-finest shit-eating grin and pulled Regina into a hug, not caring where they were. "Him and me are like a pair of fightin' roosters, Snookums. Fightin' over you, of course."

"That's nice. But," Regina said and briefly touched the tip of Stella's nose with an index finger to show that she was about to Make A Point, "I'm not a prize turkey that gets awarded to whoever wins the cockfight. I make my own decisions on who I'm going to be with... and I've already

made up my mind, Stell. It's you." With that, she flipped her hair over her shoulder - where it landed in a perfect cascade - and walked into the mansion.

Stella's shit-eating grin faded briefly, but it was soon back at full strength. "Rrrwoar," she said, nodding with a lustful gleam in her eyes.

The dressing room assigned to Regina was hardly more than a plastic cubicle, cramped, hot and uncomfortable, but there was just enough space for two and that was all that mattered at that exact moment for Stella and Regina - it meant they could snog heavily without facing a risk of getting caught.

"Did I boost your self-confidence enough, or should I go on?" Stella said once they separated, breaking out into a snicker at the sight of Regina in her underwear leaning against the inside wall of the cubicle.

"No, I think it's fully charged now."

"Oh... darn," Stella said and performed a little shimmy on the spot.

"Ah, I guess we would give it another little shot. C'mon."

Stella didn't need a written invitation so she quickly stood up on tip-toes and reached out with her puckered-up lips. An inch before their lips would have connected...

SLAM! SLAM! - "Yo, Miss Harrison! Ten minutes!" someone barked outside. The fist pounding on the door was enough to make the entire cubicle rock back and forth like it couldn't decide on staying erect or giving up the ghost.

"HOLY CANNOLI!" Stella barked back, putting a hand on her wildly beating heart. Spinning around, she tore the door ajar and quickly found the guilty party through her impressive skills as a private investigator - it helped that he was the only one outside. "Hey, buster! Yeah, I'm talking to you! The next time, wouldya mind knocking on the flip-floppin' door instead of trying to break it down? Sweet mother of pizza, are ya tryin' to give us a brown streak in our shorts or someth-"

The messenger just waved at the irate Stella and walked away.

"He... he walk- he walked away from me! Nobody walks away from me, Stella Starr! Nobody walk- HEY BUSTER! You better extend those jumbo jet wings you call ears and listen to me! If you slam on the door again like that, I'm gonna serve you a gorgeous, fresh knuckle sandwich that's gonna taste so goooood you gonna eat through a straw for a month! So there!"

"Stell..."

"Those arty-farty types get on my nerves... no respect for us hard-working women... NO respect," Stella said and slammed the cubicle door shut behind her, making the whole plastic contraption shake in its foundation.

"In the meantime, perhaps you could give me a hand with the tanner lube and my first outfit?" Regina said with a wink, holding up an extra-large tube of HeroTan and a minuscule paper bag.

Stella blinked a couple of times, but then she broke out into a shit-eating grin and grabbed the lube tube. "O-ho-yeah!"

Eight minutes later, the perfectly bronzed Regina stepped out of the plastic cubicle wearing a black two-piece strapless bikini that was hardly there at all. She quickly pushed her bare feet into a pair of beach slippers and began to move away from the dressing room, but suddenly noticed that Stella wasn't with her. "Stell? Yoo-hooo, Stell? ...Stella?"

Stiff as an ironing board, Stella was leaning against the inside of the cubicle with a goofy grin on her face and glasses that were fogged over to such an extent that small droplets of dew dripped down from the lenses.

"Are you all right?" Regina said and took her friend by the arm.

"Uh-huh..."

"Sure?"

"Uh-huh..."

"Can you walk?"

"Nuh-uh..."

"Then you gotta stay here, Stell. I really gotta hustle... you heard Steve, they won't wait for me."

That made Stella snap out of her Regina-induced coma and push herself off the wall. "I can walk! I can walk! I've walked since I was two... or three, I can't remember. But I can walk! I can't see... but I can definitely walk!"

"Now's a good time to do it, hon."

"Uh-huh!"

The sunbed they had seen Lele da Silva use was empty, but the French photographer who had been taking pictures of her had moved further down the pool to get away from another session that took place in the water featuring a platinum blonde and a brunette who were frolicking merrily in the deep blue water.

As Regina and Stella moved behind the reflective screens to go down to the far end of the pool, the two young women in the water put their heads together and whispered something to each other. Regina heard what they said but chose to ignore it - Stella heard it too, loud, clear and in surround sound, and she couldn't ignore it.

Stopping dead in her tracks with one foot up and one down, she slowly turned around and went back to the edge of the pool where she bent over and put her hands on her knees while looking at the platinum blonde. "So she was already old when you were in diapers, huh? Tell me, kid, ain't it weird to wear a diaper under a swimsuit? How did they get you here? Lure you in with a couple-a strawberry lollipops? Does yo mama know you're here?"

"Stell-la," Regina said in an embarrassed tone from further down the pool where she had sat down under an awning and was being tended to by a hair care specialist and a make-up artist.

"I'll be right there, Reggie," Stella said and turned back to the two young models. "But before I leave you, please allow me to pour from my vast library of knowledge... one, the so-called old woman over there has been in more first tier appearances than you've had salads, and two... the chlorine is dissolving your dye. Have a nice day."

"Ohmygod, ohhhhhmygod!" the blonde howled and immediately grabbed her hair to check every single one of her ends.

Whistling the chorus from I'm Gonna Getcha Good, Stella dusted off her hands and walked over to where Regina was waiting for her turn.

Regina was so busy getting pampered that she didn't have time to scathe Stella when the mop-haired investigator came down to her end of the pool, but a little pointed glance did sneak out between the clouds of hair spray and the frantic touch-ups that tried to gloss over her crow's feet.

Stella just shrugged and kept on whistling.

Behind them, the photographer readied his camera and pointed it at Regina to get a picture of what kind of pictures he would get. "Hmmm," she said, furrowing his brow.

"Hiya, I'm Stella Starr, Regina's manager," Stella said with her hand forward. Initially, the photographer ignored it, but Stella was insistent and he had to take it. "Say, I'm pretty good with a camera. Maybe I can, you know, give you a tip here and there?"

"I doubt it," the photographer said in a French accent.

Mostly ignoring the jab, Stella ground her jaw a couple of times and stepped even closer to the fancily dressed man. "I gave you my name, how about giving me yours?"

The photographer turned around and shot Stella a scathing look that said *'If you don't know me, I don't have time for you'* - "Benny Oggadin."

"Ohhhh, Benny Oggadin! ...Sorry, bub, never heard of ya. What kind of scene do you have in mind for Reggie?"

"A picture kind," Benny said and held up his camera. At the same time, he shot Stella a look that said *'if you don't leave now, I will.'*

"Stell-la..." Regina whined, earning herself a wave and a little blown kiss.

When the hair care specialist and the make-up artist had finished touching up Regina's already divine frame, she got out of the plastic chair they had put her in and stepped forward.

"Finally," Benny Oggadin said. "Let's get to work. There's a beach ball over there, take it and hold it high. Stand in an X."

"I got it! I got it!" Stella howled and jumped over to the large, multi-colored beach ball. It was so light it nearly flew from her fingers when she raised it in the air, but she managed to hand it to Regina without too many problems.

Smiling nervously, Regina took the beach ball and stepped away from the parasol. Hurrying around the little bench, she stepped into the strong sun, though the direct rays were blocked by the white canvas filter.

Benny Oggadin nodded at the overall look of the scene, but waved his hand impatiently to tell Regina that she should get on with it. "Right. Now stand in an X like I told you. Beach ball high. Spread your legs and your arms... look to your right..." he said while taking picture after picture on his no doubt outrageously expensive professional camera.

Regina did as told but felt too nervous to enter the zone she needed to be in, and it showed. Her jaw and shoulders were tight and her whole demeanor was that of a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming Mack RS truck. She moved in awkward fits and jerks that she knew - with a sinking feeling in her gut - wouldn't cut it at a fifth rate fashion show, much less a prestigious event like the Swimsuit Illustrated shoot. For each time she performed a pose that didn't come out right, the knot of nervousness in her gut grew heavier.

Oggadin moved down on his knees to get the full effect of Regina's endless legs, but by the way he was shaking his head, he didn't appear to be satisfied with the setup. "No, don't force it... loosen up... now look straight up at the beach ball... I told you to loosen up, woman!"

Stella's eyebrows went up, down, up, down and finally up at the photographer's disrespectful tone towards Regina. She had to stuff her entire right fist into her yap to stop herself from

speaking her mind, and even then, she couldn't hold back a few inarticulate grunts that would have stripped paint off a wall had they come out.

"All right, I'll have to find the best of a bad job," Oggadin said and moved into the shade to see the pictures on the camera's display. "In the meantime, go over to the pool and lie down on that blanket there."

The way Regina sighed and let go of the beach ball told Stella everything she needed to know about her lover's state of mind, and she was at her side in oh point two, grabbing a small parasol along the way to protect the carefully lacquered hair. "Hey, how do you feel? Boy, he's annoying, huh?"

"I feel like shit, Stell, and it's going even worse. I..." - Regina shook her head and let out a long, slow sigh. "I can't do it anymore."

"Whut? Buh... of course you can! I mean... I mean, you're looking like a Goddess in that bi- bikini... of course you can do it!"

"No. I'm just not here... I can't find the comfort zone."

"That's Benny Wotshisface's fault! Not yours!"

"No, Stell. The triggermen have always been like that... earlier, I grabbed the aggression they sent me and returned it tenfold into the pics, but now I cramp up. Ah, to hell with it. I don't know who I was trying to kid... I'm a wrinkled old has-been. It's over," Regina said and shuffled over to the bench under the parasol instead of the blanket like Oggadin had told her to.

Struck speechless at her partner's plunge into the bottomless pit of despair that she knew so well herself, Stella scrunched up her face and followed Regina with a hypercritical eye. When she had travelled from the soles of the tall woman's feet to the tufts of her lacquered hair without finding anything at all that looked remotely like a wrinkled, old has-been, she put her hands on her hips and let out a fighting grunt, almost like she was ready to take on the challenge.

"What are you doing?" Benny Oggadin said in a French accent that grew stronger as he got agitated. "I told you to get on the blanket... oh, why do you model women always have to be so-"

"Gorgeous?" Stella interjected, grabbing a bottle of mineral water that someone had left on the table at the parasol. She quickly unscrewed the cap and handed it to Regina so she could drown her sorrows. "Beats me, too, fella. I mean, all women look great, but some just look greater than others, right? Now take Regina here, I mean, how can anyone not love her legs that go all the way from down there to up here? Or her fantastic midriff, her perfectly sculpted V's, her abs that show up just right without being intrusive, or... of course, the coop de tatt-"

"Coup d'etat. That's not what that phrase means. You mean piece de resistance," Benny said surly.

"Oh I ain't resistin' any of her pieces, bub. Whatever... the coop de tatt, her well-rounded, perfectly-sized, all-natural c-cups. Yessiree, no silicone enhancement there. Now, let me tell you something that you may not know, Sir, and that is that silicone enhancements also lose their shape over the years... yes, it's true. But look at those," Stella said and held her hand under Regina's breasts like she was trying to sell a walleye at a fish market, "tell me, do they look out of shape to you? They most certainly do not. And! And, that's not all. Her eyes. Have you ever seen such gorgeous eyes outside of Hollywood? I think not. Those gorgeous eyes can smile, they can cry, they can shoot fire, they can do everything you've ever wanted from a pair of eyes, if you only know how to break down the barrier that's in front of them. You know what I'm saying? Charm the woman and reap the Goddess. Right?"

"Lady?"

"Uh, yes?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. I have better things to do with my time, so it's really quite simple," Benny said and turned to Regina, "if you don't get down on the blanket now, I'll move on to someone who can follow instructions."

Stella took such a deep breath that she appeared to want to suck in the entire atmosphere. Her jaw was working overtime, her skin grew more and more flushed and her fists clenched and unclenched in an ever-faster rhythm.

Regina sighed and got up. "Stella, please," she said and moved over to the blanket where she sat down and waited for Benny to tell her what to do.

"Finally," the photographer said and got his camera ready. "All right. Hands behind you. Turn alongside the pool. Bend your legs in an upside-down V, the right knee higher than the left. Look out over the water. Hmmm. Keep that... keep that."

Walking around Regina, Benny Oggadin took several pictures from several angles, but it was clear from the many mocking grunts he let out that he still wasn't satisfied with what he saw on the display.

Stella was once again eating her fist to stop herself from barking at the photographer - or even push him into the pool - but her volcanic temper was saved by Steve Darrian who came out to watch how his former main squeeze was doing.

"Benny," Steve said and put a hand on the photographer's shoulder to make him stop. "Take five. Sort the images you've taken and come back out. Okay?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Darrian," Benny Oggadin said and left so quickly it looked like he couldn't wait to get away from Regina and Stella.

Grumbling inwardly, Stella followed him with her eyes until he was out of earshot - then she stormed over to Steve and slammed her hands onto her hips. "What the hell kind of hack did you

sic on us, Stevie-boy? I wouldn't trust that fella to take pics of a still life! He clearly has NO idea on how to sweet-talk a woman into working for him! He has NO idea of women as a whole!"

"Actually he's got two Golden Cameras, Miss Starr."

"Yeah? 'Cos he dropped them down the toilet?" Stella growled, blocking Steve's path to Regina.

Regina chuckled darkly and got up from the blanket. "No, he won them two years running for having shot the best fashion cover... worldwide," she said and wrapped the blanket around her body so she wasn't so exposed.

Stella couldn't counter that and reluctantly moved aside so Steve could talk to Regina. Grumbling, she walked over to the edge of the water and looked back at the other models who were working at the other end of the pool. A sneaky thought suddenly entered her mind, but she didn't know if Regina would go for it - she didn't care one half-fraction of an iota if Steve or Benny would approve of it.

"Hey," Steve said and put his strong hands on Regina's arms. "I watched you from the mansion. That wasn't... how can I put it... your best work."

"It was shit, Steve," Regina said and shook her head - her hair was so lacquered up it didn't even move. "The worst waste of time I've ever been involved in. Waste of my time, waste of your time... waste of energy, waste of enthusiasm... just a waste."

"Waitaminute, I have an idea," Stella said, but she wasn't heard.

Steve pulled Regina into a very chaste hug and briefly touched her cheek, mindful not to upset her bronze tan or her makeup. "You gave it your best shot, Regina. They can't all be winners, eh?"

"I guess not," Regina said and pulled the blanket closer.

Stella scrunched up her face and said: "Hey, I got an idea-"

Unaffected by the interruption, Steve turned around and pointed back at the mansion. "If you just put the used swimsuits in the-"

"WOULDYA LISSEN TO ME FOR A FLIP-FLOPPIN' CHANGE!" Stella barked so loudly the entourage down the other end of the pool stopped what they were doing and stared at the wild-haired woman, though she was so used to that she didn't even notice. "I. Got. An. Idea! Not just any idea... a good idea.. a damned good idea... a one-hell-of-a-damned good idea... the next best thing after sliced bread, soft-toned light bulbs and Oreos. I'm gonna take the pictures of Reggie," she said, knocking an index finger into her chest.

"Miss, Starr-" Steve said, but Stella held up her hands before he could even get started.

"Nope! Nuh-uh! Not one word! Nix! Zip it, flip it, shake it, bake it, don't care as long as you tape it! I'm gonna take the pictures of Reggie. So there! In all modesty, I know exactly how to get the best out of her. Ain't that right, Reggie?"

Regina opened her mouth to reply, but all she had time for was an "Uh-"

"Yes it is, and you know it. Steve, this doesn't have anything to do with Reggie and everything to do with Monsee-ur Wotshisface... he wouldn't know how to take pictures of a woman if she jumped up and bit him in the rama-lama-ding-dong! Well, you be lookin' at someone who knows a thing or two about women, Stevie-boy!"

"Stell," Regina groaned, but the blonde investigator was on a roll that couldn't be stopped by anything bar the end of the world. Recognizing the look, Regina pulled out the plastic chair with her foot and sat down.

DEEP breath - "Stevie-boy, I'll bet you're a real swell hunka-chunka who knows his way around women. Stop me if I'm wrong, but isn't the number one priority to create an warm, intimate environment? And with that out of the way, appreciate what she has, make her comfortable enough to come out of her shell... make her smile at you, for cryin' out loud! If you can make her smile, you're more than halfway there. Look, I could go on for hours, but to cut a long speech short, I know I can do a better job with Reggie than that hack. I rest my case." - Once Stella had delivered her soliloquy, she took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

Steve's eyebrows slowly slid up his forehead - then the corners of his lips began to tremble and he let out a loud, braying laugh. "I must say... I've read you all wrong, Miss Starr. Underneath your funny clothes, you're a player. Hmmm. All right. I wouldn't be where I am if I hadn't taken a chance now and then. You got it. The stage's all yours."

Grinning from ear to ear, Stella put her hands in her rear pockets and seized the opportunity to strut like a rampant peacock. "Thanks, Steve. You won't regret it," she said and shimmied back and forth at the edge of the pool. "Oh, and I'd show you my portfolio, but I kinda left it on the back seat of our Rolls-Royce."

"Okay?" Steve said and looked at Regina whose only response was a shrug. "I didn't get that one, but never mind. I'll be right back with a camera... once I've told Benny. That's gonna be fun. Not."

After waving goodbye to Steve, the grin on Stella's face grew even wider on her way over to her downcast friend. Sitting down cross-legged on the white tiles next to Regina, she reached up and put a warm hand on the model's bronzed legs. "Reggie... it's gonna be just fine. Think big bang... think supernova... think, uh... uh... the Tokyo Starlite Show. Right?" she said with a wink.

"From your mouth to God's ear," Regina said with a sigh.

"Awwww, then we're S.O.L. 'cos she's never listened to me before... although you could say I've been blessed," Stella said and ran her hand up and down Regina's calf. Only after she had done it

did she remember that the bronzed skin tone had come from a can rather than the sun - and was presently all over her fingers. "Oh... flippety-flop... yuck..."

Ten minutes later - including a minor nuclear detonation when Benny Oggadin was told about Stella's plan - the daring scheme was about to be set in motion: Regina had changed into an electric blue one-piece that matched her eyes perfectly, a breezy, blue silk scarf was ready for its big starring role, the canvas filters were in place, the floor fan was going at the second-to-lowest setting, a borrowed boombox was playing a Village People CD, the camera was ready and Stella was **so** ready she was practically bursting at the seams.

"Right..." she said and checked the camera's settings one more time. Looking up, she glanced at the Goddess in Blue and felt like Moses just before the Red Sea parted - a miracle was about to happen. "Are you ready, Reggie?"

"I'm ready. Please make me look great, Stell."

"Well... that's a given. Here we go," - *click, click, click* - "Nice and easy..." - *click, click, click* - "Sway to the music..." - *click, click, click* - "Let the rhythm move you..." - *click, click, click* - "Imagine my hands all over you..." - *click, click, click*.

"Stell!"

"Okay, maybe not that one... feel the music sweep over you..." - *click, click, click* - "Sway along to the beat..." - *click, click, click* - "You're so beautiful, Reggie." - *click, click, click* - "Oh, grind those hips, baby!" - *click, click, click* - "Yes, stretch out... stretch for me, baby..." - *click, click, click*.

"Oh, Stell!"

"Sorry, tee hee... uh, let the fan work for you... yes, turn around a little, let the wind catch your hair..." - *click, click, click* - "And the scarf... play a little more... yes..." - *click, click, click* - "Baby, look at me... look at me, please..." - *click, click, click* - "Oh, gawwwd... flip, I think that came out blurry..."

"Stell-la! This isn't a good time to get your glasses fogged up!"

"They're not... naw, I got it, I got it... just a few more, Snookums..." - *click, click, click* - "You're the most beautiful woman on the planet, baby..." - *click, click, click* - "Well, you and you-know-who, but, huh..." - *click, click, click* - "Yeah, put your hand on your stomach again, that was good!" - *click, click, click* - "No, your stomach, Reggie, not your torpedoes... yeah, yeah, I saw you sticking your tongue out, cheeky so-and-so... don't think I didn't get a picture of it!" - *click, click, click* - "Oh, that's a great look... and... aaaaand..." - *click, click, click* - "That's it! Wow..."

Completely unsuspected by Stella and Regina, Lele da Silva had been peeking around one of the canvas filters throughout the shoot. Seeing Regina go through her poses in such an unrestrained and natural fashion made the top model's eyes grow wide and sparkly. When the shoot was over, she let out an excited little squeak and hurried back to the mansion to find Steve Darrian.

Letting out a long sigh as the tension left her system, Regina went over to the floor fan and turned it off. Turning around, she reached for Stella and pulled her into a strong hug that ended in a sweet, little kiss. "Thank you for cheering me up, Stell. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. I thought I was a goner, but... but you showed me there's still some life left in the old girl."

"Told ya it was Wotshisface," Stella said into Regina's bosom, beaming like a little sun. "May I say it? Huh? Huh?"

After pulling Stella into another kiss, Regina mused her nose against Stella's and let out an uncharacteristic snicker. "Oh, go on then... just this once."

"You still got it, Reggie!"

"Awww... thank you, darling. Love ya."

"Love ya, too... with little chocolate sprinkles on top! And strawberry jam!"

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CHAPTER 3

While Regina went over to the plastic chair to catch her breath, Stella sat cross-legged on the tiles and checked the photos she had taken. As she clicked through the colorful pictures on the little display, she found that she could be quite proud of what she and Regina had achieved - "Uh-huh... o-yeah... yepers... mmmm! Mmmmh! O-yeah... uh-huh... oh... look at this one, Reggie," she said and held up the camera.

The photo was the one where Regina had sent Stella a smoldering gaze that rivaled anything any lava stream had ever produced. The electric blue swimsuit was perfect, the wind had caught Regina's hair and scarf perfectly, her body was angled perfectly - accentuating her thighs, hips and chest - and her eyes were like two azure pools of energy that threatened to burn a hole in the lens.

"Yeah... you got lucky there, huh?" Regina said and reached out to muss Stella's wild mop of hair.

"Lucky! Feh... I'm just that good. Hey, did you know you look kinda okay?"

"I think I've been told once or twice, yeah," Regina said and flipped her lacquered hair over her shoulder.

Stella had positioned the two canvas filter screens in such a way that they could have some privacy for the photo session, but it also meant they couldn't see what went on at the other end of the pool.

A wall of cackling, chirping, squealing and tweeting sounds that grew louder by the second made Stella put down the camera on the table under the parasol and get up to move the screens aside.

"Holy sh-!" she exclaimed loudly when she saw an entire battalion of scantily clad models march towards her, led by Lele da Silva in a neon-green, open-sided one-piece, and Steve Darrian who had an unreadable expression on his face. "Re- Re- Reggie! I need urgent backup, pardner! I got wo- women all over the place here... Reggie!"

When Lele saw Stella gawk at her with a panicked look on her face, she put out her arms and ran towards her. "Oh, Miss Starr! It's so gooooooood to see you!" she howled in a charming Brazilian accent as she delivered a bronzed, flushed, crushing hug to the flustered Stella.

"Ba... be... Le... lu... uh... buh... beh... h- hi, Lele," Stella croaked, surrounded by so much flesh and so many exquisite curves she had no idea where to look or put her hands.

"Miss Starr, the other Internet gurus have nothing on you! You are the greatest!" Lele said, grabbing hold of Stella's hands and giving them a strong squeeze.

"Uh... I am?" - Stella had to fight through a thick cushion of inappropriate thoughts involving neon-green and electric blue swimsuits, bronzed bodies, long legs and plenty of feminine curves, but she finally remembered that she and Regina had played a charade the first time they had met Lele at the LaFontaine party. In order to blend in with the guests, they had pretended that Stella was a fashion guru who offered tips online. Her big yap had got her into trouble - no news there - but Regina had stepped in and smoothed things out before they got out of hand. "Uh... but of course I am. You know, we online gurus rarely meet the people we give advice to, so, uh... if you don't mind, you can tell me why I'm the greatest," Stella said with an ever-widening smirk on her face; one that earned her a groan from Regina.

"Remember you told me that all-natural was the next huge thing? It was! I allowed myself to regain some of my natural curves, and not six weeks later, I headlined my first show! I haven't looked back since and you helped me get on that path, Miss Starr!" Lele said and pulled Stella into a new, equally crushing hug.

"Ooofff! O-hoh, well, yeah... you know. All in a day's work for us gurus," Stella said and adjusted her glasses. "Uh, but what's all this about?" she continued, waving her hand at the scantily clad models who were all gawking at her, including the platinum blonde from the pool who had earlier been whispering about Regina behind her back.

Lele quickly went over to Steve and hooked her arm inside his. "I was watching your session with Miss Harrison. It looked so easy, so natural, so right that I thought to myself, Lele, that's the way to go. Isn't it, Steve?"

"Yes," Steve said flatly.

Looking at her old colleague, Regina knew that Steve's hands were tied by Lele's request. In any modeling agency, the wishes of the number one star were law - even if she was only a loaner like Lele - simply because she provided too great a share of the income to risk her seeking greener pastures elsewhere.

"Well..." Stella said, scratching her hairline. "I only did it because Benny Wotshisface was so... ugh... towards Reggie."

"He was like that to all of us, Miss Starr," Lele said and made a sweeping gesture at the other models to a chorus of 'Yeah!', 'That's right' and 'Uh-huh!'. "That's why I and some of my friends would like to ask if you'd do a session with us?"

Stella blinked once, then twice. With a furrowed brow and a comically slack jaw, she looked at Regina, at Lele, at Steve, at the other models, back at Lele, back at Steve, back at Lele and finally back at Regina. Just when she thought she was ready to croak out an answer, her cheeks blushed red and she had to go through the entire chain again; looking at Lele, Steve and the models until her eyes were glued onto the proud smile on Regina's lips. "I... guess... I... could... do... that... Lele..." she said in a curious cross between a hoarse croak and a squeaky chirp.

"She'd love to," Regina said and put her hands on Stella's shoulders.

The befuddled look on Stella's face proved that she had momentarily lost the ability to speak, breathe, or even access her brain on a more general neurological level, but the red blotches that soon rolled over her cheeks and her super-excited, brightly shining eyes told the world all it could ever want to know about her state of mind.

Fifteen minutes later, the end of the pool closest to the mansion had turned into a party zone with colorful inflatable beach balls, plenty of laughter in the air, photographers who were hard at work shooting hundreds and hundreds of pictures, and a merry band of swimsuit-wearing models who shook, shimmied and rocked to the eternal summer soundtrack of the Village People, Gloria Gaynor, Sylvester and all the other stars from the 1970s.

Four big shots from the executive board of Swimsuit Illustrated stood off to the side, watching and commenting on the events as they unfolded. One of the suits pointed at two models who were shooting in the pool, and the group shuffled over there to get a better view.

Stella was kneeling on the edge of the pool, trying to hold the camera steady and combat the wad of cotton candy that had previously been her brain - at least, that's what it felt like to her as she struggled to maintain focus through glasses that threatened to fog up at any moment.

In the deep blue pool, Regina and Lele were frolicking merrily by throwing water at each other, bobbing up and down, teasing each other, and generally behaving like a pair of two-legged mermaids.

Since the last session, Regina had changed into her final costume, an open-sided one-piece identical to Lele's, except it was off-white. When wet, it clung to her body like a second skin and showed with startling clarity that she didn't possess a single inch that could be classified as any less than perfect.

Stella kept clicking like mad, taking so many pictures of the two water goddesses that the camera had grown quite warm. Struck mute, she could only grunt and nod at Regina and Lele, but they were so experienced and talented they didn't need directions as such.

"Stell, I hope you're ready for the big finale... we're pruning so we better quit while we're ahead," Regina said and took Lele's right hand in her left.

"Uh-huh," Stella croaked, nodding so hard her haystack bobbed up and down.

"Okay, here goes!" Regina said loudly and took a deep breath. By her side, Lele did the same, and the two women briefly went under the surface of the water - a second later, they exploded out of it like a pair of leaping dolphins. Still holding hands, they formed a big W as they stretched their arms and bodies out of the water, both leaning back to bring their swimsuit-clad torsos to center stage and showing off what they had, which was plenty.

Stella let out the loudest whoop she ever had as she took a whole series of pictures of the three-second master class in superstar modeling. "Oh, Gawd..." she croaked, shaking her head in disbelief.

As Regina and Lele splashed back down into the water and floated away, Stella bumped down on her rear, put the camera and her glasses safely back from the edge of the pool and began to rub her face thoroughly, too bowled over by the striking visual fireworks to even breathe properly.

Getting up, Stella hadn't bothered to put on her glasses, but perhaps she should have - she hadn't taken a step before she bumped into four dark, blurry shadows that appeared where dark, blurry shadows shouldn't have been. Startled, she took a step back and suddenly found herself in the same situation one of her cartoon favorites had been in many times before: Wile E. Coyote suspended in thin air over the edge of a thousand-foot drop.

Fortunately, the distance to the pool was only ten inches, but it didn't stop time from slowing down to a crawl for Stella. In her two-second hangtime, she opened her mouth to let out an

inarticulate, braying, tornado alarm-like shriek while flapping her arms like a bumblebee who hadn't been told she was incapable of flying.

SPLASH!

"Oh, Stella..." Regina groaned as the bow wave hit her and Lele and sent them a good ten feet away from the human depth charge.

Hacking, coughing, spluttering and growling, Stella bobbed up to the surface and began to tread water. A few seconds later, she'd regained enough breath to go into one of her best '...ucker'-hissy fits for years - one that simply would not quit, no matter how hard Regina and Lele tried to calm her down.

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Some time later, Regina, Steve and Stella, who was wearing a fluffy, hot pink bathrobe that she had borrowed from the wardrobe people while her soaked clothes were being tended to, sat on one side of an impressive mahogany table in one of the suites on the first floor of the mansion.

The other side of the table had been occupied until very recently by three of the four executives from Swimsuit Illustrated - the fourth and final one had received such a shock from the language Stella had spewed out after she had fallen into the pool that he had felt it necessary to spend some time being pampered by scantily clad models.

As the three suits left the room, Steve turned to Regina and tapped his fingers on the smooth desk. "Okay, that went well. They liked what they saw. The first session was a waste of time, just like you said, but the second and third hit the sweet spot... pardon the expression," he said, briefly putting his hand on top of Regina's.

Regina - back in her charcoal gray pantsuit and the white blouse - moved her hand into her lap. She did it without drama, but it was clear to see that she didn't appreciate Steve's attentions. "You don't have to tell me, Steve. I've been to enough evaluations to know how to read between the lines."

"But of course, of course," Steve said and got up, suddenly feeling the temperature in the room dropping by several degrees. "Miss Starr, I know you're Regina's manager, but I need a word with her in private, if you don't mind."

Stella looked at the smooth operator for a few seconds before nodding and getting up from the chair. Instead of going to the door, she went over to Regina and bent down to pull her into a hug from above. "I'll be outside," she whispered for Regina's ears only. "If he gets frisky with you, just holler and I'm gonna come back in and take a hacksaw to his-"

"I'm quite sure it won't come to that, Stell," Regina said and patted Stella's hand.

"Mmmm-yeah, but you never know with these people. I'll be right outside." To show that she meant business, Stella leaned down again to put a sweet kiss on Regina's freshly scrubbed lips.

Once Stella had left the room in her neon-yellow flip-flops and her hot pink bathrobe, Steve put the chair Stella had vacated back where it had come from before sitting down on the one he had used earlier. "Regina, may I be frank with you?"

"I won't accept anything else and you know it, Steve," Regina said and crossed her legs away from her former lover.

"Oh, I know. Anyway, the first session was a disaster. Nothing short of a disaster... Benny Oggadin said a few things about you that I won't repeat, but they weren't complimentary."

"Fair enough. I didn't do a good job."

"No you didn't, quite frankly. However, the second and third sessions proved that you still have what it takes. And with that in mind..." - he reached into his jacket that hung from the backrest of his chair and found a folded-up piece of paper - "Here's something for you to think about."

Locking eyes with Regina, he put the paper on the table and pushed it towards her.

The paper was folded in a way that made it impossible for Regina to read the small print, so she pulled it closer to her without actually taking it. A brief glance at the only visible line told her it was a draft for a contract with the Darrian Modeling Agency.

Regina sighed and tapped her fingers on the paper. After a few seconds, she picked it up and unfolded it. She read it once, then another time to get the true meaning of the figure that was near the bottom of the page. "Seventy-five thousand dollars?"

"For a one-year contract, yes. Catwalk shows, ads, personal appearances in infomercials and shopping malls, photo sessions like this one. A one-year contract with an option for more... both sides will be able to renew or forfeit it with only a month's notice."

"Forfeit it if I'm not performing well enough," Regina said matter-of-factly as she skimmed through the document for a second time.

Steve didn't answer verbally but a waved gesture proved Regina's point.

"It's not something I can decide here and now, Steve. I need to talk to Stella about it. She's very important to me and I don't want to screw up what we have."

"I understand," Steve said and got up from the chair. After sending Regina a goodbye smile that she didn't respond to, he took his steel gray jacket and put it on. "I'll send her back in," he said on his way over to the door.

Once he reached the door, he put his hand on the handle but didn't twist it. "Regina, you only have to look at Helena Christensen to see that it's possible to make a comeback in your mid-forties."

"I'm not Helena."

"No, but you're damned close. I'll respect your decision whatever it turns out to be, but the example she's set is worth putting into the equation. Isn't it?"

Regina nodded briefly but didn't offer any further comment.

"Right," Steve said and turned the door handle.

Stella was quickly back inside and hurried over to where her best friend and lover was seated. "Oh, baby, was that big, nasty fella mean to you?" she said and sat down in Steve's chair. "I'll bet he was. I better give you a little kiss," - *kiss* - "and another," - *kiss, kiss* - "and then we have this one, too,"

- *kiss, KISS, kiss*.

Chuckling, Regina pulled Stella down for a real kiss that nearly made the blonde investigator's knees knock.

"Wow, he musta been really nasty," Stella said as she bumped back down on the chair.

"No, he wasn't nasty at all, actually. He offered me a contract," Regina said and pushed the paper across the table.

Stella took it and began to read, moving her lips as she went through the lines of legalese to keep track of what it said. When her eyes reached the end of the document, she furrowed her brow and shot Regina a puzzled and perhaps even slightly worried look. "Seventy-five grand? For a one-year contract?"

"Yeah."

"Holy cannoli..."

"It's not that much, actually. I don't think Lele will get out of bed for anything less than double that," Regina said and drew an empty pattern on the shiny, smooth mahogany desk.

"Huh. I'd definitely get out of bed for seventy-five grand," Stella said and adjusted her glasses. "Of course, nobody in their right mind would pay me seventy-five grand just to get out of bed... they wouldn't have to... a Meaty Mama and a can of Slurrry! Raspberry Fizz would do the trick," she continued with a cheeky grin on her lips.

"Oh, ha ha," Regina said and reached over to muss Stella's hair. Sighing, she bumped back in her chair and crossed her legs the other way. "That kind of money could buy us a lot of things for the business. We could get your Pacer fixed."

"Yeah, I s'pose we could, but... Reggie, in this contract, it says that you'll do runway shows, a few ads and stuff... now, as your manager, Miss Twenty-Five Percent, don't forget, I think we should dig a bit deeper and find out a few more details before you commit to it. I mean, infomercials... for what?"

"Good point, Stell. I'm far too old to be first tier, I know that. That's for the kids like Lele, but..." - Sighing, Regina got up from the chair and moved over to the windows. Below at the pool, the photoshoot was winding down with the last few photographers taking pictures of the last few models.

Symptomatically, the sun had already left its zenith and was creeping towards the western horizon, a state that matched Regina's mood pretty well.

"No..." she said quietly.

When nothing more came, Stella got up and shuffled over to her friend where she wrapped an arm around the sculpted torso. "Whassat?"

"I said no, Stell. First, second or third tier, the stress is the same. I just can't do the airport, taxi, hotel room, prepping, performance, post-show party, back to the hotel room way past midnight, taxi, airport slog anymore. I don't wanna spend so much time away from you."

"Awww... you gonna make me cry, Snookums... hell... I'm already cryin'," Stella said and raised her glasses to wipe her misty eyes with the bathrobe sleeve.

"So... how about we find your clothes, tell Steve, and get back to the cozy little office we call home? We could watch a movie tonight... how about Imagine Me & You?"

"Ooooh!"

"Maybe call for a pizza and some razzies or a few cherry colas...?"

"OOOOH! Reggie, you're the woman of my dreams, you know that?" Stella said and crushed herself flat against Regina's attractive, highly desirable and just plain cuddly body.

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On their quest to recover Stella's missing clothes, the two women met a group of cheerful, bubbly models led by Lele da Silva who all offered the All-Knowing Internet Guru a big hug or kisses on the cheek. Soon, Stella's cheeks carried residue of roughly seven brands of lipstick in all shades, ranging from husky orange to bright pink.

"We thank you so much, Miss Starr! This was the best event we've been to for a long time... isn't that right, girls?" Lele said and raised Stella's hand in the air.

"Yeah!" the rest of the models cheered before they all rushed in and gave the two investigators a big group hug.

"How come they kiss you but only wanna shake my hand?" Regina said and bumped shoulders with her shorter friend once the swarm of models had moved on.

"Oh well," Stella said and adjusted her glasses with a big grin plastered on her face, "there are several reasons for that. First of all, I'm a guru... then we have the cuteness factor. You're okay to look at, but you sure can't beat my cuteness. Nobody can beat my cuteness," Stella said with her tongue stuck so firmly in her cheek it took her several seconds to get it back.

Flicking her hair over her shoulder where it - obviously - landed in a perfect cascade, Regina shot Stella a sly little grin. "Oh, is that a fact?"

"That is a fact, Miss Big-Ol'-Model-Superstar. That's a very strong fact, yeppers."

"Hmmm. You sure?"

"Fully. You wanna test my cuteness, Snookums?" Stella said and grabbed hold of Regina's hand so she could swing it back and forth on their way down a seemingly endless hallway on the first floor of the mansion.

"Yeah. But it's gonna have to wait until tonight. I'm sure some of the rooms up here are occupied by... ummm... people sharing an intimate moment, but that's not my thing anymore."

Stella stopped walking with one foot up and one foot down. Slowly narrowing her eyes and baring her teeth in a horrified grimace, she turned around and looked at some of the closed doors they had just gone past. They hadn't been able to hear anything through the doors, but that didn't mean nothing was happening on the other side. "No..." she croaked.

"Oh yeah," Regina said and put her hands on her hips.

"Oh, pharr... no, let's get my clothes and get home," Stella said and resumed walking. She quickly took Regina's hand again to give her some emotional balance. "Uh, Reggie?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you ever... you know? At a photoshoot?"

"Couple of times."

"Aggh... with Steve?"

"No."

"Agggh! There were others?!"

"And you've never had any girlfriends before I came along?" Regina said and leaned down to put a very tender kiss on Stella's cheek.

Stella scrunched up her face but eventually broke out in a cheesy grin. "Weeeelllll," she said, waving her hand.

"Anyway, it was more than fifteen years ago, Stell... actually, it was closer to twenty years ago now... hey, 'Wardrobe', we need to go in here," Regina said and briefly knocked on the door to a room. When the knock was answered with a 'Yes?' she went inside.

Stella kept standing outside for a moment just to check if any naked models came out. When it was all-clear, she hurried inside to get dressed so they could get back home and wipe all images of Regina with someone else from her mind.

Finally back in her clothes that had been dried with a careful hand by the wardrobe consultants, Stella had her hands shoved down the pockets of her maroon twill Capris - that suddenly matched the lipstick she had on her cheek - as they waded through the mess of cables, canvas filters and assorted other equipment in the grand hall in an attempt to find Steve.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a young model who was almost cowering up against the wall. She was looking so lost and depressed that Stella came to a dead stop just to observe her. "Hey, Reggie... look at her over by the wall. What do you think's going on there?"

Regina turned to look at the young woman. With her trained eye, she could see at once that the woman had the right height, build and excellent facial proportions with a strong jaw, prominent cheekbones and perfectly shaped eyes and eyebrows. She looked no older than twenty, though she was probably younger than that. "I don't know, but why don't you go over and ask while I find Steve?"

"Good idea," Stella said and went over to the young woman before Regina had even completed the sentence.

Regina looked at her lover's gently wiggling rear end and came to the conclusion that she probably **was** the cutest of them all. Chuckling, she continued through the mess of cables until she found Steve with two of the executives from Swimsuit Illustrated. "Steve, can I have a moment?" she said, finding the contract draft from her liner pocket.

"Sure? C'mon, we can sit down here," Steve said and excused himself before moving over to a leather couch arrangement at a secluded corner of the grand hall. "So?" he said as he held out a chair for Regina.

"Thank you for the offer... but no thank you. It's just not gonna work," Regina said and pushed the contract draft back to Steve.

"You know," Steve said and sat down facing his former colleague. At once, he crossed his legs away from her. "I had a hunch you were going to say that. All right. There's nothing I can do to sweeten the deal for you?"

"No," Regina said and glanced at Stella who was talking to the young woman.

Steve followed Regina's glance and nodded knowingly. "I understand. It's for real?"

"It's for real, Steve," Regina said and stole another glance at Stella.

A few crickets had time to chirp somewhere in the far distance before the two people opened their mouths at the exact same time. "We could-" -- "But I-"

"You first," Steve said as he folded up the contract and put it in his pocket.

"Well... although I have to decline the full contract, I would be interested in getting attached to a few ad campaigns for your agency. I guess they would mostly be local. That is... if you would still be interested in working with me."

"Oh, I would, yes. Ad campaigns. Mmmm... I have to say it would be waste of your talents to restrict yourself to a couple of campaigns."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I just can't live out of a suitcase anymore," Regina said and looked back at Stella who was apparently trying to show the young woman how to walk like a duck.

"No, I get it, I get it. Ads... okay," Steve said and leaned forward on his chair. "Well, we do have a few options open. L'Orient is about to launch a campaign for a new skin care product for mature women, and they've already put out feelers for models and actresses in the relevant age bracket. Filippo Wine Imports has put out a tender for a run of TV ads promoting their wines. They want a cool, classy look so I think you'd be interesting for them with your elegance and stature. Also, LaBellaDonna Fashion is eager to promote their fall collection for women aged forty-five plus."

"Oh, I'm not quite there yet..." Regina squeaked.

"I know, but it could be a good gig for you... print, TV and online. Then we have Pegasus Jewelry, they're always looking for striking women... and you are still a striking woman, Regina. Very much so, in fact."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, I'm only speaking the truth," Steve said and sent Regina one of those looks that sent messages on several different levels.

Regina couldn't hold his look but preferred to glance back at Stella who was showing the young woman something she had found in her pocket. "Yeah, well, I may be getting older but I'm not getting dumber, Steve. You want something I can't give you anymore."

"Awww. We had a pretty good time back when we were together, didn't we? I'll never call you a liar, but if you say we didn't have a good time, then... huh... I'd say you were bending the facts a little. Mmmm?"

Regina took a deep breath to oppose Steve's train of thought, but grudgingly came to the conclusion that he was right. They had been great together; great on the runway and great in bed - but all that was ancient history now. "I did have a good time, Steve... but whenever it got personal beyond what we did in the sack, you screwed me over. Financially, emotionally..."

"I know, and I'm sorry about that. I was young and arrogant back then... and so were you, I might add. We both had knives up our sleeves, ready to hack, slash or stab anyone who could be a threat to our place in the bright lights. Yes?"

Once again, Regina had to concede the point. "Yes," she said and shifted uncomfortably, "but it's also why I don't want to get too personal with this new situation. I'm willing to do ad campaigns, maybe for the companies you mentioned, maybe for others, I don't know... but nothing beyond that. And I do mean 'nothing', Steve."

"I hear you," Steve said and put out his hand. "Let's shake on it. I'll see what I can find and mail the setups to you. Deal?"

"Deal," Regina said and shook Steve Darrian's hand.

Meanwhile, Stella was going at a hundred-and-ten, relaying all her adventures of the day to the young woman to see if she couldn't cheer her up a little bit. "Oh yeah, I went into the pool all right. Caught between Regina Harrison and Lele da Silva. Talk about a glam sandwich, eh? Oh, you know Regina Harrison, right? Of course you do, she was, like, the biggest babe in the history of babes since the dawn of babehood. You see over there by the chairs? That's Regina Harrison and Steve Darrian. I know 'em both well. Actually," she said and adjusted her glasses, "I know 'em better than well. Regina and me are like this," - she clasped hands with herself - "and Steve and me are like this," - she thumped fists with herself.

"Uh-huh?" the timid woman said with eyes that darted back and forth between Stella's wild appearance and the two tall, divine creatures by the chairs.

"O-yeah! Cross my heart, hope to choke on a Jalapeño!"

"Oh... h- here they come..."

Stella turned around and waved enthusiastically at Steve and Regina who were slowly treading their way between the many cables that were being rolled up all around them. "Guys, this is Ann Davenport. She's here for her tryout."

"She was here for her tryout, yes. She was *late* here," Steve said in a slightly harsh voice.

Ann Davenport took a half-step forward but seemed to regret it almost at once and went back against the wall. "Like I told you, Sir, there had been an accident down on the boulevard... my bus got caught in a huge traffic jam..."

"Oh!" Stella said and rolled her eyes so hard they nearly fell out of her head. "You've come by bus? Shoot... buses... you know, I could tell you a few horror stories about buses... and bus drivers, hot rockety BANG, the Bay City bus drivers! Holy flippomatic, just the other week, I-"

"Stell, I'm quite sure Ann knows everything about it," Regina said and put her hand on Stella's elbow. "And Steve, I know for a fact you're not blind."

Steve nodded with a sly grin on his face. "I'm a lot of things, but blind ain't one of them."

"Yeah, but have you looked? Really looked?" Regina said and nodded in Ann's direction.

Steve put Ann under such scrutiny that even Stella felt the gamma rays stream through the air. The young woman grew a slight blush but kept her bluish-gray eyes locked onto Steve's. "You're right, Regina. All right. Ann, was it?"

"Yes, Sir," the young woman said with a nod.

"Ann, let's find a room where you can change. I'm sure we can get one of the triggermen to give us half an hour. Okay?" Steve said and put his arm around Ann's shoulder.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Oh, don't thank me yet. The hardest part is still to come," Steve said and turned back to Regina. "And you... if you ever change your mind, just give me a call. Yeah?"

The double meaning of Steve's words hung in the air like a pregnant hippopotamus and it made the atmosphere between Steve and Regina rather frosty - especially since she thought she had already sent her former lover a clear message.

Regina didn't want to undermine Steve's authority in front of the young woman, so she merely grunted and slipped a hand down Stella's left rear pocket where she gave the well-rounded derriere a little squeeze. "You know, Steve, I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. Anyway, just stick to the ads and everything's gonna be hunky-dory. Okay?"

"Okay, Regina," Steve said with a far more disappointed look on his face than the one that had been there only moments before.

Stella didn't quite know what was going on, but she had never been one to back down from a verbal sparring match, so she wrapped her arm around Regina's waist and returned the little squeeze she had been given. "Have a great time, Ann. See you on the front page! ...and with that, Stevie-boy, Reggie and me are gonna go back home and give ourselves one hell of a glorious workout 'til the cows come in. A-ripper-derchee, buh-bye and see ya! C'mon, Snookums, I can hear my bell ringing."

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An hour later, the two investigators drove into the parking lot at Rockin' Ruby's and quickly found a spot between a truck and an SUV. They didn't climb out at once since they had more pressing matters to attend to first.

Pulling back from Regina's luscious lips, Stella still hadn't lost the cheesy grin she'd worn at the mansion. The look only intensified when she glanced down at the miniature shopping bag she had dangling from her index finger. "You know, Reggie, I think it's quite... uh... thought-provoking to think that the, uh... white swimsuit can actually fit into this teeny-tiny-mini-winnie bag."

"Yeah," Regina said and reached over to run her fingers over Stella's neck under her dirty-blonde haystack. "D'ya think it's a silly idea to donate it to Ruby? I was thinking that she could use it for a raffle or an auction or something...?"

"Naw, naw, I think it's a great idea. And we're keeping the electric blue one, so... heh heh heh..."

Nodding, Regina stepped out of the SLK and waited for Stella to get out so she could close the roof.

"I'm just a little miffed that we couldn't get the pics I shot of you to go with it, but... eh. Maybe later," Stella said and opened the door of the low-slung sports car. Taking a deep breath, she bolted out of the bucket seat in an attempt to combat gravity - a fight she was destined to lose.

Even going at full speed, she only made it forty-five percent up. Flapping her arms, she began to fall backwards until she landed back down in the bucket seat with a BUMPH! and an OOOOF!

As she landed, the shopping bag flew from her hand and cartwheeled through the air. The centrifugal forces took over and made the white, open-sided swimsuit flutter around until it landed very nicely on top of her, covering her face completely. "Well," she said in a muffled voice as the fabric clung to her features, "I s'pose this wasn't the worst that could happen... Reggie? Reg-g-gie? Stella in distress!"

"Don't lose your socks, I'm comin'," Regina said and shuffled around the back end of the SLK to help Stella out of the car.

A little later on inside the bar, Ruby Albrecht looked at the miniature shopping bag with a puzzled expression on her face. "An auction is a great idea, but... you mean to tell me there's a swimsuit hiding in there?" she said and leaned against the bar counter.

"O-Yeah," Stella said and adjusted her glasses. "A real neat one, too. Go on, Reggie, show Ruby what we're talking about!"

Even as Regina reached into the bag, a group of highly interested spectators came from the nearest booths to form a human donut around the two investigators. Predictably, it didn't take long for the peanut gallery to let out a few wolf calls and howls.

Grinning, Stella turned around and slapped several high-fives with some of the people they knew from their regular visits. "Hey gals, you'll never believe what I did today... nah, I shouldn't tell ya... don't wanna cause ya no sleepless nights. Suffice to say it involves Reggie here and Lele da Silva. I'm sure you know her."

'*She's hot!*' someone shouted at the back.

"O-ho is she ever! She's scorching to the touch... which I did," Stella said with an impossibly wide grin on her face. "And my glasses didn't even steam up! How 'bout that, huh? And of course, I shared a swimming pool with them."

'*Oh, phooey!*' someone shouted.

"Phooey-dooey, I'm tellin' ya no pooey!"

The wordplay was received with much groaning by the peanut gallery, but Regina stepped in and pulled Stella into a hug from behind. "Every word is true," she said, kissing the top of Stella's head.

Regina finally took the minuscule piece of clothing from the shopping bag and took a step back to present the open-sided swimsuit, holding it against her front so everyone could see what they were talking about.

Within a second, Rockin' Ruby's fell stone silent save for the happy sounds that came from the dance floor at the back of the bar.

"Okay," Ruby said to break the silence, "I guess that could be called a swimsuit... or a napkin, I can't really say. I'm more of a t-shirt and Bermuda shorts kinda gal myself, though."

Regina carefully re-folded the swimsuit and put it back in the bag. "In any case, here you go... a white, one-piece, open-sided swimsuit, worn only once by yours truly... and all the more exclusive because of it," she said and handed it to Ruby.

"Thanks, Reggie. Should fetch us a nifty sum at the next community auction," Ruby said and gawked at the miniature bag the swimsuit was in. "Hey... the show's over, gals!" she said strongly to the assembled peanuts, earning herself a few moans and groans.

Once the crowd had dispersed, Ruby put the shopping bag behind the counter and turned back to Regina and Stella. "Anyway. What can I get you tonight?"

"Oh, we can't stay, Ruby," Stella said with an excited little shimmy where her knees went one way, her hips another and her arms did both, though not at the same time. "We got something special planned... a private get-together, if ya catch my drift."

Ruby chuckled and opened the hatch in the counter to go behind the bar. "Sounds nice," she said and started filling a bowl of pretzels from a plastic bag. "Well, don't let me stop ya. Have fun... and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Regina and Stella were already on their way over to the door, but they stopped and turned around to look at the owner of Rockin' Ruby's. "You know," Stella said thoughtfully, "nude parasailing is pretty much out of the picture..."

"Aw, I knew I shouldn't ha' told you that story! Will you get the hell outta here!" Ruby said and threw a pretzel at the two investigators who quickly ducked the salty stick and hurried out of the door snickering like a pair of demented juvenile delinquents.

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THE END of SWIMSHOOT SUIT?

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IV - KNIGHT IN A WHITE GOWN

Written by Norsebard

Stella Starr stood at one of the windows overlooking the busy boulevard, eating a nuked BLT sandwich and watching the many lights zoom past the building that housed the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. The hands on the clock were approaching ten to eleven in the evening and it was - unsurprisingly - pitch black outside

With an echoing slurrrip, she emptied the can of raspberry fizz she had been drinking and put it in the special plastic bag marked 'For recycling'.

The Paper Monster beckoned though she felt she was unprepared to face it; unprepared to go into the monster's lair with nary a weapon but her ball point pen, her two remaining sandwiches - another BLT and a grilled cheese - and her two cans of soda.

King Frost had made a late comeback so in order to keep warm in the office that seemed far too cold without Regina Harrison there to add some sizzle, she'd had to don a shock green long-sleeved sweater, a pair of Pippi Longstocking socks and her winter jeans that were just a tad too large for her.

Sighing, she sat down at her desk and grabbed the pen and the first of the case folders that she needed to go through. After she had filed the last folder she had been working on, she hadn't closed the notepad she had been using, and the full page of scribbled updates mocked her quite badly.

"Aw, what a night for Regina to visit her darn aunt. Why is she visiting her so often, anyhow? I mean, doesn't she know that her little Stella needs her for some cuddly-wuddly?" Stella mumbled under her breath. Knowing that she was being unreasonable, she hunkered down and went to work delivering body blows to the wretched Paper Monster with her trusty ball point pen.

Half an hour later, she had gulped down the grilled cheese sandwich and was halfway through a can of cherry cola. Even though she had worked fully concentrated, she had only managed to close two further case files, and the paperwork was, figuratively speaking, hanging out of her ears.

Her patience was wearing so thin it could have slipped under one of the vault doors at Fort Knox, and when the Paper Monster lashed out at her by throwing one of the folders onto the plush gray carpet which made Polaroids, hand-written notes and typed sheets fly everywhere, she'd had enough and jumped up from her chair.

"Ooooooo! I can't tell ya how much I hate this sh... sh... sh... crud! Hate it-hate it-hate it! Hate it!" she said, hop-hop-hopping around in a circle in the middle of the office floor.

When the fiery tendrils of fury finally left her, she bent over and put her hands on her knees. "Hate it," she croaked and got down on the carpet to pick up all the pieces of paper.

"Page nine, page seven, page fifteen, page nine... waitaminute... oh, page six, page twelve, page fourteen, page oh-I-don't-need-this-crap!"

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring, tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

Sighing like the weight of the world was on her shoulders, Stella reached up on the desk to find her phone.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring, tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

She found it, but also sent the notepad and the ball point pen down on the floor where the sharp object nearly stabbed the back of her hand.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring, tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Aw hell... this better not be a telemarketer... hello, you've reached... oh, thank Gawd it's you, Reggie..."

Mumble, mumble?

"Naw, I'm lonely... lonely and depressed... lonely, depressed and doing some paperwork."

Mumble, mumble?

"Yeah, but the little Paper Monster bugger is really giving yours truly a hard time, Snookums. It would be a lot easier if you were here..." - While she was speaking, she climbed into the cozy den under the desk and got herself comfortable jammed up against the inner walls.

Mumble, mumble.

"Yeah, I know. How's your aunt, anyhow?"

Mumble, mumble.

Like she always did when she listened to Regina's dulcet tones on the phone, she felt a wave of warm fuzzies sweep over her like a comfortable blanket. Closing her eyes, she pretended that Regina was there with her, whispering in her ear, nibbling on her earlobe, kissing her neck, running her fingers up and down her...

Jerking upright in the cozy den, Stella realized she was about to slip away into a dream world draped in a pleasant shade of pink, but as long as the Paper Monster kept growling at her up on the desk, she didn't have time for any distractions.

Mumble, mumble?

"Whut? Uh, no I'm sorry, Reggie... I didn't catch the last thing you-"

Mumble, mumble.

"Yeah, I'm a bit tired."

Mumble, mumble.

"Oh no, you gotta hang up already? But your little honey-bunny is missing her big Snookums SO badly," Stella said and performed a disappointed little rock-a-shimmy on the carpet.

Mumble, mumble.

"Oh... okay. No, I'm gonna make myself a gallon of coffee. The cherry cola isn't doing the trick tonight."

Mumble, mumble.

"Love you too. Bye, Reggie... see ya tomorrow. Here's a goodnight kiss for ya, mmmmmua!"

Stella turned off the phone and threw it up onto the desk. From the BUMP! and the resulting growl, she reckoned she had whacked the Paper Monster over the head but it didn't exactly leave her ruing the toss.

A yawn cracked her face wide open from ear to ear but she was determined to get back up and continue her chores. Her determination only lasted for two seconds beyond thinking it - then a laziness brought on by the two sandwiches in her gut took over and she bumped back against the inner wall of the desk. "Naw, I gotta... but I don't wanna... but I gotta... but I don't wanna... but I..." - *Yawn!* - "Gotta... ZZZZZZZZZZZZZ..."

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Coughing and spluttering, the nine-year old Stella Starr spat out the mouthful of sand she had collected when she had fallen flat on her face on the white beach north of Bay City.

She shook her dirty-blonde mop of hair and sat back on her thighs, eager to get all the sand out so she wouldn't be chewing grits the rest of the day. She knew the best way to do that was to stick her fingers in the corners of her mouth and say: "BLBLBLBLBLBLBL!" really loud and fast - so that's exactly what she did.

"Oh, Stella!" a young, female voice said behind her.

"BLBLBLBL"-ing once again just to get the final grains out, Stella got on her feet and dusted off her hands, her white Casper The Friendly Ghost t-shirt and her blue shorts. Turning around, she pushed up her glasses and glanced at Gennifer, a girl from her class, and once again wondered how two blondes could be so different.

Not only was Gennifer nearly five inches taller than Stella's four foot six-and-a-half, she was obnoxious to the power of five, too. A real abrasive package of designer clothes, snooty attitude and huge, stylish hair. Most of the times, the color of their hair seemed to be the only thing they had in common - except for the love of raspberry fizz.

"Look," Gennifer said and shifted a clipboard covered in stickers of Madonna, Wham! and Whitney Houston, "we don't have all day. Mrs. Jordan gave us a simple assignment: go down to the beach, find some seaweed, put it in a plastic bag and bring it back. Stella, why is that so hard for you?"

"It's not hard, Gennifer... I just tripped over that piece of driftwood. I didn't see it. If you had been in front, you would have tripped, too!"

"Would not."

"Would, too!"

"I don't have time to argue with you," Gennifer said and began to walk further down towards the edge of the water. "I'm going to find that seaweed now. You can follow if you want, but if you fall into the water, you're on your own."

Stella's chin quivered slightly but she gulped down the tears and settled for sticking out her tongue at Gennifer's back as the obnoxious girl walked along the beach. "I didn't wanna come along to this camp school!" she said loudly, but Gennifer didn't even acknowledge it and kept walking. "My mom made me go! I'd much rather be at home drawing or writing... it's much more fun... I can do what I wanna and not have to... to..."

With drooping shoulders, Stella realized Gennifer had already gone so far she couldn't hear her. Sighing, she bent down and picked up her own clipboard that she had dropped when she fell. Like Gennifer's, it was covered in stickers but hers were of actresses rather than pop stars - Lea Thompson, Ally Sheedy and Molly Ringwald.

An hour later, the entire class was assembled at the dunes overlooking the sandy beach. Mrs. Jordan was droning on about the finer points of seaweed but the on-site biology class couldn't hold Stella's attention. She had her eyes firmly trained on a bird's nest that was balancing on a fork in a branch in one of the trees behind the dunes, and it took all her willpower to look at Mrs. Jordan once in a while to at least seem like she was paying attention.

The bird's nest won out, and Stella exploited a particularly boring stretch in the lecture to slip away. She was quickly at the trees and found an old stump to sit on while she watched the nest. She could hear bird song, but she wasn't sure what kind of bird it would be.

With a smile on her lips and a couple of excited, red blotches on her cheeks, she opened her clipboard to a clean page and began drawing a sketch of what she thought was up there.

A little while later, she suddenly noticed that Mrs. Jordan had stopped talking behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw to her great horror that the class had left the dunes and were well on their way back to the camp school compound.

"They left without me... but... but... didn't nobody notice I wasn't there...?" she said in a voice that trailed off into nothing.

Sighing deeply, she adjusted her glasses and began the five-hundred yard trek back to the huts with her clipboard under her arm and rejection set heavily in her shoulders.

Walking into the forecourt of the compound, she wiped her nose on the back of her hand, and then wiped the shiny back of her hand on the seat of her shorts. She caught a glimpse of a group of girls jumping rope next to the mess hall, but she didn't know if she dared to go over there and ask if she could play along.

She kept hemming and hawing for a few minutes but eventually decided there wasn't any point in trying - they'd just turn her down like they always did. Turning left, she went past a group of boys playing rough'n tumble football before shuffling into the mess hall to see if she could find herself an early treat instead.

The field excursion had taken longer than anyone had predicted - especially for Stella after losing track of time - and it was already late afternoon which meant the mess hall was slowly filling up with yapping, giggling and squealing kids who were seated at the tables allocated to the various classes.

At the table belonging to her own class, Stella was relieved to find Laura sitting away from most of the squealing kids, reading a book. Laura 'Law' Cruz was Stella's best friend, or rather only friend, and she was the only one who seemed to fully accept Stella's strong will and quirky ways.

"Hi, Law!" Stella said and reached down to give Laura a little best-friend-hug from above.

"Hi, Stell! Where have you been?" Laura said and put away her book, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists Of Avalon*.

'Law' - thus nicknamed because her father was a detective at the Bay City police department - was only an inch taller than Stella, and she had shoulder-length brownish hair and almond-colored eyes that were set well in a pretty face.

"I found a bird's nest in the trees and went over there and started making a drawing of it... it was such a warm, fun little place where the birds were singing and I heard an animal rustle in the bushes and the sun was shining down on the crowns that were swaying in the breeze and it was really beautiful. But when I was done you had all left... where'd ya go? Uh, I know where you went 'cos you went back here so never mind that, but why didn't nobody notice I wasn't there?"

Laura shrugged and put a hand on Stella's arm. "I don't know," she said truthfully.

"Me neither. Anyway, I found a bird's nest like I told you and I made a drawing of it. You wanna see my drawing?"

"Sure!" Laura said with a big smile.

Matching the smile with one of her own, Stella opened the clipboard to the relevant page and pushed it over to her friend.

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After supper - where Stella had drawn attention to herself for exclaiming loudly that the healthy, nutritious soup tasted like nuked shoe polish - all the kids streamed out of the mess hall to mill around in the forecourt.

There was just enough time to play for an hour before the seven-thirty curfew, but when Stella looked around for Law, she couldn't see her anywhere. Sighing, she shuffled over to a stone bench where she wanted to make another drawing, but she was suddenly surrounded by five girls; Gennifer in charge of her pack of harpies.

"Hey, Stella... where are you going?" Gennifer said and blocked Stella's way.

"None of your business."

"Girls, you should have seen Humpty-Dumpty today. Fell flat on her face down on the beach," Gennifer mocked, giving Stella a little push on the shoulders of her Casper t-shirt. "Yeah. Oh, that was so graceful, Humpty. Face in the sand and ass high in the sky... real classy."

"Shut up..." Stella croaked and adjusted her glasses.

"Oooh! Make me, Humpty!"

The far taller girl and her harpies all took a step towards Stella who clutched her clipboard like crazy, afraid that Gennifer would take it again and mock her drawings and little poems that she had worked so hard on.

Then it happened; Snickering, Gennifer reached for the clipboard but Stella hung on. Gennifer tried to yank it towards her, but Stella just clenched her jaw - and her fists - and was determined to fight for her privacy.

"You're not getting it!" Stella said through clenched teeth. She couldn't stop a little sob from escaping her lips, but it only made the harpies bully her even worse.

"Girls! Behave!" a mature female voice called out from somewhere behind the fighting girls.

Through a veil of tears, Stella could see that it was Mrs. Jordan, a teacher she hadn't always seen eye to eye with. This time, however, she was glad to see the older woman because it made Gennifer and her harpies take a step back and temporarily stop their bullying.

Seeing freedom ahead of her, Stella sprinted between Gennifer and the girl to her left and made a break for the beach where she knew she'd be safe. Running as fast as her short legs would allow, she was soon on the sand where her progress was slowed a bit.

She didn't stop running until she came to the tree where she had seen the bird's nest. Panting hard, she bent over to catch her breath before sitting down on the stump she had used earlier. Her calves and thighs were burning from the exertion of running so fast for so long, and she let out a pained groan that was swept away by the salty breeze that always seemed to come in from the vast Pacific.

Using the clipboard as a fan, she waved fresh air at her legs to stop them from burning so badly. She eventually regained her breath, but she knew the worst was still to come.

She looked with deep regret at the path back to the compound. She knew if she wasn't back before the curfew, she'd have hell to pay with Mrs. Jordan, the principal and ultimately her mother, but she didn't care.

"And it doesn't matter anyhow..." she whispered to herself so she wouldn't disturb the bird in the nest, "nobody's gonna notice I'm gone. Well, Law might, but what can she do on her own? No... I might as well... might as well... wait... what is that?"

Behind her, she could hear a horse trotting along the beach. The unusual sound piqued her interest and she turned around and hid behind the stump so she could observe without being observed herself.

Soon, a beautiful woman wearing a white gown came riding into the scene on a tall, white stallion. The woman had long, dark hair that flew in a perfect cascade behind her, and as she came closer to the edge of the beach, she reached out at her gawking spectator.

"What in the world?" Stella said and looked down at her body. Instead of her nine-year old self, she had matured into an adult woman, though her clothes were the same, a Casper T-shirt and a pair of blue shorts.

"Stell?" the rider said, revealing herself to be Regina Harrison.

"Reggie? How... where in Sam Hill did you get that horse?" Stella said and jumped up from her hiding place. "You didn't sell the Merc without asking, did you? Shoot, the leasing company is gonna skin us alive..."

"Shut up and get up here," Regina said and put out her arm.

For once Stella did as told and climbed up on the tall stallion where she slipped into place in front of Regina. When she was safely seated, she felt her lover's arms around her waist pulling her into a strong hug and a sideways kiss. "Mmmm... I love you, Reggie," she mumbled, closing her eyes and enjoying the sweet contact.

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'Well, that's good to know... I love you, too, Stell,' Regina said from a million miles away.

"Wh- wh- whut? Whut?" Stella croaked, slowly coming back to the surface. Looking around, she realized at once that she had dreamt the whole thing. She wasn't at the beach north of Bay City, she was still inside the cozy den under the desk. It wasn't 1985 and she wasn't a lonely nine-year old, it was present day and she was a thirty-seven year old woman with the world's most gorgeous girlfriend - and a lower body that had gone numb all the way up to her navel. "Oh, Gawd..." she croaked when she tried to get herself out of the cramped position.

She eventually fell to her right, bumping down on the plush carpet right in front of a pair of shoes she knew quite well. "Reggie?" she croaked, looking up at the twenty feet tall woman who was towering above her.

"Who else? Maybe... Laura... hmmm?" Regina said and winked several times at her blonde companion.

"Oh, I, uh... I said that out loud?"

Crouching down, Regina helped Stella up into a sitting position, but as soon as she let go, the rag doll collapsed again, this time falling backwards. "Yep, you did... hmmm. How long have you been sitting in there, Stell?"

"Ever since we spoke on the phone. When was that?"

"An hour and a bit ago."

"Shit..."

Regina chuckled and quickly took off her trench coat to move more freely. With a heave-ho, she reached under Stella's back and numb legs and simply lifted her off the carpet.

"Ohhhh," Stella breathed, leaning into Regina's soft chest. "I love you, Snookums... you're my knight in a white gown..."

"Uh-huh? I look great in white. Anyway, I came by 'cos I wanted to surprise you, but when I peeked in, I couldn't see you anywhere," Regina said and deposited Stella on their couch, "but the lights were still on so I got kinda worried. By the way, who's Laura?"

"A dear friend from school... I was back there, Reggie!" Stella said and grabbed hold of Regina's blazer jacket with both hands, crumbling the delicate fabric in her strong grip. "I was back and it was horrible! Horrible! HOR-rible, Reggie!"

"I believe you... ugh... let go... let go, Stell... this is an original Bruno Lanier! Pleeeeease!"

*

CHAPTER 1

The March sun was shining, the coffee was hot, the donuts had chocolate frosting and the pictures in the scrapbook that documented the revived modeling career of Regina Harrison were hi-gloss and just plain ol' sensational. All in all, Stella Starr was happy with life.

Whistling through her teeth, she put a tray with her coffee mug and a plate with the two donuts down on the low table and immediately jumped up into the couch. Folding her legs up underneath her, she opened the scrapbook to the first page before taking the mug in her left hand and the first donut in her right.

The opening page was an ad Regina had done for Pegasus Jewelry. She was supposed to promote a gold necklace, but the only thing Stella didn't look at was the actual piece of jewelry - Regina's cheekbones were so sharply defined, her eyes were so blue and her entire appearance was so husky and smoldering that all Stella could do was to let out a wolf call and a throaty moan. "Yeah, baby... you still gotmmff itmmff," she mumbled around a bite of donut.

After taking a sip of her coffee, she flipped the page and nearly fell off the couch at the sight of Regina's endless right leg promoting a well-known brand of nylons. "Yeahhhhh...." she breathed, running her fingers up the picture of the thigh.

The next photo was one of Regina in gold lamé and a black top hat. The ad was supposedly promoting a bar of soap, but that wasn't what Stella had in mind when she saw the picture. "Oh-hoooooo, Reggie... niiiice..."

The final photos in the first batch were screen captures from a TV ad promoting the Bay City Florists Online Delivery Services in which Regina - in a stylish pantsuit and high heels - played a businesswoman who was given a bouquet of roses from Random Guy who seemed to be very enamored with her character. The company's tagline was '*Bay City Florists, flowers create magic,*' and the sequence of screencaps showed very clearly what kind of magic had been created as Regina and Random Guy ended up walking away hand in hand. "Ugh... don't like that one... nuh-uh," was Stella's only comment before flipping the page to the next image, a promotional headshot of Regina.

Just as she took a big bite out of her chocolate frosted donut to get the image of Regina with some guy out of her mind, the door burst open and the real Regina Harrison stormed into the office of the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency.

Regina was wearing regular blue jeans and a maroon shirt over a black tank, but the six-foot-one frame of the dark-haired, graceful woman seemed far more agitated than usual, and at first, she couldn't even speak.

When she did, Stella wished she hadn't: "Stell, somebody's broken into your Pacer!"

There was no reaction from Stella during the first second after the awful announcement; the second second didn't bring anything either, but by the time the third second rolled past, the blonde investigator let out a fire alarm-like scream that threatened to blow out every single one of the windows. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-" she screamed, jumping up from the couch.

Regina immediately clapped her hands over her ears, but that meant she couldn't stop Stella from tearing through the office and storming out the door in her short-sleeved red-and-green checkered flannel shirt, her baby blue jogging pants - that had a hole on the right knee - and her Tasmanian Devil socks. "-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA... my- my- my- c- c- car... my Pacer! Oh no, my Pacer! What did they do those fee... fi... fo... fu... miserable rotten ba... bas... criminals?!"

On her way over to her beloved brown AMC Pacer, she had no problem figuring out what had happened - the hatchback was wide open. She quickly came to a screeching halt at the car and began to hop, skip and jump around, alternating between her left and right leg. Her eyes were nearly bugging out on stalks, her face was pale except for two red blotches on her cheeks, and the muscles on her neck stood out very clearly, creating a trunk-like effect on her otherwise so slender throat.

Regina came up to stand behind her friend and lover but decided it would be best for all involved if she waited for the volcanic activity to blow over before she attempted a hug.

Instead, she looked at the lock on the hatchback. "It wasn't jimmed, it was smashed open," she said, leaning in to study the completely ruined cylinder. "Oh, whoever it was left us a little gift... he dumped a plastic bag in the trunk. Or is that yours, Stell?"

A jerky shake of the head made Regina grunt and look back at the strange, small plastic bag. "Odd. Really odd. Okay, other than that, it doesn't look like anything's been stolen. I'm gonna go in and take the keys, Stell... okay? Stell, please don't go nuclear on me while I'm away... okay?"

A jerky nod made Regina hurry back to the office to get the keys.

Two minutes later, Regina unlocked the driver's side door and peeked inside, mindful not to touch the steering wheel in case the burglar had left fingerprints. "Naw, everything looks like it should here, too... the eight-track player is still there... of course, nobody in their right mind would take that. Never mind."

Regina closed the door and crossed over to the passenger side, casting a sideways glance at Stella who still hadn't calmed down. After opening the other door, she bent over and peeked into the glove box. "Kenny Rogers, The Carpenters, The Osmonds, Jackson Five... no, the cartridges are all there, Stell. Really weird. Looks like he went through all that trouble just to dump a plastic bag..."

When Regina came back to the rear of the Pacer, Stella had cooled down enough for a hug, so she pulled the fiery blonde into a crushing, comforting, soothing embrace.

"My car," Stella croaked, sniffing deeply while looking at the ruined lock.

"I know," Regina cooed, patting the back of Stella's head.

Stella sighed deeply and moved away from Regina, though not before placing a loving kiss on the tall woman's lips. "I came in at six thirty because I wanted to do some paperwork... I didn't hear a thing so it must have happened really quickly. What do you think he left us in the bag?"

"No idea, Stell. You wanna find out?"

"Yeah... hang on... I'll get the oven mitts and the sausage tongs..."

Wearing an ice hockey goalie mask, a long windbreaker she had put on backwards and oven mitts that reached up past her elbows, Stella inched closer to the Pacer with the sausage tongs out ahead of her like it was a mine detector.

When she finally arrived at the car, she used the sausage tongs to give the suspicious-looking plastic bag a little push and was relieved to see that nothing disgusting came out of it. "Well, he didn't use it to take a dump," she said behind the mask.

"Ew, Stell... why'dya have to say something like that," Regina said and took a hasty step back from the brown car.

Stella chuckled darkly behind the goalie mask but soon sobered. "Sorry... oh, to hell with it, I'm just gonna... give... it a little... shake..." she said and pushed the plastic bag around the carpet in the trunk.

"Oh... there's a note," she said when what looked like a luggage tag slipped out of the plastic bag, "something's written on it... and it's bloody..."

"Bloody?" Regina said and pushed her way past Stella to peek in.

"Yup... bloody. Can you see what the name is?"

"Mmmmm... no. Not really... looks French..."

"I'll give it another little pu- Cheese... oh... flip...!"

Stella had finally managed to give the plastic bag a strong enough push to empty it out onto the upholstery. Instead of the bubblegum wrapper, the spent condom or the ketchup and mustard-

smears hot dog tray she had expected, she and Regina were looking at seven rocks - and not just any rocks; seven expertly cut diamonds that glittered like mad in the spring sunshine.

"Oooo-kay..." Stella said as she raised the goalie mask to get a full view of the diamonds. "Reggie... you know a lot more about that stuff than I do... do they look real to you?"

Grunting, Regina reached into the trunk of the Pacer to pick up a rock. She held it up against the blue sky and marveled at the way the colors and light played in the many little facets. "Uh-huh!"

"Oooo-kay... well, we can't leave them out here," Stella said and rubbed her chin. The oven mitts made the gesture quite difficult so she took off her entire protective equipment and ran her hands through her dirty-blond haystack of hair that had been flattened by the goalie mask. "Reggie, pack 'em up and... Reggie? Reggie, snap out of it, will you? You can gawk at those rocks when we get 'em into the office... Reggie!"

Regina was far too busy with admiring the diamonds to listen to her shorter friend, but she certainly felt the index finger poking her rather rudely in the gut. "I beg your pardon!" she said, rubbing her side.

"You're pardoned," Stella said, scooping the rest of the diamonds back into the bag. "And while you're at it, I need that rock you're holding... Reggie? Reggie!"

"Well, what?"

"Rock. Bag. Now," Stella said and held up the bag.

"Oh, all right." - Sighing, Regina put her favored rock into the bag and watched with a look of unbridled desire as Stella wrapped it up and put it inside one of the oven mitts to keep it safe.

"Reggie?"

"Yeah?"

"I thought you only looked at me like that," Stella said with a pout.

"Yeah, but you're my little diamond, honey... diamond in the rough, of course."

Stella chuckled out loud, but the sound got stuck in her throat when she looked at the sorry state of her car. "Hmmm. Yeah. You big, lovable goof."

"But of course!" Regina said and flicked her hair over her shoulder where it obviously landed in a perfect cascade. To underline her words, she turned around and cocked her hips in Stella's direction, thus performing the first stance of her much-loved Too Cool For Words routine. "No?" she said and put her pinkie between her lips.

Stella rolled her eyes and went back to her beloved car. "Reggie, why don't you go in and try to call Inspector Moynes... these rocks gotta come from somewhere. I'll put the bloody luggage tag into one of those fancy evidence bags I bought a stack of at the flea market... and, uh... I better ask Billy if he has room for my old girl. Can't leave her out here like this," she said as she caressed the old bodywork around the tail-lights.

The request was answered by a little snicker and a pat on the rear. "I thought you only looked at me like that," Regina said, echoing Stella's earlier words.

"Reggie..."

"I know, I know. Call the Inspector," Regina said and shrugged in her patented can't-give-a-hoot-fashion. With a flurry, she spun around and walked inside, remembering to slam her hips left and right in her favored model-walk as she crossed the parking lot - though the look was spoiled somewhat by the oven mitt containing the diamonds.

Stella observed the slamming hips and drew a pretty picture in her mind, quietly giving herself a little physical pick-me-up even though she had more important things to deal with.

Fifteen minutes later, Stella came back into the office and closed the door behind her. "Billy wasn't in. There was a note on the door saying that he'd be back tomorrow. I couldn't get the hatchback to close by itself so I've jammed it shut with some rope that's attached to the jack and the spare tire," she said and moved over to the table where she'd had such a good time earlier.

One of the donuts had fallen onto the floor in the earlier excitement and had deposited all its chocolate frosting on the carpet. "Shoot... and I'll bet my coffee's gone cold, too... yep. Uh-huh. Of course. Why not. Double shoot."

Regina was sitting at her desk with her legs resting on the corner like always. When Stella came over to her, she waved at her boss, friend and bedmate with her bare feet, a gesture that was repeated with a single Howdy by a rather filthy Tasmanian Devil.

"They must be insanely busy today," Regina said, holding her hand over the microphone in the receiver, "I've been on hold the whole time."

"Do they still use the theme from Knight Rider?"

"No, it's a new one. I know it but I can't place it... here, listen," Regina said and held up the receiver.

Stella quickly bent down and put the old-fashioned telephone to her ear. "Hmmm, you're right... that's a TV oldie... but which one... it's definitely from the 1980s. Bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummm... hmmm. I gotta think. Hey, you want some coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"I do. I only got half a mug before," Stella mumbled and moved over to the small table behind the door, constantly humming the theme song in her head.

While the coffee machine was blubbing merrily, Stella moved over to her desk to turn on their laptop. After writing the log-on code, she took the evidence bag with the bloody tag and put it on the desktop. "Waitaminute... is it Spenser For Hire? No. Hmmm."

The challenge called for all the brain power she had, so she shuffled around the desk to her chair where she had enough peace and quiet to rack her brain to come up with the right title. "It's not Kojak or Streets Of San Francisco... no. Baretta? No. Rockford Files? No. They're all from the 1970s. Hmmm. Hmmm!"

She shot up from the chair and began to pace back and forth, using one hand to rub her brow while clenching and unclenching the other behind her back. "Riptide? No. The Incredible Hulk? No... another 1970s show."

At the other desk, Regina let out a chuckle at her friend's antics.

"Jake and The Fatman? No. Airwolf? No... that's very recognizable. Is it even a TV theme?"

"Gotta be," Regina said and held up the receiver, "it's too cheesy to be from a movie."

"Oh, you never know with the 1980s... that was a colorful decade," Stella mumbled under her breath, remembering the recent dream she'd had where she was nine years old.

By the time the coffee machine let out a shrill, electronic Ding, Stella had nearly worn a hole in the carpet. Growling at her inability to connect with the theme song, she strode over to the little table and poured herself a full mug of dark, hot coffee. "Miami Vice...?" she said around a sip.

"No way. Not even close. I watched that show religiously," Regina said from the other desk.

"Hmmm," Stella said and moved over to the laptop. Shrugging, she found the search engine they always used and entered a few keywords. "Hmmm... listen to this article, Reggie. Diamond trader robbed in broad daylight. In the artisan district, the forty-two year old diamond trader Avi Friedman was held at gunpoint and robbed of a briefcase containing cut diamonds at a value of nearly one million dollars. Yikes."

"Friedman... that's not the name that's on the bloody note, though."

"No... okay, here's another article," Stella said and clicked on the next link. "Case of armed robbery of diamond trader breaks open, arrests made. Two men in their late thirties, Jules Foch and Vincent Charlebois arrested in connection with the armed robbery of diamond trader Avi

Friedman. Further man wanted for questioning. Police are asking for information from the public. Hmmm. That was more than a month ago."

"Foch?" Regina said and swung her legs off the corner of the desk. "Could that be it, Stell?"

Grunting, Stella took the evidence bag and held it so she could see the name. "Mmmm-yeah... mmmm-no... F-a-u-c-something-something-something. It looks like it, though it doesn't use the same spelling as in the article."

"Doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"True. Any luck with the Inspector?"

"Nope," Regina said and held out the receiver where the cheesy theme was still playing.

"21 Jump Street? No. Ohwhatthehellisthatsong?!" Stella said and threw her hands in the air.

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Twenty minutes later, Regina was no nearer getting through to Inspector Moynes and Stella was no nearer to finding the title of the song despite going through every online music and television database she could think of.

"I can't stand that Muzak anymore... I give up," Regina said and slammed the receiver down on the phone.

"Can't say that I blame you, Reggie... bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummm. Bum-bu-bum-bum-"

"Stel-l-l?"

"Uh-huh, Snookums?"

"Stop humming!" - Spinning around, Regina took an elastic band and fired it slingshot-style at her wild-haired friend.

"Sorry!" Stella squealed while she ducked to get out of the way of the missile that only made it two-thirds of the way there.

"No, you're not!"

"Iz too!"

"Iz not!"

"Iz too!"

SCLHIP-POW!

"Ha!" Stella cried, peeking over the edge of her desk. "Missed! Again!"

"Oh, you! I didn't miss, I was aiming at the desk!"

"You didn't hit that either, Reggie... you wanna borrow my glasses?"

"No thanks. If I offer a cease-fire, will you come over here and give me a kiss?"

Predictably, Stella was out of her chair before Regina had even finished saying the S-sound in 'kiss'. The blonde investigator strode across the plush carpet and leaned down to meet her friend's friendly lips halfway there. "I will, Snookums," she said once they separated.

"Good. So, you wanna go back to the case we've stumbled over?"

Stella kept standing with her hands on the armrests of Regina's swivel-chair. She had a look in her eyes that showed she was thinking very, very hard about it, but she ultimately nodded and leaned down to give her lover another brief kiss. "We better," she said on her way back to her own desk.

Regina smiled and put her legs back up on the corner of her desk. "All right. What do we actually have here, Stell? One," - she started counting off on her fingers - "we have a bag containing seven cut diamonds. Two, we have a foreign name on a bloody luggage tag. Three, we have a news article that gives us the info that a million dollars worth of cut rocks were robbed from a trader... where's the connection?"

"Where's the connection... and number Four, where's the connection to us? Why did they end up in my Pacer? The rotten, miserable, good-fer-nothin' so-and-so..." Stella grumbled, taking notes in her notepad.

"The name on the luggage tag isn't the same as the trader, so it could be one of the robbers or a shady customer."

"Yeah," Stella said and put down her ball point pen. Leaning back in her chair, she rubbed her chin several times and began to tweak her right earlobe. "Reggie... do you... nah."

"What?"

"Nothing."

When Stella didn't continue, Regina shrugged and took her own notepad to scribble down a few thoughts and ideas.

"Reggie, could it be... nah."

"Stell! Will ya get to the point!"

"CoulditbetheFrenchmafia?" Stella said, speaking so fast that it came out as a single word. She had barely spoken the sentence before she ducked her head down between her shoulders and began to squint at all the windows.

"The French Mafia?"

"Yes!" Stella whispered. "They're a rough bunch. They have a hundred-and-ten different ways to make you talk, you know... water torture... they make you drink a lot of wine but won't allow you to soften it with water or go to the little girls' room... they put burning bamboo sprouts under your fingernails-" she whispered, slowly ducking so far down she ended up with her nose being level with the edge of the desk.

"If it's the French Mafia, don't you think they'll have burning baguettes instead?"

"-make you suffer through a load of foreign movies with subtitles... hey... baguettes? I'm trying to be serious here, Reggie!"

"Uh-huh? The French Mafia, yeah right. That's such a stereotype, Stell... like every Asian person knows martial arts. You've been watching too many movies. Just because the names are foreign doesn't mean they're with the Mafia. They could be kindergarten teachers for all we know."

"Sure, but... kindergarten teachers don't usually rob diamond traders at gunpoint..." Stella said and scratched her eyebrows.

"It was an example, Stell," Regina said flatly.

"Oh... okay. I knew that."

"Uh-huh?"

"Oh, we gotta do something!" Stella said and jumped up from her chair. Reaching into her bottom drawer, she found a small, brown digital wristwatch that she put on. With a sigh, she pressed one of the buttons and watched the digital readout come alive.

"What's that?"

"A Dictaphone watch."

"When ya buy that?"

"Couple of weeks ago. Hush, it's ready," Stella said and stood up straight - it only lasted for two seconds, then she hunched over again to be a smaller target in case Mafia assassins had already lined up outside the office building. "My name is Stella Starr and I'm a Private Investigator. I am recording this message out of my own free will. If I'm to disappear or d- d- die before this case is

wrapped up, I would like to... to... no, that's not right. Uh... okay... if I'm not to survive this assignment..."

"Oh, Stell," Regina groaned and buried her face in her hands.

Ten minutes of Stella's ramblings was all Regina could take, so she reached for the phone and tried calling the police station again. *'Perhaps I should call the asylum instead...?'* she thought and looked at her very blonde friend who was acting out some of her past history to record it for posterity. *'Nah... she's too cute for that.'*

The awful Muzak started again, but unlike her first attempts, it was mercifully short. An electronic click proved that she had finally reached her destination.

'You've reached the Bay City Police Department, First Precinct. How can I help you?' a female voice said at the other end of the line.

"Hi, this is Regina Harrison from the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. I need to speak with Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes, please," Regina said and found her notepad.

'I'm sorry, Inspector Moynes isn't available, Miss Harrison.'

"Oh... all right. Do you have anyone there who worked with her on the Avi Friedman diamond robbery case?"

'One moment, please...'

"No problem."

Regina could hear the secretary mumble a few words in the background, but they were too muffled to make out.

'If you'll hold for two minutes, you can speak to Detective Faucher. He worked with Inspector Moynes.'

"I'll hold," Regina said and put her hand over the receiver. "Stell... Stell! While you're freaking out, I'm actually working here!"

Stella stood up straight and stopped acting out an incident that had seen her accidentally dent the fender of her father's Plymouth when she was twelve years old. "Whut?"

"I'm earning my wages, Stell. I can't get hold of Mary-Jane but I'm about to talk to one of the detectives who worked with her on the case."

"Oh... that's good. Just keep it up and there's a strong chance you'll end up as a halfway decent investigator one day."

Regina swept her legs off the desk, spun around and shot Stella a dark, insulted glare, but she couldn't hold it for long - then she stuck out her tongue and waggled it at her friend.

"Ah, you know I love you, Reggie! I love you so much the skin between my big toe and the next one itches when I think of ya," Stella said with a snicker. Turning off the recording device in her wristwatch, she shuffled over to her chair and picked up the phone, ready to talk to the detective whenever the contact was established.

When the detective finally came to the phone, he only had time to say, '*Hello, this is Detective Calvin Faucher,*' before Stella's eyes popped wide open and her jaw became slack.

With trembling fingers, she slammed her own receiver down on the phone and jumped up from the chair. In oh point two, she was at Regina's desk where she checked the name on the bloody luggage tag - 'F-a-u-c-h-e-r.'

Yelping, Stella tore the receiver from Regina's hands and slammed that down as well.

"What the F-?!" Regina said, nearly falling off her chair.

"-Frenchman! A French detective! He's a spy! An agent sent in to eliminate us before we can dig too deep in the mysterious and quite frankly scary case of the stolen diamonds. Reggie! Don't you understand that if you had spoken to him at length, he would have tracked down our position and sent out an extermination team to exterminate us?"

"He didn't have to... I told the secretary that I was from the Harrison-Sta-"

"OH NO! No, no, no, no, no, we're gonna die, Reggie! They're gonna send one of those assassination squads and w- w- w- wipe us out! I don't wanna die, Reggie! I look horrible in a dark suit and with my arms crossed over my chest and a hole in my forehead and I especially look horrible in a lined coffin where there's no room to breathe or even crack a fart and-and-and-"

"Stell-"

"And we're gonna hafta find our passports and pack our suitcases and leave at once... oh no... I don't think I've kept my passport updated... I haven't been abroad for a decade and even then I was only down to Tijuana with a girlfriend and that was only for a weekend 'cos she wanted me to smoke pot laced with some other gunk but I didn't wanna and-and-and she made goo-goo eyes at a guy while we were down there... can you believe that? But it was such a flop that I never saw her again and I cried myself asleep for a week but I was so much younger then and I wanna grow old and I don't wanna die!"

"What in the world has gotten into you today, Stell...?" Regina said and rose from her chair. "Are you on some kind of medication? You didn't drink a fermented cherry cola or something, did you?"

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring.

"It's them!" Stella shrieked and jumped a foot in the air. "The assassination squad! The extermination team! They've found us! They've found us! Goodbye, Reggie! I want you to know that I loved you!"

With that, Stella sprinted away from a gawking Regina, threw herself down on the carpet and dove under the couch. It was a snug fit, but by sucking in her gut she could pass under the lower edge. Once she was fully under, she had more room to breathe.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring.

"Stell, I don't know where your cell is! Stella?" - no reply.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"I knew this would happen one day... she's had one Meaty Mama too many... she's snapped..." Regina groaned and began to look around for the telephone.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Stella, I don't know where your phone is, for cryin' out loud!"

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Mumble, mumble, mumble!"

"Whassat?"

"In my vest pocket!" Stella said, briefly popping her head out from underneath the couch. In the minute she had been down there, she had assembled quite an impressive collection of dust bunnies in her hair.

Tweedle-deedle-ring-ring-tweedle-deedle-ring-ring!

"Okay," Regina said and hurried over to the hallstand by the door. "And Stell, you need a new ringtone. The one you have now just gotta go... Hello, this is Regina Harrison?" she said after she had found the phone in the pocket.

Mumble, mumble.

"Oh, hi, Inspector Moynes. I've been trying to reach you all morn-"

"OOOOOOOOOH!" Stella howled underneath the couch.

Mumble, mumble?

"No, that was Stella... she's a bit beside herself today."

Mumble, mumble...?

"Mmmm-yeah, that's a good way to describe it," Regina said and looked at the gray-haired Stella who quickly popped back inside.

Mumble, mumble.

Chuckling at the Inspector's words, Regina walked across the carpet to sit down at her own desk. Once she was there, she put her legs up on the corner and made herself comfortable. "Yeah, that's very true, Inspector."

Mumble, mumble.

"Well, we wanted to ask if there has been any recent development in the Friedman diamond robbery case."

Mumble, mumble?

"Yes, it's come up in one of our investigations."

Mumble, mumble?

"Yes. Sort-of."

Mumble, mumble... mumble, mumble, mumble.

"Okay. Well, it was worth a shot." - Regina leaned forward and took her notepad. In it, she wrote that Inspector Moynes hadn't made any progress in the case based on the simple fact that the two men who had been arrested weren't talking.

Mumble, mumble?

"I'm really sorry, Inspector... I don't think Stella can talk now."

From underneath the couch, the aforementioned investigator crept closer to the edge and stuck out her nose and glasses. "What's it about?" she whispered.

"I'll ask," Regina said with her hand across the little hole where the microphone was on the cell. "Inspector? May I ask what it's about?"

Mumble, mumble.

"Okay. Hang on," Regina said and covered the microphone again. "Stell, it's the info you requested about the father of your old friend from school."

"Oh!" Stella said and tried to scoot out from under the couch. Bumbling and fumbling, she - inevitably - got hung up on the lower edge and began to moan and groan while she tried to get herself free. The moaning and groaning soon grew to such a level that it became quite embarrassing to listen to.

When Stella let rip with a juicy groan, Regina shot to her feet and hurried over to the couch to help with the extraction. "Stell... Stell, listen to me... you need to get your head out first... yeah, that's it... get your head out first... then you gotta suck it in... don't panic, we'll get you out... you came in so you can come out..."

Groan... moan. Groan! Moan, groan! Ooooh! Moan! Groan!

Mumble, mumble?!

"Uh, no, Inspector... it's not quite what it sounds like," Regina said into the cell phone.

With an echoing PLOPP! Stella finally broke free of the underside of the couch and rolled out into the middle of the floor where she ended up flat on her back with her hands out to the sides, panting like crazy. Her short-sleeved red-and-green checkered flannel shirt and her baby blue jogging pants were covered in dust bunnies, and she was holding a four-month old pretzel in her hand. "That wasn't one of my best ideas," she croaked, wiping her nose and face free of the gray bunnies.

"Ya think?" Regina mumbled under her breath, sticking out her tongue and the cell phone so Stella could finally get to talk to the Inspector.

Stella blew her much, much taller lover a little kiss and took the phone. "Hi, Mary-Jane, this is Stella," she said, putting her free hand under her head and snuggled down on the plush carpet.

Now it was Regina's turn to groan. Rolling her eyes, she knelt down next to her prone friend and began to remove the dust bunnies one at a time, remembering to tickle the unpredictable investigator at random intervals just to keep her on her toes.

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It took most of the afternoon for Stella to calm down from her paranoia, but even after mellowing out, she preferred to bend over each time she went past the windows - which was a bit unfortunate considering she was setting the coffee table for a quick afternoon snack while Regina was in the bathroom.

Tip-toeing across the carpet carrying the coffee pot and a bag from Zeligman's, Stella came to a full stop at the first window. Hunching over, she flew forward for three paces and then walked regularly for the next three. The following three paces were taken at full speed, and then she walked regularly for the final three.

"Coffee's ready, Reggie!" she said and poured the hot liquid into their two mugs.

'Almost there! Two minutes!'

"Uh-huh!" Stella said and opened the paper bag from their favorite bakery. She had sent Regina down there to get something they could both enjoy, but the further she got into the bag, the more the contents stood in opposition to her expectations and her sweet tooth. "Jewish biscuits, vanilla butter cookies, yay! Bran digestives... diet cookies, low-fat biscuits... eww... aw, hell."

Behind the grumbling investigator, Regina came out from the bathroom and clicked off the light with her elbow. It didn't take her long to notice the sour look on Stella's face, and she knew exactly what was wrong. "You don't like what I've picked, Stell?"

"Mmmm-yeah, well... bran digestives?"

"They're good for you."

"You know, that's what my Mom always said when she tried to hook me up with some guy," Stella said and put a holed vanilla butter cookie around her pinkie. "Anyway, at least you got Jewish biscuits and these wonderful things," she continued, taking a bite of the cookie.

When it proved to be as sugar-free as the others, her face practically melted and she let out a groaning cough that sent crumbs all over the place. "What's..." - *cough* - "this...?" - *cough, cough* - "This ain't-" - *cough, COUGH, cough* - "a vanilla butter cookie?" - *cough, COUGH, COUGH!*

"They're all sugar-free, Stell."

Suffering from an acute state of shock, Stella drew a sharp breath to speak her mind but didn't stop to think that she was nursing a mouthful of crumbs. Half a dozen of the little, scratchy buggers immediately went down the wrong pipe, a fact that was underlined by the way her face turned red, then white, then blue, and the way her entire body spasmed and jerked around.

"Regg-" - *cough-cough-HACK-splutter-cough-hack-COUGH-splutter-SPLUTTER-hack-cough-COUGH! COUGH!-cough-SPLUTTER-hack* - "-eggie! Are ya trying to-" - *COUGH, HACK, COUGH* - "kill me?" - *SPLUTTER!*

Regina threw herself onto the couch and folded her legs up underneath her. Offering Stella a slightly mischievous two-hundred watt smile, she took a Jewish biscuit and bit it in half.

"They're great. I like 'em," she said after gulping it down.

"I can't believe you said that..." - *cough* - "I know for a fact you taste excellently-"

"Stell!" Regina said with a groan.

"Sorry, that you have excellent" - *cough, cough* - "taste... but ya gotta be" - *splutter, cough* - "kiddin' when you say you like 'em!"

Regina leaned forward and took two bran digestives. "I like 'em!" she said with a grin as she popped the first into her mouth. "Mmmmmmmh! Oh yeah, delish!"

"You weird... you very weird," Stella mumbled under her breath. "I need an O. I'm sure I got a roll of O's somewhere around here... O... O-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh, where are you? O?"

She looked into the top drawer of her desk: "No O." - The bottom drawer: "No O. Where are my O's?" - The top drawer of Regina's desk: "No O here." - The bottom drawer: "No O here either! Reggie, did you eat my O's... nah, scratch that."

"O...?" Stella said, running her hands through her wild mop of hair. "O...? O! O, ya gotta be here somewhere!"

Walking with determined steps, she quickly crossed the distance to the cupboard behind the door: "No O... whaddahell?"

Stella spun around and strode up to the row of metal filing cabinets that formed the other wall of their office. "O... O... O... a... b... c... d... O... O... O... e... f... g... O... O... O... No O," she said as she pulled out each drawer in succession.

"Have ya thought about checking under, Gee I dunno... O?" Regina said with a wicked gleam in her eye.

"Oh, ha ha... HA, flippin' ha. And another HA! Of course I've thought of checking under O, Miss I-Think-I-Got-All-The-Best-Ideas-'Cos-I-Got-A-Halfway-Decent-Head-On-My-Shoulders! What do you think I'm doing here?" Stella said and pulled out the metal drawer labeled 'O.' - "... ahhh. My O's!" she continued gleefully as she finally found a brand new pack of Oreos.

She quickly tore open the pack and took out the first cookie. After sniffing it to verify its authenticity, she opened her yap and threw the entire treat inside without bothering to twist off the lid. "MMMMpf! Ommmpf! Lovemmmmpf mymmmpf O'smmmpf!"

"Uh-huh?" Regina said and matched Stella's eating binge by taking on a whole diet cookie at once.

Munching like a madwoman, Stella bounded up into the couch and snuggled down next to her best friend. "Ommmpf?" she said, holding up the pack.

"No thank you, Stell. They're not good for me."

Munch, munch, GULP! - "Yeah, right... how can you say that with a straight face when you're eatin' those tasteless things? You know what?"

"No?"

"I'll have another O just to compensate," Stella said as she took the next Oreo from the pack and twisted the lid off in time-honored fashion. After making short work of the creamy center, she popped both wings into her mouth and chewed on them in a rather noisy manner.

RRRRRINNNNGGGGG!

"OH, PHARCK'M!" Stella growled and smacked her forehead so hard her haystack flew in all directions. "Alwaysmmmpf whenmmmpf I'mmmmpf eatingmmmpf!"

Snickering, Regina clawed Stella's thigh and rose from the couch. "I'll get it, Stell."

*

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CHAPTER 2

The next morning dawned bright and sunny but Regina and Stella were too busy following the ancient scrolls of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, to notice.

An hour later, it was still bright and sunny and now Stella had plenty of time to notice. After pulling her bedroom curtains aside, she opened the window and took a deep breath of the clean, crisp March air. A ray of sunshine caressed her bare skin in much the same way Regina had done earlier, and she closed her eyes and let out a long, sated "Ahhhhhhhhh..." that showed that her internal batteries had been fully recharged.

Turning back to the bed, she let her eyes glide up and down the bare thigh that was visible just beyond the edge of the blanket. The grin she wore was real and it only grew wider when she sat down and ran an index finger up the thigh and in under the blanket.

"I thought you'd had enough?" Regina husked, clawing Stella's bare back.

"Of you? Never."

"Awww... thank you."

"Thank *you*, Snookums," Stella said and leaned down to give Regina a sweet good-morning kiss.

Regina reached up and pulled her lover down towards her. With a cute little sigh, she and Stella snuggled up close and were satisfied with simply sharing the same space. "Stell, I have an idea about the diamonds," Regina said as she ran a finger across Stella's bare stomach.

"Yeah? Spill it, girl."

"I think we should contact Avi Friedman and tell him we have some information that we need to deliver face to face. If he agrees to meet with us, we could ask him about the name on the bloody luggage tag."

"But not give him back his diamonds?"

"Not at first, no," Regina said and gently touched the tip of Stella's nose. "Don't forget, it said in one of the online articles that he was strangely reluctant to help the police, or even give the press what they needed to print sketches of the robbers. If we sense he's hiding something, I think it's best to give the diamonds to Mary-Jane... if not, we could give them back to him."

"Hmmm. Okay. I can go with that. That's for a little later, though."

"Well, I was going to do it now--"

"No. Later," Stella said and began to nibble on Regina's throat.

"Okay... muuuuuch later."

It was **still** bright and sunny an hour and a half later when Regina and Stella came out of the apartment complex with a spring in their step and a silly song on their lips.

Stella was wearing red tennis shoes, purple Capris, a blue Rokkstar Street Tuff T-shirt and her yellow vest. Regina was more elegant in dark gray jeans and a long-sleeved, ivory Lana é Mara blouse from the summer collection that had premiered only a few days before - but despite their differences, they looked fabulous together.

Regina quickly unlocked the SLK and helped her lover down into the dreaded bucket seats. Once the blonde investigator was safely strapped in and the roof had been lowered, the path was clear for the events of the day.

"Sweet Chicky-Dee, I got the munchies... there's gotta be something worth eating in here," Stella growled and opened the glove box. After a little rummaging around, she found a bag of Hot Chili tortilla chips. "Oooh! Hot Chili!" she said and dug in even though the bag had already been opened for a week or more.

"Stell... we've only just had breakfast... how on EARTH can you eat tortilla chips now?!"

"Watch me, Reggie." - Soon, she was chewing on a mouthful of tortilla chips and she made sure Regina was able to hear her crunch them. "Want one?" she said around a couple of chews.

"No, thank you... ugh," Regina said as she started the engine and reversed out of the parking space.

Traffic was slow so Stella had plenty of time to drive Regina off the wall with her incessant crunching - and she did. The number of dark looks she received increased exponentially as they trickled through the boulevards and connecting streets to get to the Harrison-Starr offices.

Crunch, crunch, CRUNCH, crunch.

"Stell-"

CRUNCH, crunch, CRUNCH, crunch.

"D'ya think you-"

Crunch, CRUNCH, crunch, crunch.

"Would you mind stop-"

CRUNCH, crunch, CRUNCH, crunch.

"-ping? You're driving me-"

Crunch, crunch, CRUNCH, crunch.

"Nuts!"

Crunch, crunch - "Whassat, Reggie? These things are so loud I can't hear a darn thing." - *CRUNCH, crunch.*

"How many do you have left, Stell?" Regina said in a voice that bordered on the hysterical.

CRUNCH, crunch - "Not many." - *crunch.*

"Would you mind giving it a rest?"

Crunch, crunch - "Huh?" - *CRUNCH, CRUNCH.*

"Cut it OUT!" Regina howled, grabbed the bag of tortilla chips and threw it in the back seat.

Snickering, Stella blew her slightly agitated lover a little kiss while she dusted off her fingers and her mouth. "Well, there's no need to go all Ellen Ripley on me. Why didn't you just say so?"

Regina's lips moved but nary a sound came out - perhaps for the better, judging by the glares she occasionally sent her wild-haired companion.

Ten minutes later, they were stuck in the traffic jam from hell. The boulevard they were on was bumper-to-bumper with scores of cars, taxis, trucks and buses of every size ahead of them, behind them, to their left and to their right - and nothing moved.

"Pfffff," Regina said and turned off the engine. She considered standing up to take a look, but she couldn't be bothered.

As always, the distance from thought to action was shorter for Stella, so she simply unbuckled her seat belt and stood up. "Naw..." she said with a shrug as she shielded her eyes to see better. "Metal boxes everywhere. Out in the really, really far distance, I can see an ambulance and a cop car. Must be an accident."

"Probably. You have your cell?"

"Yeah," Stella said and patted her pocket.

"I think we need to go ahead with the plan," Regina said and sat up straight. "What if you called Avi Friedman's office and asked him for a meeting?"

"Good plan, Reggie... uh... what's his number?"

"You're the boss, boss," Regina said with an impossibly wide grin that earned her an immediate swat on the thigh.

"Hello, Mr. Friedman?" Stella said five minutes later after trying four different directories. "This is Stella Starr calling for the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. We believe we have information pertaining to your stolen diamonds and we want to ask if you're interested in meeting us later today at our offices on Carter Boulevard. And by us, I mean myself and my business associate Regina Harrison."

Mumble, mumble.

"Oh... all right, Kazuki's on Thirty-third Street?" Stella said out loud while looking at Regina.

Grabbing the cue, Regina leaned over and found their map book inside the glove box. After a bit of leafing one way, then the other, then back to the first way, she found the street and how to get there. Nodding, she gave Stella a thumbs-up.

"Works for us, Mr. Friedman," Stella said into the phone. "At noon?"

Mumble, mumble.

"At one, noted."

Mumble, mumble?

"No, Sir, no..." Stella said and shifted uncomfortably, "we're not attention-seeking gold diggers who are out for a free lunch or a quick buck off a high-profile criminal case. No."

Mumble, mumble.

"Yes, I'm sure you were jesting, Sir. Kazuki's at one. See you there, Mr. Friedman," Stella said and closed the connection. "Attention-seeking gold diggers..." she grumbled while putting the phone back in her vest pocket.

Chuckling, Regina reached over and mussed Stella's hair. "He's probably just being paranoid, Stell. You oughtta be able to sympathize with that... after all, you spent a lot of yesterday hiding under the couch."

"Yeah, but... hey... now that gives me a really good idea!"

"I don't wanna have sex under the couch, Stell," Regina said flatly.

Stella didn't even hear Regina's objection - she was already well on her way into building a grand, rose-tinted scheme for their immediate future. "If we ever get out of this metal hell, I want you to hold the conversation with him at the restaurant, Reggie. I shall be undercover! Deep undercover!"

"Uh-huh?" Regina said, already dreading what that would imply.

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Kazuki's on Thirty-third Street proved to be a moderately-sized family-run Asian seafood restaurant with - among other features - white tiles on the floor, a long bar counter made of shiny aluminum and ten tables equipped with integrated lamps that looked like old brass bells from fishing boats. There were several more tables in a small enclosure beyond the back door, and it seemed that most of the restaurant's visitors had chosen to sit outside.

The centerpiece of the interior was a huge water tank by the front door that had been divided into two smaller basins; one for lobsters and one for Chinese mitten crabs.

Regina was sitting at a table close to the lobster basin. She had chosen to dress up for the occasion and was wearing a gun metal gray pant suit over a black, O-neck blouse. Her no-nonsense outfit, her black shoes with one-inch heels and her neat ponytail made her look the part of a serious investigator.

Moving with casual grace, she checked her wristwatch and saw they still had a few minutes before Avi Friedman was scheduled to arrive. To kill time, she picked up the menu even though she had already ordered a small platter of boiled vegetables and pickled seaweed in ginger sauce.

Even though sushi was apparently Kazuki's specialty, raw fish was the furthest from Stella's mind. Not only couldn't she stand it, she was already enjoying a crisp plaice filet with French fries and a huge glob of home-made spicy tartare sauce. Now and then, she reached for her can of Slurppy! Cherry Cola and took a few noisy slurps through the drinking straw.

Moving with anything but casual grace, she reached into the pocket of her dirt brown cover-all - that had the name of her company, Bob's Plumbing, on the back in red and gold - and found her cell to check the time. One PM sharp.

Her mirror shade hangers enabled her to perform a visual sweep of the interior of the restaurant without the other guests noticing anything, and she exploited that anonymity to the fullest by checking out Regina's legs.

After one more dreamy sweep of her best friend's endless thighs, she smoothed down her dark mustache and goatee, and took the drinking straw to perform another noisy slurp.

Two minutes past the top of the hour, the glass door was opened and a well-dressed, clean-shaven man in his early forties with slightly dark, Middle Eastern features stepped into Kazuki's. He was somewhat heavy-set though his pale gray business suit did a good job of camouflaging his belly. A bulge halfway between his belt buckle and his right hip hinted at the presence of a firearm, or at least a holster.

Walking into the restaurant, his gray tie flipped up from the slight breeze that ran through the shop from the enclosure at the back, but he quickly smoothed it down against his white shirt.

His eyes were of an indeterminate color, but strong, and he used them to check out the few customers, glancing at the men and women with the air of someone who had plenty of experience of recognizing potential trouble. "Miss Starr?" he said, walking over to Regina's table.

"Regina Harrison, in fact. Mr. Friedman?"

"Indeed."

"Nice to meet you," Regina said and rose from the chair. Putting out her hand, she noticed that she was an inch or two taller than he was.

Avi gave Regina's hand a strong shake and kept his eyes on hers throughout. "Nice to meet you, Miss Harrison. Have you placed an order yet? If you haven't, I can recommend the lobster," he said in an accent that was difficult to place.

"I'm sorry, I don't eat fish, Mr. Friedman," Regina said and moved back to the table.

Grunting, Avi held out her chair and made sure she was seated before he sat down on the other chair.

Within seconds, a waiter came out with Regina's seaweed. He quickly took Avi's order of the sushi du jour and went back into the kitchen.

"Now, Miss Harrison," Avi said, eyeing the odd dish that had been drenched in white sauce. "Your associate said over the phone that you have information pertaining to the shipment that was taken from me?"

After slicing open a pickled seaweed leaf and cutting a boiled asparagus in two, Regina put down her cutlery and focused on the eyes of her dinner partner. "We do, Mr. Friedman."

"Well?"

"Does the name Faucher mean anything to you?"

"Faucher? No," Avi said, but his eyes told a different story. "If that's all, I'm afraid this has been a waste of time."

Regina sensed at once that the man sitting opposite her was far more in the know than he let on, and she took her sweet time in stabbing the boiled asparagus she had cut in two. "The name was on a bloody luggage tag," she said and put the vegetable in her mouth. "That in turn was inside a small plastic bag with seven cut diamonds," she continued after a few seconds of elegant, classy chewing.

Avi leaned back in his seat and furrowed his brow.

Before he could speak, the waiter came out with his order. The plate of sushi du jour looked inviting, but Avi started pushing it around almost at once, having seemingly lost his appetite. "And the diamonds are... where?" he said, suddenly locking eyes with Regina.

"Oh, they're safe. They've been handed over to the Bay City Police Department."

The mumbled curse that flew from Avi's mouth was in a language neither Regina nor Stella could understand, but the meaning was very clear. He briefly scrunched up his face and looked like he was about to blow up, but he cleared his throat and stuffed a large piece of sushi into his mouth to cover his temper.

At her own table, Stella was halfway through her plaice filet. She pretended to read a newspaper, though the only one she had been able to find was a week old and from Japan. Taking her can of cherry cola, she leaned back in her seat and observed the businessman closely.

Like Regina had noticed earlier, Stella could see that Avi was wearing a holster on his right hip, though - like Regina - she was unable to see if he was actually armed or not.

She briefly glanced at her tall, graceful friend who was eating her Oriental dish with relish. *'Brrrr... seaweed... yikes... and asparagus... gimme fat and salt any day. Yeah. Fat, salt and French Fries. In tartare sauce. My arteries will clog up but at least I'll die happy. Okay, a massive coronary is probably never particularly funny, but... eh.'*

Avi dabbed his lips on a napkin and pushed the sushi away after only eating a single piece. "Miss Harrison, I feel I better tell you the whole story... or at least, the whole story from my perspective. You see, I wish you hadn't handed over the diamonds to the police. I believe... or suspect... there's a mole somewhere in the police force. Among the Detectives who worked on my case, to be exact."

Two tables over, half a mouthful of cherry cola, fries and tartare sauce went down the wrong pipe of a man in a dirt-brown cover-all - 'Carl', according to the name tag - making him gasp, wheeze, moan, cough, splutter, hack and croak to get everything back out.

Bolting upright, 'Carl' put his arms in the air and tried to apply the Heimlich maneuver to himself, but it wasn't until one of the waiters came rushing to his assistance that he was able to dislodge the French fry that had already gone halfway down into his lungs. A final croaking cough sent the offending item spewing forth from his mouth, onto the table and down onto the white tiles.

In the disturbance, 'Carl's' goatee had been pushed onto his left cheek and his mustache was drooping quite severely, but he hurriedly slapped them back in place. The fries suddenly seemed less attractive, but he still had half a plaice filet left and resisted quite vociferously when the waiter wanted to take the plate back to the kitchen.

Avi had noticed the incident with the beard, but shrugged - it was Bay City after all.

"Where was I? Oh yes," he continued, pushing his chair a bit back so he had room to cross his legs. "The diamonds came from a mine in rural Congo. I bought them in a cut state at an online auction in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The day before the robbery, they were flown to the United States, to BCX, where I picked them up at the customs office. They were sealed in a secure mail package that was transported back to my own office in an armored limousine. I've used this procedure for years and there's never been any problems."

"Only this time, there were."

"This time, I had barely stepped out of the limo before I was robbed at gunpoint by three men. Two of them were tall and beefy, and the last was slender... the last one appeared younger, too. They were all wearing ski masks so I couldn't identify them when the police showed me photos."

"Hmmm," Regina said and pushed away her empty plate.

"The police managed to arrest the two beefy men some time later, but they're not talking. The third man and the diamonds are still missing."

"Were the diamonds insured, Mr. Friedman?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not insane." A ripple rolled over Avi's upper lip, but if it was supposed to be a smile, he didn't have much luck with it.

"Mmmm. Why do you suspect a mole inside the detective squad?"

"The two men they arrested were French Canadians. One of the detectives in the squad is of French Canadian descent... and he has two brothers, one who's a customs officer at the airport and one who's been in trouble with the law several times... I've checked. And the diamonds have yet to resurface. Mmmm?"

Regina nodded and dabbed the corners of her mouth on a napkin. "Well, that does sound a bit... uh, fishy," she said, eyeing the nearly untouched plate of sushi.

"Indeed. And now you've handed over some of the diamonds to the police... Miss Harrison, would you care to make a wager on how long the diamonds will remain in their custody?"

Nodding, Regina cast a brief glance at Stella who was really, really busy reading the Japanese newspaper. "I wish we had known this earlier, Mr. Friedman."

"So do I. It's been a pleasure speaking with you, Miss Harrison," Avi said and pushed back his chair. With a smile, he put out his hand and waited for Regina to shake it.

'I was right...' Stella thought, gripping the empty can of cherry cola so hard it nearly buckled, *'I was right... there is a conspiracy... and it's the French Canadian Mafia! Among the detectives! And it was the guy Regina nearly spoke to... Sweet Chicky-Dee... we got diamonds! We got guns! And we got Le Quebecqueers! Oh Gawd, I'm gonna need a clean pair of shorts before this thing is over!'*

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"Are you all right, Stell... uh, Carl?" Regina said when they crossed Thirty-third Street ten minutes later to get to the SLK. "It sounded like you were trying to hack up a lung back there..."

"I almost did... I'm kinda raw..." Stella wheezed.

Regina quickly unlocked the Mercedes and helped Stella down into the bucket seat. "I'll bet. Want a tortilla chip or two?"

"Nuh-uh!" Stella said and shook her head quite hard, once again upsetting the glue on the back of the mustache. "Oh this darn thing... I thought we had it licked... guess not," she continued as she pulled the fake beard off completely and put the two items into the pocket of her cover-all.

Regina got in and turned on the engine. When there was a gap in the traffic, she activated her turning signal and drove out into the inner lane. "It was a great piece of pickled seaweed, though."

"Oh, yuck... yuck... and another yuck to give you three to choose from! Womankind isn't supposed to eat pickled seaweed, Reggie! They're... they're yucky."

"And how would you know? Besides, womankind isn't supposed to eat so much fat and salt, either, you know."

"Nonsense," Stella said and waved her hand dismissively. "plaice filet, fries and tartare sauce are good for you."

"In which parallel universe, Stell?"

"Didn't we already have this conversation? I love it! So there!"

Regina opened her mouth to complain but realized there wasn't any point. Instead, she went out into the fast lane and mashed the gas to beat a yellow light that changed right in front of them, earning herself a howling - and very predictable - "OOOOOOOOOOOOH! Reggie!" in the process.

**_*_

Some time later, Stella - back in her regular clothes including her yellow vest - drove her beloved AMC Pacer into Billy's garage and up onto a pneumatic lift. After turning off the engine, she stroked the vinyl dashboard a couple of times and whispered a few words of love to her favorite old girl.

Sighing deeply, she stepped out of the car and shut the door behind her. "Now, Billy," she said in a voice that was quite croaky after her deathmatch with the French fry, "we're talking about fixing the lock on the hatchback, right?"

"Right," Billy the Mechanic said, nodding. As always, he was dressed in a horrendously filthy canary-yellow boiler suit over an even filthier T-shirt that advertised Slurpy! Root Beer. Chewing on his cheek, he pushed his greasy baseball cap up his forehead so he had room to scratch it.

"And then we got the whine under the dashboard," Stella continued, caressing the Pacer's roofline. "I've tried to prepare her for your coarse hands, but she's a lady, Billy, don't forget that."

"Some ladies like it rough, Miss Starr," Billy said with a goofy grin that faded from his face a split second later after it registered that Stella didn't find his quip funny at all.

"Billy?"

"Y- yeah?"

"When was the last time you were on a second date with someone?"

"Uh... it's been a while..."

"Do you think the two are connected, Billy?"

"Wh- which two, Miss Starr?"

"If you don't know that," Stella said and pushed her glasses up her nose, "then I'm afraid I can't help you. One and one makes three, Billy, but only if you can get to two first. Right?"

Billy had no idea what his wild-haired neighbor was saying, but he had even less idea how to phrase the question so he wouldn't get an even more confusing answer. In the end, he settled for smiling and nodding. "Uh, don't worry, Miss Starr. Your car is quite safe here. I'll treat her like she was my own."

"I've seen your van, Billy... shoot, I've driven in your van. Please don't," Stella said and stepped away from her brown Pacer.

"Uh... okay. Uh... right. I need to call for some parts and stuff so it's probably gonna take me a couple of days... I'll be over when it's done," Billy said and put out his filthy hand.

Stella initially shied back from it but she didn't want to look like an uncouth animal so she gave him a thump on the shoulder instead - the results were the same, an oily hand.

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Later that same afternoon, Regina turned the SLK onto Eleventh Street, a one-way street in the middle of the artisan district. The condition of the road was quite poor with many potholes, but it didn't stop her from giving the powerful car plenty of right foot.

Stella was eating genuine Italian 'gelato', an ice cream wafer cone she had bought from a street vendor. The two scoops - pistachio and strawberry - practically melted under her tongue, and she let out a constant stream of near-orgasmic moans and groans as she savored the quality ice cream.

Just as Stella extended her tongue to lick another layer off of the pistachio, the Mercedes went into the deepest pothole in the northern hemisphere.

Unperturbed, Regina kept her foot on the gas which made the car lurch back out of the hole like a gazelle on the run from a cheetah. The shocks and springs groaned and the steering wheel shook hard in her hands, but she kept going.

The hard knocks the car received were enough to make both scoops of ice cream first break free of the wafer cone and then shoot up into the air like the cork from a champagne bottle.

Trying to get as much hangtime as possible in their fifteen seconds of fame, they went through a triple corkscrew with a twist before they came back down and ended their days splattered against the windshield of a Chevrolet Malibu that was following the SLK.

"WHAT THE FLIPPETY-FLIP-FLOP... WHERE'S MY ICE CREAM?!" Stella howled with her tongue hanging out of her mouth, ready to lick off the pistachio that wasn't there anymore.

Regina glanced in the rear view mirror but chose not to say anything. Instead, she pointed over her shoulder and came to a halt in the middle of the street.

Growling from somewhere deep in her throat, Stella unbuckled and jumped up to kneel on the seat.

The Chevrolet behind them had its wipers going at their fastest setting, but all they did was to smear the 'gelato' all over the windshield. The driver eventually realized he had only made the mess worse and stopped the car with a hard jerk. Two seconds later, he jumped out onto the street and offered Regina and Stella a very impressive master class in Inventive Cursing In Spanish.

"Reggie...? I think we better leave," Stella said and hopped back down in the bucket seat. As Regina gunned the engine, she took a brief look at the wafer cone but came to the conclusion that it was all she had so she might as well eat it.

"Okay, pull over... there's a public pay phone over there," Stella said and pointed diagonally across the street they were driving on, Fourteenth Street, which was still in the artisan district.

"Yup," Regina said and pulled the SLK over to the curb. After turning off the engine, she shuffled around in the seat and put her arm across the backrest of Stella's seat. "And now what?"

"Now we're gonna flush out a rat... a detective rat. Shucks, can you believe it, Reggie? I sure can't. Y'know," Stella said and took one of those very deep breaths that told a story of having a long story to tell. "When I grew up, the police were sacred. We kids looked up to the policemen, right? I'll bet you did, too-"

"Sur-"

"But when something like this happens, Reggie, people start to lose faith in the police. That's when anarchy comes into the picture. Anarchy and violence. Anarchy, violence and awful behavior like wearing bell bottoms to the opera... brrrr. Even I draw the line there-"

"Huh... what's that got-"

"But ask yourself, where would we be without having faith in the police? Vigilante hell is where we would be, Reggie... isn't that right?"

"Yea-"

"Yessir, vigilante hell where everyone would need to buy a weapon of some sort to protect him or herself and their family. Isn't that right, Reggie?"

This time, Regina didn't even bother to open her mouth - she merely nodded.

"Right", Stella said and adjusted her glasses. "That's what I say." The seriousness of her statement seemed to weigh on her shoulders that began to slump ever so slightly.

Regina took the opportunity to muss Stella's hair. "So what shou-" she started to say, but was once again rudely interrupted by the fiery investigator:

"And now we're gonna flush ourselves a detective rat, Reggie!" Stella suddenly exclaimed, pounding her fist into her open palm. "And we're gonna do it by calling Mr. French Canadian Mafia Bigshot and say that we have a pack of diamonds that we're willing to sell for... uh... ten thousand."

"They're worth a helluva lot more than that, Stell."

"Sure, but a street punk wouldn't know that, right? Ten thousand in cash or else we're gonna send 'em to his immediate superior. Uh, would that be Mary-Jane?"

"No idea."

"Me neither... never mind. That's what we're gonna do. Yeah," Stella said and flopped back against the backrest. "We're gonna need something that can distort our voices... better make that *my* voice, he's already spoken to you."

"A napkin? A handkerchief?"

"No and no."

"Then what?"

"I'll... uh... think of something," Stella said and pulled the little lever on the door.

Through a minor miracle, Stella was able to get out of the low-slung sports car on her own, and she was soon standing by the curb waiting impatiently for a gap in the traffic.

Three times she stepped onto the street and three times she had to jump for her life; once for a bike messenger who came screaming past her going at least thirty, once for a garbage truck that had roughly nine orange LEDs flashing on the front to warn pedestrians - Stella didn't see it until it was almost too late - and once for a black BMW convertible that cruised down the street with the radio going at 'eleven.'

Sighing, Stella shot the pay phone across the street a longing glance, wondering if she'd ever get there. She suddenly realized the street was clear, but the split second she put her foot down on the asphalt, a paramedic ambulance came blasting past with full lights and sirens.

Inside the SLK, Regina buried her face in her hands and let out a long, sobbing groan.

Stella looked left, then right, then left, then right, then left again before she finally ventured away from the sidewalk. She crossed the narrow city street in four seconds flat and hurried over to the pay phone to make sure nobody got to it before her.

As luck would have it, the phone hadn't been vandalized and it even had a signal when she tried to lift the receiver. "All right... okay. All right. Uh... now what... huh... oh, yeah... my vest," she said and quickly whipped off her yellow down vest.

She cleared her throat a couple of times to get the frogs out, but suddenly realized they made her sound all street-tough and harder to identify, so she roared briefly into the vest to get the frogs stuffed back down. Flashing Regina a thumbs-up, she dialed the number for the detective squad and waited for the secretary to pick it up.

Stella just caught the tail-end of the Muzak used at the precinct, but was still unable to remember where it came from. "Bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummm... oh, what is that theme song... Scarecrow & Mrs. King...? No. Moonlighting? ...no."

'You've reached the Bay City Police Department, First Precinct. How can I help you?' the familiar female voice said at the other end of the line.

"Yo, girlie, I wanna talk to detective Faucher," Stella said into her vest in her best grizzly impersonation.

'You need to speak up, Sir, it's a bad connection.'

"Whut...? I said, I need to speak with detective Faucher."

'Detective Puree?'

"Detective Faucher, for cryin' out loud! Detective Faucher!" Stella roared, forgetting all about speaking through the yellow vest.

'Oh... please hold.'

"Yeah yeah, I'll hold..."

Much to Stella's frustration the Muzak started over. This time, she tried to whistle along to the electronic beats to kick her brain into remembering which show it came from, but she could simply not put a name to the theme. A few clicks and hisses told her someone new had entered the line, and she quickly raised her vest.

'This is Calvin Faucher. What's this about?'

Stella took a deep breath and eased herself into her street persona. "Yo-yo-a-loha, fella. This here's a friendly call from yours truly, the one and only Razzie, from a pay phone on Fourteenth Street. Now I gone and found myself a nice little bag of surprises... seven cut rocks... diamonds, baby. And a niiiice little luggage tag with someone's name on it. A name that sounds sus-pee-ciously like the one you just used. Yeah, ain't that a nice little bag of surprises. How 'bout that?"

'So?'

"So? Fella, fella, fella... so they're yours for ten thousand dolores, baby."

'Get lost.'

"Get lost? La Meea-mya? Yeah, well, okay, fella... if I was you, I'd start practicing bending over and kissin' my ass goodbye 'cos my next stop will be the post office, baby, and dere, I'm gonna send your boss three or four of the rocks plus the luggage tag with your name on it. How's them rotten apples, fella?"

Silence.

"Ten thousand dolores, baby," Stella said, looking up and down the street to check if anyone was watching her.

'You're calling from a pay phone on Fourteenth Street?'

"Dat's right, fella. Right next ta Hansen's Jewelry Imports."

'I'll be there in twenty minutes.'

"With da money, baby... don't forget da money! You won't see me, but just put da money on top of da phone. Oh, and I've left you a little something so you can see I ain't feedin' you no bullshit sandwiches. It's a photo."

Click.

"Huh," Stella said and put the receiver back on the phone. Scrunching up her face, she tried to analyze how the conversation had gone, but she couldn't come to a firm conclusion. With a grunt, she reached into her vest's liner pocket and took a print-out of a photo they had taken of the bloody luggage tag - it wasn't the world's greatest print, but it would have to do.

Holding the photo by the edges so she wouldn't leave fingerprints, she looked around for something to pin it down with. It didn't take her long to find a medium-sized cobblestone that someone had kicked out of the pavement, and she picked it up and used it as a paperweight on top of the pay phone's metal casing.

After checking that the print-out was secure under the cobblestone, she put on her vest and went up to the curb to wait for a gap in the traffic.

"So?" Regina said once Stella was safely back in the low-slung sports car.

"Well, he bought it hook, line and sinker... I think he'll show up... but I don't know what he's actually gonna do when he does. He's definitely crooked, that's a fact."

"Hmmm. I guess we just have to wait."

"He said twenty minutes, so... yeah. I wonder if there's still a couple-a tortilla chips left...?" Stella said and went on the prowl for the missing bag.

Sixteen minutes later, a dark gray, unmarked squad car entered Fourteenth Street and rolled very slowly down towards the pay phone at Hansen's Jewelry Imports.

Regina caught a glimpse of it in the door mirror and quickly patted Stella's thigh. "He's here... lose the chips, Stell."

Crunch, crunch - "Oh, PHARCK'M... alwaysmmpf whenmmpf I'mmmpf eatingmmpf..." -
Crunch, CRUNCH, crunch, CRUNCH, gulp!

"Maybe if you ate less you'd be fine...?"

"Oh, ha ha. What do you know about eating, Reggie? I only ever see you nip at your salads. That's not eating, that's grazing."

"You're calling me a cow?" Regina growled, but a saucy wink made it clear she was only kidding.

"Nuh-uh! Nuh-UH!"

On the street, the squad car trickled up alongside the silver metallic Mercedes and suddenly came to a stop right next to it.

"Shit," Regina said and made sure to look away from the unmarked police car. "Stell... hurry... we gotta make out!"

"Huh! You know, I've wished you'd say- MMMMPF!" - Stella never made it very far with Regina reaching over and claiming her lips, laying a lovely one on her that went on and on and on.

Behind them, the driver of the squad car had seen enough and drove on towards the pay phone.

"He's gone," Regina whispered and pulled back from her thoroughly kissed friend whose glasses had been transformed into a fogged-up mess.

Wearing a goofy grin on her face, Stella squirmed merrily in her seat as she slowly came back down to earth. "Wooooow," she croaked, taking off her glasses to wipe the lenses. "Hot diggity DANG, Reggie... your kissing is improving. Remember our very first kiss? It was like smooching with a wooden chief... but now... ho-boy, watch out below, heh, heh, heh."

"Silly," Regina said and clawed Stella's thigh. "C'mon, we've got work to do. He's parked at the wrong side of the street and is getting out."

Stella finished polishing her lenses and pushed her glasses up her nose. Grunting, she reached into the glove box to take her favorite pair of binoculars. She could see at once that the driver of the dark gray squad car hadn't bothered to close the driver's side door nor turn off the engine.

She quickly zoomed in on the detective and let her eyes glide up his beefy form, from his black shoes, past his gray pants, gray shirt, black tie and up to his closely cropped salt-and-pepper hair. It was easy to see by his strong appearance and decisive gestures that he wasn't a rookie but a veteran - the scuff marks on the worn holster on his hip only accentuated that.

"He's found the photo I left for him," Stella said, zooming in on the pay phone where the detective was studying the print-out. "He's touching it bare-handed so he obviously isn't worried about leaving prints or smearing mine. Hmmm."

Regina kept a close eye on the wing mirror in case the detective had called for backup before he went into the situation, but so far, she could only see the regular traffic.

"He just took his cell," Stella whispered although the detective would never be able to hear her. "He touched the screen once... make that twice. He must be calling a number from the registry."

Regina grunted and looked back at their target. "He's probably wondering why there isn't anyone here to meet him. The photo's gotta set off a really nice train of thought, too."

"Huh, I'll bet," Stella said and lowered the binoculars.

The detective put his phone back to his ear and nodded a couple of times like people invariably do. After speaking a few sentences, he put the phone into his breast pocket and stepped back to the waiting squad car to turn off the engine, though he didn't get into it.

"Now what?" Regina said, but Stella could only shrug.

Seven minutes later, Regina noticed a dark shadow in the left mirror. Before long, a black armored limousine with pitch black windows went past them and pulled over on the wrong side of the street behind the squad car.

"Ho-ly flip! That's a limo! A huge limo! Get the license plate, Reggie," Stella said and hurriedly rummaged around for her notepad. "I can't find my notepad! Get the license plate... where's my notepad? MY NOTE- I CAN'T FIND MY NOTEPA- AW, HELL!"

"Nine WXS one-oh-seven. Stell... Nine WXS one-oh-seven..."

"My notepad!?"

"NINE WXS ONE-OH-SEVEN, STELL!"

"Wh- whut? You found my notepad?"

Regina slapped her forehead and buried her face in her hands. "Nine William X-Ray Sierra one-oh-seven... why don't you use your wristwatch?"

"Where's my pencil-"

"Screw your pencil, use the super-secret-agent-spyscope-dictaphone-wristwatch you got on your arm, Stell!"

"Huh, calm down, Reggie... there's no need to yell... okay, okay... it's on," Stella said and pressed the appropriate button on the electronic device. "What's the license plate again, Snookums?"

"Nine William X-Ray Sierra one-oh-seven," Regina said into the miniature microphone on the watch.

"There... that wasn't so hard was it?" Stella said with a little grin. She didn't have time to look at Regina, but if she had, she would have dropped stone dead. Instead, she took her binoculars and

swept them across the scene. "Naw, can't see who's in the limo... must be a bigshot in the French Canadian Mafia."

Right on cue, Calvin Faucher stepped back from the armored limousine that soon took off down Fourteenth Street. Half a minute later, the detective climbed into his unmarked police car and drove the same way.

"Should we follow him, Stell?" Regina said with her fingers on the ignition key.

"Hmmm. He's got a gun, but... yeah, let's go," Stella said and reached for her seat belt.

Twenty minutes and just as many turns later, Regina had to come to a full stop at a mesh gate on wheels that blocked the road they were on. The cross-city trek had taken them to the huge warehouses on the docks where they couldn't drive in without proper accreditations.

"Okay," Stella said and reactivated her wristwatch. "The detective was able to get into the docks by flashing his badge to a security guard, but we don't feel like flashing anything so we can't follow him. The squad car seemed to turn left roughly two hundred yards down the first warehouse, through a sliding metal door. Uh, the metal isn't sliding, the door is. Oh, you know what I mean."

"You're talking to yourself, Stell," Regina said flatly.

"Huh?"

"We're the only ones who'll ever get to listen to it... never mind..."

"Anyway," Stella continued into her watch, "we've marked the location on our map and are about to head home. I arranged for Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes to drop by a little later today for coffee, cookies and perhaps a Danish or two, maybe one of those really great pastries that have strawberry jam in the center. I forget their name, but-"

"That's completely irrelevant, Stell!"

"-they taste really great, and... whut?"

"Who cares about the pastry!"

"Boy are you cranky today, Reggie. I thought after the morning we had that you'd be in a better mood. Huh! ANYhow... Inspector Mary-Jane will swing by, hopefully with news on my old friend Laura. Uh, Stella Starr out."

"Out and about," Regina said and turned the car around to get back in the right direction. "Now all we need to do is to work out how we get home from way, way, way out here."

"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem," Stella said and took their map book.

Groaning, Regina put her left elbow on the windowsill and clutched her forehead- "Famous last words, Stell..."

"Nonsense... we're smart, capable women who know exactly what we're doing! So there!"

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CHAPTER 3

The return trip from the docks was a wild and woolly adventure, and the two investigators had visited neighborhoods they didn't even know Bay City had. Worn out, hungry, thirsty and with a near-empty gas tank, they finally arrived home at the Harrison-Starr offices.

Regina had barely driven into the parking lot before Stella cried "STOOOOOP!" in her ear, causing her to slam on the brakes.

"Look!" Stella whispered, pointing out of the windshield. Fifty yards ahead of them, a dark gray squad car was parked at an oblique angle to the office building. The driver's side door was slightly ajar, but nobody was in it. "It's Calvin Faucher! He's come to finish us off!" she continued in a whisper, grabbing hold of Regina's arm.

"He can't know anything about us setting him up, Stell," Regina said, but kept her foot on the brake just in case.

"I don't wanna die... I look awful in a black suit in a white coffin with a red hole in my forehead..."

"You told me that already... oh! Someone's coming!" - A figure came out from behind the car and opened the driver's side door fully. It didn't take Regina two seconds to recognize Mary-Jane Moynes, and she let out a long, slow sigh of relief.

Stella was less convinced and kept her firm grip on Regina's arm. "It looks like..."

"It is, Stell," Regina said and took her foot off the brake to let the SLK glide forward. They were soon at the parking bays and chose the one nearest to the Inspector's car. "Now remember, act natural... okay? We know she isn't one of the bad people, but she probably doesn't know about the mole in her squad."

"Act natural. I hear ya," Stella said and pulled the little lever on the door. Bolting upright, her general tiredness and the shock of seeing the Inspector prevented her from getting any further than forty-seven percent up - then gravity took over and she fell backwards onto the bucket seat with an UFF! and a BUMPH!

This time, Regina hadn't had time to get out before she was human-divebombed by her lover, so she ended up with a lapful of blonde investigator. "Owch... not that natural, Stell..." she said, mussing the dirty-blonde haystack.

Snickering, Stella clambered down and out of the car and eventually found the asphalt with her feet. "Hiya, Inspector!" she said with an overly cheery wave.

"Hi, Stella," Mary-Jane Moynes said and stepped forward to shake hands. As always, she was impeccably dressed in a pale coffee pantsuit over a dark brown blouse. Her short strawberry-blonde hair was styled perfectly and attracted many jealous looks from Stella. "Hello, Miss Harrison."

"Hello, Inspector. We've known each other for so long now," Regina said and closed the roof on the Mercedes, "please call me Regina."

"All right," Mary-Jane said with a grin. "Well, Stella, I have something for you... I've found a few pieces of information about your old friend and her father."

"Great!"

"Yes, and I also have a few gifts from my niece, some chocolate and a bouquet of flowers. Remember you helped her with the two fences some time ago?"

"Oh yeah, yeah... chocolate, eh? I'm a great fan of chocolate," Stella said and unlocked the door to the office. With a head that was swimming from all the events of the day, she completely forgot to raise her leg high enough to clear the metal rail at the bottom of the door, with inevitable and highly predictable results - *BUMP!* - "YEEOOOOW!" she cried, hop-hop-hopping into the office on one foot.

"Uh, are you all right, Stella?" Mary-Jane said, holding the door to allow Regina to come through.

"Yesssss!" Stella hissed through clenched teeth. She hopped over to her chair and fell down into it with a bump. Kicking off her shoe, she went to work massaging her toes on her right foot that had taken the brunt of the impact.

Regina closed the front door behind them and kicked off her own shoes, not in sympathy, but because she loved how the plush carpet tickled her feet. "Have a seat, Mary-Jane. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, please," the Inspector said and moved over to the couch.

"So," Mary-Jane said and put down the coffee cup. "Laura Cruz' father left the force on medical grounds eleven years ago. Prior to that, he had been working in the archives for two years. He

was taken off active duty when he was diagnosed with lung cancer in the summer of 1999. That was before I entered the squad so that's why I couldn't remember him."

"Right," Stella said, munching on a chocolate.

Nodding, Mary-Jane took another of the chocolates. "He passed away seven years ago due to complications from the cancer."

"Oh, that's sad. I wish I had known... I would have contacted Law."

"Law?"

"Well, that's what we called Laura in school 'cos her Dad was a cop," Stella said with a wistful smile.

Sensing that Stella needed some support, Regina reached over and put a comforting hand on her back.

"Hmmm," Mary-Jane said and took another sip of her coffee. "Laura Cruz herself has only recently returned to the States. She had been working in South America as a teacher for underprivileged children for the better part of a decade. From what I could dig up, she was working for an NGO that had to cut down on its overseas projects... hence her return."

"Oh..." Stella said, leaning into Regina's touch.

"Yes. She's actually living right here in Bay City now. She's attached to the North Bay University as an external lecturer in social sciences."

"Wow... how about that," Stella said, but their conversation was interrupted by the Inspector's cell ringing.

Mary-Jane quickly got up and answered the call. "Uh-huh? Okay? Right. I'll be there." - After closing the phone and putting it back in her pocket, she scooped up the last of her coffee and snatched a chocolate. "That was my Captain... there's been a development in a case we've been following. So... I gotta go. It was nice talking to you, gals. I hope you can use the info I gave you," Mary-Jane continued, putting out her hand.

"We sure can, Inspector. Thank you very much," Stella said and gave the hand a thorough shake before Regina did the same.

As the dark gray squad car did a three-point turn in the parking lot and drove out onto Carter Boulevard with its lights flashing, Stella watched it from the window with her hands shoved down her pockets and a pensive look on her face. "So Law is working at the University. Huh."

"Is she someone I should be worried about, Stell?" Regina said and came up to stand behind her lover.

"Of course not. But I won't hide I had a huge crush on her when we were teenagers. I never really found out how she felt, but, uh... I had a feeling we were on the same wavelength. Anyway. I think I'll contact her, but... man, she's done so much in her life. What have I done, Reggie?"

"Are you kidding? You're a licensed private investigator, a real clever one, too. You've helped countless people over the years. And you know what I say... brains are sexy," Regina said, husking the last words into Stella's ears.

"When did you ever say that?" Stella said with a laugh. Turning around, she wrapped her arms around Regina's waist and pulled her close.

"Just now!"

"That's good enough for me. Now come down here so I can kiss you senseless."

"Yes, ma'am," Regina said and did like she had been told.

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A quarter past eleven the same evening, Regina turned off the SLK's headlights and trickled up close to the mesh gate on wheels that blocked the road at the docks.

Stella held an opened pizza tray on her lap and was chewing noisily on the second-to-last slice of a Quattro Stagioni. Now and then, she put a two-foot long, neon-green drinking straw shaped like a butterfly between her lips and took an equally noisy slurp from a can of raspberry fizz that she had put in one of the cupholders.

"How the hell can you eat now, Stell? I simply don't get it," Regina said and turned off the engine.

"Does that" - *munch, munch* - "mean you don't" - *munch, munch, MUNCH* - "want the last slice?" - *Munch* - *gulp*.

"Yes. That's exactly what it means," Regina said flatly.

The blinding grin on Stella's face was real, though it was marred slightly by a splash of tomato sauce that was smeared all over her upper lip. "Suit yourself."

Regina and Stella were both wearing their commando fatigues: black boots, black jeans, black sweaters, black knitted caps and two fat, black stripes on their cheeks. This time, Stella was wearing her nylon shoulder holster where her phone was easy to reach - she had chosen that

position over the Velcro-latched pocket on the sleeve because she could only access that with her right hand.

Shuffling around uncomfortably, Regina watched in disbelief as Stella munched down the last slice as well. "Tell me again, why are we here? I thought you were afraid of the French Canadian Mafia?"

"Well, I am... but we've got a chance here, Reggie. A chance to nail a couple of big kahunas. I mean, that's gotta count for something, yeah?"

"Stell, we don't actually know what's in there... it could be a rotary club meeting for all we know... or a bingo hall for bad guys."

"Oh... you think?"

"No, I don't think... I was just giving you a few examples, Stell..."

"You know," Stella said as she licked her upper lip from one edge to the other, "I doubt it's a bingo hall." - When her tongue wasn't enough, she took a napkin and dabbed her mouth.

"You missed a little sauce."

"Where? Here?" Stella said and dabbed her upper lip.

"No, to the right..."

"Here?"

"No, Stell, to your right..."

"Here?"

"No, Stell, that's not your right."

"Is too!" Stella said and held up her right hand.

Regina briefly scrunched up her face but decided that action was the best solution for all involved, and resolutely took the napkin. After a thorough dab-dab-dab to mop up the sauce, she crumbled it up into a ball and threw it in the back. "There. No more sauce."

"Thanks, Reggie! You're my friend!"

"You're welcome... have you thought about how we gonna clear that barbed wire on top of the mesh fence?" Regina said and pointed at said obstacle.

Stella reluctantly followed Regina's finger but soon turned back to her friend. "Barbed...? Wire...? Oh, flippety-flop," she said in a voice that trailed off into nothing.

"Huh," Stella said as she jumped down on the other side of the fence. Looking up, she could see that the fire blanket they always carried in the trunk had done the trick - they had simply folded it twice and placed it over the four rows of barbed wire. "Told you it would work, Reggie. They do it all the time in the movies."

"Don't gloat yet, we still have to get back over the darn thing," Regina said as she pulled herself up and swung her legs over the fence. From her position roughly eight feet in the air, she had a great view of the warehouses on the docks and could see that lights were on in the one they wanted to check out.

"Piece of cake, Reggie!"

"Don't say," Regina said and jumped off the fence, "Ugh... don't say things like that. It's only gonna come back and bite us."

Even though streetlights that cast an orange glow on the asphalt were legion in the docks, most of them weren't working which left the piers quite literally in the dark. From somewhere to the right of the two investigators, the sound of waves gently slapping against the underside of the docks broke the silence, and Regina made a mental note not to let her blonde friend out of her sight - after all, Stella plus saltwater made for a very poor cocktail.

No-nonsense barking from large dogs in the middle distance made both Regina and Stella clam up and look into the darkness.

"Psst, Reggie... did you remember the doggie treats?" Stella whispered.

"No I didn't, Stell!"

"Me neither... let's skedaddle... meet you at the first warehouse... that's the one, right?"

"Yessss..."

"Okie-dokie..." Stella said and ran hunched over into the darkness, like she had seen her heroines do countless times on television.

Regina rolled her eyes but followed the dirty-blonde wondergirl.

Three minutes later, they arrived at the first warehouse and were able to climb up onto a pile of metal boxes that had been placed outside a row of windows since the last time they had been

there. Once perched on the flat top, Regina looked down upon the pier and wondered quietly how on earth Stella had managed to get up without drama. She didn't want to tempt fate so she kept quiet and settled for a half-shrug.

The row of indescribably filthy windows were overlooking the concrete floor of the first warehouse that was littered with scores of large crates that had been placed at random - or that's what it looked like, at least.

It soon dawned on them that they didn't need to look at the crates, but rather at a small table near the center of the floor. An ugly man in a dark suit came in from the other side and placed a black briefcase on the table.

As he opened his jacket, an Uzi became visible.

"Uffda..." Stella breathed, "that's the Mafia right there..."

"I'm beginning to agree with you," Regina whispered into Stella's ear. Sudden movement behind them made her clamp her hand down onto Stella's shoulder and whisper: "Don't. Move. We. Got. Company."

Stella had time to let out a pained squeal, but after that, she bit down on her lips and looked down onto the pier with wide eyes.

Two sentries with large, black Rottweilers on metal-studded leashes came around the corner below the two investigators. They took their time going past the warehouse, but didn't look up - they didn't even hear Stella's knees knocking though it was quite loud up on the metal boxes.

After a horribly long wait, the sentries walked further along the warehouse and eventually turned the corner.

"Gawd," Stella croaked.

Regina shook her head and wiped a few beads of sweat off her brow. "That was close," she whispered.

"It was too close... for my shorts..."

"Eww, Stell!"

"I couldn't help it! It was only a little squirt..."

"We don't have a plastic bag you can sit on..."

"Who knows if we'll even get out of here alive! And you're talking about plastic bags!"

"Well, you-"

"Hush! Someone's coming!"

For the umpteenth time in the years she had worked with the easily excitable investigator, Regina scrunched up her face at the insult of being cut off like that, but a deep sigh and a look toward the heavens cured it.

The metal sliding door they had seen Calvin Faucher's squad car drive through earlier in the day rolled all the way up to reveal two men walking outside to smoke a cigarette - both were heavily armed.

"Oh, this wasn't a good idea after all," Stella whispered.

"Now she tells me... hey... hey, look at that," Regina whispered back, pointing at a narrow catwalk inside the row of windows. "D'ya think we could open one of the frames and get in there?"

"Dunno... let's try... quietly!"

"Oh, no kidding?"

"Ha, ha... less sarcasm, please. Sarcasm is like iced coffee... it's only okay to a certain point, then you choke on it."

"Stell?"

"Yeah?"

"I have NO idea what you're talking about... there... put your hand there. Okay... and now pull..."

"UGGGNH! UGGGGGGNNHHH!"

"Pull, Stell!"

"UGGGN- Oy, whaddahell you think I'm doing?" Stella whispered, spinning around to look at her friend. "I'm pullin' like a blip-bloppin' crazy motherhumper on speed! So there!"

"Well, pull harder!"

"Pull harder," Stella growled, yanking the rusted window frame towards her. With a creaky, agonizing groan, the window opened enough to allow the two women to crawl inside.

Once Regina and Stella had reached the narrow catwalk that overlooked the interior of the warehouse, it became clear to them they should have brought a tourist phrase book - the conversations were held exclusively in French.

Down below, three men were talking amongst themselves over the briefcase; their talk was occasionally punctuated by laughter or what appeared to be lewd comments.

Once upon an eon ago, Regina had worked an entire summer in Paris, and she was racking her brain to rediscover the long-forgotten neurons that could translate what the men said. Unfortunately, she was unable to recognize more than a few scattered words here and there. One word she did pick up was 'diamant,' which meant 'diamond'.

One of the three was a slender man who appeared younger than the two others, like Avi Friedman had mentioned at Kazuki's, and Regina narrowed her eyes to give him a closer look. At first glance, he was joking like the others, but a more thorough inspection betrayed that he was nervous - he was constantly switching his weight from one foot to the other, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists to a beat only he knew.

"Stell, look at the slender one," Regina said, whispering into Stella's ear.

The blonde investigator answered by nodding.

"He's as jumpy as a kitten," Regina continued, earning herself a new nod.

The whole catwalk suddenly began to vibrate to such an extent that they had to grab hold of the railing. The reason soon became evident: the sliding door rolled up and a dark gray squad car drove into the warehouse.

"Oy! Ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-ob-OB!" Stella croaked, bouncing up and down while trying to hold onto everything she had - and hold down the pizza and razzie she had just eaten.

A second before the rapid oscillations stopped, Stella's cell phone flew from her holster, bounced along the catwalk, slid down a chute and ended up on top of a crate some ten feet below them. "Oh... blergh... webbl... ibbl... upbbl... blergh..." she croaked, clutching her face that had grown rather green around the gills.

Even Regina was affected by the vibrations, though she was more concerned about her hair. Breathing deeply, she smoothed down the strands that had broken free from her commando cap, and made sure that everything was picture perfect. "Oh! Look, Stell!" she whispered and pointed down.

Near the small table on the floor, none other than Calvin Faucher stepped out of the squad car with a briefcase similar to the one the other goon was holding. As Regina and Stella were watching, the detective opened his briefcase and took out a large bag of diamonds that he put on the table.

"I knew it... I knew it, Reggie!"

"For once, I'll agree with you... you called this one," Regina said and mussed Stella's neck.

The four men below continued to speak in French, and it didn't take long for one of the goons to open the original suitcase which was crammed full with dollar bills. The men grinned and swapped the bag of diamonds for the money.

"We gotta do something before they leave," Stella whispered while rubbing her chin, "but what... uh... I know, call Inspector Moynes."

Down below, one of the goons presented a bottle of booze that he unscrewed and took a long swig from. After wiping the neck on his sleeve, he gave it to detective Faucher who also took a healthy sip.

Reaching for her phone, Stella only grabbed her nylon shoulder holster. "Wh- whut? My phone? Where's my ph-? Reggie, have you seen my phone? I swear I had it when we got in here!"

"I don't-"

"My phone?!"

"Stell..."

"Where's my ph-"

"You musta lost it."

"There's that sarcasm again, Reggie! Remember what I told you about sarcasm?"

"Stella, while we're on the subject... remember to breathe so you'll get oxygen to your brain... here, use my phone," Regina said and reached into her Velcro pocket on her arm.

Breathing deeply, Stella snatched the phone but offered her lover a reasonable facsimile of one of her own two-hundred watt smiles as a thank you. After dialing the number to the precinct, the inevitable happened: "Oh... it's that Muzak again," Stella said quietly. "Bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummm... bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummm... oh, what the flip is that song?! Remington Steele? No..."

"We should have asked Mary-Jane about that Muzak is what we should have done, Stell."

"Well, why didn't you?"

"Why didn't *you*?"

"I had chocolate on my mind. So there! Bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummm... oh... it's not Charlie's Angels, is it? Hmm... no."

Looking down upon the men who were still sharing the bottle, Regina suddenly scrunched up her face. "Stell? Is your phone on?"

"You found my phone? Where?"

"Yes I did, Stell... and I'm asking if the phone is on?"

"Well... of course it's on," Stella said and looked at her tall friend like she had grown a second head. "...why?"

"Is it on silent?"

"Uh... can't remember..."

"Did you at least change the ringtone from that tweedle-deedle nonsense?"

"For your information, yes I did."

"To what?"

Stella quickly gasped and looked down into the warehouse. "To... to... to... oh, I loved that show..."

Out of nowhere, a dark, manly voice suddenly proclaimed the world to be *'IN A TIME OF ANCIENT GODS, WARLORDS, AND KINGS-'*

"OH, STELL!" Regina howled and slapped her forehead.

"I think I found my phone," Stella croaked, looking over the edge of the railing and down onto a crate some distance below where her phone had lit up like a Christmas tree from the incoming call.

'A LAND IN TURMOIL CRIED OUT FOR A HERO-' the phone continued.

Somewhat predictably, the four men down below began to holler, and they all drew their guns and aimed them at the catwalk high above the concrete floor. One of them found a powerful flashlight that he used to sweep the upper levels, and it didn't take more than a few seconds for Regina and Stella to quite literally find themselves in the spotlight.

"Up there! Two men!" one of the goons shouted and took a potshot at the two investigators - fortunately for Stella and Regina, he was a bad shot and it hit the concrete wall several yards away from them.

"Gimme my phone! We gotta hustle, Stell! Now!" Regina howled and jumped towards the open window with her recently reclaimed phone in her hand, but Stella shook her head vehemently and hustled the other way instead to get to her own telephone. "Oh, will ya forget the damn thing! Stell! Oh, man!"

Stella didn't listen. Hunched over and running along the catwalk, she couldn't quite see where she was going in the semi-darkness that was frequently disturbed by the cone from the flashlight.

Predictably, she put her foot on the wrong section and found the chute that had also claimed her telephone. "OoooooOOOOOooooOOOOH!" she howled when she felt the catwalk disappear under her boot.

One foot was suspended in thin air and one was still on the catwalk, but gravity won out and she went down the chute on her rear, bump-bump-bumping all the way down - she actually managed to snatch her phone when she went past the crate it was suspended on - until she landed on the concrete floor with a BOOMPH! that kicked up a fair-sized cloud of ancient dust.

Coughing and spluttering, Stella checked all her body parts and was relieved to find that all were still there. She hadn't even lost her glasses on her way down, but when she looked up, she almost wished she had.

Above her stood four men with dark, serious looks on their faces - and they all had their weapons drawn.

"Uh, hi..."

'IN A TIME OF ANCIENT GODS, WARLORDS, AND KINGS-' suddenly blasted out from the phone, but Stella hurriedly turned it off to avoid any misunderstandings involving her good self and the many firearms in the area.

"Hi... uh... health and safety inspection!" she said and got on her feet. Dusting off her rear, she made a big number of looking all the men in the eye. "Oh boy are you guys in trouble! Yessirree, that chute is gonna cost you plenty. It won't cut it anywhere, not downtown, not out here. Nosirree, but you know what? I'm gonna let it slide this time... so... see ya, fellas."

"Grab that little twerp and tie her up! And get the other one!" Detective Faucher barked and waved his gun in Stella's face.

"Little twerp?! I'm five foot four-and-a-half, thankyouverymuch!" Stella howled, but it was to no avail - the three French Canadians grabbed her arms rather coarsely and forced her over to a tarpaulin-covered wooden crate that was placed against one of the walls of the warehouse. "Oy...! Quit ticklin'!"

As she was pushed against the crate and her arms were tied to the nylon netting for the tarpaulin, all sorts of dark thoughts raced through her mind, and she began to look around for the instruments of torture she was sure she'd be exposed to - like strong wine, subtitled foreign movies or even the dreaded baguettes that would be shoved under her fingernails and set alight.

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Outside, the quiet pier had turned into a beehive of activity with the goons, the sentries and their barking Rottweilers all searching high and low for the missing person.

High and low, but not high enough: instead of climbing down, Regina had taken full advantage of her long legs and had swung herself up on the roof of the warehouse - made of sheets of corrugated iron - where she kept well out of sight by huddling down next to a large ventilation shaft that had a fan on top. The corrugated sheets were highly unstable and felt like they could buckle under her weight at any moment, but she had no other option.

Panting in fits and starts, she took her telephone and used her trembling fingers to dial the number for the police precinct. "Not the Muzak, not the Muzak, not the Muzak," she chanted while she waited for the connection to go through.

'Good evening, you've reached the-'

"This is an emergency! Patch me through to Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes at once!" Regina barked into the phone - speaking strongly but quietly enough for the goons not to hear her.

The secretary immediately followed orders, and a series of clicks and hisses were heard in the telephone.

'Inspector Moyn-'

"Inspector, this is Regina Harrison. Stella is in trouble and we need urgent help! We're down at the docks... the first warehouse after the gate," Regina said and tried to look down the ventilation shaft for any sign of Stella - she couldn't see anything. "She's being held captive at gunpoint by the people who stole the diamonds from Avi Friedman..."

'We know!'

"How soon can you- wait... you know? How can you know?"

'We know because right now, we're not even seventy yards from where you're hiding! You've stumbled smack-bang into a joint task force operation against organized crime!'

"Aw, shit... but there's a crooked cop in your squad, Mary-Jane... Calvin Faucher is working with the-"

'No he's not, he's an undercover operative. His job is to flush out the men who benefited from the robbery on Avi Friedman.'

"But the name on the bloody luggage tag... and Calvin's brothers... and the limo... it's all a charade? Aw, shit!"

'You can say that again.'

"And I will. Shit! Shitshitshitshit-shit!"

'Much as I would like to, there isn't anything we can do for Stella right now. We have to wait for Calvin to give us the signal... or else the entire sting will have been for naught. I really like you gals, you know that, but this will be a millstone around my neck if it falls into the crapper. I'm sorry.'

"Yeah... okay. I understand, Mary-Jane," Regina said and rubbed her forehead. "I, uh... I'll think of something. Talk to ya later."

'Later.'

Groaning, Regina put the phone back in the pocket on her arm and closed the Velcro flap. She looked up into the night-time sky that reflected such a sheen from the tens of thousands of lights in and around greater Bay City that not a single star was visible. "Stell... I'm gonna save you if it's the last thing I do," she whispered and began to climb down the sheets of corrugated iron to get back to the open window.

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Down on the floor, Stella had her face firmly scrunched up - not because she was afraid or needed to pee, but because of the booze-laced breath of the man standing right in front of her.

"Sweet chicky-dee... fella... could you go breathe somewhere else?" she croaked, trying to turn her head away from his mouth. "Please? Your breath is strong enough to strip off paint..."

"Strip? Now there's an idea," the man said with a crooked grin.

"Naw, I don't think it is, ac-chew-ly. I already seen me a naked guy a couple-a times, and believe me, it's not something I wanna experience again..."

Calvin came over to the hostage and put a hand on the guard's shoulder. "Your boss will be here soon, J.P.," he said and shoved the other man away from Stella.

Once Calvin was alone with Stella, he went closer to the tied-up woman than the guard had ever been. "And you, you little twerp... I don't think you quite understand the crap you've gotten yourself into. These guys don't play nice. As soon as the big boss gets here and the transaction is completed, what do you think is gonna happen to you?"

"Burning baguettes?" Stella croaked.

Calvin narrowed his eyes and took a step back from his hostage. "What?"

"B- burning baguettes under my fingernails?"

"Ah, how can I put it... no. No, I don't think it's gonna be burning baguettes."

"Gawd, that's a load off my mind..." Stella said and drew a deep a sigh of relief. "But you... Mista, lemme tell you, the world doesn't look favorably on crooked cops... you may be all big and strong now, but when the judge throws the book at you, you iz going down with the rest of them!"

"Are you threatening me?" Calvin growled and moved his face right up next to Stella's.

"N- n- n- not really..."

"Which gang do you belong to, twerp? You're too short for the Rippaz and you're too white for the Cobras... you're a woman so you can't be a Lord of The Streets, but you're not woman enough for the Amazon Army."

"Not woman enough?! I beg your pardon!"

"What's your stake in all this? Who's your-"

Calvin didn't have time to finish the sentence before two honks were heard from outside the warehouse. *'It's the boss!'* one of the goons shouted.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock... your time is running out, twerp," Calvin said before spinning around on his heel and walking into the center of the warehouse.

Stella gulped once, then once more, and finally once more for good measure. "Reggie... Snookums... this is one of those situations where I really, really, really need your help," Stella croaked, feeling sweat trickle out from every pore in her body, "so will you please come and save your little honey-bunny before she's t- t- t- torn to shreds...? Pleeeeeeeease...?"

Unbeknownst to Stella, her Snookums was watching her at that very moment, though there was very little Regina could do as she was crouched down on the catwalk high above the concrete floor to present the smallest possible target.

"Hmmm," she mumbled, looking with apprehension and worry at the show that was going on below her.

The supposedly crooked cop walked over to the sliding gate and opened a small, integrated door. At once, he started talking to someone outside; someone whose voice was awfully familiar.

"Well, I'll be..." Regina mumbled and crawled back to the row of windows to see better. Sure enough, Calvin Faucher was talking to Avi Friedman, the diamond trader, who was wearing a pale gray business suit, a white Panama hat and an evil grin. "Now that's what I call an S.O.B. This whole thing stinks to high heaven. Betcha ten bucks this is an insurance scam..."

Patting each other on the back, the two men stepped through the integrated door and walked back inside.

Down below, Stella could hardly believe her eyes when Avi Friedman came in with Calvin. "Ooooooh, if I get my hands on that... that... that..." she mumbled, coming up short verbally but continuing the blue prose in her mind. Soon, her lips were working overtime from cussing out the trader.

What happened next left Stella completely and utterly confused.

Avi stepped over to the briefcase with the money and Calvin patted him on the back - then the crooked cop took a step back from the businessman and said "That's a done deal!"

Three seconds later, the sliding door exploded inward and a myriad of police officers wearing black body armor, goggles and assault rifles stormed into the warehouse and threatened everyone into a quick and painless submission.

Behind the shocktroopers came Mary-Jane Moynes with several other plain-clothes detectives, holding her service pistol ready and wearing a bulletproof vest with the letters MCU - Major Crime Unit - on the back.

The black vest clashed with her pale coffee pantsuit, but for Stella, the Inspector was a sight for sore eyes. "Mary-Jane! Wo-hooooo! I knew you'd save me! Reggie? Reggie! Reggiiiiie...?!"

A loud and echoing '*I'm here, Stell! I'm co-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-oming!*' was heard from the other side of the warehouse, and soon, a figure dressed in black flew down the chute until she landed on the floor with a BOOMPH! just like Stella had done earlier.

Back on her feet in oh point zip, Regina stormed between crooks, shocktroopers and detectives with but a single target on her radar - her little honey-bunny.

"Oh, Reggie!"

"Oh, Stell! Are you all right?" Regina said and wrapped her arms around Stella's body that was still tied to the wooden crate. They started kissing at once, even before Mary-Jane could find someone who could untie Stella.

"I am now!" Stella said in one of the very few moments she could tear her lips away from Regina's. "Ooooh! We-" - *kiss, kiss, kiss* - "MMPF! There's-" - *kiss, KISS, kiss* - "someone... some-" - *KISS, kiss, kiss* - "who wants to talk to us!" - *KISS, KISS, kiss*.

"They can find their own damn honey-bunny!" Regina growled and immediately went back to wrestling with Stella's lips.

"Yeah, MMPFH!" - *KISS, kiss, kiss* - "that's nice, but... uhhhh..." - *kiss, KISS* - "I think we... ungh..." - *KISS, KISS, nibble* - "hafta st- stop... MMPF! ...stop now-" - *kiss, nibble*.

Regina agreed and pulled back from her partner with a sigh. With a last, little stolen kiss and a cocked eyebrow, she faced the interloper who turned out to be a blushing Mary-Jane.

In the meantime, another detective came to Stella's rescue and used a pocket knife on the ropes that were restraining her arms. When the ropes had been cut, she put her liberated limbs to good use by wrapping them around Regina's waist.

"Hi," the Inspector said without actually looking at the two investigators out of fear of blushing even harder. "So... is that how you always say hi, or...?"

"Naw," Stella said with a grin, "this was just a little Nice To See Ya. You should see what a real I've Missed You, Baby looks like."

"Uh-huh? I better take a rain check..."

Behind the Inspector, the various goons, crooks and criminals were led out to a large, black bus that had been parked outside the smashed sliding door. Once the warehouse had been cleared of opponents, Calvin Faucher came over to the three women with a curious look on his face. "Hi... I'm Calvin," he said and put out his hand.

"Hiya, bub," Stella said and shook it. "I guess you aren't as crooked as you appeared to be, huh?"

"No. By the way, I'm sorry for calling you a twerp back there..."

"Oh, that's all right. I've been called worse... though I can't remember when," Stella said and gave Regina's waist a squeeze to make her stop shooting fire with her suddenly fiercely blue eyes.

"And your name is...?"

"Stella Starr from the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. This is my lovely assistant Regina Harrison," Stella said and gave Regina's waist another little squeeze.

"Oh," Calvin said and scratched his hair, "you tried to call me, didn't you?"

"That's right, Detective," Regina said.

Calvin chuckled and began to rub his chin. "Boy, this could have turned into a mess... I wasn't sure which peg to put you on, Miss Starr..."

"The feeling was mutual, Mr. Faucher," Stella said with a wink. "When I saw you come in with ol' Avi, I sorta-kinda guessed that it was an insurance scam or something in that vein... right?"

"Hey, that's what I said!" Regina interjected.

"Yes it was," Mary-Jane said, "Avi Friedman contracted a known group of thugs to perform the robbery. Unfortunately for him, we already had an operative inside the gang. After the robbery, our operative was attacked and chased by some of the gang members but he managed to escape with a portion of the rocks... unfortunately, they caught up with him and gave him a good beating. He hasn't been able to tell us where the diamonds went."

"I know where they went!" Stella said with an impossibly broad grin. "We found the bag with the diamonds in my Pacer. It's in our office... in my desk drawer. What a string of cosmic co-inky-dinks, huh? Wow, you'd almost think a higher being was playing us like puppets, huh? She pulls my strings and I jerk this way... she pulls another and I jerk that-a-way... ain't that right, Reggie?"

Regina flashed one of her trademark two-hundred watt smiles and pulled Stella close, but Calvin just stood there with a comical look on his face and his jaw halfway down his chest.

Mary-Jane noticed her colleague's dumbstruck look but could only offer a half-shrug as compensation. "Eh... it's always like this when Stella and Regina are involved... you'll get used to it... eventually."

"In short, we still got it," Regina said, much to Stella's amusement.

"You better believe it, Snookums," Stella said and stood up on tip-toes to lay a wet one on her partner's lips.

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Half past twelve, Regina drove the silver metallic sports car into the parking lot at Rockin' Ruby's. The bar closed at one, so they had no problems finding a spot near the entrance.

"So," Stella said, counting off on her fingers, "crook one hired crook two, three and four to rob him. Once they had, crook two and three turned on crook four and wanted his cut of the loot, too. What crook one, two and three couldn't know was that crook four was an undercover cop. Crook four dumped the diamonds in my car with a note for a person that crook one, two and three mistook for a fellow crook, namely crook five. It turns out crook five wasn't, he was also an undercover cop. Well, then we have crook six, Mr. Bad Breath-

"Stell?"

"Uh... yeah?" Stella said, holding up four fingers on one hand and two on the other.

"Does it matter? The diamonds are safe, you're safe, a handful of crooks are off the street and Mary-Jane got a huge feather in her cap. Win-win all 'round, really."

"You're right," Stella said and reached over to claw Regina's stomach. "Well, I do have one regret."

"What's that?"

"That we... again... failed to ask Mary-Jane where the Muzak came from..." Stella said with a snicker.

Regina chuckled and reciprocated the clawing by caressing Stella's thigh. "We're just gonna have to live with it."

"Yeah. Uh, Snookums...?" Stella said and pointed at the door.

"I know, I know..."

Once Stella was safely out of the low-slung sports car, the two investigators walked hand in hand across the near-deserted parking lot until they reached the door to the bar.

Stella, as always the perfect hostess, decided to hold the door open for Regina. Just as she opened it, a very familiar bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummmm wafted out from the TV that Ruby had recently installed above the bar counter.

"Holy SHIT! That's it!" Stella cried and forgot all about the door - inevitably, the spring-operated door bounced back and thumped into Regina's left side.

"OWCH! Stella! That's gonna leave a bruise!"

"That's it! Ha-ha! That's it!" Stella said, jumping up and down while pointing excitedly at the colorful pictures on the TV. "It's the A-Team! Bum-bu-bum-bummmm, bum-bum-bu-bummmm! Ho-yeah, baby! I knew that I knew it... uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh! It's the A-Team, Snookums!"

Regina growled as she rubbed her arm, but she couldn't stay angry with her easily excitable friend for too long. "Well, that's good, Stell," she said and pulled the bouncing investigator into a sideways hug.

Ruby Albrecht rose from her customary place at the end of the shiny bar counter and came up to greet her two regulars. "Hi, gals. Uh... what's that about the A-Team?"

"Long story, Ruby. Hiya," Regina said and took off her commando cap to let her long, dark locks fall down over her shoulders where they - inevitably - ended up in a perfect cascade.

"When isn't it with you guys...?"

Grinning, Stella pushed her glasses up her nose and squeezed herself flat against Regina's side. "Hi, Ruby. Oh, we're in a good mood today. We busted an insurance scammer and a French Canadian Mafia cell!"

"Oh, okay..."

"Yeah! So... uh, I'd like a funny drink if you have one. With an umbrella and stuff. Maybe layered? I mean the drink, not the umbrella," Stella said while nudging herself repeatedly against her tall friend.

"Okay. Comin' right up."

"And a driver's rum and coke for me, Ruby," Regina said and schlepped the bouncing Stella down towards their regular booth.

"Sure," Ruby said and went behind the counter to get the napkins, but when she turned back around, Regina and Stella were already snuggling up to each other so furiously that the napkins were pushed aside for later. "Sheesh, you guys... get a room," she said, chuckling under her breath at the sight.

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THE END of DIAMONDS ARE A P.I.'S WORST NIGHTMARE

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VI - MOVIE HORROR

Written by Norsebard

"Wrath Of The Midnight Ripper," Stella Starr mumbled as she and Regina Harrison left the movie theater with the rest of the late show crowd. "Brrr... I should have known it wouldn't be family-friendly fare... gawd..." she continued, slurping up the last of her half-gallon-sized cup of Slurppy! Cherry Cola before dumping it in the appropriate trash can in the lobby.

"Aw, it wasn't that bad," Regina said, crumbling up the plastic bag her rice treats had been in and sending it the way of the Dodo in another trash can.

"Yes, it was, Reggie... when the Midnight Ripper came into that dorm... with his pickaxe and his insane eyes and his scar and-and-and-and his long, creepy fingers... brrrr. Gawd."

"You mean fingers like these?" Regina husked and let her long, slender digits play around on Stella's exposed neck that suddenly sprouted ten thousand goosebumps in oh point nothing-at-all.

"Don't. Do. That. Reggie," Stella croaked, swatting away Regina's hands faster than she could spell her own name.

"Sorry," Regina said and sought out Stella's hand instead. Walking out of the glitzy, glamorous lobby with the many posters promoting the future premieres and the films that were already playing, the two investigators strolled along the sidewalk to get back to their Mercedes.

The April weather showed itself from its best side and there was still a touch of warmth in the air even a quarter past eleven. The sky was mostly black although there were still a few bright streaks in the western skies.

The parking lot next to the movie theater was well-lit, but the fact that it held cars, trucks and SUVs of every size created deep shadows between the vehicles.

Stella shivered and pulled her yellow down vest even closer as she stepped into the paved lot. She wished she had decided to wear something more substantial than a Bugs Bunny T-shirt and a pair of thin summer jeans, but when they had left her apartment, the temperature had been too high for anything else.

"You cold?" Regina said and found her car keys.

"I'm scared shitless!" Stella whispered.

"No... not because of the Midnight Ripper?"

"Yesssss..."

"It was really quite tame, Stell. Even if it did get kinda bloody along the way... uh, and he got blown up at the end with that dynamite and everything. But it was a great full-burn, don't you think? They're already filming yet another sequel, actually."

"La-la-la-la-la, can't hear ya, don't wanna hear ya, ya might as well stop talking," Stella said and jerked her head around to look for pickaxe-wielding Midnight Rippers lurking in the shadows. "Never gonna watch another horror movie again in my life. Never. Never-ever. Never-ever-ever... nuh-uh. No way, no how, no ma-"

"Hiya Misshy, got a light?" an elderly man said right in front of Stella just as she went past a tall SUV. From his slurred voice and the funny way he was holding his unlit cigarette, it was evident that he'd had a drink too many, but Stella didn't have time to acquaint herself with such details.

All in the space of one second, she gasped loudly, stood up on tip-toes, stared wide-eyed at the elderly man, let out an inarticulate groaning shriek, spun around, jumped up and finally wrapped herself around Regina's tall, sculpted body like a girl kangaroo looking for her mother's pouch.

"Whoa, Stell!" Regina said, staggering first backward and then forward as she tried to compensate for the added weight.

The inebriated man wiped his nose on the back of his hand and looked like he didn't understand a thing of what was going on. "Hey..." he slurred, trying to focus his watery eyes, "where'd she go? I jusht ashked if she had a light... I got this chigarette here and I wanna shmoke it..."

"I don't have a light either, Sir," Regina said, grabbing Stella's trembling butt cheeks to keep her from sliding off.

"Awww, that'sh good... pregnant women shouldn't shmoke," the man said, swaying left and right. "How long d'ya have to go before you pop your load there, Misshy?"

Despite her terror, Stella couldn't stop herself from snorting loudly and muss her head into Regina's upper chest.

"Oh, I'm not... uh..." Regina said, but realized that to a drunken man, she would indeed look pregnant.

"Musht be any day now," the man continued without noticing Regina's hesitation. "I mean, you're sho big... musht be tripletsh or shomething... you're really brave getting pregnant... I mean, at your age an' everything."

Regina groaned and took a staggering step backward. "At my age? At my age?! I'm forty-three, thank you very much!" she howled, almost forgetting to keep a firm grip on Stella's rear.

"Oh... okay. Naw, you look a good ten yearsh older. Musht be your gray hair," the man said and tried to wipe his blurry eyes.

"I don't have gray hair!" Regina screeched. This time, she did forget to hold onto Stella's butt which meant that her precious cargo dropped like a stone onto the paved lot - or rather, down onto her feet. "Owch! Stell!"

"Ooooh, Reggie... my butt!" Stella groaned, reaching behind her to rub her aforementioned body part.

The inebriated man was already swaying back and forth like a leaf caught in a storm, but seeing the pregnant woman give birth in the middle of the parking lot gave him such a shock that his eyes nearly rolled back in his head. A split second later, he spun around on his axis and hurried away from the two women, letting out a long, wailing groan as he disappeared back into the shadows.

"Okaaaaay..." Stella said from her position on the ground where she was still holding onto Regina's long legs just to be on the safe side in case the inebriated man had really been the Midnight Ripper. "Now look what you've done!"

"What I've done? He insulted my hair! What was I supposed to do, Stell... take it on the chin? Naw, not with me... not with Regina Harrison... not when I so clearly still got it!" Regina said and flicked her perfect hair over her shoulder where it obviously landed in a perfect cascade down her long back.

"WHATever."

"Tell you what we're gonna do, Stell... one, you get off my legs. Two, we're going over to the Merc. Three, we drive home and spend the rest of the night in our jammies and then under the blanket."

"Awright!" Stella cried and scrambled away from Regina's legs with a wide smile on her lips.

While the blonde investigator got on her feet and hurried over to their car where she bounced up and down like an excited puppy, Regina rolled her eyes and looked toward the heavens.

"Sheesh... and all because I wanted to see a nice, little horror movie..."

"Are ya comin' or what, Reggie?"

"Yeah, yeah... don't get all wadded up. I'm right here," Regina said and pressed the little button on the fob to unlock the SLK.

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THE END of MOVIE HORROR

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VII - FIRE & ICE CREAM

Written by Norsebard

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CHAPTER 1

To call Stella Starr nervous would be an understatement. She wasn't just nervous, she was nail-bitingly, stomach-churningly, cold sweat-inducingly nervous. Pacing back and forth while waiting for news on her most beloved old girl, she had already worn down the fingernails on her right hand and was about to go to work on those on her left.

The late April weather was nice and warm - as witnessed by her bare feet in her purple flip-flops, her loud, zebra-striped tights and her red, shapeless t-shirt that drooped stylishly to leave her right shoulder visible - and yet she felt cold to the core.

Finally, the man she was waiting for came out to greet her.

"How is she? How is my old girl? Pleeeeeeease tell me she's all right! I can't go on if I don't get her back!" she said, rushing over to the man and grabbing hold of his lapels.

"Whoa!" Billy the Mechanic said, trying to pry his neighbor's surprisingly strong fingers off his filthy, canary-yellow boiler suit. "Whoa... Miss Starr! You're gonna get oily and stuff!"

"I don't care! Tell me how she is!"

"Your Pacer is just fine, Miss Starr," Billy said and gave up trying to release himself from Stella's iron grip. Instead, he reached up and pushed his greasy baseball cap back from his forehead so he could run an oily hand through his sweaty hair.

"Ohhhh!" Stella howled, jerking away from Billy's manly chest to bury her face in her hands. "I was so worried... SO worried..."

"It's just a car..." Billy mumbled.

"No! No, it's not just a car! It's THE car, Billy! I've... I... you just don't... we... she's my old girl!" - With that, Stella hurried into Billy's garage to look at her pride and joy, her beloved brown AMC Pacer.

"Uh... okay," Billy said, looking like he didn't know if he should call the local psychiatric ward or not. Shrugging, he felt it best to keep a close eye on the easily excitable woman. "Uh... anyway. I've replaced the lock cylinder on the hatchback and sent the paperwork to the insurance company. They've gotta square that between themselves and the cops and stuff... don't want anything to do with that."

Stella nodded vigorously, too preoccupied with running her fingers over the fixed hatchback to answer verbally.

After getting the bill from a messy table at the far wall of the garage, Billy came back to Stella and handed it to her. "And the whine under the dashboard... well, that was an overheating control

box for the turning signal. No big deal. I got one from a wrecking yard for next to nothing. All in all, it'll be eighty bucks, Miss Starr."

"Thank you, Billy," Stella whispered reverently, draping herself over the side of her Pacer to reconnect physically with her old girl.

"Uh... yeah. No problem," Billy said and scratched his two-day stubble.

Five minutes later, Stella reversed out of Billy's garage and drove slowly across the parking lot to get to the slot closest to the door of the building housing the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency.

Getting out, she whistled a merry little tune as she reached back in and started wiping Billy's thumbprints off the dash and the steering wheel with a fluffy rag. "Ahhh... all is right in my world," she said out loud as she put the rag back in the glovebox.

Her world became even more right when her merry whistling was joined by the Beach Boys who blasted out of a car radio behind her. Turning around, she could see her business associate, best friend and now bedmate Regina Harrison driving up the short ramp and trickling closer to her in the low-slung, silver metallic Mercedes SLK.

Driving with the roof down, Regina slowed down to almost nothing and put up her hand in the age-old gesture of '*yo honey-bunny, slap me a high-five*' when she went past Stella.

With the high-five duly slapped, Stella hurried after the SLK as it drove into the next slot after the Pacer. "Good morning, Snookums. She's back!" she said, pointing at the Pacer.

"So I see," Regina said and turned off the engine. After unbuckling, she took Stella's hand and pulled her down for a strong How Ya Doin' kiss. "Mmmua! Sorry I couldn't pick you up this morning. I know how much you hate going by bus."

"Aw, it wasn't too bad... I only had my toes crushed once... and I got a backpack in the gut... and a toothless guy kept leering at my boobs," Stella mumbled and adjusted her glasses.

"Oh, that's good." - Taking the key from the ignition, Regina opened the door and stepped out of the car, only to be met by a long, insistent wolf call.

While the wolf call was still fresh on her lips, Stella took a step back to get the big picture - or more to the point since it was Regina, the tall picture.

The six-foot-one former Queen of the Catwalks was wearing black shoes, form-fitting black jeans, a nylon belt with a black buckle, a white, broad-strapped tank top designed to look like a men's undershirt from the 1960s, and finally an open, breezy summer shirt with three-quarter length sleeves, held in a shade of blue that matched her eyes perfectly. To round off the ensemble, she had a pair of pitch black sunglasses perched on top of her dark locks.

Grinning at the wolf call, Regina went into the first pose of her favorite Too Cool For Words routine - the one where she cocked her hips and put a pinkie on her lips - and let out a sensual sigh that was meant to show she was ready for anything her blonde companion could throw at her.

"You know, Reggie," Stella said and made a big production number of furrowing her brow and narrowing her eyes, "if you practice that pose a bit more, I have a feeling you could go places."

"Oh, you!" Regina said and pulled her lover into a crushing hug.

"OOOF! Okay, okay, okay... you still got it!" Stella mumbled, squished up next to Regina's c-cups.

"An' don't you forget it!"

Stella broke out in a cheesy snicker at her position in life and the world in general, but decided to get the most out of it while it was there, and snuggled down into her lover's grasp. "Oh... no chance of that ever happenin'!"

"Hey, are we still on for the harbor fair today and tonight? They're advertising it every three minutes on the radio," Regina said once they finally separated.

"Oh, you bet your cute little belly button we are," Stella said and did her absolute worst to tickle Regina's stomach in the vicinity of said belly button. "And we're taking the Pacer. It's the bicentennial anniversary of Bay City... what better way to celebrate that than to drive down there in a genuine piece of Americana?" she continued, pulling her tall lover over to the building.

"Genuine piece of... something," Regina mumbled, but Stella didn't pick it up - fortunately. "Stell... ummm..." she said out loud once they were at the door.

"What?"

"Are you... are you going to wear those zebra-striped tights to the fair?" Regina said out of the corner of her mouth while Stella put the keys into the lock on the front door.

Stella stopped dead and turned around slowly, forgetting all about the keys. Putting her hands on her hips, she thrust out her jaw and sent Regina a glare that said: *'Go on, insult my clothes... no no, don't hold back. I'd love to hear it'* - "Yes I am. So there!"

"O-kay."

"Would you rather I went pantless to the harbor fair, Reggie?"

"Well, that would definitely draw atten-"

" 'Cos if you do, just say it. Or maybe you don't wanna go to the harbor fair with me at all, Reggie? 'Cos if you don't, just say it. I got a whoooooole phonebook of gorgeous women who would love to come along."

Chirping crickets.

"You know what, Stell, your zebra-striped tights are a really good fit," Regina said and nodded enthusiastically.

"Mmmm!" - Stella spun around and finished unlocking the front door. Whooshing it open, she strode inside and went over to her desk that had recently been liberated from the clutches of the dreaded Paper Monster.

Regina followed a bit slower and gave Stella a couple of sideways glances as she kicked off her shoes. As always, the plush carpet tickled her feet as she walked across it, but the tickling would have to wait - she was on a mission.

After briefly stopping at her desk to put down her sunglasses, she went into the conference room and began to rummage through the first of their wardrobes to look for something very particular that she knew would transform Stella's outfit from ridiculous to not-quite-as ridiculous.

Before Regina could make it back, their phones started ringing. "I got it," Stella shouted and reached across her desk to pick up the receiver. "You've reached the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. This is Stella Starr, how may we help you?"

'Hello?' a female voice said at the other end of the line. '*Are you Mr. Harrison Starr's secretary? Is he in?*'

"No," Stella croaked in a strangely choked-up voice. "Mr. Harrison Starr isn't in 'cos there is no Mr. Harrison Starr and there will never be no Mr. Harrison Starr unless something very very wonky happens and either Reggie or myself will have a sex change operation which I can guarantee you will never, ever, ever, EVER happen!" - DEEP breath.

'*Oh... pardon.*'

"Think nothin' of it... common mistake," Stella croaked and pulled out the drawer where she kept the information sheet recording the number of '*People asking for Mr. Harrison Bleepin' Starr.*'

A quick count-off proved that the mysterious caller was the forty-seventh different person to get it wrong. After drawing a fat line with a pencil, Stella slammed the drawer shut while rolling her eyes to such an extent they nearly fell out of her head.

'*My name is Carrie Stephenson and I... I think my husband is cheating on me.*'

"I see," Stella said and sat up straight. She quickly took her notepad and flipped it open to a new page. "Go on," she continued, taking the pencil she had only just used.

'Well, he's a businessman who's always worked late, but recently, there's often a faint smell of wine and perfume on his collars. I used to work for him, but when I got pregnant, he hired a new secretary... a very beautiful woman.'

"Mmmm. And the scent of perfume on his collars isn't just a new brand of aftershave? You know, we had that in a case once where the husband... it's nearly always the husband, but I digress... anyway, where the husband had tried a new brand of aftershave without telling his wife and she conked him over the head with a cast iron frying pan... or was it a wok? It could have been a wok, I can't remember. It was one of the two."

'Ah... no. I always buy his colognes et cetera.'

"All right. Well, I suppose you would like us to put your husband under surveillance? We have a special discount this month on stakeouts. Cameras, sound recording, the works, everything is included in the price."

'Uh... surveillance? Well... possibly... do you think it would help me?'

"Well," Stella said and locked eyes with Regina who was pushing the full-sized mirror into the office with a wide leather belt hanging loose over her shoulder and an impossibly flashy two-hundred watt smile on her lips, "in my experience, we nearly always catch them in the proverbial act, so... yes. It would give you an insight into what he's doing. It might be perfectly harmless."

'I... I would like that... yes. I would like you to observe my husband at and after work. He's working at-'

"Oh, we don't need that information now, Mrs. Stephenson. I'll start a case file and do the necessary paperwork later. Do you have a number where we can reach you without your husband knowing about it?"

'Yes, it's 555-6548.'

"- Four-eight. Got it. Thank you for choosing the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency, Mrs. Stephenson. I promise we'll get to the bottom of it. After all, our motto is 'We'll never let a two-timer get away with it.' "

'Thank you! Thank you, Miss Starr. I'll talk to you later. Bye-bye!'

"Goodbye, Mrs. Stephenson," Stella said and hung up. After making a few notes on her notepad, she turned around and looked at the real motto which read *'If you're not satisfied with our services, you can kiss our...'* -- Shrugging, she turned back to Regina.

"A new client, Stell?" Regina said and sat down on the corner of the desk.

"Yup. What's that you got there?"

"A belt."

"Oh, ha flippin' ha. I have eyes, you know."

"Oh, I know. It's a belt that will transform your outfit from... mmm... mmm... mmm..."

"Spit it out, Reggie!" Stella said and thumped her fist down onto the desktop.

Regina grinned and rose from the corner of the desk. "From slightly tawdry to sublime. C'mon, get up," she said and held up the belt. "Get up... you know I only bite when you ask nicely."

"Yeah... tee hee," Stella said with a snicker. "Oh, all right."

Getting up, Stella went over to stand in front of her friend. Snickering again, she stood up on tip-toes and stole a little kiss from the tall woman's lips. "So?"

"Let's go over to the mirror. Okay. Stand with your back to me... yep, like that," Regina said and put the leather belt around Stella's waist once she was in position. After tightening the belt on top of the red oversized t-shirt, she pushed it down onto Stella's hips and allowed the strap to hang loose. "Is that great or what? You may thank me," she continued, trying to fluff the dirty-blonde haystack of hair into something resembling a hairstyle.

Stella cocked her head and looked at her reflection. She tried different poses to see how the belt moved with her, and was quite surprised at how cool it actually looked. "Hmmm. Well. Yeah. The belt looks great, but..."

"But?" Regina said and leaned in to give her shorter lover a kiss on her neck.

"The zebra tights gotta go..." Stella said with a shrug.

Nodding, Regina added another little kiss for good measure. "Two words, my little honey-bunny. White. Capris."

"You planned this all along, didn't ya, Reggie?"

Regina shook her head slowly and offered Stella a "Who me?" along with her patented Can't-give-a-hoot shrug.

"Yeah, right..."

"I plead the Fifth," Regina said and leaned down to make her presence felt on Stella's neck.

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"We're all going on a- summer holiday!" Stella sang at the top of her lungs a few hours later when she and Regina were cruising down Carter Boulevard - at a mind-blowing thirty-three

miles per hour - to get to one of the connecting streets that would take them downtown. "Oh... I love that song. And I love that it's possible to buy brand new eight-track cartridges on eBay!" she said, stroking the Pacer's ancient player that was working itself through her newly acquired Cliff Richard's Greatest Hits.

"And I love how you look in those white Capris, hon," Regina purred, stroking Stella's thigh.

"Thank you... though clothes aren't everything, you know. It's what inside that's really important."

"But of course... especially when it's you," Regina husked.

Stella turned her head and flashed Regina a very broad smile. "Awww!" she said, returning the favor by reaching over and clawing Regina's endless thigh.

"Oh! Fifty-fifth Street! Hang a right here, Stell! Here!" Regina suddenly said, pointing to the turning lane to their immediate right.

Stella yelped and hurriedly looked in the mirror - she saw at once she couldn't make it into the inside lane, but she tried anyway. The wheels were barely touching the white line when a delivery van let it be known through an excessive application of its horn that there wasn't any room for the brown Pacer.

In a flash, they were past the intersection and were well on their way towards Fifty-fourth Street. "Oh, shoot... oh, flip... oh, flop... oh, flippety- I was too busy with your thigh to notice the street," Stella growled and whacked her fist down onto the rim of the steering wheel.

"As long as you weren't too busy with the street to notice my thigh, we'll be just fine, you and me," Regina said with a grin, but it faded fast when she caught a glimpse of the dark look on Stella's face. "Ooookay," she said and minded her own business.

"Ah, we can still get there if we take Fifty-third Street. There's an under- and overpass back to Fifty-fifth," Stella said and made sure to use her brand new, whine-free turning signal before she swept into the inner lane where she slowed down to a safer twenty-eight miles per hour to be able to keep up with the street signs.

Regina furrowed her brow and immediately reached for the glovebox to get their map book - then she remembered it was still in the Mercedes. "Are you sure about that, Stell? I think there are roadworks on Fifty-fourth and Fifty-third. I think we have to go all the way down to Fiftieth Street to cross back to Fifty-fourth."

"Now you're confusing me, Reggie," Stella said and furrowed her brow. "We can't get to the harbor fair by going down Fifty-fourth, only Fifty-fifth... but we need to use Fifty-third to get back to Fifty-fifth 'cos Fifty-third isn't... no... shit... 'cos Fifty-fourth isn't connected to Fifty-fifth Street."

"No, Fifty-fourth..."

"Didn't you just say there are roadworks on Fifty-fourth Street?"

"Uh... yeah," Regina said and looked up at the signs to see where they were, "I meant Fiftieth. We need to go to Fiftieth Street to cross back to Fifty-fifth. I'm pretty sure there are roadworks on Fifty-fourth and Fifty-third... right?"

"Whaddaya mean 'right'? You askin' me? I haven't got a clue, Reggie!"

"Well, me neither! Maybe we can use Fifty-second or Fifty-first? I don't know... it's been ages since I've been down either one."

"No, Fifty-first Street won't work 'cos that's a dead end that ends in a parking lot outside a huge shopping mall."

"You sure about that?"

"You betcha front teeth I'm sure." - *Tick-tock, tick-tock* - "Or is that Fifty-second Street?"

"I think it's Fifty-second Street, Stell, 'cos I remember a print ad that says '*Come to Monisha's Mall on Fifty-Second Street... your one-stop shopping paradise for designer clothes, cosmetics and accessories.*' "

"Yeah, you'd remember stuff like that," Stella mumbled under her breath.

"Whassat?"

"Nothing, dear."

"Oh. Oh! Look!" Regina suddenly said and pointed out of the windshield at a large, orange sign that said '*Roadworks! Fifty-fourth and Fifty-third Street Closed! Detour along Fifty-fifth Street.*'

"Fifty-fifth Street!" Stella howled and sat up straight on the Pacer's plush velour seat. "They put the sign **after** the blip-bloppin' intersection! Now we have to go all the blip-bloppin' way down to blip-bloppin' Fiftieth Street to get back to blip-bloppin' Fifty-fifth! Aargh!"

By the way Stella gripped the steering wheel, Regina knew that even the most innocuous word, comment or question could send the blonde investigator into a spit-flying '...ucker'-rage, so she chose to be as quiet as a mouse and crawl way over to the passenger side door.

Twenty minutes later, Stella drove off the busy Fiftieth Street and into the forecourt of a gas station to cool down and to get some sugar for her sensitive system. Before she had even said a

word - apart from an inarticulate growl - she left the car and stomped across the lot to get to the convenience store.

Still minding her own business, Regina flipped down the sun visor and dove right into one of her favorite pastimes - looking at herself in the little mirror on the flipside. "Mmmm... o-yeah... uh-huh... mmm-hmmm," she said, trying to cock her head at different angles to find the best possible Perfect Light.

Regina's serenity was rudely interrupted by a young boy who came over to the Pacer and peeked into the opened window. Though she tried to go on with her posing, the boy's continuous licking on a lollipop that seemed to be a foot long made it impossible, and she eventually flipped up the sun visor and put her elbow on the windowsill. "Hi," she said, looking at the boy's denim coverall, Batman t-shirt and red beanie cap.

"Hi." - *Lick, lick, LICK, lick.*

"What are you doing out here by yourself?"

Lick, LICK, lick, LICK - "Waitin' for my parents to come back out of the store."

"Oh."

LICK, lick, lick, lick.

"You know, all that sugar isn't good for you."

Lick, lick, LICK, lick - "My Mom says it's okay."

"Oh. Well, who am I to argue with your Mom," Regina said and chewed on her cheek, wishing for Stella to return so they could get on with their agenda.

"I'm not allowed" - *LICK, LICK, lick, lick* - "to talk to strangers."

"But you came to me?"

Lick, LICK, LICK, lick - "You didn't look scary."

"But of course I don't look scary! Kid, let me tell you a story of how I, Regina Harrison, once stole the show from one of the-"

"Will-yam." - *LICK, lick, lick, LICK.*

"Pardon?"

Lick, lick, LICK, LICK - "Will-yam."

"William? That's your name?"

"No, Will-yam." - *LICK, lick, lick, LICK.*

"Will-yam, right. Okay, Will-yam, many, many years ago, I shared a special catwalk at the Cannes Film Festival with one of the greats... she was considered a Goddess, but I got the headlines, and she didn't appreciate that one b-"

"Are you a hundred years old? You have wrinkles everywhere." - *LICK, lick, lick, lick.*

Regina's bragging got stuck halfway down her throat, and she blinked a dozen times to get the shock under control. Then she hurriedly flipped down the sun visor to look at herself in the little mirror. "S- sure... I have one or t- two here and th- there, but n- not everywhere... Stella... heeeelp! Oh, where is she when I need her?"

LICK, LICK, LICK, lick. - "My parents are back. Goodbye," Will-yam said, spun around on his heels and ran over to two people who came out of the convenience store carrying two six-packs of Slurppy! Classic Cola and a shopping bag filled to the brim with candy and potato chips. "Mommy, I just spoke to a woman who's a hundred years old!" Will-yam said excitedly, jumping up and down and pointing at the Pacer.

"Stella... where are you...? I need you so badly..." Regina croaked, slipping further and further down in the seat so the eyes of the world wouldn't be on her hundred-year old wrinkles.

Two minutes later, Stella came back out of the gas station store licking a huge raspberry lollipop. Not knowing that her Snookums needed some moral support, she took her time crossing the parking lot, stopping to look at a few specials that were lined up outside the store.

"Wannammpf lickmmpf?" she said as she sat down in the antique car - *Gulp!* - "Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"I'm a hundred years old and I have wrinkles everywhere," Regina croaked, trying to stretch her skin with her hands.

"Y'know, you look like a ghoul when you do that. Uggh. Don't like it one bit."

"A ghoul? What's worse, looking like a ghoul or a wrinkled old woman?"

"Snookums," Stella said and started the Pacer. "You need to lick a little lollipop. Here. And don't make me say that again, my tongue still hasn't recovered from the first time."

"Sugar isn't good for you..." Regina croaked.

"Pah. A lollipop is always good for you. Now eat while I get back out on the street."

Sob, pout, sulk - "Thank you, Stell... you don't think I look like I'm a hundred years old, do you?"

"Uh... no...? Ah, you still got it," Stella said and accidentally ran her hand all the way up and down Regina's thigh.

Sob, sob, pout, sulk - "Thanks, honey-bunny..." - with that, Regina put out her tongue and started licking the raspberry lollipop at a ferocious pace. "Mmmmpf! Sugarmmpf..."

Stella narrowed her eyes and watched Regina lick the tooth-achingly sweet candy like there was no tomorrow. "Snookums... did we go through one of those personality-swap techno-gizmo thingies like in that Syfy movie we watched the other day? 'Cos... I don't know... your behavior is a little odd..."

"But I lovemmpf sugarmmpf..."

"Uh-huh?" Before driving onto Fiftieth Street, Stella made sure to check everywhere for the Candid Cameras she was sure had been put up while she had been in the convenience store.

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By the time they made it into the zone close to the fairgrounds at the end of Fifty-fifth Street - after doubling back, over, under and through the various side streets and detour routes - the huge raspberry lollipop had been reduced to a tiny little slip of vaguely pink sugar.

"Mmmm... I love lollipops," Stella said as they rolled up to the end of a seemingly mile-long line of family cars that were all waiting to get into the fair's designated parking area, the gigantic asphalt lots outside the Bay City Bulldawgs' stadium that had been commandeered for the event. "If only they didn't make you so thirsty."

"Uh-huh," Regina echoed, wishing she had something - anything! - to remove the taste of artificial raspberry flavor from her lips and tongue.

Stella leaned out of the opened window to see if she could suss out how long it would take - 'long' was the short answer. "Wow... how many people d'ya think are here, Reggie? A million? Maybe more?"

"Oh, I don't think-"

"And they only have one guy sitting in the booth. Isn't that typical, Reggie?"

"Well, yeah but-"

"I think it is. They want our money for the parking and the stuff at the harbor fair, but they won't provide us with a decent service."

"Maybe there was another guy but he needed to pee?"

Chirping crickets.

Grunting, Stella popped out the spent lollipop stick and put it in the ashtray. "Well, wouldn't that be typical? You'd ha' think he could have a bucket or something in there to take a leak in," she grumbled, raising her foot off the brake to let the Pacer trickle forward a car-length.

"Wanna listen to some music while we wait, Stell?" Regina said, already holding the next eight-track cartridge ready.

"Which one is it?"

"Disco Explosion '79!" Regina said with a broad, near-two-hundred watt smile.

Chuckling at the look on her friend's face, Stella reached over and patted the endless thigh. "Right on, sista! Let the music play!"

"That'll be twenty dollars, please," the uniformed man said once Stella and Regina had made it to the glass booth.

Stella already had her wallet out, but the staggering amount of money needed for such a simple operation made her come to a dead halt and stare at the man with wide-open eyes. "Naw, back it up, fella... we only want a spot to park in... not buy the whole dang stadium..."

"Twenty dollars, please."

"To park here? Twenty dollars for a measly parking spot at a football stadium that belongs to a team that plays so flip-floppingly awful they went two and fourteen last season even with their best line-up...? Hell, they couldn't even beat the conference whipping boys! Aw, screw that, WE ARE the conference whipping boys!"

"Twenty dollars, please."

Stella's jaw moved in erratic patterns, her fingers were playing a Speed Metal anthem on the steering wheel and there was a strange growl coming from somewhere deep in her throat - in short, she wasn't best pleased. "All right," she growled and gave the parking attendant two ten-dollar bills.

The uniformed attendant tore off a stub from a notepad and handed it to Stella with a fake smile and an even faker: "Follow the yellow lines into the parking lots. Have a nice day, Ma'am."

"That's Miss, buster!" Stella barked and mashed the gas. The old girl lurched forward and cleared the area around the booth in world record time.

Regina glanced at her friend but wisely kept to herself.

Following the yellow lines, Stella drove over several speed bumps and went past a first, then a second, then a third lot that had already been filled to capacity and subsequently closed. There were already thousands upon thousands of cars, SUVs and trucks parked in orderly lines in the lots, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out they would need to go on a trek resembling the forty days in the wilderness to get to the actual fairgrounds.

"Sheesh..." Stella said with a sigh as the fourth parking lot was closed just as they came up to it. "I'm beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea after all, Reggie..."

"Mmmm-yeah... oh, there's a guy waving us into the fifth lot," Regina said, pointing ahead at a uniformed man who was wearing a fluorescent vest over his fatigues.

"I see him. At least we'll get one of the first slots," Stella said and made a ninety-degree right hand turn to get into the fifth lot. After a bit of maneuvering, she rolled into the slot and turned off the engine.

A scant minute later, the entire row they had been led into was filled with family cars of all types - and suddenly everyone swarmed out at the same time and assembled in a sort-of illogical place halfway down the parking lot.

"Stell, it's gonna be fine, I promise. We're gonna have a great afternoon and a magic evening here," Regina said and leaned over to place a nice, little kiss on Stella's cheek.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if we're both pulling in the same direction, I guess the rope won't be as heavy, huh?" Stella said and repaid the favor by claiming Regina's lips.

After getting out and locking the car, they started on the long trek that would take them down to the main gate of the harbor fair - with the sun beating down on them mercilessly.

Fifteen minutes later, Stella schlepped herself across the burning hot asphalt desert. Struggling to put one foot ahead of the other in a desperate attempt to simulate actual walking, she resembled a lost soul trying to cross the Sahara. "Water... water..." she croaked.

Her mop of hair was damp and flat against her head, her glasses were misted up and had slipped down to the tip of her nose, and her overall level of freshness was two notches below what was required for her general sense of well-being. "Water..."

"There's a soft drink vendor over there, Stell... Stell? Stella?" Regina said, looking as fresh as a daisy who had just come out of the shower. "Oh, Stell..."

"Water..."

"I guess it's up to me," Regina said, put two fingers in her mouth and let out a shrill whistle that made everyone, including the vendor, turn around and look in her direction. When she made eye contact with the vendor, she waved an arm in the air to let him know there was money to be made.

The soft drink vendor waved back and hurriedly turned his ingenious vehicle around - a reverse tricycle with a huge cooler box welded onto the front.

"Hi," Regina said once the vendor had reached them. "My friend and I need a drink. Whatcha got?"

"Cold Frizzie's Carbonated Mineral Water and Frizzie's Diet Cola."

"Uggh... none of the above. I can't stand Frizzie's," Stella croaked, "you ain't got no Slurppy! razzies or cherry colas?"

"No we don't, I'm afraid. The harbor fair is sponsored by Frizzie's," the vendor said. In his early twenties, the man was sharply dressed in gray pants, a white t-shirt and a white garrison cap that sat crooked on his dark, curly locks.

"Uggh..."

Chuckling, Regina quickly opened the lid of the cooler box and took two cans of Carbonated Mineral Water. "How much?" she said, digging into her pocket for her wallet.

"That'll be six dollars, Miss," the vendor said and held out a money pouch.

Hearing that, Stella's eyes popped wide open and she gasped so loudly she would have choked on saliva had she had any. "Six... doll... ars?" she croaked, "six dollars for two cans of soda!?"

"Hush now, Stell, I got it," Regina said and gave the vendor a ten dollar bill. "Keep the change. Okay?"

The vendor happily put the bill into his purse and got back on the tricycle. "Thanks! Have a nice fair!" he said as he wheeled away.

Stella tried to follow him with her eyes but her misted-up glasses made it difficult for her. "Six... dollars... six!"

"Things are expensive at fairs, Stell, you know that," Regina said and cracked open Stella's can. "Here. It's nice and cold... it's gonna give you the burps if you're not careful."

"Thank-ye!" Stella mumbled and hurriedly grabbed the can. Throwing her head back, she drained every last drop of carbonated mineral water in what seemed to be a single gulp. "Ahhhhhh!" she said, rolling the cool can across her forehead once it was empty.

Regina scratched her eyebrows at the insatiable nature of her partner but eventually shrugged and cracked open her own can. Like a proper lady, she only took modestly sized lady-sips. "Oh, this is nice and refreshing. Are you ready for the last part of the trek, Stell?"

"How far do you think we have to go?"

"Well, I'd say another half a mile or so."

"Oh, Gawd..." Stella said and bent over to put her hands on her knees. "Naw, I'm a strong woman, I can handle-" - inevitably, the carbonated mineral water performed its ancient, vengeful trick by giving her such a kick up the backside that she had no choice but to let out a resounding "BUUUUUUUURRRR-"

"Mmmm-yeah, Stell, told ya that would happen..."

"-UUUUUUUUUUURRRR-"

"Dear God, Stell, they can hear you clear down in L.A..." Regina mumbled, looking around to see if anyone was close enough to get an unfiltered dose of the Stella's - a few were, but they seemed to be purposely ignoring the belching woman.

"-UUUUURPP-H... gawwwwd..."

"Bless you," Regina said and patted Stella on the back to get every last burp out before they made it to the entrance.

With the mineral water doing a good job of cooling off Stella's internal pathways, the last half-mile was less strenuous than the first had been, and her good mood had returned to the point of hooking her arm inside Regina's and humming the final bars of Donna Summer's I Feel Love.

The main gates soon came into sight, and even better, there weren't many people in line. Stella immediately felt even better and she leaned in to bump shoulders with her tall lover. "You know what I'm looking forward to the most, Reggie?"

"No? The merry-go-round? The fireworks?"

"The merry-go-round and the fireworks are gonna be great, no doubt about it... but I was talking about meeting Laura again. Yeah. That's going to be so much fun," Stella said dreamily, pulling Regina's arm closer to her. "Law and I were the best of friends back then... yeah."

"Stell, the more you speak of her, the more I get the impression the crush you had on her was perhaps, uh... a little bit more than that...?"

"Well... from my point of view, yes, it was more than just a crush, but... hey, are you worried?"

"Nah. I'm cool," Regina said with a smile that never quite reached her eyes.

"Look, Snookums," Stella said and pulled the two of them to a stop just outside the main entrance, "you have absolutely nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. I love you with chocolate sprinkles on top... hell, I love you with tutti-frutti sprinkles on top! And you know how much I love tutti-frutti... and not only that, there's strawberry jam and whipped cream, too! Huh?" Stella said, poking an index finger into Regina's white undershirt.

Laughing, Regina leaned down and gave Stella a little hug. "All right."

"All right," Stella echoed. "At least there aren't too many people at the entrance. It shouldn't take us too-"

MEEP, MEEP!

"Whut? The road runner? Here?!" Stella said and spun around to see where the honking had come from.

Out of nowhere - or rather, coming from the very parking lot Regina and Stella had just trekked out of - a white shuttle bus drove past them and pulled up close to the main entrance where it deposited a full load of happy, excited and first and foremost fresh families who all swarmed over to the gates that soon jammed to a gridlock.

"A shut- shut- a shuttle b- b- bus...?" Stella croaked; then screeched, "they have a shuttle bus? We've just crossed the flip-floppin' Gobi desert on foot and they have a shuttle bus?!"

The last words of the sentence had been presented in such a screeching manner that Regina involuntarily clapped her hands over her ears.

"Wait, wait... lemme see that stub," Stella screeched and began to rummage through her pockets. When she finally found the parking stub, she flipped it over and read: "Free shuttle buses are available at sections four- AAAAAAARGH! We coulda taken the blip-bloppin' shuttle bus, Reggie! We coulda taken the shuttle bus! We coulda saved six bucks for those blip-bloppin' sodas if we had taken the shuttle bus! We coulda been here fifteen minutes ago if we had taken the shuttle bus! And now... now... NOW we have to wait for all those people to get through the entrance and they're families with little kids and old people and old kids and little people and it's gonna take an eternity to get everyone through 'cos they all wanna pay with plastic but oh-no where's the credit card I don't have the credit card, do you have the credit card, Frank? No I thought you had it, honey. And-and-and they go through all their pockets only to find it in their purse and it takes a blip-bloppin' e-TER-nity to get everyone through and in the meantime all the best seats will be taken at the free promenade concert and the best hot dogs will be eaten and

we're gonna be late for the meeting with Laura and why does it always have to be this way... why, why, why, why, WHY DOES IT ALWAYS HAVE TO BE THIS WAAAAAY!? Oh God, I hate my life!" - *DEEP, DEEP breath.*

MEEP, MEEP!

"Oh, Rippa Rat A New One, the next shuttle bus is already on its way here... hurry, Reggie! We gotta get in line before the next shuttle bus comes and dumps a new load of... Reggie? Reggie, why are you wearing your shirt like that? I mean, it wasn't designed to be held over your head like that... Reggie? Why's your face so red? Did you get stung by a bee or something? Aw hell, we can't wait... c'mon, Reggie, we gotta hustle."

Not wanting to waste another second, Stella grabbed the mortified Regina's arm and dragged her up to the tail end of the shortest line. "There... that wasn't so bad, was it? You want me to pay for the general admission? Reggie? ...Reggie?"

*

*

CHAPTER 2

Regina's acute and violent embarrassment over her fast- and loudly-talking friend lasted until well after they had gone through the main entrance - in fact, she didn't lower her blue shirt until they went past a string of vendors who sold all kinds of sugary and salty sweets from portable, wooden huts.

"Ooooh!" Stella said, looking at the first of the vendors. "Popcorn... mmmm! Salt! Smell that salt? That's the good stuff right there, baby. And caramel fudge! Reggie, you want a box of caramel fudge popcorn?"

"No, thank you," Regina said, lowering her pitch black sunglasses so no one could recognize her.

"Awww, don't be Chief Woodenhead today, Reggie! Live a little!"

"I'd rather, uh..." Regina said and looked up and down the row of vendors. A brightly decorated hut further down the left side caught her eye, as did the sign that said '*Genuine Italian Gelato Sold Here!*' "I'd rather have an ice cream... if you're buying? There's an Italian ice cream vendor down there... you kinda like that, don't you?" she said and pointed at the colorful hut.

"Oooh! Italian gelato? Remember the pistachio dream that was SO rudely snatched from me when we worked on the case with the stolen diamonds?"

"That's what I was think-"

"You **are** talking my language, Reggie! For a while there, I was worried. I could definitely eat a pistachio... well, c'mon then," Stella said and hooked her arm inside Regina's to drag her along.

The alley was filled to capacity with families who came from the main entrance; mostly children, but a great number of adults as well. To get to the ice cream vendor, Stella and Regina needed to thread their way through hundreds and hundreds of kids and grownups holding balloons, boxes of popcorn, huge wads of cotton candy and lollipops that were so large they made the specimen Stella had bought at the gas station seem like a toothpick.

At one point, a particularly impressive wad of hot pink cotton candy was on a direct collision course with Regina's blue shirt, but she managed to evade it by spinning around on her axis which earned her wild applause from the adults in the vicinity.

Once at the ice cream parlor - a sign held in red, white and green proclaimed it to be Andrea de Barazzo's Ice Cream - Stella pressed her nose flat against the glass to look at the twenty-four different flavors she could pick. "Well, pistachio is one... but I want two scoops. Oh, I'm not good at deciding what I want... especially not when there's so much to choose from..."

"I'll say," Regina said under her breath, remembering an unfortunate incident in a coffee shop some time earlier.

"Stracciatella... espresso... chocolate chunk... tiramisu... creamy cherries... Stracciatella, definitely. Or maybe tiramisu..." Stella mumbled as she studied the plastic containers with the inviting, colorful flavors. "Aw hell, this is such a beautiful day, you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna take stracciatella and tiramisu. And pistachio. Yep. What do you want, Reggie?"

"Something low-calorie."

"Noooo, c'mon," Stella whined, but she could see rather quickly that her tall, ascetic friend couldn't be swayed by the mighty lure of sugar, so she shrugged and stepped up to the tall counter. "Hi," she said to the young man who came out to greet her.

"Buongiorno!" the man said with a sweeping gesture and a small bow. The ice cream vendor had friendly, dark brown eyes set well in a slightly round face, and he had short, dark brown hair that was almost a perfect match for the color tone of his eyes.

"Wow, are you really an Italian?" Stella said with eyes as wide as saucers.

"Nah, I'm Andy from Pittsburgh... but the girls love that stuff," the man said and broke out in a chuckle.

"I'll bet," Stella said and raised Andy's chuckle with a snicker. "ANYway, my dear old friend Reggie and I would like some ice cream. Whatcha got that's low calorie?"

"Low calorie? Are you trying to insult me?" Andy said, but added a wink to take the sting out of the words.

Stella's reaction wasn't late in coming - a broad smile that only became broader as she turned around and began to poke a thumb into Regina's side. "Ha! Ha, and another Ha! I knew it, Reggie! You can't get that low-calorie, no-taste gunk here..."

"Then I'd like a small plain vanilla in a wafer cone, please," Regina said, squirming under Stella's ceaseless attack. "Ooof! Cut it out... cut it out or I'm gonna tickle ya half to death, Stell!"

"You know," Stella said and stopped at once, "I don't think you can... but we'll see... tonight." - The last word was delivered in a whisper.

Behind them, Andy had already finished scooping up a small plain vanilla and was putting it into the wafer cone. "Here you go, bella donna," he said and handed it to Regina. "Have you made up your mind yet, Miss?" he continued, turning back to Stella.

"Yup," the blonde investigator said, pushing up her glasses with an index finger. "I want three scoops in a cup. pistachio, stracciatella and tiramisu."

"Pistachio, stracciatella, and tiramisu coming right up," Andy said and went to work on the various ice creams. It didn't take him long to get it done, and he soon handed the cup, a small plastic spoon and a large white napkin to Stella. "That'll be five dollars. I hope you'll like it enough to come back to Andrea de Barazzo's Ice Cream."

"Oh, you betcha," Stella said, eyeing the cup of ice cream with a lusty gaze.

After paying, Regina and Stella strolled on down the line of vendors until they reached an open area where the free promenade concert would take place later on in the day. The stage was ready for the orchestra, but the stagehands were still putting in the benches needed for the audience. Now and then, the sounds of the musicians tuning their instruments wafted through a huge, dark gray backdrop that had been put up all along the rear side of the stage.

Beyond the area where the benches were being put up, a large group of well-dressed people of all ages - the dress code seemed to be summer suits and straw hats for the gentlemen, and floral dresses and large hats for the ladies - had gathered and were talking excitedly amongst themselves.

They were behaving in accordance with their class, but it was clear to see they were all eager to get to the best seats once the ropes cordoning off the spectator enclosure were removed.

"Ohmmpf, Immpf lovemmpf freemmpf concertsmmpf," Stella said, digging into her Italian ice cream with gusto.

"Whatssatmmpf?" Regina said, busy licking a hole in her plain vanilla.

"Immpf saidmmpf, Immpf lovemmpf freemmpf concertsmmpf."

"Rightmmpf."

"Immpf dommpf!"

"Suremmpf," - *Gulp!* - "I just can't understand a word of what you're saying, Stell," Regina said with a broad grin.

Stella scrunched up her face to see if Regina was making fun of her but decided that she wasn't. Unable to keep the sour look for too long, she broke out in a snicker while she bumped shoulders with her friend. "I said, I love free concerts. There's no obligation to stick around if you think it's boring. You don't even have to sit there and fry in the sun, you can walk around like we do now."

"It says on the event poster they'll play Sousa Favorites. That's marching band music, Stell," Regina said out of the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah? Well, that's fun!"

"Mmmm-if you say so."

"I do say so," Stella said and hooked her free arm under Regina's. "C'mon, finish your vanilla. I'm gettin' thirsty again so I think I'll look for a hut that sells soft drinks." - *sniff, sniff* - "And I've found one already. It's over here, Reggie."

The sea of humanity seemed to thicken when Stella tried to push her way through it, but she managed to make it over to another of the vendor huts - though she had to take it one cautious step at a time.

Just as she put up her right leg to take the last step onto the wooden sidewalk in front of the soft drinks hut, a group of screaming, playing children tore past her, going so fast she only had time to see a colorful blur. "Whoa! Yikes, that was clos-"

BA-DA-BOP! said a balloon that hit Stella's cup with the last of her ice cream. The paper cup flew out of her grasp and sailed through the air, but through her lightning-fast Kung-Fu reflexes, she managed to grab it back before it could make an unfortunate impact with the paved ground. "My ICE CREEEEEEEEAM! Oh, sweet Chicky-Dee, I saved it," she groaned, holding onto the paper cup with all the strength of a tigress. "Oh... ohhhh... that was close... I better... I better..."

Digging in with the plastic spoon, she took the rest of her remaining ice cream - the pistachio - and scooped it into her mouth in a single, huge gulp. Turning around, she flashed Regina a thumbs-up as she began to suck on the ball of ice cream in her mouth.

Instead of looking at Regina, she should have looked ahead, but it was too late to change how the world turned. With the very next step she took, her shoe hit the edge of the wooden sidewalk which sent her into a forward parabolic flight and made her howl a muted "WHOOBBBBL!" on her way closer and closer to the wall of the soft drink vendor.

Even worse than that, the howl made her swallow involuntarily which sent the entire ball of ice cream down her pipe. She managed to wrestle back her balance before she smacked the wall

with her beak, but the ice cream that sunk deeper and deeper into her gut gave her such a freeze-induced head- and backache she might as well have headbutted the hut into submission - it wouldn't have hurt any less. "Gaaaaaaawd," she croaked cross-eyed, clutching her aching sides and waddling around numbly in a lazy figure-of-eight.

Regina considered pulling her shirt over her head again, but her nurturing feelings towards Stella won out, and she stepped forward and pulled the unfortunate blonde into a comforting hug, rubbing her arms up and down the petite back to keep her warm.

"My pistachio..." Stella croaked once she had regained the ability to speak.

"I know. Shhh," Regina said, giving her lover a little squeeze.

The soft drink vendor they were standing next to had several large and colorful signs hanging outside advertising '*Bay City's Number One Favorite Soft Drink - Frizzie's Sold Here!*' but Stella could only shake her head at that slogan. "And it was all for nothing... they only sell Frizzie's... I can't stand Frizzie's... far too much fizzy... they make me belch."

"Ahem. As we found out down on the parking lot," Regina mumbled.

"Yeah..."

"C'mon, Stell, let's move on. I can see the first amusements from here," Regina said as she looked over Stella's shoulder.

"Amusements?" Stella said, forgetting all about her sulking. "Ooooh, let's go, Snookums! Maybe they got air hockey!"

Regina chuckled as she watched Stella stride off and move through the massive, noisy crowd with the poise of a professional rodeo rider. "I love her, but she's so high-maintenance I almost need hazard pay... on the other hand, ya sure can't beat the fringe benefits... mmmm... she's definitely got it," Regina mumbled to no one in particular before following her fiery lover into the crowd.

The first amusement they went past, a shooting gallery where the object of the game was to shoot balloons with colorful soft darts, didn't prove exciting enough for Stella so she carried on full steam ahead. The second amusement, a huge wheel of fortune where the prizes were tickets to various concerts, was more interesting, but the spectators were five deep all along the counter so that was out of the picture as well.

The third booth, a basketball game, was exactly Stella's idea of a good time - well, more or less - and better still, it was deserted. On their way to the amusement, a strange and curious sound of...

Twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle-twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle!

... filled the air between Stella and Regina who was still walking two steps behind the blonde investigator just to make sure the white Capris were still doing their job.

"What in SAM HILL is that? Is that the promenade concert?" Regina said, stopping to perform a full three-sixty degree turn to find the source of the unusual atonal melody.

Twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle-twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle!

"Nope! It's my new ringtone," Stella said and reached into her pocket to find her phone. "Ya like it?"

Twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle-twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle!

"Mmmmm-eh, how can I put it..."

"You don't like it...?"

Twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle-twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle!

"I didn't say I didn't."

"You didn't say ya did."

Twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle-twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle!

Regina took a deep breath and considered stuffing her fingers into her ears, but she stopped herself at the last moment. "Aren't you going to-"

Twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle-twit-twot-twe-deedle-twe-daddle-laddle!

"- take it, Stell? It could be important."

Mumbling something unintelligible that sounded suspiciously like "First she doesn't like my tweedle-deedle ringtone then she doesn't like my Xena ringtone now she doesn't like my twit-twot ringtone... maybe I'm gonna make one that combines all three just to put a burr in her shorts," Stella pressed the little button and put the phone to her ear. "You've reached the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency. This is Stella Starr, the senior investigator."

Mumble, mumble.

"Oh hi, Joe. Any news?"

Mumble, mumble.

"A job? You have a job for us?"

Mumble, mumble.

"*You* have a *job* for *us*? GET OUTTA TOWN!"

Mumble, mumble?!

"Nah, just kidding, Joe," Stella said and leaned against the counter of the hoop hut. "I don't have my notepad with me so you'll have to go real slow."

Mumble, mumble...

"Whaddaya mean you always do? Cheeky so-and-so..."

Mumble, mumble. Mumble. Mumble, mumble.

"Okay? A secretary needs a safe house for a couple-a days?"

Mumble, mumble.

" 'Cos she's blown her embezzling boss...? Uh, Joe, that's not really our thing-"

Mumble, mumble!

"Oh... okay. She's blown the whistle on her boss. Right. Phew," Stella said and gave Regina a thumbs-up.

Mumble, mumble.

"Okay, we've got another thing lined up, too, but if you call tomorrow with her number, we'll get in touch with her."

Mumble, mumble.

"Great, Joe. Thanks... bye."

Once the phone was safely tucked away in Stella's white Capris, she put out her hand which made Regina come over to her and take it. "Hey, Snookums, that was Joe."

"So I gather."

"Yeah, he was contacted by a gal who feels threatened by her former boss' business associates after she ratted out on him to the IRS. She needs to disappear for a few days while the authorities take care of it... or else it might be a permanent thing... wouldn't want that."

"Nope. Your place, my place, hotel room?"

"Oh, definitely a hotel room. It's deductible," Stella said with a grin before reaching up and stealing a quick kiss. "And now! Now we're gonna shoot some hoops!"

Turning around, she went up to the counter and put down the fifty cents required to get five balls. "Hiya doin'," she said to the young woman manning the booth. "Five balls if ya don't mind."

"Would you care for some competition, Stell?" Regina said and put down another fifty cents.

Stella grinned and made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "Be my guest... just prepare to get whipped. Metaphorically speaking, of course," she said with a wink.

The young woman quickly took the coins and put five garishly colored foam balls in each of the baskets that Regina and Stella stood in front of. "The game is simple," she said and pointed at the vertical line of hoops they were supposed to hit, "aim for the smallest hoop at the top of the line. That will give you five points. If you miss that, the ball will roll down to the second, third or fourth hoop that will give you four, three and two points respectively. If it misses all four, it will be collected in the fifth hoop at the bottom that will earn you one point. Once you've thrown the five balls, your score will be tallied and you can select a prize. All right?"

"Okie-dokie!" Stella said - Regina settled for nodding.

Stella took the first foam ball and held it up to her eye. Concentrating so hard she could barely breathe, she threw the ball which missed the first hoop completely and rolled all the way down into the fifth- "Oh, fuh-get'it!"

Grinning, Regina threw her first ball, but she couldn't hit the smallest target either and it rolled all the way down to the fourth hoop which gave her two points.

"Beginner's luck," Stella growled and took her second ball. Concentrating a little less, she threw it - and missed the first hoop completely. That particular ball ended its run in the third hoop, so it wasn't all bad. "Ha! I'm leading!"

"But for how long?" Regina said and carefully selected her second ball from the remaining four. Scrunching up her face, she threw the ball with a loose wrist and watched it sail through the air, ultimately landing in the second hoop, earning her four points. "Uh-huh? You **were** leading."

Stella mirrored her partner's look as she took her third ball. "C'mon," she whispered to the foam creature, "c'mon, this one's gotta count... go!"

Using the loose wrist technique, she let it go with a whoop - but watched it bounce off the center railing between the two lanes and fly clear off the playing field. "Shit!"

The young woman behind the counter quickly bent down to take the stray ball and threw it down the fifth hoop. "I'm afraid that will only count as a one-point score, Miss."

"Yeah, all right," Stella grumbled, chewing on her cheek to calm down.

"My turn," Regina said and took her third ball. Deciding to have a bit of fun with it, she threw it crooked like a curveball, but watched in disbelief as it flew straight down the second hoop, giving her another score of four points. When she heard a choked-up, grunting gasp from her right, she turned towards Stella to offer her a two-hundred watt smile as a consolation prize.

Now Stella really chewed on her cheek. The fourth ball was a neon-green one, and she took that as a good sign since it was also the color of one of her favorite pair of socks. After taking a deep breath to loosen her limbs, she let the ball go and watched it roll lazily through the air, heading for a date with destiny - or rather, with the first hole. Two seconds later, it went down into the five-point hole with a satisfying PLOPP!

"Yabba-dabba-doooooooooo!" Stella howled and jumped a foot in the air. Upon landing, she immediately went into an outrageous performance of the Hucklebuck that the inventors of the party dance had never envisioned. "Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh, do the Hucklebuck, meh-heh, bah-hah, bee-hee, wee-wee, with a little roll and a lotta rock... I got a five, I got a five, I got a five! Didya see that, Reggie, I got a five!" she shouted while she twisted, jittered, shimmied, shook, rocked, snaked and hula-ed her way across the alley.

"I kinda noticed, Stell... and so did they," Regina said drolly, looking at the people who were all staring in wide-eyed disbelief at the outpouring of emotions displayed by the short blonde. "Well, let's see what I can do," she continued, throwing her own fourth ball. Unfortunately, it was a bust that fell directly into the fourth hoop.

"Two points, Miss," the young woman said. "That brings your tally to twelve points. Your... uh... dancing friend has ten points."

Hearing that, Regina grinned and took her last ball. "Yo, dance muffin, time to throw your last ball. Oh, and you're down on points to *moi*, the foam-goddess."

Stella did the Bay City Hokey-Pokey on her way back to the counter, but when she took the last foam ball, she was deadly serious. "This is it... this is it... one ball for the win... c'mon foamy!" - The ball gained enough height but not enough oomph and could only make it to the third hoop, but it did fall into that without drama. "Oh, pooey..." she said, chewing on her cheek again as she glanced across the playing field to her tall partner.

Regina screwed on her game face and took her last ball. After holding it up to her eye to aim, she let it go - only to see it bounce off the rim of the second hoop and roll all the way down to the fifth and final one.

"One point, Miss," the young woman said and collected the balls.

"Feh," Regina mumbled, stuffing her hands into her jeans pockets.

Stella counted on her fingers and soon came to the conclusion that she and Regina were tied on points - and that they had both made thirteen. "Brrrr," she said with a shiver. "Good thing I'm not superstitious..."

"You *are* superstitious, Stell," Regina said surly.

"Yeah, but if you say you're not, the Specter Of All Things Thirteen will move on to the next unlucky geezer..."

"Congratulations," the young woman said. "You both have thirteen points. You may choose a prize from the second shelf, over here," she continued, waving her hand at a shelf of slightly cheesy prizes that mostly consisted of plastic items of no real value.

Stella's eyes fell upon a sixteen-piece 3D puzzle of the Eiffel Tower, and she quickly put up her hand. "The puzzle!"

"The puzzle, all right," the young woman said and turned to Regina. "And you, Miss?"

"You know..." Regina said, squinting at the items that were so far below her high standards that it was simply ridiculous. "Tell you what, in the spirit of competition, I'll let my partner here choose my prize. Is that okay?"

"Well... okay. Sure," the young woman said and turned back to Stella.

"Ooooooh! Thanks, Reggie!" Stella said and pulled Regina into a sideways hug. "In that case, I'd like the... the... oh! Is... is that a yo-yo with red and green LED lights? Oooooh! Gotta have that one!"

"The yo-yo is yours, Miss," the young woman said and put the blinking yo-yo on the counter next to the 3D puzzle. "Thank you for playing."

"You're welcome!" Stella squealed, clutching her two prizes to her bosom.

"Would you like a plastic bag to carry your prizes in?"

"Uh... if you got one, yeah!"

Regina couldn't stop a warm chuckle from escaping her lips at the sight of her highly excited lover stuffing her winnings into a neutral plastic bag, and she wrapped her arms around Stella's shoulders and gave her a fair-sized crush from behind, taking the opportunity to steal a kiss on her neck. "Way to go, Stell... you earned 'em."

"Thanks, Reggie... love you to bits! I'll even let you play with my new yo-yo!"

"Gee, thanks, Stell..."

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On their way over to the marquee where they had arranged to meet with Stella's old friend Laura, they shuffled past Andy the Ice Cream Man who was pushing a cart around equipped with a large freezer box and a parasol held in red, white and green.

"Hi!" Stella said as she recognized the friendly ice cream vendor. "Your pistachio was flippin' great!"

"Well, that's good to hear," Andy said and tipped his non-existent cap.

Smiling at the man, Stella turned back to Regina and kept walking, but a sudden commotion behind the two investigators made them turn around and look back.

A young woman pushing a very similar ice cream cart - also equipped with a freezer box and a parasol, though hers was plain yellow - had bumped into Andy's cart and was blocking his way.

The young woman who was in her mid-twenties and dressed in white looked like a fury unleashed with sparkling dark hair and dark brown eyes that shot fire at Andy. "I told you before, Andrea, this is my turf! I don't want you to sell your second-rate crap over here!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

Andy stared at the dent on the front of his cart and then up at the fury. "You dented my cart! You did that on purpose! You knew your bumper is higher than mine... you rammed straight into it!"

"Pah! Don't change the subject, Andrea. You're not welcome over here!"

Stella observed the heated exchange with round, confused eyes. She didn't really want to get involved, but the 'second-rate crap' comment made her grunt and stride forward to give the fury a two-dollar slice of reality.

"No, Stell... noooo," Regina whined, but it was too late.

"Oy, Missy," Stella said as she came up to the two warring ice cream vendors, "I think you need to get off the boil and calm down just a fraction. I've just bought a pistachio, stracciatella and tiramisu from Andrea's hut and that wasn't second-rate crap, lemme tell ya."

"Stay out of this, shorty!" the fury said and stomped back to her own cart. "If you had tried Giovanna Fiorito's Original Gelato, you'd see that what Andrea sells is crap!"

Stella stopped dead in her tracks with a gaping mouth, one foot up and one foot down. Soon, the second foot was lowered as well, and an animal-like growl started somewhere deep in her throat.

"Aw, hell," Regina groaned, rubbing her brow. "Stell, we don't want to keep Laura waiti-"

"Shorty?" Stella growled, stepping forward menacingly. "Ohhhh, you didn't... OHHHH you didn't... yes you did! Shorty? Who you callin' shorty, Missy? I'm five foot four-and-a-half... that ain't short. I'd really like an apology, Missy!"

"Yeah? Well, you're not gonna get one! Shorty!" the fury said and threw Stella an Italian hand gesture that didn't need an interpreter.

Behind the hissing alley cats, the orchestra at the promenade concert began playing one of John Philip Sousa's lesser known marches with great aplomb, painting the perfect backdrop to the red blotches that had formed on Stella's cheeks.

Umpa-umpaaaaaa-umpapa-umpaaaa-umpapa-pa-pa-umpapa-paaaaa.

Blinking several times, Stella stepped forward with the corners of her mouth twitching uncontrollably. "Ha, ha... HA... ha... HA! Ha, ha, ohhhh you didn't... ha, ha. HA FLIPPIN' HA! Lemme tell you a story about Li'l Red Hiding Hood, Missy, ha, ha, HA, she ended her days being torn to shreds in the yap of a horrible wolf monster, ha, ha, ha... anytime you're ready, Missy. Anytime you're ready!"

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

"Oh, yeah?"

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

"Oh, YEAH!"

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

Knowing she he had to stop the bare-knuckle world championship bout before actual blows were exchanged, Regina stepped in and put her hands on Stella's taut shoulders. "Oh, look at the time, Stell. We're going to be late for the meeting with your old friend, Stell. You remember Law, don't you, Stell? She's waiting for us at the marquee. We don't want to disappoint her, do we, Stell? Stell?"

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

"Not now, Reggie... I'm about to tear her a new one..."

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

"Can we do it a little later, Stell? We're drawing attention to ourselves..."

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

"I thought you loved attention, Snookums?"

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpu-umpu-umpu-umpapa-paaaaa.

"Not like this," Regina groaned out of the corner of her mouth.

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpa-umpa-umpa-umpa-pa-paaaaa.

The situation defused itself when Giovanna Fiorito threw her arms in the air, spun around and went back to her own ice cream cart. With a "Pffff!" she pulled back and disappeared into the crowd.

"Yeah, you just take a hike there, Missy! Big piece of... of... of... roasted chicken kebab!" Stella said, throwing the ice cream vendor a homemade hand gesture that didn't need an interpreter either.

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpa-umpa-umpa-umpa-pa-paaaaa.

Regina let out a sigh of relief and rolled her eyes repeatedly behind her black shades. "Okay, that was fun... not."

Sighing deeply, Andy reached into his freezer box and found a small gift for the hopping mad Stella: a prefabricated strawberry ice cream cone. "Here, Miss... thanks for your help. Giovanna is a pain in the butt. She seems to think she's got dibs on this part of the harbor fair or something... only she doesn't."

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpa-umpa-umpa-umpa-pa-paaaaa.

The corners of Stella's mouth were still twitching furiously, but the sight of an ice cream cone made her calm down. Deflating like a leaky balloon, she bent over and put her hands on her knees. "Thanks, buddy. I could use a good ice cream."

Umpa-pa-pa-paaaaa-umpa-umpa-umpa-umpa-pa-paaaaa.

"Well, in that case, just swing by Andrea de Barazzo's place, eh?" Andy said and closed the lid of the freezer box.

"You betcha, Andy," Stella said with a smile as she unwrapped the cone before it melted. "Oh, I better be going. Reggie? Reggie? Reggie, where are you off to now...? Oh, there you are. Wait for me, Reggie!"

The marching music kept playing in the background, but as Stella and Regina moved further down the alley to get to the marquee, it slowly blended into the regular din of the fair and was soon only part of the ambience.

"Oy, wait up, Reggie!" Stella said, hurrying after her long-legged companion. "Man, how about me and her, huh? Sweet chicky-dee, I was about to drop the hammer on her..." - *LICK, lick, lick.*

"If you had," Regina said and came to a stop to wait for Stella, "the security would have kicked us out in oh point nothing at all." - Holding out her arm, she waited for her fiery friend to take it before walking on.

"Nah... they wouldn't dare." - *LICK, lick, LICK* - "Not with me, not with Stella Starr! And definitely not with you."

"If you had fought that woman, I wouldn't have been anywhere near here, Stell," Regina said with a cheeky grin.

"No, you're definitely more of a lover than a fighter... but you can move, baby!" - *Lick, lick, LICK* - "Remember when you wrestled? Gawd, you looked so fine in those tights... hey, we still got that outfit, don't we?"

"Yep."

LICK, LICK, lick - "Ooooooh, I just got an el-fanta-sticky idea!"

"What, the masked wrestler and the fair maiden?" Regina said and leaned in to bump shoulders with Stella.

"I can see we've reached that phase of our relationship where we can read each other's minds, Reggie," Stella said with an impossible wide grin. "All the more reason to love you." - *Lick, LICK, LICK - crunch, crunch, crunch, GULP!*

"Well, I love you too, honey-bunny... I just wish you wouldn't go all-street brawler quite so frequently... oh, here we are," Regina said and pointed at the marquee.

Becky's Buffet Bonanza was the biggest marquee at the entire festival, and it had enough seating for several hundred customers at any one time. Looking at the thirty rows of benches and tables, and at the impressive buffet line at the back of the tent, it was hard to imagine that it was a temporary pavilion and that none of it had been there a mere three days earlier.

"Ooooh," Stella said and took a deep sniff. "Food... and plenty of it. Excellen-ty! Tell you what," she said as she hooked her arm inside Regina's and went into the marquee. "I promise I'll try to keep calm in the future. How's that?"

"Works for me, Stell. Here's a kiss for later, mmmua."

"Thanks, Snookums! Here's one right back atcha, mmmua. Hey..."

"What?"

"Are we overloading on mush?" Stella said with a cheesy grin.

"Is that even possible?"

"Nope! Watch out below, it's eatin' time!"

Three minutes later, Stella came to a dead stop halfway down the buffet line. She was clutching a plate with excited, trembling fingers but furrowed her brow and let out a highly confused grunt at the dishes that were lined up under the warm spotlights - and then another one just for good measure. "Waitaminute... tofu burgers... celery sandwiches... soy bean hot dogs... what in the WORLD?!"

"Becky's is a vegetarian buffet, Stell... didn't you read their ad?" Regina said and shoveled salad into a plastic tray before snatching a soy bean hot dog and drowning it in a healthy squirt of organic seasoning sauce.

"No, I didn't... oh, no... oh, hell... oh, hell no..."

"Hell, yeah!"

"Ohhellno!" Stella whined, putting down her plate like a petulant child. "And-even-worse-they-only-got-Frizzie's..." she mumbled, making it sound like a single word.

"C'mon, it's good for you. Grab a tofu burger, Stell, it's great. It's got everything a meat burger has."

"Except the most important part!"

"Look, they've got different kinds of cheese over there... you can make a really delish cheeseburger," Regina said and pointed further up the buffet line.

"But I don't wanna have a burger without the meat, Reggie..." Stella whined, shuffling from side to side in the line like she needed to pee and didn't know where the ladies' were.

"Still the carnivore, eh? It's good to see that some things never change, Stell," a warm female voice said from somewhere behind the two investigators.

It didn't take Stella one second to figure out who the voice belonged to. Spinning around with a happy squeal on her lips, she put out her arms and pulled her old friend Laura Cruz into a crushing, best-friends-who-haven't-seen-each-other-for-far-too-long hug. "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Law! Gaaaaawd, it's so good to see you!" she said, burying her face in the nook of the slightly taller woman's neck while giving her the crush of a lifetime.

"Hello, Stell," Law said with a broad smile once she had been liberated from her human vise.

Like Stella, Laura was thirty-seven, but that was where the similarities ended. Laura had always had Latin coloring, but her skin tone seemed to have deepened slightly since her adolescence and she was now a warm bronze. Her dark brown hair was smooth and at shoulder-length like it had

been in the old days, and her eyes were still almond-shaped and held in a glorious shade of brown.

She was wearing form-fitting, dark brown slacks and a breezy, off-white blouse with a plunging V-neck that allowed a peak at the top of her cleavage. Around her neck, she had a crucifix and two small women's symbols on a gold necklace that stood out in striking contrast to her bronzed skin.

"Sweet Mother of all things holy, look at you," Stella said as she held Laura at arms' length. "You're gobsmackingly gorgeous! I wanna say you haven't aged a day since I saw you last, but that would be a lie 'cos you're ten times the amount of hubba-hubba now than you ever were back then! Hubba!"

"Geez, thanks, Stell," Laura said and broke out in a huge blush. "You know how I recognized you? Your hair. You still got the same haystack," she said with a snicker.

"And the haystack stays until my dying breath. Oh, I'm such a schmuck. Law, I want you to meet the, uh..." - Stella looked at Regina and decided to tell the honest-to-goodness truth - "the woman I love more than anything in the world, Regina Harrison."

"Awwwww!" Laura said and put out her hand. "I'm delighted to meet you, Miss Harrison. Wow, so you're the one who tamed Stella, huh?" she said with a wink directed at her old friend.

"Oh, I wouldn't exactly say that, Miss Cruz. And please, call me Regina or Reggie," Regina said and shook hands with Stella's friend. Looking at Laura, Regina couldn't help but study her general features and quickly came to the conclusion that she could easily earn a living off her looks if she wanted to.

"Sure... if you'll call me Laura or Law."

"Okay," Regina said with a grin.

Stella grinned too and pulled both woman into a cozy, little group hug. "Law, whaddaya say we blow this tofu stand and find somewhere else to eat? They only got vegetarian stuff here."

"I know, Stell, that's why I suggested it. Aren't most women vegetarians these days?"

"Blergh... not you too?!" Stella said in a nasal voice that came dangerously close to screeching.

Five minutes later, Stella, Laura and Regina sat down at a secluded part of one of the benches and began distributing the dishes they had bought - salad and the soy bean hot dog for Regina, a salad for Laura, and a herbivore, meatless cheeseburger for Stella.

Regina smiled at her sulking lover as she cracked open the first of three cans - a Frizzie's Diet Cola - and pushed it across the table. "Here, Stell, a diet cola for you, mineral water for the adults."

"Uggh... they ain't got razzies..."

"No, that's right, they didn't have any raspberry fizz but the diet cola is just as yummy."

"No, it ain't."

Laura chuckled into her salad as she watched the exchange. "I see that nothing has changed, Stell. You're just like an upscaled version of your old self."

"I don't think I'll ever change, Law," Stella said in a moment of striking insight. "Hmmm. Being true to who I am has given me so much, so... you know," she continued, reaching over to give Regina's hand a squeeze.

"Wow, you guys complement each other so well it's uncanny," Laura said and scooped up a forkful of salad. "How long have you been together?"

Regina looked at Stella who nodded in return to let her know that she could tell their story. "Well, we've worked together for close to three years now, but we only took the big step last Christmas."

"Yeah, it took a while before Reggie understood the error of her boy-seeking ways," Stella said with a shit-eating grin.

"Oh, I see," Laura said, nodding knowingly. As she was eating, she furrowed her brow and looked at Regina's profile. "Pardon me, but I feel like I've seen your face somewhere... but that can't be right, I mean, you're a private investigator..."

"Well," Regina said and flicked her perfect hair over her shoulder where it landed in a perfect cascade, earning herself a snickering groan from Stella, "you very well could have. It just so happens that I've been in a few ad campaigns recently for the likes of Bay City Florists and Pegasus Jewelry. Prior to that, you could have seen my face on the cover of several fashion magazines like Young 2Day, Now! Fashion and Michelle's."

"No, it was in a late night movie on TV... hmmm. Maybe I'm mistaken."

"Oh," Regina mumbled and hurriedly focused on her soy bean hot dog.

"What my dear friend is trying to say," Stella said and reached over to give Regina's free hand a reassuring pat, "is that she was one of the world's top models back in the 1990s."

"Oh... oh, I'm terribly sorry, I didn't mean to be rude..." Laura said and quickly reached out to offer Regina a brief touch. "From late 1994 to the summer of 2010, I lived in the rural regions of Central and South America and we didn't have many fashion magazines there..."

"I can imagine," Regina said, holding a piece of hot dog on her plastic fork. "No, it's quite all right. I'm getting used to it..." - the last words were delivered in a voice that trailed off into nothing.

Stella grew tired of pushing her meatless cheeseburger around and decided to take a bite out of it just so she could confirm that it was a tasteless critter compared to the real thing - but much to her surprise, it was juicy, spicy and, yes, tasty. "Oymmpf! Thismmpf ismmpf goodmmpf!" she said, nodding vigorously.

While Stella was chewing, little dribbles of tomato and barbecue sauce ran down the corners of her mouth, and Regina was quick to take a napkin and dab them away. "Thanksmmpf, Reggiemmpf!"

"You're welcome," Regina said and put the spent napkin down on Stella's plate for future use. "So, you're teaching at the North Bay University, Law?"

"Yes, that's right, though I'm not part of the faculty as such. I'm an external lecturer so I need to have an assessor in my class at all times. Of course, I know twice as much about the subject as that old egghead ever will. Eh..." - she waved her hand dismissively - "But that's all boring stuff. What I'm dying to know is... are you gals really gumshoes, you know, like Sam Spade, Larry Kent, V.I. and those people?" Laura said and wiggled her eyebrows.

Munch, munch - gulp! - "We are," Stella said, wearing a proud smile. "We're fully licensed Private Investigators. We have all sorts of cool electronic gizmos that we use all the time, we've got a cool company car, and even better, we've got a wardrobe full of costumes that we use when we need to go deep, deep, deep undercover. Which is often!"

"That's cool, Stell... have you helped many people, then?"

Munch, munch, MUNCH, munch, gulp! - "Oh, we've had and solved nearly fifty cases, Reggie and me... yeah. We haven't hit a dead end yet in any of them... though, o' course, following the law of averages, I s'pose we'll have one sooner or later. It certainly won't be for a lack of commitment, huh, Reggie?"

"Nope," Regina said and mussed Stella's haystack.

"But it must be dangerous!"

MUNCH, munch, munch, MUNCH, gulp! - "Weeellll, I guess we've both been held against our will a couple of times... and shot at... and nearly run over... and threatened by all sorts of people with bad breath... and squared off against ghosts... and invisible men... and burglars, two-timing

husbands, fences and what have you, but... you know, all in all, we've had a great time. And there's been a lot of fun along the way, too."

"Gawd," Law said and made a horrified face at Stella's casual description of their line of work.

"What can I say, Law. It's my calling," Stella said with a broad grin plastered on her face. "Isn't that right, Reggie?"

Mirroring the grin, Regina leaned in and placed a little kiss on Stella's cheek. "Yep. Stell is a natural. She's definitely worth investigating, if you know what I mean..." - *wink, wink*.

"Uh-huh?" Laura said and returned the saucy wink.

MUNCH, munch - Gulp! - "Oh... darn, it's all gone," Stella said and looked at her empty plate. "I think I want another... it was pretty good, ac-chew-ly..."

"Told ya it would be, honey-bunny," Regina said and thumped her fist into Stella's shoulder.

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CHAPTER 3

After their less-unhealthy-than-usual fast food dinners - during which Stella went up to the buffet for her third helping of herbivore cheeseburger; the Frizzie's Diet Cola was a bust like she knew it would be - Stella and Laura easily slipped into their school personas and dove right into reminiscing about their childhoods and adolescence:

"Ohhhh," Stella said and clapped a hand across her forehead, "do you remember when I fell in arts and crafts... with a whole bucket of white paint in my hand... flip-flopparoonny, we had white paint EVERYwhere..."

"I remember... several days later, I found white paint in my pocket! I still don't understand what you needed that much paint for, Stell... we were making salt and pepper shakers for Goodness' sake!" Laura said, snickering under a politely placed hand.

"But they needed to be painted, didn't they?" - Remembering the embarrassing moment, Stella buried her face in her hands and snickered like a schoolgirl.

The sound sent a warm wave through Regina's heart, and she reached over and pulled her lover into a sideways hug. "Law, I'm sure you know this already," she said, mussing the blonde haystack, "but Stell doesn't need a reason. She just... well... does it."

"I know," Laura said, winking at her old friend. "There was another time... I think we had gone on camp school up north of the city... by the beach. Remember that one, Stell?"

"Sure I do... I just dreamt about it the other month. That was why I decided to try to find you again, Law."

"Oh wow, really?"

"Sure! Cross my heart, hope to choke on one of Reggie's pap bran digestives!" Stella said and made the sign of the cross in front of her. "I was working late one evening wrestling with the Paper Monster-"

Laura scrunched up her face and looked to Regina for an explanation. -- "Our case files." -- "Ohhh... okay."

"-and I kinda fell asleep under my desk... long story, don't ask... and I dreamt of you and the whole camp school thing. I dreamt of Mrs. Jordan and you and the nuked shoe polish dinner and the school compound and the bird's nest I found in the trees and my drawing of it and I dreamt that I got bullied by that ba... bi... be... ba... Gennifer-with-a-G and her pack of venomous harpies and I ran out onto the beach where I... where dear ol' Reggie here actually saved me on horseback, but that's another story."

"But you didn't know me back then, Stell!" Regina said and leaned in to bump shoulders with Stella.

"Hey, it was a dream! There are no rules in dreams, ya know."

Laura chuckled at Stella's long-winded description and thought back to the many, many long-winded descriptions she had heard during their years together in school. "Well, in reality, the school principal sent out a search party for you when you hadn't made it back before the curfew. Boy, was he mad... hopping, spit-flying, screaming mad."

"Yeah. I got grounded for a month when we got back home," Stella said thoughtfully.

"Mmmm. Do you still draw?"

"No... I don't have the time for it. And besides, I couldn't draw worth a damn even back then," Stella said and waved her hand in disgust. "They were only stick figures. Bad ones at that."

"But they came from the heart, Stell."

"I s'pose they did, but... no. Law, do you ever hear from some of our old friends from school?"

"Not really, no. Of course, I've been out of the country for so long, so..." Laura said and toyed with her empty soda can. "Though... I did read something in the newspaper about everyone's favorite Gennifer-with-a-G."

"Oh? Her obituary?"

"Stell!" Regina said, gasping loudly.

"Reggie, I'll bet my bottom dollar you were never bullied the way me and Law were, so... you'd share my view of her if you knew her. That's all I'm saying."

Laura nodded solemnly. "It's true, Regina. She was an awful bitch, pardon my French, to anyone outside her little circle of so-called friends. Anyway, even before I left, she married the owner of a small-scale car dealership out in the 'burbs because he got her pregnant at eighteen. The article I just read covered the baptism of their fifth kid."

"Wow, five kids? I'll bet she has plenty to do, huh? Yoo-hoo, Gennifer-honey, junior's crapped his diapers again and it's your turn to change 'em," Stella said with an evil snicker.

"Yup," Laura said, echoing the evil snicker.

"So I'm guessing she wasn't someone you'd call a best friend?" Regina said cautiously.

"No!" -- "Hell, no!" Laura and Stella said as one.

A few moments of thoughtful silence passed between Laura and Stella where they both relived being at the receiving end of Gennifer's nasty behavior, but the blonde investigator soon drew a deep breath and returned to the present:

"Law, listen," she said, sobering, "I'm sorry about your Dad. He was a great guy. If I had known, I would have contacted you, but..."

"It's okay, Stell," Laura said and put her hand on top of Stella's. "That was eons ago... I had only just made it back from Ecuador when he died. I knew he'd been ill for some time, but I wasn't prepared for it to end that fast."

"Yeah..."

"How are your parents?"

The question was simple but the answer was anything but. Stella opened her mouth to reply, but she closed it again almost at once. After a casual half-shrug, she reached across the table to take Regina's hand in her own for some much-needed moral support. "Mom's fine, but... well, I don't know how Dad is at the moment, honestly."

"You haven't kept in touch?"

"I... no. Well, we spoke at last year's Christmas dinner, so..." Stella said and performed a new shrug. "Mmmm, I said we 'spoke', but in reality, the things that were left unsaid outweighed the brief chats we did have. Eh."

"He doesn't approve?" Laura said quietly, reaching out for Stella's other hand to offer her own support to her old friend.

"He doesn't approve of anything I do. He never has. He can go stuff himself for all I care," Stella said and shuffled around uncomfortably. "New topic, please. This is gettin' entirely too serious for my tastes. Law, there's gotta be a sweetheart in your life...?"

The deep, heartfelt sigh that came from Stella prompted Regina to get up from her spot on the bench and shuffle to her left to sit behind her lover. Putting her long legs on either side of the bench to make room between them, she pulled Stella into a strong hug from behind that earned herself a wistful smile.

"Stella, I'm so sorry for bringing that up," Laura said quietly. "You may slap me silly if you want."

"I don't wanna slap you silly, Law," Stella said and shook her head so much that her wild mop of dirty-blond hair swished back and forth against Regina's chin. "You couldn't know."

"I should have known, but never mind that now. Please allow me to say that from this side of the table, you two share a bond that just blows everything else out of the water... I get the warm fuzzies just looking at you! And the only other time that happens is when I'm with my girlfriend," Laura said with a wink.

"The Harrison-Starr Detective Agency is only happy to provide you with the warm fuzzies... we'll put it on your bill," Stella said around a chuckle.

Laura broke out in a wild snicker that didn't calm down until she had found her wallet in her front pocket. "Her name is Alejandra. Here's a couple of pictures of us from the QuickiePiccy-machine down at the Central Station," she said and held up a sequence of three photos.

"Aw, she's gorgeous," Stella said, adjusting her glasses.

"You better believe she is," Laura said and put the photos back in her wallet. "Y'know, I've traveled the Americas coast to coast and tip to tip... and then I find my soulmate right here in the Heights in Bay City. Isn't that funny? We met at a function at the University and it just said zap."

"Oh, that's really romantic," Regina said, mussing Stella's neck with her long fingers. "It's easy to see the love in those photos."

"Thanks, Regina. Yeah, I'd say we both got it bad."

'Fire!' someone shouted from out front.

"Speaking of which," Laura continued, oblivious to the cry, "have you guys ever considered-" - Before she could complete the sentence, the cry was repeated:

'Fire! Fire!'

"Whaddahell?" Stella said and sat up straight around her living cushion. Moments later, a fire alarm started ringing its head off somewhere further into the fairgrounds, creating a small-scale panic among the eating guests at Becky's Buffet Bonanza.

'One of the ice cream huts is on fire!' a man shouted out front, running past the marquee with his arms flailing in the air.

"God, she didn't!" -- "Reggie, you think it was Whatsername?" Regina and Stella said over each other.

"Th- there's a fire?! And who's Whatsername?" Laura said and got up from her bench to get a clearer view.

"Reggie, we better check it out... lemme out," Stella said and waited for her long-limbed backrest to scoot off the bench. As soon as she had room, she hopped up and ran out to the alley between Becky's and the other vendor huts.

The alley was awash with families escaping from the fire alarm, if not the actual fire itself. With the din of the crowd rapidly growing to impossible levels, Stella couldn't hear a thing, but she thought she could smell a faint whiff of burning wood on the leading edge of the breeze.

Soon, the harbor fair security personnel hurried the other way to at least try to control the crowd before a real panic would break out, but they were too few for the massive number of guests to be of any use.

"Right," Stella said and slammed her hands onto her hips. "Reggie, it's Harrison-Starr to the rescue. If it really is Whatsername--"

"Wasn't it Giovanna?" Regina said and put her hands on Stella's shoulders as she looked at the sea of humanity that moved from left to right in front of the Buffet Bonanza.

"-Huh? Giovanna? Can't remember, only that she gave me the sour burps... ANYway, if it really is her who's gone bananas and set Andy's hut or his cart alight, uh... we may have had, uh... a hand in it. Hey," she said and turned around, "are you okay with it?"

"Yeah, well... sure. Why the hell not," Regina said with a shrug. "But we're not exactly dressed for firefighting, you know," she continued, touching her cotton shirt.

"No, but, uh... oh, we'll deal with that when we venture into the fiery inferno," Stella said and waved her hand dismissively.

"Stelllll--"

"Go ahead, I'll tell Law what we're gonna do... okay?"

It took Regina a couple of seconds to make up her mind, but when she did, she nodded and grabbed Stella by the shoulders to steal a very quick - but sloppy - kiss right on the blonde investigator's lips before she moved too far out of range for it to be effective.

Snickering, Stella watched her companion hurry against the stream of people until she couldn't see the blue shirt or the free-flowing hair any longer. "Law," she said, moving back into the Buffet Bonanza, "I'm sorry, but we gotta cut it short. Looks like Reggie and me have some work to do."

"Gawd, Stell, this is dangerous! I'm sure the fire department is already on their way here!" Laura said and pulled Stella into a crushing, protective hug that nearly saw her smothered against the bronzed skin.

"OOOF! Uh... yeah, but... uh... oh, this is kinda nice... ahem! Anyway, Law, it's a long story, but there's a risk we're already involved if it's the person we're thinking it could be..."

"But...!"

"Tell you what," Stella continued as she pulled back from her old friend, "I'm trusting you with the 3D puzzle and the LED yo-yo I won. I know you'll take good care of them..."

"Uh..."

"Law, I think you should leave with the crowd. If the festival is evacuated, you'll have a head start. Okay? I got your number and you got mine so we can easily find each other again once everything has calmed down. Okay?"

"Okay, but... Gawd, please me careful, Stell... here's something for good luck," Laura said and quickly grabbed hold of the back of Stella's head to pull her close - then she slapped a wet kiss right on her lips.

"Oooh... ah... uh-buh... eh... webbl... buh..." Stella said and staggered back from the kiss with a cross-eyed, befuddled look on her face, "Ebb... I'm... a webbl... kissin' pirate today... gawd... Buh!"

By the time Stella made it to the burning ice cream hut, she was relieved to see that it wasn't Andy's - though her relief was short-lived when she realized that it was actually Giovanna Fiorito's Original Gelato hut that had caught alight instead. "Aw hell... maybe we need to flip our view of this whole disaster on its head..." she mumbled, looking around for Regina.

On the rear side of the vendor hut, bright flames were licking up the wooden surface and they were getting closer and closer to igniting the roof as well. Several of the window panes had already been shattered and most of the colorful plastic advertisements that adorned the walls of

the hut had begun to melt, dripping toxic material down onto the pavement and releasing fumes into the air.

"I'm here, Stell!" Regina shouted as she came around the rear of the hut with a thirty-pound foam extinguisher.

"Have you started yet?"

"Yeah, on this side... we gotta do it together."

"Ten-four, good buddy... that's a clean and green five by five," Stella said and began to run around the other - deserted - huts to find a fire extinguisher she could use. "Oh, there's a peachy one right there," she said and made a beeline for a bright red extinguisher that was hanging next to a stove inside a sausage parlor.

Quickly taking it off the rack, she broke the safety catch and held it ready. *DEEP sniff* - "Oh, I love the smell of roasting frankfurters in the afternoon... but let's go kill that fire... Reggie! Let's gooooo!"

Regina walked around the burning hut, mindful not to singe her precious eyebrows or to get soot in her hair or on her blue shirt. She squirted the foam at the lowest part of the fire, but it re-ignited almost at once. "Stell? Start here..." she said and pointed at the biggest flames.

"Okie-dokie-gotta-stop-the-smokey," Stella said and held the foam extinguisher ready. "And let her rip! Yahoooooo!" - with that, she squeezed the trigger and watched in wide-eyed excitement as the icy, white foam squirted out of the extinguisher and mixed with the same material that came from Regina's similar tool.

"Ooooooh! More fire, Cap'n!" Stella squealed as the flames broke through in another place close to where they were squirting. She adjusted her beam, but that meant the first fire seat only had Regina's foam on it which proved not to be enough.

"Jeez, I think we're gonna need some assistance, Stell! Two aren't enough," Regina said and stepped away from the flames that quickly shot back up.

"Yeah... I can hear sirens but they're still kinda far away..."

"Yeah."

"Is Whatsername still in there?" Stella said and got up on tip-toes to look through the smoke and flames.

"No, the hut is empty," Regina said and looked down as her extinguisher began to gurgle. "And so is this one. Naw, I think we gotta pull back, Stell."

"Hang on! I'm coming with the big guns!" a male voice shouted from somewhere off to their right.

Running back out into the alley, Stella shielded her eyes with her hand and soon spotted Andy hurrying towards her pushing a funny-looking cart with a huge, dome-like structure and a coil with a hose on it.

"Oy! Andy! Where da hell did you find that big thing?" Stella shouted and helped the ice cream vendor push the cumbersome cart between the huts and around the back.

"Abandoned at a fire post up near the promenade stage..."

"Well, that's reassuring," Stella grumbled as she grabbed the nozzle and unrolled a hundred-foot hose. "Reggie! Look what Santa Claus has brought!"

Regina threw away her empty extinguisher and grabbed the one Stella had dropped before, but she couldn't do much on her own. In the far distance, they could still hear sirens, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the fire department wouldn't get there before the fire had spread to the adjacent huts.

When Stella realized Regina hadn't heard her, she cupped her mouth and let out an echoing "Yo! Miss Too-Tall-To-Fit-Through-A-Regular-Door! We got company!" - that did the trick.

With Stella manning the hose, Andy and Regina pushed the cumbersome cart in place and stood well back, just in case the dome-like structure exploded.

"I'm ready!" Stella shouted, holding the hose under her arm like she had seen their firefighting friend Kristy Newbourne do at a Meet-and-Greet at her fire station. "Hit it!"

Praying silently that it wasn't about to get worse instead of better, Regina leaned down and did as told.

When the foam came through the hose, it was with such a powerful surge it nearly lifted the petite Stella clear off the ground - "OOOOOOOOEEEEIIIII!" she howled, dancing left and right while wrestling the Incredible Hose Monster.

"OoooooOOOO!" - *squirt, squirt, foam shower* - "OH YEAH!" - *SQUIRT, squirt, FOAM* - "Now we're talking!" - *squirt, foam shower, SQUIRT* - "Oh that's too MUUUUUCH" - *FOAM, FOAM, FOAM* - "OH YEAH, got it now" - *FOAM, squirt, foam shower* - "No I don't, ugggh!" - *SQUIRT, SQUIRT, foam* - "Yikes, what is this shiiii- OOOOOOH! -thing" - *FOAM, foam, FOAM* - "Crud, this beast got fangs, baby!" - *SQUIRT, SQUIRT, foam* - "Suck on this, f-lame-o!" - *foam shower* - "Gotcha now... gotcha now..." - *foam, FOAM, foam* - "Yeah, choke on this, you naffy little critt- OOOH!" - *FOAM, squirt, SQUIRT* - "Sneaky, are ya?!" - *SQUIRT, SQUIRT* - "Hose 'em! Hose 'em down, baby!" - *foam shower, dribble, click, click, clonk* - "Eat my foam, Mr. Hot Buns! So there!" - *click, click, CLONK, click, CLONK*.

"Stell!"

"Wo-hooooo!" Stella squealed, quite literally riding the wave.

"Stell! Stella! You can stop hosing now, we've turned off the foam! The fire is out!" Regina roared to be heard over Stella's excited squeals.

"Whassat, Snookums?"

"QUIT HOSIN', THE FIRE IS OOOOOOUT!"

"Oh... okay. Darn, just when it was gettin' real good," Stella said and dropped the hose. Putting her hands on her slightly sooty hips, she studied the charred, foam-covered remains of the ice cream hut and gave herself a high-five for a job well done.

Regina shook her head in disbelief at what she and her expensive clothes were exposed to, but began to coil up the hose nonetheless, mindful of not getting chemical foam suds on her black jeans.

"Ummm..." Andy said, brushing soot out of his hair, "excuse me for being kinda blunt, but your friend is a... is a... she's, uh... intense."

"Yes, she is," Regina said with a chuckle. "This was nothing, though. You should see her when she really gets going."

"Oh... okay," Andy said and scratched his ear.

'There he is!' a shrill female voice suddenly shouted from somewhere beyond the burned-out hulk. *'I want him arrested! He's destroyed my business! I want him arrested!'*

'You said that already,' another female voice said, more dulcet and mature by far.

"Huh, I know that second voice," Stella said and shuffled off to the right - sure enough, none other than Inspector Mary-Jane Moynes came down towards her with a hysterical Giovanna Fiorito in tow.

As always, the Inspector was impeccably dressed, though she was wearing white, comfy shoes, sand-colored slacks and a classy burnt-orange blouse rather than her trademark pantsuit.

"I want him arrested! Him! Him right there," Giovanna screeched, pointing at Andy with a horrified look on her face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on a minute there, Missy," Stella said and put up her hands in the age-old gesture of *'Stop your whining before you give me the sour burps all over again.'* - "Andy helped us put out the fire. Hi, Mary-Jane," she said with a sheepish grin.

"Stella Starr... oh hell, I should have known," Mary-Jane said and briefly looked toward the heavens for guidance. Grinning, she put out her hand and waited for Stella to shake it. "Hi. We gotta stop meeting like this... I can't even get away from you on my day off. Where's Regina?"

"Down the back. She's checking the foam," Stella said with a broad grin. "ANYway, Andy came with that big thing right there... the cart. If he hadn't, we wouldn't have been able to save anything from the hut," she said and tapped her knuckles against the charred wall.

The *crreakkkk* it produced made her step back from it in a hurry, but she kept the smile on her face.

To counter that, Giovanna moved forward and shook her fist at Andy and Stella. "Inspector, you can't listen to these two! They're in it together! Little Miss Blondie Runt here took his side in a shouting match we had earlier today! They're in it together!"

The aggressive language made Stella scrunch up her face and chew on her cheek, but she showed remarkable zen in restraining herself from punching Giovanna into next week - brought on by Mary-Jane's presence. If the Inspector hadn't been there, however, the catfight would have been glorious, if short-lived.

Mary-Jane let out a sigh at the way Giovanna was speaking in exclamations, but she stood up straight and turned around to face the shrill woman. "Miss Fiorito, you need to calm down. Your hut has been saved... mostly... and it appears it's been saved by the same two people you accuse of starting the fire. That doesn't add up."

"Yes it does! That man there has been wanting to drive me out of the market for months now! Every fair or festival I go to, he puts up his hut as well! And now, he's obviously recruited his over-the-hill blondie girlfriend there to make my life a living hell! Well, I won't take it anymore! I won't!"

Stella's nostrils flared at being called over the hill, but she took a few deep breaths and thought about what would have happened if it had been Regina who had been called that - she was sure it would have been apocalyptic. The thought of her tall lover going tribal on the shrill woman made Stella's day, and it also made her burst out in an evil snicker.

"And now she's laughing at me! At me!" Giovanna exclaimed loudly, but no one seemed to want to listen to her, least of all Inspector Moynes who kept pulling annoyed faces at the sound of the woman's voice.

Hearing the agitated voices, Regina wondered what was going on and shuffled up from behind the hut to put her hands on the shoulders of Stella's fire-red t-shirt. "Hello, Mary-Jane... nice to see you. Wow, we meet in the weirdest places, huh?"

"Mmmm-yeah, no kidding. Hi, Regina," Mary-Jane Moynes said and reached out to shake hands with the tall investigator.

"So," Regina said and gave Stella's shoulders a squeeze, "I'm obviously not a fire inspector, but I think I may have found the cause of it."

"Oh?"

"Yes. It looks like the fire started on the floor of the hut, near the compressor for one of the freezers. It looks old and neglected."

"Does it now?" Mary-Jane said and turned back to Giovanna.

"Whaddaya have to say for yourself?" Stella said, flashing the shrill woman a shit-eating grin.

Giovanna's chin started to quiver but she shook her head vigorously and crossed her arms over her chest in a strong display of defiance. "I'm not speaking a word without an attorney present! I want that man arrested, Officer! And if you won't, I demand to talk to someone who will! Right this very minute! I refuse to stand here and be insulted by some... some... some arsonist and his bleached blonde airhead girlfriend who probably can't even spell her own name and who's too dumb to understand she shouldn't swallow her bubblegum!"

GASP! - "Okay, okay," Stella said and put up her hands, "just hang on for a sec there... I can sense where this is going, and it's not gonna be a happy-fluffy-bunny place, lemme assure you. Why don't we-

"Happy-fluffy-bunny," Giovanna mocked, pulling faces at Stella's colorful speech. "What are you, straight outta kindergarten? Nobody who's playing with a full deck speaks like that!"

Scrunching up her face, Stella looked back at Regina who shrugged in return. "Hey, Missy," Stella drawled, "I have an itty-bitty nursery rhyme for you... a real swell little ditty that goes a little something like this... cut the crap, ain't no jack, stick a dirty sock down in your yap... so there!"

"Stell, Stell, Stell," Regina groaned and clapped a hand over her eyes.

By the time Stella finished, Giovanna really got going. Her eyes glazed over, her chin quivered like she was caught in an earthquake, her fists clenched and unclenched, her cheeks were tinged by two red blotches - and when she had taken a very deep breath, she let rip with a five-star, ocean-going, super-shrill '...ucker' rage that left most of Stella's similar rages gasping in the dust in comparison.

"Whoa there, amazonette," Stella said, smoothing down her haystack that was blown backwards from the sheer volume and the vitriol of Giovanna's words, "Sweet chicky-dee, do you really kiss your Momma with that mouth? Yikes on bikes..."

Unsurprisingly, the comment only made Giovanna scream louder.

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Two hours later, most of the fair and the world at large had returned to normal - Giovanna Fiorito had been sent to the fair management to cool down - and Stella, Laura, Regina and Mary-Jane were standing on the pier with what felt like an extended family of ten thousand interested spectators who were all watching a tug boat dragging a manned barge several hundred yards out into the bay.

With the disturbance, the show was running a little late, but the fading light would only amplify the colors of the grand fireworks display that was scheduled to come on, so no one complained - well, except Stella who kept looking at her watch.

"Mmmmm," she grumbled, "they better get a move on... Deadline starts in an hour..."

"Why didn't you set the recorder, Stell?" Regina whispered into her partner's ear.

" 'Cos it only works every other time."

"Not when I set it."

"Yeah, well... darn thing hates my guts."

"Mmmmm," Regina said again and leaned down to give Stella a couple of kisses on her neck. "I'm afraid you're gonna have to catch it in a rerun. Did you forget we promised Ruby the other day that we'd swing by and help her select the music for her Sophisticated Lady theme night after we wrapped things up here?"

Stella looked up; then down. "Yessssss..." she whispered, shaking her head slowly.

"Stell, if Kate Marshall were here, I'm sure she'd agree that you should help a good, old friend like Ruby instead of watching the show. Right?"

Grumble, grumble - "Probably. That's the kind of warm, gentle, beautiful, empathic woman she is."

Standing on the right of the two investigators, Mary-Jane turned to shoot them a curious glance while she dug into her pocket to find her Smartphone. "What are you two lovebirds whispering about? Kate Marshall is an actress, right? What kind of love shack are you guys running, anyway? Hey... do I need to give Vice an anonymous tip?"

"Oh ha, ha, Mary-Jane," Stella said and stuck out her tongue at the Inspector.

"Ha ha right back atcha," Mary-Jane said and put her phone to her ear. After a few seconds, the connection was established. "Hi, honey... I'm down at the wharf. You're coming, right? The fireworks are about to start. Mmmm? Okay, but don't take too long. See ya in a few."

Grinning, Stella reached over and gently thumped the Inspector's shoulder. "Why, Mary-Jane! Are you here with a date?"

"I am. He said he'd be here shortly."

"Awww, that's so cute and cuddly and romantic," Stella said with a dreamy smile on her face. "Lookin' at the fireworks is always fun. I remember one time, this was years ago by the way, way before I met Reggie, where-" - she suddenly came to a hard stop and performed a perfect double-take - "Waitaminute... he?"

"He, yes. I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend, Stella?" the Inspector said as she put away her phone.

"Uh... sure, but... uh... I, uh... sorta... kinda... always thought that... I had you pegged for a... never mind."

'Oh, look!' somebody shouted, *'there's a countdown on the barge! Nine, eight, seven, six...'*

Regina decided to save her lover from the acute embarrassment that had already formed on her fair face so she took an arm and ran her fingers up and down it. Leaning in, she mussed the dirty-blonde haystack one more time.

"Egg on my face, Reggie... egg on my face," Stella croaked.

"Don't tell me you had a crush on Mary-Jane, Stell!"

'Five, four, three...'

"No, but... well, maybe a little one. What if I had asked her out...? Or made a pass at her? I mean, I was pretty sure about her and she looks really great don't you think... and I've been kinda lonely from time to time you know that and sometimes, a bit of fun is the best cure for loneliness and she was always sort of there and-and-and... but of course, then I got to know you a little better..."

"A little better, yes," Regina said and mussed Stella's neck with her long fingers. "Why would you need to ask anyone else in the whole wide world when, I, Regina Harrison, the Goddess of Love reside here in your presence?"

'Two, one...'

"Okay, yeah, good point. Good thing I didn't have to. Mmmua, love you, big girl... love you with... uh... with all my heart... yeah," Stella whispered and let her hand roam across Regina's well-shaped derriere.

'And here we GOOOOOOO!'

"Love you too, little Miss Haystack," Regina whispered back. With a smile, she leaned down to claim her partner's lips in a wet one just as the fireworks were sent high in the sky from the barge.

Soon, the evening sky was lit up in green, blue, red, gold and silver from the exploding fireworks. Beautiful patterns were drawn by the expert pyrotechnist, and all the spectators clapped and cheered loudly, especially at a series of colorful fountains that sprayed golden sparks high in the air from each end of the barge.

Behind them, Mary-Jane's date came running into the area and soon wrapped his arms around the Inspector. To everyone's surprise, he looked to be a decade younger than her, but the smile on her face when he gave her a smooch proved once more that age was irrelevant when it came to love.

"Huh," Stella said and looked around for her own smoocher. With the colorful fireworks as a backdrop, she pulled Regina down for a proper kiss, one that took her breath away and offered a hint at what kind of entertainment the rest of the night would bring - well, as soon as they were done at Rockin' Ruby's.

On Stella's other side, Laura cheered loudly at the fireworks. Once it died down with a huge, starry explosion high up in the sky, she grabbed Stella's free arm and pulled herself into a squealing, hopping, crushing group hug.

"OOOF! Glam sandwich!" Stella croaked, crushed by glamorous women from both sides at once. "Ooooh, this would be a good place to die..."

When the fireworks display was over, the spectators began to dissipate and go back to the various eateries and amusements. Laura, Stella, Regina, Mary-Jane and her date lingered on for a few more minutes, but since they didn't really have anything to look at on the pier, they trickled back up into the fairground itself.

"Stella," Laura said and hooked her arm inside her old friend's. "I think I'll call it a night. It's been so much fun to see you again. This time, we have to... HAVE to stay in touch. I'm going to El Salvador and Nicaragua for six months come October, but I demand to see you again before then. Okay? I want to show you where Alejandra and I live and everything. You *and* your gorgeous sweetheart," she said and winked at Regina who grinned in return.

"You definitely have a deal, Law. Hey, I want to show you our office, too... and my pride and joy, my favorite old girl... my Pacer," Stella said with a broad grin, holding the little plastic bag with her winnings from the hoop game.

"Deal," Laura said and pulled Stella into a chaste hug where she kissed both the blonde investigator's cheeks. "Oh, I've had so much fun tonight!" she said, suddenly yanking Stella into an all-singing, all-dancing best-friend hug.

"Ooooooh! So have I... hot diggity DANG!" Stella said with her face buried in the nook of Laura's bronzed neck.

"Bye-bye, my friends!" Laura said and waved with both hands as she walked up the incline to get to the fairgrounds.

Chuckling, Mary-Jane and her date walked over to the shell-shocked Stella and offered her hand. "That's it for us, too, gals. I think Denny and I need to get home so we can finish the evening in style."

"Oh, that's gre-" Stella said, but suddenly came to a dead stop as the hidden meaning of the Inspector's words filtered through to her brain. "Well... buh... buh... buh-bye..."

"You have to excuse my blonde friend here... she's new to all this lovey-dovey stuff. Have a great evening," Regina said and shook hands with Mary-Jane's date and finally the Inspector herself.

Once Mary-Jane and her boyfriend had disappeared in the crowd, Regina turned back to Stella who still hadn't fully recovered from the shock. "Stell? Stell? Stella, are you all right? Yo-hooo," she said, waving her hand in front of her lover's face. "Do you need to lie down or something?"

"I'm fine," Stella croaked. "I just didn't expect that at all... it seems so random. Next thing you know, someone's gonna tell us none of this really exists... that we're just characters in someone's series of stories."

"Well, *you're* certainly a character," Regina mumbled after making sure Stella couldn't hear her.

With their friends gone, Regina and Stella eventually strolled off to the exit, too. Holding hands, they were enjoying the relative peace and quiet of the fair that had attracted a slightly older clientele after most of the families had left.

After a little while, they made it up to the upper part of the fairgrounds and nodded a goodbye to Andy who was busy scooping up ice cream for an elderly couple.

"I don't think we're fictional characters, Stell," Regina said while she swung her partner's hand back and forth. "I mean, it would take a genius of unfathomable proportions to create someone like *moi* ."

"True..."

"Quick, what did we do last Tuesday?"

"Last Tuesday...? Nothing. Nothing at all... I was bored out of my skull the entire day, and then we said an early nighty-night and went home separately."

"Do you really think someone would go through all that trouble just to invent a day where nothing at all happened?"

While Stella thought about that, they left the fairgrounds and started looking around for the shuttle buses. Instead of the large, white vehicle, they found a sign that said, '*Shuttle service closes at eight PM.*' - Shrugging, they went on the long trek to get back to the Pacer.

"Yeah, well..." Stella said after a while. "Writers do the strangest things sometimes... it would explain some of the weird stuff that's happened to us... to me... over the years... and in my life. And maybe last Tuesday was never, uh... shown... or something? I dunno."

"'No' is the short answer to my question, Stell... of course we're not fictional!"

"Well, hmmm..." Stella said, scrunching up her face. Coming to a full stop, she did a slow three-sixty degree turn in the middle of the huge parking lot to see if she could spot any signs of a higher being manipulating them through letters, words and paragraphs. "Wait... ooooooh, holy guacamole! What's that up there! In the sky!"

"Where?"

"There! There! It's an eye! It's a blip-bloppin' eye! They're lookin' at us! Ooooooh, they're lookin' at us!" Stella howled, pointing at a large orange-white disc that hung low on the horizon.

"That's the moon, Stell," Regina said flatly.

"Oh... okay. I knew that. I just wanted to see if you did."

"C'mon, let's drive over to Ruby's. I'll buy you a raspberry fizz!"

"Yippie!" Stella squealed and jumped a foot in the air. Upon landing, she raced ahead so she could have the Pacer hot, ready and running for Regina. Fifty yards into her sprint, she turned around, threw her arms high in the air and shouted: "Loooooooooove you!"

"I love you too, you crazy, wonderful little firebrand..." Regina said, waving back at her boss, best friend and loving partner.

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THE END of FIRE & ICE CREAM

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VIII - THE QUEEN & THE YAPSTER

Written by Norsebard

Dinner:

Sitting on the couch in the office of the Harrison-Starr Detective Agency, Stella Starr had barely wolfed down her final slice of pizza before she opened her yap and took a DEEP breath: "Yap yap auction yap yap yap oh, beauuuuutiful Kate yap yap yap dinner yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap CJ yap yap yap yap yap oh, sweet Kate yap yap yap yap yap yap Deadline yap yap yap yap" - *DEEP breath* - "yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap..."

At her desk, Regina Harrison just nodded, hoping that her easily excitable friend would soon be worn out from the incessant yapping - after all, it had already been a full twenty-four hours since they'd had dinner with the TV star Kate Marshall and her wife, the FBI agent CJ Carson following the earlier Helping OUT Our Kids charity auction.

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Bedtime:

Putting her glasses on the nightstand, Stella Starr had barely snuggled down in bed before she opened her yap and took a DEEP breath: "Yap yap yap Deadline yap yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap yap yap auction yap yap yap yap yap yap dinner yap yap yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap CJ Carson yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap" - *DEEP breath* - "yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap..."

Under the covers, Regina Harrison just sighed, wishing that her easily excitable friend would soon be worn out from the yapping.

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Breakfast:

Sitting down on a chair in her kitchen, Stella Starr had barely poured milk on her cereal before she opened her yap and took a DEEP breath: "Yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap dinner yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap auction yap yap yap yap yap yap CJ at the FBI yap yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap Little Ashley's Christmas Miracle yap yap yap yap yap yap yap awwww so sweet yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap yap" - *DEEP breath* - "yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap..."

Behind the newspaper, Regina Harrison just groaned, praying that her easily excitable friend would soon be worn out from the yapping.

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In the middle of a stakeout:

Lowering the binoculars, Stella Starr had barely jotted down the latest observation on her notepad before she opened her yap and took a DEEP breath: "Yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap yap yap yap wokam.com yap yap yap yap auction yap yap yap yap yap yap gorgeous CJ yap yap yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap Deadline yap two thousand one hundred dollars yap yap yap yap yap" - *DEEP breath* - "yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap..."

Behind her sunglasses, Regina Harrison closed her eyes and shed a little tear, begging any higher power that would listen to make her easily excitable friend worn out from the yapping.

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After work, driving over to Rockin' Ruby's:

Throwing the empty pack of Oreos she had just wolfed down into the back seat, Stella Starr had barely finished crunching the last cookie before she opened her yap and took a DEEP breath: "Yap yap yap yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap Little Ashley's Christmas Miracle yap yap yap yap auction yap yap yap yap dinner yap yap yap yap yap yap promotional photo yap yap yap yap yap yap CJ and Kate yap yap yap yap Deadline yap yap" - *DEEP breath* - "yap Kate Marshall yap yap yap yap..."

Rubbing her clammy brow with a trembling hand, Regina Harrison thought about how she could make her escape by taking the red-eye to somewhere more peaceful - like one of the world's war zones - all the while cursing inwardly that her easily excitable friend hadn't yet been worn out from the yapping.

As they drove the silver metallic, low-slung sports car into the parking lot at their favorite haunt, something odd happened - Stella piped down.

For a few seconds, Regina just thought her blonde lover had lost her voice but the annoyed look on Stella's face told a different story. "What is it, honey-bunny?" Regina said as she turned into a slot and turned off the engine.

"You haven't listened to a word I've been saying, Reggie!"

"Oh, well, I wouldn't say that..."

"Yeah?" Stella said and adjusted her glasses. "Then I'd like to hear you explain why you just nodded and smiled when I said that Kate Marshall had two heads and that she was in fact an illegal immigrant from Venus?"

"Well, I just... thought... that... uh... you know, men are from Mars and-"

"Reggie!"

"Sorry... you're right," Regina said and reached over to put a hand on Stella's jeans, "I guess I did zone out."

"When?"

"Last night...?"

"Oh, Reggie!" Stella said and blew a raspberry.

"Yes, but I was there, hon... remember? I heard all that was said at the auction and at the dinner table and... everything. Yes, CJ is a gorgeous woman... well, she would be," Regina said and flicked her perfect hair over her shoulder where it unusually didn't land in a perfect cascade, instead hitting the headrest - "And, yes, I know all about Kate's roles in her movies, shows and guest appearances and even the little videos she made for wokam.com... and I still think it's eerie how you and Kate look so much alike..."

"Regina Harrison, the next time you want to watch one of your old fashion show DVDs, I might not be interested!"

"Oh..."

Softening her demeanor, Stella leaned over and placed a sweet kiss on Regina's lips. "But that doesn't mean I don't love you any more. Huh, Snookums?" she husked, tracing Regina's lips with an index finger.

"Love you too, honey-bunny," Regina said and pulled Stella over for a real kiss, though the blonde investigator was impeded somewhat by the fact that she hadn't yet unbuckled.

By the time the lovebirds entered Rockin' Ruby's, the place lived up to its name by being quite rockin' indeed. The entire row of high stools at the shiny bar counter were filled with drinking women, music and laughter could be heard from the dance floor further into the bar, and all but one of the booths were occupied - as always, Ruby Albrecht had put a 'Reserved' sign on the first booth.

"Hi, Ruby!" Stella shouted as she stepped into the bar, waving at the owner who was sitting at her favorite spot at the end of the counter.

After taking off her yellow down vest, Stella quickly fluffed her haystack of dirty-blonde hair and adjusted her pink hoodie - the one with the white tussles - that she wore over a white tank.

Ruby waved back, but much to Stella and Regina's surprise, everyone in the bar turned towards them and began to cheer, clap and whistle lewd wolf calls.

"Uh... did I forget to zip my fly?" Stella said out of the corner of her mouth while discreetly feeling down the front of her jeans.

"No, I checked," Regina said casually, grabbing the opportunity to go into the first pose of her Too Cool For Words routine that really accentuated her baby blue blouse and deep blue slacks and blazer. "Thank you, dahlings!" she said in an exaggerated upper class accent as she walked up the aisle between the bar stools and the booths, remembering to slam her hips from side to side.

"Uh... buh. Yes, thank you, dahlings!" Stella mimicked with a big grin on her face. She didn't have Regina's hips so she couldn't quite achieve the patented model walk, though her efforts did earn her applause. "Now will someone pleeeeeease tell us what in the WORLD is going on here?!" she said once she reached the far end of the counter.

Ruby Albrecht stepped forward and offered Regina her hand. "Oh, we're just celebrating the cool fact that our tall friend here has made the comeback of the decade," she said, waiting for the model to shake it.

Regina scrunched up her face but shook Ruby's hand nonetheless. "You mean the ads I did? Well, thank you, but-"

"Nope! Girls, time to flash our friends the big news!" Ruby said and hurried over to the patrons who sat on the bar stools. As one, the women turned around and showed Regina their Smartphones that were all displaying the Swimsuit Illustrated web page - or more precisely, the sneak preview of the coming issue.

"Buh...!" Regina groaned as she stared at the image on the little displays.

"Whut? Whut-whut-whut...? Lemme through... short person wanna see!" Stella said and pushed her way past Regina. When she was able to catch a glimpse of the displays, her jaw dropped down to her navel. "Buh... uh, buh... Re... buh... beh... hub... dub... we... that's... that's... YOU!"

Regina Harrison graced the cover of the coming issue of Swimsuit Illustrated, throwing herself backwards in a pool like a leaping dolphin while wearing an open-sided, off-white one-piece swimsuit. The wet suit clung to her body like a second skin, revealing that she was very much a woman. Below the evocative photo, the words '*The Return Of Queen Regina!*' were typed in an eye-catching red that underscored the entire surreal situation.

"Cheese... Oh... Flip," Stella croaked, feeling her glasses misting up. "That's... that's... that's my shot... I took that picture... I... don't... be... lieeeeeeeve it...!"

Chuckling, Ruby stepped forward and began to clap at the two investigators. The late-fifty-something former Pro Softball star suddenly put two fingers in her mouth and let out a wild, piercing whistle that made the cheering even louder. "Way to go, guys. Wow, everyone here at Rockin' Ruby's are really proud of ya... and even better, your first drink will be on the house!"

Through the shock, Regina had lost the ability to speak and was simply staring at the phone she had been given by one of the barflies. A little sniff was soon followed by another, and then another. Her chin began to quiver and her eyes misted over - and all of a sudden, the floodgates burst and she let out a sobbing, Stella-like howl right in the middle of Rockin' Ruby's.

Stella was at her best friend's side at once and pulled the tall woman into a crushing hug. She had a hard time understanding it herself, but that mattered less with her lover crying. "There, there, Reggie... you big, old superstar, you... there, there... hey... waitaminute... wait-a-minute..."

"Thank you. Wha-" - *sniff, sniff* - "What is it, Stell?" - *sniff, sniff*.

Stella had been rubbing her hands up and down Regina's tall back, but her movements slowed down when a vague, distant memory of something quite foggy started knocking on the inside of her skull, asking to be let out so it could join the party. "Didn't Steve say something about... what was it... what did he say... just before last Christmas... oh, shoot, what was it... waitaminute, I got it... Steve said something ab- about FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS, BABY!"

The last words were delivered in an air-raid siren like quality and volume straight into Regina's delicate ears, and it made the tall woman jump back with a "GAAAH!"

"FIFTY! THOUSAND! DOLLARS!" Stella said, bouncing around like a rubber ball in a washing machine. "Oooh yeah, uh-huh, oh-hoh, eh-heh, ah-hah, aw yeah-yeah-yeah... Reggie, c'mon here... you know what?"

"No?" Regina said, still rubbing her ear.

After leering left and right, Stella leaned in to whisper very quietly into Regina's other - good - ear. As she pulled back, she had a shit-eating grin on her face that didn't seem to want to be going away any time soon.

"Well," Regina said and smoothed down an eyebrow that had gone all erect from hearing Stella's idea, "I second that motion, but we definitely need to be at home to do that, Stell..."

Ruby came back to the two investigators and put her hands on their backs. "I think I get it... but you do have time for a drink, right? Like I said, it's on the house."

Stella was too bouncy to speak at once, but she eventually nodded - just before she ran down the line of bar stools to high-five every single person there.

Ten minutes later, Regina closed the connection in her cell phone and leaned back against the backrest of the red bench seat. "That was Steve. He wanted to congratulate us... and he confirmed the amount."

"Speechless," Stella said, slurping loudly from her colorful mojito that Ruby had decorated with an umbrella and a pink flamingo on a toothpick.

"Yeah. Of course, like he said, we need to split it between my agency-"

"Which is me."

"-and the photographer-"

"Which was me."

"-and my minders and general staff."

"Which is me. Speechless!" - Stella suddenly sobered and leaned back to put a warm hand on Regina's thigh. "Snookums, it's your prize. I want you to use it on whatever you want and need. If you want to blow it all on designer clothes, be my guest."

"Heh... I want to show you the world, Stell. Perhaps we can squeeze a vacation into our busy schedules?"

"Well, I wouldn't say no to that... I've always wanted to go to Disneyland!" Stella said and stole a quick kiss.

"Dis- MMUA -eyland?! I was thinking about Paris or Milan... or Rio... or Buenos Aires..."

"But I wanna go to Disneyland!"

Regina blinked a couple of times as she studied the pout that had already begun to form on Stella's face. Shrugging, she pulled her best friend into a sideways hug. "Okay. But I have an even better idea."

"Better than Disn-"

"Muuuuch better."

"Spill it, girl," Stella said and poked Regina in the stomach.

Smiling, Regina snuggled up next to her easily excitable lover and held on tight, knowing from experience how the blonde fury would react to the following news - "Well, I happen to know that the studio where they film Kate Marshall's show Deadline has guided tours, and that it's possible to be there when they shoot scenes..."

"Ooooooooooh! I love you, Regina Harrison!" Stella said and broke through Regina's firm grip to wrap her arms around her tall lover.

"And I love you, Stella Starr..."

Stella began to rock back and forth while she squealed out her enjoyment of the situation and how much she actually loved the tall woman - though most of it came out as a mumble because she was speaking into Regina's bosom - but she eventually rocked so hard the inevitable happened-

"Uh... no wait... hang on, Stell... Stell!" Regina said and tried to grab hold of the tabletop.
"STELLLLLLLL! WE'RE GOING DOOOOOOWN!"

Moving in perfect synchronicity, the two investigators slipped off the edge of the bench seat and landed in an unruly heap under the table with Stella sprawled on Regina's stomach.

BA-DA-BUMPH! - "OOOF!" -- "Oy! Wa-hooo, Reggie!"

'*Are you guys all right?*' Ruby said from somewhere further up which prompted Regina to flash her a thumbs-up. '*Uh-huh,*' the bar owner said and went back to her business.

Regina and Stella briefly looked at each other - Regina's precious hair was all over the place and Stella's glasses had slipped down to the tip of her nose - but they soon succumbed to warm, infectious laughter that bubbled up from their hearts.

Before long, the scene had turned into a veritable lovefest where they laughed, nibbled, kissed and exchanged heartfelt declarations of love while they held each other tight.

Pausing for a moment to climb back up on the bench, Stella and Regina looked deeply into each other's eyes, both thinking about what they had been through together, what they had now and what they would have in the future - then they grinned and continued the glorious laughing, nibbling and kissing in their new, and far more comfortable position.

"I think this could be" - *nibble, kiss, NIBBLE* - "the start of one hell of a" - *KISS, KISS, nibble* - "sizzling night, Reggie," Stella husked into Regina's mouth.

"I agree, Stell." - *Nibble, KISS, nibble.*

"Oh, Jeez, you guys! You're scaring the little girls up here at the bar!" Ruby said from behind the counter, but this time, the investigators were far, far too busy with each other to even wave in the bar owner's direction.

Three minutes - and thirty-seven kisses - later, Stella and Regina chugged down their free drinks, grabbed their jackets and made a beeline for the door, once again followed by a concert of cheers and lewd wolf calls from the patrons and Ruby Albrecht.

Outside, Stella paused for a fraction of a second to take a deep breath, but the sight of Regina jogging back to the SLK gave her the impetus she needed, and she was soon hot on her partner's tail, laughing out loud into the cool, refreshing evening air...

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THE END of THE QUEEN & THE YAPSTER

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THE END of

LAST WORDS FROM THE HARRISON-STARR DETECTIVE AGENCY

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